

Ladies Night at the Yawning Portal

By Ed Greenwood

The woman in the ill-fitting robes drew herself up to her full height and snarled gruffly, "One side, fools! Halaster Blackcloak is no man's lackey!"

Her voice soared rather alarmingly at the end of her utterance, but the other ladies in masks and similarly clumsy disguises tittered excitedly.

"Oh, what a clever disguise!" one giggled. "And what's that you're carrying?"

"The dreaded Moonpenguin of Boof," the false Halaster growled. "So insult me, any of you, and -- Halamaravatara!"

And with that grandiose mock incantation, she gestured threateningly with her oddly-shaped bundle, which looked more or less like what it really was: a simple wooden bust of someone whose true identity was concealed under the towel that draped it.

"Ladies, ladies!" a cold voice snapped from the darkness of the archway ahead of the line of waiting women. "No jostling, please, and no threats! We cannot be responsible for the safety or even continued survival of those who unleash magic inside the Portal!"

The eager women leaned forward in unison, peering to see the source of that chilling voice. Obliging, something bone-white stepped forward into view upon the threshold. This "something" looked very much like an upright, walking human skeleton.

Several little screams pierced the air, and then more applause.

"Oooh," the giggling matron's voice sang out, "and who are you supposed to be?"

"Myself," the skeleton said flatly. "I'm kept quite busy enough just being myself. I've no time for playacting and masquerades and foolishness. I serve drinks here at the Yawning Portal and entertain men of . . . exotic tastes."

A little silence fell in the warm yet breezy Flamerule night, and then the false Halaster asked, "Ah . . . are you really a skeleton?"

"Of sorts." A bony hand reached out and touched the disguised woman's arm. The false Halaster saw only bones, but felt the brush of soft, warmly bare flesh. "I am female, and I truly live."

The skeletal woman raised her voice to carry along the line of waiting women, and added, "Welcome to Ladies' Night here at the Yawning Portal. Here are the rules: Anyone who draws a weapon, throws anything, casts any magic, or harms anyone else who's unwilling to be harmed, or even appears to do any of those things, may themselves be harmed -- or worse -- on the spot."

She left a little silence for that to sink in, but when the giggling matron started to ask a question, overrode her loudly and firmly with the words, "You may retain your disguises or reveal yourselves, as you prefer. Within these walls wait a few select males to entertain and divert you, but no male patrons will be allowed through the doors of the Portal this night . . . though of course we have little control over who -- or what -- comes Up From Below."

There were a few excited shrieks of mock or perhaps real fear from the line. The skeleton let them die down before adding, "I hope you'll enjoy yourselves, but I must remind you that this night is a trial; if its success is marred, there may be no more Ladies' Nights at the Yawning Portal next season, or ever. Do we understand each other, ladies?"

There was a ragged but general chorus of agreement, ere someone far down the line called out, "Will we see Durnan dance?"

The skeleton folded its arms across its chest and replied, "You may be very surprised at the staff you'll see here this night. I've not seen Durnan among them, but it may be that he intends to put in an appearance later."

Several loud booing sounds from the line suggested that several of the disguised ladies had imbibed enough strong drinkables to strip them of customary reserve and judgment.

So much was confirmed shortly after the skeleton stood aside, indicated the dark and empty arch, and suggested, "Enter!"

Amid many giggles the women disguised as men stumbled, scurried, or slunk through the doorway -- and one of them was so bold as to reach out and try to wave a hand through the waiting bones of the skeleton.

Her questing fingers touched no cold bones, but rather the curves of an invisible bared bosom that covered them. The owner of that bold hand emitted a gasp that rose swiftly into a scream.

The skeleton shook its head as the screaming woman -- who wore a Danilo Thann mask and a glittering gold-shot "blade about town" costume, plumed codpiece and all -- shot ahead into the darkness, and collided loudly and painfully with someone else.

"Definitely too much to drink," she muttered. "This is going to be a long night, to be sure."

"Here, as promised: the ring. Hurry!"

"But what if it all goes wrong? After all, a room crowded with excited women in disguises they're not used to, all looking for entertainment, and, well . . ."

"Trouble."

"Exactly. Someone is sure to see me starting the bloodletting -- how can they not? -- and then there'll be -- "

"A lot of screaming and fleeing, general mayhem, and this ring will see you safely out of it before anyone with spells enough to trace you can arrive. Yes, messy and very public . . . but your best chance this season, I assure you, to get to her -- and therefore to him."

"But even if all these "Chosen of Mystra" tales are pure nonsense, he's not just some back-hedge spellhurler! He's the Lord Mage of Waterdeep!"

"And that's why he must die. Should have been slain decades ago. We'd all be better off today if Halaster had taken him down in that first duel. For the sake of all Waterdeep, Khelben must die."

A ring flashed in a stray beam of moonlight as it was slid onto a finger, and the owner of that hand hissed his agreement and turned to stride away from that dark and dripping place, turning only once to call softly, "Yes. Khelben must die!"

There was no reply, only the endless, slowly echoing drip, drip of falling water.

The ring-wearing man hurried away, shivering as he found the stairs that would lead him up to the warmer Waterdhavian night above. Three steps up, he shivered again, and clutched his new-won ring more tightly. Did they always have to meet him to plot their murders in the damned sewers? What was wrong with somewhere warmer that served wine?

The Yawning Portal, for instance . . .

The din in the Yawning Portal was nearly deafening, but it was a happy near-deafness. The disguise-adorned shoulders of dozens of dancing Waterdhavian matrons and younger, thrill-seeking lasses (some of whom were the daughters of matrons in the same room, trusting to their disguises to conceal their identities from their mothers) bumped and jostled around spell-lit tables where the oiled, lightly clad muscled bodies of hired warriors posed amid shrieks of approval.

Though most of the usual dining-tables and benches had been cleared away, the many-pillared taproom was crowded and hot, awash in perfume, high-voiced excitement, wine, and chatter.

The room was already abuzz with the news that the notorious gossipmonger and writer Volo had been uncovered -- wearing ridiculous makeup and padding designed to make him appear to be a woman -- and tossed unceremoniously into the harbor. There would be no Volo's Guide To Ladies' Night, the rumor insisted, unless Volo invented everything as he swam among the rotting fish guts -- and dared to defy an edict that would cost him four fingers if such a publication was ever seen in Waterdeep.

The high tankard shelf running all around the taproom had been cleared of its customary row of containers and was now crowded with small dancing creatures, many of whom appeared to be playing, blowing, and otherwise producing the wild, high dancing music that keened and echoed throughout the smoky room.

From her table in one back corner, the false Halaster blinked at them, afraid that some magic must be at work. No, her sight was clear enough -- those were chipmunks! Chipmunks dancing with gnomes . . . female gnomes in strand-of-silver gowns who were juggling bells and making music! Among them were some whose hands repeatedly shaped rings of flame out of empty air -- rings that a certain sleek, silver-white furry form plunged through. It moved like a little flame along the shelf, as the eyes of the false Halaster narrowed. Everyone knew Laeral the Lady Mage of Waterdeep and her Sisters had silver hair . . .

There was a flash among those rings, and the silver beast was gone. Then came another flash, and the false Halaster -- like all of the other three ladies at the table, a fake Piergeiron, a parody of a foppishly decadent old noble lord, and a false Watch officer with huge moustaches that looked to have been made from the brushes of two well-worn brooms -- shrieked and flinched back.

Poised above their glasses of firewine was the silver creature, fixing them with dark and glittering eyes as it plunged its nose into the drinks and drained glass after glass in a noisy trice. It was a . . . weasel!

The false Halaster screamed again, at about the same time as the phony Piergeiron. The weasel lifted its dripping snout, gave them what could only be described as a sly grin, and -- flashed away again, to reappear on the shelf, leaping through a succession of illusory flaming rings once more.

"Our wine!" the non-Watch officer howled.

"The one weakness of Jitters the Blink Weasel," the skeletal doorguard murmured in their ears, as small flying things that seemed all whirring wings and glossy eyes swooped out of nowhere to bring them fresh, full glasses with flourishes that spilled nary a drop. "Addicted to firewine. Drink up, ladies, drink up, or he'll be back!"

The false Halaster pulled her mask aside long enough to hiss, "I am a noble of Waterdeep, senior in my house, and I have the ear of no less than three Lords of Waterdeep! I demand to know: Where did all these -- these juggling gnomes and trained weasels and -- and -- things come from?"

"Malaver's Miracles and Wonders, a traveling beast-show from beyond Secomber, hired for the night," the woman who seemed all bones replied. "That's Malaver herself, over there."

Masked once again, the noble matron followed the aim of a bony pointing finger to where a dwarf in a brown robe that looked like a moss-stained monk's cassock was climbing drunkenly up onto a table where one bronzed giant of a warrior danced.

The false Halaster shuddered, shook her head, and then looked away -- but not before she saw Malaver try to climb one shining, mighty-thewed leg, and get plucked free and tossed onto the heads of the hooting, reaching crowd for her troubles.

Some of the women around her were howling -- gods above, had they no shame?

The gigantic warpig turning on a spit at the far end of the room suddenly flared into crackling flame as a cook who wore mainly feathers and her own sweat danced out of a kitchen hatch and doused it with decanters of wine, earning roars of approval.

Suddenly the air was full of the whirring flying things again, this time bearing sizzling skewers of meat. The chipmunks along the shelf seemed to shudder and shrink away in disgust from the rich spicy smell of the skewers as these food-laden projectiles thunked down into table after table, like small faery arrows fired to earth.

Eager hands snatched them up, but the lady who was not Halaster eyed them doubtfully and then turned to the doorguard of the unseen flesh once more. "What meat is that?"

"Roast chipmunk. A delicacy where I come from."

The false Halaster shuddered. "That's disgusting!"

Bones shrugged -- a fascinating sight in itself -- and their owner murmured, "That's not cruelty, Lady Irlingstar; that's the food chain."

"You know my name?"

The doorguard shrugged again. "Knowing enough to keep me alive is my business, just as it is the business of all successful adventurers."

"You -- you're an adventurer?" Awe crept into that question despite Lady Nael Irlingstar's best efforts to quell it. Reading romantic sagas of daring lady adventurers was her greatest private delight.

The skull somehow gave her an odd look. "Better than that, Lady Ir -- Halaster. I not only have adventures, I write about them."

Lady Irlingstar stared at those empty eyesockets, so close to hers, and the endlessly smiling jaws below them -- and shivered.

The mask was hot, and the rubber corset with its overly grand curves and padded protuberances was even hotter, but the time was near. Just a few breaths more, in all this misery of sweat and sharp elbows of over-enthusiastic lady dancers, and Waterdeep would be needing a new Lord Mage.

Right now, the real Laeral was disentangling a clever little trap of intertwined spells in Neverwinter and averting the family scandal that accompanied it -- so this Laeral, smiling and walking rather stiffly around the edges of the room, tall glass in shapely hand, had to be someone else.

Khelben, most likely, come to spy and pry at the request of Durnan's family, who, despite the staggering sum they'd accepted from Salu Hiilgauntlet's little covey of noble matrons to surrender their famous inn to "wild women" for a night, really wanted the Portal to survive until dawn.

The Lord Mage of Waterdeep didn't do fireguard duty, of course; there was an entire Watchful Order for that. He'd agreed to come here because of deftly-spread rumors.

The man sweating in his mask and rubber amid the jostling dancers knew all about those rumors, because he'd done a lot of the spreading himself. A band of lady adventurers was to be founded here this night, to go straight down into Undermountain -- the Glittering Gauntlet of Glory band, sponsored by those infamous halflings called the Buckleswashers. These lady adventurers numbered more than a few noble lasses among their masked ranks and were emboldened by certain long-hidden enchanted items they'd found in Waterdeep -- items of magic now avidly sought by the Red Wizards of Thay.

Khelben could hardly resist so many lures. "She" almost stumbled as she reached a stretch of wall where tables were few but amorous ladies, who'd bought the temporary company of magnificent dancers, were many and crowded together to handle and proudly flourish their purchases. Yes, this wasn't Laeral, or any true woman. This had to be him.

The man took a few carefully casual steps towards the advancing Khelben, fingering the ring. This was the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, after all; he'd only get one chance. . . .

"Jalamra not like squid-heads," the towering barbarian growled, shifting shoulders that were as broad as any hobgoblin's. A shining sheen of sweat drew many eyes to the tattoos on her large and rippling muscles -- snakes that wound their ways down her arms, and snarling dragons that wound up her belly onto her breasts.

"Jalam, they're not real mind flayers," the lithely-gliding, sharp-voiced woman beside the barbarian said quickly, clapping a hand to Jalamra's sword-wrist. "Ratha -- Rathara -- take her other hand!"

"So she can hurl me across the room, instead of yon axe? Not a strategy that impresses me," a rotund woman with the decidedly male voice responded from Jalamra's other flank.

"Rathan!" the sharp-voiced woman snarled, also sounding decidedly less feminine, "Just do it!"

"As you command, Tormarra," the fat woman crooned sweetly, in an impossibly high and flowery falsetto.

The hulking barbarian between them, who wore so little that her femininity was unquestionable, looked from one of her companions to the other, and glowered down at them both.

"Jalamra know squid-heads by their stink and what they try to do to her head," she growled. "These real!"

"Jalamra, Jalamra," the sharp-voiced woman said derisively, "have you not seen spell-spun illusions before? I ask you: just how would a band of no less than seven illithids, walking along quite openly in their robes with mauve tentacles a-slimily quivering, manage to get right to the heart of Waterdeep? Next you'll be telling me th -- Mask and mother-bitching Tymora, they ARE real!"

A hand streaked to a dagger -- but seven heads bent forward as one, tentacles stabbing out with lightning speed.

There was a flash, a crackling akin to the sound the spitted warpig had made earlier, and seven heads stiffened, went black around the edges...and slowly toppled backwards, into -- sudden vanishment.

A skeleton raced forward, drawn sword in hand, and snapped furiously, "Who cast magic in the Portal? Which one of you?"

"Ah," said a bearded shadow from behind her, as it sharpened into the likeness of a robed man whose dignity waned not a whit as the woman of invisible flesh whirled around and thrust her sword out. "That would be me."

The sword-blade promptly melted into nothingness in a snapping shower of blue sparks, leaving the skeletal doorguard holding a smoking hilt, and asking in a voice tight with fear and anger, "And you are?"

The bearded wizard bowed. "Halaster of Undermountain, at your service."

An impossibly-well-endowed woman with an unruly mane of tawny hair and eyes as green as Calishite glass stepped forward from a nearby table and said, "Excuse me," as her buxom beauty fell away into another tall, slender, robed and bearded man's body, "but I am Halaster of Undermountain. Use your own name when doing your dirty work, Khelben."

Amid the gasps of mingled fury, fear, and excitement rising from tipsy women all around, a sweating woman in a mask who bore a gleaming ring on one upraised hand stiffened, turned, and then whirled back to stare at the stumbling Laeral. No . . . no, it simply couldn't be!

Khelben bowed to Halaster, pointed at Laeral, and asked softly, "Then this is not your doing?"

"None of mine. Yon flesh golem is under the control of the Red Wizard over there."

There was a shriek, a flash, and suddenly one less woman was in the room. The disguised Red Wizard had fled.

Halaster and Khelben exchanged glances, and then shook their heads in shared disgust.

"Older and slower, older and slower," Halaster muttered.

Khelben nodded grimly. "Got clean away from us," he said, "though that should not have been possible." As he glared at the false Laeral, its shape changed, sagging into the stitched and battered semblance of a walking dead man.

"A flesh golem!" Lady Irlingstar gasped, her words echoed from across the room by a ringing voice she recognized. It was coming from behind a grinning pirate mask, but it was unmistakably Salu Hiilgauntlet -- and sounded just as furious as Lady Nael herself was.

They stepped forward as one, both opening their mouths to demand of the Lord Mage of Waterdeep just what was going on at their revel, what with lurking, spying wizards, flesh golems, and --

Whatever they might have said was drowned out forever by a howl of anguish as sudden and as loud as an avalanche. "NO! Broren! Nooooo!" Jalamra shook her companions off her arms and charged across the room, heedless of tables, shrieking women, and bearded wizards in her way. "Beloved! Who did this to you? Who slew you, Broren? Whose throat and guts shall I rend?"

Halaster and Khelben landed on their backsides, and bounced, more or less in unison. Exchanging glances, they nodded in common accord and waved deft hands.

The sobbing barbarian vanished in mid-roar, leaving the taproom full of hushed, frozen women blinking at a tottering flesh golem.

"Unless I'm mistaken," Khelben growled, rolling over onto his knees to rise, "these two winsome wenches are actually Knights of Myth Drannor more notoriously known by the names Torm and Rathan! I think we'll be having a few answers about now, and -- "

"Die, Khelben, by the will of the Red Wizards! Let Waterdeep be delivered from your tyranny! Die!"

The shouts of the figure leaning over Khelben with a gleaming ring on one extended and hairy hand were unmistakably male. There was a flash, a roar of flame -- and chipmunks vanished from shelves all over the taproom, reappearing in a squeaking, helpless stream that shot from the winking ring straight into the face of the Lord Mage of Waterdeep.

Khelben went over backwards again, sputtering helplessly amid the small furry storm. Halaster took a swift step forward with hands raised to unleash deadly magic, stared at the Lord Mage floundering on the floor . . . and started to laugh.

That mirth built into a torrent of helpless guffaws that left the mad Wizard of Undermountain shaking and reeling -- laughter that only redoubled when the figure with the ring said, "Oh, dung!" in a voice of despairing astonishment, and started shaking the ring and shouting its command word over and over again.

Chipmunks vanished, reappeared, vanished, and reappeared again, many of them trailing streams of wetness in their fear.

And then the would-be assassin drew himself up, rubber corset slipping past his waist, and slowly, carefully, and very loudly and firmly said the command word one more time -- and the flesh golem exploded.

There was much sobbing and moaning amid the smoke that curled thickly out of every door and window of the Yawning Portal. Cursing with a fluency and verve that shocked Durnan momentarily speechless, his wife and daughter raced ahead of him into their inn, seeking the worst.

A meaty smack, gasps, and reeling shapely limbs told Durnan they'd promptly found it, though they'd probably been thinking of fire and messily-dead noble matrons and roof collapses rather than literally running headlong into Torm of Shadowdale.

Torm promptly coughed, flung himself sideways, and came rolling to his feet in the wake of the still-running women. He coughed again as he found his feet -- and there was now a dagger glinting in his grasp.

Durnan closed aging but still iron-strong fingers around the thief's weapon-hand, and said gently, "Drop steel, Knight of Myth Drannor, or I'll maim you. Regretfully -- but assuredly."

Torm blinked at him. "Durnan? Durnan, what in the Nine Hells possessed you to let anyone hold a Ladies' Night in the Yawning Portal? D'you know what they're doing in there?"

"Not yet," Durnan replied calmly, carrying Torm along like a weightless doll by means of the thief's trapped hand, "but I'm well on my way to finding out."

At that moment a dusty, many-tentacled head rose out of a heap of rubble right in front of them. Without slowing, the owner of the Portal swung the thief like a weapon, bringing Torm's drawn dagger-blade down in a vicious thrust.

Tentacles balled up in a frantic, writhing shield to fend off that steel fang. "Strike me not! Strike not!" the half-buried illithid hissed. "I'm a peaceful painter, come here to savor images to inspire! I mean no harm to anyone, and have offered none!"

"A mind flayer, in my inn," Durnan growled, drawing something small that glittered from his belt and holding it ready in his hand. "Ye watching gods, what by all the -- ?"

"Illithids are the least of your worries, Master of the Portal," an unfamiliar voice said coldly out of the wall of smoke ahead. "You've been hosting the matriarchs of at least seven noble families of the city this night, and Halaster Blackcloak . . . not to mention the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, a Red Wizard and the assassin he hired, a flesh golem, two Knights of Myth Drannor, and -- "

"And you," Durnan said calmly. "Mind telling me who you are?"

A skeletal figure stepped out of a drift of smoke, conjuring up a gentle glow out of nowhere with one hand and doing something with the other that caused the illithid to vanish with the chopped-off beginnings of a startled cry.

Torm's eyes narrowed. Over and around the walking bones in front of him, the dust was clinging to a tall, slender, and quite curvaceous female form . . .

"I've heard that voice before," he observed. "In Skullport, when someone was playing at being . . . Laeral, is that you?"

"Lady Laeral, if you please." A skeletal hand struck a pose, cupping a half-seen hip. "I do have some dignity to maintain, strutting around breeze-naked all night."

Durnan sighed. "Lady Mage, you didn't have to . . ."

"Ah, but I did. I have to find some way of earning pocket money, after all, and -- "

"Even when you've no pockets to put it in," Torm murmured, a remark that was promptly ignored.

"-- someone has to keep an eye on things, once your family has left the premises."

"Khelben and Halaster aren't enough?"

"Good Durnan," Laeral replied rather grimly, "the two men you name are the very things I was keeping my eyes on. Just one old and strong-minded archmage tends to be too much for any inn to hold, and you've been hosting two."

The smoke was thinning now, and with it came a slackening of coughing and retching sounds from the taproom beyond Laeral, and an increase in shrill demands to be let out and cries of, "Laeral is dead! The Lady Mage struck down, before our eyes! Doom falls upon Waterdeep!"

Before the present moment, neither Torm nor Durnan would have thought it possible for a skeleton apparently possessed of no more than empty eyesockets to roll its eyes, but they were now swiftly enlightened.

"You'd better do something," Laeral told the owner of the Yawning Portal, "or they'll start tearing the place apart."

Durnan nodded, knowing she was right. One didn't run an inn in the City of Splendors for decades without learning how to read the mood of a crowd . . .

"Khel -- your lord still in there?" he asked, as he strode forward. "And Halaster?"

"The Mad Mage teleported himself away as the golem exploded," Laeral replied, falling into step behind him, Torm at her side, "but yes, Khelben is still -- "

"As the golem exploded?" Durnan asked wearily. "Have I time for this tale, just now?"

"No," Laeral replied simply.

"My, but I'm unsurprised," he said with no little sarcasm. "Now, I know you and your lord can mindspeak or spell-speak or whatever: Please do so, and bring him here to us now, as speedily as -- "

There was a flash, and the Blackstaff stood in the entry hall before them. He gave Durnan a nod of recognition and then turned to the skeleton and growled, "Must you take such shapes, woman? Not enough showing your skin to all Waterdeep, but every last bone, now -- "

"Lord Khelben," Durnan said crisply, "I require your aid. Right now. Many frightened and angry women of Waterdeep are crowded into the room behind you, and they need to be reassured and made to feel satisfied. Immediately."

Khelben sighed. "Yes, yes. I know what we must do. As usual."

"Ridiculous!" Citta Hothemer spat, tugging a long-nosed mask from her face angrily and hurling it across the room. "That's what we've been made to feel, here! Salu, I don't know what you were thinking of, when you chose this low, common, dirty place! This has been a disaster!"

There were cries of agreement, and Ariel Jhanszil, every bit as proud of her blood-lineage as Lady Hothemer, tore off the tattered remnants of her own disguise and snarled, "For once I agree with you, Citta! An utter disaster!"

"We've been made to look like fools!" a younger noblewoman sobbed, and even Nael Irlingstar admitted, "Things have not gone well."

Salu Hiilgauntlet straightened to the loftiest inch her shapely frame was capable of, her dark eyes flashing with a fury as great as any of her fellow Waterdhavian matrons, and said coldly, "Our noble and well-planned revel was deliberately ruined, ladies, by men of this city who set out to -- "

There was a sudden great burst of bright blue light in the rubble-strewn, scorched center of the taproom -- a sphere of stabbing radiance so sudden and so strong that women cried out in fear and cowered, all over the room.

Out of the heart of this spectacular burst of light stepped an all-too-familiar figure: the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, in his familiar black robes.

The ladies froze into staring silence in an instant. Very few of them had ever seen the Blackstaff smiling excitedly before.

"What an adventure!" Khelben cried, spreading his hands as he pivoted slowly to regard every corner of the room with shining eyes. "Valiant ladies, all Waterdeep thanks thee this night -- for thy bravery has saved us!"

The lithe form of a sharp-eyed thief in leathers, with drawn daggers glittering in both hands, raced into the room, causing more than a few anxious gasps. Torm drew himself up to his full height and declaimed, "The Lord Mage speaks truth! Even we who lurk in shadows must come forth this night to herald ye, bold ladies! Your battle-courage has preserved the city for us all!"

A rotund, heavily-breathing priest of Tymora trudged into the taproom from another door, and added, "This I also attest to, and salute you, ladies!"

There was another burst of radiance -- pearly-white this time -- and out of its brief shimmering stepped the Lady Mage of Waterdeep, resplendent in a high-bosomed gown. Laeral smiled happily as she gazed around the room. "You've done our sex proud, ladies, standing firm against mind flayers, Red Wizards, deadly slaying spells, and more! Before all the gods, I swear we must have more Ladies' Nights, if this is the mettle of ladies our fair city can muster!"

She snapped her fingers, and silver trays started to drift into the room through various doorways, each bearing a small, gleaming forest of decanters. "Durnan, the proprietor of the Yawning Portal, shares our pride! He would not dream of intruding into your gathering, but begs leave to offer as his gift, in small token of the service you have done to him and to the city, these fine wines from his private cellar!"

There were purrs and whistles of anticipation as the decanters headed towards the walls of the room where the smoke-smudged and bedraggled women stood crowded behind upturned tables and the sprawled, senseless warriors that had earlier graced them . . . and then a general rush of snatching and swigging and giggling and quaffing more deeply.

"One thing more," Laeral added. "The Glittering Gauntlet of Glory has been forced to postpone their foray into Undermountain because they now lack funds enough to get back out -- thanks to thieving spells cast by the Red Wizards before you ladies so bravely defied them and drove them away. Their first adventure will have to wait for the next Ladies' Night at the Yawning Portal!"

There was a general roar of approval from the ladies, many of whom waved decanters in enthusiastic salute.

Amid all of this merriment Torm, Rathan, Khelben, and Laeral bowed politely -- and vanished in a winking of spell-motes, leaving the ladies of Waterdeep alone to stare rather dazedly at each other ere they roared out their glee again, and went back to the serious business of sampling wines that seemed endless.

It was not long before the sleeping potions the decanters had been laced with took their usual effects, and drugged ladies collapsed decorously all over the room. Gentle snores arose, building swiftly to an unlovely chorus -- and in the darkness of the old and dusty spy-passage that ran above one end of the taproom, Halaster Blackcloak growled, "Gods, Laeral and Khelben! What rot you spouted! What unadulterated, piled-chin-deep piffle and cart-dung! What lies upon lace-trimmed lies! What -- "

A sudden giggle at his elbow startled the Mad Mage into stiff silence. No one could creep so close to him unawares!

A second giggle gave way to the voice of Laeral of Waterdeep. "My Lord Halaster, you've dwelt in and under Waterdeep for centuries and expect anything else to feature at a Waterdhavian noble gathering? Well, you are an idiot!"

A moment of chilly silence followed her tart remark . . . and then, for the second time that night, Halaster of Undermountain burst into roars of helpless laughter.