

VOLO BREAKS A HOT TALE

by Ed Greenwood

The 2008 "Spin A Yarn" Realms Tale

"Volo," Olimbur Dardulph growled, "just what by Fzoul's stolen mustache wax *is* this tripe? I can't print *this!*"

Volo's fat and cigar-chewing publisher snatched a parchment off the top of the pile in front of him, flung out an arm, and read grandly: "Tailless tressym sighted in Athkatla! Gnomes of the Sword Coast demand greater recognition, want others to look down more often! Swordmages demand all wealthy bakery owners be stopped! Cross-dressing cannibals ousted from mind flayer-run brothel in Skullport, illithid complains of too much 'love at first bite'! Starving cannibal werelion forced to swallow his pride! Codpiece of Vecna found at last!"

He flung the offending page disgustedly across the table at Volo. Like all uncrumpled parchments, it soared a little way in the direction he'd sent it, then stalled in the air—and glided right back into his face. Irritated, he batted it down and aside. Forlornly, Volo watched it settle to the littered cobbles underfoot.

"I mean, come *on!*" Dardulph snapped, his sullenly smoldering cigar vanishing into his mouth at a frightening rate. "This is soooo Time of Troubles-ish!" He gave Volo his best angry glare.

The slim, scraggly bearded man across the table sniffed, tilted his cap to an even more rakish angle, and asked rather stiffly, "And just what is wrong with that? *I lived* through the Time of Troubles, may I remind you! Gods walking Faerûn, castles hurled down like—"

Heads turned at nearby tables in the drinks and broths shop, and Dardulph rolled his eyes and flung up his hands. "Yes, yes, *yes,*" he snarled, wet cigar flapping from the corner of his mouth at every word. "I *know* you lived through the Troubles. You've told me—and told me—and, yes, told me *again* what you saw and how by the skin of your er, *ahem* you survived it! Impossibly brave and valiant hero or not, more than one of the gods must love you, I *must* say, or they'd not have kept you alive through the Spellplague and the century since—and no, not *one* more word about how much more terrible the Troubles were than the Spellplague; I care not! I *never* cared! And I never *will* care! That's old news—and that's precisely what I'm sick of!"

"You—you're actually accusing me of dredging up stories from the dead past?" Volo snapped, suddenly looking almost as angry as Dardulph. "Each and every one of those headlines you read is news from right now! Matters of import in this city today! I swear—"

"I know they are! That's not my complaint, Lord Geddarm the Lucky! It's this 'Aha-gosh! Hear this! And this! And, wah-how, *this!*' style you persist in jotting *everything* down in."

Dardulph snatched up another sheet of parchment, crushed it into a ball without looking at it, and pitched it over his shoulder. It struck a heavily scarred dragonborn taking tea at the next table smack in the center of his forehead—and fell into the fluted bowl of mint-and-cress soup in front of Scarscales with a genteel, but spectacular, splash.

Volo stared at the dragonborn, who looked ominously up from the soup now decorating his front. As the dragonborn peered around with narrowed eyes in search of

the source of the wadded missile that had hit him, his scars began to glow with silent, pulsing peril. Dardulph wagged a reproving finger across the table, oblivious to the roused menace behind him.

“It’s the written—I will *not* say literary—equivalent of shouting constantly, in exactly the same ‘The Realms end *now!*’ tone! Damn it, now you’ve got *me* doing it. Just—just *stop*. Stop doing it, or I’ll stop publishing you. And, yes, paying you.”

Volo blinked and sat up hurriedly. “Hey now, Dardulph old trumpet, there’s no need to—”

“Oh, yes, there *is*,” Dardulph told him heavily. “When I suggest politely, you blithely ignore me. When I speak bluntly and firmly, you dismiss me as a young, know-nothing ignoramus. So now you drive me to it: the threat direct, so to speak. Amend thy style or get the boot. Do I make myself clear?”

“Abundantly,” Volo replied rather faintly, wiping his brow. It seemed to have swiftly acquired a rather fine sheen of sweat. “Ah, just so we don’t both have to endure this unpleasantness again, would you mind very much showing me an example of the style you’d prefer? And provide some direction as to the content?”

Scarscales reached over his shoulder to pat the hilt of a gigantic sword slung across his back, as if to reassure himself it was available for action. Soon. With slow, deliberate care, he lifted the parchment to allow as much soup as possible to drain back out of it, ere he began unfolding it. He looked at it closely, so as to best determine how to unravel the sodden mess. Volo felt sweat now beginning to run down his back, between his shoulder blades. The spellscars on the dragonborn’s shoulders were now a bright blue-white, flaring as if they were about to burst into open flame.

Putting on his best humble smile, Volo asked Dardulph earnestly, “Please?”

The publisher shot him a suspicious glance, bit down on his cigar so hard that it drooped, almost bitten through, and said flatly, “I’ll do that. I’ll send you to investigate something, and I’ll forbid you to use even one exclamation mark when writing about it. Not one, d’you hear?”

“I do indeed,” Volo said hastily, eyeing the slowing drips of soup at the next table. If he were right about the contents of that particular piece of parchment, he might not have much more time left in his life to write about anything. “Tell me. I’m eager to begin; tell me now!”

Dardulph closed one eye, the better to glare even more suspiciously, and growled, “There’s an establishment in this town that I’m quite sure you’ve both heard of and patronized, because it’s a brothel.”

“Festhall,” Volo corrected brightly. “We’re supposed to call them—”

“*Indeed*,” Dardulph agreed, his sarcasm heavier than any two of the Walking Statues. “I find myself utterly unsurprised that your expertise regarding festhalls is bright, complete, and shining. Wherefore this little assignment should be right up your alley. Ah-hem, so to speak.”

Behind the publisher, the parchment was being uncrumpled with slow care—and Scarscales had caught sight of Volo’s terrified stare and was looking back at him. It was a baleful, steady regard that held not a trace of a look of love.

“If, that is,” Volo’s publisher continued with a sneer, “you can keep all of the city’s festhalls straight in your mind. Not that you’d mind poking your nose into every

one of them, hunting for the right one. From all the tales you tell, I'd say you could put that nose to some novel uses—"

"Flattery, Dardulph, flattery!" Volo laughed, raising a hand—more to blot out his view of the dragonborn's now-blazing eyes than for any other reason. "Enough, I plead, or you'll have me quite forgetting whatever it is I'm supposed to do!"

"What you're supposed to do," Dardulph growled, "is write in short, emphatic, plain-fact sentences like this: I went to the No Liches Allowed Festhall on Ship Street to investigate reports that, contrary to Waterdhavian law, curses are being cast on customers. I met with so-and-so, owner of the festhall, and he told me such-and-such. Rumors in the city tell of this curse, that one, and this other one. So I came back to meet with Waterdeep's most benevolent publisher and showed him what I'd written, and he sent me off to do this next step. Then that one. Until we had a story that made a pinch or so of sense."

At that point, the severed end of Dardulph's cigar fell into his tankard, but he'd long since emptied it. Choking on the other end, which seemed to have lodged in his windpipe, the publisher managed to hack out, "Got it?"

"Dardulph," Volo announced with dignity, "I thank you! I'll do just that. Though I cannot help but observe that you've had more than a little too much to drink. If you hadn't done *such* a good job of publishing so many of my chapbooks, I must admit I'd have stormed away from here long since, ending our long and profitable working relationship right now. Over this trifling matter of style having to do with mere broadsheet-work, the passing news of the day, yet! However, I'm glad you have been so open and honest with me, and I'm pleased you chose to trust me enough to speak so candidly! I shall be *delighted* to alter my headings, so to speak, and turn my ship of life in a new direction. I'm grateful to you, in fact, for—"

"Not firing you," Dardulph supplied flatly. "Yet. So get going."

"My distinct pleasure!" Volo replied, shooting to his feet and sprinting off.

From behind Dardulph, there came an angry bellow. "Hail-hah! *You!* You with the nose! The runner! You wrote this dung-filth?"

The publisher nodded his head gloomily as the dragonborn strode past him. "He did. For me, worse luck."

Scarscales spun around, sword hissing out. "He works for *you*?"

Olimbur Dardulph vomited up the end of his cigar onto the table, coughed twice, and fixed the dragonborn with a hard stare. "He does."

As the sword swung at his head, he sprang nimbly aside, chair crashing over in his wake. Plucking up a quill and one of Volo's parchments from the tabletop, he flipped the page over to its blank side, ducked another sword-slash, and snapped at Scarscales, "You attack citizens often? You do? Why? What's your name? And how is it spelled, hey? Age? Domicile? And you're famous for—?"

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Volo came to a stop and peered intently up at the gloomy, dingy shops. This was not one of the better stretches of Ship Street.

Ah, there was the new raw-fish-balls eatery. "Brain Food," largely notorious for being owned by a mind flayer. One of a recently begun chain of such, a talkative kilted

mercenary leaning on a fearsomely large two-handed sword had given him to understand, adding, “the skull-scoopers’ll have us all, in the end. Drooling and brainless, like a Lord of Waterdeep!”

Witty, very witty. And, yes, over there was the newly blood-spattered house where a tiefling family had just moved into the neighborhood, and evicted the usual skulking collection of squatters with force and enthusiasm.

Which meant that *this* edifice, right between them, was his goal, the place that might be inflicting curses on its—

Volo peered at the sign, frowning. “No *wonder* I’d never heard of it! This is the Velvet Tentacles! ‘No Liches Allowed,’ my left—”

“Oho,” came a rather thin, whispery voice from about the height of his kneecap. “You selling that choice body part, then?”

Volo frowned down at the interruption—which proved to be a heap of severed human hands and arms, most of them wizened and blackened with age. They were moving in complicated, interlocked concert. Bony fingers gripped bony limbs loosely, to allow sliding motions, and held the whole assemblage together in a vaguely cat-shaped body with a head and neck made of two upright and together skeletal arms, one holding a single eyeball—which was staring fixedly back up at him—and the other holding a mouth, which moved to emit a rather nervous, reedy throat-clearing as the scion of House Geddarm stared at it even harder.

Was this a . . . yes, it was; various crawling claws and dreads, all working together to move around the cobbles of Ship Street in a loosely knit body. Some wizard’s toy, or a prank. Or, just perhaps, the results of a curse.

“No,” he told it coldly. “I was thinking aloud—as all geniuses do. Soliloquizing, in the vernacular. So kindly clear off; I have no intention whatsoever of selling any parts of my body. Around here, there’s a good chance they’d be fed back to me on a platter, in any one of these, ah, *superior* eateries.”

“Heh, so they would. Veldra’s, yonder, sells troll jerky that keeps you going and going and going.”

“I expect it would,” Volo said wryly. “Veldra paying you to bark her wares? Or are you, ah, *connected* to the Tentacles, here?”

“Neither. I’m a prospective customer, same as you.” The mouth twisted itself into a broad leer, and the hand holding it turned it firmly away from Volo to face the festhall’s closed front door. “Give us something to feel, lass,” it called, in a whispery approximation of a huskily male voice, “and this coin’ll be yours!”

The strange assemblage of undead produced a large, smooth-worn gold coin from somewhere and waved it, using several arms that had thrust up through its back to do so.

Volo eyed the disk—gold, sure enough; looked to be dwarven, and old indeed—then looked back up at the freshly painted “Liches” sign.

It had been nailed up over an older, fading signboard that proclaimed to passing citizens that the building housed: “Ghost of Xameelg Custom Hauntings.” Still, that was nothing to be exorcised about; Xameelg had been gone for at least as long as Volo had been able to read. Patrons would search in vain for anything identifying the place as the Velvet Tentacles; it was one festhall that had never known any need to advertise.

Volo looked back down at the odd undead—or *probably* undead; it might, after all, be an automaton controlled from afar by an eccentric or pranksome wizard. “Doesn’t yon lich prohibition cause you trouble?”

The hand holding it turned the mouth and the eye back to face him. “Nay, it’s not against all undead, just liches. One lich, if truth be told.”

“Oh? Does this have anything to do with the curses I’ve been hearing about?”

“Wouldn’t know; how good’s your hearing?”

Volo frowned. “Uh . . . sorry?”

“Huh,” said the undead assemblage. “Not good. Well, then, what curses have you been hearing about?”

“Nothing very specific,” Volo replied. “That is, all sorts of wild claims, not one the same as any other. So before I dare to, er, patronize this establishment, I want to hear some truth.”

“Heh. Come to the wrong ward of *this* city, you have.” The undead waved a dismissive hand, not seeming to notice that the movement made several fingers fall off. “I can tell you *one* truth, and for free. Someone is stealing front doors—*lots* of front doors—hereabouts. Who and why, nobody knows that’s talking, yet.”

“And your guess?”

“Some cult or other. They spring up like spring weeds, you know. ‘Through open doors true enlightenment will come,’ or some such.” The undead turned back to the festhall front door. “Haven’t taken this one yet, though.”

As if its words had been a cue, the door of the Tentacles swung open, and a rather weary-looking—but smiling—man lurched out.

“Hoy! Well met, Lord Bones,” he greeted the undead assemblage, sidestepping hastily to avoid treading on it. “You should ring a bell or wave a pennant, or something! Most sailors have bigger boots than mine!”

“Wise advice, Dusk,” the bone-body agreed, scuttling sideways like a crab to get well clear of future traffic exiting the festhall. “Got a breath or two to spare? This jack here’s a little wary of embracing the Tentacles; afraid of curses, he says! Talk to him, hey? I’ve got a bone or two achingly overdue for polishing!”

And with surprising speed, it made for the still-open door. Dusk still had a hand on its heavy, well-worn edge, but let go to wave farewell to Bones, who easily beat its slow swing shut, and vanished into the interior.

Leaving Volo staring at the patron. Who shook his hand heartily, in the new fashion. “Dusk Lanvyl of High Healers Everywhere, at your service!”

Volo’s nose twitched. A story! (“High profile leader of Heartlands-wide healers guild patronizes notorious Dock Ward festhall! At your service only after he’s been serviced!”) Oh, *yes*. “Well met, Dusk! Volothamp Geddarm, at yours!”

“*The* Volo?”

“Heh. *The* Dusk?”

The healer grinned wryly. “Right, we’re even. So did I read Bones’ a-right? You might not want to ask all your questions standing in the street right outside the front door of the Tentacles?”

“Ah, indeed,” Volo agreed. “Goblet of firewine, my coin? At the Wanton Weredolphin, or a house of your preference?”

Dusk grimaced. “Not the Weredolphin, please. I’d best not be seen there for the next little while; a private matter. Why not the Arrowclad Jester? Not far, and if we take a booth, very private. It’s where Mirt underwent his unexpected pregnancy, and the place Fzoul Chembryl groomed his mustache a time or two.”

“Mirt underwent—? I can see my store of questions growing!” Volo replied delightedly. “Lead on, O Font of Knowledge!”

“I usually seem to,” his newfound friend replied with a smile.

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“So who’s that?” Haramond Bandoun asked, his voice as coldly calm as usual. “The inquisitive one, not the healer.”

“I’m not sure,” the pirate captain growled, from around the level of the lich’s knees, “but I think it might be that Volo tell-all scribe, who’s supposed to be over a century old, thanks to some meddling wizard or other. No loss if you slay him, but he spends his time asking questions, mind. So let him live long enough to find out all about the Tentacles, then question *him*. The hard way.” She chuckled.

“The hard way,” Bandoun agreed, joining her in dry mirth. “Aye, I might learn something useful. Good plan, Verity!” He started to stride back and forth, voice rising in the gloomy cellar. “I *will* get back into the Tentacles! I will!”

Verity Morninglady shrugged. “We all need our obsessions, to carry us through life. Otherwise, boredom would rule us all.”

Her voice remained a smoky growl. She always growled, if she remembered to, because she thought pirates should growl, and because she was a dragonborn. She spoke from around the lich’s knees because the magical girdle she wore—not entirely by choice; it bore a curse as well as armorlike protection, she’d recently discovered—not only kept her figure breathtakingly buxom, it also kept her as short as a halfling child.

Verity regarded the world through lowered eyelids, looking perpetually bored, because she had a lazy eye and preferred that not all the Realms knew that. She also had a purple peg leg because the skin of the gigantic red dragon she’d once slain had faded to a fetching purple hue, because as a matter of style a pirate captain should have a peg leg, and because the dragon had helpfully removed her own right leg at the knee during their fight to the death.

She worked with Haramond Bandoun because an obsessed lich was perhaps the most powerful but biddable creature she could think of for getting her whatever she wanted in Waterdeep, so long as his obsessions remained unfulfilled. So if this Volo learned anything useful, or Bandoun took it into his rotting head to go after the healer, then Volo—or Lanvyl—would just have to die. Quickly. Pirate captains had to be briskly efficient if they wanted to survive for long.

“I do *not* have an obsession!” Bandoun told her sternly. “A lich has needs, that’s all! I miss the warmth and vigor of life, and find myself comforted by tasting it often. I—I should never have hidden in the Tentacles, that last day!”

“Well, your wanton wench disguise would have been fine if you hadn’t dallied with Mirt. Consequences, consequences!”

“How was *I* to know it would backfire, and I’d father a child on him? It was my last taste of life, before lichdom! That’s why I sought out a jack rather than a lass; ’twas still on my list of things to do ere death! The spell wasn’t supposed to—”

The pirate captain shook her head. “If you’d stuck to your usual leper disguise, and pretended to be a patron rather than staff—”

“They *knew* my disguise! I didn’t *dare!*”

“Why? They might have joined in?”

Bandoun whirled around to face her, waving his withered hands in agitation. “No, no, they might have warned Mirt, and I’d have ended up dead before I could embrace undeath!”

“I think I’d rather embrace undeath than that smelly old merchant, but perhaps I’m just being overly picky.”

The lich drew himself up. “Perhaps you are!”

“But then, how can one deem me ‘overly picky’ when I work with a lich who still lives in his mother’s cellar? A lich whose spent the last decade of life trying to entice women in clubs and taverns by posing as a leprous mercenary, who always offered to, *ahem*, ‘lend a helping hand’? And assure them he ‘worked for tips’?”

“I would appreciate it deeply,” Bandoun hissed, “if you abandoned this line of introspection. *I* do not comment on your profession or prospects, do I? And leave my mother out of this!”

Verity sighed. “I only wish I could.”

“Enough! Just because she has a little drinking problem—”

“*Little?* You call being addicted to shape-changing potions a—”

“She’s *not!* She’s playing a role, *remember?* If Vrandeir is blind and furious at being so and drowns his furies in drink from time to time, and she stands in for him during those incapacitations—thereby earning us all very good livings, I might add—then she’d hardly be convincing if she didn’t slake her thirst a time or two, would she? All Waterdeep knows Vrandeir is reeling drunk most of the time, and blind to boot, but still they flock to him! And why? He’s the city’s best alchemist, that’s why! And it’s Mother that won him that reputation and maintains it—*her* skills, her nose for identifying concoctions with a single sniff, her—”

“Willingness to sleep with every Watch captain sent to investigate her,” Verity said flatly, holding up both hands quellingly. “Which I both admire in her—taking those tumbles for all of us, uncomplainingly—and applaud her skill at. Don’t take me wrong, Har! I *like* your mother. I just think the time should have come long ago for you to stand on your own two feet, and walk out of here on them and establish a life of your own, with—”

“If you two are *quite* finished arranging my future downfall down there, I need a hand pouring a vat,” a silken-soft voice floated down the stairs to them. For all its wanton, liquid warmth, it managed to hold a rather sharp edge.

The lich winced, shot Verity a glare, and called, “Yes, Mother!” with hardly a trace of weary resignation. Lifting his robes like a priestess, he started up the stairs at a run.

Emily scuttled out of the corner where she’d been hiding and followed him.

Emily always followed him.

Verity rolled her eyes. It wasn't Bandoun having a much younger sister who trailed around after him all the time—and wore magical boots that could “jump” her through walls and closed doors and any other sort of obstacle intended to keep her out—that was so irritating. After all, she never said anything. She just sat and watched with her huge dark eyes, and listened.

Huh. No *wonder* Bandoun had enjoyed little success luring women. His one consort was mad—and now, reputedly, in the clutches of the dread demon Graz'zt. She'd spent centuries raising a dragon from when it had been a lost and lonely wyrmling, and had gone witless when it had abruptly left her. Bandoun's insistence in calling her affliction “mourning sickness” was more pitiful than amusing.

Emily was a potential threat, yes, because she saw and knew *everything*, and her ten-foot teleports made it impossible to elude her scrutiny when one was trying to skulk and scheme, yet remain in Waterdeep. Yet that wasn't what made her irritating.

It was her imaginary friend that wasn't imaginary. And her minotaur nanny who was terrified of children.

A table in the corner erupted toward the ceiling. Verity kept well back—and sure enough, the flying snake (and why couldn't girls these days have *normal* “imaginary friends,” like, say, other little girls?) shot up the stairs, followed by the whimpering, hands-over-its-eyes, blundering she-minotaur.

With a sigh, the pirate captain followed.

Never a dull moment around *this* madhouse, to be sure.

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The door-minstrels at the Jester were performing an old ear-smiter of a ballad about an angel sent to the Nine Hells who comes back as a lich, and were doing so noisily and badly, but Volo knew the prime purpose of such forecourt bawling was to keep the laughter, screams, cursing, and crashes of a successful Dock Ward tavern from reaching the ears of every casual passing Watch officer. He and Lanvyl sought the quieter depths of the establishment, procuring a private booth with the ease that came with the time of day, and settled in over two large goblets of firewine to talk.

“So tell me all about the infamous Mirt getting pregnant,” Volo said with a contented sigh, after the first warming surge of wine had spread satisfyingly through him.

Dusk shrugged. “Some sort of magic, of course. Both his fertility and the fathering; seems the one dallying with him was no wench at all, but a man. A leper.”

“A *leper*? And people accuse *me* of embroidering lore!”

The healer grinned. “I know nothing of your skills at embroidery, but I agree it sounds too juicy to be true. And may be, for all I know. Happened in one of the back booths, I'm told. Now the Fzoul tale is a more certain one; plenty of citizens saw him here often, always being tended by a barber whilst legions of Zhents ‘just happened by’ to recognize and chat with him. He had to give it up when more and more of them gave him grins and turned back into various Harpers and Chosen of Mystra, right before his eyes, after he'd had good long detailed discussions of Zhent schemes with them.”

Volo winced. “I'm surprised this place is still standing.”

“I believe they gave Fzoul the choice of keeping himself still alive enough to stand anywhere, and leaving the Jester unscathed, or cutting loose and wrecking this end

of Dock Ward but being buried in it, in little pieces. That is, in utter agony yet kept alive to, er, enjoy the experience. At length.”

Volo took a deep swig of firewine, and immediately regretted it. He didn't *quite* choke, but Dusk grinned and asked, “Would you be requiring my professional skills, about now?”

Volo waved away the offer, shaking his head. “Getting old, that's all. Right, tell me every last dirty thing you know about the Tentacles. Any hints of curses, too.”

Lanvyl rolled his eyes. “Where to begin? Hmmm. Right, this is all going to tumble out, in no good order; that find you fair?”

“Say on,” Volo assented, waving his goblet. It was decorated with a relief carving that seemed to depict the elf war-hero Telva locked in friendly—*very* friendly—carnal combat with Baelam the Bold, if he was correctly recalling the bad tapestry the adornment was copying.

Still, it was better than Lanvyl's goblet, which seemed to depict a flight of high-flying vampire spider monkeys aloft over a city frozen forever in the act of breaking wind in unison to form an incendiary cloud. Or perhaps it was a portrait of a caravan-line of pack beasts in the air above a city, all of them giant inchworms but busily transforming themselves into butterflies. Art, these days . . .

Lanvyl cleared his throat, then peered down into his goblet—which seemed to have somehow emptied himself. Suppressing a sigh, Volo beckoned a wine-wench before the healer could settle his best “hurt and astonished” look onto his face. “Thirsty work already, I see,” he murmured.

Dusk had the grace to look a little embarrassed. “Ah, evidently. Evidently.”

The wine arrived on the shapely shoulder of a tall, smiling lass who seemed to be clad in little more than a wisp of harbor-net and several cats, who were perched on various of her slopes or clinging to the netting as they languidly traveled to better vantage-points. With practiced ease she directed the pour-spout of her wineskin past their mischievous paws to refill Lanvyl's goblet. Volo raised a coin between his fingertips, but she shook her head, murmured, “When you're both done, saer,” and glided away.

Lanvyl watched her go until she was completely out of sight around behind some booths; Volo grinned and told the ceiling, “I begin to see why this place meets so strongly with your approval.”

“They have tressym, too,” the healer said brightly. “Some without tails! *And* cathshee!”

“Not to mention the very finest of netting,” Volo murmured, raising his own goblet again. “Which reminds me . . . is there any netting at the Tentacles?”

The healer winced. “Sorry. The Tentacles, yes. Well, the place pays monthly tribute to deep gnomes—no, I don't know why. It has some rather surprising clientele, too. A deepspawn, for instance; they say it asks no questions, and then just leaves. And it was a favorite for a lot of elves—but all in a bunch, a few months back, they took vows of chastity and turned their tumble-coins over to doing good works, or so they said. Obviously *something* pretty dramatic happened to make them all decide never to darken its, er, doors again.”

Volo's eyebrows had risen, in the best Elminster manner. He lowered them, the better to narrow his eyes, and asked, “And has there been anything *unusual* about the Tentacles, recently? Anything at all?”

“Well, they hired a wizard. No, *not* as a bedmate. But on staff and resident, not just the Watchful Order on retainer.”

Volo’s brows were up again. “Sounds like they’re trying to deal with some trouble. Persistent trouble. Who is this mage?”

The healer shrugged. “I’ve seen him, but it’s not someone I know. Youngish, not a rugged adventurer sort—or a pompous world-saver, either. Didn’t catch the name. He told me he spends his days casting grease spells and putting out fireballs. ‘It’s a living,’ he said. Sounded bored, not on guard against anything. Of course, he might be under orders to act casual. There could be trouble; they put that sign up, for one thing.”

“Oh, yes. ‘No Liches Allowed,’ ” Volo agreed dryly. “So it did. Not a word about why, I suppose?”

“A lich—named ‘Bandoon’ or something of the sort—got to be a problem. Faithful customer who became a bit obsessed, and more than a bit, er, tireless in his attentions. Apparently lives right across the road, so he gave the welcoming ladies no rest, so to speak. Things eventually came to a—*ahem*—head.”

Volo rolled his eyes. “That’s *my* sort of line.”

“Sorry. There was some sort of trouble with Mirt, who was also a regular customer—”

Volo grinned. “You fail to surprise me.”

“—and apparently the lich stole a bed slat. By mistake, he insisted, thinking it was his.”

“He purports to carry his own bed slat around with him? As what, a pacifier? A touch of home to cuddle in the wee hours of the night, when the warm and willing softness abed with him just isn’t enough?”

“This wasn’t just any bed slat. Apparently it was a staff of thunderous might.”

Volo’s eyebrows started skyward again. “The Tentacles keeps a staff of—? Isn’t that just a tad excessive, even as a hearth-and-home defense?”

Lanvyl shrugged. “Heh. You’re talking about a place that decorates the floor of its back hall with a sentient hellhound pelt that howls and belches fire when stepped on.”

“I see.” Volo’s voice had turned decidedly dry. “And they would do that why, exactly? Someone have a twisted sense of humor, or—?”

“I’m told it’s an alarm against persons skulking in and out uninvited; the staff know enough to step around the, ah, fur rug.”

“This isn’t much like the Tentacles legend presents to us, is it?”

The healer grinned. “Not even close. Yet it’s why I like the place. Where else, look you, would one see a flesh golem that gets used as a towel-rail?”

Volo grew a grin of his own. “You’ve not been in many nobles’ bath chambers in this city, have you? If you tallied them all up, there must be a legion of flesh golems, all standing patiently next to thunder-thrones or fluted tubs.”

Lanvyl winced. “I might have known. So that’s a ‘comforting touch of home’ rather than just tasteless whimsy. Nobles *are* different than the rest of us, aren’t they?”

“Nobles have coin enough to indulge their eccentricities, that’s all. The rest of us dream of glowing lasses as our stairposts; they build such things with glee, as swiftly as they get the chance, and with utter lack of taste. Unless they want such things to be licked in passing, and make sure some sculptor supplies a taste. Usually strawberry.”

The healer laughed, then looked at Volo and swiftly lost his mirth. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“I wish I was. I understand the flesh golems, though; your average noble lord tends to be far more fearful of robbery or betrayal than the rest of us—and with good reason, most of them; we don’t know a twentieth of the things they’ve done to richly earn themselves enemies. So they want to have a guardian, in case someone bursts into their bedchamber some night with a dagger drawn. Now, some noblewomen will enjoy large, muscular, motionless man-shapes standing around as they dress and sit on the thunder-throne and make love to their lords. Others won’t, and will object to a flesh golem standing in the corner. So some clever lord makes it a fashion that noble ladies can laugh at, and then of course their reluctant lady has to have one, too. Behold, a new towel-hanger!”

Lanvyl winced again. “Keenly seen, plainly said; I begin to see why your career was so notorious.”

Volo nodded ruefully. “I learned to run very fast—and to start running before things got dire. Not to mention finding out all I could about it before I ever went near anything interesting. That way I didn’t have to tarry too long, or even go in if I didn’t have to. Speaking of which: say on. What else should I know about the Tentacles?”

The healer shrugged. “Not much else to tell. You know what goes on in a broth—ahem, festhall.”

“In-depth research is my specialty.” Volo grinned. “The place have any interesting neighbors?”

Lanvyl frowned. “Well, someone tried to start a home for retired and aging Gith—nursing care for those who want to die there—across the street. I hear it’ll probably close, though. Not much business. Oh, and there’s Melvar the Mouth.”

“Melvar the who?”

“Melvar is a halfling who sells information—hard-to-learn information. So he’s called ‘the Mouth.’ He does what the Watch likes to call ‘loitering suspiciously’ outside the Tentacles, because if someone goes to see him, it’s not so obviously to see him, if you catch me; they just pretend they were bound for the Tentacles.”

Volo peered into the depths of his goblet. “I’m familiar with the tactic,” he replied, “and with halflings selling answers for coin, too. What makes this Melvar more interesting than any six or seven hin of the Warrens?”

“He stammers like you’ve never heard, but struggles right on with what he’s trying to say. Loves alliteration, too. ‘Fair fortune find you flourishing, friend,’ and more. A lot more.”

“If he stammers that badly, how’d he end up selling the sort of messages best whispered?”

“He’s only been stammering this last season or so. Seems the Tentacles used to have a pass-phrase, and firmly kept out all who didn’t give it. The festhall even had trained tressym who’d provide it if you flipped them a copper. They’d scoop the coin into a little sack around their necks, and flip out a scrip with the word written on it; they used to fly onto the decks of all outland ships that docked. Well, once he had the stammers, Melvar couldn’t say it—and he and a lot of other cheapcoins got the stammers because that mage the Tentacles hired on cast curses on them; if you try to slip out without paying in full, that’s what befalls you.”

It was Volo's turn to wince. "That could cut into your patronage, in a place like Dock Ward. It'd seem wiser to me to have a reputation for good bedmates rather than curses, hey?"

"Hey, indeed. I suppose it's 'we're paying for this wizard, so we're going to use him.' Unless they hired him because they really have something to hide, or are seeing some sort of *real* trouble ahead."

"Now *that*," Volo murmured, eyes going bright and merry, "sounds interesting. I think it's high time I fell into the embrace of the Tentacles."

An uneasy look passed across Lanvyl's face, and cleared his throat and said hastily, "Well, I really must return to my work, friend Volo. Thanks for the firewine and the talk. If you find out anything really dramatic, I suppose I'll be reading it in the broadsheets, yes?"

"Of course!" Volo agreed heartily.

Only after the healer had departed did he dare to mutter into the bowl of his empty goblet, "Unless old Dardulph is involved in whatever's going on at the Tentacles, and is sending me straight into a trap, of course. I'd not put something like that past him."

At that moment, a roar of choral singing that was more enthusiastic than tuneful burst into the Arrowclad Jester, along with its source: a crew of sailors dressed like what too many leering minstrels had left gullible upland famers thinking pirates looked like. Eyepatches, gold buckles the size of small shields, flopping sea-boots, open-fronted shirts with sleeves one could hide litters of kittens in, feather-festooned cockaded hats tilted so low their wearers were striding straight into pillars—the yo-ho-hoing works. And as they sang, advancing in unison, they were *dancing*.

Ye Watchful Gods. Volo caught some of the lyrics, and hoped his grimace wasn't too violent, before he could get his face turned away. They were wearing, after all, rather a *lot* of swords.

*Oh, we sail the Sea of Swords, in search of Anchorôme!
We are brazen pirates bold, stout captains to dismay!
We share our gold and our socks and we never wed,
Change partners, spend each night in a different bed.
We live high and hard and we'll soon be dead,
The seas in our wake running ever red.
Gnomes our foes so we marooned them to stay,
Wrecked on rocks in Anchorôme.
Hide nothing from us for there's nothing to save
From us, the proudest of pirates brave.
Oh, we are the scourge of the stormy wave,
The—*

The lusty but rather tuneless chorus went silent abruptly as a frowning man at a nearby table completed his spell, folded his hands, and sat back in satisfaction.

Volo could now hear his own breathing, and the clink of cutlery across the room—but a magical stillness had descended on everything in the direction of the Jester's front door. So it was in eerie silence that the pirates shouted and pointed and snarled, then hauled a frightening array of weapons out of various sheaths and scabbards, and charged

across the room at the spellcaster, taking a heavy toll of furniture that happened to be in the way.

By the time they reached Volo's table, he was long gone, scuttling across the floor on hands and knees, headed for the slightly greasy trail that marked the way to the kitchen. Where there would be a back door onto a suitably stinking, rat-infested alley; comfortingly familiar terrain.

Overhead, a cutlass went spinning past, surrounded by the twinkling flames of a burgeoning spell, and found a wall with a solid *thunk*. Causing an elderly goodwife—or so she looked to be—to look up from her plate and tallglass, frown, and pluck from her ample bodice something that looked suspiciously like a wand.

Oh, yes. It was high time to leave.

* * *

“Holy razors of jordaini-gelding! What happened *then*, saer?” The youngest underscribe was excited.

Most of the semicircle of young writers of which he was a part looked almost as interested. Obviously their employer had survived, so some measure of suspense was missing, but it remained to be seen what sort of wild and colorful tale he'd tell. Either way, it was light work for the next issue; its main story was obvious, and was sitting right in their midst writing itself. For once.

Olimbur Dardulph worked a fresh cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, chewing hard around the debonair smile he was trying to share with his rapt staff.

“Well,” he rumbled, “the dragonborn swung at me again, carving up my table after I ducked aside with the agility I am—*ahem*—justly famous for, and swore he'd gut me. His exact words, as I recall, were: ‘Gut you like that grimlock bard who didn't have a heart of gold, after all!’ So of course it was only prudent to strategically withdraw, and I did.”

“Flee, screaming like a school lass,” the lone and impressively rotund Watch officer interpreted laconically, from where he was sitting, by the door.

Dardulph gave him a dark look. “I don't recall you being there, orsar.”

“Yet I was,” Rondreval murmured, a clear challenge in his soft voice. He was the fattest elf Waterdeep had ever seen, being rounder than most ale-kegs but only a head taller. No wonder his rumored career as a rogue had been so brief; it would be hard for someone whose girth bid fair to outstrip that of any three typical pillars, combined, to freeze into immobility and so escape notice. Anywhere. “Behind the wine-castle.”

“Oh? And what brings an officer of the Watch into Aldremand's Finest Quaffs and Broths in the middle of the day? To hide behind its wine-castle? Have dastardly Waterdhavians been stealing sips, then?”

The broadsheet staff tittered loyally.

Orsar Rondreval Sambrast ignored them, reserving his stare for Dardulph's face, which was beginning to redden. “When a broadsheet tells the city about no less than *six* very interesting and hitherto secret matters in a single issue, we in the Watch just naturally take an interest in the publisher of such an, ah, *energetic* publication, and seek to learn more of his motives, doings, and who he chooses to meet with.”

Dardulph frowned. “*What six matters?*”

“The bard with the didgeridont. The adventurers who call themselves the Freedom Fighters, brawling with the two Red Wizards at the tea party.”

The elf was now counting off his sentences dramatically on his fingers, not looking at the broadsheet staff but well aware that he had their rapt attention. “The tenday-long rain of pastries,” he added. “The unseen orchestra. Gnomeball. And the kobold cheerleaders at a wedding of singing dwarves in Silverymoon.”

The publisher was looking genuinely bewildered. “We—uh—you are aware we make most of that stuff up, don’t you?”

“*Make it up?* One of the best-selling broadsheets in Waterdeep, and you *invent* most of what you print in its pages?” The orsar windmilled his arms in mock horror and astonishment. “What a scandalous admission! Of *course* you make it up! We’re not entirely dunderheaded in the Watch, you know! Yet it strikes us as more than a little *odd* that you should *just happen* to invent some fancy-tales whose wording, for the sharp-eyed, leads to a very secret code-phrase in use at the Palace!”

“What? *What* code-phrase?” Dardulph waved his cigar, scattering sparks the size of coals in all directions. “I didn’t even know the Palace *had* code-phrases, beyond ‘I’m sorry, he’s in a meeting right now, and can’t be disturbed’ or ‘We are well aware of that, have the situation in hand, and matters are well under control; a proclamation shall be made in due course.’ ”

Rondreval’s face was a picture of sneering disbelief. “Your knowing seems more than a little selective, Citizen Dardulph. Let’s just review the gist of those six, shall we? First, the bard, whom you cleverly neglected to name. Habitually plays a hollow tree-branch like the drone-horns of Chult, only he calls it a ‘didgeridont.’ Sings or fast-talks only in Abyssal—according to you—accompanied by a young sahuagin shaking gourds filled with stones, to provide a rhythm. Has occasionally performed with a large band of singing and dancing halflings—who love and understand Abyssal, I suppose. Has a hit song, ‘Mind the Gap,’ that races over the events of the century since the blue fire came—that in Abyssal, too, hmm? Has been known to become violently incontinent after some of these didgeridont performances . . . which I can only surmise is what, according to one of your follow-up tales, drew the avid attention of a squealing, leaping-about-in-adoration—I’m stlarning near *quoting* you here—whip-wielding, wreathed in flames, farruking bat-bloody-wingéd *balor!* And to top it all off, you ran two frankly scatological back-pages stories, the first claiming this bard gets all of his best ideas from a *sentient canker sore*, and the second more than insinuating he plays his didgeridont not with lips and lungs, but with his nether cheeks and bottom-wind!”

Dardulph blinked. “Well, you must understand that these details you cite are mere *embellishments*, meant to lend interest and an air of suspense and wonder to our narratives, to encourage speculation and . . . and . . .”

“Add rank whiff of the sewers, so as to sell more broadsheets,” the Watch officer added, in acid tones. “Yet I noticed, among all these *embellishments* of yours, that some sentences near the end of all those six printed stories began with the word ‘furthermore,’ even when its use made the prose even clumsier than the rest of the reportage. I took note of the first letter of the word following ‘furthermore,’ in each instance, and wrote them down.”

He drew something from a pouch protruding from the belt around his bulging middle like a giant’s nipple. It proved to be a scrip of parchment; as he waved it, he

added heavily, “You’ll probably be entirely unsurprised to learn that those letters I noted down spell out some words. Yet before we discuss that, let us move on to the Freedom Fighters. A band not chartered under that simple a name anywhere that we can find, by the way.”

Dardulph sighed. “Right, what about them? Or about our tales of them?”

“So we read of a tea party—thrown by a noble you again neglect to name, but clearly imply is of our fair city—whereat two Red Wizards were seen to openly compare their spellscars. The host of this affair, you write, has a lich-slaying sword named ‘Grumpy’ in pride of place over his mantle. Though you mangled the blade’s name, that detail is clearly intended to specifically identify the noble to anyone possessing the slightest familiarity with Waterdeep.”

Dardulph spread his hands. “And so? What would you have me do?”

“*Don’t* ask me that question. You’ll regret the long list of my suggestions, believe me. Many of which involve you leaping onto the points of sharp swords, bared backside first. Now, back to this host, who soon regrets the composition of his guest list, when these Freedom Fighters—whom we read in your broadsheet have compromised their morals, though you coyly neglect to say how, and are apparently led by someone whose name, before your oh-so-diligent scribe mangled it, was something similar to ‘Brice Vallidan’—provoke the Red Wizards into battle. Causing considerable damage to the premises, and some fatalities amongst the adventurers. Which was certainly news to the Watch officers who attended that party, and witnessed *nothing of the sort*. Who wrote this, ah, out-and-out fantasy, by the way?”

Dardulph excavated a ledger from among the heap of tomes and parchments on his desk flipped its pages until his daggerlike forefinger found what it wanted to rest upon, and announced grimly, “That was Volo.”

“Volo, eh? I might have known. Was he the avid chronicler of the bard, too?”

“Uh . . .” More pages were flipped. “One of them.”

“I see. Right, on to the rain of pastries. This sounds more like something a bored broadsheet scribe sitting at his desk, who wants to fill a small bare corner of a broadsheet page where an ad didn’t materialize, might cook up.”

Rondreval was clearly enjoying himself. “An anonymous ‘trickster god’—don’t want to lose any advertising revenues from any temples now, do we?—escapes from prison and hooks up with his again-nameless weather-goddess lover for what he and she have both been aching for, lo these long and stretching days, so it rains icing-drenched pastries for days. In some region of the Realms I’ve never heard of, nor any of our Palace cartographers or far-traveled envoys, either. And just who can imprison a god, anyway?”

Dardulph burrowed into the heaped ramparts of his desk for another cigar. “All right, all right, I had a hand in that. Give an honest man a break.”

“Fair enough. If I ever meet any honest men in Waterdeep, you have my solemn promise I’ll do so. If someone else hasn’t got to them first, and broken something fairly major.”

The orsar produced a long, dark, sleekly slender cigar of his own. “Which brings us to a similar trifle; the invisible traveling orchestra. That appears at inopportune times and plays shrieking crescendos at inappropriate moments. Inopportune for skulkers and illicit lovers, it would seem, and inappropriate for their, ah, successes to fail to be noticed. Your work, again?”

“No,” Dardulph said with an air of triumph. “Volo’s.”

“Volo again? Well, well. And where might this intrepid employee of yours be right now?”

The publisher shrugged. “I know not. He stands not at all in my fond regard, just now. I’ve given him one last chance; sent him off on a major investigation. Where it will take him, I do not know.”

“You *do not know*. Suspiciously convenient, wouldn’t you say?” Rondreval sniffed. “Right. On to gnomeball. A new sport that you say—”

“Volo says,” Dardulph interrupted firmly.

The orsar raised one eyebrow, not looking surprised, and continued, “That in one of *your* broadsheets, Citizen Dardulph, Volo writes is ‘sweeping the land.’ Just which land isn’t specified, which has caused the Palace some measure of trouble, this last tenday, fielding daily inquiries from gnomes interested in knowing what land, and where, so they can go and learn how to play this ‘gnomeball.’ ”

Dardulph snorted, his new cigar obligingly underscoring his cynical mirth with a dark puff of smoke. “They’ll get a surprise when they’re told the rules.”

“So I gather, after reading your subsequent stories about the kobold cheerleaders, complete with their jests about wanting to attend some sort of ‘International Gnome Punting Championships.’ The ball in gnomeball is a live gnome, I take it?”

The publisher nodded. “Live to begin with, at least.” He stopped nodding and started shaking his head. “Barbaric. Very barbaric.”

“I see that. By your manful struggle not to snigger, among other things. Yet Volo isn’t done yet. In follow-up tales we learn that the sport of gnomeball has a new and rising star. A frost giant. Ha ha.”

Someone in the semicircle of listening staff suddenly burst into a fierce bout of sniggering, precipitating several other splutterings and muffled explosions of mirth. Rondreval cast a cold look in that direction ere asking Dardulph flatly, “I take it the sentence about the gnomeball players seeking to return to the ‘Holy Gnomian Empire’ being stopped by a ‘Department of Gnomeland Security’ is Volo’s idea of amusing embellishment?”

Dardulph nodded. “It is. Volo’s alone.”

The orsar was smiling faintly, but his eyes were like the points of two drawn daggers. “Yet you failed to edit it out.”

“Space to fill, no time to write other copy,” the publisher explained hastily.

“These things happen. In the broadsheet trade, it’s always best to move on.”

“You sound like a murderer leaving an alleyway with his dagger still a-drip,” the orsar observed rather wearily. “Yet let us, as you so glibly suggest, move on. To the last of our six ‘furthermore’ subjects, the kobold cheerleaders. Who were, so your broadsheets would have us believe, hired to entertain at a wedding in Silverymoon—a city your far-traveled writers would have us believe is currently plagued by murderous gnome spinsters. Which may purport to be news here in Waterdeep, but is *certainly* news to any dweller in Silverymoon. Volo again?”

Dardulph nodded, starting to chew his new cigar. “Such a rogue,” he muttered. “Can’t think why I’ve employed him this long . . .”

“Like hires like,” the fat elf told the palm of his left hand, as if it needed instruction.

Then he raised his gaze to the publisher again. “We read that this cheerleader-enhanced wedding is a union of two singing dwarves—or rather, a rather deaf youngaxe to a she-dwarf who fancies herself a great singer, and shares her vocalizations with all the Realms far too often, too loudly, and all too often flat. Or is Volo sliding into the role of musical critic here?”

The publisher shrugged. “Actually, that opinion is held by many. I believe it’s quite accurate to say she thinks her singing is better than most folk judge it.”

“Fair enough. Back to the cheerleaders, then. Led by a cleric of Loviatar, who flogs them with enthusiasm during their cheers; is this true?”

“So we were told.”

“You’ve not seen them perform a single cheer?”

Dardulph looked uneasy. “Not a cheer, no.”

The Watch officer leaned forward and put a gentle smile on his face. “I’m waiting.”

The publisher reddened, and slumped back behind his untidy mound of books and parchments. “We interviewed them in a local festhall.”

“I see,” Rondreval purred. “The Tentacles, perhaps?”

“It may well have been . . . yes. Yes, it was. How do you know?”

“I work for the Watch. As a lifelong resident of the city, you may have heard of us, once or twice. Perhaps even, over your rich, well-spent years, derived some inkling of what we do.”

Dardulph winced. “Well, orsar, if you saw me—uh, my staff—there, why do you feel the need to ask?”

“I *occasionally* feel the need to make citizens feel the need to tell the truth when dealing with the Watch. A quaint notion, I agree, but quaint notions have saved empires before. So, then, truth-teller, you met these cheerleaders in the Tentacles. A brothel.”

“Festhall, orsar, we’re supposed to call them—”

“Indeed. I recall the edict well. So you were, shall we say, *festing* in this hall, and you witnessed these cheerleaders performing something that was not a cheer. Was their leader in fact flogging them, during their, ah, act?”

“Uh, no. They were all flogging him.”

“I see. Was that all they were doing?”

“No.” Dardulph cleared his throat, sank down further until his staff could see nothing of him but rising wisps of cigar smoke, and muttered, “They were . . . *working* at the broth—the festhall. Doing—harrumph—what workers at such an establishment usually do. Only all in one room, as a team.”

“That must have been an exciting interview. Did you, in your customary course of probing for the fascinating stories you print, by any chance ask them why they were working at the Tentacles?”

“To earn enough money to buy some coaches and horses to travel home. They’d come here—to the Warrens, that is—to compete at cheering, in some sort of competition. Sold candy to pay for their way here, lost some coin playing at riddles with the skulls of Skullport—who are being seen in certain city alleys these days, on dark nights—and were counting on winning at least one of the prizes to have enough to get back home. Didn’t win anything.”

“I see,” replied the orsar, who was beginning to. “Did you happen to witness these cheerleaders meeting anyone of interest, or doing anything more than is usually done at the Tentacles? Anything at all?”

Dardulph’s eyes narrowed. “You find these kobolds suspicious?”

“I find everyone suspicious, because I have a nasty suspicious mind. Just answer the question, Citizen Dardulph.”

“Well, there was an outlander sellsword who came up to them, not as a customer, mind. Never gave his name, looked to be from somewhere in the North. Big slab of muscle-meat, wearing one of those skirt-things.”

“A kilt?”

“A kilt. He was wearing a huge two-handed sword down his back, and he offered its service to the kobolds. Unprompted.”

It was Orsar Sambrast’s turn to narrow his eyes. “What exactly did the kobolds say to him?”

“Only the Loviatar-worshipper answered him,” Dardulph said slowly, remembering. “That kobold looked from the sellsword to his blade—he’d drawn it to wave it about, see?—and asked him, ‘You both on the same team?’ ”

“And the sellsword replied?”

“Nothing. Just smiled and strode off, as if the kobold had given the wrong answer.”

The orsar nodded, as if pleased, then gave the watching staff a long look ere he turned back to Dardulph and said calmly, “There remains the matter of the code-phrase, and how you came to know it.”

Dardulph waved his hands in exasperation. “As I told you, I *don’t* know it; I had no idea there even *were* Palace code-phrases. If I happened to write one—excuse me, *spell one out*, by this convoluted ‘furthermore’ method of yours—it’s pure coincidence, nothing more.”

“So the phrase ‘Torm and Rathan and a cowbell’ means nothing to you, I take it?”

The publisher shot up in his chair and triumphantly made the signal that told his staff to note down what the orsar had just said.

“No,” he told Rondreval smugly, “but it soon will. We’ll worm the truth out of someone, never you fear, and probably sooner than you—”

“You’re unusually brilliant today, Olimbur. It means nothing now, but a tenday back it still meant: ‘The alliance holds; proceed with the plan.’ ”

“Which alliance? And what plan?”

“Ah, now,” the elf said, wagging a reproving finger. “I’m but a lowly Watch officer, not a Lord of Waterdeep or a senior courtier at the Palace. I—”

“Horse-dung!” Dardulph pounced. “You were sent to investigate the Sembian envoy’s doings in Scornubel, last summer! And the murder of druid guide who was so afraid of the city, and markets, and all, that some healer tried to cure—the one who kept a hare as a pet!”

“Really,” Orsar Sambrast purred. “Close-kept city secrets, both of those. Not spoken of in our fair Waterdeep, and not so much as implied obliquely in your or any other broadsheet. Yet you know all about them. My, my. Your innocent act *does* need work.”

The publisher froze, then flushed. “We hear a lot more than we print,” he snapped. “I am a loyal Waterdhavian—that’s why I’ve written nothing of those investigations, after the initial stories of the scandals.”

The Watch officer nodded. “We know exactly what you hear. That’s why we now watch you so closely, Olimbur Dardulph. And why I know you’re lying about your passing on a Palace code-phrase being mere coincidence.”

Dardulph did not trouble to hide his sneer. “Prove it! You can’t, can you? You came here to try to get me admit something, because you can prove *nothing!*” His sneer widened. “You actually expect to find some way to make me wear any responsibility for these, ah, mistakes?”

The orsar’s sneer was fainter and colder. “If I somehow do, it might just force you to take the first step in your life along the road to learning from them.”

The publisher leaned back in his chair. “Or it might not.”

“Not even if the Watch just happens to share a story with some rival broadsheets, about a certain noble lady Olimbur Dardulph has been dallying in the bedchambers of? Clad in her best face-daub and gowns, while she wears his boots and waves his secret Loviatar-worshipping whip?”

Dardulph went white, his mouth fell open, he shrank back from the gently smiling elf—and he and his chair overbalanced and went over backward, meeting the floor with a thunderous crash.

The Watch officer stood up, his great girth now seeming somehow menacing rather than comical.

“Well,” he said icily, looking from the senseless publisher to his gaping staff, “it seems the learning begins. Even when Olimbur Dardulph least expects it.”

In the stunned and lengthening silence, he turned and lurched rather grandly out, his half-cloak swirling.

* * *

“That Volo,” the lich’s mother said flatly, “is going to be an ongoing—and ever-growing—problem. You might as well eliminate him now.”

“This instant?” Verity Morninglady growled. “I ask because he’s—”

Kalandra Bandoun regarded her with cold tolerance. “Pirates are supposed to growl and be bloodthirsty every moment they’re awake, is that it? No, Verity, *not* this instant. I meant just as quickly as it’s possible to work his demise in a manner and at a time and place that won’t bring the Watch down on our collective necks—or set them to scouring the city for a brazen murderer, either.”

“We’ll take care of it, Mother,” Haramond Bandoun promised—and promptly winced as Emily smiled up at him, her not-so-imaginary flying snake dropped onto his shoulder and rubbing against him, obviously getting ready to molt again. The minotaur Glaress muffled her sobs by shoving her snout into her own left armpit.

“That is, we’ll take care of Volo if you keep Emily and her, ah, retinue here.”

“I am not,” Emily announced venomously, firmly drowning out her mother’s murmur of agreement, “staying here while you go out a-murdering. Why am I condemned to miss the fun?”

Verity hefted the padded doorknob that usually dangled on its thong from her belt and looked hopefully up at Kalandra Bandoun—but the woman who could so casually destroy them all shook her head meaningfully.

Her finger, when she raised it from where it had been marking her place in her book, a pop-up, lushly illustrated guide to the practices of Sune—and very distracting it was, too—pointed at Emily. A brief emerald spurt of something that looked a little like flame and a little like arcing lightning darted from her finger straight into her daughter’s eyes.

Emily froze mid-sowl. The snake launched itself from Haramond’s shoulder, straight at Kalandra, but another emerald pulse brought it to an eerie halt in midair. “Watch them, Glaress,” she murmured to the minotaur, waving her finger at Emily and the snake, “but touch them not—or they’ll be free to move and talk and make mischief again.”

The minotaur nodded gratefully, her terror ebbing swiftly now that her charge was more statue than child, and Kalandra turned to her son.

“Done. So go, and do, and be subtle about it. Take Verity with you; whenever you go alone, buildings seem to catch fire or fall into the streets, and the Watch isn’t getting any friendlier.”

“Yes, Mother,” the lich said, irritation loud in his every word. “I’m not an idiot, you know.”

“No, you merely behave like one.”

“I do *not*.”

“Who took a thunderstaff and brought no end of trouble down on his own head, hmm? You had to fight off a flesh golem two nights back, because of that.”

“Well, I can hardly be expected to know that a respectable festhall would have a *flesh golem* as a regular patron.”

“‘Respectable festhall’? The *Tentacles*?”

The lich sighed. “All right, Mother. I’m *going*.” He turned away in a whirl of black robes and cape, to sweep to the door—then completely spoiled the gesture by turning back again, grimacing. “What’s that *smell*?”

“You *are* aware that Vrandeir’s brother is a demon binder who serves Graz’zt, are you not? And that Vrandeir is writing a book about the decline of gnomes into ‘ankle-biting monsters’?”

Haramond Bandoun sighed. “Demon binding. I *knew* it. Does he have to practice those spells in our house?”

“Be glad he knows how to cast them. Graz’zt still has your phylactery.”

“I know,” the lich said sourly. “What I don’t know is why he stole it. What’s one more lich to him?”

“Nothing. The phylactery, however, is useful to him as an aphrodisiac for she-demons. It seems even demons hunger to get lucky, these days.”

“My phylactery? An *aphrodisiac*?”

“It seems more than odd to me, too, but neither of us is a demon, are we? Now enough wasting time, Son—get out there and cleanse the Realms of Volothamp Geddarm! Or have your lady pirate do it for you, I care not which.”

“Yes, Mother,” Haramond Bandoun replied sourly, flinging the door wide and striding grandly out into the street.

Verity winced, darted after him—and was in time to pluck at his robes and jerk him back out of the way of a passing merchant’s wagon.

It went creaking past, Kalandra sighed and shook her head, Verity gave her an apologetic shrug—and her son ignored them both and strode off down the street, muttering something dire.

Verity hastened after him. Never a moment’s rest . . .

* * *

There was a stir as Rondreval shouldered his way into the room. The younger Watch officers all looked up at him, and they were all excitement and business, their eyes shining.

And holding not a trace of the veiled disgust Rondreval Sambrast was used to seeing, as they looked at him and wondered how an elf so lurchingly fat as to be entirely unhandsome and graceless had somehow managed to attain a Watch rank that made him their superior.

He was pleased to see that they’d been huddled around the scrying orb, and that it was still a-glow with Olimbur Dardulph’s cluttered office—which was in the throes of the expected uproar. They’d been watching and listening to everything.

“You—you were a very dagger of menace, sir!” one of the most ambitious young blades piped up.

Rondreval shrugged, trying not to look pleased. “One does what one must, and is appropriate,” he said quellingly. “Right now, we see who Dardulph runs to. He’s scared; I achieved that much.”

A swordcaptain who was trying hard not to seem ambitious asked diffidently, “I mean this not as nay-saying, good orsar, but only to further my own understanding: why did we not just march all in a body into yon chamber, pluck up this rogue of a publisher from his chair, and shake some answers out of him?”

Rondreval gave that man a thin smile and replied gently, “Because whoever lurks behind Olimbur Dardulph has at least one spy in his staff, probably two, and they were all in the room watching, just now—even as you were watching them. We don’t want that someone behind Dardulph to know that we know or suspect the slightest thing about him—yet.”

“ ‘Yet’? When will that time come?”

“When we find and oust the spy he has amid the Watch of Waterdeep, and he knows beyond any doubt we’re after him,” Rondreval replied softly. It afford him a certain bitter amusement, then, to observe an entire room of Watch officers stiffening in alarm, and then darting apprehensive or suspicious glances around at all their fellow officers.

Ah, good old Waterdeep. One vast, sprawling den of corruption.

He looked down at his impressive belly.

Well, yes, there was no denying it. He fit right in.

* * *

“Look you . . . look well . . .”

That voice was low and throaty and cajoling, a voice that sounded somehow familiar to Volo—and that was certainly engaged in doing things that were *very* familiar to him.

Corrupting someone, and selling something to them.

“Yes! Oh, yes!” This second voice was almost a-gasp with hunger. The hunger to have, to hold. Lust, yes . . . but the lust of a collector, not a lover. The difference was subtle, granted—

A glow kindled and glimmered, reflecting off dark stone. The glow itself was *just* out of his view. Bane take all, he had to *see* . . .

Volo crouched down and crawled a little farther. He *had* to see . . . to know . . .

“Wonderstones, the likes of which only a few nobles have seen in this city for nigh a century. You are gazing on scenes more than a hundred years old,” said the somehow familiar voice, the seller. “Behold the famous Mirt the Moneylender, with his friend and fellow adventurer, the innkeeper Durnan. And over there, Baelam the Bold.”

Volo inched closer, hardly daring to breathe for fear he’d be heard. Closer to the light, and almost certain discovery. When he’d advanced as far as he dared, he could *just* see a tiny angled sliver of crowded shelves of gleaming gems that must stretch along the entire wall. Gems that were casting back the lamplight, gleaming and glistening like so many watchful eyes.

The tip of a finger entered his field of view, pointing at one gem. It promptly lit up from within, and he saw the scene its magic held within it. A languidly moving view of an obviously noble lady of Waterdeep writhing in pleasure on a great pink satin bed, her silk-draped body almost entirely covered in cats and kittens, their purring drowning out her own . . .

Sound! This one had *sound!* Watching, thunderbolt-hurling *gods*, what it must be worth!

“Behold the Lady Ammellaraume Margaster, of old, with her pets—whom she loved and valued above all others,” the seller murmured. “Dead these two centuries at least, yet alive still in this irreplaceable gem. Priceless, some would say—yet the Margasters, who covet it greatly, have set a price on it. Seven million lions, of proven Waterdhavian minting—plus a random handful of gems from the family vaults.”

The voice. Volo knew it now.

His new friend, Dusk Lanvyl.

The healer was selling priceless magical gems. Wonderstones that held scenes of the past—scenes that moved and spoke.

The side door into the Tentacles had opened into a sort of closet within the festhall’s thick stone outer wall; Volo had been told to feel just above the level of the toes of his boots for the catch that would cause a panel to swing open, had done that, had felt the wall in front of him pivot away, and had advanced gingerly into the darkness. Down some dank stone stairs into a lightless passage. It had definitely turned in the right direction to bring him into—or rather, under—the Tentacles, but he’d found no stair up, nor any of the flogging “dungeons” reputation furnished the festhall’s cellars with. Only endless darkness, until a faint glimmer of light from off to the right had led him into this side-passage, and a vantage-point above a room full of wonderstones.

Was this part of the Tentacles at all? Or was there more than one panel in that closet, and he’d opened the wrong one and found his way somewhere else?

Dusk's voice spoke again, startlingly nearer now. "This one," the healer murmured triumphantly, "is new. I believe you'll recognize some of the folk in it."

"That's—that's Beleryk!"

"The most ferocious kobold paladin of Sune, yes. His boasting aside, perhaps the *only* kobold paladin of Sune."

"But—but how did you—?"

"We must have *some* secrets, you'll understand." Dusk's voice was like honey. "I'm showing you this to conquer all doubts you may have as to our ability to make new wonderstones."

The voice became more dry . . . even a touch menacing. "Wonderstones that can show all the Realms what you want them to—for a price. And *only* what you want them to, for a slightly higher price."

"I . . . I hear you well." The collector's voice sounded more grudging than cowed. It was rough around the edges, too, as if regaining a customary curt gruffness.

There were other, fainter voices now, too. A high pitched one was arguing faintly in the background, as if from a great distance, squabbling with a voice that was too deep and soft for Volo to make out anything of what it was saying.

"Now, this, as you can hear, is Beleryk arguing with his sword. A vorpal blade, I believe." Dusk's voice was as warm as honey once more. "He was most anxious to come to an understanding with it, after his unfortunate encounter with some shifters."

"Yes." The collector sighed, sounding less than pleased by the memory. "He thought he'd ignited Elminster's ire—and that the sword was uh, wrong."

"Defective?"

"That's the word. He couldn't understand the language it spoke, thought he had acquired some sort of barbers' jest—a blade that sliced hair at the slightest contact, you see—and didn't realize the sword was scared of bloodshed and thought itself unworthy."

It was Dusk's turn to sigh. "A sword sunk in its own doubtful esteem. I see. So how did this kobold get to be the height of a tall man, as we see him here?"

"Ate troll jerky, or so he says. *I* think he somehow convinced the sword to reveal its powers to him, and making him bigger was somehow one of them. He had tail-envy, you know. And a bit of a problem judging depth and distance. Quite a few of us died because of that."

Dusk's voice rose in smooth incredulity. "And all of you *believed* that claim? With him lopping off heads and arms right and left? Did he apologize?"

"No, it was the *sword* that kept shouting 'Oops!' "

"I see. Now, who's this? A limbless dwarf on a cart who seems to get himself around with his beard, I can see that much—but do you know him?"

The scene in the wonderstone had evidently changed.

"I do," the collector said ruefully. "Goes by the name of Roarynguld. Favorite mistletoe-trimmed hat and all. That's a prehensile beard, by the way. We think Alorxlan enspelled him, to make the hairs strong and supple enough."

"*Alorxlan?* The mind flayer who spends his days hunting down the ghost of Xameelg?"

"There's more than one illithid seeking poor dead Xameelg?" The collector sounded amused. "Yes, *that* Alorxlan. He put the dwarf to sleep with magic and

amputated his limbs to sell them. The purchaser was a flesh golem Alorxlan encountered at the Tentacles festhall.”

“The—? You don’t say. Well, well. So, has this Roarynguld learned who removed his arms and legs yet?”

“Not that I know of. He woke up lying on some stone building blocks and calling, ‘It’s only a flesh wound!’ Awakening out of a nightmare I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to have . . . No, he regards Alorxlan as his greatest friend in all the Realms, just now—because the mind flayer’s been teaching him how to use his beard to move about, manipulate things, and so on.”

“Teaching him? Aiding another? A mind flayer feeling *guilty*?”

“I don’t think so. I’d put coin on a wager that a certain illithid has future plans for Roarynguld.”

“That sounds more likely,” Lanvyl agreed. “So you see we can make wonderstones right now, and aren’t just selling off a few ancient oddities?”

“I see that, yes. Have you any ‘ancient oddities,’ though? Gems whose scenes you don’t know the significance of?”

“Oh, yes. That one, the one beside it, and this one down here.”

Glows shifted and danced, but Volo decided he dared not move to try to see anything.

“A funny-looking old man handing out apples to children,” the collector mused. “No, I don’t know him. Looks to be the Sword Coast North, though, and some time back, judging by what they’re wearing.”

“Two centuries at least,” Lanvyl agreed. “And this is, well, just what you think you’re seeing . . .”

“A group of ghouls who seem to like nothing better than sitting around a campfire roasting mallows,” the collector murmured. “I take it you and I stop on this one at the same question: why?”

“Indeed,” the healer replied. “We know of no answer yet, though. Here’s the last.”

His voice sharpened. “You *do* know something about this one, I see.”

“Not enough to be worth anything much to you,” the collector said ruefully. “No name or reason, just a wisp of an old bard’s tale out of Scornubel: that in the wilderlands near the High Forest there once laired a dracolich who pounced on travelers and threatened them into undertaking meaningless, nonsensical quests just because the bone dragon was lonely. Or crazed. Or both.”

“We are familiar with that tale, but in no more detail than you’ve just given. None at all, in other words.”

“Who is this ‘we’?” the collector asked gently. “Are you—”

“Going to refuse to answer that question? Of course.” Dusk Lanvyl’s voice was suddenly as sharp and hard as drawn steel.

“Is there a particular reason you now feel the need to wave that dagger? Are you suddenly no longer interested in clients?” The collector’s voice held no trace of fear.

“Oh, no. We do want to sell stones, to those who can meet our prices. Yet we also want to, ah, reinforce our earlier admonition. We require your utmost discretion over this. Tell *no one* what you’ve seen here, or . . .”

“Or you’ll carve me to bleeding ribbons? Won’t that diminish your marketplace, rather?”

“I don’t intend to doing anything fatal. Painful, yes, but not fatal. Remember, I *am* a healer.”

Lying very still, Volo tried to repress his shudder. Dusk Lanvyl sounded so reasonable.

So warm and friendly. Like your best friend in all Waterdeep.

Then again, that was just it. Reasonable until the knife went in. Like anyone’s best friend in all Waterdeep.

* * *

The door banged, and Olimbur Dardulph, trailing foul smoke from the cigar clenched between his teeth, strode into the room and made straight for his desk.

Not one staffer dared to ask where he’d gone, at such a run, after struggling up off the floor in the wake of his chair’s toppling crash and the fat elf’s departure. For one thing, his face—pale no longer—did not look as if he were in any mood to answer questions about anything. And for another, he was already snarling, “Well? Stories? What’ve you come up with? Broadsheets don’t write themselves, you know!”

After a moment of silence, they all started to speak at once, shouting out headlines excitedly until Dardulph scooped up the old bucket that had been full of discarded parchments for months and flung it in their general direction.

Through the heart of its flood of crumpled stories, he roared, “One at a time, Bane take you!” Then he pointed, like a duelist lunging with a sword. “*You!*”

The staffer he was indicating blinked at him for a moment, then blurted, “Uh, the Purple Dragons of Cormyr are infecting the citizens of their realm! Half Cormyr is expected to be dead in a tenday!”

“No, no, that’ll start a panic,” Dardulph growled. “Can’t use it unless you come up with something Waterdhavians can ship off to Cormyr to sell as a curative! *That’s* what you have to trumpet, not the sickness—or you’ll have the Watch turning Inner Sea caravans away from our gates! Give readers hope—hope that they can enrich themselves by selling something—even if it’s just the mold on things they’ve forgotten in their cellars! *Think*, dolt, think! We’re a *trading* city!”

He swung his arm to point at another staffer at the far end of the room. “You!”

“Uh—ah—a kobold merchant fared east seeking a potion to make him live a century longer, thought he found one and drank it, but now his touch has turned all his oxen to newborn pony size—and every dragonborn he touches falls over dead! He was captured by pirates, but got away and has now returned to the city, and rushed to Vrandeir to try to get a cure for—for whatever he now is!”

Dardulph stared incredulously. “*What* have you been drinking? And what’s with the sickness angle?” He shook his head. “Well, get some sex into it, somehow, and we’ll run it! Pah!” He bent with a grunt to retrieve his fallen chair.

“Vrandeir says the cure is, um, powdered loin of lich?” the staffer blurted hopefully.

The publisher turned to give his second-best glare. “Living sex, not undead sex! Undead sex only works if there’s a living female who can’t keep her clothes on mixed in with it!” He snatched up the chair. “Are you *sure* you want to be a broadsheet writer?”

Because this *is* a port, you know; down on the docks, they're always in need of more idiots to drop barrels into the harbor!"

Shaking his head again, the publisher lowered himself into his chair. "Someone else want to smite me with their brilliance?"

"Vrandeir the alchemist has learned how to turn gold into mallows! Has tricked some nobles into eating half their wealth already!"

Olimbur Dardulph had begun to sneer in disgust—but paused in mid-dismissive wave to grin. "Your second sentence rescued your first. Good, that's in. After we do a lot of work on it. Next?"

"Hedonistic scholars in Amn are spreading the secrets of long life—and long other things, too!" another staffer shouted.

Dardulph discovered he'd chewed his cigar until only a tiny, flaring stub was left outside his mouth. He bit through it, batted the lit end across the room with the back of his hand with an expertise born of long practice, and reached for another. "Good, good, we'll use that. Sprinkle in some names of nobles who are too old or sick to get down here and put a sword through you for slandering them, and have it on my desk before I've worked my way through this new cigar!" He waved a finger as if it was the business end of a hatchet. "You!"

The staffer he'd singled out froze, went pale, swallowed, then managed to say, "A school of the latest Abeiran architecture is opening in North Ward, and it's rumored the legendary Elminster will be giving speeches there!"

Dardulph looked disgusted. "Architecture? Who cares? Now if the school falls down into the street and kills someone important, *that's* news!"

"But—but it's *true!*"

"True? What did truth ever have to do with the broadsheet business? Amuse, anger, titillate—with emphasis very much on that first syllable, son—and rabble-rouse, that's what we do! Making a long and proud tradition of it, let me add! Truth! You'll be telling me not to take bribes, next!"

Rolling his eyes, he pointed at another staffer. Who promptly announced proudly, "Masked halfling lucidors have been dueling with pirates on the docks—not with swords, but by competitive dancing! It's all sponsored by meat-and-tomato flatpie-eating tiefling merchants!"

"And our readers would care about this *why?* Is there sex in it? Masks go good with sex, and so do pirates, so—hey? Any sex?"

"Uh, n-no."

"Well, put some in, boy! Put some in! Do I have to do everything *myself?*"

Dardulph swung his boots up onto his desk, leaned back—his chair creaked alarmingly—and puffed on his new cigar. "Anyone have something else? Some fresh new way we can make a noble look like a fool—excuse me, like more of a fool than they all look, already?"

"That fire in that noble's mansion in Sea Ward last tenday?" someone ventured. "We could invent some new, hitherto-suppressed crazy cause of that."

"Good, good, so give me a sample of your invention, son."

"A house kobold who couldn't read mixed up alchemical fire with bacon grease?"

"Kobolds! What is it with the kobolds? How about this: mysterious epidemic of kobolds in the city! We can't seem to stop writing about 'em! *Idiots!*"

“The kobolds are idiots, saer?”

“No, you dolt—you are. All of you. Just forget about kobolds—forever, until I change my mind—and listen: if you’re going to create something new about that fire, it has to make a noble look like an idiot, and they either have to do or say something outrageous, or there has to be sex. Nudity, at the very least.”

Dardulph waved his cigar. “So get a pen, one of you, and write this down; *this* is how it’s done. Ahem. Lady Blahblah—I forget now whose mansion burned, but I’m sure one of you can look it up, I keep back issues in the privy for read-and-wipe purposes—took delivery of her new dress, put it on, activated the spell on it that makes it catch fire to impress people she’s dancing with at feasts, and pranced around the mansion asking all her noble kin, “Does this make me look fat?” She set fire to a dozen tapestries without noticing, while she was thusly promenading, then decided to make love to her stablemaster and pulled him down onto a handy heap of hay, which of course caught fire. Whereupon her three lovely daughters burst up out of it, holding hands with as many guilty-looking servants who’d all forgotten to put any clothes on, and fled in all directions across the city, causing several chases that turned into parades. Then we list a few crazies that nobles have recently hired, who were seen in those parades—a wizard whose only spell turns meat into trail-jerky, a War Wizard from Cormyr who’s afraid of casting spells and doesn’t believe in violence, a Lord of Waterdeep who can’t stop turning into a flying monkey and back again because of a curse; that sort of thing. There. *That’s* how you write a broadsheet story.”

“Well done, saer! Oh, bravo!” Various staffers shouted praise and clapped. Dardulph rolled his eyes again.

“Can’t you even bother to make your obviously false flattery sound just a wee bit convincing?”

“What?” someone asked mockingly, from the back of the room. “You mean as convincing as what we print?”

Dardulph shot to his feet, his chair crashing over again—only without him in it, this time. “Who said that? *Who* said that?”

A door banged.

“He’s gone, saer,” one of the staffers reported. “Well, who was it?”

“I know not, but he was wearing a Watch uniform, saer.”

Dardulph sighed heavily, and sat down again even more heavily—having forgotten that his chair had fallen over, and was no longer waiting for his descending bottom.

“That,” he snarled, stifling a groan of pain and starting the long crawl to the corner of his desk where he could claw his way up the ladder of partway-open drawers, “was a cleverly-concealed spy. You *stlarning* idiots.”

“Haunted bone flies around city! Ghost of Xameelg is hiding in the leg bone of a barbazu!” a staffer shouted desperately.

“I *like* that one,” Dardulph snarled, huffing his way back into view. “We’ll use it.”

Which was when the end of the cigar he’d bitten through in his fall, lying forgotten on the floor behind him, exploded, hurling him the length of the room.

If he hadn’t had enough parchment to fill a good-sized stable stall moving with him, and about a dozen staffer’s bodies to further cushion his fall, he might have been killed.

Now just who most wanted him dead?
Dardulph pondered that for about two seconds, and then passed out.

* * *

As he reached for his third drink, Volo regarded his hand with vague interest. Its tremblings had almost subsided. Almost.

He'd lain there in the dark and cold, hardly daring to breathe and not daring to move, as Lanvyl and the collector had agreed on a price—nine hundred and sixty thousand stlarning golden lions of Waterdeep, by the gods!—for a wonderstone. Just which stone, Volo had no idea.

After they'd gone, it had taken him quite some time of cautious stumbling and groping to find the right way, and get into the cellars of the Tentacles.

Where he found himself with no stomach at all for lashes and gasps and playful lasses sending smoldering looks back over their shoulders as they wiggled themselves and jangled their manacles, but with a profound and deepening need for a quiet corner with comfortable seating, a reassuringly large and heavy goblet brim-full of strong wine, and plenty more of it for replenishment.

There it was again. Accompanied by a tingling that almost had to be magic—and not fault of this excellent firewine at all. A warm, intimate murmur at his earlobe: “Elminster hates it, you know, that his dad is still around.”

Volo blinked. The previous whisper had been something about an old acquaintance would soon be collecting a debt from a certain Haramond Bandoun. Gentle, melodious, and somehow threatening. Hadn't Bandoun been the name of that lich there'd been talk of?

And who by the legendary tantrums of The Simbul was whispering in his ear, anyway? No one nearby, that much was certain. The mysterious sendings had begun after his first drink, but he was *not* drunk—barely relaxed—and he'd been throwing firewine down his throat for *years*, now, without so much as a mumbling in his head before this . . .

“When Bandoun's consort is retrieved from dread Graz'zt, all debts shall be repaid.”

Gods, it sounded like a temple oracle! Portentous doom and threats, all in one sanctimonious sentence. “I don't know who you are or why you're talking to me,” Volo snarled at the empty air, “but I paid good coin for this firewine and I'm trying to enjoy it! Go bother Olimbur Dardulph if you want to share cryptic secrets with the Realms! He'll twist them until their own grand-dams won't recognize them!”

The briefest of confused sounds erupted by his ear. Had that been . . . a giggle?

* * *

The Watchful Order wizard turned to Sambrast, arching one eyebrow in silent and loftily disdainful query.

The orsar stopped giggling and shrugged. “So our fishing is catching nothing. Meaning Volo's a tougher beast than I gave him credit for, or I'm mistaken. Which will be no shame at all to me; I've been mistaken a time or two in my life before.”

The tone of his words made them almost a challenge, and the wizard sniffed and turned away.

“Keep on with your spell,” the orsar ordered sternly. “Send him a chuckle now and then, to make him think he’s being watched. I want to hear what he says, even if it’s not to us. Things are going to get rather crowded in the Tentacles, very soon now.”

The wizard shrugged. “So long as the Watch is paying . . .”

“We are,” the stout elf snapped. “Which leaves you in no higher moral standing than the lasses at the Tentacles, now does it?”

The wizard sniffed again, but had run out of room to turn away any farther.

* * *

Volo winced. At a nearby table, someone had just merrily declaimed, “Hold my ale, and watch this!”

Trouble would swiftly follow. It always did, whenever anyone was idiotic enough to say that.

The merchant who’d just proclaimed himself an idiot in eager search of trouble was finding his feet somewhat unsteadily, his grinning friends half-rising from their seats to watch—and as followed the direction of their gaze to a faint squeaking, nigh the floor, he realized that either there was more than one limbless, cart-bound dwarf trundling around Waterdeep propelled by the ground-pushings of his own beard, or he was gazing upon the same Roarynguld who’d been captured in the wonderstone.

The merchant was moving to block the path of the cart, chortling in anticipation of amusement soon to come—mirth that stopped abruptly when a scabbarded sword swept into the backs of his knees and laid him out with a crash on the floor, the back of his head bouncing off the rushes hard enough to make Volo—not to mention the merchant’s friends—wince.

That sword was being drawn, its short and dragon-headed wielder striding to confront the dwarf on the creaking cart. Volo blinked. A kobold! So this must be—

“I am Beleryk, holy knight of Sune the Lady of Love!” the kobold paladin announced fiercely. “And *this*”—a vorpal blade flashed in the light of the nearest glimmering wall-lamp—“is hallowed steel that shall soon cleave thee, damned and curséd dwarf of—”

Beleryk’s challenge was muffled into tinny near-silence as a half-pillar that was sculpted very realistically into the shapely flank and breast of a tall, curvaceous woman suddenly emerged from the wall-niche it had been filling, revealing itself to be a grotesque flesh golem trailing the womanly guise like a dangling cloak and bristling with various extra limbs and appendages, and thrust a stout metal slops-bin, upside down and thankfully empty, over the raging paladin.

Shrieks of metal promptly erupted from within the bin as the kobold tried to hack its way to freedom—and with an apologetic air, the lumbering flesh golem slapped the bin, shoving it a good six paces along the aisle in a single jump.

Before striding after it and bringing a fist the size of a large anvil down on the top of the bin again, just as it was starting to rise up and emit kobold squalling. Off the golem lurched, shoving the bin before it—as far more patrons than just Volo watched in open-mouthed fascination.

The cart squeaked again with sudden urgency. “Hey! Hoy, saer! *You!* Ho, Flesh Mountain! Those are my arms and legs you’ve got!” the dwarf roared. “Come back here! Come *right* back here!”

The flesh golem gave no sign of having heard, and the cart set off in pursuit, evoking a ragged cheer from the onlookers.

The toppled merchant lay right where he’d fallen, out cold, his looks not improved by the tracks of the cart’s wheels that had just run the length of his body.

“The Watch,” the hostess in the truly spectacular corset muttered, as she hastened past, her wild mane of long red hair streaming. “Runelee, call the Watch!”

“Huh,” a dusky-skinned wisp of a lass with a spectacular row of three breasts and tiny lit cage-lamps dangling from all of them responded, as she appeared from a side-passage, “most of them are here already. Half out of uniform, mind you, and busy!”

“Stars in the harbor!” the hostess—Sharlee, that was her name; Volo’s aging memory wasn’t quite gone yet—snarled. “Do I have to do everything *myself*?”

“As the dancer said to her drunken client,” Runelee replied automatically, watching the procession recede into the dimly lit distance of the back rooms. A suddenly ravenous Volo thrust the menu on the table in front of him up and under her chest-lamps, in an attempt to be able to read it. Noticing him, she grinned and obligingly arched herself forward over him, reaching out to clutch the carved wooden endpost of the adjacent booth—an opening oyster shell, complete with pearl—to keep her balance.

“Thanks,” Volo said dryly, reaching for his goblet as he enjoyed the view. “By the way, you haven’t seen a healer by the name of Dusk Lanvyl recently, have you?”

“More than *seen* him,” Runelee purred. “He came in to clear some agreement or other he’d reached with that brute of a dragonborn with Lord Bones. And had time for a little slap-and-tickle on his way back out—not six breaths before I heard Sharlee starting to snarl. Thankfully, he kept old Scarscales waiting at the door.”

“Lord Bones? The—ah—the little scuttling heap of bones with the . . . Lanvyl works for *Lord Bones*?”

“Yes,” Runelee replied simply. She obligingly shifted herself sideways a trifle so Volo could scan the list of appetizers.

“This dragonborn—he has scars all over him, head and face especially, and they glow when he gets angry?”

“Yes. See anything you *like*, saer?”

“Indeed, and I want it *all*,” Volo replied with a wink and a leer, more out of habit than out of ardor.

He couldn’t help but notice not just Runelee’s close and pleasant charms, but something in the middle distance, beyond her: a familiar figure emerging from the same side-passage Runelee had appeared from, earlier. Striding fast, face stern, on urgent business bent: Dusk Lanvyl, ornament of High Healers Everywhere. Not turning Volo’s way, but going straight across the aisle and continuing along the far end of the side-passage. Toward the back of the Tentacles, where the staff stairs and private offices were . . .

Volo slipped out from under Runelee, murmuring a swift thanks and inventing his own urgent need to visit the jakes.

“Another time, then,” she said into his ear, nibbling it deftly as she slid out of his way.

Nodding and smiling, he was after Lanvyl like a leaping arrow, hastening to the passage so he could—

Slam hard into someone who was striding after the healer, far more silently but even more urgently. Someone wide and muscular and covered with scales.

Someone who was very, very hard. It was like slamming into a moving wall. Volo found himself on his backside on the floor, staring up at—

The much-scarred dragonborn he'd last seen looming threateningly up from a dining table behind Olimbur Dardulph.

The dragonborn who'd just lost hold of something he'd been carrying in a little cloth bag, a bag now flying open as it whirled in midair, to disgorge the something. And who was clutching desperately—and vainly—at that something even as his scars started to blaze bright with anger, one hand went to the hilt of his sword, and his eyes stared down at Volo like those of a hungry lion sighting dinner.

“*You!*” Scarscales spat.

“Gulp!” Volo replied intelligently, rolling away for all he was worth.

As he crossed the floor in a rapid whirl of boots over neck over boots again, he caught one good glimpse of what had just flown out of the bag, to sparkle high through the air of the Tentacles.

It was glowing as it tumbled, lit with an inner fire that caught every eye—and entertained those gazes with a scene of a noble lady of Waterdeep in the briefest of wisps of silk, writhing and purring on a great pink satin bed that was a sea of similarly writhing and purring cats and kittens . . .

The dragonborn burst past Volo, howling, “The instant I have that stone again, you are a *dead* Volothamp Geddarm! Dead, I tell you!”

The wonderstone fell like a little glowing star—right into the deft grasp of a hand that snatched it calmly out of the air.

An elf hand that belonged to an astonishingly fat elf. Orsar Rondreval Sambrast of the Watch smiled at the onrushing dragonborn and said sardonically, “Well, well. *Such* a lucky find. The Margasters very much want this back—*without* paying you far too much for it, thief.”

“Are you calling me a thief?” the dragonborn roared, sword singing out as it covered the last few paces to the Watch officer in what could only be described as a thundering charge. “After I paid nigh on a *million* lions? *Die*, corrupt and gutless fool!”

A dozen hand crossbows twanged as one, from up and down the dimly lit back aisle of the Tentacles, and the dragonborn staggered, swayed, and then collapsed on his face with a crash. As various faintly smiling Watch officers threw off cloaks and got up from beneath hard-working dancers, to come forward in case a second volley was required.

It wasn't. Darkslumber acts very fast, and even small amounts can bring down a horse. Decidedly larger amounts obviously dealt capably with dragonborn.

“No, just a gullible fool,” the orsar told the senseless scaled heap on the floor, before looking up at the man who'd reappeared from the side-passage, in the firm grasp of three unsmiling Watch officers. “*You're* the thief—aren't you, Lanvyl?”

The healer put a rather bewildered smile onto his face. “I—I don't know what you're talking about, saer!”

“Oh, yes, you do,” Volo and Sambrast said, in firm but unintentional unison—in the instant before a tall and black-robed lich who would have been arrestingly handsome had his flesh not been withered here and there, a smaller-than-a-kobold dragonborn dressed like a bard’s fancy-dream of a flamboyant peg-legged pirate, a little girl with great and knowing dark eyes, and a hulking but stooped-over, sniffling and cringing minotaur all burst into the aisle, with a flying snake darting and looping like a restless black flame above them . . . and Olimbur Dardulph huffing and lurching along in their wake, one cigar in his mouth and carrying a fistful more for backup.

The glow of an already-cast spell washed over the shoulders and arms of the lich as he drew himself up and announced with a cold smile, “I am Haramond Bandoun, Lich Mighty—and Volo must die!”

Orsar Sambrast was still rolling his eyes at those melodramatics when the lich launched himself in the direction of Volo.

His most direct route took him right through the crowd of Watch officers. They snatched out swords and daggers as he trampled them—and Bandoun sneered at them, plucked the nearest Watchman off his feet, and tore that unfortunate’s head right off his shoulders.

The lich turned amid all the spurting blood and hurled the head back down the aisle behind him, before swinging back and throwing the writhing, spasming body into the now-shouting Watch officers right in front of him, wading after it into their swords and stumbling bodies without hesitation.

“You’ve got to get a head in this world, I always say,” Dardulph remarked inevitably, amid the screams and crashings of booths and tables all around emptying. It was a line Volo had uttered a time or two before, but right now he was using all his breath to scramble up and get away, not that he was having much success in the crush of crowded-together bodies . . .

The shrieking exodus of fleeing customers was thankfully brief, but it evoked a roar of anger from Sharlee the hostess, who spun past the enthusiastically hacking Watch officers—the glow around the lich seemed to be turning their swords and daggers back like the very best armor—to snatch at the oyster-shell endpost.

It came up and away in her hand, revealing itself to be the artful hilt of a shimmering sword, the pearl the grip and the partly open halves of the shell the guards of a basket-hilt.

Slicing the air with it, her long hair swirling around her, Sharlee charged at the lich from behind—only to stagger back, swear, and find herself facing a dragonborn lady pirate, who was brandishing a blade of her own and grinning bloodthirstily.

“Do you even know how to hold that thing?” Verity Morninglady taunted, words that were not her first mistake of the day.

A moment later, she was giving ground in a clanging whirlwind of desperate parries, seeking just to keep herself alive as the enraged hostess attacked. And promptly stumbling down the back of a Watchman’s leg and almost losing her throat right then.

Luckily for the pirate, Lord Bones chose that moment to almost delicately drop from a rafter in the dimness overhead, straight onto Sharlee’s head. The undead had plenty of bony fingers to grip her long red tresses with, and it used them enthusiastically. Skeletal arms slid smoothly this way and that, fingers as busy as crawling spiders’ legs, and Sharlee found herself blinded with her own hair, wild-woven across her face. Even as

she started to claw at it, Lord Bones swarmed down the entwined strands to her throat, where the undead rearranged itself around her neck—and started to throttle her.

Her muffled snarls became muffled screams, as she clawed and tore frantically, dropping her sword.

By then, full battle was raging in the Tentacles, with the Watch hacking at the lich and the thigh-high dragonborn pirate, various spells flaring and glowing as they abandoned city-issue swords for their own enchanted daggers and family weapons—magic that had wiped the sneer right off Bandoun’s face and made him flinch and duck out of respect for their weapons—and more mayhem raging.

Runelee was hurling goblets and cutlery from the tables at the flying snake, which was excitedly and indiscriminately trying to bite any head it found nearby. Lanvyl had twisted away from his Watch captors and was trying to flee the Tentacles, sprinting until a table or booth blocked his way and then seeking—sometimes with success, and more often not; furniture tends to cooperate with dashing warriors only in chapbooks—to clamber up onto and over it. The she-minotaur had gone shrieking-wild with terror and was crashing in random directions around the Tentacles, upsetting tables and booths in a way Lanvyl could never hope to match . . . and Dardulph and Volo were both trying to stay alive yet still see everything, which meant they found themselves scrambling wildly from hither to yon and back again.

Just now, Orsar Sambrast, puffing like a dockhand shoveling grain, was running up the back of a wounded and reeling fellow Watchman to hack at the flying snake with his sword—and bringing it down. Even before it struck the littered floor, it was in two whipping, writhing halves—and he stamped on the head snarlingly and repeatedly.

Watchmen were falling, dead or sorely wounded, on all sides, but Verity and Bandoun were still sorely beset, a feebly moving Sharlee was trying to beat her own head against a table and so rid herself of Lord Bones . . . and in the midst of this chaos, Emily picked up the sword Sharlee had dropped.

She hefted it, a little smile coming onto her face, then took three swift steps and jabbed it into her brother’s behind.

“I’m tired of you bullying me, and Mother liking *you* best,” she announced sweetly.

As Bandoun stiffened to his full height, screamed—and collapsed into rolling, fading dust that rushed past the Watchmens’ boots and was gone even before his dying wail had finished echoing down the festhall.

“Trust the Tentacles to have a lich-slaying sword,” Rondreval Sambrast muttered, in the moment of shocked silence that followed. He brought the hilt of his own blade down hard on Verity Morninglady’s head, and watched her crumple to his feet. Gentlesirs didn’t strike down ladies from behind—but then, she was a dragonborn pirate, no lady . . . and he’d never been anything approaching a gentlesir, either. Kicking her sword away and grinding his boot heel into her wrist until he could hear bones break, he turned to survey the wreckage—and noticed something.

Emily was simply—gone. Standing there smiling triumphantly down at where her brother had been one moment, then—*blink*—gone the next.

Then the orsar noticed something else.

Pointing with his sword, he roared, “Men—*get that thing!* Quickly, before it kills her!”

The hostess of the Tentacles, shrouded in her own hair and crawling bones from the waist up, was sagging limply down off a table, with Lord Bones busily disentangling itself from around her neck.

Watch officers charged, waving their swords—but the undead assemblage of bones and eyeballs and other scavenged body parts dropped away from the nigh-senseless Sharlee and scuttled away with surprising speed.

“It’s getting away!” an armar shouted.

“Stop it!” others cried, as they ran. Like a racing spider the size of a small dog, the undead darted this way, and then scurried that way, as they gave chase.

Ahead of it, along the aisle, a door banged open—and the flesh golem backed into view through it, carrying the now-sliced and battered slops-bin. One splay-soled, clubbed foot that was sickly pink in some places, brown-white and brown in others, veined with purple here and there, but mainly a moldy grey came down right on top of the scuttling Lord Bones with a loud *crunch*.

Bones broke and spewed shards in all directions as the golem obliviously turned and strode back along the aisle, shattered and crushed fragments of bone falling away from its feet as it went. Seeing Runelee raise the reeling, staggering Sharlee in her arms, it strode up to them, drew itself up rather proudly, and announced in a deep, ponderous wheeze, “Paladin all taken care of! In harbor now!”

“You—you talk?” Runelee’s astonished question was echoed by a hoarse but dumbfounded Sharlee.

“Oh. Yeah. Don’t everyone?”

“But—but—”

The flesh golem grinned, and reached out a hand of mismatched fingers to tousle their hair with surprising gentleness. “More fun playing dumb. Hear more, see more. Seen *lots*, thank you, ladies.”

Sharlee and Runelee looked at each other—and then, astonishingly, blushed.

A little way down the aisle, a Watch officer shrieked, gurgled—and toppled. Emily turned away from him with her new-found sword scarlet to its carved guards and ran it through another Watch officer. From behind, just like the first one.

As he groaned and started to go down, she giggled, and stabbed the officer beside him even as that veteran armar turned to stare at her in disbelief.

He went on staring in disbelief, all the way to the floor. As Watchmen all over the room shouted in alarm—and Emily giggled again.

“Oooh, I *like* this,” she announced. “Now people can fear *me*, for a change!”

“Disarm her!” Sambrast roared, and the surviving Watch officers hastily launched themselves into another charge. Smiling sweetly, Emily watched them converge on her, in a swiftly closing ring—and then was abruptly gone, with only a momentary flare of light from her boots as warning.

“Where is she?” the orsar roared, looking wildly all around. “Find her! Find her! *Get her back!*”

Abruptly he saw her, waving cheerfully at him from far down the aisle, dripping sword in her other hand. She laughed as the Watch officers all skidded to various halts, and turned to mount a new charge. “This,” she told them merrily, “is *fun!* Who shall I skewer next, hmm?”

There was the briefest of squeals from right behind her, down low—and the rush-strewn floor of the Tentacles rushed up to smite her, so suddenly that Emily had no time to will her boots to snatch her away, no time to even keep hold of the air in her lungs.

The sword clanged as it bounced and spun away, driven from her grasp as her elbow smashed into the floor. Her shriek of pain was almost drowned out by Roarynguld's roar of triumph. "A dwarf! A dwarf defeats thee!"

The Watch officers were running hard, and they didn't even try to slow down. If the dwarf on his cart had run the murderous lass over, well and good, but they still needed to pounce on her and get those boots off her . . .

They hurled themselves with more speed and enthusiasm than precision, as Watch officers have done from Waterdeep's earliest days—and the dwarf and Emily were struck senseless in the same moment as burly armored bodies slammed into them from all directions, in a pile of brawn that grew . . . and grew . . .

Leaving Orsar Rondreval Sambrast shaking his head sourly as he puffed his way forward to stand over them. "Bunch of foot fetishists," he growled. "How many of you does it take to fail to get one pair of boots off a girl's feet? Hmmpf."

"Orsar?" a new voice called, from near the front of the Tentacles. "Orsar Sambrast?"

The fat elf fell forward onto the squirming pile of his men, slid down it until he could take hold of Emily's boot heels and tug her footwear firmly off, and only then drew in a deep breath and called back, "Yes?"

Watchmen were streaming into view around the far end of the aisle, a fresh patrol that was dragging something. A . . . yes, a bound and sleeping minotaur.

"This came roaring out of the front door of this establishment, Orsar," the swordcaptain leading them reported crisply, jerking his thumb at the trussed she-minotaur. "We had to use darkslumber to stop her—in mortal peril, me and me men were, and . . . and . . ."

His voice trailed off uncertainly as his gaze fell to the heap of Watchmen on the floor, and the fat elf lying propped against them with a girl's shoes in his hands, and her bare feet protruding from under his arm. "What's . . ."

After settling on Sambrast and in rather guilty haste looking away again, the swordcaptain's eyes hadn't ceased roving around the scene. His jaw dropped, and he stopped and began a slow pivot on one boot heel to turn and look all around, his mouth vaguely struggling to find words.

What he finally came up with was as predictable as it was understandable. "What the stlarning bed-bouncing happydance *happened* here?"

"Some reckonings," the orsar replied, not even trying to rise from the floor. "Including a rather final one for Lord Bones."

He pointed at several of the shattered bones strewn about the floor. "Collect those, though, just in case. I don't want a crime lord slowly reassembling itself after we've all gone, and making *more* work for us, fighting and catching it all over again."

Then Sambrast looked up at Dardulph, and pointed at him. "*You're* out one employer, now . . . and so is Lanvyl. Not that you've lost much—your boss was already trying to rid himself of you. That rigged cigar came from him. Oh, yes. To silence you so you couldn't betray him to us. He knew the Watch was closing in."

Dardulph went bone white, his eyes bulging. Just as the swordcaptain had done before him, he was working his mouth hard without any words coming out—but that might have been because he'd just swallowed his cigar.

"So Lanvyl and Dardulph were working for Lord Bones," Volo mused aloud. "I wonder who Lord Bones was working for?"

"Me," said a calm voice from behind his ear, as the cold tip of a swordblade slid into his ribs. It was like being stabbed with an icicle; Volo was suddenly so cold he couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't even shiver.

Kalandra Bandoun drew her sword back out of him and stepped past him, drawing a wand from her belt as she went. "I believe it's now time for me to settle a few scores," she announced calmly. "The destruction of my son—a worthless dreamer, but still my son—is worth the lives of just about everyone in Waterdeep, I'd say. Wherefore—"

Her voice was starting to get fainter, and the Tentacles was growing darker. Volo knew it was him, starting to die on his feet. Not that knowing so enabled him to do one darned thing about it.

"—I'm going to have to kill you all. Painfully. So we'll begin by slamming you into walls and rafters and tables, until all your joints are shattered."

"Golem!" Sharlee shouted desperately. "Attack her!"

"Of course," the flesh mountain rumbled, lumbering forward.

Kalandra Bandoun gave it a brittle smile, raised her wand, and said almost gently, "Let us begin."

Magic roared out of the stick of wood in her hands—was it a wand at all?—and the shouts and screams of Watchmen were all lost in that mighty roaring, a raw thunder that went on and on as men were plucked up like rag dolls and hurled away across the dark cavern of the Tentacles.

Swaying, helpless and almost senseless, Volo knew that now was the moment that bards would cry that he did something heroic—if this was a bardic tale, and not real life.

There was nothing he could do, even if he'd not been afraid, even if he knew what to do. The golem was trudging slowly forward—so slowly—its head bent in the face of the howling storm of magic . . . and it was alone, now, the aisle swept clean of bones and bodies and fallen weapons and cutlery and all.

Everything except Emily, lying still and senseless on the floor, and Volothamp Geddarm, sagging forgotten just behind Kalandra Bandoun.

All he could do was fall. He was going to fall whether or not he wanted to, in the next few moments . . . So he fell.

Forward, throwing out his arms with the last of his strength, toppling into her.

And slamming her to the floor, wand or whatever it was skittering away across the rushes, sword clattering as she gasped in startled pain.

And the golem strode up to her—and brought the slops-bin down on her head with all its strength.

Crunch.

Volo shuddered at that sound, or thought he did, but the world was falling far away, now, and everything was wet and dark, very dark . . .

* * *

He blinked. There it was again. Light.
Light and noise, a hubbub of voices.
A party?

Volo decided he didn't want to miss this, so when the sound and light flared again, he willed himself toward it.

Whereupon it rushed up quite suddenly to claim him, and he found himself lying on his back on a table in the Tentacles, staring up into the pleasant view of Runelee's three lanterns.

Familiar faces were smiling down at him. Runelee's of course, but Sharlee's, too—and Rondreval Sambrast and Dardulph. Above and behind them all, the flesh golem.

"See? It worked," the voice of Dusk Lanvyl said from somewhere just above and behind Volo.

"Lucky for you," the orsar told him. "Or you'd be sleeping in chains in Castle Waterdeep for most of a season while we decided what to do with you. In a slow and lazy manner, of course. Perhaps a trial, five or six summers from now . . ."

"Hey!" the healer protested. "I had nothing to do with any of this. I was merely a sales agent for a single wonderstone that Lord Bones had found from somewhere, just one, and—"

"The dragonborn tells a different tale," the elf grunted. "Strangely, I'm inclined to believe him, considering—"

"Considering he's a known thief and an outlander, to boot? Whereas *I* am a loyal, tax-paying born and bred lifelong citizen of Waterdeep, who founded the High Healers Everywhere, and—"

"Has a cellar-full of wonderstones worth enough to buy the entire damned city, sitting not at all far from here," Volo mumbled.

Everyone stared down at him.

"What did you say?" the Watch orsar growled.

Volo smiled, and looked at Dardulph. "Do I still have a job?"

"Hang you, yes," the publisher growled. "I'll call myself crazy on the morrow, but—yes. Why?"

"I have an exclusive story for you," Volo said. "A hot tale that will—"

Above him, Lanvyl cursed as he discovered that a hand had descended on his own. It was the golem's hand, and it was effortlessly crushing his hand, covertly drawn dagger and all.

The healer started to whimper in pain as coldly smiling Watch officers took hold of his arms.

"Now," Rondreval Sambrast said silkily, "we wouldn't want to undo all that good healing work you've just done, would we? Take him away, lads—and use the heaviest chains. Let him hang upside down until I get there. And I may be awhile."

He looked back down at Volo. "Saer Dardulph may print an exclusive hot tale, Saer Geddarm, but I'm going to hear it first. Along with him, and these ladies, and their helpful golem, too. Times are hard, these days, and I find myself in need of a little light entertainment."

Volo smiled weakly. "How much of it do you want me to tell? Do I include your love affair with Kalandra Bandoun? Or just Lanvyl's?"

The smile slid right off the orsar's face. "You know too much," he growled. "That's your problem."

Volo nodded. "Always has been. Always has been."

Dardulph suddenly erupted in roars of laughter. Helpless, roaring laughter that grew and grew until they were all laughing.

Except Dardulph, because by then he was choking on the cigar he swallowed. Again.