

Tavern Tales



Volume One

Edited by Jennifer Andersen

A ComStar Media, LLC Book

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A ComStar Media Book
Salem, Oregon

TAVERN TALES – VOLUME ONE

Edited by: Jennifer Andersen



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Favern Tales
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The Young Rowé
An Azieran Tale
by Christopher Heath

The Young Rowé

An Arieran 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 the dragon?* “Caught the dragon and much more, I am sure,” the young bard answered, making the effort to sit upright and pay this visitor proper respect. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” He reached out to a silver tankard etched in copper, portraying will-o-wisps dancing upon a marsh. Renwick raised the cup, motioning a faint salute to his unexpected companion, before tilting the honey mead to his lips.

“Must I need a reason to engage in pleasant conversation?” questioned the stranger. He suddenly remembered his manners, leaning forth and extending a hand out over the rectangular tea table. “Daschskul is my name, and yours?”

“Renwick Dothlind of the House of Dothlind, Malkan Bree.”

“Pleased to meet you, Renwick Dothlind of Malkan Bree.”

“Likewise.”

“Come to Moongoth to fight in the wars? There is a tempest brewing, surely, and this is the storm front.”

The bard laughed his discord. “Nay, I shall be long gone at the first signs of conflict. When word reaches my ears that the Cinderlands are on the move, I shall strike north, back toward Malkan Bree, then

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

Nightmare on Almstrat
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 a carnival. It’s the famous Harvest Festival, Harfest. Get it? Harvest Festival-Harfest!” Grundel chuckled.

Dansil sighed and nodded, Grundel was very proud of his play on words, “Alright then, how is the Harfest going to draw in a Nightmare?”

“Pay attention, my boy, and learn from the master. There’s a haunted castle in the hills on the other side of Almstrat, said to house a witch or some other nasty thing, right?”

“If you believe the stories mothers use to scare impudent children.” Dansil sighed.

“Well, I for one do believe them because one of those stories is about the Damonisch Rat, the demon council, which meets once every ten years in the depths of the abyss. By my calculations it should meet in seven days, on the full moon, right?”

Dansil nodded again, not wanting Grundel to delve once more into how he calculated the exact date of the Damonisch Rat.

“Legend has it that Nightmares are sent to summon the guests from this world one week before the Damonisch Rat. What do you suppose happens if a guest doesn’t show up? Maybe he has his guild-hall privileges revoked, or maybe he has to pay a fine.”

“You shouldn’t joke about those things,” Dansil said, glancing nervously about the leafless, gnarled

Jura the Wanderer
by H. Winterthorne

Jura the Wanderer

Jura sat on the chair-shaped throne of stone by the dead inland sea. A weak breeze stirred her green grey hair, the color of old ice frozen for thousands of years. The ribs of a great serpent lay in a multitude of tapered prongs winding about, stuck in the ice. Dried skin flapped in tatters for a thousand paces. The skull bent down to her, still attached to the vertebrae. She stood, reached up to a fang three times her height, and gripped the tip hard. She let the cold iced tooth chill her flesh, as if it could do any harm, then she focused, reached inward, caught the residual energy in the bone and drew it out.

Even the air about her stopped moving. A sudden loud CRACK then smaller ones broke the silence and that too decreased to a hissing as the massive fang broke, shattering and dissolving into powder. She brushed the bone dust off her hands.

She smiled, that little dinner had been fun.

The sea serpent had thrashed in eagerness at the sight of such a small but potent supper standing on the rocks. Over three hundred times longer than Jura, it aimed right for her, teeth as long as her body opened wide to welcome her.

They missed.

Jura leapt and went for the soft-scaled throat, her hands sinking in fast through skin and muscle to grab the neck bones.

The serpent roared, rage covering up the draining feeling. It slammed against the scarp, trying to dislodge then eat the irritation.

Jura grunted as her hips and legs broke, the flesh about them bloodied and pulped. She held on, draining as fast as her need and ability allowed. The dead zone spread rapidly, the serpent couldn't raise its forelimbs to scratch her off. It couldn't lower its head to bite at Jura because she was too high. The roars became moans and the moans whimpers as bits of flesh showed through. The bones went bare with sinews drying, tightening them into place. Scales melted, skin drew back, muscles receded into thready clumps. Half an hour later, Jura was left hanging on a dry empty carcass.

Shrunken mounds of fur that once were deer, wolves, and even a mountain lion, mere snacks, were scattered about the seashore. The desiccated remains of thousands of fish floated like so many dead leaves. Without underwater food, the serpent had come to the surface, and Jura had been waiting. It had cost her body a good deal. She'd never been this bold, this desperate, this HUNGRY!

The last depression in her side closed up. The last fracture healed. It was nice not to have a crushed pelvis anymore, not that she needed her legs to hold on once her fingers had sunk into the leviathan's flesh, it had just hurt, a lot. Not for long, a sunset to sunrise in the dead of winter wasn't long at all.

That damned crevasse had been much deeper than she had thought. It took too long to get out after the storm hit. A score of years was too long. The children she'd seen in the village nearby were grown by now with babies of their own. They warily welcomed her with dried fish and weak ale but she was much hungrier than that. To get what she needed, Jura didn't know how far she would have to travel

The Wraith's Forest
by Judith Leger

The Wraith's Forest

The late afternoon light glinted off the golden-skinned fruit that rested in the dirt and small rocks beneath the Tree of Providence. The Tree's yellow-green, heart-shaped leaves and grayish-white bark stood bright against the darker leaves of the surrounding forest.

Keely hesitated on the dirt path leading to the small clearing where the Tree grew. The straw basket, strapped to her back, thumped against her shoulder blades. She squinted, unsure of what she saw, but the nearer she came, the stark truth of the fallen fruit struck as a physical blow to her middle. She gasped, sudden fear snapping her forward across the rocky rise to lift the fruit with great care. A strong citrus scent rose from the fuzzy skin covering the ripened orb.

At first, she found nothing wrong, but when she looked closer, she noticed a dark bruise forming on the side that struck the ground. She studied the stem. A thin sliver of bark protruded from the tip. She considered the weight of the round fruit and wondered if that was what caused it to fall, or could there be truth in what the elders claimed about the Tree? Guilt flooded her thoughts as she frowned up through the branches and leaves to the clear sky. "Did you feel my emotions? Could you tell I did not desire to be here?"

Why had this happened? The last day of the harvest, she had looked forward to completing her task and returning home to her expectant mother. Heavy with child, her sweet mother denied needing assistance, but Keely noticed her labored movements.

With a mental groan, she laid the fruit next to the trunk. Tales of the other woman this happened to flitted through her mind. Laura Rose. She had been eighteen, older than Keely by one year, when she had gone to the tree to harvest and found a fallen fruit. A beauty they claimed she had been, golden-haired with innocent blue eyes, slight of stature and full of grace. All the local men desired to claim her as their wife. But that fact had done little to save Laura Rose's sanity from the inhuman creature that wandered the forest. At least, that is what the older ones of the valley declared.

Keely's gaze wandered to where the forest loomed along the perimeter of the small hill where the Tree flourished. She searched for the dark-robed shape of the Wraith. Shadows danced and darted among the timber and bushes. Wind raced through the canopy, shaking loose leaves and branches from the massive oaks. The breeze captured wisps of Keely's black hair and swirled them about her cheeks. The hem of her plain brown skirt fluttered against her ankles.

Ancient trees towered all around her. The locals named the ominous woods after the Wraith. With the Tree of Providence in a small clearing deep within the forest, the path to it remained protected from outsiders because of the spectre. Not human, and not fully a spirit, he existed in a half-life. For reasons lost over the years, he allowed the young women to come and go when the time to harvest arrived; that is, as long as they remained on the path and in the clearing, and did not wander into the trees.

Keely found no comfort for her fear and worry, and she saw no Wraith. Her heart burdened with anxiety, she groaned. She glanced at the fallen fruit. The valley's wizard, Master Nole, needed all the harvest to brew the elixir that helped keep balance in the valley. She hoped the damage was minor.

The Errant Daughter
by Jennifer Lee

The Errant Daughter

“I’m bored.”

“So study then.”

“That’s what’s boring me,” Jylynn said as she slammed closed the large tome in front of her. Elspeth jumped and looked at her sister disapprovingly.

“If Father comes in here and your book is closed...” she warned.

“Then he will throw a mighty fit and I will no doubt be punished.” Jylynn lounged back in her chair, covering her eyes with her long thin fingers. “What I wouldn’t give for some excitement!”

“There shall be plenty of excitement when he sees you aren’t studying like he told you to,” Elspeth said softly as she turned back to her book.

“You study. You’re good at it. I’m not. I just want to go out there and do something. Besides,” Jylynn said with a sly smile, “I already know magic.”

“You will finish your studying much sooner if you stopped indulging in your fantasies and started studying,” Elspeth said not even looking up from her book. She was used to Jylynn’s stories.

Elspeth looked up as she heard what could only be magical words emanate from her sister. Before her eyes a light shot out of her sister’s hand causing the air around them to explode with a sparkle of lights. Although she was astonished by her sister’s ability, she couldn’t help but giggle like a child as she looked around the sparkling room.

“What is the meaning of this?” an overly calm and quiet voice demanded from the doorway. Jylynn and Elspeth both jumped in their chairs and wore identical looks of surprise on their identical faces. Both girls had the same long flowing silvery hair, the same golden almond shaped eyes, and the same pert nose and small mouths. The difference really lay in the personality of the two, their father reflected as he eyed them with suspicion. While Elspeth’s silvery hair was tied back out of her face, ideal for pouring over a book, Jylynn’s hair was flung messily around her with no rhyme or reason to the look. Elspeth’s face was unadorned by powders or enhancers, while Jylynn had exotic colors painted across her eyes and lips. Elspeth had a few tasteful adornments on the lobes of her pointed ears and around her neck, while Jylynn’s strategy seemed to be to shove every piece of jewelry she owned onto her body. Her wrists were full of bracelets, many necklaces were jumbled on her neck of both cheap and expensive types, and she had a ring on every finger. Elspeth dressed more in line with her class, her pale violet dress revealing nothing but her simple elegance, while Jylynn’s audacious colors and flimsy fabric made her look more like an entertainer than the daughter of a noble who was the Chancellor of Chaos. All of this reflected the more studious nature of Elspeth, as well as the wild streak Palmer had tried hard to remove from Jylynn.

“Father, Jylynn was just showing me her magic,” Elspeth said, taking the blame as if she had asked for this demonstration. It was always this way with them, Palmer knew. He looked at Jylynn, ignoring Elspeth’s words.

“Your instruction was to read your studies, not to expend your abilities with these fruitless spells.”

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Tavern Tales Volume One

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