

*Only a Woman Can Take This Sort
of Abuse*

By Ed Greenwood

Part One

Lord Manshoon drifted up through the fading mists of a rather pleasant, already-forgotten dream rather blearily -- but came thoroughly awake in a heart-freezing hurry at the horror he beheld.

Himself, in a full-length mirror. Clad fetchingly in the garb of a more-than-somewhat saucy serving wench. Boots up to here, cross-garters of shimmer-ribbon above that, rising up into a little leather skirt that clung to his haunches, topped by a tight leather cummerbund that quite banished his spreading belly, and offered his hairy chest to the world beneath his usual head-cowl . . . grotesque, to be sure, but -- yes -- he rather liked it. Not that he could strike quite the same fear into the hearts of apprentices looking like this, but keeping one's underlings guessing is essential, and this would certainly accomplish that . . .

Now, how by Bane's sure hand had he ended up here, and dressed like this? Asleep on an unfamiliar -- and rose-scented -- pink-cushioned bed, beneath a ceiling glass that adorned a gilded ceiling, in a grand chamber that . . .

Oh, darkness come, the revel!

He rolled off the bed and sprang to his feet -- spike-heeled, and wobbly; mustn't turn a heel, now -- in one smooth motion, looking around for doors. And weapons. And foes.

There wasn't a spell left in his head . . . and in slowly deepening fear Manshoon realized the familiar, ever-present tingling of his many protective and hanging enchantments were gone. Completely gone.

He'd been lured through a doorway by the dark-eyed lady on the other side of it, who'd affected not to see him at all, but had been casting a spell of great power that he'd never seen before. Anxious to see more of that magic, he'd taken one step too many, and -- and -- oh, Bane forefend, he'd found himself on a gently rocking Calishite pleasure-berge when his other foot came down, amid a sea of soft cushions and scented smokes, with silks hanging everywhere . . . and seven sharp-eyed women standing smugly all around him, one a ghost and one a drow.

He'd been doomed, doomed at last, and --

How'd he come to be here? They'd overcome him with spells, they must have, and amused themselves dressing him like this for some reason, rather than just slaying him . . . but why? And why could he remember nothing of it, nothing at all?

Manshoon caught sight of a door, strode towards it, flouncing in irritation as he found the garters forced him into a swaying, sashaying gait, and flung it open.

In the room beyond -- an even grander bedchamber, this one furnished in deep purple and clusters of hanging greenglass lamps, with a circular gilded bed hanging on chains from the ceiling in their midst -- stood a man somewhat shorter than Manshoon, who wore a corset trimmed with peacock feathers and an ostrich-plume tail that must have been very uncomfortable, a neatly-trimmed beard, and an utterly bewildered expression.

It was Volothamp Geddarm. The Volo. Within easy reach at last!

Something approaching murderous glee welled up within the Lord Manshoon as he strode forward, arms reaching for that scrawny throat.

Which was when he discovered that someone had done his nails. With little prancing golden unicorns. And he was wearing wristlets trimmed with pink ribbon.

Volo's eyes widened. He tried to turn and run, setting the tiny bells along the top of his corset to jangling -- as Manshoon pounced.

The man who'd betrayed the secrets of the Art to half of Faerûn screamed as Manshoon's fingers sank into his flesh. And tightened, choking off that despairing cry.

The man who'd made the Zhentarim great smiled coldly. Even cross-gartered, he could still make men scream before they died.

"Volo?" Dove Falconhand asked incredulously. "What by the whims of Our Lady is he doing here?"

"Writing Volo's Guide to Catering," Alustriel replied in a rather dry voice. "Certain to be a widely-read sensation, he says."

"Safer than his last widely-read sensation, that much is certain," Syluné remarked out of the empty air.

Laeral cast a sharp look in that direction. "Left your body somewhere again?"

"And with whom, this time?" the Simbul added archly.

"Sisters," the disembodied voice replied tartly, "I found it prudent to go drifting. In this, ah, state, I can more easily perceive others who are lurking about us, taking care to be unseen."

Storm Silverhand turned from her inspection of the nearest rack of dusty wine-bottles and asked, "Who, for instance?"

"Do you recall the returned Manshoon? The one who so meekly bowed to Fzoul and sat back in his spellchamber to work out ways to hurl his own mind from one of his clones to the next?"

"The one who's up to something that will destroy Fzoul and all his haughty priests if he manages it, and himself at their hands if he fails?" Dove asked, folding her arms and leaning against the nearest pillar. She might as well be comfortable; by the Lady, her six kin always wanted to talk so . . .

"That Manshoon, yes," Syluné replied, every bit as archly as the Queen of Aglarond. "Well, he has crafted spells that let him not only move from clone to clone, but force himself into the minds of weak-willed folk and beasts as well -- leaving him free to jump from body to body, long after foes strike 'him' down. Watching him has been one of my duties this past season."

"He's lurking here? Why? Our Divine Lady will snuff him like a candle if he tries to worm his way into any of our minds -- if we don't get to him first."

"He's trying to do something to one of the cooks. Thaalder, they call him. He's not truly a man, that one, but wears human shape -- and such a mountain of spells that I'm surprised he can stand up, and that you six haven't felt his presence long ago."

"The mercane?" Qilué asked suddenly, from where she lounged in the shadows. "The one some mage of the Realms -- the original Manshoon himself, probably, or this later clone wouldn't know his true nature, hmm? -- forced into githyanki shape?"

"Is that what he is?" Alustriel looked across the wine cellar at Laeral. "Laer, are you sure this little feast is such a good idea? A jest's a jest, but how many folk are we going to slay or harm while spinning it? And how much mischief will Manshoon -- and others, taking advantage of all the chaos -- do, merely so we can have some fun?"

The Lady Mage of Waterdeep folded her shapely arms across her breast, looked severely down her nose at her sisters, and sighed. "This is not a jest, ladies. 'Tis a scheme of entrapment dressed up like a jest."

"Oho, why didn't you say so?" Dove asked, leaning forward eagerly. "Tell, tell . . ."

Alustriel frowned. "And why didn't you tell us that at the outset? You know how much I dislike deception, Laer. I thought we'd settled this long ago."

"As it happens, Lustra, I've no love for my friends, kin, or allies deceiving me, either," the Simbul said sharply, "but in this case I find myself as eager to hear more as Dove is -- and quite able to answer for Laeral: She didn't tell us because some of us just don't bother to act anymore. Our words, tones of voice, how we carried ourselves . . . we'd have betrayed our gleeful keeping of a secret, as sure as the sun will rise on the morrow, and the trap would have failed before the quarry was caught."

"Are you sure the sun will rise on the morrow? I'm not." Qilué's voice was soft, and her acting good enough that there was a momentary pause before the other six saw from a certain glint in her eye that she was teasing.

Dove tossed her head. "Sounds like one of Khelben's old Tower lessons." She dropped her voice into perfect mimicry of the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, and said, "Oh, aye, we know it did yesterday, and the day before that -- but do any of us hold utter certainty that it will do so again, after it sets outside that window? Such certain folk may have the conviction and strength of will to be a good mage -- but they are also either disguised gods or utter fools, and I can teach useful things to neither."

Laeral snorted in amusement and turned to Storm. "Let's choose the wine and get back up there, before the wandering phantom of Manshoun manages to worm his way into Thaalor's mind, or the Red Wizards decide this particular small cottage on the Dragon Coast would make a good place for an enclave, or there's another flight of dragons, or . . . something."

The Bard of Shadowdale smiled broadly and thrust two long, dark bottles into Laeral's hands. "Well said. After all, if we tarry talking long enough, something always happens."

She ducked down, selected another pair, and turned to hold them out to Dove, who accepted them with the dry comment, "As I recall, that's not what you told the officer."

Storm shrugged. "I was acting the part of a very moral noble lady of Cormyr then."

"Are there any very moral noble ladies of Cormyr?" the Simbul asked the ceiling, but any answer Storm might have made was lost in Qilué's query, "So what did you tell the officer?"

Storm grinned, drew herself up, and said in an elderly, imperious, and outraged voice, "Excuse me, but you want me to do what?!?!?"

The drow lifted a long arm in a wave that indicated she should say more, so Storm obliged. "He quickly protested that I must have misunderstood him, and that his smile was mere welcoming politeness and not a leer at all, and his question: 'So, how much, sweethips?' was an official inquiry as to the amount of rose petal scent, commonly known as 'sweethips' in Marsember -- an assertion that was and remains news to me, but gods' luck to him for swift thinking -- I was importing with me into the Forest Kingdom."

"Give me some bottles to carry," the Simbul told her, "and let's get up those stairs before something does happen. If any Red Wizards are so foolish as to poke their noses into our little feast, I don't want to miss a moment of the fun."

"No sending severed heads flying into the soup this time," Syluné told her, from the empty air beside her ear. "All that iron tang from the blood and oversweetness from the brains ruins the taste."

Aravil Kettlesworth looked down the kitchen and rolled his eyes in despair. His goblin chopknife had broken off peeling and chopping to lick a plate clean, his halfling baker was mixing batter with his feet again, his hearthmaster was staring mournfully into an empty handkeg (having torn one end of the little cask off to make sure he'd had every last drop of firebelly -- though Jastarl was a better smith and oven-tender drunk than sober, to be sure), and his head cook had drawn her little belt whip again and was lashing the bowl of cake icing enthusiastically enough, as she muttered prayers under her breath, to send spatters of it all over the ceiling. The thick, rich, sweet cream icing that only she knew how to make, with its ground radish and dozens of other secret ingredients. . . .

"Roreldra," he snapped, knowing he had to speak swiftly or they'd all be wearing the contents of the bowl, and he'd end up sweating alongside Loust to try to make an inferior substitute, when he'd need to be spicing and thickening the gravy instead, "Stop that! The Maiden of Pain -- reverence her -- won't be happy if you ruin our work in your devotions! You can flog me when it's all over, and then I'll flog you, and Loviatar will be satisfied!"

Roreldra stiffened and gave Kettlesworth a cold look. "And who are you -- a dwarf, and a mere cook at that! -- to know the will of the Painmaiden?"

Loustern Thistleberry stood up, knee-deep in his bowl of batter, plucked a burning brand from Jastarl's hearth-fire, and calmly lit the end of Kettlesworth's beard on fire.

As their leader roared in alarm and sprang straight up into the air, clawing at his beard and looking wildly around for the nearest water -- the filthy, oily lake in the sink, as black as swampwater -- the halfling grinned at the

priestess of Loviatar and replied, "See? He's an expert on pain! And hear you? He knows all the right ritual curses, too!"

The half-elf, half-troll head cook put her hands on her hips, scowled at Loustern . . . and then grinned. Her fierce smile became a chuckle, followed swiftly by another, and then -- despite herself -- she let out a bray of laughter, which she hastily muffled by burying her face in the icing.

"Oh, dear," Storm said calmly, appearing up the cellar steps with a brace of wine bottles under her arm, "and I was so looking forward to plowing through bowls upon bowls of that icing, too!"

Kettlesworth, in full racing flight across the kitchen in search of quenching water, spun around to face the Bard of Shadowdale. His momentum carried him crashing on into the stout stone sink anyway, hip first. He groaned in pain as he staggered away from it, beard blazing. Kettlesworth's Fine Feasts was finished, finished, and he couldn't think of a word to say.

Storm gave him a sunny smile as she went to the door that led to the ice-cask -- the ice-cask! That's where he should be headed! Icy water in plenty there -- and said, "Well, at least Volo's managing the spit nicely. . . ."

Which was when there came a heavy crash from the feast hall, followed by Volothamp Geddarm letting out a scream of pain and despair.

Roreldra came up out of the bowl blowing icing-bubbles of mirth. Loviatar would be so pleased.

The Simbul's hair was playing gently about her shoulders, as if teased by a wind that wasn't there, as the spit-frame raised itself out of the scattered embers, a jug of cooking-oil came out of nowhere to wash the soot off the sizzling carcass in a spectacular jet of flame, the wood helpfully gathered itself once more into a steady fire, the hot coals reassembling into an orange bed of heat -- and a groaning Volo was whisked through the curtains into the kitchen.

"Efficiently done," Alustriel commented, watching. "So Volo's offering his customary expertise to this hapless traveling band of caterers, is he?"

Laeral snorted with mirth. "Next stop for Kettlesworth's Fine Feasts: the Pirate Isles."

"No," the Simbul said softly, "Thay. Deepest Thay. In some zulkir's kitchens. Let me enjoy giving some thought to just whose."

Dove shook her head. "What, and have them all be killed? When they could bestow this entertainment on the nobles of Waterdeep for years yet? What a waste!"

Laeral rolled her eyes. "You don't like the City of Splendors, do you?"

Qilué slipped between them like a lithe and inky shadow, purring, "What of our stomachs, sisters? What care you for them?"

"I want to know something else," Alustriel announced, watching Qilué vanish through the kitchen curtains, and Storm reappear through them a swift breath later. "I want to know why you chose this particular tumbledown cottage in the middle of nowhere, sister."

"Mystra chose this place," Storm replied, "and Kettlesworth's traveling band, too -- and hasn't yet shared with me the reasons why. It might have something to do with us being here to deal with Manshoon, or . . ."

The old and heavy double doors of the cottage's main room (the chamber that old Urisk had so grandly called "the feast hall" when hearing what the lady bard from the Dalelands wanted the place for) boomed open, and a figure in battered armor threw back a travel-cloak from its shoulders and strode in, waving a glowing silver sword. "Greetings to all in this house!" it declaimed, in a voice that quavered with age. "I am Thongolor Elftorn, Fist of Tyr!"

The sword clasped in the paladin's heavy war-gauntlets flashed, and said in a steely voice, "And I am Dzeldazzar, Defender of the Innocent!"

Dove rolled her eyes. "And then again, perhaps we're here to deal with this."

"So there I was," Thaalder muttered, the air around him crackling with magic as it always did, "without a tarrasque baster -- and tarrasque must be prepared perfectly, look you, or it regenerates in the diner's stomach. Not only do your clients not live to pay you, but there's this little matter of outrunning the beast as it devours everything in its path, clear across Faerûn, and --"

"Thaalder," Aravil Kettlesworth said firmly, "I love to hear your tall tales as much as any of us, but we've got a feast to rescue right now, and the Seven bloody Sisters of Mystra her divine thundering self out there getting hungrier with every word you utter, and you know what happens to folks when they're really hungry!"

"They get really bitchy," Survreel hissed, looking up from the platter he'd absently started to nibble the edge of, "and these particular ladies happen to be able to blast kingdoms to ruin with their spells!"

Jastarl stared at the goblin -- and then started to tremble, and whirled around to glare at Kettlesworth. "I need a drink!" he rumbled. "Gods-curséd Seven Sisters inna next room and we're gone all to Nine Hells in here! Look at that sauce!"

"What's wrong with my sauce?" Roreldra snarled, giving the hearthmaster a look that had daggers in it. Kettlesworth hastily clamped his hand on the wrist of the hand that was snaking toward her belt.

The priestess promptly dropped the ladle in her other hand into the sauce, and used her freed fingers to pluck up her apron -- revealing the garters that ran down from them to her leggings: garters that bristled with no less than six daggers each.

The dwarf swallowed. "Loust! Help, here!"

The head cook swung her head around to glare at the halfling. "You keep your utensils out of this!"

Thaalder looked at the ceiling, dipped a finger in one of the three pots simmering in front of him, and licked it thoughtfully. "Tarrasque or tarragon? I can never remember."

Kettlesworth made a grab for Roreldra's other hand. She let him take hold of it -- and then lifted her arms and stepped back from her counter, dragging him helplessly over the bowls and into -- a very hard meeting with her uplifted knee.

The dwarf gasped, too robbed for breath to howl, and went limp, shaking uncontrollably at the same time. Roreldra swung him up overhead, breaking his grip on her with ease, caught him, and drew him back over her head so as to throw him the length of the kitchen. "Listen, Singebear, I may work for you, but never forget --"

"That the Seven bloody Sisters of Mystra are getting hungrier and hungrier, and happen to be the particular ladies able to blast kingdoms to ruin with their spells," a silken voice purred in her ear, as hands that felt like inflexible iron suddenly clasped around Roreldra's wrists -- and two slender thighs slid around her neck, squeezed tight for one agonizing moment, and then slackened again.

"Oh, gods," Loustern Thistleberry gasped, beating Kettlesworth to the words by half an awed breath. "Oh, sweet dancing gods . . ."

Not one of the caterers had seen Qilué Veladorn enter the kitchen -- magic, undoubtedly -- but every last one of them save Roreldra had seen her erupt from under the table.

"Now put your employer down -- gently -- and let's have no more of this." The drow gave everyone in the room the same sweetly cold smile. Her fine white teeth held chilly promise. "If anyone is harmed by anyone else back here," she added, "I'll be annoyed. And we wouldn't want that, would we?"

The tense silence that followed was broken by the sounds of several people swallowing . . . and Survreel Halfclaw disgracing himself all over a heap of dishes.

"Rest easy, Dzeldazzar," the tall woman in armor remarked calmly. "There're no innocents in this room, so there's no one you need be defending, just now. And your bearer looks a trifle exhausted."

"I am the judge of who's innocent and who's not," the blade replied in a ringing voice. "Oppressors of the innocent are ever clever-tongued!"

"Well, that's true," Alustriel agreed, sitting down at the feast table, and waving at the chair beside her. "So, Sir Thongolor -- you've seen many winters. Is this your last quest, do you think?"

"If Tyr grant it so," the paladin said wearily, accepting her chair. The sword in his hand made a sudden lunge sideways that nearly dragged him onto the floor.

"Sitting at ease?" the glowing sword almost roared. "When innocents in need of succor could be anywhere in this house? Something drew me here, I tell you!"

Laeral and Alustriel exchanged glances, and managed not to smile. Dove rolled her eyes again.

"What's behind yon curtains?" the sword demanded suddenly -- a breath before the muffled voice of Kettlesworth the dwarf cried for help.

Dzeldazzar, Defender of the Innocent, fairly flew through the air, towing Thongolor Elftorn across the table, scattering platters, candles, and silver.

Laeral stifled a giggle as the paladin made the most comical -- and uncontrolled -- charge she'd ever seen.

Yet it worked. The curtains offered little resistance.

"It was several winters before they got the stench of tarrasque out of the draperies, but at least the things regenerated after that," Thaalder said merrily, to no one in particular, as the drow flowed down Roreldra's body to the floor, plucking a dozen daggers from the head cook's waist and thighs on the way and tossing them up to the ceiling with unerring accuracy, to quiver there in the overhead beams.

Loustern and Jastarl stared at Qilué, their mouths very dry. The drow wore her customary velvety black thigh-high boots, and above that her harness -- a few straps that covered very little of her supple hide. And she was beautiful . . . gods, but she was beautiful, and moved like a hunting cat who knew just how dangerous -- and alluring -- she was.

Roreldra of Loviatar was trembling as she set Kettlesworth down -- very carefully -- and turned slowly and cautiously to look at her assailant.

Who whirled and ducked under the table and suddenly wasn't there, as an old and puffing man in beleaguered battle-armor burst through the curtains, a glowing sword flashing in his hands.

"Which innocent cried for help?" the sword demanded, as the man holding it gasped for breath. "Yield up the truth unto me!"

Everyone stared at it in dumbfounded silence. The sword lifted in the air, stiffening and then wavering like a beast sniffing for a scent, and then howled, "EVIL! Great evil and fell magic!"

And it sprang across the room, straight at Thaalder.

"Stop it, sister!" Syluné's disembodied voice snapped suddenly. "Stop it before --"

Blue lightning reached out from around the jerking, gasping cook, stabbing bright and crackling fingers at the lunging sword.

Dzeldazzar thrummed angrily, thrusting at Thaalder, who arched back away from it, wild-eyed and babbling, "A tarrasque baster in the wrong hands can be dangerous! Milking your tarrasque, now . . . And I've heard tell of tarrasque head cheese, too, but I've not the faintest --"

Blue sparks were racing up the blade, now, leaving the paladin a whimpering, helplessly trembling thing. Qilué came out from under the table again like a dark racing storm, caught him under the armpits, and whirled him away from the spasming cook, sword and all.

The Fist of Tyr staggered and then flailed his arms wildly as the sword tugged at them, seeking to turn him around to menace this new threat. Qilué held him close and entwined herself about him, for all the world as if they were dancing, as Thaalder slumped back down amid blue sparks and crackling fires, murmuring, "I hadn't used it in years, yet it made a tasty meal . . . and they said the smell of the feast would charm everyone . . . they lied, of course . . ."

"Evil!" the sword hissed, jerking Sir Thongolor's arms this way and that. "Any who would resist or prevent me or the holy warrior who bears me must be evil -- and must be destroyed!"

And it dragged the old paladin's wrists around so sharply that he cried out in pain -- as it slid itself up under his armored armpit and up the almost-bare ebony flesh pressed against him, slicing deeply.

Silver fire splashed and flowed as Qilué lifted her head so Dzeldazzar wouldn't thrust into her jaw beneath her chin. The youngest of the Seven drew in a deep, shuddering breath, closed her eyes for a moment, and then opened them again and said calmly to Roreldra, "Worshiper of Loviatar, you might want to offer a prayer to the Maiden now. This pain shouldn't entirely go to waste."

And she let go of the paladin to wrap one arm around the blade, holding it against her in the long gash it had made -- and to grasp at its hilt with the other.

Thongolor's failing fingers fell away, and Qilué took hold of the blade and held it firmly against and into her as she sank to the floor, kneeling around it as if embracing it.

And as it started to thrum and smoke in the depths of her welling silver fire, Dzeldazzar started to scream.

"Sounds like an interesting time in there," the Simbul commented. "Should we go in?"

"Dove," Syluné's voice snapped, "get in there and help Qilué. She needs to hold the sword she's cradling right where it is -- don't pull it away from her. Laeral and Alustriel, I need you to both watch over Thaalder, to make sure the spells on him don't all collapse and fade away . . . or we'll have Manshoon using him for some new misdeeds."

The Witch-Queen of Aglarond lifted her head, hair swirling around her shoulders. "And what of me? A fight, and you want me to stand idly by?"

"Yes," the voice of her dead sister said crisply, "I do. Alassra, your love of battle leads you to work entirely too much destruction, given half a chance. Why don't you dance with Storm, and keep watch over the doors -- just in case, say, some Red Wizards decide to join our unexpected party. Or some of the wizards of Shade, perchance."

"The Simbul's eyes flamed. "Perchance, indeed." She whirled around to face the doors Sir Thongolor Elftorn had so recently staggered through, and raised her hands, flexing her fingers in anticipation.

Storm discovered that it was her turn to sigh and roll her eyes.

"So there they were," Thaalder muttered, to no one at all. "A seller of kitchen wares across the planes, waving a -- a tarrasque baster, that's what he was waving, yes -- and a gnome illusionist, slender and a good dancer, all sparkling lights to hide her modesty as she . . . yes . . . and there I stood, holding this recipe I'd paid so many gems for. A means to cook tarrasque for royal tables, they said . . . written by the Simbul herself, they said, and --"

His eyes cleared, and his head jerked up. "The Simbul," he gasped. "She's here. Now." He looked around wildly, even glancing up at the ceiling, with its dagger-studded beams, and down under the tables. "Uh . . . invisible?"

"Out there," one of the two tall, beautiful, silver-haired women at his side said firmly, pointing at the curtains that shrouded the doorway out into the feast hall. "Would you like to see her?"

Thaalder stared at them, and then down at the smoking, whimpering remnant of the magic sword the wounded drow was clutching, holding it inside herself as it melted away. He swallowed.

"No," he said, almost whispering. "Not particularly."

"So tell me, all-knowing spider of the Harpers," the Queen of Aglarond said conversationally, "what you know of our caterers. Kettlesworth's Fine Feasts -- a traveling band that somehow seems to have acquired Volo as its fetch-and-carry dolt."

She cast a scornful look across the room at Volothamp Geddarm, who gave her a weak, terrified, falsely bright grin and went on turning the spit with infinite care.

Storm leaned back in the chair she'd taken, looked up at the ceiling, and half-closed her eyes. "The dwarf who heads it is a well-meaning sort, Aravil Kettlesworth by name. He was a wandering cook-for-hire with various mercenaries and armies for decades until he hooked up with a halfling baker famous for his muffins, one Loustern Thistleberry, formerly of Secomber."

"Muffins," the Simbul said flatly. "I see. Thistleberry? As in the things that keep so many starving lost woodcutters alive in northern winters? And leave stains that don't come out?"

"The same. He inherited the name from his parents, mind, rather than crafting it as a trade-name."

"Aye, so we have Kettlesworth and Thistleberry," the Simbul prompted, "and then -- ?"

"And then they began cooking in Waterdeep for private dinner parties, among merchants first, but over six seasons or so working their way up to wealthier and wealthier patrons -- which is when We Who Harp began to take a close interest in them."

"As in: whom were they working for?"

"And how could they be made to work for us, wittingly or even better unwittingly. Access to servants and grand houses, food deliveries, knife sharpeners dropping by . . ."

"Yes, yes, I rule a realm, remember?"

Storm raised an eyebrow. "Lassra, there's no need to be testy. Relax, treat life as a great game, and enjoy its unfolding colors as it comes."

"Not being sex-kitten and kindly mother to half Faerûn, sister, my life seems to unfold spell-hurling wizardly foes from behind every tree and shrub and cloud and shadow, as it comes."

Storm put out a hand to stroke the Simbul's arm. "And how exactly does that make you feel?" she asked softly.

The Queen of Aglarond looked down at her sister's fingers expressionlessly, but did not draw her arm away. "Ambiguous," she told the double doors across the room. "Just -- ambiguous."

"And so?"

"And so I tend to welcome the next dastardly foe, because spellblasting them into the heart of next month gives me drive, and purpose, and something to do until it's time to light the evening fires and take tea."

Storm's reply was such a low-voiced whisper that her sister had to lean close to hear it. "Ah, now: We're not so different after all."

Sir Thongolor Elftorn, Fist of Tyr, staggered across the kitchen, clutching his arm and groaning. "I fear," he gasped sadly, "I fear . . . broken . . ."

Qilué Veladorn rose to her feet, heedless of her torn and dangling straps of harness and the open wound between them that streamed silver fire, and tossed a sword-hilt at him. "So, I'm afraid, is your blade."

The paladin stared at her in horror. "Dzeldazzar! Its enchantments sustain me! I . . ."

And then he seemed to stiffen. Syluné's voice said sharply, "No -- no, you foul -- "

Sir Elftorn straightened, lifting his head with new vigor. "I am the Defender of the Innocent," he announced. "Die, wanton drow wench!"

There was a sudden flurry of what looked like sparks of darkness, in the air of the kitchen not far from Roreldra of Loviatar's nose -- and out of them came a sword that flew into the paladin's hand. A strange weapon, whose blade was three whirling shards of steel that chased each other around a central spike, whirling with bloody purpose.

The Fist of Tyr smiled a cruel smile, and strode towards Qilué. The fingers of his free hand moved deftly through a rapid series of intricate gestures. "The silver fire," he said in a hungry voice, "at last . . ."

"Lassra," Storm asked curiously, "what're you doing?"

The Queen of Aglarond tossed her head, but didn't stop moving around the feast table. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Folding our mouth-cloths into little swans, like the parchment-folding El does from time to time."

"You observe keenly. Little swans, all."

"Why?"

"I'm trying this 'relaxing' you spoke of. I don't find doing nothing -- or nothing beyond empty chatter -- to ease me in any way, so . . ." With a sudden striking movement, the Simbul crushed the swan she'd just shaped back into crumpled shapelessness.

"No, no," Storm protested. "I like them!"

The Witch-Queen of Aglarond turned to face her. "And is that why I should do things?" she asked very softly. "Because . . . you . . . like them?"

Storm opened her mouth to reply, but the curtains spoke for her.

They made the briefest of hissing sounds as a great fireball burst through them and flashed across the feast hall, racing past the table and the two Chosen to strike the far wall with force enough to melt a new window in it in an instant. Its flames were bright silver.

Two figures tumbled together down out of the wake of that burst of fire, locked together in what looked like a struggle . . . until Qilué flew upright, still clasping the other person -- the paladin Thongolor -- and started to dance with him, whirling to give the Simbul a merry smile.

"Just what by the Nine Hells and the darkness of Shar befalls, sister?" the Simbul snarled, her eyes two kindling flames.

Qilué smiled at her, a little weakly. "Just showing Sir Elftorn here that she-drow aren't all evil -- and not necessarily all wanton wenches, for that matter."

"Indeed," the Queen of Aglarond replied, flat disbelief in her tone. "Now can you kindly provide me with another answer that has just a whit more truth in it?" She spread her hands, and sparks of awakened magic could be seen to spill from her fingertips.

"The paladin's blade wounded Qilué, and she destroyed it," Syluné's voice announced crisply. "Whereupon he started to die, and Manshoon's sentience burst into him. Foolishly seeking to snatch silver fire, he attacked Qilué -- and she gave him some. Quite a lot more than he could handle, actually. Which left him helpless in pain-thrall, allowed me to drive him out, and let Qilué apply enough of her spillover to keep this old holy knight alive. If we guest him here at our feast, we should be able to restore his will enough to let him live beyond the loss of that blade, which seems to have been riding him for years."

"Mother Mystra, it's like having an all-seeing lore-crier forever at our elbows," the Simbul snapped. "Can't you leave a little mystery in life?"

"We have left one, sister," Alustriel put in, from the kitchen doorway, "and not such a little one, either: where's Manshoon now, and what's he up to?"

"I can top that little mystery," Laeral called calmly, from somewhere behind her. "Where'd this tarrasque come from?"

The Simbul was two swift strides from the door when someone came screaming through it and tried to claw his way up and over or perhaps through her, frothing in fear.

That someone made it halfway up and over her head before his frantic movements slowed -- due to the realization that he'd just torn away old and well-worn black cloth from something that was round, soft, and yet firm. Something feminine. Something . . . oh, no . . .

The magic that hurled Volothamp Geddarm down the room towards the new window in its far wall carried with it the soft but heartfelt words of the Queen of Aglarond: "I customarily wear this tattered wreck of a gown because I like it -- as it is, not with its front torn away by a clumsy hack of a hedge-wizard with a mouth and a pen both too large for his britches!"

It was at about this time that Volo came to another realization -- a bone-splintering one. He wasn't going to pass neatly through the window, or even strike it at all. He was going to meet a very solid-seeming section of wall instead.

"Oops," the Simbul told his dulling senses lightly, as he slid down into soft, waiting oblivion. "It seems I missed."

Her sudden giggle was the last sound he heard.

So it came to pass that the Queen of Aglarond was the last of the Seven Sisters to enter the kitchen. It was a mark of how upset the paladin and the caterers were that none of them so much as glanced at what was left of the front of her gown, now dangling down from her waist, or what its new disposition revealed.

They were all staring instead at the horn-headed, bristling-with-spikes lizard that was poised on one of the kitchen tables, its head extended towards the paladin (who was cowering behind a grim-looking Qilué, a sleek and slender shadow in front of his battered armor), but turned at the moment to regard, with unblinking interest, the flaming beard of Aravil Kettleworth -- who was giving it a trembling smile from behind the sizzling flames scorching his nose . . . a smile only slightly more sickly than the grin adorning the face of the halfling baker beneath him, in whose grasp trembled the blazing fire-log that had obviously ignited the dwarf's chin-growth.

Its distraction was disappearing rapidly. The Simbul's eyes narrowed, she waved a hand, and made sure that the flames -- and the beard -- would survive indefinitely.

The few tarrasques she'd seen before had been castle-sized brutes, but this one was the size of a large dog.

"Syluné," she asked the air, "is this beast for real?"

"Yes, Alassra," the disembodied voice replied. "It's a tarrasque -- shrunken in size, somehow, not a runt or a baby, but the real thing. Manshoon summoned it and then went into its mind. He's there yet, engaged in some sort of struggle. I believe he thought controlling it would be simple . . . and got a surprise."

"The only surprise I feel," the Queen of Aglarond replied, "is why we're not enthusiastically destroying it, right now! A tarrasque? Manshoon? Two good reasons to blast away!"

Laeral and Alustriel shook their heads, clucked tongues in exasperation, and sighed, more or less in unison. "Lassra," they said reprovingly, ere the Lady Mage of Waterdeep added, "We have to know why he summoned it and then went inside it rather than just hurling it at us as his warrior. Learn first, slaughter later, remember?"

"I came to Elminster's teachings rather later than most of you," the Simbul replied tartly. "But learn and discern away -- in whatever breaths we get ere it decides to slaughter all of us."

"W-wouldn't your investigations go better," Loustern Thistleberry stammered hastily, "if w-we got out of the way? The meal's almost done, and . . ."

He lapsed into terrified silence with only a single, brief peep of fear as the Witch-Queen of Aglarond gave him a wolfish smile, and said, "Why yes -- I have a spell ready that can whisk you to several hiding places. Would you prefer behind the altar at a promenade of Eilistraee deep in the High Forest? Or perhaps just inside the front gates of the city of Shade, with its oh-so-gentle wizards who like to experiment on halflings with etching acids and spells that change your limbs to biting snakes or worse? Or is a sojourn in the endless void of dimensions beyond this world to your liking?"

"Ah -- ah -- ah," the halfling replied despairingly, and fainted.

"I've heard more helpful choices," the goblin muttered, from somewhere behind his heap of dirty dishes.

"There's a powerful magic inside the beast," Alustriel said suddenly, her fingers spread before her as if she could feel through her fingertips. "Something not of it, nor of Manshoon. A sorcery that cloaks a thing, not a creature."

"So we cut it open," Dove suggested, her sword singing out.

The tarrasque's head snapped around to face her, and its jaws began to open.

"Now you've done it," Roreldra of Loviatar moaned -- and toppled over into a faint.

Aravil Kettlesworth threw up his hands in despair, teeth chattering in fear and beard still flaming merrily, and fled along the table.

"Not so swiftly there, master of feasts," the Simbul said softly, lifting a finger -- and the dwarf found himself running frantically in the same place, frozen just at the end of one table, at the point where he'd been planning -- legs spasming with the pain of vainly straining -- to leap to the next. "We may be needing this cooked, you know."

"P-p-precisely what I was striving to see to, L-l-lady Queen!" Kettlesworth gabbled, turning a bright and desperate smile upon her.

Which was when she released her magic, and he sailed onto the next table, off balance, facing the wrong way, and -- fetching up with a crash against the spice rack. Which emptied itself, one glass bottle after another, thoughtfully onto his head. He slumped under that onslaught, brain betwattled, and was heard to say dazedly, as he slid over the edge of the table to the floor, "L-l-lady? You're bare, you are!"

Dove glanced back from the tarrasque, and lifted an eyebrow. "No nyzette, Lassra? Or is this a distraction for foes? I doubt it'll work on Hungryfangs, here."

The Simbul sighed. "Volo," she explained scornfully.

It was Storm's turn to raise an eyebrow. "At a time like this? I'm impressed. Did you reward his nerve appropriately?"

"So we can open a way to another plane, and try to force Hungryfangs here through it," Laeral mused, "which might send a problem away for a time but leave Manshoon free to work whatever mischief he desires -- or we can slay the thing by battering it to death, which is most easily done, I'd say, by spell-hurling the walls, floor, and ceiling of this cottage repeatedly back and forth, but not letting our little pet here out of it. I'm sure with all seven of us here, we can muster at least four wish spells."

"But how is it able to resist Manshoon's will? And what ensorcelled thing is inside it? And why does it tarry, not attacking us? Moreover, why does Sir Elftorn fascinate it so?" Storm demanded. "Answers first!"

"The dwarf does have a recipe for tarrasque," Survreel Halfclaw said suddenly, peering around the edge of his mounds of dishes. "We joked about it one night. A secret recipe, he said."

"Yet not so secret he can't laugh about it with all of you," the Simbul remarked. "And where does he keep this so-closely-guard secret?"

"Where he was running to. That bucket on the chair down the end, there, beneath the ambry: Its upper lip comes off. His secret writings are folded up under it."

The Queen of Aglarond crooked a finger, and the bucket sprang down the kitchen into her hands. Its lip detached with a click and lifted away, spilling a handful of well-worn, many-times-folded-and-refolded parchments into her waiting hand.

"Well, well," she announced, a moment later. "Our Kettlesworth surprises me. Recipes for a gargarice that's really a love potion, a sage's notes about the city of Shade, and a parchment that says: "Your intended theft of the tarrasque recipe is doomed, Loustern. I burned it a month back. I pay you good coin, and if your greed demands more, your patron will have to find something else to covet. Faerûn will never see tarrasque muffins, nor shall bards sing of the daring of Loustern Thistleberry. One thing more: Try to burn my beard again, and the curse of the Ironstars will fall upon you."

Dove frowned. "Yet he claimed to have such a recipe, just now."

"Not so," Qilué corrected silkily. "He implied that he was rushing to see to the possible future cooking of our tarrasque, no more."

"Swordpoint scored," Storm Silverhand acknowledged. "Syluné, how fares Manshoon? I've one of those incredibly astute feelings that this tarrasque isn't going to pose here quietly forever."

"Still struggling," the spectral Witch of Shadowdale replied. "There's another mind in there with him . . . no, two minds. One of them is . . . flat, narrow, like the sword was. It must belong to the magic item."

Alustriel stroked her chin thoughtfully. "You think this tarrasque swallowed the item?"

"I think it isn't -- or wasn't -- a tarrasque."

"Aha!" The Simbul said then, holding up the last piece of parchment triumphantly. "A hidden message on the back, written in verjuice -- that's revealed when I conjure heat upon the page! Kettlesworth's hand, again: 'Tarrasque must be cooked in a volcano. Beware lava monkeys. Many sorcerers react violently to consuming tarrasque flesh and cannot work magic for some time.' That would, of course, include us; if this speaks truth, we Seven are allergic to tarrasque-flesh. And would be robbed of all magic use for however long we managed to live." She lifted her head to gaze at her kin, frowning. "What, pray tell, are 'lava monkeys'?"

"I don't want to know," Laeral said flatly, "and I'm sure any recipe for cooking tarrasque owes more to bardic fancy than kitchen skills. Leave off, and let's be solving this little mystery -- the one right here, with the jaws and the tail it's starting to lash!"

"Now, now," Dove said soothingly, "it's only a little one."

"Is that akin to a 'little plague' or 'a small sundering of the earth,' mayhap?" Qilué teased. "Look at it! Rising restless, for sure."

"We're gonna have to improvise," the goblin put in, clambering up onto the nearest table. "What happens if you do kill it? Does this Manshoon die with it, or get freed to go gnawing his way into his pick of our brains, or . . .?"

Dove smiled almost fondly at Survreel. "Ah, me little piggesnye," she remarked, in the rustic accents of an old seafarer. "Ye see the problems clear enough, ye do."

"Be still, all of you," the ghostly voice of Syluné snapped. "I'm seeing . . . getting close now . . . closer . . ."

Silence fell. The tarrasque made a querulous sound in its throat, like an uneasy dog deciding whether to growl or whimper.

"Manshoon has been pushed back," the Witch of Shadowdale announced. "I can't slay him without doing harm to this other mind -- which will unleash the tarrasque to . . . do what tarrasques do. This other mind is . . . aha!" She fell silent again.

Into its long stretch the Simbul remarked conversationally, "Sister dearest, if you weren't dead already I'd almost be forced to kill you about now. Don't ever 'aha' us and then leave us hanging again. And if you try to pretend you're Manshoon when next you speak, be warned that I will try to destroy you. Somehow."

"Patience, Alassra. You've had centuries to learn it, so show us a trifling amount. Now." Syluné's voice held the sudden snap of command, and into the shocked silence that followed this eruption she added. "It seems Manshoon derived his infamous stasis clone spell from the natural processes of the tarrasque. It self-fertilizes by devouring certain gems, and then lays eggs in its lair. It slumbers for seasons at a time, hatching them, and as each egg breaks it devours its dead young, and puts the living ones into stasis. There they remain until it's slain, whereupon the eldest baby is freed. Only when it perishes does the next eldest awaken, and so on."

"Charming," Alustriel remarked. "So what happened to this one, that it came to house a magic item and another mind besides Manshoon?"

"I'm not sure yet," the voice of the dead Sister said, a little more faintly. "So much confusion . . . this other mind remembers fleeing, fleeing in more fear than he'd -- yes, it's a 'he,' a human male -- ever felt before. Running from . . . a flumph?"

"A flumph," Laeral said gently. "Lune, are you sure you aren't just wallowing in a mind that went raving mad long ago?"

"No," Syluné replied, her voice sure. "This man is clinging to the ensorcelled item and is protected by it . . . he knows it as a gem, by the way."

"The tarrasque ate a gem?" Dove asked, frowning. "Won't it just . . . pass out the other end, eventually?"

"I've a bad feeling about this," Survreel Halfclaw told Faerûn at large, cowering down on the table and then slinking over its edge and back underneath it.

Part Two

In a dust-choked room far from the coastal cottage -- a chamber that seemed to be furnished entirely in towering stacks of books, loose parchments, scrolls, and little drifting lights that lit the cluttered scene but dimly -- a tall, thin man in untidy robes and an untidier white beard looked up sharply from a tome that he was studying, his moving finger plowing aside thick green-gray centuries of tomb dust, and asked the empty air, "Yes, love?"

Then his eyes widened, and he swallowed. "By the holy caresses of She Who's Gone, ye look gorgeous like that, Lass! Are ye -- ahem -- busy on matters of import, or have ye a few breaths to spare for the attentions of an old . . . I see. Yes, yes, of course."

He looked wildly around for a bookmark, then shrugged and undid the belt-cord of his robes, laying it between the pages to mark his place, and strode hairy-kneed across the chamber, unbound robes billowing behind him. The drifting lights obediently followed.

"Tarrasques? Couldn't ye tangle spells with something more straightforward, like Larloch or Szass Tam or . . . yes, yes." He flung tomes aside like a child burrowing after a favored toy, and then seized on one, broke its warning glowing seal with a gesture made with one long finger, and announced, "Here we are! Zarlandar, Lune says? Thy tarrasque must have swallowed the life-work of a Netherese archwizard rather more insane than most: he sacrificed his own life to empower the gem that bears his name. Yes, 'tis supposed to mind-whisper 'Zarlandar' endlessly; she'll have brain-ache ere long, if she goes on trying to pry at it. Well, of course I'm getting to that. Here: Once every thousand Midsummer nights, the gem will grant a great wish, puissant enough to alter all Faerûn forever. Be glad 'tisn't Midsummer, because it distorts time and Art and all living things for quite a ways around it, sparing only the one holding it and making the wish . . . aha, hold all! The gem's linked to an ancient holy sword, high Dzeldazzar, Defender of the Innocent, and destroying that blade also awakens the gem to fulfill any wish. Ye haven't seen a holy swor -- oh. I s -- Manshoon's in contact with this gem? Are ye sure ye don't want me to come to ye, girded for spellstorm and Realmsdoom?"

The brazen head by the doorway erupted into sudden life, startling the Old Mage almost as much as it did the young woman who currently wore Lhaeo's looks and had been creeping closer to eavesdrop.

"No," it declaimed, in the unmistakable tones of an angry Queen of Aglarond. "Only a woman can take this sort of abuse."

"So our tarrasque has this most mighty of wish-gems in its stomach," Alustriel mused. "When it dies, or the gem is passed, is the wish-power awakened?"

"I'm not prepared to discuss specifics, Sisters," the Simbul snapped. "Not with the founder of the Zhentarim in there listening. Suffice it to say that slaying the tarrasque would be a bad idea."

"It's calling me," Sir Thongolor said wonderingly, from behind Qilué. She turned to regard him, and he shrank back as if scalded. "I thought it was the beast, but it must be that gem. I keep seeing visions of Dzeldazzar . . . does the gem seek it, somehow?"

"Somehow," Laeral agreed. "And you needn't recoil from Qilué. She's personally consecrated to two goddesses and is more holy than you can ever hope to be."

The paladin's eyes narrowed. "The dark Seventh is a Chosen twice over," he intoned, and swallowed, staring at the women all around him in wonder. "Are -- are any of you members of the Seven: the Seven Sisters who serve Mystra?"

"We are," Dove said simply, watching him closely.

The old man stared at her in awe. "Then . . . then I'm your long-lost brother!"

"I've a very bad feeling about this," Survreel Halfclaw remarked, from somewhere beneath a distant table.

"Mother Mystra," Storm breathed. "Centuries of prying throughout the Realms in your service -- and still you surprise us anew, each day!"

The Simbul gave her an irritated look. "Our Mystra's gone, remember? A child walks in Mystra's boots these days, striving to learn to wear Mystra's robes."

The Bard of Shadowdale shrugged. "I prefer to believe that the goddess who sired us lives on in those robes and boots, slowly molding and changing that brave youngling into Herself once more. But enough airy philosophizing -- there's this little matter of a tarrasque, and a wish-gem, and Manshoon!"

"And our feast spoiling untended, the longer we stand here," Dove reminded them.

"Whatever happens, I'd just like to thank you, Sister Queen, for arranging this in the first place," Qilué said to the Simbul. "We gather together too seldom."

"Not seldom enough for some," the Queen of Aglarond muttered, tossing her head as if shrugging off the praise. Yet all of her kin knew she was rather pleased.

Sir Thongolor stood silent and motionless, his mouth slack, staring into the gaze of Alustriel, who held his upper arms firmly and was gazing into him as if she could see tiny details on the curving back bones inside his skull. The paladin was trembling, and great drops of sweat were welling up on his paling skin.

"He believes he's the son of Dornal Silverhand and has hazy memories of playing rough-and-tumble games with us . . . interestingly, in a castle I don't recognize at all," Alustriel said slowly. "I see a cruel hand at work here, crafting these false remembrances . . . a man, a mage . . . guiding the power of Dzeldazzar to influence this Thongolor's mind. Avenging is something it was created to do very well . . . ah, I see. Once knowing he stood among us, the blade would have awakened this vision, and this one . . ."

The paladin whimpered, and then crumpled in her grasp like an empty husk. Alustriel staggered for a moment under his weight, and then lowered him gently, armor and all, to the floor. "He was to have slain you, Storm, and Syluné, too, and then gone hunting Dove, deeming all of you evil creatures who'd slain the real trio."

Laeral shook her head. "But why?"

"To eliminate those of us who frequent the Dales, and care about them -- and so, time and again, confound the plots of the Zhentarim. A clever curse upon the blade, so the malevolence behind it would be masked by the shining power of Dzeldazzar."

"So who aimed this arrow at us?" the Simbul asked quietly, her eyes smoldering again.

"I've not felt this man's work before, sister," Alustriel murmured, "but perhaps you have?" She turned and laid a hand on the Simbul's arm.

The Queen of Aglarond stiffened. "Hesperdan," she spat. She waved her hands in angry spell-gestures and pointed at the fallen paladin.

Alustriel frowned. "Lassra, what have you -- ?"

"Laid a deep mind-slumber on him," the Simbul replied curtly. "Locked to me. I've no wish to battle murderous paladins as well as raging tarrasques -- or some of our feast dishes are certain to get burned, or spilled, or both."

"Sisters, this other mind belongs to a commoner of Waterdeep," the disembodied voice of Syluné said abruptly. "A woodcarver by the name of Aunstel Duthland. He . . . he's been sitting here so quietly because he loves us all. Passionately."

"He -- ? Sister, has all Faerûn gone raving gidig?" the Simbul snapped. "Tarrasques that aren't tarrasques, paladins who think we're sisters and so must be slain, Volos who burst out of kitchens to paw me, invisible wandering Manshoons . . . what next?"

"Ah, that would probably be me," a hesitant voice said from the hatch that led down to the wine cellars. "Is it safe to come up yet?"

"Master, what are you doing?"

"Working on a spell," Elminster replied with dignity, from his stance in the middle of the glowing circle clad only in one of the Simbul's more daring nightgowns -- a confection of black silk, dark red ribbons and black lace that left his hairy legs bare -- with one foot planted firmly, calf-deep, in a cake that he'd set on the floor in the precise center of the circle. Its whipped-cream innards were spilling out over its rich icing. "What doth it look like I'm doing?"

The young lady apprentice had seen many things since she'd begun posing as Lhaeo, and she supposed that this was less immediately perilous than most. After all, 'twasn't exactly news by now that the Old Mage was creeping mad.

"Ruining the cake I worked so hard on," she said faintly. "And was looking forward to tasting."

"And so ye shall, when I'm done here," Elminster told her, waving a dismissive hand. "I do wash my feet from time to time, ye know."

His apprentice sighed, turned away, and asked over her shoulder, "Is the spell you're working on a dark secret, or am I permitted to know . . . ?"

"'Tis a new translocation spell -- a cake walk, of course."

"Well, now," the Lady Mage of Waterdeep told the face peering hesitantly up the cellar steps, "That would depend on whether you're still Thaalder -- or Thaalder ridden by Manshoon."

"Manshoon's still here in Duthland's mind," Syluné reported. "And if he breaks out, I'll deal with him."

"Sister, are you sure . . . ?"

"Oh, yes. He's the only one of us two who can die, remember?"

"Thaalder," Laeral suggested pleasantly, "why don't you stay right where you are, just for now -- sit down on the steps, and rest easy -- for your own protection? Just until we have our big fight with the tarrasque and perhaps level this cottage, and the nearest town, several adjacent kingdoms . . . whatever proves necessary."

"I'm sitting down, just as you say," Thaalder replied quickly, and they heard scrambling sounds on the steps.

"Good. Do you have any idea why Manshoon was trying to claw his way into your mind? Have you had dealings with him before?"

Thaalder hesitated. "No . . . and yes."

"I'm glad you're so certain," Dove put in. "Care to be a bit more specific?"

"I . . . I know where several of his clones are cached. Still in stasis, on another plane. I, uh -- had some business dealings with another Manshoon, an earlier one."

"And is there any little agreement still existing between you that we should know about?" Laeral asked, sudden steel in her voice. "Attacking us, or aiding him, or producing or awakening some magic at a particular time, perhaps?"

Four Sisters lifted their hands and cast swift spells as she spoke, and the cook on the steps glowed visibly, and rose into the air a trifle, still in a sitting position. He swallowed, and -- just for a moment -- his face looked longer and thinner, more like that of a githyanki.

"N-no," he blurted. "I swear!"

Four Sisters relaxed. "He speaks truth," Alustriel informed the other three, and they relaxed, too. So did Thaalder, enough to settle his behind back down on the steps, where he decided to take up staring up at them all, wide-eyed and trembling.

"Right," Storm said firmly, "I think it's time to hear a little more about Aunstel Duthland and his passionate love for us. I've never enjoyed the fond embraces of a tarrasque before."

Syluné chuckled. "One should never stop seeking out new experiences," she proclaimed, in gruff mimicry of Khelben Blackstaff.

Laeral rolled her eyes. "Lune! Just tell us."

"The gem does this to its bearers, it seems. Part of the lure that ensnared Sir Elftorn. He can't help but love us, and try to serve us, and tell us of his feelings. It was that last bit that was driving him wild, trapped in tarrasque shape, unable to form the words he needed to. He was hoping Elftorn could speak for him, somehow."

Qilué sighed. "So -- according to the gem, or its governing magics -- Duthland is officially its bearer?"

"Yes. He was the last person to use the gem for a wish, and he misworded it."

The Simbul's mouth did not -- quite -- quirk into a grin. "Well, he's not the last person to do that."

"Indeed. He was being bullied by both the guild he was refusing to join and by a Trades Ward arson-protectionist gang, and desired to be so strong and feared that none would dare to try to vanquish him. And to have a happy family similarly protected."

"So the gem made him a tarrasque, complete with a nest of not-yet-hatched eggs," Dove said. "Sometimes I wonder about divine senses of humor."

"I stopped wondering centuries ago," the Simbul said rather bitterly. "After all, isn't the evidence just a trifle overwhelming?"

"The gem made him a tarrasque, with a nest of eggs," Syluné confirmed. "And laid its usual compulsion on him: He was the bearer of the gem, and must keep it safe. So, lacking good hiding-places -- for a tarrasque won't tolerate anything close to its eggs, no matter how precious -- he ate it. And it started eating him."

"Aha," Alustriel said, nodding.

"Yes, this gem eats at the vitality of its bearers; hence the compulsion. As a result, Duthland's been dwindling in size for centuries now."

"So how powerful is he?" the Simbul asked. "Can we readily slay him, be done with all this, and get on with the revelry?"

"No," the voice of the spectral Sister replied. "There's another problem."

"There always is," Qilué said darkly.

"Manshoon?" Laeral asked.

"Aside from our pet Zhentarim," Syluné's voice sounded a trifle weary. "The gem believes Duthland here has become too weak. It recently awakened the next egg -- and compelled him to flee from his lair before his tarrasque instincts caused him to eat that egg."

"So we have two tarrasques," Alustriel said with a sigh. "Marvelous. How fast do they grow?"

"Survreel," Syluné asked quietly, "tell us all: how fast do they grow?"

"Oh, dung," the goblin replied despairingly, from somewhere under the tables. "How did you know?"

Elminster flickered, there was a brief burbling from the depths of the cake, and -- nothing happened. Yet, as is all too often the case, it happened suddenly.

"Master?" the apprentice asked anxiously, from the doorway.

"What? Still watching? Nothing to worry over; a minor adjustment needed, that's all. Since when did watching my failures become such a deep fascination for thee?"

"Since you put on that night-dress," the false Lhaeo replied. "I . . . yes, let's just call it fascination."

She whirled and fled -- but not before a helpless giggle escaped her.

Elminster sighed, shook his head, and adjusted the silks about himself. "I wonder why they call it a 'merry widow'?"

"The gem knows its creations are near, and that you're associated with them," Syluné replied, "but no more. So: tell us about it. Now."

The goblin blinked up at them all from under the table. "I mean no harm! I -- my father charged me to take them. And no one denies Uiniscyklas Halfclaw anything if they're fond of life."

"Take them?" Laeral's voice was firm again. "Survreel, what are 'them'?"

The tarrasque eggs. Right after that wizard came and killed the tarrasque. He blasted down half the mountain to get to it -- our half, where all the Halfclaws live. Father found me and gave me the eggs. To keep them out of the hands of the wizard, he said, because 'such fools always come back.'"

Alustriel's voice rose in exasperation. "Which particular wizard?"

"Manshoon, of course. He went off after the other tarrasque, the first one. Father didn't want him to have the eggs, too. He said there'd be death the world over, for centuries to come, after the wizard got himself killed or cast a spell wrong, and the tarrasques all got loose."

"Why didn't he just destroy the eggs himself?"

"He was afraid he'd unleash them if he tried. He was right, I think. Their minds . . . they're not quite asleep, you know. Every time I handled an egg -- big, rubbery things, like melons but the size of a pony -- my head got filled with all that's seething around in their heads."

Dove shrugged. "That can't be a lot. Eat, eat, eat, right?"

"Y-yes. They wanted to eat me. They . . . were much happier when I took them to where food was."

"All the food prepared by Kettlesworth's Fine Feasts?"

"And Kettlesworth, too, and Thistleberry and all of us. Potential meals, see." The goblin sounded miserable. "I'm sorry to spoil your revel, Queen of Aglarond."

"You haven't quite managed that yet," the Simbul told him thoughtfully, but her gaze made Survreel retreat farther under the table.

"All of this is beginning to make my head hurt," Dove announced. "Can't we just slay a relevant villain -- Manshoon will do -- and have done with all this?"

"Come out from under the table, Survreel," Qilué said gently. "You're neither a blateroon nor a cumberworld, and we're not going to slay you."

"Or even maim you," Dove added cheerfully.

The goblin burst into tears.

"Whaa?" Aravil Kettlesworth groaned, from where he lay in a heap beneath a larger heap of glass bottles. They rolled and clinked as he emerged from them, struggling up onto one elbow. "What've I missed?"

"Nothing much," Storm told him with a motherly smile. "A tarrasque family, a mind-controlling gem, goblin skullduggery, two tarrasques on the loose reduced to one by a fell wizard, the passionate love of a paladin . . . mere passing fancies."

"Oh. Well. Uh, that's all right then," the dwarf told her -- and sank back into unconsciousness again, beard still blazing.

Alustriel regarded him thoughtfully. "Alassra," she asked calmly, waving her hand at the silently-sprawled dwarf, "I'm not looking to gain a blazing beard or the bruises bestowed by dozens of bottles, but do you think you can do that for me? Gently? A little blessed senselessness would be welcome about now."

Like an eel coiling in mud, Manshoon lurked in the darkest corners of this mind that had become such a dangerous, busy place. All around him stood the dark walls of tarrasque bestiality, an endless savage hunger roiling in bewilderment. Yonder, the bright and steady throb of the Zarlandar -- and somewhere ahead of him, in the tatters and tilting shudderings of this exhausted ruin of Aunstel Duthland's awareness, lurked the hard and sharp deadliness of Syluné Silverhand, the Witch of Shadowdale. Fearless and alert . . . and hunting for him.

Bane blast all. There was only one way out. He was going to have to dare the daunting mindfire of the Zarlandar and try to harness its power. With infinite care, he spread himself thin and ragged, until he could barely cling to self-awareness. And then he set off towards the great brightness of the gem, drifting slowly, very slowly . . .

Roreldra screamed. The Seven Sisters, Thaalder, and the paladin all tensed or raised weapons or jumped; only the tarrasque failed to move.

"Oh, goddess, oh goddess, O Loviatar Blessed Maiden!" the priestess gasped from the floor, coming awake wide-eyed and sweating. "Ohhh . . ."

Abruptly she became aware of all the intent gazes aimed her way and fell silent.

"Yes?" the Simbul asked her, almost silkily.

Roreldra, already bone white, went a sort of sickly yellow, the hue of old crumbling candles, and swallowed. "I -- I was having a screamdream, I guess."

"Why don't you tell us about it?" the Queen of Aglarond asked her with gentle kindness, and added in the same tone, "Sister, Manshoon is still with you, is he not?"

"He is," Syluné said grimly, "but he's up to something."

"I'd be surprised if he wasn't," Alustriel commented. "Yes, Faithful of Loviatar?"

Roreldra bit her lip. "I -- I was standing against a stone wall, in an alley somewhere, with many others. Strangers, men from all over Faerûn. We were waiting for something, talking as bored folk do . . . and then the farthest ones started going silent. The three next to me were hairy, hunched men, sailors, and they were arguing over a great, tasty stew they'd just had. One of them chuckled and said, 'You guys are never going to believe this,' and told them the cook had told them they were eating old birds and a dead guardsman, cooked in a sauce of stolen royal wines and perfumes. One laughed and asked, 'Is this a tall tale?' but the other got angry. He'd just yelled, 'I ate WHAT?!?!?' when he reeled and fell over against me. I pushed him away, and that's when I saw it: He'd been killed by a sword like a needle, sliding right through his chest. It'd stabbed him through the wall, sliding into his back, and looking down the wall I could see that they were all dead that way -- and that right where my back had been, the sword was thrusting out, reaching for me! All black and wet with everyone's blood!"

"All right, gently . . . gently . . ." Dove soothed her, putting out one long arm to pat the head cook's shoulder. "Rest easy. 'Twas just a dream."

There was a wet, slithering sound from behind her, and a moan of astonished pain -- followed by curses from the goblin in one direction and many of the Sisters from another. Dove whirled around, sword up -- and froze, staring.

There was a naked, blood-drenched man kneeling wild-eyed on the table where the tarrasque had been . . . and a glowing, ghostly smile -- Syluné's mouth -- floating in the air beside him.

"Sisters," she said, "may I present Aunstel Duthland?"

Roreldra of Loviatar erupted into fresh screams.

"You've never tasted meat like this before," said the dwarf, as he laid it on the table. Six of the Seven Sisters stared at the platter hungrily, and, as music began to play, Thistleberry staggered into view with something domed and steaming in his hands and an uncertain smile on his face. Bottles unstopped themselves all around the table.

"Just so long as it's not tarrasque," Alustriel said darkly.

"Oh, no, no, no, lady! 'Tis the very finest of -- "

Dove turned away from Kettlesworth's protestations, not bothering with a goblet. Bottle in hand, she faced the floating smile beside her and demanded, "So what the Nine Hells happened?"

"Manshoon got to the gem and called on its power."

"What? He cast its wish, with all of the chaos you promised us would befall, and none of us noticed?"

"Ah . . . yes."

"And so? The disaster strikes us when?"

"And so Manshoon gave himself a new body, but also restored Duthland to his own body as a sort of cover, so I wouldn't find him and uncover what he was up to. He thought. I saw what he was going to do, but rather than struggle with him and be caught in whatever he did call forth from the Zarlandar, I took us all to an extra-dimensional space with a little spell of my own."

"Oh. So you've been twisted into utter insanity now, but you left him there?"

Syluné chuckled. "No and yes. I'm fine, and so far as I know his wits are intact, too -- but he's in a little hidehold I prepared some centuries ago, wherein various lost souls who were friends of mine are enjoying an endless revel. Right now, he's wandering about listening to their chatter, nibbling on sweetbites and tarts, sipping fine wines, and wondering where in the Nine Hells he is and how he's going to get out of there."

"How many centuries are you going to let him wander?"

"If you living six will help me, not long. I want to have a little fun with Lord High and Mighty Manshoon."

Dove's stomach rumbled loudly. "Can we eat first?" she asked.

"Of course -- and here's the cake!"

There was a burst of applause from around the table when the creaking cart was wheeled in, Jastarl, Roreldra, Thaalder, and the goblin Survreel all struggling under its weight. The cart held a white-icing-sheathed castle as large as a small pony, topped with gaily fluttering pennants and to the accompaniment of tiny warhorn fanfares.

"Oh, that's a nice touch," Laeral remarked.

"Thank you," the Simbul replied with dignity. "Dig in!"

That started a general snatching of knives, ladles, and plates, and getting up from seats to approach the cart. It was well underway when there came a flash of light, a burst of icing spattering all over everyone, the walls, and the ceiling -- and the center of the castle vanished into a ruin in which stood an all-too-familiar white-bearded man, fetchingly clad in an abbreviated night-dress of black silk, dark red ribbons and black lace that left his hairy legs bare. He blinked at them all, and then managed a cheesy smile.

Six Sisters roared with laughter -- and after a fire-eyed, hair-stirring moment of pure fury in which she looked at the ceiling and received a droplet of icing in one eye for her pains, the seventh joined in.

"Ahem," Elminster said to her. "Sorry, dear -- I was testing this new spell. Eh, 'cake walk,' d'ye see? The translocation chant still needs some work." He looked down at the castle around his knees, and then at his helpless-with-mirth fellow Chosen, and added gruffly, "Cheap joke."

He reached down, stuck one long finger into the icing, licked it clean, grunted approvingly, and dug his whole hand in.

"Old Mage!" Dove called, in mock anger, waving her sword. "Were you invited?"

"Nay, but I'm here," he grinned back -- and then caught sight of the Simbul's spell-gestures.

"I love it when she gives me that 'I'm going to savage ye' grin," he confessed to Dove, waving his icing-caked hand at the Queen of Aglarond -- and then hastily vanished.

"The nerve!" The Simbul howled, struggling not to dissolve into the same helpless laughter that had already ensnared most of her kin.

The caterers and the paladin looked on in bafflement -- and so did someone else, who came to his feet at the end of the room wearing a rather dazed expression.

Volothamp Geddarm's eyes focused on six rolling, guffawing silver-haired women, the fabled Seven Sisters of Mystra, and his jaw dropped open. "What's going on here?"

Syluné's voice cut through the mirth like a knife. "Sisters! Volo!"

Heads turned, and Alustriel struggled through her helpless giggles to find breath enough -- hampered as she was by Qilué entwined around her, sobbing with laughter -- to gasp, "What of it?"

"Sleep everyone! Everyone but we Sisters, and Volo!"

The High Lady of the Silver Marches was equal to this task. In seconds Volo was staring at a slumped and snoring paladin and caterers.

"Now what?" The Simbul demanded, regarding Volo in a way that made him suddenly and apprehensively remember who'd torn open the front of her gown. It was still, ah -- he tried not to look below her chin.

"And now, Sisters," the ghostly mouth of Syluné said triumphantly, "'tis time to disrobe Volo! Right down to his gallygaskins, and beyond!"

"Ha ha! VOLO! His gallygaskins!" came a general roar. Volothamp Geddarm turned in wild terror and ran for the melted hole at the end at the end of the room.

He didn't make it.

The Calishite pleasure-barge rocked gently -- and Manshoon of the Zhentarim toppled like a felled tree. No one bothered to catch him. He bounced nose-first among all the cushions as the Seven Sisters smiled down at him.

"Your ruse worked so easily," Qilué said in pleased disbelief. "He was like a little boy eager to clutch a new toy!"

"That's just what he is, Sister," the Simbul told her. "Every last man who fancies himself an archmage." She turned her head. "So here we have Volo, as bare as the day he was born -- if he was born; I have my doubts -- and Manshoon, both of them at our mercy. So what's your plan now, Lune?"

"Mind-reaming," Syluné said crisply. "I want every last spell burned out of their minds, and as much sorcerous knowledge undone as Our Lady will allow."

"Splendid idea," Laeral agreed, "but you hardly needed this scoundrel Volothamp naked for that."

"Well, now, that's where our fun comes in, at last. Elminster's little escapade gave me an idea . . ."

"In the words of Survreel Halfclaw," Qilué observed with a smirk, "I've a very bad feeling about this."

Manshoon smiled fiercely down at the man he was strangling. Volo was turning as purple as the bedchamber around them.

"Die, you spell-betraying little weasel!" the founder of the Zhentarim snarled, shaking the shorter man as he tried to make his fingers meet in Volo's throat, and wished fervently that this ridiculous cummerbund-corset affair wasn't so cursedly tight . . .

Something struck the back of his head a shattering blow, and shards of emerald glass flew in all directions. Manshoon staggered, snarling. The back of his head was wet, wet with his own blood --

He flung up a hand to it, and discovered a sliver of glass had laid open his hood, the scalp beneath, and now the palm of his hand, too. He let go of the gurgling, sobbing Volo with a dismissive snarl and turned to --

Catch another lamp full in the face, swung enthusiastically on its chain just as hard as the first.

"Now, now," Dove Falconhand said reprovngly, from behind it, "good serving wenches don't break lamps!"

Spitting blood, teeth, and glass, the longtime Lord of Zhentil Keep went down.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" Alustriel asked, from a distance.

"No, nor blinded him," Dove said calmly. "Just stopped him from killing that wretch Volo." Her firm hands took hold of Manshoon's neck, and lifted him to his feet as easily as if he was some sort of doll.

"Hold still," she told him firmly, "and I'll sluice all that away with some water. Try to strike me, and I'll start breaking your fingers."

Blindly, hardly daring to sob for fear he'd suck in glass, Manshoon allowed himself to be towed across an eternity of soft rugs and cushions, through several doorways, and into a marble-sheathed room where icy water was poured over him, gently soothing words told him to rest his hands on the unseen marble with his head down, and then tingling fingers healed him.

"Now straighten up, turn around, and pose. Hand on hip, like a strutting tavern-strumpet. And smile at me."

Manshoon swallowed his rising rage and did as he was bid. His spells would humble any man who tried to do this to him, but there were seven of them, Bane take them, and all of them Chosen . . .

Dove Falconhand stood just out of reach, regarding him critically. "Smile, I said. Like you mean it, not slouching like you're thoroughly ashamed as you struggle with your rage and try to decide how you'll break me to get even."

Manshoon glowered at her. She gave him an almost-smile and waved one hand -- and a full-length oval looking-glass appeared suddenly in the air, facing him. Once more he was treated to the spectacle of glossy, spike-heeled over-the-knee boots, shimmer-ribbon cross-garters on his hairy legs, the flounce-skirt and leather cummerbund . . . she'd peeled off his cowl, and his own face stared back at him, eyes red-rimmed with rage . . .

"Oh, Bane have mercy, take it away!" he snarled.

"Smile at your reflection, preen -- just for a moment, mind -- and promise not to go around killing Volos, and I will."

Manshoon stared at her blankly for a moment, and then said flatly, "I promise." Then he struck a sultry pose, one hand on his hip and another behind his head, blew her a simpering kiss, and smiled.

The conjured mirror vanished, and Manshoon let the smile fall off his face like a dead thing.

Dove turned away. "Quite impressive. You're free to go."

For an instant he trembled on the verge of racing after her and lashing out with his fists . . . but did nothing. Even if there were no Seven Sisters with all the magic of Mystra backing them, she looked strong enough -- Bane, look at her shoulders! -- to break every bone in his body.

Manshoon looked down at himself. Of course. They meant him to walk out of here dressed like this -- probably onto a busy street somewhere, for folk to gawk and laugh at. Well, he'd just call up his . . .

Spells.

Yet in that deep place in his mind where he was accustomed to always holding the restless fire of some ready spells, there was nothing. Dark emptiness.

And worse than that. His most private and mighty of secrets, the stasis clone -- the bright doorway of excitement was there in his mind, as it always was, but beyond it . . . nothing. He'd forgotten the process, how to use the magic. He knew that if he found one of his carefully-stored scrolls and read it, the runes would now mean nothing. The spell wouldn't work, for him. Ever again.

No more nine lives, or a dozen, or a score. He was . . . he was as trapped as other men.

Manshoon stood frozen, wondering dazedly where he'd put those notes on lichdom, abandoned so long ago . . .

He stared down at his hands in disbelief. Little prancing golden unicorns glinted up at him mockingly. Jaunty pink ribbons fluttered at his wrists.

"Oh, no," he gasped. "Oh, no."

And Manshoon of the Zhentarim went down on his knees, cross-garters and all, and started to cry.

"He hasn't screamed yet," Alustriel said, sounding almost disappointed.

Dove shrugged. "I wasn't preparing to revel in his humiliation. He's crying, isn't he? He's probably needed to cry for years . . . if weeping doesn't cleanse him, it may drive him mad. Will you be happy then?"

Alustriel shook her head and turned with Laeral to look at the other scrying glass. A wild tinkling of many tiny bells had just arisen from it.

Volothamp Geddarm was regarding himself in a mirror with horror and trying to wrench off his corset. The ostrich-plume tail waved wildly, and a spasm of pain crossed his face that must have been directly connected to the unseen other end of that appendage.

Laeral and Qilué burst into identical snorts of mirth and almost bumped noses as they bent forward to smother laughter.

"Our pair of clowns discovered their loss of magic yet?" the Simbul asked, striding into the room with a large plate of cake in her hand.

Wordlessly Storm indicated the two scrying glasses with a flourish.

The Queen of Aglarond gazed into one, and then into the other, and smiled a little smile.

"Well, that's no surprise," she said, a trifle wearily. "Only a woman can take this sort of abuse."