

The Weaver of Dreams

By Ed Greenwood

" 'Closed For Inventory'? Since *when*?"

"Since I discovered the *Grimoire of Naughty, Naughty Thinking* was missing," Baerem said darkly. "The halfling plumbers are holding a moot in the city right now -- and you know what happened *last* time."

Yathla favored him with her best wide-eyed innocent look. "No, I don't believe I do," she murmured, donning a tiny frown of puzzlement. "Was that the time there were all the exploding squirrels? That took off their little costumes and then just burst?" She shuddered delicately. "I can still remember the *mess*."

"No," Baerem said heavily, "that was not the time of the squirrels. It was the time you perused the *Grimoire* and promptly invited a dozen plumbers, all of them afire with the thoughts and dreams of forming their own guild, to watch you dance -- on a table in the House of Cheeese with a blind elf tracker and a kobold scanties seller. While modeling his laciest wares. On your head. After drinking about a keg of something called Foo Foo Demon Poodle Rum."

"Oh," Yathla replied slowly. "*That* time."

He watched as she started to remember, and her eyes went very wide. Then a slow, sly smile grew across her face. The Weaver's slenderest, most beautiful assistant licked her lips, half-closed her eyes, and purred, losing herself momentarily in what were obviously very favorable memories. "Then. Ah, yes. They don't make -- "

"Willing kobolds like they used to?" Baerem finished for her, interrupting incredulously. "Yath, have you forgotten what Herself said to you then? After she had to pay the kobold for the loss of his sentient undergarments? And the elf for the breaking -- *breaking!* -- of his singing sword?"

"*Deserved* to break. Churlish thing only sang lewd songs, and its two heads were always fluting along in different keys, at that," Yathla replied sullenly. "They never stopped simpering at each other, either, and whispering sweet nothings. How can an enchanted sword be in love with *itself*?"

"Never seen a noble lady with her mirror in her hand, have you?" Baerem took up his ledger again. "Now stop dredging up eminently forgettable yesterdays and help me with this! Before Herself gets here, and throws a tantrum!"

Yathla sighed heavily, slouched over to the stepladder Baerem was waving sternly at, clambered up it to the shelf he pointed her to -- and then brightened, giggled, and plucked out a box to wave at the Weaver's senior assistant. "Oooh, *codpieces!* You didn't say you'd gotten to the codpieces! They're *fun!*"

"Indeed," Baerem agreed, putting on a firm smile to hide his inward sigh. Yathla was in one of *those* moods. *Wonderful.*

"Ready?"

Her voice was bright and perky. Oh, blast. The last time she'd put on that voice, she'd been trying to feed him puppy sushi she'd spent a good silver shard on -- his -- when sent to buy highsunfeast from a cart on Ship Street, and pass it off as "dogfish."

"Ready," he replied, without enthusiasm.

"Codpiece of Wondrous Power, one, slightly used," she read out, stroking the little linen bag all the time. Baerem decided not to go on watching her. "Does that mean what I think it means?" Or answer her.

After she grew tired of waiting for him to fill the silence, Yathla sighed loudly, replaced the bag, and took out its immediate neighbor.

"Codpiece of Holding," she announced. "Hmmp. Silly name. They *all* hold -- "

"Yes, yes, yes," Baerem said loudly. "Herself'll be here *very soon* now!"

Yathla gave him her best "don't care" pout, but put that bag away, plucked out the next one, gave it a stroke that evidently -- from the way she snatched them away -- left her fingers surprisingly warm, and hastily put the bag back on the shelf. "Codpiece of Fireballs," she said, in awed tones.

The next bag was double the size of the previous ones, and obviously held two items; square boxes, by the looks of the bag. "Dueling Codpieces," Yathla read out, her voice turning puzzled.

"Tell you later," Baerem promised. "*Next*."

"Enchanted Codpiece of the Dwarf Brangraerho the Eunuch: His Substitute Horn." Yathla's voice turned puzzled again. "Why is it called His -- "

"Later, later, later," Baerem chanted swiftly, not looking up from his ledger.

"Don't forget, now, when later comes," Yathla warned. "I'm *sure* there're things you promised to tell me all about, long ago, that you never have, yet."

Baerem rolled his eyes. And never will. Not wanting Herself to remove *my* horn from the rest of me. With a dull grindstone.

"Got it," he announced briskly, with an unspoken "next" clear in his voice.

"Citadel of Oiling Pleasure," she read out, the pout back in her voice but trailing away swiftly into puzzlement again. "From Calimshan. Miniaturized." She spread her fingers to take hold of the top of the box.

"*Don't* open it!" Baerem snapped. "That was a full-sized castle! With domes! If it expands in here it'll crush us like rotten grapes, burst open the walls around us, and -- and -- annoy Herself!"

"*Everything* annoys Herself," Yathla complained.

"Indeed it does," a strong, crisp voice announced from the doorway beyond the stepladder. "Wherefore -- "

The Weaver fell silent to allow Yathla time enough to shriek a little "Eeep!" and jump straight up from the ladder, land awkwardly on the ladder again while frantically juggling the box, and go pale once she'd clasped it hard and safely to her chest.

" -- you should govern yourselves accordingly," the Weaver of Dreams concluded, sweeping past them both in a swirl of black gown.

As always, the lady wizard wore the cowl that concealed her features while she was in her office; from out of its gloom one of her eyes blazed like a pale star. Also as always.

"Lost something, Baerem? Why the inventory?"

"The . . . the *Grimoire of Naughty, Naughty Thinking* is missing, Lady," Baerem said grimly.

"Are you sure you didn't take it home yourself?" Yathla teased him, from atop the ladder, holding the next box from the shelf. "You know . . . for just a peek?"

"Quite sure," Herself answered for Baerem, leaving her senior assistant staring up at her with his mouth open, startled to frozen silence. "Being as I took it home myself last night -- for a good long look. Lady wizards get just as lonely as their curvaceous but empty-headed junior assistants."

During this speech the tall but slender black tome emerged from somewhere under the robes, and was steered into Baerem's hand. It was warm. He gulped, trying to forget that it had seemed to emerge from a half-seen bosom.

"So," Herself asked sweetly, now looking directly at the trembling Yathla up on her ladder, "which pages are your favorites? Hmm?"

Yathla gave her very best impersonation of a fearfully gobbling turkey -- and fell over backward, ladder and all.

Baerem launched himself into a frantic dive, ledger flying, to try to catch the box that Yathla's fall had propelled up into the air, ere it spun back down to the floor.

As he crashed chin-first to the floor and slid along, skidding on his elbows, their employer calmly and neatly caught the box in her fingertips, high above him. "Bonsai of the Apocalypse," she announced. "Get that, Baerem?"

The ledger promptly landed on Baerem's face. Hard.

As he struggled not to sneeze or cry, his nose throbbing, he heard a distinct chuckle from overhead.

"Put all of this to rights and join me in the outer office," Herself ordered, her voice still musical with amusement. "Both of you."

"Now we're in trouble!" Yathla hissed at Baerem, as the door swung closed behind those sweeping black robes. "And it's *your* fault!"

"No it's not," the Weaver's voice came magically out of the empty air from between them, "yet. I'm confident it soon will be. Yours, or yours -- or both of yours. Outer office; my patience is not limitless."

Yathla struggled up out of the wreckage of the ladder, only to freeze as a label on a nearby shelf caught her eye. "Magical Sheath of Rhythm? Baer, what's a -- "

"Later," Baerem muttered, tidying away the ledger and hurrying back for the ladder.

"And why would anyone keep a Ring of Uncontrollable Fire Starting?"

"I don't know, I'm not a wizard," Baerem told her, "but there's one waiting in the outer office for us both, and she's -- "

"Undead Ogre's Foot of Power? Great Wizard Naere's Clout of Hair Removal? *Legendary Boots of Naked Woodcutting*? Baer, what did Herself *do*, before she started weaving dreams?"

"Minded her own business," Baerem and the Weaver's disembodied voice said in perfect, sharp unison, as the senior apprentice made for the door.

Pouting, Yathla flounced after him, not noticing when an incense burner and a large, firmly stoppered metal flask labeled "Decanter of Endless Whining" rose from the floor by themselves, and flew silently after her.

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Mirt seated himself in a chair that groaned under his settling weight, plucked up a bottle of blue wine and thrust it in the direction of his guest -- who shuddered as he waved it away -- and asked gruffly, "So, out with it, man -- why are ye here?"

"I -- I visit you on behalf of a patron who desires to remain nameless," the man began smoothly. "A . . . ah . . ."

"A noble lord who doesn't want his name used," Mirt said.

"I -- ah, er -- yes."

"Good," Mirt said firmly. "These visits always go best when my guests manage to utter a few truths, now and then. I won't even bully ye to learn who our overly coy lord is, yet. Let's hear his complaint."

The man flushed. "I don't know that he'd care to have that word used -- "

"Ah, but *I* know I don't care what cute terms he prefers or bluntness he prefers to avoid," Mirt rumbled. "Ye came here to deliver his complaint, didn't ye? And get me to do something about it, aye?"

"Er, aye. I mean, yes."

Mirt broke the seal on the bottle, jerked the cork out with his teeth, and took a long drink of wine, breaking off with a loud sigh of satisfaction. "Well?" he barked. "Are ye going to keep

me waiting as long as one o' them gnome washer-lasses, who wants your stained old clout whiter than the moon?" He raised the bottle. "I could be down at my desk, ye know, drinking better stuff than this!"

His visitor looked pained. "Ah, undoubtedly. To be brief, then: my patron finds his nightly slumbers repeatedly interrupted by bad dreams. Nightmares he believes are intended to crudely scare him into ah, refraining from . . . ah, a certain action."

"Pursuing the youngest Lady Manthar into his intended tryst atop his family's crypt in the City of the Dead, during some highsun or other," Mirt supplied promptly. "Kindly tell Lord Nandar I can't stop legitimate commerce. He'd've been wiser to have chosen a noble lass with a less watchful father -- or contented himself with doxies or the beautiful daughters of wealthy would-be nobles, some of whom would eagerly sleep with him just to be able to boast to their friends."

His visitor sat very still. "How did you -- ?"

"Ye were sent to me because I'm a Lord of Waterdeep, remember?"

"Well -- ah -- let us be very clear on one thing: you did *not* hear the name of my patron from my lips."

"Presper Staunach, yer reputation remains unchanged," Mirt observed, in tones so dry that it took some moments before his visitor realized how biting he'd been insulted. "So let me say some things now, hey? The Weaver of Dreams pays her taxes, honest and in full, is a member of the Watchful Order, and keeps to her own business. When she sends dreams to folk o' Waterdeep, to deprive them of sleep or scare them into doing something or other, 'tis for fees, not out of malice or for personal gain. In short, she provides a service to all -- services akin to those that nobles such as, say, Lord Nandar, can afford because they have staff wizards that most other citizens can't even dream of affording. Now, if Lord Nandar desires the Weaver put out of this particular line of business, he'd best take it up openly with both the Lords of Waterdeep -- through Piergeiron, at the Palace -- *and* the Watchful Order. And I wish him luck; I'll enjoy the entertainment and it'll give him something to do for the rest of his life, even if he lives to be very old. Good day to ye, Staunach; send the old lecher my personal approval of his tastes -- Esmrelle Manthar? Ya-hey! -- and tell him he'll just have to take the bad with the good, so to speak. She may even be worth it."

Presper Staunach rose, visibly wrapping his dignity around him, and nodded gravely. "I'll relay your words, Lord Mirt. Unembellished."

"Wise of ye," Mirt said dryly. "Follow the golem out."

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"Paladin gives birth to baby troll! Most ancient and incontinent of dragons loses false fangs!"

"High priest announces quest for the Burrito of Exquisite Flatulence!"

"Seventy-five temple virgins from Turmish missing -- believed devoured by starving designers of games to the Syl-Pasha of Calimshan! Said virgins were carrying stocks of

poisoned elven wine -- report all cases of arms suddenly dropping off, uncontrollable laughter, and explosive bowel evacuation to your local Watch!"

The broadcryers were in full and splendid voice this forenoon; Volo winced as he shouldered his way through them. "It should be here -- or rather, *there*. That door. The black one with the star."

Gorth Garlen nodded, and dropped a hand to the hilt of his sword. Regarding the staggering broadcryers Gorth had just sent sprawling in all directions, Volo hoped he wasn't going to be quite foolish enough to draw it, here in the open street, where the gods alone knew who might be watching.

He wasn't -- quite. The blade flashed out as Gorth yanked the door wide and bent forward to begin his charge up the revealed stairs within, that led up to the floor above Lady Bordelho the Chaste's Piratical Gear and Costumery shop.

Someone was coming down those dark, narrow steps, and Gorth drew back his steel with a snarl of irritation mere moments before he would have gutted whoever it was.

Which might have been quite unfortunate, seeing as it was a stout, amiable-looking member of the Watch, in full uniform and sporting a splendid mustache.

Who winked at Gorth, asked jokingly, "So she likes it violent, hey?" and edged on past.

Gorth gave Volo a flat glare back over his shoulder. "Sure this is the right place?"

"I'm sure," Volo told him firmly, starting up the stair.

Gorth nodded, squared his shoulders, and went up the stairs in a thunderous rush. Volo started after him then stopped, whirled, and hurried back down the stairs as silently as possible. When he reached the door, he slipped out through it, strolled to the nearest alley -- and sprinted down it faster than he'd run in years.

Volo the Valiant he might be, but he didn't even want to be in the same ward of the city when Gorth Garlen tried to plunge his sword into the Weaver of Dreams.

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"I'm expecting trouble," the Weaver announced. "Right about -- *now*."

The office door burst open, banging against the wall, and a large, broad-shouldered man who wore a sneer, an eye patch, and ragged leathers bounded through it and across the room, his drawn sword slicing the air on its way to the lady wizard's throat.

Where it struck something that rang like abused metal, bent the blade amid a brief shower of sparks, and sent its wielder staggering sideways, wringing a numbed hand as the sword bounced and clattered.

"Sorcerous *bitch!*" he spat, clutching at his sword arm.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced," the Weaver said politely, "though you obviously know who I am. Baerem?"

Her senior assistant obediently emptied the box she'd handed him earlier, right under the intruder's boots. The flood of small iron spheres came out with an enthusiastic roar -- echoed by Gorth a moment later, when his feet shot toward the ceiling and he came down with a crash on the now-littered floor. Baerem obeyed the Weaver's nod by thrusting the office broom firmly into the man's crotch and giving a shove.

Buoyed along on hundreds of smooth iron spheres, Gorth Garlen slid swiftly across the office and out its still-open door. They heard him cry out in pain several times on his precipitous journey back down the stairs.

"Yathla," the Weaver commanded.

Her junior assistant blinked at her, as lovely -- and as puzzled -- as ever. "Yes?"

The lady wizard pointed. "Pick them all up, and return them to the box. Mind you retrieve all that went down the stairs with our uninvited guest."

"But -- but *he's* down there!"

The Weaver turned away. "Not any longer. My spell took effect just as you began your little protest. Now be quick about it. We've much to do this day, and I don't want any of our more welcome patrons to slip on the stairs when they arrive for their appointments -- which begin very soon. Baerem?"

Her senior assistant had already positioned her reclining chair, and was holding it ready for her, her preferred drink in his other hand.

"Thank you," his employer said gratefully. "Your competence is much appreciated."

Neither of them had known until that moment that Yathla's shapely little behind could convey a pout, but it could.

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"Male paladin misspeaks prayers, instantly becomes pregnant at altar!"

"Courtesans entertaining buyers in Thayan enclaves revealed to be zombies!"

"Adventurers escape beholder with pink, weeping eye affliction, and brother beholder whose eye's covered with growths!"

"Town drunk in Aglarond unmasked as a king fled from royal duties!"

"Runaway bride spends night of passion with drunken dragon and litter of kittens, priests refuse to speculate on offspring!"

"Catapult designer arrested after using live gnomes as test loads!"

"Pirate beholder spotted on beach, wearing multiple eye patches and walking on eye tentacle peg legs!

" 'A Darker Shade of Gloom' spell suntanning comes to the city of Shade!"

"Eastern chefs start raw fish eatery in Telflamm: giant beasts of the deep served live to tables, diners to slay and eat their own fresher than fresh feasts!"

The broadcryers were in their usual fine -- if somewhat hoarse, as the day was drawing on -- form.

Mirt gave them a sour look, then grinned through the smudge-covered glass at the scantily clad shop lass who was busily "redressing" the display windows of Lady Bordelho the Chaste's Piratical Gear and Costumery shop.

She winked and gave him a provocative little wriggling-fingers wave, her mouth full of pins and the rest of her busily displaying a deliciously golden tan and a few scraps of riotously pink and orange silk "pirate rags." Her gleaming black boots came right up to her pelvis, and two golden hoop earrings, each as large as Mirt's hairy palms, framed her beautiful face.

A charming little minxlet, to be sure, but not a patch -- heh, an eye patch -- on her employer.

"Lady Bordelho" had married a real pirate and become a pirate captain before deciding that there was more coin to be made in selling open-front shirts, wide belts with face-sized golden buckles, cutlasses that curved and belled out like the beaks of pelicans, and supple sea boots to young, bored nobles and others with more wealth than fashion sense.

Mirt remembered her drinking bouts fondly. She'd made fools of more young nobles than he could count, and gone right on strutting the length of the tavern tables, dancing as sizzingly as many a festhall wench. Nowadays she kept to herself more, selling night-long "change thy bodies to the other gender" magics to young lads and lasses who wanted to dress up as pirates and have adventures. With a sideline in sewing and designing bridal gowns, with her old crew plying the needles. Oh, and selling such fripperies as "Scabbards of Endless Polish" for dandified idiot nobles.

Once a season she rented a ship and dressed it up as a pirate vessel for a night of raucous harbor-cruising. Wet shirt contests, gender-shifting for the night, and all. There'd been that disaster the one year her "cabin boy" turned out to have a borrowed ring of fire-starting and a grudge, but the burning ship had been sailed out to sea and all the revelers rescued with stirring tales to tell, so no lasting harm . . .

Mirt stopped to chuckle at the wax figures of the shop's window display. A snarling bearded pirate figure whose peg legs all turned to tentacles at the bottom was menacing a clean-cut pirate who peg leg seemed to be just for show (being as he was standing on two perfectly good legs). This confrontation was being watched by a parrot who had hooks instead of wings, perched on the shoulder of an effeminate young silk-shirted pirate whose hair formed a huge round cloud around his face, whose shirt bore the words "Duty to Protect the Booty," and whose attention seemed to be fixed on his own painted fingernails.

Not for the first time, he wondered how Lady Bordelho got along with her upstairs tenant, the sharp-tongued and rather private Weaver of Dreams.

Swimmingly but not *too* swimmingly, he hoped, making that weak joke to himself, recalling drowned pirate victims floating in the harbor in elder, wilder days. He mounted the stairs at a slow, wheezing trudge.

Angry, bulbous, blue burburs, but stairs seemed to be getting steeper, these days . . .

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"This visitor is *not* to be attacked," the Weaver announced calmly. "No matter what he may say or do. Masks on, both of you."

Baerem and Yathla hastened to obey. When their employer used that particular tone of voice, obedience -- and a complete lack of assistants' questions -- was their wisest conduct. Besides, with certain visitors, it was a relief to know that one's face was hidden behind a mask, and couldn't be remembered for later.

They were barely masked and settled again at their desks when the office door opened again, and Mirt the Moneylender wheezed his way into the room, lurched across it, and sat down in the visitor's chair without hesitation.

"G'morn, Launtra," he rumbled cheerfully.

"Mirt, I prefer not to use any other name than 'the Weaver,' " the cowed lady wizard snapped. "Please refrain from repeating what you just called me. Ever."

"I'll try, Laun, but ye know how *forgetful* we Lords of Waterdeep are," he grunted. "Forget all manner of odd things, we do, and -- "

"Your point," the lady wizard said silkily, "is taken. Did you come all the way up here to make another one, perhaps?"

"Did," the old man replied, nodding. "Now, what was it? The dragon -- Leisa, was it? -- ye called down on old Grauble? That she-ninja ye hired to thin the ranks of the nobles -- the one with the bunny suit and all them jingling body-bells? Ah, no, no, I remember now. Two things. One, a warning: some seventy-five temple virgins are on their way here, intending to seize yer *Grimoire of Naughty, Naughty Thinking*. Might want to hide it, or summat."

"*Were* on their way here," the Weaver corrected tartly.

Mirt lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, took care of them already, did ye? Work quick and quiet, ye do. Another point: the recent arrival of one Gorth Garlen, blade for hire, atop the poisoned points of the railings around the armorers' guild headquarters. Not the done thing, lass, for all his unpleasantness. Can't be doing the likes o' that in *my* city, mind."

"I don't see how you can prove that I *did* do it," the Weaver of Dreams observed pleasantly. "I've been here in my office all this morn, and have two witnesses to prove it."

"Ah, yes, so ye do. An' Tarthus -- ye remember Tarth, hmm? -- has a spell ready that'll show us what their eyes saw of the spell ye cast on Garlen, as he, *'hem*, went back down yer stairs. More than enough to get ye thrust out of the Order."

"What do you want, Mirt?" The Weaver's voice was gentler than ever, but as cold as a winter gale.

"Ye to come with me. Now. Peacefully. To attend a polite little meeting."

"With whom?"

"Ah, now, that's a surprise."

"I don't like surprises."

"Wizards never do, but Faerûn certainly seems to hand a steady stream o' them even to politely murderous lady mages, hey? Come. Think of it as an adventure."

"And if I refuse?"

Mirt looked sad. "Ah, lass, lass, let's not start, hey? First I'd have to spank ye, which would mean yer assistants would see what ye really look like, an' then I'd -- "

"I will come," the Weaver of Dreams announced calmly. "Baerem, get out the black wand and guard these premises until my return. Yathla, go somewhere far away -- North Ward -- buy some new garments for yourself, and then spend the night at a good hostelry there. Quietly, in your room."

A slender hand emerged from beneath the dark robes and tossed a large handful of coins -- most of them gold -- in a neat arc toward Yathla.

Who was too astonished to catch any of them. The lady wizard strode out of the office while they were still pinging and clinking around the floor.

Mirt gave Baerem a reassuring grin, and followed her to the stair.

Baerem was too busy gulping to smile back. The *black* wand? The one that released the Lich of Swords?

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The underlibrarian looked over the top of her glasses and the book in her hands, and gave her reading audience her best professionally distant smile.

"So, you see, the Second Guild War was really caused by these three noble-hired wizards, using spells on the minds of guildmasters. It ended up as the uprising and struggle in the streets we've all heard about, yes, as long-simmering resentments were acted upon, but -- "

"I have my own copy of *The Grand History of the Realms*, as it happens," an elderly man in a Palace uniform interrupted stiffly, "and it says nothing about wizards doing any meddling."

"Indeed," agreed a thin, aging noble over a pair of hexagonal spectacles, his gaze severe. "Have you any proof of this, young lady? Or is this merely another revisionist fantasy, of the sort ignorant younglings spin so often these days?"

Underlibrarian Delmistra Parendrel smiled at one man and then the other.

"Now, gentle readers all," she said in motherly tones, "you can't believe *everything* you read in *The Grand History of the Realms*. It's a book written by mortals just like us, riddled with the same foibles most of us possess, and we all make mistakes, or exaggerate, or leap to assumptions that are later -- "

"Delmistra," the young noble in the front row commanded suddenly, "put down that book, take off those ridiculous glasses, and kiss me."

To the astonishment of many, the primly dressed young woman did just that, insinuating herself into the grinning noble's lap with a lithe grace that made many mouths water, displayed her splendid new stockings to best advantage, and informed everyone at that end of the library that she hadn't, that morning, put on her smallclothes.

"Godolphin Nandar!" the senior librarian said severely, striding across the room like a storm cloud in a hurry. "You will kindly refrain from using coercive spells on my staff! The Watchful Order expressly forbids -- "

"The Watchful Order," the noble replied, putting firm hands around the waist of the dreamy-eyed librarian who was settling in against him, "can kiss my -- "

"*No*, thank you, young Lord Nandar," another voice commanded, as its owner came into view around a bookshelf. There were some gasps among the gathered reading audience; when she was angry, Mhair Szelrune, Lady Master of the Watchful Order of Magists and Protectors, could be rather striking. "You're as bad as your father. Assist Underlibrarian Delmistra back to her feet at once, and kindly keep your hands on socially acceptable parts of her body while doing so."

"And if I don't?" the young noble drawled, lifting a hand that sparkled with awake and ready magical rings.

Mhair sighed and waved her hand.

One of those rings exploded.

It was a small blast, just enough to vaporize the ring and sever the finger wearing it. Godolphin Nandar yelped in pain and shot up out of the chair, spilling the entranced librarian into Senior Librarian Martul's arms.

Awkwardly, that bearded, four-eyed man -- Martul literally had eyes in the back of his head, and two pairs of thick spectacles, to boot -- wrestled her back to her stool and put the book back in her hands.

"Godolphin," she murmured ardently, leaning toward the capering, yelling noble. Most of the audience grinned widely, openly enjoying the proceedings.

Mhair frowned and made another gesture. The underlibrarian blinked, looked startled, then clutched the *Grand History* all the more tightly, and asked the front row, "Oh . . . ah, where was I?"

"In his lap!" someone explained helpfully, gleefully pointing at the now-weeping noble, who was on his knees staring at his severed finger in horror.

"Put it back!" he howled at the Lady Master of the Order. "*Put it back!*"

"No, I don't think so," Mhair replied, curling both of her hands into beckoning claws. Obediently, all of Nandar's other rings slid off his fingers and flew through the air toward her.

He grabbed at them, wildly and vainly.

"Your missing finger will be a better reminder than anything else I could provide," Mhair told him, turning away. "And perhaps -- just perhaps -- this will be one lesson you'll truly learn."

Another person came into view around the corner of the shelf.

"Ah, *there* ye are, Mhair," Mirt the Moneylender greeted the Lady Master jovially. Catching sight of Nandar's finger lying on the library floor in its own tiny pool of blood, he bent with a wheeze, plucked it up, and juggled it in his palm. "This'll hit the spot, later."

He leered at the watching audience for Delmistra's reading, and advised them, "Always scrounge food when ye can. Ye just never know when life will turn too busy to sit down to a proper meal."

His words were rewarded with some pale faces, retching sounds, and gagging; he grinned merrily as the benches emptied rapidly, leaving the bewildered underlibrarian blinking and murmuring, "Oh, dear. Oh, oh, dear."

"Del, dear," the senior librarian told her, "I think it would be best if we cancelled the rest of the reading for this day . . . don't you?"

Two stern-faced Watchful Order mages had appeared around the bookshelf, and were bearing down on the crying Lord Nandar. They took him by the elbows without slowing, plucking him bodily off his feet as they continued to the door the audience had precipitously departed through.

His cries died away swiftly leaving only Delmistra blinking up at Martul and saying rather doubtfully, "Ah, yes, yes, I suppose so."

Then she gasped in astonishment and dawning fear, staring at the latest figure to appear around the corner of the end bookshelf. Martul turned, stared, and gulped.

"Good afternoon," the Weaver of Dreams greeted everyone in a voice that was calm, courteous, and only slightly menacing. "Is this my . . . surprise?"

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"Baer?" Yathla's voice quavered only a little. The doppelganger who had cruel hold of her seemed to be suffering from some sort of crisis; aside from his bruisingly hard fingers, he kept changing from one shape to another.

Baerem gulped again, and raised the wand. "Don't make me use this," he snapped, trying to sound menacing.

The doppelganger now seemed to have settled on being some sort of huge, upright bear. He sneered.

"Go ahead, pretty boy. Use it on me. I've taken care of Lady Bordelho, and I can take care of you. And when you're spread all over this floor in little bloody cantles, I'll find this Weaver you're hiding, and do the same to her. Gorth Garlen still owed us four thousand two hundred and six gold dragons, and he's now a little too dead to pay any more of it off."

He lowered his shaggy head to regard Yathla with yellow, blazing eyes, and favored her with a leer that displayed his pressing need for dental work -- or some other means of removing large pieces of rotting, long-ago meals from among his jagged fangs. "You, I'm sure I'll find another use for, first. And if you scream, I'll just bite your throat out."

Menacingly, he lifted one hand. It became a bear paw, and grew one long talon, stretching towards her to . . . brush her hair away from her face. With a little sigh and shiver, she promptly fainted in his arms.

Scowling, he lifted and turned her, positioning her limp body as a shield against Baerem's wand.

Desperately wishing his employer would return from her meeting, the Weaver's senior assistant closed his eyes, silently called on Azuth, and triggered the wand.

There was a faint whoosh, a sudden stench of sulfur, a little curling black cloud of smoke -- and a tall, thin, irritated-looking man in rotting robes was standing in the room with that smoke eddying around his ankles, arms folded as he glared all around.

Or rather, someone who'd once been a man. He was dead, and looked it. Baerem swallowed. This was the Lich of Swords, all right.

The last of the smoke faded away, revealing to all that the lich was facing the world wearing stiletto-heeled ankle boots that seemed to be made of old iron. Baerem dragged his eyes away from the astonishing footwear and up the decaying robes to notice that the undead mage was holding what looked like a letter opener in one long-fingered, bony hand.

"You," he addressed Baerem coldly, the moment their eyes met, "summoned me. What is your will?"

"S-slay yon doppelganger," the senior assistant managed to reply. "Uh, without harming the ah, sleeping lass he's holding."

The doppelganger promptly whirled into a blurring-fast spin -- that slowed when two identical unconscious Yathlas slumped to the floor.

The Lich of Swords gave one of them a disgusted sneer and tossed the letter opener at it like a dart.

In midair, that miniature sword became a full-sized sword that promptly split, as if it were shedding reflections in both directions, into a dozen identical blades. All of which opened little mouths on their hilts and sang.

In glorious harmony they plunged deep into one of the Yathlas, blood spurting in all directions as the swords withdrew, slashed, flew around like darting needles, and sang something merry in Elvish.

Then they flashed back to the lich's hand and somehow sank into each other again, drenching the bony waiting hand in fresh, blue-green doppelganger gore. The Lich of Swords straightened up, seeming somehow taller and more substantial, gave Baerem a tight smile, and closed his hand around the now-miniature-once-more sword.

Then there was a flash, the wand in Baerem's hand quivered, and the room was empty of liches once more. The floor was strewn with lumps of what looked like ivory-to-brown pudding, slumping down into shapeless blobs, but all the blood was gone, sucked into the swords and then into the lich.

Which was a good thing, as Yathla rolled over into what had been the largest, deepest puddle a moment earlier. Moaning softly, she writhed in interesting ways, and murmured, "Baerem . . . my hero . . ."

Baerem swallowed, standing there holding the wand uncertainly. Was this how she truly felt about him? Or a clever little ploy to draw him down into her arms? Or would she awaken furious, and start slapping and biting and punching him, if he dared to put his arms around her?

He was still standing uncertainly over her when her eyes fluttered open. She stared up at him, eyes very large and dark.

"You rescued me, didn't you?"

Baerem cleared his throat. "Well, uh . . ."

"He did," a wet, thin ruin of a somehow familiar voice husked, from behind them both. "Only wish he'd . . . been there . . . to rescue *me*."

It had taken Lady Bordelho the Chaste a long and glisteningly bloody time to crawl up the long, narrow flight of stairs, and it had cost her the very last of her strength. Chin on the top step, she spat out a lot of blood, laid her face down in it, and went still.

Yathla gave the broken and bleeding pirate shopkeeper one look, retched, enthusiastically spewed whatever was in her stomach all over the floor -- and fainted again.

Wincing, Baerem turned and charged back into the storeroom. There had to be *something* in a box that could help Lady Bordelho. There had to be.

For one thing, she might be Herself's landlord, but she owed the Weaver several thousand gold -- and Baerem had an uncomfortable feeling that if she died still owing it, the Weaver would hold her senior assistant responsible.

Why not, after all? She held him responsible for everything *else*.

* * * * *

"So we are met," Mhair Szelrune said calmly, watching the blue sparkling mist of her spell settle over the frozen, unseeing forms of Underlibrarian Delmistra and Senior Librarian Martul, and bring an absolute hush to this corner of the library. As it thickened, the rest of the library disappeared from view entirely, leaving Mhair seated with Mirt, the Weaver, and another lady wizard who also wore a cowl, though hers was a light blue, with robes to match, and she was far shorter and plumper than the Weaver.

The Weaver stared fixedly at this latest arrival -- who had said not a word thus far -- and spared no attention for Mhair or Mirt.

"Huh," the Lord of Waterdeep commented to the ceiling. "Another glaring contest. Do lady wizards do anything else?"

Wordlessly the Weaver lifted one finger and pointed at him. The dark ray that shot from her fingernail struck something unseen about a handwidth from his chest, and rebounded back at her, striking arrow-swift into the cowl and leaving her reeling and gasping.

"How -- ?"

Mirt beamed at her. "'Tis called *magic*, lass!"

"Buffoon!" the Weaver of Dreams hissed at him. "Have you no couth at all?"

"None," he replied promptly. "Used it all up and spat it out, years ago. Couth's not much use to a sellsword -- an' even less to a moneylender. But then, I see certain lady mages have lost all of theirs, too . . . trying to scorch me in front of the Lady Master of your Order. Idiot."

The Weaver of Dreams stiffened. "You called me here for better purposes than merely to insult me, I trust?"

She turned her head pointedly away from Mirt without waiting for an answer, and looked at Mhair. "Lady Master? Have there been *complaints* from the nobles again?"

Mhair smiled. "Of course. Yet that's not why we're here. The Order approves of your dream-sendings. I might go so far as to say you're something of a hero, and many members wish they'd thought of it first."

"You're enforcing the two-season rule, then?" The Weaver's voice was softer, almost pleased.

"I'm giving you *four* seasons without competition," Mhair replied. "The little suggestion-tale sequences you weave *and* instilling fear makes two trade innovations, for this generation at least. Ahghairon did it, of course, but few since, and none have ever made it their livelihood."

"Thank you," the Weaver replied gently. "Then why -- ?"

"Something else," Mhair said and waved a hand at the plump stranger cowed in blue.

The Weaver of Dreams turned her head again to regard that blue cowl almost reluctantly, as if she'd known it would come to this, and feared this moment.

Two slender, feminine hands bare of rings and any other adornment emerged from all-concealing sleeves to rise, draw back the cowl, and reveal the face within.

The Weaver of Dreams screamed.

* * * * *

"Yochlol craves gut surgery! Wants to lose weight!"

"Beware all-white drow on magical quest. Seen in the city by night, armed and dangerous! Seeking means of tanning, some say!"

"Zulkir of Thay suffers food poisoning in Telflamm; widespread local devastation predicted when he recovers enough!"

"Poisoned wine served at royal feast. Nine punchbowl-diving, chandelier-swinging halflings perish!"

"Incontinent dragon captures halfling plumber to help with his digestive problem, but flies over prince's wedding for unfortunate royal flush!"

"Castle in upland Turmish going cheap! Cursed with sudden bursts of strange music! Staffed by animated magical suits of armor who communicate with visitors through mime!"

"By all the stammering mages who've ever miscast magic, these broadcryers are running out of good tales," Presper Staunach muttered, shouldering through them. "I could think of better myself."

"Well, do that, and sell your babblings to them," Lord Baelrun Nandar replied crisply. "I do."

Presper turned to gape at his friend in surprise. "You do?"

"You're listening to some of them now," Nandar said sourly, "O most exalted of critics."

Presper winced, swallowed, and said hastily, "I'll go first."

"Indeed," Nandar replied, drawing his sword. "I should have confronted her to her face months ago." The tip of his splendid sword glowed blue. "*This* ought to open quite a hole in even the best spell-guarded lady wizard."

Ahead of him, Presper drew open the door, started up the stair -- only to slip, recoil, and hastily retreat back out again.

"She's behind what befell Godolphin," Lord Nandar was snarling, as if Presper had still been standing attentively at his side. "I'm sure of it! And no witch maims a son of mine and gets away with -- "

"There's a river of blood running down the stairs," Presper blurted out, looking pale and a trifle green.

"Hmph. Undoubtedly someone *else* with a complaint got here first," the head of House Nandar growled. "Well, let's hope we're not too late. If it's someone of breeding, they may have been polite enough to have left me some part of the lady wizard to kill myself."

Slashing the air viciously twice, he smiled grimly, and started up the stair. In his wake, Presper Staunach gulped, and followed.

* * * * *

"Beaver Figurine of Mystical *Shaving*?"

Incredulously Baerem flung aside the fortieth or so box, not caring where it crashed down or what befell its contents, and plucked out another.

He was panting now, as he grew more frantic, here in the very back of the Weaver's storeroom, clawing his way through the shelves she kept curtained off, where he was forbidden to go.

There *had* to be something.

Well, there was, wasn't there? Netherese brandy laced with heavy magic, a cloak of elf hair, a spell that promised to bring into being a tub of lava directly overhead, something called a "Hoard of Rodly Might," a wand to make one's desire shift to embrace the other gender -- and just who would use that, and on whom? Not to mention: *why*? -- "one puppy, preserved," and a heavy, clinking box that just might be what its label promised: "Netherese gold coins, recently discovered."

Gah!

Then his fingers closed on a box that clinked dully -- the sound of heavy, liquid-filled metal things striking each other! Like vials . . . of healing?

The box bore only one mark: a circle. Yes! The healing rune, or sigil, or badge, or whatever the Nine Burning Hells it was!

Baerem tore open the box, snatched the six vials out of their little wooden rack, held up each in trembling haste to make sure they all bore the same circle mark -- they did -- and started trampling boxes on a wild run to the door, to get out there and heal the Lady Bordelho. If he hadn't taken too long . . .

Out in the office, Yathla screamed.

* * * * *

"Never mind *that*! Can you put it back?"

Godolphin Nandar was frantic, but the cleric had dealt with many frantic folk down the years, and would not be hurried.

"Sit down, and try to calm yourself," he murmured, guiding the youngest Lord Nandar to a chair. "If you don't, my healing will almost certainly fail."

That gentle threat usually sparked obedience, but this young hothead seemed contrary by nature.

"Priest, I order you -- "

"Excuse me," the cleric replied, his voice suddenly as firm as cold iron, "but we take orders from only *one* source in this house. And it's a considerably more exalted one than mere city nobility."

"Mere -- ?" Godolphin's mouth fell open in utter astonishment. The cleric resisted a momentary temptation to sweep up some of the candle stubs on the table and thrust them all inside it, and instead busied himself with gently forcing the young noble's shoulders down, to make their owner sit.

He laid out fresh linen on the table, for the afflicted arm to rest on, and asked, "You have the finger?"

"No! That *bastard* Mirt the Moneylender took it! Said it would be a snack!"

The cleric's chuckle almost escaped him before he mastered himself, but he managed to turn it into a snort. Good, good; at least someone had managed to give this young cockerel a good scare.

"Ah, I'm afraid that makes things more difficult. It will take me longer and the holy offering will have to be -- "

"I don't care about that! Just do it!"

The cleric nodded and set about getting out the holy water, the vessels, and the powders he'd need. "So you were in the Castle library," he said soothingly, to try to calm the restless, wild-eyed noble. "An interesting place, that. Quite a parade of little incidents, down the years."

"Oh? What d'you mean?"

The cleric smiled. Hooked. "Well, not too many seasons ago, the senior librarian turned out to be a secret priest of Cyric, and came to a rather dramatic end. Before that, when old Alys Farndoan was senior librarian, she was stalked by a shoeshine boy who turned out to be a ghou. He tried to forcibly bed her, threatening to burn all the books in the library if she didn't give in. He meant it, too; he'd procured a Ring of Fire from somewhere."

Godolphin Nandar brightened. "Say, d'you think that would still work? How'd it turn out?"

The cleric turned away so he could roll his eyes in disgust and not be seen doing it. "Badly," he said firmly, "and no, it wouldn't. The guardians would come awake, you know."

"Guardians?"

"Some of the books on the shelves aren't books at all. They're really aging loyal warriors of Waterdeep, who agreed to be turned into books so as to last longer, awakening and regaining their true bodies only when called upon, or the books immediately around them are threatened by magic or fire. So mind you don't misbehave in the library again, Lord Nandar."

"These guardians -- who do they obey?"

The cleric didn't manage to quell his sigh. Nobles.

"The books are not a power any noble can command," he said, trying to sound regretful rather than stern. "Though someone spirited one of them away to Cormyr, I hear. Where it was eventually found in a library in the Royal Palace after King Azoun called for a fresh inventory to be taken, when books were thought to have gone missing. The wayward tome was returned, by the way."

"That's nice," the youngest Lord Nandar said sarcastically. "And this is going to help me with my missing finger how? Holy man, I'm sure you're very important and all, but I'm a busy man, and I can't sit here all day -- "

The cleric drew himself up, gave the young noble a withering glare that held all the contempt he could cram into it, and said severely, "Lord Nandar, my time is as worthless as yours; we are both mere mortals, remember? Gods cannot be rushed by such as we."

Godolphin winced. "All right, pray pardon, I didn't mean it. So, can you tell any good stories, to pass the time? Y'know . . . with sex?"

The cleric smirked. "Oh. Well, now. Yes, as a matter of fact. All of them true, too. For instance, a young and very comely Red Wizard of Thay was once seeking her first tattoo. Now, where on her body do you think she wanted it?"

The youngest Lord Nandar grinned. "I get to guess? Well, then . . ."

* * * * *

The blue-robed woman smiled a little uncertainly, and reached out a hand. "Alauntra?"

"*Summer?*" The Weaver of Dreams burst into tears, surged up out of her chair crying hard and uncontrollably, and almost buried the other robed woman in her embrace.

Mirt thrust out one hairy leg to keep the stranger's chair from toppling over backward under that assault, and watched all the ensuing frenetic babbling, weeping, and kissing with a smile slowly widening across his face.

At length, he turned to look at Mhair, and jerked his head in the direction of the bookshelves.

She nodded, and they withdrew together, smoothly and silently, leaving the two obviously ardent lady wizards to their reunion.

Mhair took Mirt's hand to lead him through her mists without their magic claiming him. It was like wading through heavy oil that surged through his head as well as hampering his limbs, but suddenly they were out, and blinking in the brighter light, on its far side.

This end of the library was empty. A few curious folk looked their way, but from afar; a line of silent Watchful Order mages kept browsers at bay.

"Right," Mirt growled, in what he fondly believed was a whisper. "Do tell."

The Lady Master of the Order smiled. "You know her not, the newcomer?"

"Beyond the fact that she's short, cheerful, lush-figured, full of life, is a mage, and seems to like the color blue," Mirt growled, "no. Who is she?"

"The famous mage-for-hire Myschanta Halarra of Arabel. Great friends with the Lady Alustriel, and famed for her adventuring in the Stonelands and Moonsea North. She once defeated six mages in a spell-battle in the streets of Westgate."

"Oh. Heard about that last one, aye. Where'd the 'Summer' come from?"

"She was called that when young -- for her merry character; sunny like summer. She and Alauntra Belhune were both apprenticed to Thardask of the Slaying Thunders, and they came to love each other."

"I noticed," Mirt said dryly. "So why'd this Myschanta come seeking her long-lost Launtra now?"

"Ah. You know how Thardask Emmercloak died?"

"Big wizards' battle, Zhents blew up his tower, one of their early show-the-Realms victories . . . all his 'prentices and staff slain. Obviously these two, at least, got away."

Mhair nodded. "For years, the Weaver has thought only she escaped alive. With the half-melted face and the seeing gem for one eye she keeps hidden under that cowl."

"I've seen her face. One night at a revel, after she'd poured a little too much firewine down herself. She didn't mean me to, and 'twas only for a moment, but I saw."

"And for years, she's hidden her name and past, and blamed herself for the death of her lover. She saw Myschanta struck down in the fray -- slain, she thought -- by her own spell, after some Zhentarim wizards deflected it."

"That'd hurt," Mirt said gruffly, turning away. "Ya-huh, 'twould."

Mhair smiled. Had his old eyes gone just a trifle damp?

* * * * *

Baerem took one look at the men with the swords -- one of them was that Staunach man, who delivered messages from nobles that the nobles didn't want their own people to be seen delivering -- menacing Yathla, and flung down the vials behind the Weaver's desk. The steel vials wouldn't break, and he needed both hands to pluck down the shield from the wall beside the door.

It was more than mere decoration. "I suppose I'm needed *again*?" it asked peevishly, as the two men shouted and charged at Baerem, slipping from the blood they'd got on their boots. "All your cheating, two-timing, singing swords not quite up to the task, as usual? Not that I ever get the appreciation I deserve -- until everyone's desperate."

"*Deal with them!*" Baerem shrieked at it, hurling it edge-on at Presper Staunach, who was in the lead.

"All right, all right, there's no need to -- hey! Not in the face! *Not in the face!*"

Despite the shield's cry, Staunach's sword crashed clumsily down right on its front, as he tried to batter it to the floor. And failed.

Its edge crashed into his ribs, plucked him off his feet, and slammed him back into Lord Nandar. Who slipped, flung up his arms in a helpless attempt to keep his balance, and went over backward with a crash onto Yathla.

Who crumpled silently to the floor under him as he swore and kicked and flailed, with the shield snarling in anger as it flew past his nose, skidded up the wall, and came arcing around for another strike.

"Here I come a-conquering!" it sang, diving down at the two men on the floor.

Baerem winced. Who enspelled a shield to make it tone-deaf? Or was it the work of a wizard who couldn't sing, so it couldn't, either?

Presper Staunach groaned as the shield slammed into his shoulder, but the other man -- was that Lord *Nandar*? Baerem gulped -- hacked it aside with his sword, a blue glow flaring in the air with every strike, and the shield shrieked and flew out the door. Its scream trailed away down the stairway, then faded out into the street.

The two men clambered to their feet, Staunach wincing but the nobleman smiling menacingly.

"Now," Lord Nandar announced calmly, "we'll open up this lad from his throat to his valububbles, then leave him to bleed while we go a-hunting overclever lady mages . . ."

He stalked forward. Baerem crouched uncertainly behind the Weaver's desk amid the litter of steel vials, not knowing what to do. There was a shifting, sliding walls trap across the room, behind yonder door, but it would kill him first if he tried to lead them into it -- and how else would he get them to open that door, before he was dead?

He thought furiously. About whirling nothing.

Then turned and ran back into the storeroom, slamming the door -- and promptly falling on his face, as his feet skidded helplessly on half-crushed boxes.

With contemptuous ease Lord Nandar smashed the door open again and stood gloatingly in the doorway.

"What a pitiful little worm you are, lad," he observed -- and then his eyes narrowed. "Or are you the lady wizard, trying to hide from me in man-shape?"

He hefted his sword, the blue glow flickering around it again, and started forward. "We'll just have to see, won't we?"

* * * * *

"*Lhaeo in Fishnets: A Love Story*," Mirt read aloud, plucking up the topmost book. He looked at the next one. "*Compulsive Finger Sucking, and What it Does*."

Setting that tome aside, he read out the revealed title of the next down on the pile. "*The Dire Puppy and the Highly Intelligent Talking Wart*."

Looking up, he favored the mist he knew hid the motionless, enspelled librarians of Castle Waterdeep with a frown. "*How much gold do we give these dolts each year to buy books for us, again?*"

Mhair joined him at the table, and pointed at the next book. "Now, now! I quite liked *that* one."

"*The Nymph Never Says No?*" Mirt gave her an incredulous look. "Sounds like something I might read, some lonely night when Asper's out riding with the elves. *You?*"

Mhair arched an eyebrow at him in smiling challenge, took up the book, and read aloud from its title page.

"See a young orc seeking acceptance in a society that doesn't understand him! Spy on a night behind doors in the lusty life of Cormyr's royal house! Witness the day at Court of a undead cleric of Ilmater who knows sweet pain when he turns a healing wand on himself! Experience every tender moment of the trysts of a vampiric half-elf prostitute with a heart of gold, a vegetarian who eats only tree sap, and wastes away; will her true love find her in time, and give of his blood to keep her alive?"

She grinned. "We share these books around, we senior ladies of the Order."

Mirt winced. "I begin to understand some things about the Watchful Order." He looked over his shoulder at the bookshelf they'd withdrawn behind, to give Myschanta and the Weaver some privacy. "Think we've given them long enough?"

Mhair gave him a sharp look. "You," she said severely, "are overly eager to burst in on tender scenes of lovemaking -- instead of just reading about them."

She passed him a book. "Here. Settle yourself down with this, and I'll spend a spell to bring us in some cheese."

Mirt grinned. "If you add wine and some pillows to that, I'll join you."

"You, sir, are a rogue," Mhair told him, settling herself down beside him. "And I believe you have a deal."

"Huh," Mirt agreed, absentmindedly caressing her. "Is this one of those happy endings?"

"It won't be," she told him with a sly smile, "when Asper comes in with the wine and cheese."

Mirt didn't flinch. "Pickles," he announced. "Don't forget the pickles. Oh, and some smoked eel."

"Eel? Mirt, must you?"

"Well, can't you just wave your staff and turn your helping into something else?"

"Mirt, my staff isn't a stick of wood that can do anything you want it to -- it's about a dozen servants who follow me around attentively. They can do many things, but turning eel into, say, steaming roast boar isn't one of them."

"Well then, forget the eel, lass. Just -- "

It was about then that they both noticed several pairs of boots approaching their own outthrust feet, and looked up.

The Watchful Order mages wore various grim looks. "Lady Master," one of them said, "Hartholan just spellspoke us. He was knocked down in the street by the Weaver's talking shield. It was fleeing, and screaming, and was scarred all over; fresh sword-blows, he thinks."

Mhair was on her feet in an instant. "Circle, touching me. I can take us all right into her back storeroom."

"Not without me, ye don't," Mirt growled, getting one hairy hand on her ankle as the Watchful Order mages crowded in around.

As the blue glow of her teleport flared more strongly, he got to his feet by the simple, pleasant method of climbing hand-over-hand up the Lady Master's leg.

Her hand reached down as if to slap him, but gave him a pat on the head instead.

"Good dog, am I?" he growled.

Then they were somewhere else.

* * *

"Druid allergic to trees!"

"Humpbacked cleric reveals secret: hump is an imp that's been riding him for years!"

"Dragon slain by own hoard, after its awakened magics made it attack him!"

"Traveling minstrel show wants to make your life a musical!"

"Drunken mind flayer can't stop washing! Obsessed, sage says: it's a compulsion! Will Luskan run out of brain fluid before it's stopped?"

"Wizard loses all control of his mouth! Curses during spells, always says the wrong thing! Three villages destroyed already!"

"Brave monkey housekeeper stands up to tyrannical mistress! Tells her off with rude gestures!"

"Death cultist man-lovers pursue goblin pimps who want to rule the Realms! Their champion a dwarf who thinks he's a unicorn, but that some eunuch stole his horn!"

"Singing sword charms king with a solo, then sings the filthiest ballads while shocked Court covers ears! Sword only sings when owner the Napping Bard falls asleep! He falls asleep before end of every song he sings!"

"Hordes of rabid chipmunks attack Everlund! Their battle cry: Moose! Moose! Moose! They seek 'the Overlord,' but who is he?"

"Foot-tall pixie musician plays his foot-long organ for new innkeeper at northern inn. Keeper is a beholder! Inn now called 'Where We Keep an Eye Out for You!'"

"Stuttering wizard who poisoned wine with miscast spell does it again! Turns priest into polar bear, and polar bear into squirrel! Squirrel now stutters!"

"Prince wears dress at royal wedding, outshines bride's gown!"

"Lich becomes scourge of ladies after adopting huge globular hairdo! Also pursued by women who want their hair back!"

"Broadcryers!" one of the Watchful Order wizards spat, flinging his arms wide and bowling everyone in front of them back against the shop fronts, clearing the street. "How'd we end up out here?"

"Something blocked my magic," Mhair said grimly. "Wands out, everyone. This bids fair to be bad. Mirt, behind us!"

"The Nine Hells I will," the shaggy Lord of Waterdeep growled back at her, trotting forward with his sword out.

"Mirt!"

"Can't hear ye! Mind! There's blood all down these stairs!"

A moment later, something came hurtling down that dark, narrow stairwell at him. He struck at it savagely with his sword, and it burst, riven pieces of box spinning away in various directions, to leave a glowing gem the size of his face hanging in the air in front of him.

"*The Tale of the Igloo*," it announced, in perky female tones. "This dome of pure snow was first seen in Anauroch, flying around above the blazing sands. It melted not, nor lost its shape, and when close was seen to be as tall as a goodly keep, with an open front entrance through which could be seen a snowstorm falling. A tree was growing up through the center of the igloo, yet no roots nor earth could be seen below the flat bottom of the flying dome, and an ogre could be seen dwelling nigh that tree, with a workbench upon which were many miniature trees. When intrepid adventurers dared to essay entry into the igloo, the snow proved to be carnivorous, biting at them and gnawing upon them in clouds that claimed three lives ere -- "

Mirt swung his sword at the gem as hard as he could, leaping off his feet to put more weight beyond its slicing edge.

The gem rang like a bell rather than shattering, and ricocheted off the walls and ceiling of the stair, still announcing perkily, "That ogre was said to be working magic through his prunings, to seek the fabled Undead Ogre's Foot of Power, but life and quest ended together when the igloo crashed into the midst of a royal wedding on the forenoon of -- "

This time, Mirt's sword managed to chip the gem, which announced brightly, "The ancient saying 'The eyes of the beholder find the stuttering cleric.' These words have always been taken to mean -- "

"Let *me!*" a Watchful Order wizard commanded. "Stand aside, Lord!"

A spell came hissing in over Mirt's shoulder, accompanied by Mhair's cry of "*No!*" It struck the gem and rebounded right back out over the moneylender. Behind him, someone cried out in sudden pain.

Mirt clenched his teeth and swung his sword again.

Two shards flew off this time, and there were cracks visible in the depths of the thing.

"The scabbards of polishing and rhythm are long lost twins, and -- "

Mirt struck again.

"Every maid's gown was prettier than that of the bride, and -- "

"It's said the eunuch found his acorns with the aid of a friendly squirrel, who -- "

Mirt's flung himself into his slash, this time, and came down heavily on the step with what was left of the gem beneath him.

Its touch was like fire, and he roared out his pain.

" -- the library inventory was short because of the unwanted wizard's aid -- "

Mirt clubbed at the thing with the hilt of his sword.

" -- fathers teaching sons life lessons will never -- "

" -- Like a pregnant paladin going into labor at the wedding of another -- "

Mirt snarled and hammered at the gem with his fist.

And it exploded.

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Baerem had run out of things to throw. Some of them, like the box he knew held the gem, had flown right out of the room without stopping.

Now, cowering on the floor in the back corner of the storeroom with the points of two swords at his throat, he was going to die.

"Baer?" Yathla called weakly, from the outer office.

Lord Nandar chuckled. "So, going to call out something heroic and manly to her? Try to crawl to her?"

Baerem stared up at him helplessly, struggling not to cry.

The lord smiled unpleasantly. "No one's going to miraculously rescue you, you know. Though I will make your death a little less painful if you tell us where the Weaver of Dreams is hiding."

"And where she keeps her magic," Presper Staunach murmured.

Lord Nandar looked irritated. "Yes, and that." The glowing tip of his sword slid like a piece of ice under Baerem's chin. "Well?"

Then the room rocked, dust swirled, and there was a terrific crash. Nandar and Staunach looked up quickly at the ceiling then made for the walls. Which was where they were when a roaring man came hurtling helplessly into the room and crashed into Lord Nandar, bones cracking audibly.

They fell to the floor together, and then the room was full of angry-looking wizards.

Mhair Szelrune, Lady Master of the Watchful Order of Magists and Protectors, strode across the room, her eyes snapping with anger. Reaching down, she plucked up Lord Baelrun Nandar by the throat.

"*You*," she spat into his dazed, pain-wracked face, then flung him down again. "Leave him unhealed. Will the pirate shop lady live?"

"Yes, Lady Master," a voice called, from the outer office. "The Weaver's lass, too."

"Unhh . . . how about me?" a voice wheezed, from the floor.

"You great idiot," Mhair said, reaching down again to haul Mirt to his feet, take him by the ears, and kiss him roundly. "No pickles for you."

"Never do get them pickles," he complained -- and fainted, slumping back to the floor again.

"Heal him," Mhair ordered, as she strode forward to give the cowering Staunach a glare.

"*You*," she commanded, "are coming with me. To begin a long penance of serving the Order and doing some good for a change."

Staunach tried to claw at some shards of dignity. "Or?"

"Or you can die, here and now, of course," she replied with a polite smile. "Painfully."

Presper Staunach looked into her eyes -- and then knelt and offered her the hilt of his blade.

"Keep it, sheathe it, and come with me," she said briskly, then looked at Baerem.

"And you, Baerem Waeldantor? Are you hurt?"

"I -- I don't think so," Baerem managed to reply.

The air behind the Lady Master flared then, turning briefly into a bright star as Watchful Order wizards cursed and scattered, and Mhair spun around, drawing wands in both hands from her belt.

The brightness faded abruptly to reveal two women, standing face to face in an embrace. They were both bare -- except for the head and shoulders of the taller one, which were covered by a familiar dark cowl.

Mhair lowered her wands, and glared around at the other Order mages to keep them from hurling any spells.

Still in each other's arms, the two women stared all around the ravaged storeroom.

The Weaver's eyes fell upon her senior assistant.

"Baerem!" she snapped. "What *happened* here? In my absence? I leave *you* in charge, for not even half the morning, and -- "

"All the Nine Hells break loose," Mirt murmured groggily, from where he lay.

"*Thank* you, Mirt! Precisely! All the Nine Hells break loose! *Well*, Baerem?"

"Well," Baerem began unhappily, "there was this doppelganger, and he grabbed Yathla, so I summoned the Lich of Swords, and -- "

"This isn't going to turn out to be one of those bad jokes, is it?" Myschanta asked gently.

"Oh, *naed*," Baerem heard himself saying despairingly.

He froze, awaiting some horrid spell-doom or other, but what came instead was quite the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

The Weaver of Dreams was laughing. Uncontrollably, head thrown back and bared body shaking.

A moment later, she'd flung off her cowl and was scooping him up from the floor, her ruined face looming up to kiss him.

Then she hugged him hard, still shrieking with laughter, and Baerem Waeldantor started to dare to hope he might just live through this day, after all.

"Lucky bastard," Mirt mumbled, from the floor. "Gets to kiss the naked lass, while I lie here, neglected . . ."

Myschanta snorted. "C'mere, you. I guess I can give one wrinkled old wreck of a man a kiss. You'll have to weave your own dreams with *something*."

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