

Every Revel a Masterpiece

By Ed Greenwood

"I am not," Rambuck says sourly, "wearing green nipples that spit out milk at the audience. I don't care how drunk those nobles are, someone is going to get angry at being showered with milk, and try to put a sword through us. Possibly several swords. Perhaps if we use firewine instead of milk, hey?"

Onstag blinks. "Are you going to pay for firewine? Otherwise, there goes our take for the evening, right there!"

Larm leans forward to wag a finger, looking none too pleased. "It's your turn to wear the buxom false front, Ram," he growls. "All the rest of us have done it. And so far you've managed to get out of wearing the genie-spewing codpiece, too!"

Rambuck makes a lewd gesture involving energetic thrustings of his fingers, three plucked nose hairs, and exaggerated kissing mimicry.

His four fellow Shorter Buckleswashers all return it, with interest.

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The summer night is warm. The five halflings are lounging, booted feet up on the tables, in the cluttered back room of an "upstairs and downstairs" shop in the Dock Ward end of Castle Ward; the establishment occupies an upper floor (above) and the cellar (below) Arlessa's Softnesses, a shop selling silken underthings and gowns.

The shop is Rarristra's Transformations, and it greets the world with nothing more than a crisp sign to that effect affixed to a solid, featureless door. Word of mouth brings it clients -- in a decidedly paltry flow -- and so, at this hot, dark moment, it is locked as tightly as Arlessa's Softnesses is locked and shuttered.

By day, all passing Waterdeep can see what Arlessa's sells. No one can see what Rarristra's deals in, unless they find boldness enough to open the door, climb the stairs, and ask. Only a handful of citizens know that Arlessa and Rarristra are one and the same person: a small, shapely, rather sharp-tongued priestess of Sharess who is currently elsewhere in Castle Ward, conducting expensive and rather athletic rituals in honor of the goddess of pleasure that have left her staff -- of five unshaven, foul-mouthed halflings named Rambuck, Larm, Onstag, Melark, and Nyndel -- alone in the back of the shop. By day, the five deftly help "Rarristra" in transforming clients. The shop is dedicated to convincingly making patrons of one gender outwardly appear to be of the other gender -- for an encounter, an evening, a tenday, or all the time. Perfumes, cosmetics, specialized undergarments, wigs, spellcastings, deft bodily shavings, and coaching in how to move,

walk, and talk are all involved.

The priestess handles the magic, but the five surly halflings handle everything else. Wherefore they have become superb actors who can swiftly and deftly create disguises, and make even a face like a sweating pickle look attractive -- for as long as a glimpse or two, in poor lighting.

These skills in turn led them into the sideline business they are preparing for now: writing and performing plays "to order" for noble patrons, that they perform for those same patrons, usually as entertainment for everyone attending a revel. They have seen -- and survived -- more nobles' revels than anyone else in Waterdeep, except the dwindling ranks of wrinkled elder nobles.

It's a brighter living than many folk endure in the City of Splendors, but far from the daring careers the five adventurers intended when they left distant Luiren behind, six summers ago.

There had been seven Shorter Buckleswashers then, but adventures have a way of killing adventurers -- and matters had not been helped by a narcoleptic dragon, several angst-ridden teen-aged mages, a flying carpet that was convinced it should be their leader rather than a mere possession, and a magical glowing chicken that turned out to be a transformed and furious drow priestess. A spell that purported to turn a gelatinous cube into a delicious dessert had accomplished less than its caster intended, leaving one intrepid halfling without a face.

The second Shorter Buckleswasher casualty had, while extremely drunk, chosen to taunt a half-orc male wearing "paladin of war" coat-of-plate armor, who acted in an effeminate manner but had muscles to spare to stride around in such a massive heap of oiled blue metal. However well-endowed the naked halfling may have been, his belief that the expensive "Stormbelly Quaff" he was drinking rendered him invisible was sadly mistaken. The mincing half-orc, shrieking in fury, had literally torn him limb from limb.

So now there were five halflings, none of whom ever wanted to again taste any adventure more dangerous than performing salacious spoofs in front of drunken nobles.

Not that they delighted in such performances. The coins were good -- and in a city as expensive as Waterdeep, vitally necessary -- but not much else thrilled the five adventurers-turned-actors. Not now they'd become favorites of the Waterdhavian nobility, who were enthusiastically hiring them to devise and perform show after show, and sending them ridiculous "suggestions" of things that simply must be included.

Hence the five sour expressions, the five heaps of parchment, and the weary, suffering

manner of the surviving Shorter Buckleswashers. They have two days and nights to prepare a show for a revel thrown by Lady Massalan, and they are sick unto death of the decidedly un-witty suggestions sent to them by the Massalan family, the Massalan upperservants, the Massalan underservants, the Massalan pets, and quite possibly several restless inhabitants of the Massalan family crypt.

In the jester-jape business, it is considered desirable to "Knock 'em dead." The Shorter Buckleswashers are feeling as if somebody already did the knocking, so thoroughly that a particular quintet of halflings wound up dead without even noticing their fates. Until now.

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Lord Massalan airily waved a goblet as large as his head. "This revel is going to be a -- a -- b'Jergal, sweetest, what was old Roaringhorn calling those paintings? Some Amnian word or other!"

"Masterpiece, lord dearest," Lady Massalan supplied sweetly, from where she sat across the grand chamber at her painting-frame, brush poised.

"Ah-hah masterpiece, thank you m'lady! Indeed. 'Pon my word, sir, 'pon my word, this revel of ours is going to be a positive masterpiece! Cleverest revel-players in the city, and they've got all our best ideas to work with; they can hardly fail!"

The visiting Lord Raventree allowed as how they hardly could, all things considered.

"And if they do," Lady Massalan commented as sweetly as before, leaning forward to deftly daub a hint of purple to her swiftly-taking-shape portrait of Lord Raventree being strangled, just where it was most needed, "they shall pay the price. My new rack has arrived, and it needs testing. We'll see how swiftly it can stretch halflings to proper human height."

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"Look you," Onstag said heavily, "this night won't last forever, and we have to be up on some stage prancing around doing this three nights hence. Unless we depart Waterdeep, just as swift as we can and never to return. Waterdhavian nobles have long reaches." He plucked the uppermost parchment from his pile, and read aloud: "An awakened tarrasque that quails in fear before lamp-genies and rings of three wishes."

There were groans. Rambuck was loudest. "The tarrasque suit again?"

"Complain not," Onstag said curtly. "Just read yours."

Rambuck shrugged, swung the long, thin cigar he was chewing around to the far corner of his mouth, and enunciated disgustedly: "A blind frenzied berserker who goes mad when folk don't excuse themselves." He tossed the strip of parchment onto the table with a 'hopeless, utterly hopeless' air.

Onstag pointed at the next halfling, Larm, who sketched a sardonic salute, flourished his uppermost parchment, and intoned: "A female barbarian who ravages a rather dainty male herald of Cormyr." Then he shook his head and asked, "Where do they get these ideas? Are we the Waterhavian House of Fulfillment of All Filthy Notions?"

"It's a living," Melark said merrily, from beside him. "The first suggestion on my pile is The Quest for Mystra's Dethma. A lingerie-stealing gang of blink dogs runs afoul of a silver dragon that's tracking a slavery ring in bare-dancing clubs, from city to city across Faerûn."

"I'd go to see that," Nyndel said eagerly. The youngest of the five promptly found himself wincing under the weight of four dark glowers, and he hastily plucked up his topmost parchment and read: "Halfling she-mudwrestlers involved in an evil plot involving sheep." Groans filled the room.

"They always want she-mudwrestlers!" Rambuck snarled. "Can't they think of anything else?"

"Sheep," Onstag pointed out darkly.

"And that's baaaaad," Nyndel chirped, inevitably.

Melark's kick was too half-hearted to do him any damage.

"Clamp your jaws," Onstag said wearily. "Rambuck, read your second parchment."

"You're not going to like it."

"I'm not going to like any of them, but we still have to hear them all. Speak.

"Right; heed: a bare-dancing club wherein one disrobing-dancer wears magical tassels of fertility."

"Fertility? How are we supposed to act that?"

Rambuck shrugged. "I just read them. As commanded."

Onstag rolled his eyes and snapped, "Larm!"

"Hearken to this my second," Larm declaimed obediently. "A wizard discovers -- and uses -- a spell that gives women extra pairs of breasts: 'four pairs are not too many.'"

"And how are we supposed to act that?"

Melark rolled his eyes. "Do all nobles have a thing for round-buds?"

"No. Just all nobles of Waterdeep."

"Enough," Onstag snarled. "Melark, give us your next one!"

"Adventurers triumph in their task, and are rewarded with a warehouse full of wax fruit. Magical wax fruit."

Five faces grimaced in bewilderment, ere five heads were shaken.

"Nyndel?"

"Magical armor that is painted onto the body of the wearer," the youngest halfling read aloud, and added, "I notice you haven't been reading yours to us, Onstag."

"No, I haven't. My stomach heaves whenever I think of doing so."

"I am stricken by the thought of your discomfort," Nyndel said, in tones that made it clear he was nothing of the sort. "Heave yonder, then read. You're two suggestions behind!"

Onstag sighed heavily, and looked around at his fellow halflings. Four unsympathetic stares were his reward. Sighing theatrically, he took up his topmost parchment and read grandly, "A little boy whose first words are magic. Who gets kidnapped by a lich from a city; a lich wielding a 'pimp cane.'"

Putting down the parchment, he added in his normal voice, "I am now entertaining suggestions as to what a 'pimp cane' might be. It's written with lightning bolts, suggesting it's magical, and I know what a 'pimp' is, and, yes, what a 'cane' is, too, but --"

"Your second parchment," Nyndel commanded darkly.

"Oh, this one's a winner," Onstag said sarcastically, flinging the first parchment aside. "Not even worth read --"

"Your second parchment," Rambuck growled sternly.

Onstag sighed again, and declaimed, "A dragon hatchling that fails its flying test."

"Splat," offered Melark.

"Ha. Ha," suggested Nyndel. Larm broke wind loudly.

Silence then fell; within it, they all watched Onstag's second parchment zigzag slowly to the floor.

"We could launch a parchment reselling business," Melark said suddenly, watching the discarded suggestion glide to a stop atop the growing heap of parchments that had already managed undeserved safe landings.

"In, say, Unther?" Onstag asked sourly. "That might be far enough away from Waterdeep. Might."

Rambuck held up a hand. "Here's one we can use: dwarf with a codpiece."

"And?"

"That's it."

"That's it? All dwarves have cod --"

"Stow it, and sit on the lid. 'Tis a start. One stock character. Needs no suit-costume. Dandy. Anyone else?"

"Magical nail polish?" Melark offered feebly. "Different hues denote different protections?"

Rambuck rolled his eyes. "And we're going to explain that to the audience how? Nobles seldom find either lectures or history lessons amusing, I find."

Nyndel's eyes widened incredulously. "You tried to lecture all those noble ladies whilst riding them? How many bedchamber windows did you get flung through?"

"A sizable collection," Rambuck said darkly. "It took me some time to learn that when human nobles ask questions, they don't really want to hear any answers but their own."

Onstag made a rude sound. "Slow-witted, aren't you?" As he and Rambuck promptly traded rude gestures, he brandished his next parchment with a flourish, and then let go of it. "A herd of rothé stampeding backward," he announced disgustedly. "How by Chauntea's warm and waiting furrows would we ever stage that?"

"Hire a mage to make one of us look like the prettiest lass ever seen," Nyndel said quickly.

"Disrobe teasingly, and when the old noblemen are leering and drooling over the display, their monocles a-steaming over, use the same spell to make the naughtiest bits turn to fanged serpent maws, biting and hissing! Those nobles'd fall all over themselves to get away, and behold: A herd of rothé stampeding backward!"

"And we'd get paid in cold lengths of their sharp steel up our backsides, not in coins," Rambuck said sourly. "Use your head, bullyblade."

"But first," Onstag added, "read us your next parchment."

"An animated wooden owl with a drinking problem," Nyndel supplied promptly.

Onstag sighed. "In other words, an old noble. They don't like to laugh at themselves, so we'd be facing the same payment problem. To the floor with it."

"Your command," Nyndel yawned, "is my wish."

"Larm?"

"Adventurers, one a thief who's afraid of the dark and of heights. He's also a wererat. Takes rat shape, the others eat him."

"Ha. Ha. It certainly amuses our nobles to see others suffer."

Rambuck blinked in surprise. "You expect them to be different from rulers everywhere else?"

Onstag threw up his hands. "Of course. How silly of me." He added a growl of exasperation and plunged into his stack, reading aloud rapidly as he hurled parchments

right and left in a veritable cloud. "A brothel wherein showing flesh is banned . . . failed evil adventurers trying to find a noble to sponsor the publishing of a book of their bloody exploits . . . an evil dancing-lass who thieves for her real living and schemes to take over the club where she works . . . elves touring the Sword Coast in search of nice meadows where they can play a game involving bashing cooked-hard tortoise eggs down little holes by hitting said eggs with tree-limbs . . . another brothel, this one having had all of its dancing-stages stolen -- how by all the Watching Gods do they think up this stuff?"

Rambuck shook his head. "Wrong question. You should be asking: How do their minds work, if they think any of that is funny?"

"Who cares?" Larm asked the ceiling.

"We have to," Onstag snapped, "because they're paying us. And paying to have us killed, if we don't show or don't make them laugh."

"So forget these suggestions for now, and come at it another way!" Nyndel burst out.

"Figure out what makes nobles laugh, and then use the suggestions however they fit with that!"

Silence fell.

"He's right, you know," Rambuck said at last, looking at Onstag.

Who groaned, nodded, and told the world, "This is going to be an utter disaster."

On cue, a temple bell tolled loudly from down the street, signaling a prophecy.

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Lord Roarel Jardeth flashed the bright grin that had momentarily fooled women all over the city. "So how's the Thayan buy-a-bride business? Randy Trades Ward shopkeepers snapping them up yet?"

"Snapping, no, but selling steadily," his friend Lord Larglar Husteem replied, leaning back against the elegantly paneled back of the booth with goblet in hand. "If they'd just stop trying to pay me in cows . . . the lower orders are so uncouth."

"I have on occasion noticed that, yes." Roarel slid into the Bright Memory's best booth to join his friend, raising a finger to the booth-jack to signal that his throat was in need of "his usual."

Both lordlings were the youngest of their families, several brothers distant from ascending to reign over their respective Houses. Which state of affairs was just fine with them. They possessed ample idle time, even more ample coins, and the youthful good looks that when

coupled with garments shouted "I am richer than many gods!" and made women look twice. Neither had any need to do any sort of work, but schemes such as Larglar's bride-selling did much to banish boredom, if nothing else.

A maid whose charms were both spectacular and well displayed bent low over their table to present Roarel's customary tallglass, which frothed with a concoction fancifully dubbed "Mind Flayer Jelly." She paused in her pose to give him time for his customary fondle, whispered throaty thanks that she probably did not mean for those attentions, and retreated. The Bower of Bright Memory club paid its staff well to humor the behavior of nobles, and it supplied ample free cosmetics to cover bruises.

Roarel sipped deeply of his drink, sighed appreciatively, and asked, "So what's this scheme of yours? It'd better be good, to make me even think of attending a Massalan revel. Gloomy old asses, the lot of them."

"Precisely. Moreover, there's a score to be settled. Last time, they made us play children's revel-games to win anything to eat! Remember?"

"Ugh. Yes. I had managed to banish that distasteful memory. I wonder what demeaning idiocy they have planned for this time?"

"Happy dancing halflings, wearing funny costumes and telling jokes the Massalans have written."

"Gods! Are we allowed to throw things at the little runts? Platters? Chairs? Fat old noblewomen sitting next to us?"

"Of course not. However, that's where my little plan comes in."

"Do tell."

"My Thayan contacts occasionally offer me some interesting things. These, for example." Larglar placed a tiny pouch on the table, thumbed it open, and let two sparkling gems spill out.

Roarel peered at them, but made no move to touch them. Larglar's sense of humor was sometimes vicious. He raised both eyebrows in a silent question.

"Enspelled glass. When you break them, the magic is released."

"And that magic is?"

"A lust spell. Short-range, but affecting all human females it can reach. Making them hunger only for halflings."

Roarel whistled. "I'd no idea such a spell existed."

"It's new. Very new."

"Ah. You mean there are still problems with it. Unforeseen side-fire effects, that sort of

thing."

"That sort of thing, indeed. Are you in?"

Their eyes met.

"Of course."

The gems disappeared back into the pouch in a trice and the pouch was slid into Roarel's waiting hand. "I have two identical gems and will use them. Only women close by are affected, remember; locate your breakings well."

Roarel smiled and signaled for another drink. "But of course."

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"A horde of kobolds, wandering Waterdeep seeking backing for a perfume of their own devising, that they call 'Scent of Sewer,'" Melark read out wearily. "A horde of kobolds, mind you, who have a pet dragon." He winced. "Get this: An invisible dragon that flies into a rage at the very sight of a brothel, thanks to an unfortunate experience it once suffered whilst temporarily spell-changed into human shape, and stuck that way."

"Well, now we know what nobles do all day," Rambuck growled. "Drink themselves into nightmares and write them down. Oh, pray pardon: declaim them out loud to servants to write down, of course."

"Gnomish quintuplets, over here," Larm offered, waving a parchment. "Trying to borrow coins enough to open a short-folk-only eatery. Humans can't get in the knee-high doors -- except toddlers from a day-nursery next door. Food thrown, strong drink sampled, much fun ensues."

"Spew of Beshaba," Onstag muttered, "that was old when Waterdeep didn't even have any nobles! Real thigh-slapper stuff!"

Melark whistled. "I've got one here: females arise to put down males everywhere, to end lewdness!"

"That might make the women laugh," Onstag told the table, "but I don't think the lords would be laughing. And the lords have the swords."

Larm leaned back in his chair and broke into song. "Oh I recall a bright, bright lord/I well remember his bright, bright sword/It gleamed so long and keen/The boldest by far I ever have seen/And oh, he used it well --"

"Enough," Rambuck growled. "Warbling like a drunken seabird may impress passing pigeons, but I have slightly higher standards."

"Slightly," Melark agreed.

"Hoy, now!" Nyndel spoke up, raising a hand. "I might have something here. Hearken: A magical tattoo that moves from one person to another."

"Aye, that we could do, with some face-paint and pulling off and putting on clothes to reveal and conceal it," Rambuck agreed, "but we'll need a story for it; such marks don't usually bounce around from person to person."

"Miscast curse, like Talona's Fury," Onstag suggested.

"Talona's Fury?" Larm was the youngest and least inquisitive of the Shorter Buckleswashers, and sometimes it showed.

"One of her high priests wanted to cause a famine in her name. He cast a blight on some fields in Amn, not knowing Chauntea had personally blessed them, and ended up causing a year of plenty that made Amnians even fatter than usual."

"They started bursting?" Melark asked hopefully.

Onstag sighed, and his rude gesture was half-hearted at best.

"Crazed talking griffon?" Rambuck offered then, displaying the parchment adorned with those words. "We've got the griffon-head mask."

"We've got a moth-eaten, mold-covered remnant of a griffon mask," Onstag corrected wearily.

"So we call it a tomb griffon, from a Land Unknown far across the sea," Nyndel suggested brightly, "where all griffons are moth-eaten and mold-covered!"

Rambuck gave him a withering look. "Oh, shut up."

"We're down to just a few parchments," Melark piped up. "Don't start fighting now!"

"Yet, you mean," Larm commented. "Right, here's my last: Adventurers at a market fair, who see Shou Lung banners, and under them are some gray-headed horses. Coveting them, said adventurers blunder in among all the parked wagons to try to get a good look at the horses -- but the horses fade away, leaving behind a heap of treasure: a cursed cloak that emits a foul stench (though the wearer thinks it smells wonderful); a staff of great power that reduces anyone holding it to idiocy; a cauldron always full of throat-burning spices, no matter how much is emptied out of it; an "angry thimble," whatever that is; and a tankard that renders all drink poured into it unable to make anyone drunk."

"Well, that's certainly believable," Rambuck said sarcastically. "I can see nobles having a laugh or two at backcountry straw-brains having lots of pratfalls mishandling magic they don't know, but I can't see them sitting still for the wild tale we'd have to spin to explain horses that turn into useless treasure. Though all of this beats my last parchment:

adventurers blunder into an all-male brothel, and the lone lass among them has a happy time."

"Oh, no," Nyndel snapped. "Never again! I'm not putting on the lady suit and having you lot waving your --"

Rambuck deftly tipped the younger Buckleswasher's stool over backward, and Nyndel vanished with a yelp, parchments swirling briefly up into the air to mark his landing.

"Why is it always adventurers?" Melark asked. "We might be on to something here: Do nobles find adventurers hilarious?"

"Nobles find desperate fools hilarious," Onstag said darkly, "and I suppose adventurers are a more interesting sort of desperate fool than the street beggars they see here in Waterdeep. Anything else?"

"Thief steals a sword that sings loudly whenever he tries to sneak up on anyone," Melark read out, "and he can't get rid of it."

"Bor-ring. Been done so often they'll be yawning before we start," Onstag said dismissively. "Anything else?"

"Your last one," Rambuck said, pointing.

Onstag looked down, shuddered, and intoned: "The mage Elminster opens a scanty-wear shop for neogi, mind flayers, grell, and beholders down in Skullport. Business is bad, so he has to go and dance in an all-male brothel to earn enough to eat." He looked around the table, which Nyndel was just reappearing at (and giving Rambuck a look that was decidedly dirty), and asked, "Any guesses as to why I wasn't reading that one out?"

"There's that all-male brothel again," Rambuck muttered. "Do nobles have a thing about all-male brothels?"

"I'm thinking bored stay-at-home noble ladies of graying years have some wild fantasies about such places," Melark said, sweeping the table clean of parchments. "I'm also thinking their husbands are going to be disgusted if we present a brothel onstage that isn't full of unclad women."

"So we don't show it," Nyndel said suddenly. "We make it an over-and-over-again joke: They can't find this notorious brothel they've been directed to, and keep asking men where it is, and getting fish-eyed looks, until one man asks them 'Ye know it's all men prancing about the stage in that place, don't ye?' Hey?"

"That'd work," Onstag agreed. "As a piece of business lasting a breath or two. But we need good solid laughs, and something to make them happen."

"Just like everyone in the Realms," Rambuck grunted. "Just like everyone in the Realms."

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"Oh, I keep my investment very secure!" Rambuck sang heartily, winking broadly at the audience. Resplendent in the prominently breasted false front, a frilly gown that a daring noble lady might have worn twelve seasons earlier, enough face paint to decorate the entire front of a large building, and the crisscrossed coils of a long black cord held by Rambuck on one side of him and Onstag on the other, Nyndel tittered shrilly at the audience, batting false eyelashes that might have passed for a strip of black fur.

"Yes, he keeps his investments very secure!" the other Shorter Buckleswashers thundered in chorus. Then Onstag stepped forward, gave the noble audience a leering wink so broad that he nearly fell off the stage doing it, and spun away. Rambuck let go of his end of the cord, and Nyndel twirled on the points of his pointed noblewoman's boots like a child's spinning-bob until free of the cord -- whereupon "she" wobbled perilously, acquired a look of pronounced alarm, and fell into the waiting arms of a drooling, tongue-wagging, furiously winking Onstag.

The audience -- or at least the male half of it -- roared with laughter, slapping their thighs and neighbors' shoulders as they shook and wept with laughter, guffawing like so many braying mules.

Lady Massalan winced, bent her head away from the spray of spittle that Lord Massalan's mirth was watering their table with, and crooked one finger slightly.

The servant standing behind her, who'd been watching for just that signal, glided smoothly forward and bent over so Lady Massalan could whisper in his ear, "Is the rack oiled and ready?"

The servant started to nod, but Lady Massalan never heard his reply; the tinging of small, gem-shaped pieces of glass breaking was already dying away, and two young nobles were ducking aside from the sudden rush of noble ladies -- and their noble daughters -- sitting up, gasping loudly, and then springing to their feet and rushing the stage. With a swirl of brown hair, gold combs, and large golden hoop earrings, Lady Massalan joined them.

The halflings needed only one look at the wild-eyed onslaught -- gowns tearing and gem-drenched highborn women clawing at each other to get past without ever looking anywhere but straight at them -- yes, them, the Shorter Buckleswashers! With one accord, they spun around and fled across the stage, hurrying for the doors that led out of the grand

revel chamber.

They'd all seen looks of lust before, a time or three, and knew what would happen if those long and gold-dusted talons the noblewomen were pleased to call "fingernails" ever reached them.

This wasn't just lust; this was a -- a lust-rampage!

Buckleswashers shed hampering bits of costume without hesitation, sprinting and leaping for their lives.

Larm tripped on his costume gown, and went down with a despairing "Eeep!" He went on rolling, hard, hoping to regain his feet before --

Two scent-reeking human bodies crashed into him, and luckily also into each other, so the impacts that might have shattered even his sturdy bones were spent on each other. Teeth rattled --- not his -- someone bit through her lip and spat blood, and Larm twisted desperately out from under, dragging the heavy weight of two noblewomen for a long, long breath before the gown tore and he was free.

He hoped they found the sight of a stained and patched clout, framed by tatters of torn gown and hairy halfling legs churning along at full speed, a little less alluring than -- Armed and armored guards barred the door, grinning openly. Let the hired entertainment get away when there bid fair to be a highly amusing spectacle? No fear!

Rambuck dived to the floor in front of their boots, sprang up into a chainmail-covered gut -- and kicked off it, springing along the wall to land at a dead run, with a retching guard in his wake.

Onstag veered after him, clutching a tangle of black cord to his chest as if it was a bag of treasure, and the other Shorter Buckleswashers were right behind. Noble ladies howled hungrily or shrieked from their seats if the magic hadn't touched them, and noble lords roared orders and swung dramatic swords -- or pounded on tables in their red-faced mirth. Rambuck ran out of chamber and sprang aloft again, planting a boot in the face of a doorjack who was reaching for him, landing with a brief thunder on a table, and then -- with a crash of blown and tinted glass from Lantan that moments earlier had depicted a ship a-sail on a sun-drenched sea -- plunged through the window.

Though a killing fall down to the courtyard outside might well be waiting, his fellow Buckleswashers did not hesitate as they followed.

"Great revel!" they heard one old lord roar to another, as the din of the room faded behind them. "Splendid! Simply splendid!"

The fall proved to be only a dozen feet or so, onto a stone battlement. Rambuck was

already most of the way along it in one direction -- with spear-waving guards pounding along toward the Buckleswashers from the other.

They wasted no breath on curses or comments, but sprang up and ran after Rambuck. Spear-points can be sharp.

It took only a few boot-pounding moments for them to catch up with Rambuck, who was diving between the legs of a lone, bewildered guard and punching the man in the cods as he did so. The man whirled, more baffled than hurt (thanks to intimate armor plate), and Rambuck sprang up and punched him neatly in the throat before he could do more than gawk.

The man staggered backward, choking and clutching at his throat, spear falling with bouncing clangs -- and Rambuck took one look at the, yes, killing fall from the battlements down into the courtyard, turned to the nearest window, and burst through it.

His fellow Buckleswashers followed, breaking back in to Massalan Towers rather more noisily than they'd ever broken into any premises before.

They found themselves in a room where startled servants had been folding linens on rows of long tables -- and were now standing hastily back as Rambuck tore through them, seeking the door at the far end of the room that must lead out into a passage.

"Stairs down!" Onstag shouted. "Where?"

A pompous-looking manservant frowned at him. "Why? Who are you?"

"The place is on fire, man!" Onstag bellowed, not slowing in the slightest. "Stairs down, man!"

"Fire!" a maid shrieked obligingly, and the servants started running in all directions, to all sorts of doors.

The Buckleswashers did curse, then -- as they saw Rambuck wrench open the door, spring out into the passage, and promptly shout in alarm. He raced to the left, and a guard with a lowered halberd came running from the right, obviously chasing him.

Onstag started swearing in earnest.

By the time they reached the passage, Rambuck was well down it, and toppling a decorative suit of armor with a terrific crash. The guard stumbled, skidded, and then started to pick his way through its litter, waving his halberd wildly.

He was right beside a row of gleamingly impassive suits of armor, and Onstag grinned like a wolf and sprang high at the paneled wall behind their heads.

Nyndel and Melark crowed with delight as the whole row started to topple; their noise was enough to make the guard try to turn, to see who they were -- and promptly get buried in

down-crashing armor.

Onstag and Rambuck grinned at each other and watched Larm, Nyndel, and Melark leap and twist and spring high through all the metal, to join them. Without a word they then spun around again and started running on down the passage, seeking stairs. Preferably stairs that led down.

The passage ended at such stairs, and down the thankful Buckleswashers went.

"Fire!" servants were calling, on the floors they were descending past; they paid no heed, but plunged out a door at the bottom that led in the other direction from the bulk of the mansion.

And found themselves in the courtyard, a broad terrace of sand-hued stone surrounded by trees, with ornamental bower-turrets at its corners, a stone privy-house midway down its stone side-railings, a stables at one end, and --

"There they are!" The shriek came from right overhead, and was so high and shrill that they barely recognized the voice of their coldly unpleasant lady host.

It went even more high and shrill a moment later, when it turned into a scream and grew rapidly louder and nearer.

To end almost at their feet with a wet, nasty-sounding "splat."

Lady Massalan bounced once, and then lay still, dark ribbons of blood flowing out from her with astonishing speed. There was enough left of her face to make it very clear who she was -- and that she was dead.

Rambuck and Onstag looked at each other in utter terror.

"We're doomed," Onstag managed to say, finding his voice first.

"Start running!"

"Where?"

"Chult and beyond! Elf-bristling Evermeet, gods take it!"

"No," Onstag snapped. "Help me with the body."

"What? Stag, are you mad?"

"Wildly and incurably, and have been for years. Help me with the stlarning body!"

Rambuck blinked, shivered as the other Buckleswashers gathered around them -- and then bent and took up a pair of noble knees. "Get going!" he barked at the younger three Buckleswashers, thrusting with his head in an effort to point. "That way! Run!"

They gaped, opened their mouths as if to ask questions or argue -- and then ran.

In their wake, Onstag and Rambuck staggered across the courtyard with the suddenly silenced Lady Massalan warm and heavy between them. Without a word spoken, they

both knew where to head for: the jakes.

Rambuck looked back, once. No one on the battlements or in the courtyard to point at them or shout, yet, but they were leaving a little trail of blood. Some of it was getting on the ends of black cord still trailing behind Onstag.

Then they were through the door, and into the cool, welcoming gloom of the little stone room, containing nothing but damp and a stone two-seater bench. "Good!" Onstag panted, "'Tis a longdrop; one of the new ones. She'll go straight down to the sewers."

Despite its broken ribs and limbs, they had to wrestle and then shove the sticky-with-gore body to feed it head-first down one of the holes, even with the carved wooden thunderthroner seat spun aside, and were gasping and sweating by the time they were done.

"We'd best be --" Rambuck started to say, finding breath enough to speak first.

Then they both froze, as someone -- human, and male, and very, very near -- laughed outside.

"Deftly done, Roarel! Deftly done! Ah, I chose the perfect conspirator!"

"Their faces!" came the chortling reply. "Tear a halfling bare and have their ways with him! And all the servants think the place is on fire!"

Onstag and Rambuck exchanged glances.

"Gods, Lar, I haven't run so far or had so much fun in ages!" Roarel laughed. "I saw you 'accidentally' put your fist through that portrait of Her Oh-So-Haughty Ladyship! She does look like a bulldog -- or did!"

"Yes," Larglar Husteem agreed. "I enjoyed that. But now I simply must water the sewers, or my poor bladder will burst!"

"I," Roarel agreed, "am in similar condition."

Their voices were right outside, but Onstag and Rambuck could work as swiftly as proverbial striking lightning when they needed to. They were both up on the bench beside a thunder-hole, the seats spun aside, with the ends of the long black cord affixed to their belts. They wasted no time plunging down the holes in unison, vanishing from the privy-house (except for the short length of cord that stretched from one hole to the other) a scant instant before the door swung open, and two young nobles stumbled in, still wild with mirth and fumbling at their cods.

Hissing relief followed, but the laughter died away.

Hanging grimly -- and damply -- in the darkness not far below the youngest Lords Jardeth and Husteem, the two halflings heard one nobleman -- Roarel -- say, "A moment, Lar.

Look you: Lady Massalan will be furious. She'll have us horsewhipped, and stretched on her racks. Oh, she'll apologize oh-so-sweetly after -- when we're already maimed. She saw what we did; I caught her glare."

"Ah. No problem," Larglar replied softly. "I happen to have another very useful little item from my Thayan trading with me. This."

"And what does 'this' do?"

"Observe."

The damp pair of Buckleswashers heard Roarel whistle in amazement. "You look just like her! How long does it last?"

"Years. Forever, unless I twist it thus and mutter the word. Now, you run for the gate, and I'll wait a breath or two and then step out of here as Lady Massalan and order anyone chasing you to desist. If they end up seeing two Lady Massalans, I'll just throw the same haughty fit she will, and you should have time to get well away."

"That'll never work!"

"You have my leave to think of something better," Larglar observed calmly, as they heard the pounding boots and shouts of men rushing past outside. Someone male and breathless and annoyed cried, "Is that a halfling? Get it!"

Roarel took a deep breath and laced up his cods. "You'll save my backside? Promise?"

"Trust me," Larglar purred.

"Then I'm off!" Roarel said, sounding amused again, and they heard the door bang. There were more shouts from outside, and they heard Larglar chuckle.

Onstag was already climbing his rope as fast as possible.

"Arendreth," Larglar murmured carefully, tapping the ring, and felt the momentary dizzy twisting of his own shape returning. "Now, if I'm Lady Massalan, I'm hardly likely to be wearing a Husteem sword -- even a toy flash-at-banquets sword. Only men do that. Or a dagger that has the Husteem blazon on its hilt. Anything else metal, that this ring can't change? No?"

The youngest Lord Husteem carefully dropped the offending items through the thunder-hole, and listened for the wet plops, far below. Instead, he heard thuds, a skirling slithering -- and then a plop. Just one.

Frowning, he leaned forward to peer down the thunder-hole, catching sight of Rambuck's head just as Onstag burst up out of the other hole and snapped a waxed cord around his throat from behind.

Larglar Husteem was swift. He spun around -- but only managed to force his attacker's

boots off the stone bench, so the halfling's entire weight was added to the iron-hard constriction on his wind.

He struggled desperately, rocking back and forth and clawing with his fingers at . . . at . . . Larglar's fate was never in doubt, even before the side of his head struck the stone bench. Onstag tore the ring off him, put it on, tapped it, and muttered, "Arendreth" -- just as Rambuck emerged through his hole.

His longtime friend twisted, rippled -- and he was facing Lady Massalan!

"Impressive."

"Impressed enough to help me tip Laughing-Breeches here down the hole?"

"After the shower he gave me," Rambuck replied, "I'm eager to do that. Highborn ramhorn!"

Larglar's boot caught him across the chops as the body disappeared in the direction of the sewers, and it was a moment before he had his breath back to ask, "Now what?"

"Now I begin a new life," Onstag replied, in a squeaky but reasonably good imitation of Lady Massalan's menacingly polite voice. "Here in this grand house, with my four firm halfling friends."

"What? And you're going to explain our presence how, exactly?"

"Revels are so important," Lady Massalan observed sweetly, "and they require practice, practice, practice. After all, the Massalan reputation must shine: every revel a masterpiece."

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