



THE ELMINSTER SERIES

Elminster's Daughter

ED GREENWOOD





One

A MURDEROUS MEETING OF MERCHANTS

A wizard, a merchant, a lord among merchants—I see no shortage of fools here.

The character Turst Sharptongue
in Scene the First
of the play *Windbag of Waterdeep*
by Tholdomor “the Wise” Rammarask
first performed in the Year of the Harp

It was a moonfleet night, the silvery Orb of Selûne scudding amid racing tatters of glowing cloud high above the proud spires of Waterdeep. Wizards in their towers and grim guards on battlements alike stared up and shivered, each thinking how small he was against the uncaring, speeding fire of the gods.

Far fewer merchants bothered to lift their gazes above the coins and goods—or softer temptations—under their hands at that hour,

for such is the way of merchants. Hundreds were snoring, exhausted by the rigors of the day, but many were still awake and embracing—even if the hands of most of them were wrapped only around swiftly emptying tankards.

There were no tankards, no embraces, and no soft temptations in a certain shuttered upper room overlooking Jembril Street in Trades Ward. Instead, it held a cold, bare minimum of furniture—a table and six high-backed chairs—and an even colder company of men.

Six merchants sat in those chairs on this chill night in the early spring of the Year of Rogue Dragons, staring stonily at each other. The glittering glances of five of them suggested that the health of the sixth man, who sat alone at one end of the table, would not continue to flourish for more than a few breaths longer had it not been for the presence of the two impassive bodyguards who stood watchfully by his chair, cocked and loaded hand-crossbows held ready and free hands hovering near sword-hilts.

That sixth man said something, slowly and bitingly.

Outside, in the night, a shadow moved. An unseen witness to the merchants' meeting leaned closer to the only gap in the shutters across the windows of that upper room. Clinging head-downward to the carved stone harpy roof-truss nearest to the shutter, the shadow sacrificed as much balance as she dared, and strained to hear. Her slender arms were already quivering in the struggle to keep herself from plunging to the dark, cobbled street below.

"There are really no more excuses left to you, sirs," the man who sat apart told the others, smirking. "I *will* have my coins this night—or the deeds to your shops."

"But—" one of the men burst out, and then bit off whatever else he'd been going to say and looked helplessly down at the bare table before him, face dark with anger.

“So you’ll ruin us, Caethur?” the next man asked, his voice trembling. “You’d rather turn us out onto the streets than bleed us for another season? When you could set your hook at a higher rate, grant us more time, and keep us in debt forever, paying you all our days and yielding you far more coin than our stones are worth?”

Secure in the strength of the two murderous bodyguards at his back, Caethur leaned forward with a widening—and not very nice—smile on his face and replied triumphantly, “Yes.”

He leaned back in his chair, very much at his ease, steepled his hands, and murmured over the resulting line of fingertips, “It will give me great pleasure, Hammuras, to ruin you. And you too, Nael. And especially you, Kamburan.”

He moved his eyes in his motionless, smiling face to the other pair of seated merchants and added with a sigh, “Yet it almost pains me to visit the same fate upon you two gentlesirs. Why, I’d almost be inclined to give you that extra season Hammuras speaks of, if, say, something happened to still Kamburan’s oversharpest tongue forever. Why—”

One of that last pair of merchants slapped his hand down on the table. “No, Caethur. You’ll not turn us to savaging each other whilst you gloat. We’ll sink or stand together.”

The other merchant of the two nodded balefully.

Caethur gave them both a brittle smile, wiggling his ring-bedecked fingers so the gem-studded gold bands adorning them flashed in the lamplight like glasses of the new vintage Waterdhavian nobles had dubbed “sparkling stars,” and said airily, “Well, then, we’ve come to that moment, sirs, when the wagging of tongues must give way to making good, one way or another. Kamburan, why don’t you begin?”

Reluctantly, the white-bearded merchant reached a hand into the breast of his flame-silk overtunic and drew forth—slowly and carefully, as two crossbows lifted warningly—a glossy-polished wooden coffer only a shade larger than his palm. Wordlessly he flipped it open, displaying the frozen fire of the line of gems

within for all to see. Seven beljurils, sea-green and shimmering, their flash-fires building.

Kamburan set the coffer gently on the table and slid it toward Caethur.

Halfway to the moneylender it stopped. Caethur lifted a finger, and one of his guards stepped smoothly forward to close the coffer and slide it the rest of the way down the table. The moneylender made no move to touch it.

“We should have gone to Mirt,” Hammuras muttered.

Caethur gave the spice dealer a shark-like grin. “Life is filled with ‘should-haves,’ isn’t it, Hammuras? *I* should have chosen to deal with more astute and harder-working tradesmen and never come to this regrettable salvaging of scraps from the wrack of what should have been five flourishing businesses.”

“None of that!” Nael snarled. “You know as well as the rest of us that times have been hard! The beasts from the sea, a season’s shipping shattered, wars in Amn and Tethyr and the fall in trade with both those lands. . . .”

Caethur spread his hands and lifted his eyebrows at the same time, to ask mildly, “And did not every merchant of Waterdeep face these troubles? Yet—behold—they’re not *all* here, sitting around this table. Only you five.” Turning his gaze to Hammuras, he held out a beckoning hand.

Grimly, the spice merchant produced a small coffer of his own, displayed the rubies it held, and slid it along the table.

It stopped within reach of the moneylender, but Caethur made no move to take it up. Instead, he turned his expectant gaze to Nael.

Who sat as still as stone and as pale as snow-marble.

“Well?” Caethur asked softly, into a silence that was suddenly very deep and yet as singingly tight as a drawn bowstring.

Nael swallowed, lifted his chin, swallowed again, then said, “I’ve brought neither gems nor my deed here with me, but—”

Without waiting for a signal, one of the crossbowmen fired, and Aldurl Nael’s left eye was suddenly a bloody profusion of

sprouting wood and flight-feathers. The brass-merchant reeled in his seat, head flopping back and mouth gaping, and did not move again. Crimson rivulets of blood spilled from his mouth, seeking the floor.

“—but how unfortunate,” Caethur said mildly, finishing Nael’s sentence for him. “For Nael, and for all of you. After all, we can’t have any witnesses to such wanton butchery, can we?”

The other guard calmly fired his crossbow, and Hammuras died.

As the three surviving merchants shouted and surged desperately to their feet, both guards tossed their spent crossbows aside and plucked cushions off a shelf affixed to the back of Caethur’s chair. Four more hand-crossbows gleamed in the lamplight, loaded and ready. Coolly the guards snatched them up—and used them.

Kamburan groaned for a surprising long time, but the rest of the room was still in but a breath or two.

“The bolts my men use, by the way,” the moneylender told the corpses conversationally, “are tipped with brain-burn, to keep prying Watchful Order mages from learning anything of our meeting—and how you happened to so carelessly end up wearing war-darts in your faces. After all, we wouldn’t want to start one more irresponsible city fashion, would we?”

Caethur rose from his chair, nodded to his two guards, and waved a hand at the gem-coffers on the table. “When you’re done stripping the bodies of *all* deeds and coins and suchlike, bring those.”

As he strode to the door and slipped out, he took something from a belt-pouch. It looked like a beast’s claw: a grip-bar studded with a row of little daggers. When Caethur closed his hand around the bar, the blades protruded from between his fingers like a row of sheathed talons. With his other hand, the moneylender drew a belt dagger and used it to cautiously flick away the sheaths that covered every blade of the claw. Something dark and wet glistened on each razor-sharp point.

Thrusting the dagger through a belt-loop and putting the venomed claw behind his back, Caethur waited, humming a jaunty tune softly under his breath.

When his two laden bodyguards came to the door, he gave them a frown as he blocked their way and pointed back into the room.

“You’ve missed something,” he said sharply.

His bodyguards gave him astonished and displeased looks but whirled to look at the dead merchants; the moneylender was not a master to be crossed.

The moment they turned Caethur took a swift step, slashed them both across the backs of their necks with his claw, and sprang away to avoid the thrashing spasms he knew would follow.

The guards were young and strong. After they stiffened with identical grunts of astonished agony, they managed to whirl toward their master, glaring, and claw at the air wildly for some seconds ere the venom stilled their limbs, and sent them toppling into the long dark chill of oblivion.

Caethur applied another knife, this one slaked liberally with brain-burn, to both of the men he’d just slain, and calmly set about collecting everything of value in the room full of corpses. After all, brain-burn was expensive . . . and after word got around of this night’s deaths, the hiring-price of guards agreeing to work for him was bound to go up sharply.

Still, the cost of just one man informing the Lords of Waterdeep of his deeds would be much higher. Kamburan’s cloak, still draped over the back of his chair, was unstained, and when bundled around Caethur’s takings, served well as a carry-sack. He drew his own cloak around him with not a hair out of place nor any change in his easy half-smile at all.

It wasn’t the first time Caethur the moneylender had walked away alone from a room full of dead men. Such things were, after all, a regrettable but all-too-often inevitable feature of his profession.

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Outside, the shadow moved, swinging up and away from the shutter, seeking the edge of the roof. A booted foot slipped, a curse blazed sudden and bright in a mind that kept its dangling body coldly silent—and with a sudden surge of effort, the shadow gained the roof and scrambled away.

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As soon as he entered the portal, he felt it: a disturbance in the flow of the Weave, straight ahead. Someone or something was casting a spell on his intended destination or had laid a trap of enchantment on it already. Only those like himself, highly attuned to the Weave, could feel it—and move to avoid whatever danger was waiting.

Chuckling soundlessly, the archmage stepped aside, moving through the drifting blue nothingness to emerge elsewhere, from a portal linked to neither the one he'd entered nor the imperiled one it reached.

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Narnra crouched in the lee of a large but crumbling chimney, wincing at the burning ache in her shoulder. She'd torn something inside, it seemed. Something small, thank the gods.

Ah, yes, the watching, all-seeing gods. She glanced up, and thought another silent curse upon the enthusiastically devout idiots who enspelled the Plinth to glow so brightly by night. Thieves don't welcome beacons that illuminate their working world well.

And a thief was what Narnra Shalace was. That had been her profession since her mother's mysterious death and the rush of neighbors, clients, and Waterdhavians she'd never laid eyes

on before to snatch all they could of what had belonged to her mother. Only frantic flight had kept a frightened and furious Narnra from being taken herself, doubtless to be sold as a slave by whichever noble had set his men to chasing her.

Everyone knew there were laws in Waterdeep that touched nobles and many more that—somehow—did not. Moreover, noble and rich merchant families had ships and wagons in plenty and outlying lands beyond Waterdeep's laws to travel to, where anything or anyone could be taken.

Leaving a suddenly coinless, bereft Narnra Shalace hunted through the alleys and rooftops. So she'd become what she was being treated as—one more thief scratching to survive in a city that was not kind to thieves.

So here she was, aching and scheming on a decaying rooftop in Trades Ward. A lonely young lass, fairly nimble in her leaps and tumblings but not particularly beautiful, with her slender, long-limbed build, her hacked-off dark hair, black-fire eyes, and beak of a nose. "The Silken Shadow," she billed herself, but still she saw men smirk when she uttered that title in the dingy, nameless taverns near the docks where odd stolen items could be sold for a few coppers—and no questions.

The winter had been hard. If it hadn't been for chimneys like this one, the cold would have taken her before the first snows—and one had to fight for the warmest rooftop spots in Waterdeep.

As it was, Narnra spent much time hungry these days. Hungry and angry. Fear was with her at every waking moment, keeping her glancing behind her and knowing it was largely in vain. She could not help but be uncomfortably aware of how skilled other thieves in this city were . . . to say nothing of the Watch and the Watchful Order and the Masked Lords alone knew how many powerful wizards. She was a match for none of them and not even a laughable challenge to most.

To come to their notice—save as a passing amusement—would be to die.

So here she crouched, desperate for coins to buy food for her belly and all too apt, these days, to fall into rages.

Rage is something a thief who expects to live to see the dawn can ill afford.

She sighed soundlessly. Oh, she was lithe and acrobatic enough to prowl the rooftops, but not comely enough to seek the warm and easier coin—hers if she could dance unclad inside festhalls. No, she was just one more lonely outlander scrambling to make a dishonest living on the streets of Waterdeep. Scrambling because she lacked the weapons of a noble name or a shop of her own to make forging a dishonest living comparatively easy.

Scowling, Narnra drew forth the purse she'd snatched earlier in that street fight in Dock Ward. A gang of thieves, that must have been, to set upon two merchants that way, and she'd raced in and plucked their prize, so they'd be looking for her. . . .

All for three gold coins—mismatched, from as many cities, but all heavy and true metal—six silvers, four coppers, and a claim-token to a lockbox somewhere in Faerûn that she knew not. Well, they would have to serve her.

From inside the top of her boot she drew a larger yet lighter purse, drew open its throat-thong with two fingers, checked that the cloak was laid beside her in just the right position, and shifted herself a fingerlength closer to the edge of the roof, ducking low.

So far as she could tell, the moneylender had no more guards left. He was wearing some sort of daggerclaw, shielded from idle eyes by a cloak he was carrying draped over that arm, but he moved like a man wary and alone. He'd hastened through Lathin's Cut to reach the High Road, and there waited in the first deep doorway for a Watch patrol to pass, and fallen in close behind it. He looked like any respectable merchant caught in the wrong part of the city late at night and trying to wend his way safely home.

If he was going to avoid the scrutiny of the standing Watchpost ahead, where the great roads met, he would have to turn aside just

below her, in only a few paces more. His gaze flicked upward, and Narnra held her breath and kept very still, hoping she looked like a rooftop gargoyle. Caethur strode on, slowing and stepping wide so as to look around the corner, then drawing in toward it, to duck around close to the wall.

Delicately, the Silken Shadow spilled her paltry handful coins down from above, to flash before his nose and bounce and roll. The moneylender froze rather than darting into a wild run back and away, peered at a rolling gold coin, and—looked up.

To meet the handful of sand from her larger purse, followed by a shadow that leaped down at him with spread hands clutching the cloak in front of her like a streaming shield.

Caethur the moneylender had time to gasp but no breath for a shout ere she slammed into him, smashing him to the street. She felt something in him break and crumple as she rode him mercilessly, their bodies bouncing on the cobbles together. By then she had the cloak tight around his head, one knee atop the arm that bore the claw, and a hand free to backhand him across the throat, as hard as she could.

That quelled the dazed beginnings of his groans and left him sprawled and limp. Narnra cut his well-worn belt with a slash from her best knife, snatched away the belt-satchel—heavy with deeds, coins, and coffers—and was up and gone, leaving her sacrificed coins and stolen cloak behind.

Yet swift as she was, she was not quite swift enough. There was a shout from up the street and the flash and flicker of Watch torches turning.

Grimly the Silken Shadow sprinted for her life, seeking the shop just ahead that had an outside staircase.

You'd think I'd be somewhere grander than this, she thought savagely for perhaps the ten thousand and forty-sixth time, if my father truly was a great wizard and my mother a dragon. Where's my high station, my wealth, and my power? Why can't I hurl spells or turn into a dragon?

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The old cook whirled around. “*Hab!* Caught ye! Boy, d’ye still want to have yer hire here, come dawn?”

The greasy kitchen lad froze, a basket of discarded cuttings and rotten leavings clutched to his stained apron, and gave Phaerorn a look of utter astonishment. “Hey?”

The cook stumped forward on his wooden leg, hefting his well-used cleaver in one stubby-fingered, hairy hand, and asked softly, “And now ye give me ‘hey,’ do ye? Fond of your nose, are ye?”

The rising cleaver gleamed menacingly, and Naviskurr realized the depths of his error. “Ah, *no*, Master Phaerorn, sir—ah, that is, yes, I am, but I meant no harm, truly, and—and—”

As the old cook advanced, the boy’s voice rose in a terrified squeak as that shining steel rose coldly to touch his nose, “—and before all the gods I swear I know not what I’ve done to offend what’d I do wrong sorry sorry *what* lord?”

“Huh,” Phaerorn said in disgust. “This is the spine they send me, these days. *This* is the eloquence of the young who’ll shine so bright an’ save us all.”

He turned away—then spun so swiftly and smoothly that Naviskurr shrieked, pointed with his cleaver at the three baskets the lad had already set down, and growled, “How many times have I told ye *nothing* is to be set against that door, lad? Nothing!”

Naviskurr looked, blinked, set down the fourth basket where he stood, and hastily went to shift the three offending ones, grumbling, “Sorry, Master Phaerorn, sir . . . but ’tis no more than an old door. We never open it, never use it . . .”

He dragged the baskets aside and straightened with a grunt to regard the nail-studded old door here in the dingiest corner of the Rain Bird Rooming House kitchens. Peeling blue paint on rough, wide planks, adorned with an admittedly impressive relief carving: a long, flowing face of a beak-nosed, bearded man that Naviskurr had privately dubbed “The Stunned Old Wizard.”

Naviskurr scowled at its perpetual sly smile. “So why must we keep everything clear of it, anyway?”

The carving flickered, glowing with a light that had never been there before—and even before the scullery knave could stagger back or cry the fear kindling in him, the face seemed to thrust forward, *out* of the door!

It was attached, Naviskurr saw as he gulped and scrambled away, waving vainly at Master Phaerorn, to a swift-striding man—a hawk-nosed, bearded, long-haired old man in none-too-clean robes. The man *flowed* out of the closed door, leaving it carving-adorned and unchanged in his wake.

Merry blue-gray eyes darted a glance at the gaping kitchen lad from under dark brows and gave him a wink ere turning to favor old Phaerorn with a nod, a wave, and the words, “Thy son’s working out just fine in Suzail, Forn, and looking likely to be wedded by full spring, if he’s not careful!”

The old cook’s jaw dropped, his eyes widened with delight—and the briskly walking visitor was gone, a curved pipe floating along in his wake like some sort of patient snake.

“Wha—wha—who . . .” Naviskurr gabbled.

Master Phaerorn folded his arms across his chest, gave his scullery knave a wide grin, and said triumphantly, “*That’s* why we keep that door clear, lad. Yer Mystra-loving, world-blasting archmages don’t look kindly to stepping knee-deep in kitchen slops, look ye!”

“Uh . . .” Naviskurr blinked, swallowed, and asked weakly, “Mystra? Archmage? Who *was* he?”

“Just an old friend of mine,” Phaerorn said briskly, turning back to his sizzling spits. “No one ye’d know. His name’s Elminster.”

With a chuckle he turned the roasts, waiting for the storm of questions to come.

Instead, to his ears came a soft, rather wet thump. After stirring thickening gravy and licking the steaming wooden spoon consideringly, Phaerorn turned to see just how the lazy lad had

made such a sound—and discovered Naviskurr sprawled across all four baskets of slops. His least promising scullion yet was staring sightlessly at the skillet-bedecked rafters. He'd fainted.

Phaerorn sighed and flicked his spoon at the lad. Perhaps a few drops of hot gravy would revive him. Or perhaps not. Ah, the mighty valor of the young. . . .

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Her mother's apprentices had been lying to her, of course. They must have been. Yet they'd been angry and taunting her, not watching their words . . . and they'd acted later as if they shouldn't have told her what they had. One had tried to make her think they'd been drunk and uttered nonsense, but the others had tried to use drink on her to find out exactly what they'd said and she'd remembered.

Crouching on a rotten and unsuitable rooftop that would send tiles clattering down right in front of the Watch if she dared to move, Narnra thought up some furious curses at the scudding moon.

She'd been over these memories more times than she could count and knew—*knew*—that Goraun and the other apprentice gemcutters had been telling the truth, or thought they were. It had taken her a year of careful probing to make sure they literally meant Maerjanthra Shalace the sorceress, better known to all Waterdeep as Lady Maerjanthra of the Gems, jeweler to the nobility, was a dragon with scales and wings and not merely the sort of "dragon" that meant a bad-tempered, powerful woman who was to be feared.

Which powerful wizard? They'd never told her that.

"Three gold," came a voice from below as another Watch officer joined the others peering about the alley. The two who were halfway up the stair that led to Narnra turned at something in his voice and asked gruffly, "So?"

“Well, so he was lured, right enough. But our victim’s Caethur the moneylender.”

There was a general growl of disgust. “Pity the thief didn’t slay him,” one of the others said. “Or did he?”

“Oh, he’ll live, though it might be long years, if ever, before he has much of a voice again. But unless Clutchcoins knows who did him—and will tell us—I think Waterdeep’s best served if we—”

“Exactly,” an older, deeper voice agreed. “I’m sure there’s something that needs our urgent attention going on over River Gate way, about now. Help Caethur to the Watchpost, and see if he feels like making us all wiser. I’ll be deeply unsurprised if he does not.”

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The bearded old man ignored the grand entry stair and its flanking stone pillars, striding instead up a flight of steps set into the mossy side of a rock garden that rose to the right of the sprawling stone magnificence of Mirt’s Mansion. Through a bower of dappled moonlight he moved unchallenged to a small stone arch bridge that joined the rising shoulder of Mount Waterdeep that held the moneylender’s gardens to an upper balcony of Mirt’s fortified house.

Halfway across that span the air seemed to sparkle, and he was suddenly facing a silent woman in a clinging, flowing gown . . . a gown of pale moonglow, to match the tatters streaming across the sky overhead.

Elminster smiled and bowed his head in greeting. “Fair even, Ieiridauna. Are Mirt and Asper at home?”

Smiling silently, the watchghost nodded and stretched one long and shapely arm back to point at the door behind her. Then she drifted forward tentatively to touch the Old Mage’s cheek with her other hand. Elminster took a slow step to meet her.

The soft brush of her fingertips chilled him deeply as it stole

a little life-force, but Elminster turned his head to kiss those icy fingers, then clasped Ieiridauna gently against him.

Her breath was like a icy thread of glacier-wind, and her shoulders and breast seem to grow more solid the longer he embraced her, but suddenly his encircling arm was empty, and the watchghost was past him, weepingly softly and saying into his ear, "Too kind, great lord, too kind! You must not give me too much."

Elminster turned and said softly, "Lady, 'tis my hope that you abide in Faerûn for at least an age to come, to bear witness and whisper wisdom—and the life is mine to give."

The watchghost shook her head and knelt to him, her head and shoulders silvery-solid but the rest of her mere shiftings in the night air. "You do me too much honor, Lord Chosen."

Elminster chuckled. "Ah, ye'll have me blushing yet, lass!" He struck a mock-heroic pose, pulled a face at her, then winked, waved, and went to the door. Ieiridauna's gentle sobs followed him.

The plain dark door opened before his hand could touch it, and a bristle-moustached face peered out of deeper darkness at him. "Seducing my watchghost again, El? Is there no end to your lecherousness?"

Elminster spread serene hands. "'Twould seem not, Lord Walrus. Nor my meddlesome curiosity, when it comes to the affairs of others—such as the overly rich of Waterdeep."

Mirt grunted and beckoned him inside. "This had *better* be good—ye interrupted us in the midst of Asper dancing."

"Ah!" Elminster said quickly, as they stepped between two motionless helmed horrors, into a lamplit bedchamber dominated by a massive many-pillared bed. "Pray continue!"

Mirt's lady love unfolded herself from a seemingly impossible pose. She'd been balanced on her shoulders on the bed, head looking back down its length as her legs arched over her to clutch a gem between her toes and dangle it in front of her own nose. She tucked her legs back in one graceful movement, tossing the

gem upward in a sparkling of reflected glows, caught it deftly, and said firmly, "Later. I'll hear fewer lewd comments this way. What befalls?"

"Ye'll pull something, doing that," the Old Mage commented, watching Asper flip herself forward and to one side in a deft, sinuous movement to end up reclining along the edge of the bed facing him.

She twinkled a fond smile at him. "Indeed: the undivided attention of a moneylender and a Chosen of Mystra. Drink some of yon wine and speak."

Elminster raised his eyebrows, held out his hand, and a decanter lifted itself from a forest of its fellows atop a tall, ornately carved greatchest and drifted into his grasp.

"No wonder mages are such drunkards," Mirt muttered. "Why, if I could do that . . ."

"You'd never have to get out of bed at all," Asper murmured sweetly. "El?"

"I come from Cormyr," the Old Mage replied, uncorking and sniffing appraisingly at the mouth of the bottle. "Where coins in profusion enough that they'd best be described as 'huge heaps of wealth' are being spent on a secretive campaign to overthrow the Obarskyrs and put a new king on Cormyr's throne."

"So what else is new?" Mirt grunted. "Our so-called nobles spend in like manner here, seeking to learn who each hidden Lord is, so they can have us murdered and bribe those who're left to choose them to step into our shoes. They never seem to reflect that they'll be setting themselves up to be murdered in turn, but then nobles are rarely swift-witted enough to get dressed without help." He held out his hand. "Are ye going to drink that or just pose with it?"

Elminster swigged, sighed appreciatively, said, "Nice fire, that!" and handed the old moneylender the bottle. "Well," he continued, strolling to the bed to pluck up the palm-sized gem from Asper's fingers and idly stroke one of her long, slender legs with

it, "These coins are coming from deep pockets somewhere here in Waterdeep. Whose, I know not—nor even to whom precisely they roll when they reach the Forest Kingdom, but I abide in hope that ye . . ."

Asper smiled. "Will find out for you, lord? Of course."

Mirt grunted agreement and passed the bottle back to Elminster. It was almost empty, of course.

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Tirelessly, the tattered clouds chased each other across the sky, so many silver wraiths fleeing a deeper darkness. From the battlements and windows and guardposts atop Mount Waterdeep, watching men shivered and looked away. Breath curling like gusting frost in the chill night air, each reflected some melancholy variation on the thought that there'd be nights like this long after he was dead, just as there had been nights like this long before his birthing.

Unwarmed by such cheery thinking, each man clutched his cloak or nightrobe tighter around himself, shook his head, and tried to call to mind more pleasant things.

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Elminster lifted his head to regard the rushing, ragged clouds. So many flames of silver in the moonlight in a silent, raging hurry to be elsewhere.

"On a moonfleet night like this," he murmured, "anything can happen—and all too often does."

He ducked through a narrow, noisome arch into the dung- and refuse-choked run of an alley.

A dead-end alley. The shadow overhead frowned at that and stole forward over a shallow roof-peak like creeping smoke.

Those cursed merchants had come light-coined to their fateful

meeting, all of them. Oh, the satchel she'd cached where none but her would ever find it was full of bright gems and deeds that made her the owner of three buildings—in Castle Ward, yet!—but her lure-coins were gone, and she'd only three coppers left between her and starvation. And now this muttering old man comes blundering along right under her best hiding-place . . .

He didn't look the sort to carry much coin—but then, she didn't need much. A handful of gold to replace what she'd lost, but a handful *now*.

Across soft moss on old silver-worn wood shingles, Narnra crept to the ruins of an old bell-spire that perched above the midpoint of the alley, just as the old man passed below. . . .

She had neither coins nor cloak, but he didn't look like much. Only fools and drunkards walked weaponless by night in these alleys. Another handful of sand, a good kick when she came down on him, then away while he was still groaning.

Across the next rooftop she went, almost to the end of the alley now. In a moment he'd see there was no way out and curse and turn. Narnra dug out a handful of sand, checked the blackened blade in the sheath at her wrist, leaned over the edge of the roof, and gasped, "Oh, *yes!*"

That voice should make any man look up—and did. Her handful of sand followed it, at just the right moment. There was a hasty scabbling from below—gods, he was away to the blind back wall like the wind!—and Narnra leaped.

He was too fast, despite slipping on slimy debris underfoot, and she landed catlike on stinking broken things, missing him entirely. He must have had his eyes shut when she threw the sand for they were gleaming calmly enough in her direction now!

With a soft, wordless snarl Narnra drew her knife and came at him in a rush, bounding and springing from side to side as she came, hoping he'd slip in the trash. He was still barehanded, and chuckling now, low and deep, like a delighted madman.

Furiously, the Silken Shadow slashed at the old man with her

steel fang, crosswise as she dodged, so that he couldn't grapple her or surprise her with some stab of his own. She wasn't afraid of any lunge at her—in all this heaped and tangled refuse, he'd go flat on his face!—but surely there was more to this old fool than mere witless wandering, and . . .

He stalked toward her, for all the world as if she was the cornered prey and he the hunting cat, and in a sudden flowering of fear Narnra thrust her blade deep into him, pulling it up hard to gut him open.

It was like stabbing smoke. He was there to her knuckles but *not* there to the steel of her blade.

With the soft beginnings of a curse Narnra sprang back from one long-fingered reaching hand and sprinted away, slipping and stumbling in the rotting refuse. Blue eyes blazed eagerly at her from beneath dark brows, a nose to outthrust her own, and a white beard. Yet for all his years, he was taller, leaner, and a *lot* faster than he'd looked, and—the air before her started to glow.

Oh, Watching Gods, a *wizard!*

Narnra ducked and spun aside, hoping to avoid whatever the magic was, and ran in earnest now, just trying to get out of the alley. This had all been a *mista*—

Something dark and tentacled rose out of the refuse and shadows along the wall ahead of her, reaching forth to bar her path and to gather her in. Something with many fell, glistening eyes, that slid greasily about in a loosely slumping, slimy body as it hissed and burbled and came for her.

A fancy for her eyes spun by the wizard's spell, it must be! No slithering tentacled thing had been in the narrow alley when the old man had walked along it, she—

A cold, wet tentacle slapped around Narnra's wrist.

She screamed involuntarily and slashed at it furiously, tugging and turning away as she did so, to keep another four or six tentacles from reaching her. Dark stickiness spurting as she sobbed and hacked, sawing and pulling desperately this way and that . . .

then something gave way, and she was free, crashing and rolling through dung, filthy water, and slimy rotting things.

The old man's voice was as deep as his chuckle. "Behold, a thief steals her greatest treasure: her life."

Furiously, Narnra found her feet and spun around, panting. The monster was gone as if it had never been—but the alleyway seemed changed. The way out was nowhere to be seen, and it now seemed a round pit of old crumbling walls and garbage, eerie in the soft moonlight streaked by the racing silver clouds overhead.

The old man was standing near one stretch of wall, his hands still empty. "Go home, lass. Leave stealing things to fools, and find another life. I tried your way and had my fun, but . . . there are better ways. Go home."

"I have no home," Narnra spat at him. "They stole it, merchants of Waterdeep. They stole it all."

He took one slow step forward, and she brought her knife up to menace him in one trembling hand.

"You tell me to go," she snarled fearfully, "and yet hide the way from me! What jest is this, wizard?"

The old man frowned. "Ah, that spell does take some that way. Stand still."

He lifted a hand, muttered something, and pointed at her. Desperately Narnra tried to duck away, but there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. . . .

The air glowed a different hue, and a tingling sensation spilled over her. She glared at him helplessly, feeling weak and empty with terror, and . . .

The feeling passed, but the alley still seemed a walled-in cage. The wizard made a sudden, curt sound of surprise and strode toward her. Narnra scrambled back, slamming against a rough stone wall almost immediately. "Keep away from me!" she cried. "I'll—I'll scream for the Watch!"

She knew what a ridiculous threat that was even as she uttered

it, but he neither sneered nor laughed. Instead, he said quietly, "Lady of the night, turn your knife-hand over, so I may see your knuckles."

Narnra glared at him, then, curious, did so. Her tumble in the refuse had scratched the back of her hand, and she was bleeding freely. She reached her hand toward her mouth to suck the blood away, but the wizard snapped, "*Be still!*"

His voice was like thunder, the air around her suddenly afire. Magic again, freezing her limbs utterly! She—he was going to—she couldn't—

Her eyes could yet move, and she could still breathe. Something was burning close before her, a flame rising where there'd been none. The blood on her hand was blazing with cold, silent fire.

Narnra stared at it helplessly. It burned nothing but yet burned. She could see her dirt-smeared hand and her glistening blood through that flame, and there was no pain.

The wizard stood before her now, staring at the same thing she was. Slowly, under their shared scrutiny, the flickering flame faded away.

Helplessly Narnra lifted her gaze to his. He was smiling. "Well," he said, in a rich, whimsical voice. "Well, well."

She stared at him, spell-frozen, unable to speak. The mage shook a small purse out of his sleeve—it looked like a palm-sized pea-pod but was made of some sort of dark and scaly hide and hung at the end of its own intricate lace-link chain—thrust it open with his thumb, and spilled seven gold coins into his palm. As deftly as any tavern juggler he flicked them into a neat stack and placed it delicately atop her bleeding hand.

"Fare ye well, lady," he said gently, gave her a kindly smile, and turned away—and walked through the wall.

Narnra Shalace stared at where he'd vanished, blinking unbelievably at the solid, unbroken stones. All she could hear was her own racing breath, all she could feel was the cold weight of coins,

the faintly tickling trickle of blood beneath them, and the solid feel of her own knife, still in her hand.

It had all been so sudden, so unbelievable, so . . .

That flame, whatever it had been, had surprised him. It had come from his spell but from her, too. He'd given her coins instead of death. Coins, as if she were a beggar or a pleasure-lass . . . or a successful thief. A stack of more gold than she could have dared hope to gain from one old man. And in a wink of an eye he was—gone, right through that wall, and she was . . .

She was able to move again, a little, and the walls of the alley seemed to *move*, around her, straightening and shifting.

Desperately, Narnra stared at where the wizard had vanished through the wall, marking just which heap of refuse was at that spot. She could move her other hand now, as slowly as a feather falling on a windless day. She reached up, took the coins, and was almost surprised to find them every bit as solid and heavy as they'd seemed. She put them into a pouch, her movements still slow but quickening with every breath, and saw that the alley around was once more long and narrow, coming to a blind end here and curving slightly as it stretched back out to the street there.

She went to the place where the wizard had vanished and cautiously extended her knife at the wall. It plunged into the stone as if through empty air. Wonderingly she leaned forward, her arm following it.

This could be the worst sort of death if the stone closed around her. Suspicious, insulted—who *was* this old wizard to lecture her and pity her and give her a beggar-offering of coins?—and yet, yes, fascinated, Narnra Shalace stepped forward into darkness.