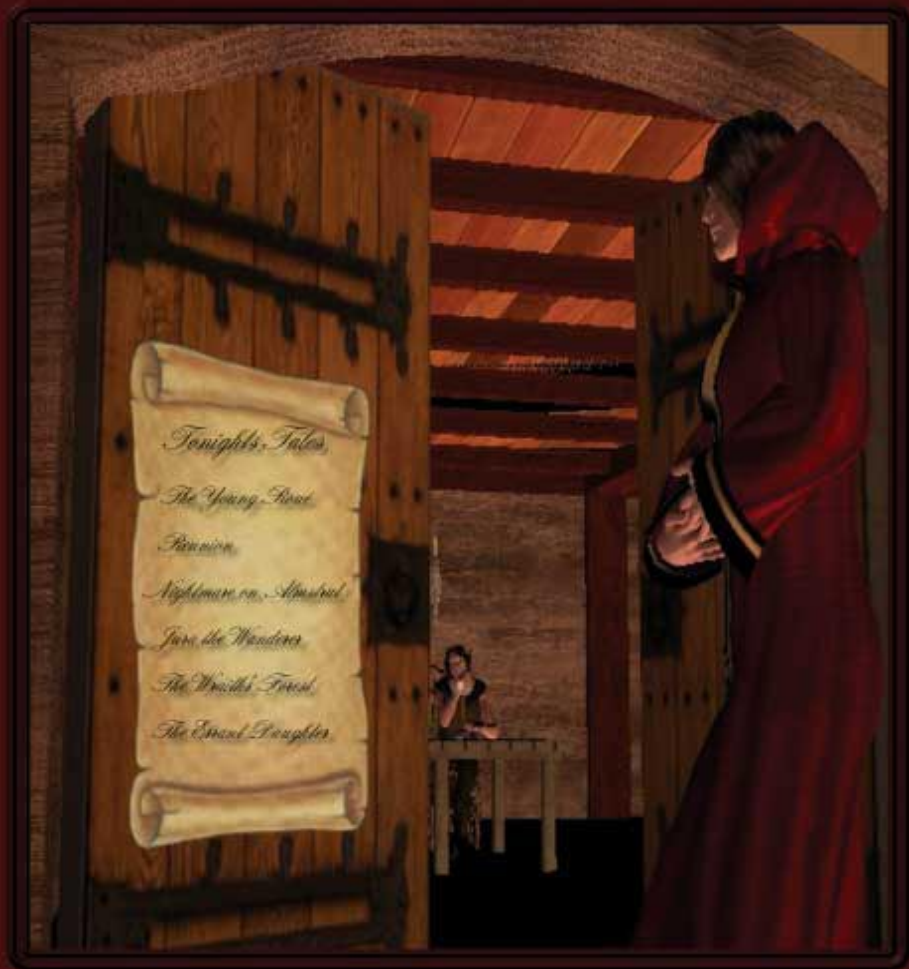


Favern Tales



Volume One

Edited by Jennifer Andersen

A ComStar Media, LLC Book

Tavern Tales

Volume One



A ComStar Media Book
Salem, Oregon

TAVERN TALES – VOLUME ONE

Edited by: Jennifer Andersen



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The Young Roué
An Azieran Tale
by Christopher Heath

The Young Roué
An Azieran Tale

Renwick laid upon the plush, velveteen pillows of a daybed wet with sweat and ale. Puffing gently on the hookah cord, opium smoke filled his lungs as all else melted into diaphanous cloud, becoming frivolous—buried in the depths of a sunken dream state. His sobriety was petitioned by loud raucous fare from the front of the heated den, and as this disturbance faded, the bard clung to his senses, even nodding in acknowledgement as a dapper gent seated himself across the marble tea table. The flaming hearth behind outlined his silhouette, as crackling embers met their demise. Renwick stared more intently with his half-elvish eyes, and the form then slid into focus.

“Chasing the dragon, my good dandy?” asked the stranger in panegyric fashion, a slight smirk upon the lips. The man was highborn, surely, clean-shaven and dark-haired, his features gaunt and thin, demeanor calm and patient. He wore an overcoat of finespun wool, beneath which could be seen a frilled jerkin of white lace. Brown leather breeks and low cut boots of black clothed his lower frame. He was a man of coin, that much was certain, even in the shadows of flickering firelight and subjected to a tinge of slick unclean—which the grungy den imposed upon all of its patrons.

Renwick stared down along his own slender form, noticing he was dressed in a fashion similar to this new acquaintance (save the overcoat) though he could not remember for how long he had donned this attire, and who had dressed him as such. A magnificent silver foil still remained at side, thankfully—for he recalled that much; the cherished blade was always near. His clothes were of finest make and undoubtedly expensive, though much like the daybed upon which he lay, stained with sweat and ale.

He brushed a tangled mess of jet-black hair from his eyes. *Chasing*

Reunion
by Lucinda Siverling

Reunion

*K*hedrine du Aurella nal Setran relaxed in the soft radiance of the day. Locks of her pale golden hair fell to the ground where she sat, curling around the stems of the various red and golden flowers. The home of Na'Haina was untouched by the whirl of elven society, by invitations to dances or debates. Her desire for quiet would be respected. Partly because Na'Haina had built her home far away from the centers of culture, choosing to dwell at the edge of a wide forest.

There were a few farming villages, and a handful of skilled crafters. Without the production of the elegant gem weaves, delicate jewelry, or intricate wooden trinkets, the area would have been entirely unremarkable. Nothing eventful had happened in living memory; they were far from the cities or the Mountains of Fire where dragons and griffons lived, and the great wars of the past had not troubled this region. Only the faeries and the tree-folk had lived here before, and the elves could live peacefully with them.

She was supposed to be meditating, considering the balance of violence and nurture in the cycle of life. The magical power that could summon lightning could also speed the mending of a broken bone, making harmony with the patterns of life very important. She'd only been studying to learn those specific sorts of magic over the past few decades, hardly any time at all, compared to some. But Khedrine would like to think that she'd learned to make better use of her time, to learn things quickly, rather than spending decades debating petty details, such as the meaning of a mage's spells being red rather than blue.

Her thoughts rebelliously kept turning to matters of love and loss and healing. Love was mysterious and powerful; and grief lasted for centuries. With a sigh, she realized that she was staring at the delicate, many-petaled crimson blossoms, her mind comparing them to roses, flowers that she hadn't seen in over a century.

So much had changed in those decades, and even more in the decades before that. The Khedrine who had left her mother's tower so long ago was almost unrecognizable in the Khedrine who sat now in her cousin's garden, calmly breathing the delicate floral perfumes. She smiled as the jewel-bright songbirds flitted from amber blossomed shrubberies to crimson flowers.

Three hundred years ago, she would never have been trying to meditate in a garden. Instead, she would have been lounging in a silken gown, feeling bored. She'd regularly attended every social gathering that she could, enjoying the fine music, the elegant dancing, and the games of flirtation. Magic had been little more than a diversion and a tool for socializing. But now, she was far more content to sit among flowers, pondering magic and memory.

Three hundred years ago, when she'd been young and overly confident, Khedrine had convinced herself that all of the tales of danger were only intended to keep the young elves from exploring, that it would be safe enough to leave the civilized lands. Everything from those travels lived in her memories, preserved with a near-painful clarity born of equal parts joy and pain, of fear and delight. She'd thirsted for truth and adventure, no longer satisfied with the tales of other's travels. The lure carried by the tales of strange, squat looking buildings, of barbaric ceremonies of state was too intriguing.

She had insisted that she wanted to explore the human realms, and would not listen to anyone who tried to dissuade her. Whispers of human cruelty and barbaric ways had not deterred her. Her mother's soft words that the ways of humans were not the same as the ways of the elven-kind had made her pause, but she had still wanted to go. She'd taken a few things, mainly to placate those who thought the journey too dangerous, and made her way to one of the places where the barriers between worlds were thin enough to slip through. It had been so easy to walk from the lands of the long-lived elven-kind to the lands of humans, and she couldn't figure out then why more people hadn't done just that. Why, the hardest part had been avoiding the notice of the Gate Guards. After that, just a few steps and a slight magical push, and she was through.

It had been a strange place, filled with unfamiliar plants bearing richly scented flowers. Some of the animals were similar to some that she knew, but just different enough to be exotic. There were so many stars, scattered in strange constellations that made the sky shimmer and sparkle. They were dazzling, and she took a moment to just stare in wonder. Nothing had prepared her for the bright ball of fire that filled the daytime sky with a painfully bright light: the previously unexplainable

human 'sun'. She had also been surprised by the moon that hung in the night sky, growing round and then shrinking to a sliver before becoming dark, then repeating the whole cycle over again.

She emerged in an isolated place, thick with streams and patches of deep, sucking mud. There were also swarms of tiny insects, things that tried to go into her eyes, causing her to cough repeatedly as she accidentally inhaled one. A thin magical shield around her kept them away after that, and she wondered why none of the tales of brave explorers in the human lands had mentioned the swarming insects or the sucking mud. Nor had the tales mentioned that so many of the plants seemed to have prickly parts, from spines along the leaves to sharp bits like little claws along the vine-like branches.

There had been no humans in the insect-filled bog-lands, so she had decided to move outwards, to go farther from the gate. There would be another somewhere else, she was certain of it. After all, there would not be so many of the Gate Guards unless there was a multitude of places where things could pass through. They would not even have the Guards unless it was feared that dangers could use the thin places to enter the elven-lands.

Eventually, Khedrine had left the bog-lands, the mud becoming less thick, the insects fewer. The deep bogs became shallow marshes crossed with hundreds of tiny trickles of water, and gradually those became fewer, changing to rolling grasses, with tiny hills and valleys. There were fewer insects, and the smells were far more enjoyable. This was the sort of place that she could imagine people choosing to inhabit. Perhaps there would be some farmers, growing their crops and tending to herds of grazing animals.

Her first sighting of a human had not been at all what she'd expected. She'd just come to the top of one of the tiny hills that undulated over the grasslands. The smell caught her attention immediately, something like copper and bile and something else, powerful and unpleasant. Glancing around to see what could cause such a collection of smells, she'd seen red splashed over the grass. In the center of the red, there was a man, far thicker and more muscular than any elf. His dark hair was matted with blood, and his eyes were strange white rings around brown circles with little black dots in the center, wide and unblinking at the bright sun. The realization was sudden and unpleasant; the man was dead.

She'd never seen a dead body before. This man hadn't simply fallen dead; he was dead because someone had killed him. Deep gashes showed red muscle against tannish skin, one arm clearly broken, half upraised as if to try to ward off a blow, and dark red blood had spilled everywhere.

Flies had settled on the spilled blood, on the gaping wounds, at the edges of the unseeing eyes, and they buzzed upwards, startled by her presence.

Horrified, Khedrine had staggered away, retching into the grass. Her thoughts were troubled, circling over what could have done that to him. Were the humans trying to deal with the attacks of goblins or some strange, new menace? For a few moments, she could do nothing except gasp, shudder, and feel suddenly, horribly certain that this would be nothing like the tales of adventure and exploration. They'd told of strange sights, of a people that knew nothing of great magics, not of sucking mud, buzzing insects, and dead bodies lying in the grass. She almost turned back, wanting to go home with all of the comforts that she was used to enjoying. But how could she face the people at home if her journey of discovery had uncovered only mud, swarming insects, and a single dead human? She would be a laughingstock. Her pride would not let her do that.

Surely, she should learn what had killed the man and if there was something attacking them. Her mind could almost see it – if she returned with the first warning of something, not dangerous enough to invade, but enough to be wary, that would certainly be something to boast about. Something brave, and adventurous, impressive enough that nobody would think of her as 'young Khedrine', no longer a silly girl but a capable mage.

Trembling, she'd wiped at her mouth, finding some water to wash away the sourness of her own bile and fear. A bit more caution was needed, at least until she knew what had killed the man. She'd been using a whisper-weak barrier to keep away the tiny insects, a little more effort should prevent her from being noticed at all. It wouldn't do to go back yet, and she wouldn't want to have to face whatever had done that to the dead man.

She'd been learning in her travels, though, and not just how to make absolutely certain that her defenses didn't falter while she walked, rested, or slept. Carefully, she'd been trying to learn what the various unfamiliar plants did, what could be eaten, and what bore fruit, what flowers smelled pleasing and what seemed to attract insects. One thing that she'd learned was that the round-bodied insects with the yellow and black stripes stung, but if she could follow them to their nest, there was a sticky, oozing amber sweetness inside. Another surprise was that the little brightly colored wings that fluttered near the flowers didn't belong to tiny fairies, but to yet more insects, these apparently harmless, with delicate legs and long tongues that let them sip at the nectar of flowers.

Eventually, her careful explorations had led her to a human village.

Nightmare on Alnstrat
by
Ramsey and Margaret S.
Lundock

Nightmare on Almstrat

“Do you really think the villagers are going to fall for this?” Dansil asked as he pounded the iron spike deeper into the ground. Already it seemed he’d driven the fifteen-foot rod into hell itself, but Grundel wanted it deeper still.

“The blacksmith loaned us all this iron without question. The brewer donated three barrels of beer. These people are so desperate for a little entertainment, they’ll do anything for some diversion,” Grundel retorted.

Dansil wiped back his scraggly red hair. He looked through the bleak woods surrounding the clearing where they’d made camp, to the thatched roofs of the dreary little town of Almstrat. It was an isolated, forgotten village whose biggest excitement came when the baker sprinkled cinnamon on the pretzels instead of salt. He could see how people around here would be starved for some fun.

“But how are we going to put on a whole carnival?”

“That’s the beauty of it, we don’t have to. I’ve got locals lined up to play some music, a little concertina, a little mandolin, a little um-pa-pa. There are some girls who do folk dances. When the people get here, we’ll run through the carnival games a couple of times, then give some kids the honor of running them. Have you got the booths tacked together? Is the paint dry?”

Dansil nodded.

“Is there enough wood piled for a really big bonfire?”

“They’ll be able to see the flames from Almstrat Platz.”

“I don’t care if they can see it from Almstrat. Will our other visitor be able to see it?”

“If he comes through these woods, he will. But how is a carnival going to draw...”

Grundel stopped him with a wave of his gloved hand, “It’s not just