

Never a Warpig Born

By Ed Greenwood

Though few in the Sembian capital of Ordulin had the slightest inkling that the Red Wizards of Thay desired to establish an enclave in their fair city, all Ordulin was aware that some wealthy, finely dressed outlanders had been asking certain property owners if they'd be interested in selling this building or that -- in exchange for ready coin, in plenty.

The typical Sembian response to such an offer is to narrow the eyes, rub the hands together thoughtfully, and to wonder how high a price might be commanded before the desire to own down-at-heel Ordulin acreage is outstripped by limited funds or open disgust at such greed. But then, such behavior is but the Sembian way, and what other places in Faerûn matter but glittering Sembia?

Other Sembian ways have to do with etiquette, the display of wealth, and fine food and drink. Wherefore one night in early fall, when the chill was just beginning to nip in the air, a coach of truly enormous size and ostentation of ornament drew up before the lantern-lit front steps of Hallowmere House, and four men in fine robes got out.

Lady Hallowmere was not to be met in town, no matter how many coins the Red Wizards proffered or doors they murmured at. However, a solid tenday of such inquiries produced the nigh-magical appearance of glittering gilt-penned invitations at abodes the Red Wizards had thought secret. The golden words invited them to eveningfeast at Hallowmere House.

They journeyed to the countryside not far west of the city. Silently singing shielding spells surrounded bodies so a-bristle with magical rings and wands and bracers and codpieces as to nearly glow. Good food they'd enjoyed in plenty in their lives, and could find at will; moreover, venturing into possible danger held little attraction. However, Lady Hallowmere owned a generous three blocks of warehouses, shops, coach houses, stables, and rather crumbling walled mansions in the very heart of Ordulin that would be ideal for the Thayan enclave.

"No scrying spells nor probes," one of the wizards murmured to his superior. They watched a dark-uniformed man with the wrinkles and silver hair of fine old age, but the rippling physique of a titan among warriors, come down those broad steps toward them. "My spells are certain of that."

The Thayans gazed up the steps past the approaching man. The old stone mansion -- huge, many-turreted, and flanked by many tall, dark trees -- looked as ready to crumble as its owner's in-town holdings. It was small wonder no one stood on those balconies watching them. What they could see of the walled gardens, behind, looked like an enclosed slice of wild forest.

"However," the murmuring man added, "there are strong shieldings on the gate guards and this seneschal -- and he doesn't look anything like the man I was told was Hallowmere's seneschal."

The Red Wizard Thaerivel nodded, silently returned the servant's wave of salute, and gestured to the man to lead them up the steps.

As they ascended in the light of the flickering lanterns, the Thayan leader turned to the three mages following at his heels and said in a low voice, "Remember, *no one* is to use magic except at my command."

The man acting as seneschal turned two steps above them, continuing to climb without hesitation or stumbling, gave them a tight smile, and commented, "Well said. That's always prudent behavior, Lord Wizards -- as well as the only

acceptable conduct in polite society."

The Red Wizards stiffened, their eyes blazing with anger, but their guide was already turning away to tug on a huge tasseled cord. A bell rang out when he did so, deep and loud and low, and in the rolling din of its echoes the Thayans reached the top step. The strange servant effortlessly threw open an ornate door that was as wide as four men and as tall as a dozen.

Beyond, the wizards could see a large, high-domed hall of stone, adorned with galleries and hung with rich maroon banners, great wall-shields of gold, and tapestries and paintings as large as the sails of great caravels. Everything glittered under the warm fire of countless candles, hanging here, there, and everywhere on gilt chain. Across a wide expanse of carpeted tile, a crescent formed table faced them, with its ends toward them and a low step-through at its center. A tall, slender lady in a dark, daring gown stood in that gap, facing them.

Even given the flattering glow of the candles, she looked larger and far younger and more beautiful than they'd been led to believe old Lady Haugratha Hallowmere could hope to be, even with the best of pampering and minor magics.

The muscular seneschal ushered the four guests into the hall with a broad sweep of his arm, and then slipped past them to one side and announced grandly, "Emril Thaerivel of Thay."

The Red Wizards stiffened again, for they certainly hadn't given the man their names. Unperturbed by their reaction, he continued, "Accompanied by the mages Yondro Belask, Imrith Halavander, and Calrauth Horthil. Red Wizards all."

"Durnan, they are welcome in my house and may enter freely," came a soft female voice from the gap in the center of the half-moon table. Its owner took a step forward through that passage so smoothly that she almost seemed to drift. Her shimmering gown swept the floor as she came, and her long, glossy fall of hair turned suddenly silver.

"Lady Hallowmere of Ordulin," the seneschal boomed.

The lady advanced to meet her guests with a pleasant smile. "You may also know me as the Witch-Queen of Aglarond," she said, as recognition made the Thayans gasp, tremble, and -- despite Thaerivel's orders -- frantically start to cast spells, "or to use your most recent description of me, Thaerivel, 'that mad bitch' . . . but I prefer to be called 'The Simbul.'"

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Outside the crumbling walls of Hallowmere House, something hairy and long-tusked darted from tree to tree -- and back again.

"This one," it hissed in a sharp, testy voice that might have belonged to a man, and not to a scarred and filthy boar. A muscular giant in leather armor bristling with weapons pointed obediently, turned to see that he'd got the right one, and then stalked forward, his grin showing tusks of his own. No leash joined the half-orc to the boar trotting beside him, though it sported a spiked war-collar. The boar stopped halfway to the tree, squinted up at it, snorted, and said, "No. Over here!"

"You're lord here, Warpig," the half-orc replied in an amiable rumble.

"Lord Warpig," came the sour reply. "*Such* an honor."

"That branch?"

"That branch," the boar confirmed.

The half-orc uncoiled the long rope from around his middle, unconcernedly tore off his mask and tied it around the metal grapnel adorning the end of the rope to muffle noise. Then he squinted up into the night and threw.

Orokh had done this before. He might be about as bright-witted as the nearest hitching post, but there were some things he was good at. Warpig watched him tug experimentally on the rope, nod his head, and then bend to knot the coils of rope into a rough harness around the boar.

They hadn't made much noise -- yet -- but Warpig was sweating despite the cool air. He did not expect to survive to see the dawn.

The branch of the old duskwood, which stood just inside the mansion wall, proved stout enough. The wall lost only a stone or two under Orokh's boots, and the half-orc's strength saw them up, over, and down. Warpig made the journey dangling like a rather dirty sack of grain, and he knew one cold, hard certainty: He couldn't depart by this route without the half-orc's help.

Orokh was skilled at some things, but at others

"Not that way, you fool!" Warpig hissed. "Stay away from lanterns; light means people can see -- see *us*, that is!"

The gardens were old and overgrown, and half-seen flagstones tilted by roots and statues loomed out of untrimmed shrubbery like sentinels. Dark lawns and beds and bowers stretched away in one direction, not yet touched by the light of the rising moon. In the other direction, paths mounted a terrace and then fell away again along a lantern-lit path. The path led straight up to the rear doors of Hallowmere House. Thankfully, the garden was still and silent.

Orokh turned to the boar for directions, and Warpig jerked his snout in the direction of the nearest path toward the house -- one that lacked lanterns and was carpeted in the wet, long-fallen leaves of years past. Evidently the gardens were largely neglected; better and better.

Stealthily they rounded a bower seat built into a rock-lined wall, and then passed the glimmer of a fishpond. Pale shapes glided in the shallow waters, and Warpig had put a hoof up onto the terrace beyond before he realized he was advancing alone. The half-orc had turned back to --

Snatch fish out of the fishpond?

"*Stop* that!" Warpig snarled at him. "You'll get us caught!"

One of the stone statues on the terrace in front of him sighed and then announced calmly, "Ye already are."

Orokh and Warpig froze, cold fingers of fear clenching around both their hearts -- and then the boar backed away with a growl, lowering his head for battle, and the half-orc stolidly commenced to draw forth and heft all manner of weapons.

"I *thought* the human smell was a bit strong!" Warpig snarled. "Think you can take us alive?"

"Aye, and a breath or two will see ye trussed on platters and ladled with sauce," rumbled another voice -- from behind them.

Warpig whirled. "Who -- ?"

"Mirt the Moneylender, at yer service," said the stout and hairy mountain of flesh now blocking the path behind them. He was waving a large sword and a larger axe rather casually in their direction.

The boar whirled around again at the sound of the half-orc's growl. "*Easy*,

Orokh," he snapped, and then stared at the statue -- who now seemed to be not stone at all, but a bearded man in rather dirty gray robes. "And who might *you* be?"

"I," said the statue almost jovially, "am Elminster, and these are my friends." He waved an old and long-fingered hand. A crescent of six or more silvery shadows rose out of the earth and bushes all around the half-orc and the boar -- tall, slender, ghostly warriors.

The boar grunted, and started to tremble. Nowhere to run; no way to hide. These were watchnorns.

"As it happens," said someone else as she stepped regally out from behind a tree, "you've come to the wrong place this night. Bent on thievery, perhaps?"

"Give me a little credit, lady," Warpig growled. "Do I look like a creeping thief? With Blunderfists here?"

"Nay, that much is true," Mirt rumbled. "Ye seem more like a talking beast and a hopeless idiot to me."

"Well, *thank* you. Thank you *very much*," Warpig replied sarcastically. "It's not enough to doom me -- you must insult me as well! Well met, I think not! Warpig am I, and this brute who walks with me is Orokh. I fear he's even stupider than he looks, so no quick movements, please. I don't know who you are, Lord Mightygirth, but I recognize the High Lady of Silverymoon well enough -- and if I do face Alustriel, then this man claiming to be Elminster probably is. Oh, *gods*."

He made a brief sound deep in his throat that might almost have been a wail and turned to face Alustriel. "Pray forgive me, Lady, if your title is now Queen of the Silver Marches or something else exalted; I don't mean to slight you." He nodded his head as if he was trying to bow, and added, "Nay, I came here not to rob anyone, but to see the Simbul."

"Few know my sister is within," Alustriel said softly. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to demand a full and honest answer to this simple query: Why?"

"Well, if you must know," Warpig told her a little testily, "I was hoping to kiss her."

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Thayan fingers wove spells in frantic haste. Thayan lips hissed desperate incantations . . . and nothing happened. Mystic words fell away into silence, and hands clawed the air vainly and slowly sank down again. Not a spell had blossomed, and not a single magic taken hold.

Four men stood and trembled -- and then burst into action, all at once. The wizard Halavander toppled to the floor in a faint, Horthil turned and sprinted for the door, and the other two Red Wizards snatched out daggers from their belts and drove them up at their own throats.

The running mage sprinted two swift steps, and then seemed to be running in some sort of thick, invisible mud. His legs moved more and more slowly . . . until he finally came to a complete halt in midair. He stood frozen in mid-dash, with eyes wide and arms flung wider.

The hilts in the hands of Thaerivel and Belask thumped against their throats and then chests bruisingly. The blades projecting from them had flashed into flesh as if it was mere smoke -- not there at all. In fact, it wasn't the hilts that had stopped against ribs, but the Thayan's own tight-clenched knuckles; to their blades, their bodies were simply . . . not there.

They waved their daggers around inside themselves wildly, but took no harm -- until at last, both inevitably and reluctantly, they gave up trying to work suicide and found themselves staring at the lady in the gown.

The Scourge of Thay. The Foe. They were facing the Mad Slayer, the Bane of Red Wizards, though her voice was not raised in its usual raw scream. Her silver hair was not a wild tempest curling around her shoulders with a life -- and fury -- of its own, and her gown was not a careless, revealing black thing of tatters.

She stood there smiling at them. She was tall and regal and serene in the candlelight, and her gown was as magnificent as her hair.

"Please," the Simbul said gently, "be at peace. I mean no harm to you this night, and I would prefer to have no unpleasantness between us, nor spell-battle. A splendid -- and, my lords of Thay, a completely safe -- repast has been prepared for us all to sit and enjoy together. It's my intention to enjoy an evening of dining and relaxed, honest converse with you, rather than slaughter and strife." She gestured almost timidly to the table behind her, and asked, "Will you join me?"

Shaking, Thaerivel let his knife-hand fall to his side, and stammered, "L-lady, what trickery is this?"

The Simbul gave him a wry, crooked smile that told him all too well that she knew her guests expected to be torn apart horribly by her spells the moment she desired their deaths. "None, Lord Thaerivel," she told him, as calmly as before. "So long as you menace not this house nor any of us here with spells or poison or blade, we shall be the most gracious hosts we know how to be. Please, will you dine?"

"Have we any choice?" Thaerivel asked bitterly.

"The door stands open," Durnan said from behind them. "You are free to go. Unharmed."

Thaerivel's eyes narrowed, and he looked all about him. There seemed to be no servants, but he could see a multitude of doors in the gloom beneath the many balconies and galleries . . . and all of them stood just slightly ajar. When he turned right around -- how he dared turn his back on the Witch-Queen of Aglarond, he could not think, but he found that somehow he had -- the leader of the Red Wizards saw the seneschal standing well to one side of the door they'd come in by. It did indeed stand open to the night and was overhung by a gallery shrouded in darkness.

At that moment the old seneschal moved, taking two quick steps across the doorway with the catlike, gliding grace of a master swordsman. Thaerivel blinked; he'd not seen such swift surety for years. He moved to where the wizard Horthil was frozen in mid-run. Or rather, now starting to move again, though very slowly.

The seneschal carefully took hold of Horthil's nearest forearm, and then things happened very swiftly.

The Red Wizard was running again, at top speed, lurching as his foot struck the ground; the seneschal ran along beside him for two swift strides to keep him from falling over, and then let go and drew away.

Horthil sprinted on through the open doorway, a despairing wail rising from him.

"Horthil! Calrauth Horthil!" Thaerivel's voice was as loud and as coldly furious

as the other Thayans had ever heard it. The running man's head snapped back as if he'd been caught on a hook, and he teetered at the head of the mansion steps. "Return!" his superior snarled.

After a slow, reluctant and swaying moment, Horthil turned around again, his face as white as bleached bone.

Durnan was bending over the sprawled form of the wizard who'd fainted, a goblet of wine now in his hand. "Awaken, Imrith Halavander," he murmured, cradling the man's head as gently as any mother ever raised a sleeping child. "Awake, and be at ease, and have some wine."

Thaerivel eyed this courtesy, gave Horthil a glare, and then turned slowly around to face the Simbul once more. Meeting her eyes, he drew in a deep breath, took a careful step forward, and said, "Lady, I -- I will be better company if I know two things: Why you are guesting us thus . . . and how did you foil our spells, with no word nor gesture."

"I would like to better understand your motives here in Ordulin, Thaerivel," the tall -- and terrifyingly near -- ruler of Aglarond replied, "and I must confess that I am trying to win a wager: that I could conduct myself with pleasantness toward you, unless or until you attack me. As for your magic, I did nothing to stop that. They did."

She extended a long, slender arm to point over Thaerivel's head. Reluctantly the leader of the Red Wizards turned his back on her again and found himself now gazing not at darkness above the entry door, but at a minstrels' gallery where several folk stood, looking down. One was a short, frail-seeming elf woman, who looked as old as Faerûn itself, and another was a tall, beautiful gowned woman every bit as regal as the Simbul, who stood with tiny stars winking and drifting about in the darkness of her long, unbound hair. Between those two floated several silvery, wraithlike forms, like the ghosts of tall, slender elves -- warriors, perhaps, or mages. As they drifted, shimmering slightly in the candlelight, it was hard to say.

"The Srinshée," the queen introduced them to the slack-jawed Thayans, indicating the ancient elf, "several watchnorns of this House, and Lady Dalance Shareth of the Sembian Church of Mystra."

Thaerivel found his voice out of disbelief, and a thread of rage born of it. "The Srinshée? She of long-fallen Myth Drannor? You expect me to believe such fancy?"

The Srinshée smiled down at him. "Believe what you like, Emril Thaerivel, son of Noskar. Belief is a strength in a mage. Yet, see: Your knife prevailed not, your contingencies hang unawakened, and all three of your personal shielding spells are down. I say again: Believe what you like."

As Thaerivel stared up at her helplessly, trying to swallow with a very dry mouth and a throat that was worse, Halavander quietly fainted again.

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The rising moon reached its first cool fingers into the gardens of Hallowmere House. It touched Mirt of Waterdeep, who was snorting with laughter at the boar's words. Elminster was chuckling, too, but for a different reason.

"Hoah! What madness!" Mirt said at last, shaking his head. "Well, what shall we do with these two fools?"

Elminster reached out and touched Alustriel's arm. Then he laid hold of Mirt's bicep firmly enough to quell the merchant's mirth and asked the boar,

"Broalaunt, is that ye?"

For a moment the beast glared up at him in silence . . . and then stirred and spoke.

"Yes," Warpig said shortly. "You know -- ?"

"I've heard. A curse was cast on ye at a MageFair by Samaerra, an apprentice of Larloch, after ye . . . became too familiar with her, shall we say?"

"Yes, yes," Warpig snarled. "I don't need reminding!"

"The kiss was the last unbinding, if I recall rightly, and it lets ye know when my -- when the Simbul is near. So ye've eaten the thirteen rabid chipmunks?"

"Yes," the boar replied, sounding a little sick at the mere memory.

"Found the Flail of Thammask, and returned it to the Traders of Honor merchants' guild in Telflamm, fulfilling the prophecy?"

"Yes," Warpig said, sounding suddenly on the verge of tears. "Gods, hitting that water hurt. I broke . . . many bones."

"What prophecy?" Mirt growled.

"A boar shall in its jaws bring the lost Flail of Thammask to the hand of a Rashemi Guildmaster outside the Land of Berserkers, atop a tower, and then leap over the battlements," Alustriel intoned softly. "I'd wondered about that. The harbor tower, I suppose?"

Warpig nodded, and so did she ere looking up at the boar sharply. "The war banner of the Shattertusks?"

"Inside," the boar said in that whiny man's voice, "on the feast table. Table linen of distinction. Dyed with the blood of vanquished foes who were tusk-gutted alive, and all that. Orokh here sold it to her, but not before I'd done what I was supposed to with it."

"Oh? What was that?" Mirt growled.

"Do we have to go through all this?" Warpig asked wearily. "You're going to stop me now, and have your sport, no? And when you're done, if I still live and hold this shape instead of being a toadstool or a stone or something, I'll be trapped like this until I get stuck and roasted by some hungry forester or noble out for sport -- or cooked alive by the spells of some mage in Aglarond while I'm trying to get into the Simbul's throne room!"

"To undo the part of the curse that kept him mute," Elminster explained to Mirt, "he had to find an orc or half-orc who'd tie the banner around his head and dance naked in a human marketplace -- by day, and with buying going on around him."

He looked at Orokh, and then back at Warpig, and grinned. "Ye bought him a cask of ale, right?"

"Three casks," Warpig said sourly. "He's stupider than he looks, but he's not a dullard."

"I'd say this Samaerra wanted ye to die a warpig," Mirt grunted.

"She's wanted me dead for a long time now," Warpig replied softly, "almost as much as I've wanted to die . . . but Larloch has kept me alive -- as a reminder to her of her pride and how not to rashly cast curses, I think. He's probably watching us now."

"Oho," Elminster said. "That makes me even more resolved."

Warpig looked up at him suspiciously. "About what?"

The Old Mage chuckled, threw his arms wide, and announced, "Broalaunt of Thay, this night you shall kiss the Queen of Aglarond!"

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"This is the best wine I've ever tasted," Thaerivel said slowly, holding his goblet up to the light. "I -- I wish I could believe that this won't be the last night I'm alive to drink anything. Forgive me, Lady, I mean no discourtesy. I simply can't . . . can't . . ."

"Believe we're dining together, and in polite converse?"

The Red Wizard nodded slowly, meeting her eyes, and swallowed. "If -- if you are going to attack us, later, permit me to say that I apologize for -- what I called you, elsewhere. You are both very beautiful and very courteous."

The Simbul smiled slowly. "I thank you, Lord Thaerivel. It comes as hard for me to be civil to -- your kind -- as it does you, to dare compliment me."

She laughed suddenly: the full-throated, hearty laughter that so few women allow themselves. The sound made all the Thayans tense visibly, and more than a little wine spilled from Horthil's goblet. Then she leaned forward with an impish smile and asked the Thayan leader, "Shall we dance, later?"

Thaerivel darted a glance up at the minstrels' gallery, where women in black and silver leather who'd not been there earlier were now playing melodies on harp and songhorn and shaum, and murmured, "Harpers?"

"I fear so. Armed from heels to throats, too," the Queen of Aglarond replied. Thaerivel closed his eyes, shuddered slightly, and then opened them again to meet her gaze directly. "I'd -- we'd all be deeply honored, your Majesty."

"Just call me the Simbul," she told him, eyes sparkling. "Or even 'ho there, mad bitch!' will do. I'm finding this delightful -- just setting aside my comfortable cloak of hate, for once."

The Red Wizard grimaced. "Yes. For once."

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"El," said Alustriel with a little laugh, "I'm not so sure this is such a good idea." "Why not, lass? *I've* kissed her often enough, and I live to stand here now and tell the tale!"

"Yes, but you're . . ."

"Her lover? I was once just a memory of grumbling old authority to her, and a rival mage of power to boot!"

"Yes, but El, *look* at you! And at the boar! Now, really, which do you think Alassra would prefer to kiss?"

Mirt looked from the old wizard to the boar, as they stood bathed in the same fall of moonlight. He scratched his jaw, shook his head, and rumbled, "I don't think there's much to choose between them, meself."

Turning on his heel to regard the ghostly watchnorns behind him, shimmering silver in the moonlight, he asked, "Aye? What d'ye think, hmm?" He waved a hand at the boar and the Old Mage, and added, "They could be cousins, right?" As if in answer, two loud snorts were heard. One -- from Warpig -- was of disgust. The other came from Alustriel, as she struggled to keep from bursting into laughter.

Elminster snaked out a scrawny old arm and tickled her, just above one velvet-smooth hip. When she looked at him, he snorted gently, very like a boar -- and she burst into open mirth, hooting at the stars as she fell forward to embrace him.

Warpig turned to the half-orc, who was still standing uncertainly beside him, his glower gone, puzzlement on his face in its stead, and his small arsenal of

weapons half-lowered. "I thought so," the man trapped in the shape of a boar snarled. "All mages are falling-down, moon-faced crazy!" Orokh looked down at him, even greater bewilderment descending over his battered features, and growled, "This is news?"

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Discussion had turned to wine, and enough different vintages had been sampled that the four Red Wizards fell deeply into animated converse with their hostess. Then a door opened and an unannounced guest came in late to the feast. Several faces peered through the door behind him to watch his progress.

Somewhat tentatively he approached the great table, dodging between the Harpers who quietly carried platters and decanters to and fro, replacing hearty roasts with sweet pastries and fruit ices. If they gave him nothing but smiles as he came, his appearance was probably to blame. They'd all seen Elminster of Shadowdale before -- though he did not seem to wear his usual smiling, winking mood.

When he reached the last pillar before the great domed center of the hall where the feast table stood, his form shimmered, sank -- and a scarred and filthy boar stood blinking in the candlelight.

The beast eyed the chatting diners, noting the sparkling wine, the way the men admired the view of their hostess afforded by her low-cut gown as she leaned forward to pour them more . . . and seemed to draw in a deep breath.

Then the boar trotted forward, heading for a particular seat.

"Well met, my love," Elminster's voice said in the Simbul's ear, as a sudden startled look on Thaerivel's face made her aware that a *boar* -- alive, large, and smelly -- had rounded the table and was trotting purposefully towards her, tusks gleaming above a slavering snout! "Like my disguise? It got me where I needed to be, this night!"

To the utter astonishment of the Red Wizards, the Queen of Aglarond laughed heartily as the boar reached her and stretched its snout up to her. Throwing her arms around its great shaggy head, she leaned forward and kissed it enthusiastically.

Light burst into being before her. The solid and stinking porcine head swirled and shifted under her hands in the heart of the swirling radiance, and from nowhere a faint but furious female voice could be heard chanting, "I hereby curse thee, Broalaunt of Thay, to be . . ."

The Simbul found herself staring into the terrified face of a filthy, stinking naked man, so besmeared and hairy that he might as well have been wearing a fur jerkin. He looked back at her, wild hope and utter horror warring in his eyes, his mouth trembling as if he wanted to scream out something he was too afraid to say -- and then a brighter, silver-tinged radiance came out of nowhere and swept around him like a cloak, and he was gone.

The Queen of Aglarond felt boar-spittle running down her chin and saw the filth upon her arms. She shot to her feet, her tall-backed chair crashing over on its side. Her Thayan guests moaned in dismay, cringing back from her as she seemed to loom over them, taller than any mortal woman could hope to be. All of the candles in the room shrank down to nothing -- and then erupted in ceiling-scorching pillars of flame.

"*Is this YOUR doing?*" she roared, in a voice that made ears bleed and might

well have been heard back in the noisiest taverns of Ordulin. "*Do you worms DARE -- ?*"

The four Red Wizards sprang to their feet and scrambled away in all directions -- and the room erupted around them.

A gigantic hand of stone burst forth from the nearest wall and reached for Imrith Halavander, who wailed, flailing the air with helpless hands, and then fainted again. Bolts of lightning crashed around the room, hurling more than one writhing, shock-haired Harper the length of the galleries. The floor rippled like the waves of a storm-tossed sea, hurling Calrauth Horthil to his knees or onto his face repeatedly as he tried to flee again, and flinging the senseless body of Halavander about like a rag doll.

Yondro Belask snarled, snatched out two wands, and fired them at the Simbul, again and again -- even after they turned into small forests of skeletal hands that reached back to claw at him in a bony, raking chorus.

All the doors of the hall flew open, and the Srinshree, Alustriel, Lady Shareth, the watchnorns, and Elminster strode in, weaving spells as fast as they could. The air of Hallowmere House crackled with energy, stinging faces like storm-driven salt spray. The Simbul of Aglarond threw up her hands, her face a flame of fury, and blasted the domed ceiling above her toward the stars with a magic that smote the ears and eyes and old stone with equal searing rage.

Through a storm of wrestling spells the frantic Harpers saw the wizard Horthil tackled almost casually at the doors by Durnan of Waterdeep. The old warrior plucked up the Thayan in one hand and started carrying him back towards his seat, struggling against swirling magic like a man leaning into the teeth of a strong storm-wind.

Elminster stood looking up thoughtfully, and thin white lines of force like tiny, wandering lightning bolts stabbed out from his fingers, clawing up through the spellstorm to spin a dome of force across the gaping hole the Simbul had just smashed through the roof. He was just in time to catch and hold scores of stones and roof-tiles that had been flung high into the sky, and now were tumbling back down whence they'd come.

The Simbul was still snarling in fury, and fresh spells raced out from her, slamming Harpers and watchnorns alike back against the walls. Thaerivel of Thay had a brief glimpse of the Srinshree standing like a tiny white beacon, shielded by her own mighty magics and so unmoved by the magical gale. From her and from Elminster's dome of force and from Alustriel and the Lady Shareth the spells hurled by the Simbul rebounded, crashing back down on the Queen of Aglarond.

Thaerivel saw her sway, stagger a few steps to one side as hungry lightnings encircled her like a slaver's lash, and shriek out sobbing rage as she was forced to her knees by the crackling backlash.

Without thinking, Thaerivel leaped to defend her, throwing the most powerful shielding spell he had left around her like a cloak.

He saw it settle, and then saw her face change, and thought he had only another breath of life left to him.

A regal hand waved, and the storm of spells was stilled. The Weave shined blindingly bright in the air of Hallowmere House for an instant that made everyone in the chamber blink and falter.

In the sudden silence that followed -- a stillness broken only by the sharp

clatter of an errant ceiling-tile bursting as its long plunge ended in a sharp meeting with the floor -- the Simbul's soft, astonished words were heard clearly by everyone present.

"Why, Thaerivel," she said, almost timidly, "how sweet of you."

"I -- uh -- ahem. It seemed the right thing to do," the Red Wizard replied, a little dazedly.

"Ah. Like building an enclave in the heart of Sembia's capital, hmm?"

Thaerivel stiffened. "Is that what you brought us here to do, Lady? Get us to promise not to proceed -- or you'll slay us on the spot?"

"Glory of the Weave, no!" the Queen of Aglarond replied, looking genuinely startled. "Build your enclave, by all means! Carpet Sembia with them -- so long as you don't put one in the Dalelands, we're quite prepared to let Thay survive."

"Ah . . . generous of you," the Thayan said stiffly.

"Don't crowd me, Thaerivel," the Simbul told him warningly. "I'm still learning to be forgiving and generous, and it's coming hard. I don't know who pulled that trick with the boar, but right now, I'm still feeling like blasting *someone* into the middle of the next tenday!"

"Ah," Elminster announced lightly, "the guilty party ye're looking to blast would be me. I fear I -- well, enjoy that sort of thing."

"*I . . . know*," the Queen of Aglarond told him, dropping both of those words into the feasting hall like slow, cold stones. "Do you really think I don't know the touch of your magic, El? I've been waiting for you to tell me *why!*"

"Well, some years back, a young and foolish Thayan went to a MageFair and got himself cursed," the Old Mage began, "and as you were being so forgiving and welcoming towards Red Wizards this even -- "

"*You* tried to make me lose our wager," the Simbul said in tones of soft menace, a dark light rising in her eyes that made all of the Red Wizards in the room back away, faces paling. "Why, I ought to -- "

Elminster was suddenly gone, and in his place stood the still-unclad, terrified-looking Broalaunt of Thay, with a half-orc standing beside him like a frowning, blinking mountain.

As the Simbul uncertainly lowered the claw-like hand she'd raised to hurl spells at her lover, her eyes narrowing and the Thayan dwindled suddenly back into boar-form. As if lifted by a giant, invisible hand, the beast rose, grunting and squealing in terror, towards her.

When its dripping, sniveling snout was a finger's length away from her lips, the boar came to a whimpering halt and hung there in midair, trembling violently. With a startled roar of fear the half-orc was also plucked from his feet, gliding through the air squirming and clawing, to also end up nose-to-nose with the Queen of Aglarond.

The Simbul glared at them both, her hands on her hips, and they shrank back from her burning gaze.

Beyond them, she saw the Red Wizards were on their knees, wringing their hands and staring at her with large, frightened eyes.

Suddenly the Queen of Aglarond threw back her head and laughed. "Well, as long as you all still fear me," she said lightly. "That's respect enough." She threw her arms around the boar's head and kissed it soundly, even after it turned back to a weeping, cringing Broalaunt -- and then turned and served

the half-orc the same way.

"Well, well," Mirt murmured in wonder from across the room, shaking his shaggy head slowly.

"My thanks, Old Mage," the Simbul said fondly to the man who'd faded out of nowhere to stand beside the stout and wonderstruck merchant, as the fifth Thayan wizard and the half-orc started to drift away from her again. "Your motto applies!"

Mirt turned and looked at Elminster. "Oh, Old Mad Goat? What motto would *that* be?"

Elminster smiled at him and then at his lady love, and said it with her:

"Whatever you do, do it with love."