



ED GREENWOOD THE HERALD

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



Book
VI



THE HERALD

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Published by Wizards of the Coast LLC. Manufactured by: Hasbro SA, Rue Emile-Boéchat 31, 2800 Delémont, CH. Represented by: Hasbro Europe, 4 The Square, Stockley Park, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB11 1ET, UK.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

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Cartography by: Mike Schley
Cover art by: Tyler Jacobson
First Printing: June 2014

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-0-7869-6460-4
ISBN: 978-0-7869-6549-6 (ebook)
620A4360000001 EN

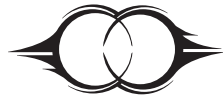
Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress

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CHAPTER 1



The Triumph of Night

THE NIGHTS ARE GROWING LONGER, AND BETIMES THE EARTH shakes!” young Lady Wyrnwood hissed, leaning forward in her excitement and granting the table a splendid view of the six linked silver dragons arrayed on fine chains across her décolletage. “What does it *mean*? Are we all *doomed*?”

The younger nobles around the table leaned forward in shared excitement, but several older ones rolled their eyes or muttered disparagements.

“Doomed, doomed—always doomed!” gray-haired Lord Garonder Illance remarked. “We’ve been ‘doomed’ since before I was born. Thankfully, the gods work slowly. Even more slowly than unsupervised servants.”

Lady Wyrnwood regarded him with finely honed scorn. “Dismiss my views at your peril, Lord Jaded Seen-All! Things are *happening* beyond these walls, outside our fair city—things that could well shake every last high castle in all the world! The nights *are* growing longer, believe you me!”

An elder lord at another table turned in his high-backed chair with a sigh of exasperation. He harrumphed to indicate his minor embarrassment at knowingly breaching etiquette—even in a club

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like this one, open to all with coin enough to pay ruinous prices for platter and goblet—it was customary amongst well-bred highborn to give no sign of having overheard something not addressed to them. And then he growled, “Of *course* things are happening beyond these walls; we’re at war again! I’d have thought you might have noticed! Aye, it’s Sembia, and it’s *always* Sembia, but the battles do affect the prices of everything, which is to say the fortunes of us all.

“And, aye, the nights are indeed getting longer. Yet strange things happen in the world every day; the lengthening nights may have nothing at all to do with the wild news that’s been reaching us—or even the real troubles. Still less do longer nights mean any sort of inevitable ‘doom.’ The ground-shakings have all but stopped, and they mean volcanoes erupting, not gods walking!

“All of this gloom-talk reminds me of the fights in my youth among the high priests of this city, over what certain movements of the stars meant. Each one seemed convinced the stars ‘proved’ that *their* deity was going to triumph over the others. And yet, where are we now? No god has triumphed over all others, and the stars still move. So please, let us hear less of inevitable doom!”

“What? Stars *move*?” A young lordling frowned in disbelief from a table at the back of the room. His father shot him a look of contempt.

In the darkest corner of this exclusive upper room in the Memories of Queen Fee, the most fashionable and expensive club of all the clubs that overlooked the great Promenade in Suzail, the battered mountain of a man known as Mirt hid his rising interest behind a large and nigh empty goblet. If there was one thing apt to make nobles of Cormyr fall abruptly silent, it was being reminded that commoners—or worse, outlanders—were present and listening to them.

And if there was one good reason why a man who should have been dead a century ago, who’d been a lord himself in a different

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time and place, would spend far too much coin to drink with this lot of bores and snide highnoses, it was to overhear interesting things. Things that could be turned to his advantage.

Things that made Mirt feel as if there was any sort of reason to go on living at all, in this unfamiliar and darkening world.

Literally darkening. The night seemed on the verge of engulfing all, war erupted across the lands, and each day brought news of new strangeness. Stars fell from the sky; folks proclaimed themselves Chosen of this god and that, and gathered armed hosts to battle other self-proclaimed Chosen; and monsters boldly stalked farm fields and high streets night and day—*pah*.

'Twas like a bad dream.

But enough, the nobles were still gabbling. Of course.

"Lord Haelrood," young Lady Wyrmwwood was loudly telling the room, "I *gladly* accept your correction, for does not your care for this matter—your noticing the lengthening nights, and thinking on what it might mean—ride muster to my *point*? Grim portents are everywhere, the world around us darkens, and some great reckoning is at hand!"

"Great reckoning? I had *no* idea the Wyrmwwoods had been dodging the royal tax takers," Lord Harflame commented mockingly, from behind the decanters of fine Tethyrian rubyfire he'd been steadily emptying all evening. Club rules forbade doxies from entering the upper rooms, so rather than cradling a playpretty in either arm, he'd brought a perfumed glove from each of the two waiting for him, and perched them atop the decanters as boastful trophies for all to see. "A *great* reckoning coming, indeed!"

"Display not your ill breeding further, sirrah!" Lady Wyrmwwood spat. "I speak in all solemnity, caring for fair Cormyr above all—and we *are* at war, are we not? Or did you hide off in the countryside and do nothing to defend Suzail?—but beyond our borders, mindful of the fate of the vast world that cradles us all! Mock me not!"

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“Ah, but you offer such a splendid—dare I say ‘juicy’?—target, my *good* lady—”

“Harflame, *enough*,” old Lady Rowanmantle snapped, secure in the weight of her years and the formidable reputation she’d built over those many seasons. “What you dare or do not dare, and whether Lady Wyrnwood is correct or not, are alike neither here nor there. Your dares are your own amusements and follies entirely, but she fears for the future of our realm—and with good reason.

“War ravages our land once more, and I hear Cormyrean fights Cormyrean—something that even a *child*—if not a noble lord—must see can have no good ending for Cormyr. Moreover, since you seem for some inexplicable reason to need the reminder, ’tis the duty of nobility to ponder and fear for the future of their land, for that *is* their responsibility and their daily business. Or should be. As *true* nobles well know.”

Silence fell in the wake of that biting rebuke, and Harflame went pale and thin lipped. He sat back and reached for one of his decanters.

“Our realm has troubles and tumult enough,” another old lord muttered, “but wars are raging everywhere, on our soil included. We *should* worry. The lass speaks truth.”

One of the young ladies sitting with Lady Wyrnwood burst out eagerly, her eyes large and dancing in her fervor to be a part—at last!—of important matters, “Fabled Myth Drannor stands besieged! And there’s talk that gods long thought dead and gone are awakening! And Chosen—or folk believing they are Chosen, or base pretenders claiming to be Chosen, and those are all one when it comes to the damage done—of every deity, demigod, and half-forgotten place spirit are everywhere, toppling thrones and raising armies and murdering those who stand against them, or whose gold or fancy hats they covet.”

“A bad time,” Haelrood agreed heavily. “A bad time indeed.”

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Lord Snelgarth slammed down his twentieth empty goblet of the evening and snorted, “I think it all began when some sages started talking of the World Tree, and were allowed to go on doing so. Madness, sheer madness. Give me the Great Wheel, and I know where I stand. Give me order, and the rule of kings, and laws and good roads and warm indoor privies—”

“And clean water,” Lady Rowanmantle put in firmly.

“*And* clean water, aye, Lady, well said, so long as servants and peasants are taught to *use* it occasionally, upon their own persons—and I can live out my life content, worrying myself over the trifles my very safety gives me the luxury to raise into grave concerns. Caring about gossip and fripperies, secure in the knowledge that the Realms is as safe as it can ever be, life solid and sure for most, and peace preferred to war by sane folk. Not this ‘world all afire’ stuff. I’m too old for it.”

A darkly handsome stranger who’d just strolled into the room, a goblet and a sealed flask of the choicest Shaldaunsan glimmerfire in his hand, nodded at Snelgarth and murmured, “Me, too.”

Various nobles looked up at the sound of that smoothly cultured, purring, unfamiliar voice, but—not recognizing the face, and so judging the man an outlander—made no reply.

Into the resulting silence, as he unhurriedly crossed the room, the newcomer added, “Yet some old ways still hold true now as Marpenoth begins in this Year of the Rune Lords Triumphant—and just who are *they*, now? Feuds, hatreds, and the desire for revenge keep many of those of elder years alive and active rather than sinking into their dotage, as such things always have.”

“True,” Mirt granted, waving a hand at the empty chair across his table, as the man reached the back wall and discovered no handy vacant seats. “And which lord are you?”

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“Manshoon,” the darkly handsome man replied quietly, dropping into the proffered chair and using a thumbnail to unseal the glimmerfire with the ease of long practice. “Once, I was High Lord of Zhentil Keep. Just as you were once a Lord of Waterdeep, Old Wolf.”

Mirt’s eyes narrowed. “Now *that’s* a name I’ve not been called in many a year . . .”

Manshoon shrugged. “Old glory, older secrets. Yet you tarry here, in this pretty kingdom of knights in shining armor, great green forests, and foolheaded nobles. Why?”

“’Tis as pleasant a place to die as any, and the lasses are passing fair.”

“I’d noticed you partaking of their company, yes,” the darkly handsome man almost purred, over his goblet of glimmerfire. “Yet wolves can never content themselves with mere dalliance. Surely you have greater concerns.”

It was Mirt’s turn to shrug. “Don’t we all? Or pretend to, to justify our idleness? What concerns you, that you have time enough to listen to idle nobles prate and blow wind?”

“The Chosen of the gods concern me, as it happens. Specifically, that they now seem as abundant as wild-breeding rabbits, underfoot everywhere, all running about in confusion—save those who’re being rounded up and imprisoned.”

Mirt’s eyes narrowed. “Oh? By whom?”

“A god who wants to feed on their power, of course,” Manshoon replied. “The question is, which one? Obvious candidates leap to mind, but I like to be sure.”

“And the gods aren’t talking to you these days?”

“The mantle of Chosen is one I’ve never accepted.”

Mirt shrugged again. “Most of us never even receive such an offer.”

Manshoon sipped glimmerfire. “Do shepherds ennoble their sheep?” He set his goblet aside, and added, “I confess to be harboring

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growing curiosity as to your own standing, Old Wolf. Do you tarry here because someone divine asked you to? Are *you* a Chosen?"

Mirt smiled thinly. "Old wolves never tell."

Manshoon sighed. "Yet you just have, haven't you? Ah, but deeds press and time races on." He rose, drained his goblet, and set it down beside the flask. "Enjoy," he said, turning away. "I must see a goddess, about the fate of a world."

Mirt lifted bushy eyebrows. "What—again? What a *dashing* life you lead!"

The onetime lord of Zhentil Keep threw a scowl back over his shoulder, and was gone.

Mirt regarded the glimmerfire calmly, and resolved to take it with him, not touching a drop, and hurl it into a foundry fire. When the smiths were at a safe distance, of course.

The Manshoons of this world, he thought, are capable of *anything*.



Amarune heard the old man's approach long before she saw him, in the damp, deep forest: slow and careful but heavy footfalls. Nor were his the only footfalls she could hear.

There were others out there in the thick stands of trees, quieter than he was—and moving cautiously closer.

She shot a swift glance back into the tomb behind her to see if her companions had heard.

One wise old eye met hers just long enough to wordlessly tell her they had. Yet they kept to their work, seemingly unconcerned, so Rune kept to hers.

Not that she turned her back on the forest for an instant.

She'd thought nothing more dangerous than deer would disturb them here in this small but forgotten forest tucked into the rolling

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hills southeast across the Chionthar from Elturel. Too small to even be shown on most maps, and old and tangled and untouched by woodcutters. Well, so much for her judgment.

The old man came into view at last, ducking out from behind the trunks of trees as fleetingly as he could until he climbed the last leaf-covered ridge and bobbed up into the open.

At first, she pretended not to notice him, though anyone not deaf would have heard his coming, this close at hand. Heavy boots stalking with care through the rotting leaves, old stones, and dry dead ferns, not more than a dozen strides away.

She cast one swift glance in his direction through the fall of an errant lock of hair that always escaped her browband, just to make sure he carried no bow.

There was no sign of one, so she returned her attention to her work, not looking up again.

After all, he was just one man, and she could hear the wheeze in his breathing—and no matter how many others were skulking unseen out in the trees, the tomb had thick stone walls girt with much earth and gnarled tree roots, and only this one door.

Rune kept on scraping away the muck of centuries with her trowel. Gods, but small furry forest things shat a lot. And went to a lot of trouble to gnaw twigs and weave them into nests that—

“Well met.”

The old man’s greeting was flat and unfriendly. The sort of “Well met” a warrior tosses before him like a gauntlet, in challenge. He might as well have bluntly demanded to know her name and what she was doing—

“Who are you, and what’s your business? Here in the tomb of a wizard dead these three centuries?”

Rune straightened slowly to face the man, brushing her hair back from her face. Her two companions kept right on with their

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cleaning, bent over in their respective dark corners of Ralaskoun's crypt. Leaving this to her.

"Tennarra," she replied, giving the name she usually used when dealing with strangers. "I am, as you can see, cleaning."

The old face was unfamiliar, adorned with old scars, and more unfriendly than ever. "Aye, girl, but *why*? Most folk leave wizards' tombs well alone. Are you a tomb robber? Or one of those who seek to raise the dead?"

Rune gave him a frown back. "Neither. I work to cleanse tombs and bless them, so the dead won't rise and walk as liches."

The old man nodded. "Wizards itch to walk, aye. But they don't need help. Come out of there."

He wore homespun, and over it a leather jack that had once been part of some modest warrior's war harness. A belt knife and a short sword rode at his belt. He was burly, and had hands as hard as his face, but no gauntlets, and nothing drawn and ready.

"Come away *now*," he snapped, stalking closer. Rune could hear other footfalls in the forest now, to her left and right.

So could her two bent-over companions; she could tell from momentary pauses as they turned their heads to listen.

Rune sighed and drew back into the crypt. Away from its mouth, where she could be rushed from either flank or easily shot down with arrows. Into the damp, musty darkness of the unlit stone room with its plain, high stone-block casket, like the altars in many a way shrine.

"I said come out of there!" the old man snarled, drawing his sword.

Amarune backed along the casket, moving to her left. "The wizard Ralaskoun never married, and died childless. He can have no kin. So by what right do you tell me what to do and not to do, old man? Who are *you*?"

The old man ignored her question, advancing on her slowly. He'd taken but three slow, menacing steps when five men waving swords

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suddenly burst into view, three rushing out of the trees and bushes behind him to charge straight at Rune, and one coming around either front corner of the crypt to race along its walls right at her.

“How many?” one snapped at the old man, as he sprinted past.

“Her and two feeble old women behind her, inside,” the old man called, as the first swordsman reached Amarune—and hacked at her face viciously.

She sprang back, flicking her trowel full of twigs and old dirt into his face, and swept out her dagger. Trowel and dagger were feeble defenses against a broadsword, but—daggers came whirling past her ears out of the crypt behind her like darting wasps, and the swordsman thrusting ruthlessly at her was suddenly shrieking and clutching at his face.

Which meant he left his throat unprotected.

Amarune rushed forward to cut it open, but another dagger flashed past her arm from behind her and got there first.

Gurgling and spurting gore, the hilt jutting from under his chin, the swordsman sagged back into another rushing up right behind him, into a brief, stumbling collision. More swordsmen were heading the other way, rushing around the massive stone casket in the other direction—to promptly crash to their knees, gurgling and clutching their throats, though the flying daggers had come nowhere near them.

The foremost swordsman had fallen; Rune watched the second go down with the swarm of daggers stabbing at his head from all directions.

Beyond them, the old man had planted his sword point down in the trampled ferns, and was raising his hands to work magic.

Rune drew back her trowel for a throw, but he, too, was suddenly clutching at his throat and struggling to breathe, his eyes and then cheeks bulging as his face slowly went purple—and he toppled like a felled tree.

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Silence fell. Rune trotted swiftly around the wizard's casket to make sure all of their assailants were down. They were—and by the time she'd returned to the mouth of the tomb with the crone who'd been working on that side of the crypt, the other crone was standing in it, head lowered in concentration and hands spread.

They stopped and waited. It wasn't long before the first crone's head rose, eyes opened, and hands fell. "No one with a thinking mind near. Hold silence, though."

She turned to look at the other crone. They met each other's eyes, nodded, and lifted their arms in smooth unison like two tavern dancers embracing phantom lovers on a stage, both shaping empty air as if caressing it. Then they murmured wordless whispers of concentration and effort . . . and the forest in front of the tomb seemed to fade away beneath sudden, swift-spreading mist.

Mist that was neither damp nor clinging, but tinged with a luminous blue radiance. Mist that made Amarune's hair stand on end all over her body. Including up her nose.

Fighting down the urge to sneeze, she asked, "I recognized the war-daggers spell, but El, what did *you* do to them?"

"A very old and ruthless spell. Expands the tongue swiftly, and chokes its victim. Doesn't work on most mages these days, as the incantations they speak linger just enough to guard their tongues against such meddling. Everyone else, though . . ."

That crone had straightened to become a white-bearded, beak-nosed old man, gaunt and sharp eyed. The other became a tall, shapely woman with long, flowing silver hair that moved restlessly around her shoulders as if stirred by many breezes, or as if each tress had a snakelike mind of its own.

The man was Elminster, the ancient and infamous Sage of Shadowdale, and the woman was Storm Silverhand, the legendary hearth mother of the Harpers. Archmage and harpist, both fabled

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Chosen of Mystra. Traveling companions many a novice mage would not have dared to even approach.

Nor tarry within half a realm of.

Rune smiled a trifle bitterly. For her part, she hardly dared step out of their sight, for fear some fell foe watching them from afar would pounce on her and rend her with claws or spells or magic before she could draw breath to scream.

She'd been helping them as an unskilled laborer helps master crafters, handing them what they needed, cleaning up in their wake, and doing grunt work. Dirty dishes, for instance. She'd seen a lot of those, these past three tendays, as they trudged the backlands, from tomb to tomb and ruin to ruin, from overgrown and forgotten altar to hilltop way cairn. A young woman and two feeble old crones, ostensibly cleansing and blessing old graves to prevent undead from arising from the earth—but in truth, rebuilding the Weave.

It was like a vast and invisible web or intricate tapestry, its strands torn and snarled, whipping restlessly in the shifting winds and in need of anchoring.

Which was what they were doing: crafting new strands of force to bind the Weave to the few wards that had survived the ravages of the Spellplague, and repairing others that could be salvaged until they could serve as anchors. This tomb was one of a handful of unscathed wardings. Mystra or no Mystra, war or fresh spellstorms or wrathful Chosen or not, a stronger Weave meant a stronger world in the time ahead.

This mist now hiding the forest was no ground fog born of dampness nor weather magic, but something El and Storm had just spun from the wards of Ralaskoun's tomb to hide them from anyone magically spying from afar.

"Come back into the shadows," Storm bade Amarune. "We must take a look at our enthusiastic would-be murderers."

"Brigands?"

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El shrugged. "Those three, perhaps. But the old man who confronted ye, and this last of the sword swingers, here . . ."

He spread his hands in a way Rune knew was calling on the Weave to dispel all enchantments, stripping away disguises as well as protections and contingencies.

Looking down at the result, he nodded grimly.

"Shadovar. Minor arcanists, to be sure, among the least of Thultanthar. Thine own magic outstrips theirs. Possibly they sought magic in this tomb, and wanted no one else getting to it first."

"Or possibly, they were hunting us," Rune said quietly.

Elminster shrugged dismissively, but Storm looked past him at Rune and nodded, slowly and silently.

"This is not the first time these last few months Shadovar have been observed seeking magic," the Old Mage murmured. "I wonder what they want it for?"

"Shar's preparing her mortal armies to conquer all they can, and destroy what they cannot?" Storm hazarded.

Elminster sighed. "She's been doing little else these last few centuries." He shook his head. "Would that more of the gods would take up some *hobbies* . . ."

He sighed again, looked around the dark tomb, and announced briskly, "We, however, still have *our* work to do. So we can move on to Heatherhill and see what's left of Galmark Tower. Good wards it had, back when Vangerdahast was my 'prentice."

"El," Storm said gently, "we won't be able to do this Weave work in hiding for much longer. Things *are* getting worse across the Realms, not better. If half the gossip we hear is true, Chosen—or those who proclaim themselves Chosen, however deluded they may be—are being murdered as casually and as often as men stamp on cockroaches . . . and all too many of their slayers kill in the name of this god or that. All too often, Shar."

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El grunted. “Mayhap, bu—”

He broke off midword and crouched down hastily. Amarune turned to peer at him, startled, and saw that he was hiding his face in his hands. Hands that were returning to the knobble-jointed and age-spotted look they’d had when he was playing crone. Storm was resuming her crone shape just as swiftly.

The light in the tomb was changing. Rune turned to stare at the mist—and discovered it gone, the forest back at her feet again.

The two bent old crones scuttled back to the corners of the crypt, wheezing and humming, to resume cleaning as if they’d never stopped.

Amarune went from startled to frightened in one chill instant, realizing what she’d just witnessed.

Someone from afar had just magically turned off the wards, so as to see and hear everything inside the tomb.

“Who—?” she started to whisper, then hastily swallowed her words, and asked the rest of them to herself, in the silence of her own thoughts.

Who has the power to do that?

She stared at the crone she knew was Elminster. Just for a moment, one eye met hers—and one hunched shoulder lifted and then fell again, in a shrug.

Elminster didn’t know. And dared not try to find out.

Rune stared into the depths of the forest for a moment, feeling very alone and yet very watched. By unseen, unfriendly eyes.

Then she drew in a long, shuddering breath and bent to use her trowel to collect all the dirt and twigs she’d flung in the face of the man who was lying, very dead, right beside her.

She tried not to look at him. Or the second dead swordsman, beyond him.

Not that avoiding looking at things made them go away.

Even young children knew that.

Did archmages?