

The Night Tymora Sneered

By Ed Greenwood

"No, I don't think it'd be a particularly clever idea to kick over the ladder!" the chatelaine snapped. "These men have work to do, unfamiliar as that word might be to you. You're not here to play pranks on people -- you're here to be presented to Lord Piergeiron and perhaps even impress him, unlikely as that prospect increasingly seems. Now come along. The Shipwrights' Room, remember?"

The young noble -- haughty far beyond his eight winters -- made a rude, wordless sound of disgust and bolted from the room, lace collar already askew. The chatelaine darted after him, barely having time to send an apologetic look back at the two men in the shelf-lined chamber deep in Castle Waterdeep.

They gave her grins, shared wry glances and a shaking of heads, and returned to their work.

The slender, younger one at the top of the ladder grunted, "If yon mighty-bottom had tried felling me, 'twould have given me the greatest of pleasure to use this wand on him."

"And give him the head of a boar?" asked the large-nosed, aging man at the bottom of the ladder. "Or is it the one that inverts intentions, so he'd have tried his best not to play pranks on anyone, for a change?"

"Neither. It's a wand of wonder."

The older man scowled. "Idiot! There's no telling what it would have done in here, with all these magics around us! You could have destroyed half Waterdeep and us with it!"

"I wasn't dreaming of triggering it, Oruld," the younger man replied with an obviously assumed air of innocence. "I was thinking of thrusting it up his behind until he shrieked. He's so full of --"

"That'll do, lad," Oruld said severely, "that'll do. Now back to work. We've got that whole end row up there to do, yet."

He took up quill once more, planted one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder to anchor it, peered at the ledger board thrusting diagonally out and up from his belt to the full stretch of his shoulder straps to find the next line entry again, and waited.

The young man sighed, muttered, "You're no fun," at the ceiling, and rummaged in the next box. "'Decanter of endless soda water,'" he declaimed, "whatever that is. The handwriting looks like the Blackstaff."

"Ours is not to speculate, Reld. Matches my ledger. Next box."

The young man reached, peered, and read, "'Rod of lordly might, one. Condition fair.'"

"Matches. Next."

"'Cursed ring of sustenance that starves wearer.' Khelben's writing again. And we'd have such a thing why?"

"To keep it out of the hands of someone who'd misuse it, lad," the older man explained patiently. "Matches. Next."

"'Legendary nunchucks of . . . hard to read, but I think it's 'Galmai.' What's a nunchucks?'"

"Never you mind. Should be 'nunchaku,' but don't bother handing it down; I'll correct the label later. I wondered what 'LNG' meant, here on the ledger. Old Murlith's writing, of course. Next."

"'Healing potion that kills imbiber with self-doubt. Thayan.'" Reld's voice was incredulous. "I don't recognize the writing, but how would anyone know that's what it does and still be alive to say so? Hey?"

"You, lad," Oruld said severely, "are making the very great mistake of applying logic to the affairs of wizards. Treat them all as raving crazed-wits, liable to run amok at any moment, and you'll live longer. Trust me. Matches. Next."

"Trust you. Right. Of course. I'd be a fool not to be doing so already, right? Being as you're holding the bottom of the ladder and all. 'Sphere of annihilation, instructions for locating. Warning: rune-protected.'" Reld shook the box and added, "Sounds like just a sheet of folded parchment in there."

"'Tis. I tried to read it once. All coded nonsense words and strange sigils. Matches. Next."

"You tried . . . And what about the runes? Or were you a tall, beautiful elf lass, and they did that to you?"

"Funny, lad, very funny. They do have to recast the runes sometimes, you know."

"Oh? Why?"

"When someone triggers them trying to steal all these secrets, of course."

"What?" Reld leaned out so far on the ladder to peer down that he had to make a hasty grab at a heavy box to keep from overbalancing. "Who?"

Oruld shrugged. "I know not. But -- oddly enough -- she was a tall, beautiful elf lass." He squinted up the ladder, and asked softly, "How is it that you knew to mention her?"

There was a moment of tense silence, and the man at the top of the ladder rippled, and . . . changed.

Oruld heaved on the ladder with all his strength as something that looked like a black cat but wasn't came swarming down its rungs at him, all fangs and reaching claws. The ladder toppled sideways very slowly . . .

He almost made it to the door but tripped over something before he could reach its pull-ring.

Fangs tore out his throat as he frantically tried to scramble up. As he choked helplessly and the world started to go red, Oruld had just time to see what had doomed him. He'd fallen over -- the body of Reld, staring fixedly up at the dark, distant ceiling. There was dust on those staring eyes.

Then there was . . . nothing at all.

"This night at the Bloody Fist, called for nine bells. I'm not looking forward to it."

"Liable to be a brawl?"

"Liable to be just about anything. I mean, really: a gnome-halfing wedding blessed by Sune?"

"Hah! An orgy, then. Take only men who've seen what our little friends get up to before, or some of them'll get hurt while they're staring around with their jaws around the ankles!"

"And not just their jaws, ho stlarning ho. That's not what I'm worried about -- 'tis the guest-list."

"I looked and recognized not a name. So they're all outlander thieves, or slayers-for-hire, or something?"

"Nothing that easy. Look: That one's a gnome who likes to eat priests -- human priests, roasted on platters with stlarning apples in their mouths!"

"What?"

"You heard me. And this one's a Textsmith of Gond, or says he is, but according to Naevur's report he's really a priest of Tempus who lost his holy symbol and got his wits addled in 'an Illithid tea party,' whatever that is. I had Naevur's scroll out because this servant of Gond or Tempus was reported trying to sell a matched pair of magical warhammers -- one fire, one ice -- in the gods-be-cursed middle of Undermountain! Stepped right out in front of a band of adventurers on their first dungeon crawl!"

"I hear you. Will he be any the crazier than the rest of them, though, once they've been at the wine?"

"I'm not looking forward to finding out. Or dealing with this one here, either."

"'Darathra of the Deep Trees'? Some sort of wild woman of the forest?"

"A priestess of Mielikki with a temper like a winter seastorm. She lives with her unicorn steed, sleeps with her unicorn steed, and rides the stlarning unicorn steed everywhere. She'll ride it right into the Fist, trust me, and you can imagine what that'll start, once enough hungry gnomes have got enough drink aboard!"

"They'll try to butcher and roast it -- so she'll try to butcher them without bothering with the roasting."

"Exactly. Now, how many of the Guard can I have? Here and war-ready, by eight bells at the latest?"

"Can't you just --"

"No, I cannot. Watchmen don't customarily wear full coat-of-plate armor and wear an arsenal of edged steel. Nor can they command the Watchful Order to send dozens of mages to stand with them. Not to mention what fun'll go on in the rest of Dock Ward this night, and everywhere else, too, once our good citizens realize I've emptied the Watch barracks and sent everyone to a lone tavern in Dock Ward!"

A sigh gave way to a growl of exasperation, and it was promptly followed by the words: "Orlavar's command, and Emmurgan's, too. They're both still in training and will no doubt give stoneheaded orders, but I gave them veterans -- to teach them, of course -- who can be trusted to ignore them if necessary and do the right things. Even if it's slaughtering scores of gnomes, halflings, and oddbrain wedding guests in the heart of Dock Ward."

"I'm glad you said as much. It'll be a great comfort to me when we're both standing in front of Piergeiron trying to explain things. At about the time he's glowering at us over the rows of caskets and telling us oh-so-grimly how the wild-tales of what happened are going to ruin Waterdeep, spreading up and down the Sword Coast and clear across Faerûn to the Lands of the Gods beyond."

"Thank me not, as I'm not thanking you. Just remember: You made the request, so you speak first. Say whatever you like, but try to keep him from drawing his sword and beheading us both before I get a chance to back you up, will you?"

Now on that fair night of the planned union of Talaressa Wondergleam of Dock Ward and Lucklai Minstrelwish of Secomber, there was no more ramshackle tavern in all Waterdeep than the Bloody Fist.

Leaning crazily over the moot of Snail and Presper Streets in Dock Ward, its stairs rotten and its roof a ruin of missing tiles, holes, and sailtar-splotch patches, walls bowed with leakwater and splotted with stinking mold, it was a maze of props and crossbraces and turnbuckle-cables and would have collapsed into groaning ruin long ago but for their presence.

As it was, it groaned like a living thing by day and night. Scarcely a highsun passed without careful hammering to replace something that had fallen off since the last highsun. The Fist would have been spell-flattened and rebuilt long ago had it not been for the stubborn nature of its proprietor, Belgrim (who'd not been called "the Bold" during his sellsword days for nothing, though regulars at the Fist had noticed that he switched the villainous-looking black eyepatch he wore from one eye to the other, from time to time), and for the steady stream of clientele seemingly quite prepared to put up with its filth, smells, splinters, and unsafe footing.

They in turn were attracted by the Fist's brightest features: its justly famed dancing girls who danced on friendlier surfaces far more often than they dared clamber up onto the most solid surface in the Fist (the bar); and "Below," the gnome brothel had been operating out of the Fist's undercellars for at least a summer. Placed in formerly flooded and still damp chambers, the area was made usable only by frequent washings in strong perfume to slay energetic mold and by gnome-crafted pumps working night and day. The rhythmic thudding of those sturdy devices were said by some to be "inspiring" and admittedly covered other sounds, allowing folk to really enjoy themselves and not disturb the serious drinking going on over their heads. And serious drinking in the Fist always seemed to require the muttered accompaniment of shady deals being crafted.

"Are we ready?" Belgrim growled at one of the Laughing Sisters. She giggled -- they always giggled -- and buzzed close to nip playfully at his ear, gossamer wings buzzing.

"As much as we ever are. Something's wrong with the forcebar, though."

"What? You mean it's not working? Bells of Beshaba, we'll have the walls falling and folk plunging through the floor and the ceilings coming down on our heads, once they all start to crowd --"

"Relax," his barmaid soothed, sucking blood from the tiny wound she'd caused. "It's up! It's just . . . causing something else, too."

Belgrim brushed her away impatiently. "Stop trying to eat me! Problem customers only, remember?" He growled angrily as she giggled again then asked, "What 'something else'?"

Hips of Sune, the Sisters could be irritating! If having six hrasted-near identical flesh-eating fairies as barmaids wasn't so useful -- not just for spying or in a brawl but for racing tankards straight to customers and bringing men in just to gawk at their shapely little barenesses -- he'd have crushed them all seasons ago! Just to be rid of their maddening giggles, to say nothing of this habit they had of teasing you with unfinished explanations of what was important, hrast it!

"But you taste so nice, Master! Really, you do! Why, we --"

"WHAT SOMETHING ELSE?" Belgrim roared, whirling around to face her. Tszimurdue -- at least, he thought it was Tszimurdue; she had bigger bells than some of the others -- squeaked like a frightened mouse and backed hastily out of reach, wings whirring.

As he glared at her, she stared back at him, eyes very large and dark, and mewed, or yipped, or whatever little short cries were properly called when they were too dramatic and controlled to be called "hiccups" for a few frantic breaths before she blurted, "The forcebar's holding walls and all up as it's supposed to, but inside it -- in here -- it's made magic go wild!"

The owner of the Bloody Fist stared at his barmaid for a moment, blinking, and then sighed. "Blessed Beshaba loves me," he groaned, "and bright Tymora hates me! Was it something I said?"

"Well, Master, there was that time when you said if she was a real woman and within your reach, you'd --"

"Enough! Leave it unsaid -- we're in enough trouble!" Belgrim clenched his hairy fists, stalked across the room until a wall got in his way, resisted the temptation to make a new door in that wall (he'd done enough such damage a few days back), and whirled around again.

"You," he said, firmly, "are going to hurry off to Mirt's Mansion, flying high and fast so no Dock Warder has a chance to net or shoot you. You'll go in its front entrance the proper way, so as not to run afoul of his magics, and tell him Belgrim needs to call in a favor. When he tells you to fly high and far and do disgusting things to yourself along the way, say this to him: 'The dwarf revenant walks, but the ancient copper dragon has a few body parts extra.' Then leave, without bandying words with him, and get yourself back here. Got that?"

"'The dwarf revenant walks, but the ancient copper dragon has a few body parts extra.' Very well, Master." Again that maddening giggle. "So, what does it mean?"

"Stlarned if I know, but it makes Lords of Waterdeep come running like a one-legged priest of Torm wearing a boot of speed!"

The faery gave him a bewildered look, murmured something that sounded suspiciously like 'Humans get stranger and stranger,' and buzzed out the little window above the door.

Belgrim glared up at it. He'd nailed a metal patch over it yestereve, and what had happened to that?

As if in answer, there were giggles beside his ears -- just before they both received sharp little bites. He swatted, not caring what he might crush. "Go and get the dancing girls awake! I can't do everything!"

"So they said," one faery giggled.

"Very loudly, too," the other agreed, buzzing away behind the bar with Belgrim's angry growl pursuing her.

It was at that moment that the one feature of the tavern that Belgrim Huldorsord took pride in -- the round front door with its gigantic row of copper knuckles drenched in red paint -- banged open, shaking the taproom and bringing showers of dust down all around him.

The tavernmaster blinked. "And who by all the Nine reeking Hells are you?"

The figure in the doorway overtopped him by more than a head, and its shoulders were even wider than his oxlike ones. Of course, those proportions might belong to the magnificently gleaming, blued metal full plate armor, and not its wearer.

Who judging by her impressive breastplate was female. Or then again might be male, if one went by the ram-horn-jutting codpiece.

A gauntleted hand swept the visor of the warhelm aside; it opened sidewise like a curving door, rather than lifting up. The revealed face had a chin resting on a full gorget inside, a long and wandering white scar down one cheek, and brown eyes that caught Belgrim like two daggers, promising a liquid brown melting if he proved friendly -- and swift death if he did not. Female.

"I am Barrera Alhound, Just Blade of Tempus," the voluptuously armored figure said, "and this --" the paladin touched the hilt of a fearsome-looking cross-slung broadsword for the briefest of moments "-- is the Sword of Many Heads. Are Wondergleam and Minstrelwish to be wed here, this night?"

"They are," Belgrim replied wearily. "What's that to you?"

The gauntleted hand pointed down at the gleaming codpiece. "This is the Holy Horn of the Wargod. Were I a man, I'd be hacking and brawling my way through your tavern right now. As it is, I must fight the urge to draw steel with my every breath. So goad me not, man, but find me a place to hide until the time is right."

"And what time might that be?"

"When the penguins try to steal Talaressa's chastity belt, of course."

"So the renowned swashbuckler says to the drunk gnome spellweaver: that's not yer lost spellbook, he says, that's my --"

"Ahem," the faery said brightly, soaring over the bald man's shoulder to hover between two noses. One belonged to this bald old man with the golden skin, the other to the infamous Mirt the Moneylender. The fumes arising from the goblets they were crouching over made her buzz crazily to one side. "Gods, what is that?"

"Inn of Neutrality, 'tis called," Mirt wheezed. "Don't be drowning in mine, now -- takes some trouble to mix one. I imagine ye're here to see me?"

"A fair guess," the bald man put in, "seeing as few folk have anything urgent to say to a wandering monk of Kara-Tur." He peered at the faery. "My, but you're a beauty, aren't you?"

"Careful," Mirt warned, "she bites."

The faery pouted, and the monk bent even closer in fascination. "Some sort of vampire?"

"Nay. Eats human flesh, actually."

"Now that you've quite spoiled my chances," the Laughing Sister spat, "have this message! It comes to you from my master Belgrim Huldorsord of the Bloody Fist: 'The dwarf revenant walks, but the ancient copper dragon has a few body parts extra.'"

"Ohh, dung!" Mirt brought his boots crashing down onto the floor. Emptying his goblet in a choking rush, he flung it the clanging length of the room and reached for a belt that bore a battered old saber and a pair of matching daggers.

He was buckling it on even before the monk frowned and said, "Aren't we going to settle this little matter of what my gems are worth in coins of Waterdeep? Or d'you need me properly drunk first?"

As the faery buzzed back the way she'd come, Mirt the Moneylender settled the weapon-belt on his hips, belched, and replied, "Everything'll have to wait, Loreth. The fate of all Waterdeep stands imperiled again."

The monk sighed and took up his staff from where it was leaning against the wall. "It rather sounded like that, yes. To battle."

The staff emitted a shrill little crow that might best be rendered: "Yippee!"

"Dearest," Asper called down the stairs, "try not to break all that many things. It costs so much to put right."

"Of course, m'love," Mirt replied as he headed for the door, seaboots flopping. Only Loreth heard his whispered addendum: "Broken heads, however, come cheap -- if broken thoroughly enough, that is."

Lucklai Minstrelwish grinned and blew on his fingers. His just-oiled hair gleamed in the lanternlight, but his smile gleamed even brighter as he said, "Just one more throw!"

"Lucky, it's your wedding night! Can't you give the darts a rest even now?"

"Rory, I'll be giving them a rest for many nights to come," the halfling said, grinning, "and we've been on our knees to Sune so much on behalf of my lass that I've fair neglected the Lady I'm named for. So one last throw for Tymora!"

"Right, one last. Your six dragons against -- what? You've fair cleaned me out already, lad!"

Lucklai shrugged, waved airy hands, and pointed. "Against yon flowers! My gift to Lady Luck if I throw true!"

The old tavernmaster shrugged and smiled. "Throw, then, for Tymora."

Thunk. Lucky's dart quivered in the heart of the board.

Rory shook his head at it, waited until his lad plucked it forth, then made his own throw.

It struck two fingers lower, and he shook his head again, beaming, amid Lucky's whooping. Sweeping up the jug of flowers, he put it in the leaping halfling's hands.

Lucky twirled, putting the jug back on the table, and flung the fistful of flowers into the air, crying, "For Tymoraaaaaa!"

Amid a silent flash of golden light, the rising, tumbling flowers were suddenly -- gone.

Sudden silence fell in the tavern, then there were several whistles of amazement.

"Lad," old Rory said, his face as pale as the white-glazed bowl he was holding, "I think you can safely claim Tymora smiles on your union, too."

Golden foam surged as the Lady Who Smiles arose from the depths of her bubble bath and stretched languorously. "Well, now," she said impishly, as flowers appeared before her, "what have we here?"

The tall, winged white figure standing attentively beside the raised bowl stretched forth a long arm to pluck them all from the air in one deft sweep.

"Flowers, High Lady," he said gravely. "An offering from . . . a halfling in a tavern in Waterdeep, in Faerûn upon Toril. He just --" the angel almost seemed to sniff -- "won them in your name, in a dart game."

Tymora laughed, dripping and glorious, and leaned forward to sniff the flowers. The angel spun smoothly away, averting his eyes as he held the spread flowers out behind himself.

"Wonderful! Splendid!" Tymora caroled. "With Sêlune on vacation and all these tears and fretting from Kelemvor as he mopes and hand-wrings over daring to ask Mystra for a kiss or two, it's been --" Her face changed, wrinkling in a sudden spasm. "-- beeeeeeAAACHEWH!"

Flower-petals fluttered through the air. Tymora stared at them through bewildered, suddenly watering eyes. "Whaaat'sssSSSAAAAKHOOOH!"

The angel whirled and made a gesture that trailed sparks. Abruptly the petals shone as if covered in frost and began to plummet toward the floor. "Divine One, I fear --"

Tymora sneezed again, this time so violently that she overbalanced forward, crashing down on the edge of the bowl and sending great sheets of golden water geysering aloft. A drenching moment later and she was on the floor beyond the bowl, riding an irresistible wave, with the angel struggling beneath her and her face in a wet tangle of -- of -- flowers!

Tymora's next sneeze rocked the room. It was followed by another and another. Half drowning, the angel clung to the goddess atop him and fervently hoped she'd not burst into divine fire and scorch him. Particularly when she noticed the ecstasy her embrace had helplessly plunged him into. So this was paradise.

Lookingglasses shattered all over North Ward, sending dressmakers into furious curses and noblewomen screaming from their robbing chambers.

Ladders moved -- with wailing men atop them -- to suddenly loom above striding merchants who'd just carefully stepped around them.

As the merchants looked up in horror, gabbling prayers to welcome Tymora and avert the attention of Beshaba, wizards everywhere in Waterdeep started to sneeze. In Blackstaff Tower, spells went awry, splashing wildly, and in the Tower of the Order, magists doubled over in such helpless honking violence that a painted sigil of the Watchful Order fell off a wall. As it clattered to the floor, someone howled, "Magic's gone mad! Magic's gone mad!"

A burst of wild magic made of that shout a trumpet that rang out across the city, and as the cry was taken up in a dozen places, folk in the streets started to run.

"And who are our guests this night?"

Old Malasker-of-Keys looked up rather sourly. He didn't need bright young officers dropping by to preen condescendingly, this night or any other. With one crooked, many-times-broken finger he pointed at each cell in turn.

"Sembian assassin. Says she's reconsidering her line of work in the wake of a resurrection. Easily claimed, but I had to dip her fingernails in acid to get rid of all the poison she'd painted on them."

The officer nodded pleasantly, tapping the side of one gleaming boot with his rod of office.

"Yon elf with all the sword-scabbards says she's a priestess of Galaunt the Reaver an' is charged to scour all of what she calls 'human scum' from the North -- one at a time if need be."

"Galaunt the who?"

"Aye, exactly. Rhaumus is duty sage this night, an' he's never heard of any Galaunt the Reaver. Being as he's half an elf himself an' given who he's married to, I figure he should know. Baerikho of the Watchful Order cast a mindtouch and says her mind can't handle spells, arcane or divine -- an' he's never heard of Galaunt the Reaver either."

"Ah. A crazed-wits."

"Looks like. Now, yon trio with the gags on are our real prizes of the evening: tone-deaf bards, goldnoses worse than the haughtiest noble you could imagine, an' that one on the end was playing a --" Malasker consulted a note on his desk "-- Mandolin of Slumber, 'ccording to Baerikho. We've got it locked up with all the High Priestess's carving-knives."

The officer nodded. "And in the end cell? Whimpering, cloak over head?"

"Aye. Bodyguard to House Massalan. Came in here weeping, wanting to be locked in to save his own hide. Scared witless, him. Seems he met someone in Dock Ward three or four bells ago he thought he'd killed back when he was a slayer-for-hire -- years ago."

The officer smiled tightly. "Ah, that's the one I want. Release him."

Malasker frowned. "What, sir? But --"

"You heard me. Unlock the cell door. Now."

The jailer got up, feeling at his keys. Selecting one, he hesitated, regarding the officer suspiciously. "And just who do these orders come down fr --"

He was staring into something that blurred and darkened as it sprang at him. Something that looked like a panther but wasn't.

Malasker had swung swords and spitted orcs in plenty, but that was years back, and the keys were in the hand with which he needed to draw his blade.

The last thing he heard as claws smashed him against wall and floor, and gleaming fangs reached for his throat, was a chorus of gasps and curses from the cells. It wasn't the farewell he would have chosen.

"Roast displacer beast kitten! Get yer roast displacer kitty here!"

Mirt gave the shouting vendor a sour look, ignoring the sizzling, meat-laden skewer the man thrust out almost like a weapon to bar the wheezing moneylender's way. He half-drew his sword, and the man stepped back hurriedly, adding some impolite suggestions to his business-bellowings.

"Does it come with turnips?" Loreth Swanfist asked politely. Receiving no useful reply, he shrugged, turned back to the hurrying Mirt, and said, "So tell me more of this Annalathra."

The moneylender grinned. "Well, she's a fine figure of a lass, to be sure -- when ye can see her, that is. Y'see, Donalthur's curse makes her hair grow every time someone has a lustful thought about her . . . or she has lustful thoughts, fer that matter. So she's a-shearing right often and even then walks about most of the time looking like a longtrail that's stepped off a peg in Mother Wuldoth's Wiggery and started walking about by itself!"

"She must leave a trail of cushion-stuffings behind her," the bald monk said with a grin, shaking his head at this latest oddity of Waterdeep.

"Nay, she keeps her trimmings in a bag of holding -- along with one of Donalthur's fingers. She cut it off with a hurled dagger last time she saw him, and when she charged him with her shears, he didn't tarry to retrieve it!"

Loreth guffawed. They came around a corner chuckling together to find themselves facing a sea of advancing City Guards -- in full battle armor, trotting along in lines with grim-faced torsins and valabrars at their fore.

"Ho!" Mirt growled, "Emmurgan! Whither bound?"

"Stand aside, citizen," a self-important valabrar boomed, raising one gauntlet in a wave that might have meant "shoo!" to a more timid man. "Our mission must be kept secret!"

Mirt stood his ground. "Are ye for the Fist, as we are?"

"Yes, Mirt!" Emmurgan called hastily before the valabrar could unwisely bellow something else. "Fall in behind!"

"Behind?" the monk asked mildly, giving Mirt an amused look.

The stout moneylender's return gaze was what most men would term "a dirty look." "I charge less swiftly than I once did, aye," he growled, "yet ye've no need to be snide about it!"

The foremost ranks of the Guard swept past -- only to come to a confused halt almost immediately as a frantic runner raced out of a side alley, waving his hands, and hurled himself at Emmurgan's legs. Hands went to swords up and down the street, but both of the young commanders recognized the winded, gasping aumarr clinging to Emmurgan's boots and loudly commanded the soldiers, "Stop and stand!"

"What, Forn?" Orlavar snapped, none too pleased at this interruption of his first important foray.

"Back at the Castle," the aumarr gulped, shuddering with the need to get his breath. "You must come!"

The two commanders exchanged displeased looks. "Why?" Orlavar barked.

"All the lockup cells . . . open, prisoners gone . . . jailer's dead . . . throat torn out, as if a beast did it! Wild magic raging through the Castle . . ."

"Tluin," Orlavar spat. "Tluin, tluin, TLUIN!"

Emmurgan snarled wordless anger, and then roared, "Everyone! About face! Back to the Castle! Swift march!" He whirled around, weapons clanking, and then added quietly, "Tluin it all, anyway."

Torsins and valabrars were already calling orders, and the Guard was beginning to move -- right back the way they'd come.

"With me?" Mirt asked Loreth, as they hauled the still-winded Forn to his feet.

"Certainly," the monk replied, "but I thought the fate of all Waterdeep stood imperiled -- again."

"Does," Mirt growled, "but a wedding brawl's one thing and Castle Waterdeep laid waste quite another! Come on!"

Elminster looked up from his crisp new book, laid aside his quill, and sighed. "Ye may as well come in, Volothamp."

The man best known to Faerûn as Volo edged into the room with a hasty, apologetic smile. "I -- I was told I could go right up -- ah, that is to say, come right up here, I mean to say, and -- and so I did! Wherefore, here I am!"

"Quite," the Old Mage of Shadowdale agreed, in tones as dry as a desert wind. "Why don't yet sit down in yonder armchair before ye blunder into something fatal, hmm?"

Nodding and smiling like a bobble-headed doll Elminster had once seen in another world, Volo hastily backed to the armchair and fell into it, puffing apologetically, "I -- ah -- I brought you a gift!"

Chin in hand, Elminster regarded him with a look that made Volo feel like something a less-than-choosy cat had dragged in to present to the Old Mage.

With as bright a smile as he could waveringly muster, Volo held up his flat burden, wrappings disarranged from Lhaeo's examination downstairs.

"It's a --"

"I know very well what it is. Put it down, right now."

"I -- uh --"

"There, on the floor, NOW!"

Hastily Volo put it down, giving Elminster a questioning look.

"Yes, 'tis what well-traveled wanderers to other worlds might call a 'pin-up calendar' of we Chosen of Mystra. Had a good look at Storm and Alustriel and, hmm, my Alassra, have ye?"

Volo nodded, suddenly losing his smile. "Uh, I barely remember what I saw --"

"I'm sure," the Old Mage replied, in a voice heavy with disbelief. "So captivated by what ye saw of my bearded beauty were ye that not one shred of remembrance of say, the curve of a bared shoulder or the glossy fall of unbound hair on other pages remains to ye. Prudent. Very prudent. Ye might even survive long enough to depart

my tower." He blew at the ink on the pages he'd been writing on and lifted his head to add sternly, "However, ye won't survive long at all if ye go on fondling those pictures."

He waved a hand casually. Volo stiffened as a sudden tingling, prickling sensation surged through him, clawing him into upright rigidity as his scalp lifted, his hair stood on end, and great power seemed to wash through him -- then tarry, humming, with his heart in its grasp. He couldn't breathe, couldn't --

The sensation abruptly faded, letting him sink back into the chair with a gasp, sweating hard.

Elminster half-smiled. "Not to worry, Volothamp: ye're clean."

"Clean?"

"Aye, clean. Yon calendar was stolen from a very senior Harper -- 'twas a birthday present for her this year -- by Zhent hands. If what I've heard is right, one of Manshoon's clones may well be trapped inside it right now -- and able to work magic on anyone touching it, of course."

Volo stared down at the calendar, swallowing.

Elminster's smile curled a trifle broader. "However, thanks for thy attempted bribe -- oh, sorry: thy gift. Tymora walks with ye this day, for ye find me in a pleasant mood, possessed of patience enough to await even thy victorious struggle to muster courage enough to blurt out thy real reason for coming here." He spread one gracious hand. "When ye're ready . . ."

Volo found himself as tongue-tied as he'd feared he might be. Searching rather desperately for words, he stared around the room. More than a dozen -- fourteen, he thought, though when he tried to count them it never seemed as if he could keep them all straight as they gently drifted about, fading in and out of bright visibility -- crystal spheres were moving randomly and lazily in the air behind Elminster.

In one of them could clearly be seen a bustling group of gnomes clustered about a massive and wildly complicated device that could only be a wheeled catapult, urging a straining quartet of harnessed war dogs to pull it forward; in another, a darksome stone passage that looked to be underground, and was strewn with ends of burnt-out torches, rotting unpleasantnesses that were probably goblin corpses, and . . . a bone-white scuttling crab that, yes, was a skeletal human hand, walking on its fingertips . . .

"Where's that?" Volo blurted, waving at the sphere showing the crawling claw coming nearer . . . and nearer . . .

"The Haunted Halls of Eveningstar in northern Cormyr," Elminster replied, without turning around to look. "Just beyond what ye're looking at is a long hall lined with mirrors that emit doppelgangers when anyone blunders along and looks into one, so I check on it from time to time. Helps to know if half the Purple Dragons, outlaws, or adventurers in upcountry Cormyr are something other than they were last month, if ye know what I mean."

"And where's that?" Volo asked, pointing at another sphere in helpless fascination. It showed a room whose far wall sported a window surrounded by flaming curtains; these draperies blazed without ever being consumed. Their heat was keeping the area just around them clear, or rather full of water, because the rest of the room was almost filled with a huge drift of what looked like purple snow. It was taller than the man standing somewhere off to the right, but his hands came into view from time to time as he tried to shovel the snow aside with a warrior's shield.

"A room in a locale ye needn't know anything about."

"Oh. Yes. Ah, and why do you watch it?"

"Under yon purple snow -- six and a half feet of it, as it happens -- is the Chair of Sleep."

"The 'Chair of Sleep'?"

"The Chair of Sleep."

Volo sighed. "And why --"

"Haven't ye remembered the reason ye've come visiting yet?"

"I -- ah, yes. Yes."

"Well?"

"Uh, to ask you some things."

"I find myself unsurprised," Elminster remarked, revolving his hand in an airy gesture that indicated Volo should continue.

"I -- uh --"

"Just list your questions. Ye may or may not receive answers. If ye fail to begin framing queries within, say, the next six breaths or so, I'll send ye to one of the locales shown in yon scrying-spheres. A random locale."

"Oh-ah -- uh, yes, I --"

"Said as much before. Thy questions?"

Volo quivered, eyes wild, and then blurted, "What are 'magnetic caltrops'? What's the significance of the phrase 'flying vorpal turnips'? Have you ever heard of a male black half-dragon, somewhere in Sembia, who's mean to men but extremely submissive to women?"

"Caltrops that stick to most metals. Depends. Yes." The Old Mage dusted his hands. "There, that was easy. The door, as I recall, lies yonder."

"Ah -- uh -- wait! No! I'm not finished!"

"Ah, but ye are, Volothamp Geddarm. Ye were 'finished' years ago, but various mages were either too busy or too kind-hearted to complete the job. I'll remedy that now. As I recall, ye were a frog last ti --"

"Forgive me, Great Lord Elminster, but this is important!"

Elminster sighed. "Everything always is, lad. Most of it's even 'deathly important.' I fear the death involved this time might, however, be thine."

"NonononoNo! You must listen to me!"

"I've been trying to, these last few breaths. Believe me." Elminster made the 'out with it' rolling gesture again.

Volo blinked. "I -- uh -- don't turn me into a frog!"

"No, as I was saying, ye were a frog last ti --"

"Elminster! Hear me, stlarn it!"

A sudden silence fell, and Volo found himself cowering at its icy heart.

Elminster leaned forward across his desk, eyes fierce, brow scowling.

Very slowly, he smiled.

"A little spirit. Very good. Ye seem less than a worm at last. Proceed, Volo."

"A Harper sent me to tell you a lady paladin of Tempus is carrying the Sword of Many Heads into Waterdeep, right now, and she's wearing the Holy Horn of the Wargod. He was worried about something called the Shield of the Chaste and what might happen if they came togeth --"

Elminster was on his feet. "So that's where my pipe went off to! Volo, step onto yon bright tile! Now!"

"I --"

The Old Mage snatched up something, vaulted over his desk with the agility of a young and supple revel-tumbler, and fetched up against Volo. Jerking an arm around the astonished traveler, Elminster yanked him back into an embrace that brought them onto the tile together.

There was a blue flash, and -- they were somewhere else. In an alley that stank of garbage, in a large and noisy city with ramshackle, dirty buildings crowding close about them in various stages of sagging disrepair. Beyond the gagging reek of garbage, the dead-fish stink of a harbor clung to the damp air.

Volo blinked, looking around. "Waterdeep?"

"Of course. Come along, lad." Elminster was already striding away briskly through ankle-deep mounds of stinking refuse.

Gritting his teeth, Volo followed. "We're going to do something dangerous, aren't we?"

"Lad, everything's dangerous. Breathing is dangerous. Yes, we're going to do something particularly dangerous. Thanks for volunteering."

"But I didn't --" Volo sighed, then said, "All right, I did, and my price is that you'll tell me honestly: what were you writing when I, ah, arrived?"

"A tale for children, lad, entitled, 'Are You My Daughter?' It's turning out surprisingly well."

Volo let Elminster see the bewilderment he felt -- and promptly fell on his face as a rotten crate gave way and plunged his leg crotch-deep into rotting food. When he tore himself free and managed to arise, spitting and growling, he snarled, "Was there a reason you had to bring us just here in all this -- this muck?"

"Aye."

Volo breathed hard, rolled his eyes, and snapped, "And that reason was?"

Elminster smiled. "My spell went awry."

"Huh. The Great Elminster's spell went awry." Daring much as he tried to wipe his face clean, Volo added with as much dripping sarcasm as he could muster, "I've never seen that before."

"Ye've not watched me much, have ye? Right now there are great disturbances in the Weave. Something swift, short, and violent that Tymora's doing; I know not why. Yet."

"Tymora? As in the goddess?"

"Nay, Tymora my bathtub toy -- of course Tymora the goddess, dolt!"

Volo sighed. "You know her?"

"Of course," Elminster replied. "Hips like -- well, no, ye're too young."

Volo sighed, rolled his eyes again, and asked, "So why are we here, exactly?"

Elminster regarded Volo rather wearily. "What d'ye think? 'Tis time to go save Faerûn again. From itself, as usual."

Tymora's next sneeze was so violent that her hair shot out straight in all directions, and a little row of wooden statuettes -- depicting all twelve of the Lords of Imphras II, an unintentional offering from a mortal careless-tongued with his curses -- were shot across the room as if from a scattershot sling, to rattle and ping off various of the Lady's treasures.

The angel, being much heavier, was hurled only a few feet, sliding to a stop where the long, splashed fingers of golden water gave out and his shoulders met dry marble. He promptly rolled over and cast a hasty warding spell over the shelves of treasures, to protect them from further --

"WaaaaaAAACHEWH!"

-- explosions.

"Divine Lady," he said swiftly, as the goddess reeled, her hair as wild around her as a Dust Desert tumbleweed, "it's the flowers! We must get them away from you -- far awa --"

"BahahaaaaAAACHEWH!"

Staggering, her eyes streaming, Tymora snarled and waved a hand that flashed with sudden light.

The flowers were gone, every last errant petal of them.

"Oohhh," she moaned, shaking her head, as the angel dared to rise from the floor. "That wa -- wuzz -- wuhhaaaaaAAACHEWH!"

"Divine One!" the angel cried, as he was hurled helplessly down the room again. He thrust his wingtips out desperately against the walls, holding them rigid as feathers flew. Skidding along with teeth clenched, he managed to bring himself to a halt less than a handspan away from crashing into Tymora's treasures.

The goddess hastily turned her back, waving a wordless apology.

"They give off spores, or dust, or someth -- pollen, that's it!" the angel explained hastily. "We need another spell to destroy it all, or --"

"Or I'll need some mortals to do something drastic to that halfling," Tymora said grimly, face buried in her hands. "That faithful bumbler Rathan Thentraver, perhaps, with his smart-mouthed little weasel of a friend, Torm -- ha! Anyone less like the real Torm I can't imagine!"

"Divine Lady, I --"

"G-g-get him for me! Get someonnaaaaaAACHOOH!"

On a rooftop not far from Castle Waterdeep, something that was not quite a black cat arose gingerly from where it had landed after an unbelievable leap from the Castle battlements, wincing at its bruises and at least one broken rib, and . . . was suddenly human and standing astonished and naked on the roof-tiles, looking down at skin that no longer sported sleekly bulging muscles and black fur.

"BwaaaaaaAAACHEWH!"

Catlike again, the black beast blinked down at itself, shook its head as if to clear its wits, then hastily ducked down as the thunder of boots rose loud in the street below, heralding the hasty return of most of the mustered strength of the City Guard. The dark-furred slayer smiled a smile in which fangs gleamed and sprang onto the next rooftop.

Its shudder and gasp of pain upon landing were fierce, but lasted only a breath or two this time.

The not-cat smiled again.

Ah, but it helps to know the right spells.

"It's all about luck," Tymora said airily -- and smiled.

The angel sighed. "You're going to do nothing to him? After he pounced on you and poured spirits ah, up your, ahem, nose?"

"It worked, did it not?"

"After a fashion," the angel agreed faintly, indicating the shattered chamber and shaping a mirror in the air with a spell so the goddess of good fortune could see the wreckage of her hair and the streaming tracks of the floods of tears she'd shed.

Tymora shrugged. "The pain was intense, yes, and he warned I might have to dose myself again, too -- but he acted swiftly, knowing what he dared by laying hands on me. Truly faithful, and deserving of reward, not destruction."

The angel winced. "Your will prevaieth, Divine One. Yet I urge you: Let no word spread of this bodily violation. 'Twould be unwise indeed for other mortals to take up such tactics in their dealings with any deity."

"Rathan Thentraver is not in the habit of betraying confidences," Tymora said stiffly, "and even were he to do so, he's established his drunkard act so well that few folk in wider Faerûn would feel disposed to believe him. I put it to you: A stout priest of no particular lofty regard in his own church claims to have been brought into her presence by Lady Luck and to have assisted in quelling her sneezes by pouring his belt-flask of Danchaezhur up her nose. Are you inclined to believe him? Truly?"

The angel sighed again. "Well put, Most Holy Lady." He produced something from behind his back and put it into her hands.

Tymora examined the unmarked bottle. "For use when I feel the need to dose myself again?" At his nod, she asked gently, "What's in here?"

"Fire wine, Lady Tymora. The finest Toril produces. I believe you'll vastly prefer it to Danchaezhur."

Tymora thanked him with a smile, grew a flask-sling with a wave of one hand, and slipped the bottle into it. Her eyes were already beginning to water copiously again. "There are to be no . . . reparations taken against the halfling," she told the angel severely. "He acted in faith and in ignorance of the harm his offering would do to me."

The angel crooked an eyebrow. "Are we certain of this, Divine One?"

Tymora gave her grave servitor a frown and waved her other hand. What remained of her golden bathwaters arose in a parabola of glistening bubbles to loop into an oval, take on a brief rainbow sheen, and become -- a scrying-mirror of sorts. In its wavering depths they beheld not a halfling in a tavern in Waterdeep but sparkling brightness and the goddess Mystra saying firmly to Azuth, "I give to the Chosen, and I take away from the Chosen."

Tymora's eyes narrowed. "Mystra took some part in this?"

The angel coughed. "Divine One, the magic you chose can be plucked awry by stronger scryings. Mystra and Azuth have spun one such. They are watching the halfling now, yes, or perhaps surveying a locale he's within, but --"

"Overlong coincidences lie within my power and purview, Markhlar," Tymora reminded the angel, her eyes kindling into the glow that meant she was turning to anger.

"Most Holy Lady, let us watch and thereby learn," the angel urged swiftly. "You know better than most others that matters may not be as they at first seem."

Golden bubbles seemed to writhe, circle the mirror they'd shaped, then glide into it, entering the scene of the cloaked deities of magic.

Who both turned, frowning alertly, and smiled greetings to Tymora. They drew apart, gesturing for her questing to pass between them and see what they were seeing, glimmering in the depths of a half-sphere shaped by a moving web of brightness that could only be the Heart of the Weave.

Tymora beheld a halfling with graying hair and a nose large enough to have been worthy of the dwarf Hooknose, so beloved of Faerûnian minstrels' tales, rising triumphantly from a chest with coffer in his hands. "His bride

should be delighted -- and if Lucklai strays, she might even use it on him! Hah; think I'll suggest it, at the dancing!"

Someone unseen and female asked, "But what is it?"

The beak-nosed old halfling opened the coffer, took up something silver, shiny, and crafted of complex metal parts from within it, and said gruffly, "Faster!"

Metal whirred into life. "Faster," he repeated, and the whirr rose into a whine as metal spun into a blur of swiftness.

Turning toward his questioner with the item humming in his hand, the halfling announced, "An enspelled beater. For eggs and -- hah -- other things." He tapped the butt of its handle and growled, "Enough," and the contraption stopped in mid-whirr. "Nice, eh?"

"How droll," Tymora commented, half a syllable faster than Mystra did. Azuth and the angel both chuckled.

And then golden bubbles were bursting, snatching the scene of Azuth and Mystra away from her, and angels were flapping into the room, the claps of their wings banishing the last of her bubble bath.

"News!" one of them boomed, in a splendid trumpet of a voice. "Divine Ones are in dispute, as we speak! Voices and powers raised!"

Tymora wiped at her eyes. "Why? What is it this time?"

"There's disagreement," another angel said, his voice carefully neutral, "over which deity is the most attractive to mortals."

Markhlar looked at the Lady Who Smiles.

Tymora rolled her streaming eyes, handed him the cork of her fire wine as she rose to use it, and snorted, "Whatever next?"

". . . and that's how you get the apple in the pig's mouth!"

"HarharHEEharhardyharho!" A tabletop was slapped hard enough to make it sway and groan dangerously, arousing oaths of alarm.

It was rare for smells of food to waft out of the Bloody Fist, which usually offered the neighborhood only mingled ale stench (spilled, vomited, and urinated). Attracted by more pleasant aromas, a few hopeful sailors had shouldered in through the doors, settled in at the Fist's back tables, and refused to be shifted out again by the scurrying serving-maids. Nor would they be hurried in their feasting, and most of the hired glower-fists who usually kept order in the Fist hadn't arrived yet. So the Laughing Sisters were serving them rather grimly, wondering if Master Belgrim would be too enraged if they worked an actual murder or three -- and if the towering holyhead of Tempus would take offense and start swinging that headreaper of hers.

The sailors were laughing again. Too loudly, of course.

"Ho, yes. Ye can never have enough smokepowder, to be sure!"

"Arthus, tell us the one about the bard who saw something so horrible he went mute on the spot!"

"What? That's my sort of bard! Hah, what a blessing of the gods!"

One of the Laughing Sisters buzzed past their unwashed ears as closely as she dared -- and was pleased to see some of the men cease guffawing to duck their heads -- to snap, "All set here?"

"No," one grizzle-chinned salt growled back, waving his belt-knife at the plate before him. It was empty except for a tiny pile of waiting salt. "We don't have a rodent yet."

The faery hovered long enough to inquire in acidic tones, "'We'?"

He gave her a gap-toothed grin and patted the filthy front of his tunic, causing a two-headed lizard to poke its head out of a greasy tangle of chest-hair and gnash bright little fangs at her.

The faery sighed in exasperation. "They're coming. Anything else to drink?"

Someone's stomach growled with the volume and enthusiasm of a wagonload of barrels thundering down into a cellar, and someone else said sourly, "All that loveliness drifting out here for us to smell and you're not serving it forth? Throatlake's fine, lovely, but we want meat. Food, littlewings, food!"

"That's for a wedding, later," the faery informed him, "to which you haven't been invited."

A hairy-fingered hand snatched at her, missing as she ducked away -- but the flashing dagger that spun after it sliced into one of her wings, sending her hissing and cartwheeling away through the air. "So invite us, littlebuds!"

A stool took that sailor in the side of the head a moment later, sending the man toppling to the floor amid a spray of teeth. The others at the table turned with growls to see who'd felled their shipmate and beheld Belgrim Huldorsord, master of the Fist, casually picking up another stool.

He wasn't even looking in their direction -- but the paladin he was speaking to was, and her eyes were as cold and full of promise as the face of Umberlee, awaiting them in a drowning wave.

One of the salts shivered, but the others thrust out their chins and snarled, hands going to a myriad of hilts.

The Just Blade of Tempus growled, low in her throat. She looked like a war-dog straining at its leash, but Belgrim closed one hairy hand around her sword-wrist and barked, "Steady! No beheadings -- at least until you've told me all about these penguins and the chastity belt and this Holy Horn of yours, too!"

The paladin breathed heavily, blue-gleaming breastplate rising and falling like the prow of some great ship riding strong swells, and growled, "Unhand me, man, or I'll not be able to withstand the magic of the Horn! Swiftly! Let go, or die!"

Belgrim thought about that choice for a moment, then let go. "Why does the Horn --?"

Barrera Alhound closed her eyes, trembled for a moment with her hands like claws, and announced through clenched teeth, "The Horn makes wearers truly faithful to the Lord of Battles stronger, swifter, and wiser in the ways of war. They never tire, and pain cannot overwhelm them. To do this, it awakens bloodlust and rage -- and with them, all the other lusts and whims of the body. Touch me again and I'll probably tear you limb from limb -- after enjoying you. And with all this armor on me, there'd be no enjoyment on your part, believe me." She shuddered all over, arching herself wantonly, turned in a smooth hissing of shaped steel, and gasped, "In the name of Tempus, hide me from all these temptations, man!"

She bit her lip. Watching the bright red blood run down her chin, Belgrim growled, "Of course. Just as soon as you tell me about the magic of your sword and those penguins and what they want with a chastity belt worn by some gnome lass they don't even know."

The Just Blade of Tempus roared in frustration and rammed one gauntleted hand into the nearest tabletop -- into it, her solid punch crushing the wood into a deep, clearly knuckled dent.

Belgrim winced, but one of the distant sailors made the mistake of laughing.

It was what stalwarts of the City Watch sometimes called "a grave error," usually on cold mornings when they were standing in alleys looking down at immobile, frozen-in-terror-faced corpses.

The paladin snatched up a chair and flung it, so hard and fast that no one in the taproom saw more than a confused blur -- then splinters of wood flying in all directions as another sailor struck the floor, arms and legs bouncing loosely . . . and lay still.

"Master Huldorsord," the paladin panted, now spreadeagled across the round table she'd abused and clinging to its edge as if a high wind might pluck her away if she let go, "the bride who'll be here tonight is wearing the Shield of the Chaste, though she knows it not, and --"

"She's here now," Belgrim said, making his own grave error.

"She's whaaat?" Barrera roared, brown eyes blazing. She rose in a great rippling of shoulders and skirling of armor plate, bringing the table with her.

Belgrim thrust it down again, bringing them nose to nose. "The penguins," he reminded her patiently.

The paladin hurled herself across the table, bearing him to the floor, and Belgrim lost his calm, his eyepatch, and his dignity before he could even draw breath. The first dancing girl screamed at what she saw from the doorway -- just for a moment, before the foremost of the frantically fleeing sailors ran right over her.

Laden with thread and facecloths and misting-bottles of rosewater and scent, the Sisters hummed busily around the laughing, chattering gnome women -- but had already learned not to try nipping any ears, or even to get too close. Jovial and barrel-stout these bustling and triple-chinned matriarchs of the gnomes might be, but they were also swift with their swats, not to mention very accurate.

Their laughter was rising into shrieks now as they draped, pinned, and sewed, readying Talaressa Wondergleam for her mate-to-be.

When one of the Laughing Sisters happened to hum past just a shade too close, a gnome matron whose laughter-wrinkles never left her face snatched and aimed a misting-bottle with deft speed, squeezing its bulb before the faery could even see her peril.

The rosy cloud of perfume that enveloped her came as an utter, stinging surprise. In an instant it plunged her into a helplessly choking pinwheel that flung droplets in all directions from spasming gossamer wings and triggered an orgy of scent-spraying among the matrons.

Not one of them, after that first jetting cloud, wasted perfume on a passing faery. Their target was always and only the helpless, swathed-in-streamers-of-trim Talaressa, who wept helplessly as rolling clouds of bronze, yellow-green, and moonlight-blue perfume stung her eyes then did battle in front of them, roiling furiously as they drifted toward the floor.

Those warring clouds, heavier than the air in the bedchamber, rolled and tumbled along its floor and down the stairs . . . eddying down into the taproom in a hideous mingling that made Belgrim, Barrera, and everyone else there cough, curse, and sneeze helplessly and explosively -- both often and in various sequences, betimes even simultaneously.

It was enough to make a Laughing Sister sick. Several of them commenced to be so, loudly and messily.

The deliveryman who arrived breathlessly at the door of the Bloody Fist at that auspicious moment, bearing a wedding gift, stared around in astonishment, and then got a whiff of . . . of . . .

"Talona's teats, what is it?" he groaned, retching. Hurling his burden into the taproom, he staggered hastily away, abandoning his handcart with its cargo, the second half of the gift: a large and heavy barrel of turnips.

What he'd thrown struck a table, bounced, and came open. It was a polished bone scroll-tube, and the parchment within shot out with a flourish, spilling a ragged fanfare into the thick taproom air as the cantrip that had launched the scroll did its work -- and the wild magic spawned by the forcebar promptly shredded it for its troubles.

Unregarded by anyone, the scroll unrolled itself and flashed its gilded title at the room, pulsing thrice: Penguins and Turnips: 101 Things to Do When You're Bored.

The room seemed profoundly unimpressed.

"Where is she?" the paladin roared, the moment she'd mastered her streaming nose and breath enough to do so. Still half-blind, she tore at Belgrim's greatshirt with her steel-clad fingers, plucking him up to try to shake an answer out of him.

Cloth shredded -- and Belgrim's head thunked solidly back against the floorboards. Still lost in helpless coughing of his own, the tavernmaster couldn't even groan. Through slitted eyes he glared up at the helplessly weeping face of the Just Blade of Tempus until he could find wind enough to snarl, "Get off me! OFF! Unhand me, woman, or -- or --"

The Just Blade of Tempus leaned very close, voluptuous and magnificent armor gleaming very bright and blue. When their noses were almost touching, and Belgrim had seen every irregularity of her impressive sword-scar and plumbed the uttermost depths of her very hard brown eyes, she hissed, "I must . . . serve my god. Wherefore I wear this holy thing meant for men. It's embroidered on the inside and also pierced with many holes, so it has lots of edges. I can feel them in some very tender places, as you might imagine -- and it itches until I want to scream. I can't take it off. Not and keep faith with Holy Tempus. Not until I've fulfilled His will and touched it to the Shield of the Chaste. I will slay anyone and anything who stands against me. Understand?"

Her voice sank to a menacing whisper, her lips so close as she framed the words that they brushed his. "So I ask again: Where is she?"

It takes a certain strength of character to be the master of a tavern anywhere in Waterdeep, and it takes much more to maintain such an establishment in Dock Ward. Moreover, the Bloody Fist stood alone in dreadful regard among the dives of Dock Ward. Keeping it from falling down or being literally drenched in blood most nights demanded even greater qualities.

Wherefore the first response of Master Belgrim Hulderson to this most menacing of questions was to breathe heavily for a moment and frown in thought. Then he ducked his chin until his tongue could lick the throat of the paladin pinning him to the ground, and did so.

When she drew back with a snarl of her own, he replied firmly, "Not until you tell me what will happen when this codpiece of yours touches that chastity belt. And, as I've reminded you more than once, how the be-damned-by-all-the-gods penguins come into all of this."

The Just Blade of Tempus threw back her head and moaned -- then slammed herself down, hard, growling like a ravenous dog. Belgrim was grateful for what was left of the table, which separated them for a few unpleasant moments before she shuddered, shook herself all over, and gasped, "I, Barrera Alhond, am sworn to serve Lord Tempus. I wear the Holy Horn of the Wargod, I bear the Sword of Many Heads into battle, and I know not what precisely will befall when the two meet."

She lowered her head, kissed the tip of Belgrim's nose very gently, and added, "I do know what will befall you, if you don't answer me. Now."

"I had to spend almost twenty years wearing a name and face not my own and being a Lord of this city, spending coins like bladder-water to build this tallhouse and that, just to get these fools to occasionally think of putting fire-stairs on the outsides of their buildings," Elminster growled, "but at last it seems to have been of some small help to me. Come."

Volo groaned as he lifted one foot out of a gruesome-looking pool of filth. The sucking sound of his boot rising drowned his groan, so he gave up on it and trudged after the Old Mage of Shadowdale, up the rusty metal rungs of outside fire-stairs that clung none-too-solidly to the alley wall of . . .

"What is this place, anyway?"

"A rooming house we care nothing about, other than its location: next door to yon tavern."

Volo looked at the ramshackle structure across the alley and groaned again.

"The Bloody Fist. It would be, wouldn't it?"

"Of course. And I see 'tis both yet standing and still boasts an open, gaping attic window everyone seems to have forgotten about. As well as wild magic, raging in its ground floor rooms, which twisted our arrival into this alley and bids fair to make the rest of our evening interesting indeed."

"You have no idea," Volo said wearily, "just how tired I'm growing of things that are 'interesting.'"

"Ah, growing old already, young Geddarm? Ye disappoint me. I've lived well over a thousand years and not grown old yet; surely ye can manage a mere decade or two! I'm sworn to deal with such matters as yon wild magic, of course -- and if ye think I'm letting you loose to stroll around Waterdeep and get into as much trouble as ye did last time, ye've another think coming!"

Elminster sketched two swift, intricate gestures with his fingers, and Volo spat out a startled curse as he found himself plucked into the air. He made a grab for the stair-rail -- too late -- and was suddenly halfway across the alley, a little more than three floors up, with the Old Mage's well-worn boots just ahead of his nose.

Thankfully, the attic window was larger than it had looked from the far side of alley, and Volo was through it and blinking in the abrupt dimness before he had time to draw breath.

Someone else had time enough, though, or rather two someones: a young maid and lad of similar years, their shared half-undressed state betraying amorous intent, were sitting bolt upright amid a welter of blankets staring at the two intruding mages. They were also clutching each other and shrieking with fear, surprise, and enthusiasm.

Elminster stilled their screams with one touch of a glowing forefinger. Gently he took hold of their jaws and turned two fixedly staring heads until their mouths were touching. A deft pinch and twist of their lips molded a shared kiss, and the Old Mage closed their eyelids, lowered them gently back to the floor, and tucked their blankets over them.

With two spread fingers still touching their foreheads, he cast another spell. "Enjoy memories of one of my own amorous little interludes, ye two," he murmured. "It was from many hundreds of years ago, but I'm sure the mechanics of dalliance haven't changed all that much."

Sitting himself down on the sagging remnants of a chair beside the now-oblivious young couple, Elminster waved Volo to a seat on an upturned bucket. Like most attics, this one seemed full of ruined furniture, mouse nests, and oddments better left undisturbed.

"I suppose ye'd like to know a little more about why I brought us here. Young folk like ye always seem to want to know why they're doing everything and what's going on in the world. It took me almost a century to figure out I was never going to understand most of what was going on in the world and that no one else did either."

Volo sighed, rolled his eyes, and muttered, "I so enjoy 'Now, when I was young' speeches."

"Belt up, soon-to-be-something-other-than-a-frog. I can't expect ye to do the right thing in the fray that's bound to erupt when we descend through yon trapdoor, if ye don't know a few things about what's already arrived here." He sighed. "Mystra slap me, what'm I saying? I can't expect ye to do the right thing anyway."

"Ah," Volo said, daring much, "so you actually can still learn things. Good to know."

Elminster gave Volo a look that was so cold it sizzled and announced, "Once upon a time, in a realm that's not the one ye were thinking of nor yet that second land ye were starting to think of, either, there was a certain deranged weaponsmith -- no, his name matters not -- who loved to craft swords. Flawed swords, reckless swords; irresponsible swords. A sentient elven blade that spent its utterances mocking other races; a sword called the Barmaid Bane Blade because of what it did to lasses who handled drinkables, and, aye, a sharp little something called the Sword of Many Heads."

Volo nodded. As El's speech had thus far left him none the wiser, it was the smartest thing he could think of doing.

Elminster smiled thinly. "Over many years, that last blade has won the approval of the god Tempus, as ye might expect. She who bears it now is expected to use it. Moreover, the Holy Horn of the Wargod codpiece has been sacred to the Lord of Battles for centuries; it awakens battle-lusts and . . . lusts in general. Ye can see the trouble

we're heading for, can ye not? Now the Shield of the Chaste, jewels and all, caught the eyes of a sticky-fingered Wondergleam years back, but his descendants know not its true nature."

"You, of course," Volo said heavily, "do."

"Of course," Elminster agreed mildly. "Hearken and heed, young scamp, hearken and heed: That chastity belt is sacred to Helm and was crafted by one of his most powerful priestesses to aid others of her gentle gender in resisting the distractions of the flesh and dedicating themselves wholly to the clear-headed vigilance the Supreme Guardian demands. Tempus wants it destroyed, for the more careful and dispassionate an armed guardian is, the less bloodshed occurs. Wherefore the lady paladin ye told me about will be seeking to destroy the Shield. Tempus believes the merest touch of the Holy Horn will do it, but gods -- and too many men, in slavish imitation of them -- believe only what they want to believe. The Holy Horn can't destroy the Shield, and contact between them will hurl them apart, to random landings far across Faerûn."

"In a wild burst of magic," Volo said wearily. "Or rather: a burst of wild magic?"

"Ah, ye do understand such things, ye see?"

"So we're here to stop that happening?"

"Nay, lad, enough godlike folly-thought. We're here to watch the fun and clean up the mess afterward." Elminster snatched something from empty air and presented it to Volo with a flourish. "So here're thy tools of scribing for jotting down all those wild fancies and exaggerations ye seem to feel the need to indulge in. Ye may as well make notes of what happens, to prepare sages, at least, for the next time some idiot tries to bring yon holy codpiece and sacred chastity belt together."

Volo frowned down at the lap-desk with its clamped-down parchment, quill, inkwell, powder-bottle, and blotter. "These aren't mine!"

"Ah. I've deprived some more honest scribe of his, then. Sorry." Elminster did something complicated with his hands, and Volo was suddenly holding -- a heavy tangle of huge, metallic, and slithering tentacles that ended in goblet-grasping hands.

Before he could shout or scream, his hands were empty again, all trace of the metal horror gone. He scarcely managed to blink before he was holding his own familiar writing things, complete with his shapely torso-of-Sharess quill-trimming knife. Volo took firm hold of it, breathing a little swiftly, and asked, "What was that last thing you put into my hands?"

"Ah, well, to speak plainly, 'twas a deranged war construct that thinks it's a barmaid. Nothing to do with the magics below at all. Fetch-spells sometimes go awry this close to ripples of wild magic."

"Our spells can't be trusted. Wonderful. Aside from rippling wild magic, are there any other potential disasters down below I should know about?"

"Well," Elminster said slowly, "if ye see any penguins among the table decorations, they'll be transformed-by-spells agents of Thay. At some point, they'll probably try to kill everyone so as to get their hands on the various items of magic."

"Red stlarning Wizards?"

"The same."

Volo breathed a fervent prayer to Mystra then another to Tymora before he asked with a calm that was entirely false, "So what're we going to do?"

"Sit here and spell-scry the fun, until or unless we're really needed. Darathra of the Deep Trees should be here shortly, and about then the jollity should really begin."

"Dar -- no, never mind, don't tell me. Instead, tell me why your pipe has something to do with all of this."

"Ah. Ye are thinking. Good lad. There's a magic key to the Shield as well as a physical one, and that magic key -- that turns the powers of the Shield on and off -- is my pipe."

Volo gave Elminster a long look, reached for his pen, but refrained from taking it up to write anything. "Someday," he said slowly, "you're going to have to tell me all about that pipe of yours. All about that pipe. Did it wander off here by itself?"

"No, someone stole it. Hoping to use it to protect her master -- whom she's very fond of -- from magical attacks. Which might have been a very clever and effective idea if she'd had the slightest idea of how to call on its powers."

"So who's this 'she'?"

"A barmaid who works here, one Tszimurdue by name. A little winged faery about yay high -- but mind ye, all of her sisters work here too, and they all look more or less alike when buzzing past thy nose. They also like to eat human flesh, so have a care or two."

"Or two," Volo agreed feelingly. "Do we have to capture her to get it?"

"No, 'twill come to my hand whenever I desire it. If she has it locked away in a chest or cellar, it can 'ride the Weave' out of Toril long enough to slip around such barriers."

"So do you have everything well in hand, Chosen of Mystra?"

"No, of course not. That's why I brought ye along -- in case something bad befalls me."

"What? And what would I do then?"

"Ye're a scamp and a mage and have somehow, by the grace of Mystra and Tymora both, managed to stay alive thus far, despite being one of the most reckless fools I've ever met. Ye'll think of something."

Volo stared at Elminster. "I . . . I walked right over that, didn't I?"

There was a sudden soft rush of slippers, and what seemed like more than a dozen small, vigorous bodies landed on the Just Blade of Tempus at once.

Fighting for breath, she felt tugs and shifting elbows and knees and -- slicings!

With a roar of rage the lady paladin shook herself free of her assailants, armor plates sliding in a way they shouldn't have, and thrust herself to her feet, the Sword of Many Heads licking out in a wild circle around her.

With an almighty crash, all her armor fell off.

Standing there in warhelm, boots, gauntlets, and her worn and much-patched underleathers, Barrera Alhound found herself glaring at a ring of grinning halflings, all of them dapper in dark silks, gold earrings, and matching sashes; wedding finery. Evidently the well-dressed Lightfoot wedding party went handsomely armed these days, because every last one of them, lad and lass, bore a gleaming dagger ready in hand.

The halfling wedding guests must have arrived while she was wrestling with the tavernmaster -- and when the boldest of them had pounced on her, they'd slit all of her armor-straps at once.

A dozen or more of those daggers, slashing as one -- Blood of Tempus! Mindful of the halfling fondness for hamstringing and pouch-slashing, Barrera whirled around, sweeping low and wide with her blade. The movement made something bang against her thighs -- something that dangled.

The Holy Horn of the Wargod! Held in place but poorly by armor-plates that were no longer there, it hung from its man-sized hip-harness, the worn leather straps sagging.

Something flashed between her legs -- a hard-flung stool, with halfling chuckles behind it -- and there was a clang that sent the codpiece up almost into her face ere a strap parted and it tumbled high and far across the room, gleaming mockingly.

Belatedly Barrera made a futile grab for it, leaning --

The table under her boots thrust upward with Belgrim's sudden snarling heave, spilling the Just Blade of Tempus and her sword face-first into another table. She slammed into wood, fighting to plant her knees and hands on something and have time enough to turn, and -- a dozen halfling dagger-hilts thudded home in what seemed like more vital spots than she owned . . . and the world spun away from Barrera Alhound, down into a warm redness that darkened and cooled, leaving all the light behind behind, far, far behind . . .

The table went over again with a crash, and Belgrim Huldorsord staggered, reeled, and regained firm footing at last. His hands were moving together for a good dusting when his eyes fell on the ring of glittering daggers in front of -- nay, all around him, like so many gleaming fangs, all pointing his way.

Eyeing the Minstrelwish wedding party, he put his best jovial host smile on his face and grunted, "My deepest thanks for, ah, taking care of that little problem."

The halflings gave him various grins, but not a single daggerpoint moved aside so much as a fingerwidth.

Ignoring that, Belgrim waved across the room and suggested, "One of you steal that codpiece and take it somewhere far away, right now and without telling me anything about where that somewhere happens to be."

"Oh?" one of the older hin asked dubiously. "And just why should we leave you awake to give us 'suggestions' about anything?"

"Because this is my tavern," Belgrim snapped, "and without me you won't get your wedding. Hells, without me the ceilings won't even stay up!"

As if his words were a cue, a good-sized oval of taproom ceiling chose that moment to give way with a tearing, splintering crash, boards sagging down with a show of plaster and old decorative tiles.

Amid the drifting dust and pattering aftermath of falling plaster, something could be seen moving nigh the ceiling. Something that was screaming in rage and fear and indignation.

Fascinated, the halflings turned away from Belgrim to stare upward, watching those two wiggling somethings until enough dust eddied aside to let them clearly see what had plunged into view: the legs of a still-lustily-shrieking gnome matron.

Bright Minstrelwish grins unfolded on all sides.

"I knew it was worth coming!" a younger hin chuckled. "Tavernmaster, what've you got to drink?"

It was close now. The black beast could taste it.

Another catlike bound, cross another rooftop, ride loose roof-tiles as they skittered down yet another decaying Dock Ward roof-slope, and at just the right moment sprang high and far, to plunge down into a warehouse thatch hip-deep.

Rats scurried, but there was no one in the building below to shout alarm.

Drawing itself back up onto the thatch with ease, the not-cat peered across the rooftops and smiled. The Bloody Fist was in sight.

Soon it would be time to feed.

The Watchful Order mage was young, excited, and very earnest. "Hardreth reports echoes of wild magic running away south from here, in a trail into Dock Ward! Lusteene looked out one of her windows a breath or two ago and saw something lean and dark leaping and prowling across the rooftops like a great cat -- heading south into Dock Ward!"

Grim men of the Guard traded glances across that inner Castle chamber of blood and sprawled bodies. "Magic," one of them muttered feelingly. "I hate magic."

There were murmurs of less-than-pleased agreement. Among them, Mirt and Loreth exchanged looks of their own.

Leaning on a table, the stout moneylender wheezed, "I'm not chasing some deadly doom-monster half across the city. Let it gnaw and slaughter its way back around to me; I'll wait for it here, where I can have a drink or two whilst waiting to die."

Loreth Swanfist rolled his eyes, then pulled out a chair, sat on it, and said, "Spoken like a true Lord of Waterdeep, I'm sure. Now, about my gems . . ."

Markhlar put the drink into her hands. Tymora thanked him with a smile and patted the curve of spellglow beside her that meant he was welcome to sit. He trembled, knowing the power that would soon come welling through him from their hip-to-hip contact. Such pleasure . . .

Tymora waved a hand without looking away from the bright, ever-growing scrying mirror before her. It was already large enough to entirely fill Markhlar's vision and was showing them a taproom furnished with many grinning halflings, a sprawled and senseless paladin of Tempus, a glowering tavernmaster -- and a pair of fat, wildly kicking legs depending from its ceiling.

In response to the Lady's lazy wave, something appeared in the air just in front of the angel: a cloud of small, irregular white objects like misshapen teeth, only softer; perhaps more like tiny fragments of broken white button mushrooms. They were white, flecked with brown and gold in places, and dripped with a golden liquid that when it fell from them, hung in tiny droplets just below them, by the Lady's will.

Tymora scooped a handful of them out of the air and into her mouth. "Stuff yourself," she suggested through her mouthful to the still-suspiciously-peering angel. "This is called popcorn. Just the thing to go with watching wild bloodshed and destruction."

In front of them, in the depths of Tymora's magic, something flashed bright in the taproom of the Bloody Fist.

"So I said to him: what would I want with, as you say, a hat that makes people act like inappropriate archetypes? We're not all reckless with our magic, you know! Some of us have a care for the morrow in these fair Realms, we do, and -- "

The earnestly declaiming Eyesocket of Cyric broke off abruptly as he became aware that a new guest had just arrived on the threshold of the Fist and was seeking to sidle past. He leaned forward to block her way, one hand rising in a claw, as if to hurl fell magic, and let his slaying ring flash a bright warning.

"Dredra," he whispered, in a not-entirely-successful attempt to make his high-pitched voice into something sinister, "are you a guest at this wedding, too?"

The tall woman in the black leather half-mask drew herself up to her full height, her black-and-red cloak wrapped closely around her, and smiled, "Of course. Are you?"

The priest of Cyric blinked at her then down at the short, fat Fang of Malar he'd been speaking with, and observed, "The Minstrelwish family has, ah, extremely varied interests."

"Or debts," the stout Malarite replied. "Or debts." He gestured with his goblet at the Nightlash of Loviatar and asked slyly, "Going to show us the full rig, Dredra? Or are you saving it for the revelry?"

The priestess of Loviatar gave him a smile that verged on a sneer and flung her cloak wide. She was clad in close-fitting black leather, her breeches and bodice crisscrossed with a webwork of belts studded with curved metal spikes that looked like so many hungry teeth. Small lashes with many barbs were clipped to her forearms, their thong-handles around her wrists -- and blood was seeping down her leathers from two prominent places where she'd pierced herself with needles. Still in place, they jutted challengingly from two of the few areas of her skin that midnight leather didn't cover.

Xondur of Cyric winced. "That's going to drip, you know. All over their . . ."

His voice trailed away as he waved at the taproom beyond and realized what stained and splintered ruination he was attempting to defend.

"Floor?" the Nightlash finished his sentence for him with a nasty smile. "I think not. The Holy Maiden has granted me a new spell that keeps my blood from leaving me, except by direct physical removal. Of course, if you're thirsty . . ."

Xondur and Gorar of Malar both frowned in disgust and shrank back. The priestess gave them a brittle smile and stepped into the Fist, a mesh bag of what looked like penguins -- penguins? -- in her hand. Then she stopped, turned, and handed something to the Eyesocket of Cyric.

"Yours, I believe. You really should be more careful. I found them on the floor about a bell ago, when mopping up our public flogging-chamber after I'd done my shift. I trust you enjoyed me."

Xondur stared down at the two tiny objects in his palm: matching enameled Dark Sun earrings, skulls surrounded by dark flames. "These aren't mine!"

Dredra of Loviatar smiled, shrugged, and strode on into the Bloody Fist. Halflings melted away before her, some of them leering and whistling as they did so. The Nightlash gave them a smile, struck a pose, and stopped long enough to lash her own thigh. Someone cheered.

Gorar turned away from this all-too-familiar sight and caught sight of Xondur's face. Which was bone-white, the eyes in it gone large and dark.

"What's befallen you?"

The Eyesocket of Cyric shook his head slowly, throat working. When he could find words, his voice was a tremulous mew of fear.

"I've seen these only once. The Master Himself was wearing them."

"The Dark Sun?"

"Exactly." Xondur was trembling openly now. "I must go," he added quickly. "Far away." He emptied his greed-sized goblet in one shuddering quaff and thrust it into Gorar's hand.

"But why?"

"I -- I gave my life to Cyric," the priest of the Dark Sun said over his shoulder, as he hurried away. "Yet I wanted something more and prayed for guidance. He sent me a vision, and . . . these were in it. I dare say no more."

He was around a corner and gone, leaving the Fang of Malar blinking at the littered Dock Ward street, beginning to fill with all manner of people, clad in what many of them probably believed was wedding finery -- though he feared their beliefs, like those of so many folk he met, were sadly mistaken -- converging on the Fist.

"I begin," he told the empty air, "to foster a very bad feeling about this wedding." He smiled a wolf-toothed smile and added, "Think I'll stay."

"These aren't mine!" Belgrim the Bold exclaimed, looking down at the barrel of turnips. He peered at the delivery label, frowning. "'Fond regards of the happy occasion, Elminster of Shadowdale'? Whale me, but the Old Mage has some 'splaining to do!"

"Let me see," Tszimurdue told him, gossamer wings humming. She peered, then shook her head scornfully. "That's not Elminster's sigil!"

"Oh? You know Old Stormwind?"

The faery put her hands on her little tanned hips and replied rather primly, "We've had dealings. Enough to know he hates turnips. Parsnips he'll eat, but turnips, no. Says smelling cooked turnip hash reminds him of the reek of privies."

"Did someone mention Elminster?" a woman's voice asked sharply from behind them. Belgrim turned rather wearily.

The Nightlash of Loviatar was switching her whip across her thigh impatiently. "He's not going to be here, is he?"

"I hope not," the tavernmaster growled. "Fading forcebar or no, I was hoping to have something left of my tavern, come morning."

"Then leave that barrel outside. In the harbor, for instance," the faery barmaid said tartly. "I mean, really: Crazed wizard or no crazed wizard, who sends turnips as a wedding gift?"

"A turnip farmer?" the Fang of Malar offered helpfully.

The faery gave him a hard look, then shrugged and said, "Ah. A priest. No wits needed -- and none displayed." She darted off behind the bar, only to whirl around and call, "Master!"

Belgrim had learned to heed that tone. He was two strides closer to the bar before the Just Blade of Tempus staggered into view through the kitchen door, armorless and scowling. She was brandishing his best rolling pin as if it were a holy mace. Hraст it, he should've put her in the coal-cellar, not laid her out on the pastry-making table!

"Tavernmaster!" she bellowed. "Where's my sword? And the Holy Horn? Return them -- or I'll not fail in visiting the wrath of Tempus upon you personally!"

Belgrim sighed. He didn't roll his eyes, because he didn't have time. He had, in fact, only a bare breath in which, as he strode toward the angry paladin -- and she strode toward him -- to bring his fist down hard on just the right spot on the table between them to tip it over -- up and between them, striking the rolling pin up and aside. "Boys!" he barked. "Now!"

And an enthusiastic swarm of halflings swigged, let fall their metal goblets, and sprang from various nearby seats to enthusiastically swarm Barrera Alhound again. At least three of the Laughing Sisters converged from various corners of the taproom, to join them.

"Don't hurt her, now!" Belgrim roared and turned away with a smile, dusted his hands, and muttered, "Much."

The eldest Minstrelwish -- the one whose sidewhiskers were bushy and white, not black and razored into menacing points -- grinned up at him. "Worry not, man. Her sword and cod (that's not the right term for it, mind; ask any armorer) are hidden where she'll ne'er find them."

"What's this?" a white-haired and large-nosed gnome demanded, as he strode into the Fist at the head of twenty-some gnomes, much decorated in ruffles and sashes and flopping bucket-top boots with shining buckles. "Beating and stripping a human maid? In a Dock Ward taproom? Is this the sort of family our Talaressa's marrying into?"

Belgrim sighed and clapped on his best armor-plated smile. The one he used when dealing with suspicious Watch officers.

"You must be Faen Dorluglar Wondergleam!" he said heartily, extending a hand. "I'm Belgrim, Master of this tavern, and I bid you fair welcome! Pay no attention to yon struggle -- it's not what it appears, believe you me!"

The gnome glared up at him. "A Dock Ward tavernmaster telling me I'm not seeing a score of him beating senseless a wench in her underclothes and expecting me to believe him? Well, now, this day bids fair to hold more wonders than this foolishness of a Wondergleam gnome hitching herself to a halfling!"

Minstrelwish him seated all around set down their goblets in a chorus of low, throaty growls.

Belgrim felt his smile start to slip.

Pudgy, many-ringed gnome hands clapped to stout, gilded weapon-hilts as their owners glared around at the tables. Halflings smiled back menacingly.

Belgrim cleared his throat, on the rising note that he used to call on the Sisters for aid. Behind him, he heard their wings buzzing.

At the door, behind the gnomes, someone tall and kingly, in gleaming silver plate armor with the Gauntlet of Torm sculpted proud upon a breastplate as wide as most war-shields, raised a tentative hand. "I hope I'm not late?"

Perfume and grand music burst forth together in swirls at the head of the stairs, as gnome matrons bearing many-hued lanterns stepped into view. The foreguard of the bridal party wore proud smiles, prouder leg-garters, gowns that were all bows and ribbons and pinwheels of dyed fur, in a pastel storm of blues and lime greens and rose-pinks and yearning oranges, and triple and quadruple chins. They batted similarly hued eyelashes as long as childrens' fingers, and began a stately descent.

A limp hand thumped to the floor beside Belgrim's boot, and the halfling who'd missed his grab for it grinned up at the tavernmaster and murmured, "Sorry! She's safely back in her dreams! I put the Holy Horn somewhere safe, far away from yon approaching Shield of the Chaste!"

The penguin standing in the center of the nearest table -- one of many such, Belgrim saw in surprise; an astonishment that deepened with his realization that he'd never seen such table decorations before in his life -- blinked. Then it gave the halfling what could only be described as an angry glare and shot up, amid wild sparks and writhings, into the form of a robed, bald human mage.

"What?" he snapped, as penguins started to transform, all over the taproom. "What did you say? You, halfling!"

The wizard leaned over to make a grab for the collar of the hin, who was already ducking away, dagger flashing out -- and the table tipped over, spilling goblets and sending halflings shouting and scrambling.

All over the taproom, there were splintering crashes as various of the Fist's aging and much-abused tables announced to the waiting world that they could not support the weight of large, battle-eager Red Wizards of Thay.

"Mystra-sabruining Red Wizards!" Belgrim roared, diving for the floor. "Cry the Watch!"

"There's no need!" Dredra of Loviatar snapped, waving a flask in one long-nailed hand. "I'll --"

And then, of course, the room exploded in more than a dozen spells.

Or tried to.

As gnome matrons shrieked and turned and tried to wave their precious bride-to-be back up the stairs -- and got bumped into helpless tumbling falls by the slightly-less-matronly gnomes behind them -- and the paladin of Torm drew a greatsword of fearsome size and let out a ringing bellow for the watch that echoed off both Mount Waterdeep and various towers all over the southern half of the city -- the forcebar flickered, making the room and everyone in it sway helplessly, glowed various incandescently bright hues, and sent all those magics wild.

A Red Wizard discovered his pointing hand was hurling a stream of flower petals at the snarling halfling bounding up onto his tabletop to challenge him.

The Fang of Malar waved his fist over his head and was startled to receive around it not the spinning circle of fangs with which he was wont to lacerate foes, but a whirling circuit of goldfish, already showering his incredulous eyes with water.

The greatsword in the paladin's hand sprang toward the ceiling, towing the startled champion with it, and then started to dance in midair, flinging him about like a rag doll. A brightly armored, clanking rag doll.

The Nightlash of Loviatar, her empty potion bottle bouncing on the floor beside her boots and her throat still moving in one last swallow, found no barbed whips spinning from her fingertips like pinwheels to slash open Thayan faces, but rather the two bloody needles she wore vanishing, and the prominences they'd transfixed losing their streams of gore and acquiring instead two vivid green lamplike glows.

She looked down, stared open-mouthed and gasped, "These aren't mine!"

A halfling made a grab for one of them that told her they were, and she asked him, "Are they?"

In response to his enthusiastic, head-bobbing grin, she backhanded him flying then snarled a curse that made a nearby gnome lean forward so as not to miss a single sizzling syllable.

The movement made her almost fall over someone scuttling past. Someone on his hands and knees.

Belgrim the Bold, panting hard, was running across the littered, swaying floor as fast as he could on hands and knees when most of one wall leaped into the room and fell on him.

Now, it was not the fault of Darathra of the Deep Trees that Mielikki had gifted her with a formidable temper, and it was not the fault of Darathra that the usual all-hours crowding in the streets of Dock Ward -- to say nothing of the reactions of several Dock Ward entrepreneurs to the sight of a gods-stlarning unicorn, delivered right into their laps, as it were, and her necessary actions to enlighten them on the inadvisability of acting on such urges -- had delayed her ride to the wedding.

Nor yet was it the fault of Darathra of the Deep Trees that Master Belgrim Huldorsord had seen fit to construct so small a lone window in the walls of his taproom, and later seen fit to firmly board it over -- or that a self-important paladin of Torm the Humorless was filling the open tavern doorway, and swinging a sharp blade about in typically irresponsible "I'm in charge here!" manner.

Nor was it the fault of Darathra that she and the unicorn had ridden through life together for a good many seasons, and saw the world in much the same manner. Wherefore when she snarled out her anger and galloped her horned steed right at that small window, leaping right over a startled watch officer who'd been unwise enough to challenge her, the size of the window -- and its firmly boarded-over state -- didn't much matter to the unicorn. Nor was that magnificent creature without magic of its own.

Horn blazing, it struck the window, the wall around it, and the wild-magic-writhing forcebar holding the wall up -- and won.

Tables collapsed with an almighty crash as the unicorn landed, giving the room a grin very like that of the Minstrelwish Halflings -- who were now turning, all over the taproom, to gape in amazement.

And then, with a deep, rending groan, the floor gave way beneath those newly arrived hooves.

Darathra of the Deep Trees, still mounted, went Below.

Several Red Wizards toppled helplessly after her, yelling and windmilling their arms, as they collapsed through various tables and they and their freshly gleaned scrap lumber slid into the widening abyss.

They were in time to help the priestess of Mielikki splinteringly dispose of the Fist's aging cellar floor, and hurtle down into the gnome brothel beneath.

Angry Laughing Sisters swooped and buzzed, a despairing Belgrim tried to reach and cling to his own threshold, and the paladin of Torm made a titanic leap over him and the devouring hole beyond, reaching its far side with a spectacular crashing dive into the midst of his own newfound collection of collapsing tables.

He was startled to find himself breast-to-breast with a paladin of Tempus he'd met professionally a time or three before, and even more startled to find her clad only in underleathers that seemed to have been freshly ventilated in several strategic places, the marks of souvenir-seeking halfling knives still fresh upon them. She lay in a swoon, her mouth invitingly near . . .

From the depths behind him, amid Darathra's enthusiastic warcries, shrill gnome voices could be heard shouting, "We're under attack!"

An alarm-gong began to ring, somewhere deep beneath the Fist. "Ware! Get gone! Get gone! An attack! An attack!"

Popcorn flew everywhere as Tymora sprang to her feet, whooping.

"Go, girl! Get them! Get them all!" she shouted, waving her fists.

Bright and larger than life before her, a gnome matron launched herself down a banister and locked her thighs around the neck of a Red Wizard -- whose head disappeared in her petticoats as he toppled, limp and lifeless before he hit the floor. And bounced.

"Yes! Yesss!" Tymora cried, clapping her hands. A gold and silver glow erupted from her dancing eyes and raced along her limbs . . .

Markhlar hurled himself out of the way just in time, as the risen power of a goddess flared up behind him, and coins started spinning out of nowhere, far more numerous -- and harder on the skin -- than popcorn.

"Too late," Horgar muttered, peering around the corner and then ducking his head back again. "It's started already, stop me vitals!"

"Arrr," another Horgar agreed, menacingly. "You know what we have to do."

"Aye," a third Horgar growled. "Get in there and get the Sword and the Horn, no matter how much blood we must spill!"

"Arrrrrr!" the chorus was loud and fierce, but -- for once -- no one moved. Perhaps no Horgar was quite ready to burst into a dagger-bristling charge.

Or perhaps they were merely judging the terrain and unfolding fray thereon with similarly shrewd judgment, and concluding the time to strike was not -- quite -- yet.

The Brothers Horgar, in their identical blue hoods and dark leathers, with their identical scowling brows and hook-pointed beards, all looked alike. Most duergar did, to a human eye, but the Brothers tried to look so much alike that no one could tell them apart. Such anonymity was often useful.

In unison they clutched freshly sharpened knives and sickles, stood in the night shadows with their shoulders hard against a crumbling Dock Ward wall, and waited.

Wedding guests and the sort of folk who dwell in Dock Ward and who are always eager to join a fight -- as opposed to everyone else in Dock Ward, who customarily stands on the edge of a fray watching the fun and betting on the fates of various participants -- were eagerly drawing an astonishing variety of weapons and streaming into the Fist.

"Hoy, now," one of the Brothers said eagerly, leaning out from the wall to peer through the flood of hurrying folk across the street, "is that a barrel of turnips?"

Elminster shook something out of a pouch that Volo was certain he hadn't been holding a moment before.

"What's that?"

The Old Mage sighed. "Volothamp, if ye really would prefer to live a day or three longer, ye'd do well to stop asking inane questions. 'Tis a bag of holding."

"And you'll be needing it for . . ."

Volo's voice trailed away as Elminster gave him an "Aye, something far worse than a frog, this time" look.

"We're about to have a visitor," Elminster told him, waving wrinkles out of the ordinary-looking sack, "and 'tis always nice to be properly hospitable. To do that, one must be ready. Now hold still."

He touched Volo's forehead with one long, bony finger, then touched his own, and then used the same finger to trace a large circle on the floor around them both. "Move not," he added, stepping out of the circle to trace a similar circuit about the obviously amorous couple. Then he traced a line from each circle to the sack, which he laid on the floor between the two circles, and rejoined Volo. Little silver flames were flickering in his eyes, and sweat was beading his temples.

"What's wrong?" Volo asked quickly. "You --"

"Ask too many questions, as I said before," El growled warningly. "Now sit and wait like a good boy -- and if ye can't, lie down on the floor, close thine eyes, and imagine what it must be like to be a good boy."

"Why?"

"To quote far too many mothers, down the centuries: Because I say so, that's why!"

Volo eyed the Old Mage. His eyes were two silver flames, now, and sweat was running down his face and dripping from his jaw.

The floor underneath them shuddered, not for the first time, as a din that could only be wild combat arose from below. Volo glanced at the floor, and then back at Elminster.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked quietly. "You're obviously under strain -- why?"

"I'm quelling wild magic," Elminster replied shortly, "maintaining a forcebar, scrying two places at once, and calling on the Weave to drink some rather deadly Red Wizard-hurled spells. All at once. Any more clever questions?"

Volo's eyes narrowed. "That's impossible."

"An overused and much-misapplied word, that, in this world and others. Now belt up for a moment; I'm trying to hear something."

"And others?" Volo echoed. "I suppose you're going to try to dance and sing, now, too?"

Something flickered into view amid the attic debris: something tall, doorlike, and glowing. Volo stared at it. He seemed to be looking through an archway into another room -- a rather severe, plain room that held a huge, ornate four-poster bed and several floating, softly glowing globes. Thick furs covered the floor, and a silver-haired woman clad in a tattered black gown was lying barefoot atop the bed, propped up on pillows, reading. From three books that floated open in front of her, in a handy arc, without benefit of her hands being anywhere near them. Those hands were in fact rising -- though her eyes never left off reading, and her calm face remained that way -- to point right at Volo and shape some intricate gestures.

And then the scene was gone, glow and all, and Volo was blinking at the attic gloom once more. He swallowed, having seen the Queen of Aglarond a time or two before.

"Was she, ah, checking on you?" he dared to ask.

El shook his head. "That was a Thayan doing. Long ago they twisted a certain portal so it no longer led to where it once had, but rather into the bedchamber of the lady you saw, so they could visit harm upon her at will. One of the spells cast below us, just now, was spun by the wild magic into an unintentional opening of that portal. Had I not collapsed it in time, various triggered spells would have burst from it."

"And destroyed most of Dock Ward, yes?"

Elminster regarded Volo calmly. "Ye begin to see matters more clearly. Hope dawneth in me for ye yet." He lifted his head, seeming to see something invisible in the air quite close to his nose, and added, "But hold silence for a moment. The turnips are stirring."

The turnips?

With a titanic effort Volo refrained from uttering that question aloud.

Elminster was beginning to shake his head. "Breakfast? Careless; 'Tis called 'morningfeast' here -- know they not even that much? Oho. Four spells, now. Sword touches turnips and flies wild? Nasty. We'll shatter that."

The Old Mage made a sudden fierce gesture, as if slicing the air with his hand. Then his eyes narrowed, and widened again as he grinned. "A map of Netheril with that twisted portal re-cast on it? Think they we'll not notice? Ah, in a spellbook -- that's supposed to conceal it? And the book in the turnips, wrapped in their spells, ah-hah. Novices' games, novices' scheming."

He shook his head -- and then guffawed, turned to Volo, and said gleefully, "The Horgars have stolen the turnips!"

Volo blinked. "That'll affect the weather in Turmish greatly, I'm sure," he said politely, ere turning his voice into a snarl and asking, "Just what by Holy Mystra does that mean, Old Mage? Tell me!"

"Later," Elminster said curtly. "There's something we must do rather more urgently, first."

"Oh? What might that be?"

Something black and catlike boiled through the window the two mages had come in by, landed in a sleek shifting of fangs and claws -- and sprang at the two mages, jaws spread wide.

Volo squeaked out something that was half-curse and half-shriek, and whirled around in a frantic attempt to get elsewhere.

Elminster never moved.

"Now would be a good time," he announced calmly to the empty air, ignoring the great black beast about to slam into him.

There was a sudden pinwheel of silver fire, the cat vanished in mid-air a handwidth away from the Old Mage's face, silver radiance raced along lines and around circles -- and the bag of holding bulged hugely, pulsing with silvery light and started to collapse down flat once more.

Elminster's familiar curved pipe, trailing smoke as if he was puffing on it, appeared at the spot he'd been addressing, bobbed once in front of his nose, and then plunged arrow-swift into the mouth of the bag of holding.

"A saying occurs to me," he remarked, rising to pluck the bag from the floor. "Started by a cook in the Vilhon, if I recall correctly: There's more than one way to smoke a cat."

Volo stared at him, and at the limp, to-all-appearances-empty bag. "What was that?"

"Someone my pipesmoke will keep senseless until I've time to ah, interview him properly. Let me just say this much: Some folk have scruples and can know shame -- and some should never be allowed near powerful spells, not even for a moment."

Elminster glanced over at the oblivious couple, hefted the bag of holding, and -- it vanished from his hand, in another little whirling of silver flames. He looked up from his empty palm to give Volo a smile and the words, "That was the dangerous part of this evening. Now for the fun."

He swept his arm in a wide wave at the attic roof, and in its wake the close darkness became a wild scene of battle. Volo had been in the taproom of the Bloody Fist before, and knew he was seeing what was going on two floors below.

Mayhem, amid magic gone wild.

Without looking away from what he was seeing for an instant, Volo asked, "You've let go your hold on the wild magic, haven't you?"

Elminster gave him an innocent look. "Really? Doth it show?"

A frantic Red Wizard came flying up from the depths, wild-eyed and with the ring on his finger trailing flames as wild magic clawed at it -- and two Laughing Sisters flew with him, biting and sucking and buzzing aside from his frantic attempts to swat them.

A candlewheel fell from the ceiling, trailing its chain, to crash down onto the wine-soaked wreckage of a table -- which flared up into flames, blazing merrily in the space of but a breath. A halfling reeled back into that blaze and started to scream -- and the war cry-snarling Horgar who'd been hacking at him reared back in almost comical alarm -- putting the back of his skull just within reach of the table leg a gnome matron was whirling around her head as she faced her own trio of Brothers Horgar. There was a solid thunk as the table leg dealt doom, and a duergar pitched forward silently into the waiting flames.

Belgrim the Bold swung a sword at another Red Wizard, roaring in rage and fear -- and the blade became a bright bouquet of flowers. Jaw dropping, he rammed them against the man's breast and watched them bend and break, trailing petals -- and over the Thayan's shoulder he saw a Minstrelwish halfling doing the same thing: trying to stab a Horgar with a long, slender flower.

The duergar jeered and swung a dire flail viciously -- only to catch one of its chains around the elbow of a Red Wizard, and bring him crashing down helplessly atop the evil dwarf, yelling.

Belgrim's Red Wizard sneered triumphantly at the tavernmaster -- who dropped his flowers and sprang at the Thayan, throttling him hard as they went over a table together with a crash, rolled once, and started the long tumble down, down to the gnome brothel. The glow of the unicorn's horn rushed up to meet them, and Belgrim closed his eyes, winced, and waited for the crash.

The Nightlash of Loviatar laughed aloud as she slew yet another dock-thief. This was too easy! With her front snaring their eyes like two bobbing, glowing green lanterns, men were even more distracted than usual as they fought her, and --

"Hah! Now here's a brothel-wench with spirit!" a sailor roared from nearby, his many earrings jangling. Dredra turned with a savage grin, took in dirty fair hair, dozens of tattoos, and the bulging thews that held them, and laughed aloud.

"Come blade-dance with me!" she shouted through the tumult. "If you dare!"

"If I dare? Hah!" the sailor roared back, three of his fellows right behind him. A moment later, his escort shrank to two as a gnome matron came flying off the banister heels-first, and practically beheaded the shortest sailor.

The tattooed salt charged, cutlass in one hand and short sword in the other -- and the Nightlash rushed to meet him, blade-studded whips whirling.

A frying pan, still sizzling, shot between their noses, hurled by someone at a foe off toward the front door . . . and then they met, nose to nose and spitting curses.

Whip ensnared cutlass and sent it clanging, that entwining sending the sailor off-balance and wide-eyed with surprise -- right into Dredra's kiss.

She promptly lifted her knee with enthusiasm -- and as he shrieked and started to double over, bit his lower lip and then his chest for good measure, awaiting his recovery.

It came, with a roar of pain and fury, and a savage tug of his entwined short sword that brought her into his upthrusting knee -- but not being a man, the blow failed to make her faint or fall helpless. She merely groaned and grinned both at once, chest all aglow, and tugged her whip back the other way.

Fingers broke and the short sword went flying, leaving her sailor sobbing as he staggered back away from her, face sagging in sudden fear.

He promptly fell over the body of his last fellow salt, laid low by a Thayan knife. Bouncing on his behind, he found himself in the doorway of the pantry and scrambled hastily to his feet as she advanced with slow menace.

"Not so daring now, are you?" she asked, as coquettishly as a Waterdhavian noble's youngest daughter, backing him into the pantry. A faery buzzed up to her and bit at her. She ignored it.

Staring at the Laughing Sister as it clung to the smiling priestess, sucking blood, the sailor went pale. A moment later, his shoulders struck the crock-laden shelves of the back wall.

Smiling wryly, the Nightlash stalked toward him.

Grimacing, he raised a balled fist in desperation -- and Dredra of Loviatar lowered her arms, whips and all, and thrust herself forward to take his blow. "Well?" she murmured, licking her lips, "I'm waiting for your contribution."

Tattoos quivering, the sailor stared into her eyes, stark horror in his own -- and fainted in a heap at her feet.

Disgustedly, Dredra turned, looked out into the fray and beheld the Loyal Sword of Torm, armor gleaming brightly in the dancing flames rising from several collapsed tables. His blade sang busily, reaping a deadly harvest of shouting duergar and desperately incanting Red Wizards.

It took but four determined strides to reach a spot thickly carpeted in sprawled, motionless Red Wizards, where she could strike a high-booted pose and whack the paladin a good one across the back of his warhelm with her whip.

The holy knight whirled around, his greatsword flashing, faster than she'd thought possible -- and suddenly Dredra's gut felt very cold and wet and loose . . .

She staggered back with a grunt of pain, folding over and clutching at her suddenly blood-drenched stomach. Entrails -- her own, by the Maiden! -- bulged stickily between her fingers.

The Loyal Sword sprang forward to finish her off, then his jaw dropped as he saw he'd struck a woman. He gasped audibly.

"Holy Guardian Defend Me! I --" He bent over her hurriedly, the hand that was free of greatsword reaching out to heal.

The Nightlash of Loviatar looked up past his fingers to give him a smile twisted with pain, and held up her own hand. A ring winked upon it. "This . . . regeneration is . . . powerful enough. Do your worst, man of Torm!"

"No, I couldn't! I --"

With a snarl the woman with the glowing chest climbed up his offered arm, her fingers bruising claws of pain, found her feet -- and lashed him across the face.

Horthan of Torm staggered back, furious, his face dripping blood.

She whipped him again, hard enough to slap his helmed head to one side, and he caught her whip on the backswing, fisted its barbed thongs, and hauled on it, hard.

Jerked forward off her feet, Dredra of Loviatar crashed helplessly into him.

"Now that's more like it," she laughed, nose to nose. "Good pain, hey?"

And she kissed him.

Startled and disgusted, Horthan shoved her away -- and she snatched his greatsword from his hand with a taunting laugh and sprang away over the heaped bodies.

With a roar he charged her, caught up to her in three swift strides, and flung her down. They crashed heavily to the floor, war-metal atop leather, and bounced. She writhed and twisted as he grabbed for his swordhilt.

When they were done, his sword was back in his hand, and the priestess of Loviatar was lying on her back under him.

Breathing heavily, Horthan growled, "I'm sorry!" He thrust himself up to his knees, off her.

She smiled. "Thank you, sir. May I have another?"

The Loyal Sword winced. "I was being very gentle!"

Her lash cracked around his armored ankles, coiling tight, and before he could do more than fling wide his sword and free hand to claw the air in a quest for balance, she pulled, long arms rippling.

The paladin was flung away, spinning helplessly, to crash through quite a multitude of warring duergar, gnomes, and halflings. Fetching up against a wall, he gaped at her.

She grinned back, licking bloody lips, and purred, "Well, don't be!"

A Red Wizard rose behind her, wearing a grin of sheer malice and raising a wicked dagger to where he could slice at her throat.

The Fang of Malar, his face a dripping mask of blood, lunged up out of the heaped bodies and planted one fist, with all of his weight behind it, in that Red Wizard's crotch.

The Thayan folded up like a crushed doll, squeaking like a startled rat, and toppled over backward into the great gulf that until recently had been the southern half of the Fist's taproom, its cellar, and the gnome brothel Below. A gulf from which flames and smoke were now rising -- not to mention ladders swarming with gnomes in various states of interestingly abbreviated apparel.

A Red Wizard and a white-haired male gnome reeled past, trading punches, a ragged chorus of halflings whooped with glee as there was a very large and glassy crash from the direction of the bar -- Belgrim winced, from halfway up a ladder -- and as several faeries whizzed past, wings mere blurs, a voice that had not been heard in the taproom of the Fist for many a year announced, "Ah, now, but this is far too much to just watch!"

And Elminster of Shadowdale came down the banister like a shooting star racing to earth, and planted a fist in the throat of the nearest Red Wizard.

The man staggered, emitting strangulated garglings, and fell over into the large and inviting hole in the floor -- shearing Belgrim and about a dozen gnomes off a ladder as he went.

From somewhere far below, Darathra could be heard cursing almost gleefully as the arriving bodies thudded and rolled all around her.

"Dredra," Belgrim's voice floated up to them faintly, "what the Nine Hells happened to your, er, front?"

"Like them? They certainly attract attention!"

Elminster grinned at that and felled another Red Wizard with his fists.

Volo stared down the stairs at the Old Mage in astonishment. "Holy Dancing Mystra," he said at last, as Elminster delivered a roundhouse haymaker to the side of a Thayan head, then whirled to gut-punch another Red Wizard, "I thought I was the one who got into trouble wherever I went!"

"Hah!" Elminster roared back at him. "Mere amateur! Novice! Do it for over a thousand years, now, and ye can --"

He caught sight of something atop a hanging candlewheel far across the room, near a freshly bloodstained wall. Smiling, he crooked his fingers beckoningly.

The four Red Wizards facing him took that as taunting, and gave him glares of hatred as they hefted their daggers and advanced in careful unison, shoulder to shoulder.

"Dung! Elminster, 'ware!" Volo called, seeing their menacing advance.

Elminster smiled again, and retreated a step.

Sneering, the Red Wizards came on.

"Old Mage," Volo called, as several more Thayans started up the splintered stair toward him, "couldn't we have just stayed in the attic?"

Elminster laughed. "Nay, lad! Lucklai and Talaressa've been married over our heads by now, and they'll be wanting a bridal bed somewhere forthwith!"

"In the attic?"

"What, the infamous Volo, scandalized? Well, old Nendraer Wondergleam was right: This night doth bid fair to hold unfolding wonders!"

The Red Wizards raised their daggers, their grins all fangs of malice -- and the item Elminster had called from atop the candlewheel came whizzing to his hand.

Unfortunately for Thayan ambitions, the item in question was the Sword of Many Heads, and the way to the Old Mage's hand lay right through their necks.

Two of them reeled, nearly headless and spraying blood in all directions. The other two toppled with startled curses as a muscular but disheveled woman clad in the ragged remnants of what had once been underleathers rose out of the tangle bodies and hurled them off their feet.

"Red Wizards!" Barrera Alhound spat. "What next?" She punched hard, twice, and two Thayan heads lolled back loosely, as their owners abandoned all thoughts of struggling to rise and fight on -- and, in fact, abandoned all thoughts, period, for a time.

Elminster helped her up with a smile, and put the Sword of Many Heads into her hand.

The Just Blade of Tempus thanked him with a smile of her own, and then frowned and asked, "Should I know you? Who are you?"

"Just an old meddler," Elminster said dismissively, "but there: up on yon stair! That's Volothamp Geddarm: The Volo!"

The paladin of the Wargod glared up the stair at the retreating Volo -- now gabbling offers and entreaties as fast as his lips could move -- and then launched herself into a charge.

She smote the Red Wizards between her and Volo aside without even breaking stride, sending them reeling and pitching over what was left of the banisters.

A great wave of hooting, whooping Minstrelwish halflings came down the stairs, sweeping Volo with them, and ran her over.

The tide of bodies reached the toes of Elminster's boots, and then parted (as if by magic), to spit out a familiar but very bedraggled figure.

Volo looked up from the floor at the Old Mage looming over him and said faintly, "I think I'm ready to be a frog now. This has been an utter disaster."

"Oh, I'd not say that," Elminster replied, looking down not at Volo but at a garment that was spread out across his fingers. To Volo, it looked very like the Shield of the Chaste, still sparkling with little motes of light from the spell that had teleported it to him. From the attic, presumably.

"After all, look ye," the Old Mage added with a fleeting grin, waving the chastity belt like a little boy with a trophy, "it all came together just as I planned."

"Here," Elminster said a little grimly, "is thy murderer. I'll not leave him to thee, however: He's bound straight for Blackstaff Tower, where they've spells enough to deal with someone who's stumbled on the treasure-trove of Netherese magic he did."

He waved what looked like an empty sack, and Orlavar of the Guard looked up grimly from the task of washing away blood and collecting buckets of cantels of what had until recently been his friends and swordbrothers, and said disgustedly, "Who is this old madman?"

Volo smirked, and waved his hand at the Old Mage and then at Mirt, who was also helping transform the chamber into something a little less like a slaughterhouse. "Which one?"

"You," Emmurgan of the Guard growled, eyes narrowing. "You're Volo! Arrest him, men!"

The monk from afar straightened up with a whistle of amazement, to watch the fun, as grim-faced members of the City Guard started forward.

Mirt gave Loreth Swanfist a disgusted look, and the Guard commanders another, and snapped, "Don't even try! Yon whitebeard's Elminster of Shadowdale! Yes, that Elminster -- the Chosen of Mystra!"

The Old Mage gave them a seraphic smile and added, "Indeed. Yet my young companion here, Volo, is far more dangerous. You see, wild magic from the Bloody Fist still clings to him."

He crooked an eyebrow, and something swift and silver sprang from the astonished Volo to the equally dumbfounded Emmurgan.

There was a soundless flash, everyone blinked, and then a second pulse of light took Elminster and Volo with it, leaving Mirt and the others staring at each other.

Emmurgan was the first to direct his stare elsewhere.

Looking down at his own suddenly shapely front -- a bodice many a young lass would have been proud to call her own -- he exclaimed in horror, "These aren't mine!"