



# LORD OF THE DARKWAYS

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Kehai Kotaki

## Deadly Success

Flickering glows shaped two doors out of empty air, at either end of the large, dark room. The warrior strode through the one at the far end of the room, vanished in midstep—and reappeared stepping through the nearer glowing portal.

Where he stiffened in midstride to topple, spasming and thrashing helplessly—a strangled scream whistling through his working jaws—and

crash face-first to the floor. His eyeballs burst, spattering the flagstones with a foul wetness that hissed into racing wisps of smoke, even before a larger flood spilled out of his mouth to join it.

The tall, slender man in black nodded in satisfaction. Six strong Zhentilar warriors had all found the same swift death.

Consistent results. His new spell was a success. Smiling, he walked away.

*Another Stormy Night*

"My superiors at the temple? They think I'm trying to induce my brother to kiss the Holy Lash, of course. Which reminds me: you will embrace Loviatar before all other gods, won't you, Handreth?"

The wizard across the table gave her a mirthless half smile.

"I'll consider it," he said dismissively—then grinned, the bright, boyish flash of teeth Ayantha had known forever. She found herself grinning back.

"So, what brings a high-spells wizard from Waterdeep to cold, uncultured, mage-hating Zhentil Keep?"

"Coins, of course. Lots of them. And by 'mage-hating,' I presume you mean Manshoon and his magelings don't welcome wizards other than themselves?"

"I do. They don't. Walk warily, Han." She laid a long, barbed whip of many leather strands on the table, murmured a high-soundless prayer over it, then raised her eyes to his again and asked, "Who's your patron?"

"A merchant hight Ambram Sarbuckho—if you don't dissuade me from showing up at his doors by what you tell me of him."

Ayantha shifted in her seat, supple black leather and tight strands of chain moving in ways meant to catch the eye, and gave him another smile. "So you sought out your little sister to learn how things lie here in the keep before taking service. I like that."

Handreth shrugged. "To rise to become a dark-lash of Loviatar—nay, just to survive this long, in service to the Maiden of Pain—takes wits. Wizards soon learn how hard it is to trust. You have wits, and I trust you. So here we are, in this vastly overpriced

excuse for a highcoin drinking club, spending my gold. Speak."

His sister sighed. "We're not noble, so this is the best Zhentil Keep can offer us. Sit with your hands on the table, palms up. Please."

"So you can . . . ?"

"So I can lash you across your palms if someone comes into the room, to make them believe a dark-lash of the pain goddess is meeting alone with an outlander wizard for the right reasons."

Handreth put his hands on the table, palms up. "I believe I paid for a private room."

"You did. In the keep, there's 'private' and then there's 'private.' Again, we're not noble. Or Zhentarim."

Handreth nodded to signal he'd taken her point. Outside the leaded windows, the wind rose with a sudden whistle. Winter hadn't thrust its talons into Zhentil Keep just yet, but it was fast approaching, and bringing its cold with it. A time of whirling falling leaves, chill winds, and short, violent, icy rains. Puddles would form brittle skins of thin ice by night but melt every morn, for about a tenday. Then the snows would come, long before the Year of the Blazing Brand found its end.

"Ambram Sarbuckho is one of the wealthiest keep merchants," Ayantha told him, dropping her voice to a whisper. "He'll be given a lordship only if he joins the Zhentarim, though, and thus far he shows no signs of doing so. He's a glib schemer, always spinning little plots and swindles—and, I should warn you, he has hired an endless succession of serve-for-a-month wizards, rather than trying to buy the loyalty of one or two he keeps at his side for many seasons."

"So he's difficult?"

"All successful keep merchants are difficult, Brother. This one is open in his mistrust of everyone; he probably hires more informers than anyone in the city—after Manshoon, of course. He's . . . just as untrustworthy as he judges everyone else to be."

"I've done business with his factors in Sembia and Waterdeep, a time or ten; what's he known for, here at home?"

"A dealer in sundries, and importer of curios from afar."

"Huh." Handreth Imbreth grunted. "Someone a city ruler'll be suspicious of, right there."

His sister smiled thinly. "It's been a bare few months since Manshoon became First Lord of Zhentil Keep, his toady Lord Chess was named Watchlord of the Council, the priests of Bane started acting as if they were the watch, and we had eye tyrants lecturing us in our own streets. In Zhentil Keep, everyone's suspicious of everyone else. Watch your back, Brother—and never stop watching it."

"I thought Manshoon was yesterday's tyrant," Handreth muttered, "and some Lord Bellander or other is kinging it now, here in the keep."

His sister shook her head. "Folk in the streets believe that, and about half the merchants; the rest of us have wits enough to know Bellander's coup was staged by Manshoon himself. He's enthroned Bellander to be the target of those enraged by the new taxes and what's done by all swordsmen now making the lord's rule—Manshoon's rule, in truth—a thing of teeth, offering instant obedience or death. Bellander's a handsome, lecherous fool whose brains are about up to the task of outwitting yonder bowl of flower petals."

"Ah." Handreth nodded. "I'm familiar with the tactic; Waterdeep has seen it work a time or three, too."

Ayantha took up her lash, cracked it in the air, and brought it crashing down across the table. Handreth deftly plucked up his goblet before any wine could spill from it.

"We all know Manshoon's up to something, and that he will move fast when he strikes," she announced, lashing the table again as the door opened and an impassive servant brought more wine, unbidden. She held silence until the servant withdrew, then struck the new decanter of wine aside, to shatter on the floor untasted.

Handreth nodded approvingly, and she inclined her head and went on.

"We just don't know yet what he'll do. All the spies we can pay—and keep alive, once we start paying them—tell us Fzoul, who speaks for Bane in this city, is still far too furious with the First Purring Lord to aid him in any way, though they'll end up working together eventually . . . and the beholders have told him bluntly, at least once, that he's on his own for now. My thinking is that they want to see if he can really establish rule over the city before they spend any more effort backing him."

She sipped the last from her goblet, set it down, and added, "Yet that just ensures he will do something; he has to prove himself, and soon, before all the lords he outraged at council manage to kill him off or just fill his platter with so many plots, coups, and small swindles and treacheries that he'll have no time to do anything but fight them off. So far, he's divided his time between summoning keep lords and merchants to private talks whereat he gently threatens them, training his ever-growing bands of ruthless warriors and magelings behind wards no one can penetrate, and spending days in seclusion, no doubt crafting dastardly new spells. We

keep expecting his spellchamber door to open, and golems as tall as castle towers, and undead dragons with sixteen grafted-on heads, to come bursting out and lay waste to the keep . . . but thus far, only he comes strolling out."

Silence fell.

Ayantha lifted an eyebrow. "Have I frightened you into scuttling back to the City of Splendors yet, Brother?"

Handreth smiled slowly, and his eyes began to glow red.

At the sight of that, the darklash hissed and stiffened, arching back away from him in her chair.

Then she brought her lash around with vicious skill, letting the wizard taste it, right across his face.

His smile never changed.

"This," he told her, as her lash suddenly twisted in her hands, its strands leaping to coil around her neck and throttle her—then just as swiftly dropped away, leaving her reeling in her seat, coughing and gagging, "sounds like fun."

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#### *The Spellchamber Door Opens*

A tall, slender, darkly handsome man sat alone at the head of a long, polished table, his fingers clasped together under his chin. He was thinking, behind the faint half smile on his face that betrayed nothing.

In order to truly rule Zhentil Keep—not just lord it over the council—it would be necessary to break the power of the richest and most influential city merchants. Not to mention the hired wizards working for them.

The nobles he had already conquered, or could destroy at will. He just needed them to refrain from mustering arms against him and banding together while he dealt with the merchants.

The waylords. The sixteen men who could sway or cow all the other merchants and shopkeepers of the keep.

The sixteen who could not be throttled by surrounding their mansions and warehouses, and ruling the streets with sword and fist. The merchants whose mansions held Zhentil's Darkways, long-established magical gates linking those proud houses with certain mansions in Sembia. Allowing these sixteen to shuttle warriors, craftworkers, goods, and coins back and forth at will and in secret. Advantages that had won them all Sembian investments and Sembian backers whose aid they could easily call upon.

So "waylord" was a good name for them, even if only the Zhentarim called them by that name, or knew the sources of their power. To most citizens, they were merely the powerful merchants who dominated city life: folk to befriend and deal fairly with, who it was *very* unwise to make enemies of unless departing the city swiftly, never to return, and able to run far and fast. Sixteen men who shared a secret, but were a loose, often-feuding group, not a cabal or guild.

Yet true lords of the keep, for all that. Sixteen citizens who could quietly bring armies into the city without having to fight past the city walls or disembark at the docks.

They threatened the rule of anyone who sat on a throne in Zhentil Keep by their very existence. So they must die, and soon. The Zhentarim must seize and command their portals.

He had known this for years, but only now were his spells ready. Only now could he strike.

It was merely a matter of not putting a foot wrong in his swift, well-planned advance.

"If there is to be a Lord of the Darkways," Manshooon told the empty air around him, "let it be me."

He smiled at how much information he'd gathered by impersonating the wizard he'd just slain, Handreth Imbreth. Darklash Ayantha had screamed long and loud, and had proved every bit as tough as he'd expected. She should still be alive to scream for him a last time or two, when he was done here.

He reached out and pulled the cord that would tell his servants to open the doors and let his three most trusted underlings into the room.

#### *Waylords, Waylords Everywhere*

"He wants to know all you can call to mind of the waylords, so start thinking," Sneel said unpleasantly.

Kelgoran glowered. One day, Lorkus Sneel would take a step too far. . .

"Don't ever make the mistake of thinking the Brotherhood's warriors are dullards," Cadathen warned Sneel, as calmly as if he'd been discussing unchanging weather.

"I don't," Manshooon's most accomplished spy replied coldly and flatly.

"Very well then," the wizard Manshooon trusted most—because, they all knew, his Art was far too feeble to challenge the master's—replied affably, "don't make the mistake of treating them as if they are. It will only turn to bite you, when you'll least be able to afford that."

"Spare me your granddam's advice," Sneel hissed. He turned to face the warrior again. "Well?"

Ornthen Kelgoran was a veteran of many skirmishes in Thar and beyond, a hardened warrior who had become wise to the ways of the crowded stone city of Zhentil Keep, and who was Manshooon's best slayer of those who crossed him. He smiled. "Well, what?"

Sneel sighed. "Don't be—"

"A dullard? Sneel, your arrogance is only surpassed by your inability to judge others. A serious failing in a spy, I'd say."

Before Sneel could reply, the warrior swept out one brawny forearm in a florid herald's gesture, a violent movement that made the spy flinch.

Kelgoran chuckled and began to declaim. "Most important among the waylords—those the rest will follow—are five men."

He held up one hairy finger. "Srabbast Durloun, a dealer in textiles and footwear, and a greedy, coldly calm, burly mountain of a man. I know little of his hired wizard, Tanthar of Selgaunt, beyond an impressive reputation: scruples, powerful magic, widely traveled."

A second finger rose. "The importer of smoked meats and fine wines Besnar Calagaunt, who reminds me very much of you, Sneel. Thin, apt to sneer—but unlike you, handsome and elegant. Unmarried, too, and a scourge of the ladies—but a devout follower of Loviatar who lives and works with two young priestesses of the pain goddess, Darklash Ayantha and Painclaw Jessanna. I expect he's covered with scars, under all those silken jerkins."

A third finger joined the other two. "Fanthar! Halamaun, perhaps the wealthiest of the lot; he can afford two wizards of reputation: Ardthroth Thautan

of Chessenta, and a handsome, mustache-twirling Tethyrian who styles himself Valandro the Mysterious and defends himself with three swords that fly around under his command. You can be sure the master pays special attention to him."

"Leave the wizards to the master," Sneel said coldly. "Tell me of Halamaun."

"Short, ugly, a glutton. Grasping and greedy; the man's a landlord and a coinlender, what more need I say?"

"His trades."

"Uh, builder. And repairer of most buildings in the keep."

"Very well. Your fourth?"

"Mantras Jhoszelbur. Trader in metals and ores, owns our biggest foundry, two weaponsmi—"

"Three. He owns three, and is busily buying out a fourth."

"Very well. That many weaponsmiths' shops, five ships I know of"—Kelgoran paused, one brow raised in challenge, but Sneel merely nodded, so the warrior continued—"two steadings where war-horses are bred, reared, and trained, and a smallish coster or two."

"More interesting than all of that, though: Stormwands House. His own little school of wizardry, composed of the elderly mage Paerimrel of Amn and a dozen or so students, all young. They call themselves 'the Stormwands,' Jhoszelbur's old, short tempered, and—"

"Who are the most powerful of the Stormwands, the ones we must be wary of?"

"—ruthless. There are two Stormwands to beware: Rorymrar and Jonthyn. My men and I have gone drinking with them more than once, under the master's orders. They are . . . less accomplished

than they believe themselves to be, but dangerous nonetheless."

"That's four. The fifth?"

"Ambram Sarbuckho, a—"

Four guards in full and gleaming black armor stepped through the tapestries in front of them, then drew the tapestries back and secured them with chains. The full-face helmets that kept them anonymous made their voices boom; the nearest commanded, "Enough. The master is not in a patient mood. Enter."

The doors were thrust wide, revealing a thin wisp of smoke that coiled and then rose like a snake about to strike.

The three men had never seen such magic before, but they knew better than to hesitate. They strode forward, right through the smoke, and the guards slammed the doors behind them and went to their crossbows, fixed by firing ports that pierced the walls of the room beyond. Their loaded and ready bolts were tipped with a poison only Manshoon would take no harm from—for the First Lord of Zhentil Keep was a careful man.

#### *The Prize of Indispensability*

Manshoon waved the three to the waiting seats at the far end of the long, polished table, and regarded them expressionlessly. These were his most accomplished servants, which meant they were adept at acting loyal.

Sneel, Cadathen, and Kelgoran—useful to him in that descending order, yet utterly disposable whenever the need arose.

"As Sneel has no doubt revealed without actually saying so," he said flatly, "I have decided to free Zhentil Keep from the tyranny of the waylords. Now."

He looked to his spy. "Begin subtly spreading word through our usual mouths that Halamaun is finally sick of Dorloun, and is covertly gathering hired bully-blades to start killing Dorloun's employees, suppliers, and clients whenever they can be caught alone."

He waited for Sneel to nod then added, "You are also to start rumors that Jhoszelbur has decided to crush his longtime and increasingly successful rival Calagaunt. Further, you are to ensure that servants of all the waylords hear that the First Lord of the city is gathering power to decide who shall rise as lords in Zhentil Keep, and who shall be forced out of trade, the keep, and if need be, continued life. Then report back to me for additional orders."

Sneel nodded, but made no move to rise. The hint of a smile rose to Manshoon's lips.

"You are dismissed, Tarry not to try to overhear my orders to these two."

"Of course," Sneel replied, nodding low over the table before rising and smoothly making for the doors.

Manshoon waited for a signal—a single tap against the wall—after the doors had closed behind his departing spymaster. Then he looked at Kelgoran and spoke again.

"Gather your worst and most bumbling blades—those we need to test, and can easily afford to lose—for assaults on the mansions of Dorloun, Halamaun, and Jhoszelbur. Muster them at the warehouses, at the slaughterhouse, and at the Black Barrel; you choose which, for which. They're not to move, show themselves, or swing blades at anyone before I say so."

Kelgoran's nod was quick, and came with a pleased smile; he had already risen before Manshoon added, "Yes, you're dismissed."

The warrior's eager hastening brought a swift closing of the doors and the tap that followed them, leaving Manshoon and Cadathen alone together.

Whereupon the First Lord of Zhentil Keep drew a small, plain bone goblet from under the table, then an even smaller knife. Cadathen went pale.

"A renewal," Manshoon said calmly, drawing the blade along the outside edge of his hand. Dark red blood welled out, and he held his hand to let it run down his fingers and drip into the goblet, as he licked the knife clean, and slid it across the table to Cadathen.

Who deftly trapped it with his hand, rose and came to the goblet, gave himself a similar wound, licked the knife, and set it carefully down beside Manshoon, his hands trembling slightly.

When the goblet was full, the master's murmured word and swift gesture would enact the blood spell. After they both drank, any harm suffered by Manshoon would instantly also be dealt to Cadathen.

White-faced, he whispered, "Why is this necessary, Lord? Again?"

Manshoon smiled. "Call it a precaution that should hurt a loyal Cadathen not at all, but bestow upon a Cadathen of darker deed or intent a fitting traitor's reward. I need your silence, but also need you to know my plan, so you can adjust matters out in the streets and mansions to ensure it has the effects I desire. So heed well."

He cast the spell, they both drank from the glowing goblet, and Manshoon waved Cadathen back to his seat.

Only after the still-pale wizard was settled again did he add, "The waylords will be broken—or

eliminated—by an enchantment I have just perfected, that will very soon be cast upon all of the Darkways. Anyone who passes through those portals thereafter will die, horribly and instantly, as my spell transforms all the blood in their veins to a potent flesh-melting acid.”

Cadathen looked excited, but uneasy. “But will the Darkways not prove useful, in time to come?”

“They will. As doors that open when I want them to, not doors standing open always that can let sellsword armies hired in Sembia flood into the very heart of Zhentil Keep whenever some greedy Sembian or other decides our gems and metals make the keep worth the trouble of plundering. Even beholders can only slay so many sellswords before they get overwhelmed and hacked apart. And should such a dark day come, wizards like me—and you—will survive far less time than elder eye tyrants like Arglath or Xalanxlan.”

Cadathen nodded, wincing.

“So traversing the Darkways will be fatal except when I remove my spells,” Manshoon purred. “And only I will know when those times are. Making me too valuable for anyone who cares for Zhentil Keep to slay. I low being indispensable.”

#### *Windtatter Moon Rising*

Rain had stopped lashing at the windowpanes, and there was moonlight at last.

A weary but very happy Lord Bellander rose on his elbows and gazed out the window.

“Ah,” he murmured. “A windtatter moon.”

“Indeed,” replied the senior priestess lying bare and beautiful in the bed beside him. “It’s why I’m here.”

Bellander lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? Not for me?”  
Bride of Darkness Orpharla sat up rather briskly. “The Dread God revealed to Lord Holy Fzoul that the next windtatter moon would bring great peril to House Bellander. I’m here to keep you alive until morning.”

“And after that?”

“After that, Lord Bellander,” Orpharla said coldly, “your survival is in your own hands. Our most recent visions suggest we’ll be rather busy trying to keep Zhentil Keep from erupting into civil war.”

#### *The Reapers Loosed*

There arose heavy thuds of many staves and axes crashing against the doors, right on cue. His hired armymen had timed matters rather well.

In response, guards shouted and came running; Manshoon smiled tightly and worked the spell that would make them really shout.

They did more than that. Some of them screamed and fled wildly through the mansion, crashing past tables and toppling sculptures and suits of armor.

The illusion he’d spun, of a beholder drifting menacingly forward, all of its eyestalks writhing, would circle the room he was in now.

The room where Waylord Fornlar Dartreth’s Darkway flickered and glowed, now alone and unguarded.

His more important casting didn’t take long; this was his tenth murmuring of the spell. When he was done, the Darkway blazed up brightly for a moment as if angered by his magic, then settled back down to glowing just as it had before.

The First Lord of Zhentil Keep gave it a sardonic salute and smile, and let his ring take him on to the next mansion.

Most of the waylords were elsewhere, gathered at Harlstrand House—whose wine cellar was the best, and feasting hall the grandest—to debate what to do about a certain upstart Manshoon and his rising power in the city. Sneel was very good at what he did; one waylord-shaking crisis, conjured up in less time than it took to eat a good meal.

He stood now in a rather colder room, hung with dark tapestries and occupied by another Darkway—and two astonished guards, who raised their spears and reached for an alarm gong.

Manshoon waved one hand and gave them slumber. His armymen would need some time to hasten through the streets and reach the front doors of this high house; it would be best if no alarm was raised until their sudden assault on its doors.

This was all going very smoothly. He strode to where he could stand over the guards, and look to see if they had any useful magic he could confiscate.

“Let the reaping begin,” he murmured aloud, “and the fortunes of the waylords wane.”

#### *Interlude in Innarlith*

“Outlander!” the High Constable of Innarlith roared, “Come forth!”

On either side of his broad, bright-armored shoulders stood a trio of impassive constables, their armor as gleaming as his own, wands ready in their hands. When one challenges a wizard, it is best to be prepared.

High Constable Lhoreld smote the door with his mace, a glancing blow that marked but did not dent it—yet sent an echoing thunder through the bedchamber behind that door. “Elminster!” he bellowed. “You were seen to steal royal paints and brushes, and bring them to this place! Thief, stand forth!”

The door swung open.

Out of the lamplit dimness beyond strode a tall, slender, white-bearded man, barefoot and in fact—the High Constable’s eyes bulged—wearing only hundreds of smears of dried paint and a lady’s diaphanous nightgown pulled around himself. He leaned unconcernedly against the doorpost in what could only be described as an indolent—even jaunty—pose.

“Aye? Have ye brought wine?”

High Constable Lhoreld went a little crimson around the temples, and his nostrils flared. On either side of him, his constables went from looking impassive to looking stern, as they hastily leveled their wands at the man in the doorway.

“You stand in the Fortress Royal, wizard!” Lhoreld shouted. “In the name of the Spaerenza, Royal Ruler of Innarlith, I arrest you to face justice! You have stolen her art supplies—”

Elminster made a rude sound, and a ruder gesture. “Pah! I have *not*.”

“Do—do you *mock* me, man?” The High Constable was incredulous. “The Spaerenza’s paints are all *over* you, from head to toe! D’you think me *blind*?”

“Nay,” Elminster drawled. “Merely stupid.” He peered, to make sure none of the constables was clutching a decanter behind his back, then added, “Too stupid to bring any wine, at least.”

“I’ll not bandy words with you, wizard! I require your instant submission—on your knees, man, and

hold out your wrists to be manacled! You’ll be brought before Her Exaltedness for your punishment forthwith, and—”

“Punishment? Surely ye might want to determine my guilt, first? Or perhaps my innocence? Or has Innarlith no laws at all but the whim of its High Constable?”

Lhoreld was now purple and shaking. “Do—do you *seriously* mean to claim you did not steal art supplies, when sworn witnesses—over a score of servants and courtiers—saw you do so?”

“I do mean to make that very claim. I stole *nothing*. And I can produce my own witnesses to attest to my claim.”

“Oh? Outlanders in your employ?” The High Constable sneered.

“No, personages that even a thick-headed wind-bag of a High Constable might have heard of. Let me begin with the Spaerenza herself. Then a certain Lord Wizard of the city, Uldimar Bronneth—ye may know him better as the Marquavarl; their son, Prince Hajorn, oh, and the Princesses Amaelra and Marinthra, too.”

“Ah *hah*. You are aware that bearing false witness against the royal family of Innarlith is itself a very serious crime?”

“I am,” Elminster confirmed, smilingly. “I believe ye’ll find them happy to state my innocence in this matter.”

The High Constable’s utter disbelief was written very clearly across his face. “Oh? And I suppose the Lord Protector can speak for you, too?”

“No, I fear not,” Elminster replied gravely. “However, both of his subordinates—the Dukes Henneth and Portlandur—were present, and can attest—”

“I’ll bet they can.” Lhoreld sneered. “I’ll just bet they can. In fact, wizard, I’m going to wager my career on that. If you can’t get any of these worthies to swear your words are true, you’ll wither away to bones chained to the coldest, wettest wall in the deepest of our dungeons, down where the rats go to die! I’ll escort you there myself, without delay! Stand forth from yon doorway, or my men will smite you down!”

“Really,” Elminster said reprovingly, like a kindly but disappointed mother to an angry child, “that won’t be necessary—”

“Wizard, step away from yon door!”

With a sigh and a shrug, spreading open and empty hands, Elminster did as he was commanded, the constables smoothly surrounding him—whereupon the constable directly behind Elminster was imperiously swept aside by someone else coming to the door.

The new arrival was a tall, scantily clad woman whose fine features were known to everyone in Innarlith—from the coins in their purses, if from nowhere else. She pointed a glowing scepter at Lhoreld.

“I trust you recognize me, High Constable,” she said softly, ignoring the trembling, retreating constables to stare steadily at Lhoreld.

He went pale, fought to keep his gaze above her chin, then flushed and hastily looked away, stammering. “Y—yes, Great Spaerenza, I—”

“As it happens, Lord Elminster *did* spend the night with me. And my husband. After agreeing to my request, relayed by the Marquavarl—”

Right on cue, the Lord Wizard of Innarlith appeared in the doorway beside the Spaerenza. His nakedness was only partially concealed behind an

unfinished portrait he was carrying, of an entwined naked couple whose features—though not yet entirely limned—were unmistakably those of the ruler of Innarlith and her husband. Straightening the painting, he gave Lhoreld what could only be described as a sheepish smirk.

The High Constable swallowed, looked at the floor, and firmly turned his attention back to what the SpaerENZA was still saying.

“—to paint us, something that was overheard and applauded by all three of our royal offspring, and the Dukes Henneth and Porlandur, just as the Lord Elminster has informed you. I trust you will believe me, despite your reluctance to extend the same courtesy to him?”

“I—ah—uh—yes, Your Exaltedness! I—ah—most humbly apologize for—”

Lhoreld’s clumsy attempt at groveling was interrupted by a soundless thunder that smote every brain and stilled all sound for as long as it took a bright blue mist to arise out of nowhere and wash through the Fortress Royal.

Everyone trembled from the sheer force of magic rolling through them, as lightning raced through the mist.

Hair stood on end, all over everyone’s body, as the awed constables went to their knees, followed by Lhoreld and the Lord Wizard . . . and then, weeping in ecstasy, the SpaerENZA herself.

They were all staring at two eyes in the mist, eyes the size of warriors’ shields that were drifting nearer in the air, heading unblinkingly for the paint-smeared man who was still on his feet.

*Elminster, you are needed urgently in Zhentil Keep.*

“Goddess,” Elminster murmured, going down on one knee.

The force of Mystra’s divinity had driven the constables face-down on the floor, as the royal couple of Innarlith gaped at the great face now shaping itself out of the air.

*Manshoon has altered the Darkways, making passage through them fatal. The dead include many of the Art, including accomplished mages like Ardmoth Thauntan, Hoal of the Stormwands, and Handreth Imbreth of Waterdeep, the latest of Sarbuckho’s hirelings. Mend this crime, El.*

“Lady, I will,” Elminster promised, rising and reaching a hand toward the bedchamber door. His robes, clout, boots, and belt of many pouches raced to him.

*Wizards must not be slain out of hand, be they the cause of this or not—yet destroy not the gates.*

Elminster nodded, boots in hand—as blue light flared around him, and he was gone.

And with him went mist, lightning, Mystra, and all. Leaving the folk of Innarlith blinking at each other across a suddenly empty passage.

Rising unsteadily, tears still raining from her chin as if from a downspout, the SpaerENZA gave her High Constable a rather rueful grin.

“I’d say it’s a good thing you didn’t actually arrest our guest, Lhoreld. It makes it far easier for all of us to forget any of this happened, don’t you think?”

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#### *An Unlooked-For Messenger*

The alleyway was thankfully deserted, but the cold and the distinctive reek—an unhealthy mix of smelting, woodsmoke from a thousand-some chimneys, and rotting fish—told him he’d arrived in Zhentil Keep.

“Thank ye, Mystra,” Elminster murmured, hastily pulling on his boots. The goddess was, after all, why he had a deserted alley to dress in.

Right behind Fantharl Halamaun’s mansion, too.

He went round to the front as he cast a hasty spell to make his garments smarter and darker, to go with the younger and more prosperous face he was giving himself. After all, a messenger from Halamaun’s Sembian backers would either come through the Darkway, or seek entrance at the front doors.

The waylord’s guards were expecting trouble; two mountainous hulks in full armor overlooked by four crossbowmen who looked more than ready to fire.

“Emrayn Melkanthar, from Sembia, to see Fantharl Halamaun. Immediately,” Elminster made crisp reply to the guards’ challenge.

“The lord is not at home,” was the flat reply.

“I’ll await him in his forehall,” he responded, just as flatly.

“We are to admit no one—”

“You will make an exception, or your master will be far less than pleased.”

One of the crossbowmen vanished from the balcony above the doors, and returned with a handsome, richly dressed man with a styled and curved mustache.

“Valandro!” the Sembian greeted him, before the wizard could say a word. The Tethyrian frowned.

“I know you not, saer. Who are you, and how is it you know me?”

“I am Emrayn Melkanthar, and I am come from certain men in Sembia Halamaun does business with. Men who like to know with whom they deal—wherefore I was shown your likeness, and told you were Valandro the Mysterious these days, though I know you of old as—”

"Enough," the Tethyrian said sharply. Drawing two wands from his belt, he leaned over the balcony rail, and said curtly to the guards below, "Let him in. I'll be responsible."

He hastened down to meet the Sembian, wands aimed and ready, but was seen to go quiet and fall into step beside Melkanthar, leading the Sembian away from the forchall and along passages toward the rear of the house.

When they reached the chamber that held Halamaun's Darkway, Valandro the Mysterious dismissed the guards there, closed the doors to keep them out and himself and the Sembian in, then stood like an impassive statue as Melkanthar strode slowly around the glowing portal, nodded, and cast a swift, tentative spell. Only to frown and cast another.

"There," he said aloud. "Manshoon's enchantment now no longer transforms the blood of users, but instead works on their minds, promoting one of the most feeble spells they already know how to cast—and making it the only spell they can cast. Vulnerability, but not instant death. Aye, that should do it."

He strode past the motionless and unseeing Valandro to the door, but was still reaching for its handle when it was flung wide, and four guards with leveled glaives thrust forward into the room, an angry Fantharl Halamaun right behind them.

"Die, foul Zhentarim!" the waylord snapped. "Not content to—"

"Hold!"

Magic lashed forth from the intruder with force enough to send Halamaun's guards staggering back, dropped polearms clanging and clattering.

"No Zhentarim am I," said the stranger. "I am of the Vigilant Ravens."

Fantharl Halamaun blinked. The Ravens were a powerful Sembian cabal that opposed Manshoon's rise to power, but he'd thought they'd not do anything beyond offering him bad prices and a chill welcome in Sembian markets.

"Your wizard Ardmoth Thautan died using your Darkway," the Sembian continued, "because Manshoon cast a spell on it that turns the blood of anyone passing through it to acid. I've countered his spell; it is safe to use again."

Halamaun glowered at the intruder, then nodded grudgingly. "I—I just heard from some fellow traders of their Darkways becoming deathtraps. You know Manshoon is behind this?"

The Sembian nodded. "By way of payment, Halamaun"—the builder stiffened, but the Sembian waved a contemptuous hand and continued—"suppose you tell me the name of one of Manshoon's worst, ah, enforcers. The warriors he sends to do his open slayings. I feel in need of some . . . sport."

Fantharl Halamaun drew his lips back from his teeth in a mirthless smile. "Ornthen Kelgoran. He won't be hard to find—he fears no man of the city who isn't his master Manshoon or an upperpriest of Bane."

"That will change," was the calm reply.

No knife nor spell tested Elminster's wards as he stalked out of Halamaun's house. He turned two street corners before he relinquished his hold over the mind of Valandro the Mysterious, leaving behind whirling confusion as to what Emrayn Melkanthar of Sembia had looked like.

Not that the Tethyrian would have much time to ponder. Unless Halamaun was far less scared than El had judged him to be, he would keep Valandro and his overdone mustache very busy spreading word to his fellow waylords of what Manshoon had done.

#### *At the Drowning Hippocampus*

In Zhentil Keep, richly dressed strangers attracted unhealthy attention in far safer drinking and wenching clubs than the noisome, dimly lit Drowning Hippocampus, so El altered his guise again, becoming a filthy, stooped old man in fittingly foul robes.

Besides, the Sembian's coins had served their purpose, buying the news of Ornthen Kelgoran's present whereabouts from several eager tongues. It seemed Kelgoran wasn't well loved, or was well feared, or both. Probably both.

Now, the man would either be dominating the bar with goblet in hand and tongue a-wag, or abed somewhere with a lowcoin lass. Or two.

El shuffled through the doors, into near darkness and an all-too-familiar din and reek of spilled drink, unwashed bodies, spew, and burnt cabbage. Why all of these places had to smell of scorched cabbage was beyond him, but . . .

To the owner of the first hostile glare directed his way, El mumbled, "Urgent message for Kelgoran—where be he?"

"Rutting in the back," was the reply. "Best wait for him to—"

El stumbled past, and down the hall his informant had nodded toward. At its very end he discovered a guard sitting against a door with a loaded crossbow across his knees.

That bow got aimed at his crotch with menacing speed. "Go away," its owner suggested tersely.

"Message for Kelgoran from Lord Manshoon," El growled back. "Still want me to go away?"

"How do I know you speak truth?"

"You'll know," El replied, thrusting his head forward, jaw first, "when Manshoon rewards you—either for helping me reach Kelgoran, or for being less than helpful."

He let two dancing flames kindle in his eyes, just for a moment, and the guard recoiled with comical speed, swallowing and trying to claw his way upright and seeking to slide sideways along the wall and out of the way, all at once. "R-right the other side of the door, S-saer Zhent!" he offered breathlessly.

"Good," Elminster replied with a gleeful grin—as he plucked up the crossbow to aim it back down the passage, and trigger it.

Its loud *clack* was followed by a groan from the Zhentarim enforcer back down the far end of the passage, as its bolt sank deep into his chest.

Then Elminster kicked the door open and whirled the door guard around in front of him as a shield in one whirling motion, his hand clamped like a steel trap on the bones of the man's elbow.

The room beyond was almost filled by a bed. It was creaking as a cursing and very hairy man scrambled out from under a hissing-in-fear woman, reaching for his sword.

He stopped when El's spell took hold of his mind.

Almost absently El flung the guard into the coinlass as she came at him furiously, her hands like claws. There'd be time enough to compel her mind later—and the guard's, too, if need be.

Right now, he had something more urgent to do. His sudden arrival in the dark and raging cesspit of Ornthen Kelgoran's mind had alerted Manshoon, just as he'd expected.

Smiling savagely, El destroyed the First Lord's "eye" in Kelgoran's mind, searing Manshoon's magic

swiftly enough to leave its distant owner not knowing who'd burst into his enforcer's mind, or why.

That should bring Manshoon out of whatever bed he was sporting in, right now, and set him to doing things that would add decidedly more fun to the unfolding proceedings.

The guard and the coinlass were still shrieking and tumbling on the floor when Ornthen Kelgoran burst past them, sword in hand but not bothering to snatch up and put on anything more than his boots, to hurry out into the streets with the strange old man.

The Zhentarim slayer was more than a little drunk, and was a cruel, unsubtle brute at the best of times, but he knew exactly where all of the waylords dwelt.

Under Elminster's mental goading, he loped through the streets with a no-longer-stumbling old man right beside him, heading for the nearest Darkway just as fast as he could.

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#### Guidance Gives Out

Elminster shuddered at the sudden burst of mental pain, then sighed. It was too late; Ornthen Kelgoran was toppling, almost beheaded, his mind dying with dazing speed.

Elminster broke contact and let the Zhentilar fall, spraying blood as his head wobbled loosely on what was left of a thick, hairy neck. Thrice he'd held Kelgoran unmoving at each Darkway, to keep the man helpless as he altered Manshoon's slaying spell to his own.

This fourth time, the guards of Torcastle Towers had been just a bit too swift and bold. He hadn't even

begun the spell, yet here they were, with Kelgoran cut down and eight uniformed slayers charging at the one remaining intruder, howling all sorts of unpleasant things as their swords sought his life.

Elminster ducked away from one, almost collided with another who'd raced around to gut him from behind, and flung himself flat on his back. The startled Torcastle guard stumbled over him, off-balance and trying unsuccessfully to stab downward with a sword that was too long to draw back far enough to stab, and ran right into the guard who'd been hounding El.

Lying on the smooth, polished, cold stone floor, Mystra's man sighed and worked a spell that plucked all the guards off their heavy-booted feet and flung them at the ceiling high above.

They slammed into it with gratifyingly heavy thuds, swords and daggers fell from various hands—and then they all came crashing back down.

El stayed on his back amid the groans, knowing this wasn't done yet. He had to prevail swiftly, or servants and guards from all over Torcastle's mansion would be in here, and readying crossbows, and he didn't have *time* for all of this foolishness—

Four guards came swaying unsteadily to their feet after their journeys aloft and back again; one of them even still had hold of his sword.

Elminster rolled to his feet. "Keep back," he warned them. "I have no quarrel with any of ye. Just let me be, and—"

He knew his words were wasted even before he said them, but Mystra expected her agents to wield their Art with some sense of responsibility. Four guards came charging—and a fifth was crawling toward a fallen weapon, giving El a murderous glare.

Elminster sighed, worked a simple spell, and watched as the closest guard got plucked to his death, hurled through the portal that would boil his life-blood into acid at its far end. Well, certain Sembians *did* need fair warning of all of this.

That bought him time enough to use another spell on the others to fling them away into battering collisions with the walls of the room. Then he threw one into another, and hauled the crawler up off the floor to crash into the faces of two reeling guards.

Everyone went down, buying him enough time to circle around behind the Darkway, to where he could keep an eye on them all, and work the spell he needed to cast.

Fresh shouts came from the doors of the room as the portal flared, but Elminster's next spell had snatched him away out of Torcastle Towers even before the crossbow bolts came singing through the spot where he'd stood.

He was in a hurry. Manshoon would be roused and at work by now, and a certain servant of Mystra had to find another Zhentarim who knew where the rest of the Darkways were.

And as every wayfarer knows, good guides are always hard to find.

#### Sitting Alone in Highturrets

Morlar Elkavren was a waylord, and lived in a towering pile of stone, a great rising prow of tall windows, balconies, and spires that would look most looming impressive against the winking stars, to someone who had time to stand in awe.

Elminster wasn't such a someone, just now. It was enough that he knew Elkavren and the location of his home—Highturrets, an apt name if there ever was one—and that somewhere in that vast mansion was a Darkway.

And if he knew his Zhentarim, word would have spread among them by now that some stranger was tracking down Darkway after Darkway. They would be hunting for this stranger, and massing defenders around each portal to watch for his approach—or, for the Darkways they didn't yet control, around the mansions that held such portals.

Which was why Elminster now looked not like a bearded man, but a slender, rather dirty young woman clad in a hooded cloak, high boots, and not much else.

"Warm you, saer?" she husked hopefully, to the parade of dark-armored men striding swiftly down her alleyway.

One of them whirled, sword half-grating out. "Get gone, sister!" he barked. "Well away from here, and come not back, or it'll be the last thing you ever do!"

Her reply was to duck her head, hiss angrily, and—once the Zhentilar were past—scurry hastily out of the alcove she'd been loitering in and flee the way they'd come.

"Who's you?" someone barked, from ahead.

"A streetskirts," another man replied. "They've turned her out; let her go."

El paused for a moment at the cross street where those two Zhents stood, and murmured fearfully, "Which one of you is the wizard?"

"Why?" the first Zhent snarled.

"F for later," she quavered. "I was told to find him, another night, so I need to know what he looks like. Then I'll go."

Cold eyes measured her for a moment, ere the second Zhent turned and pointed. "There. He's called Cadathen. Likes redheads."

The coinless shook back her hood and opened her cloak, flouncing just enough to make it swirl. Long, unbound red hair swirled, too, though the mens' eyes sought certain other revealed features.

"Thank you," she husked, before they could do more than grin, and hurried away. She didn't bother to tell them that her thanks were to Mystra, for the fact that the magic "she" was using could shift the hue of hair even faster than it took to pull open a garment.

She had to find a Zhent in armor about the same size as Ornthen Kelgoran, before the ring forming around Highturrets got completely settled. Ah—there!

"You're the one," she purred, throwing off her cloak to reveal her complete lack of weapons—and all her now-buxom charms—to the startled Zhentilar trudging along the street, his head down and his mood dark.

He gaped at her. "What, by all the gods—?"

"Take me," she hissed, whirling him into a doorway. "Here and now! I've been watching you for months, I'm crazed about you, I *must* have you! 'Twill take but moments, then give me your name, and I'll find you for longer dalliances on later nights! Please, my lord!"

Rather dazedly the Zhentilar ran a disbelieving hand down the warm, smooth flesh offered to him, then hurriedly started to unbuckle and unfasten. "Name's Vorl, lass! Watching me for months? Who are you?"

"Jahanna Darwood, of the keep; my father's Brace Darwood; seller of roof tiles and stone, and very wealthy . . ."

"Tell me later," Vorl snarled, shoving her back against the wall as his breeches sought his ankles. "We must be quick!"

The suddenly melting mask of flesh that smothered him as he tried to kiss it retained a mouth. As he sagged into senselessness, it agreed in a very different voice, "Aye, we must. Sleep now, lusty Vorl. I'll be tying ye to the door, I'm afraid; can't have ye racing back to reclaim thy armor before I'm done with it."

A few hard, swift breaths later, a man in a cloak was bound to the door—and his exact likeness was hurrying off down the street in full armor, head down and hand on his sword.

"Vorl, you laggard," an older Zhentilar hailed him with a snarl, "where've you been? Rutting in doorways, all the way from the tavern?"

"Well, uh, yes," Vorl admitted, but his low mumble was barely audible, and the Zhentilar wasn't listening.

"Get over here, you lazy dog! We're to form a ring all around Highturrets—and your reward for being last boots in is getting to stand guard right *there*, hard by the jakes!"

"There" was an embrasure in a building's cracked and much-patched back wall, filled with rotting litter and containing a long-boarded-up door. It faced a matching alcove across the street, where a wooden bench with a hole in its seat had been placed over a large, square open shaft leading down into the infamous city sewers. Two unhappy-looking sternhelms were busy rigging up a blanket in a frame of spears, to serve as both a door and a wall for future patrons of the little seat, who might desire some privacy while they were sitting alone.

A jakes. It seemed the Zhentilar were expecting a lengthy siege.

Sternhelm Vorl growled a curse, because that would be expected, and trudged to his post, kicking aside the worst of the reeking, slimy refuse. He hoped he'd not have to wait long.

Mystra smiled on him; he'd barely had time to grow bored and cold ere the wizard Cadathen came in search of the jakes, blowing on chilled fingers and snarling some curses of his own.

If the Zhentilar mage was surprised that a Zhentilar sternhelm crossed the narrow street to hold the blanket open for him, he didn't show it.

He was surprised when the warrior stepped into the alcove with him, pulling the blanket closed, but only for a moment.

After that, he had no time left to be surprised about anything, ever again.

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#### *As The Lord Mage Commands*

"Cold, hey? Sitting alone over the sewers, I mean?"

Holding the rank of battlecaptain, Galandror dared to exchange such pleasantries with Zhentilar mages. Well, he'd not do so with the Lord Manshoon, but Cadathen was very far from—

"Too cold," the wizard said curtly. "We're not waiting the night through out here. Storm the gates."

Galandror and his fellow battlecaptain, Narleth, exchanged surprised glances, then nodded in unison. "By your command, Lord Mage."

Cadathen smiled and threw his shoulders back, like a pigeon about to preen. Obviously, he liked the sound of "Lord Mage."

Narleth used the title again, quickly. "The front gates, Lord Mage?"

Cadathen shook his head. "The rear. I'll destroy them with a spell, and the doors behind them too. You get our blades in there fast, secure the chamber that holds the Darkway, then drive out everyone in that end of the mansion. I want no one creeping up on us while I set to work on it."

"Set to work on it, Lord Mage?" Galandror asked warily. There'd been no hint of this in their orders, and Lord Manshoon wanted them to be watchful for traitors everywhere. Among his magelings, in particular.

Cadathen gave both battlecaptains calm, direct looks. "I suspect our unknown foe who's seeking out Darkways is either hiding in them, or enspelling them to serve as scrying foci, so henceforth he can spy on the rooms that hold them, from afar. I need to cast a spell on the Darkway inside yon mansion, to see if my suspicions are correct. And all of us will have warmth, chairs to sit on, and whatever food and drink can be found in a waylord's mansion, rather than freezing our behinds outside on a dark street all night."

The Zhentilar nodded, reassured.

They collected their men swiftly, Narleth leading a dozen around the front to bang on the main gates and hold Elkavren's guards there while Cadathen forced entry at the rear of the towering mansion.

"Right," the wizard snarled, when Galandror came striding back to tell him all was ready. "Let's get warm."

He raised his hands, murmured something, and the night exploded in fire.

*Guarding Flickering Silence*

"Secure, Lord Mage." Galandrör's tone was almost respectful.

Narleth had just returned and made his report. Only two Zhentilar had been killed, though Morlar Elkavren would need to replace most of his house guards and a goodly number of his household servants. The cowering lord was shut up in his own guestrooms above his front gate, with watchful stern-helms to keep him there—and not one member of Elkavren's household was both still alive and nearer to the chamber that held the Darkway than the central feasting hall.

"Well done," Cadathen replied, turning to the glowing portal. "Now to make sure this hasn't been tainted by the foe's magic."

The two battlecaptains watched him closely, of course, but they were not to know that the spell he cast was doing no such thing, and instead was altering Manshoon's slaying spell into his own less fatal magic—just as they were not to know Cadathen was really the infamous archwizard Elminster.

Suspicion was clear on their tense, grim faces, but they visibly relaxed as nothing seemed to happen. Other than Cadathen stepping back to nod in satisfaction and tell them, "Our foe worked a magic so he could spy through this, just as I suspected. He won't be doing that now."

When nothing more happened, the two warriors relaxed even more—and soon threw daggers to see who would first go foraging in the kitchens and pantries, and who would first settle down to the tense, waiting boredom of guarding the empty, silently flickering Darkway.

*Whispers at the Feast*

Though Manshoon knew the waylords were meeting in a high house not all that far away, he kept all hint of his knowing any such thing to himself.

Here, in this grand feasting hall, he was a guest of the most powerful nobles of the city, and was taking great care not to remind them of his ruthless side or the mighty magic he could hurl. Nobles tended to dislike upstarts who threatened them—particularly upstarts who could destroy them at will. His presence was all about reassurance, building alliances if not friendships, and making common cause.

Not to mention establishing a firm alibi for himself, for when word spread of all the waylords slain or embattled, and the survivors began to hurl their furious accusations.

Manshoon smiled and thanked his host for the excellent wine.

And why not? It held not even a trace of poison, after all.

His host, directly across the goblet- and platter-crowded table from him, was Lord Syal Amandon, the callow, bewildered-by-the-world son of Manshoon's onetime nemesis, the thankfully dead old snow lion Rorst Amandon.

Syal was swiftly falling under his sway, and Manshoon was anxious to keep matters that way. The other nobles—particularly old Hael and Phandymm—knew exactly what he was up to, but had thus far done nothing about it. He saw the anger and contempt glittering in their gazes, but they continued to say and do not the smallest thing to cross the First Lord. Manshoon couldn't read them—long-established wealth bought

wards and shieldings subtle spells couldn't pierce—but looked forward to any opportunity to learn what they were truly thinking.

Hopefully one would arise before they were busily trying to put swords through him.

The three younglings were another matter. Lord Thaerun Blackryn, like Syal, was the pale shell of a more formidable sire. Young, hot-blooded, quick to boast, and cunning, he spent most of his hatred and energy trying to best and frustrate his rival, Lord Mindarl Naerh. Who did the same in return. Supercilious and swift-tongued, Naerh was a decade older than Blackryn—and every whit as ignorant of the world.

Belator, now, was a very different creature. As graspingly ambitious as Manshoon himself, and thus easily understood and used. With about as much safety as one "uses" a snake.

That left only Eldarr and his ilk; as old as Hael and Phandymm, but less keen of wit and far less self-governed. They were the arrogant, red-faced ranting, patrician sophisticates every minstrel lampooned, the sort of nose-aloft old growler that shopkeepers of the city thought all nobles were like. Which meant they could be ignored until it became necessary to crush them.

And Manshoon was growing adept at effortlessly crushing the Lord Murvyn Eldarrs of the world.

So it was with more than a little irritation—all signs of which were firmly kept off his face, for controlling his own face and voice were the first skills a far younger Manshoon had honed—that the First Lord of Zhentil Keep received an unexpected spell-sent message in his head.

*F: first Lord?*

The mind touch was wildly nervous and fearful. It was Joranthas, an aging Zhentarim too weak to be disloyal—and too weak to deal with much in the way of trouble. Which is what this missive would surely be about.

*Lord Manshoon, I bring news. Joranthas was still frightened, but a little less frantic.*

*Yes? he thought back.*

*Ah, Lord, there's trouble at Wyrmhaven. I just... fled from there.*

*No doubt. Continue.*

*Ambram Sarbuckho returned from his meeting while our forces were still fighting his household servants to get to his Darkway. His bodyguards and hireswords had crossbows, and their quarrels were tipped with poison. Things went badly for our side.*

*Thank you, Joranthas. Get to cover.*

Manshoon spent his flare of rage in a mental slap that both thrust Joranthas out of his mind and dealt the old fool a headache that should leave him reeling for days. He was icily calm a moment later, when he turned to beckon Sneel from where the man stood like a servant against the wall.

"Forgive me, Lord Amandon," he said smoothly to his host, ignoring Lord Hael's glower of suspicion, "but I've just remembered that the servants who usually pump my water are ill; I must send my retainer to give orders to others to do their work, or the cook will have a dry kitchen long before morning."

"Of course," Syal said heartily, even before Sneel bent his ear to Manshoon's lips.

He kept his whispers short and simple. "Trouble at Wyrmhaven; Sarbuckho's back, and his men have poisoned bows. Get Cadathen to crush them utterly. No excuses. Report back soon."

Sneel bowed low and hastened away, and Manshoon turned back to the table with an easy smile.

He wasn't smiling inside. Cadathen had to be victorious, or the Zhentarim would lose far too many minor magelings at Wyrmhaven—if they weren't dead already. More importantly, he dared not let Sarbuckho prevail, and become a clear example of successfully defying the Brotherhood. If the waylord won the night's fray, his victory would hearten many others into their own rebellions against the Zhentarim, large and small.

He ached to be racing to Wyrmhaven himself, to hurl spells to smash and rend Sarbuckho and his every last blade and servant—and instead he was stuck here, wearing an empty smile, and taking great care to use no magic at all over eveningfeast. Well, almost no magic.

Lord Belomyr Hael was starting to smile. Bane take Mystra, but the old wolf could scent his discomfort!

Hael was old, graying and growling, a worldly conservative—and right beside him, grandly adorned elbow to grandly adorned elbow, Lord Goraund Phandymm was an even older worldly and pragmatic conservative.

They were both smiling now, almost as if they could read his mind.

Could they?

But no, he'd worked spells a hundred times to check on that. They were just good at reading the smallest signs—tightness of lip, the briefest flash of an eye—but toothless old wolves for all that.

Down the table, Lord Samrel Belator helped himself to a decanter that was already almost empty. Now there was a contrast: young, handsome, athletic, an embracer of new ways and ideas... Manshoon's real competition.

Well, such perils could be humbled—or killed—tomorrow.

Tonight, he needed an alibi rather more.

Manshoon put on his best innocent smile, reached for the nearest decanter, and devoted himself to making empty small talk.

Cadathen would take care of things.

Cadathen would have to.

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#### *Orders Upon Orders*

The man came through the curtains very quietly, but the two battlecaptains spun around, swords flashing.

"Halt!" Galandrör barked, drawing his dagger and hefting it for a throw. Narleth came around the Darkway to flank his fellow Zhentilar, barring the intruder's path to the portal, and to Cadathen.

Then they recognized him and fell silent.

"I bring orders from the Lord Manshoon," Lorkus Sneel said, with just a trace of weariness. "Hinder me and face his wrath."

The battlecaptains lowered their swords a little.

"Cadathen," Sneel said, "you are ordered to gather all of the Brotherhood's forces you feel you need, proceed in haste to Wyrmhaven, the house of the Waylord Ambram Sarbuckho, and slay everyone there who resists you to take possession of the Darkway. Sarbuckho returned from Harlstrand House while our force was still fighting through the halls of Wyrmhaven, and his bodyguards used poisoned crossbow bolts; our force is all dead or fled."

"Take me there," Cadathen replied promptly, "so you can tell the master what decisions I make, and how I fare."

"How you begin, rather," Sneel corrected him. "My orders are to report back to the master soonest."

"Very well." Cadathen fell into step beside him, calling back over his shoulder, "Battlecaptains, remain here and guard this Darkway!"

Even before they replied, he was through the curtain with Sneel, and hastening through the empty, echoing mansion, heading for Wyrmhaven.

#### *Rally and Betrayal*

The handful of blood-spattered, wounded Zhentilar crouching in the cold alleyway were in pain, and angry. They snarled out a stream of curses as they told Cadathen they had fled for their lives, or been driven out of Wyrmhaven, leaving many fellow members of the Brotherhood dead inside. Ambram Sarbuckho was victorious.

Cadathen put his arms around two of the least disabled, gathered them to him, and whispered, "And you know why Sarbuckho defeated you? He was warned of your coming by the man who came here with me. Yes, Lorkus Sneel, the master's messenger. He betrayed you. He betrayed us all." He let go of them and strode off down the alley to find more Zhents.

Sneel strode after him—and Cadathen carefully didn't look back as a brief commotion arose behind him, a thudding and snarling that ended in a wet spattering sound.

When he did turn around, the two Zhentilar were following him, their swords dripping in their hands... and the huddled heap that had been Sneel lay still in the midst of a spreading pool of dark blood, in their wake.

Justice, mistaken or otherwise, was at least prompt in Zhentil Keep.

Smiling tightly, Cadathen beckoned the two men to him, as he came upon another knot of wounded Zhents. "Would you like to avoid the Lord Manshoon's wrath, and claim Sarbuckho's head before morning?"

There was a general murmur of assent. "What if I take myself into the forehall ahead of you, take down Sarbuckho's bowmen with my spells, then blast the doors open from inside to let you in? Will you be ready to charge into Wyrmhaven to finish the fray?"

"I'll say!" one Zhentilar replied.

"We're dead if we don't," an older one growled. "None of us can run and hide to where the First Lord can't find us."

That brought a general rumble of agreement, as more Zhents came trotting up to join the throng around Cadathen.

"Right, then," the wizard told them excitedly. "Charge the doors, after I bring them down. Until then, keep back."

He made two swift, complex gestures—and was abruptly gone, the space where he'd stood simply empty.

#### *War in Wyrmhaven*

Elminster crouched low, the moment he felt the stones of the balcony beneath his feet. Being Cadathen was a bit of a strain; thankfully, he'd soon be done playing ambitious young Zhentarim.

Right after he turned, keeping below the balcony sidewall so the Zhentilar below wouldn't see him, he

made the door that led into Wyrmhaven's fourth floor quietly melt out of existence. Then he hurried across the dark, deserted room beyond. The cold night air followed him.

From all he knew of Ambram Sarbuckho, alert warriors with crossbows would be massed in the forehall and every other room that had an exterior door. Zhentish mansions sported no ground-floor windows, so defenders could concentrate where they were most likely to be needed.

Sarbuckho was a swindler from way back, and Elminster felt no compunction at all about blasting down men who fought for him.

So all he needed to do was get to the top of the great corkscrew staircase that spiraled down into the rear of the forehall, work a quiet spell, and stand well back.

As the floor heaved and shuddered, Wyrmhaven thundered and groaned all around him, a blinding flash flung a thick haze of smoke and dust into the air, and a rising roar from many Zhentilar throats told him he'd not only shattered the forehall and its defenders—he'd burst open its doors, letting them flood in.

Smiling, he waited until he thought the moment just right, and cast another blasting spell down the ruined stair, to claim Manshoon's men, this time. Then he turned and strode along the hallway, seeking a servants' stair down. He needed to get to Sarbuckho's gate and alter it, without greeting a poisoned quarrel.

In the eddying aftermath of his magics, he could feel the mounting pulse of the Darkway as he got closer to it. Thankfully, it stood unguarded, all of Wyrmhaven's guards gone elsewhere to fight the attackers.

He did what he had to do with swift ease, and teleported himself back to the alley. It was deserted, though a timid coinlass poked her head out a door to see if it was safe to emerge and seek business. At the sight of a Zhentarim mage, she hastily ducked back again.

El smiled thinly and started a careful circumnavigation of the embattled mansion, to make sure no Zhentilar got away. There should still be some poisoned quarrels left, if he knew his waylords . . .

Above all, he wanted no witnesses to tell tales about Cadathen or Sneel that would reach the ears of a certain First Lord of Zhentil Keep.

Neither his first circuit nor his second turned up anyone fleeing Wyrmhaven, where ragged shouts and the clash and clang of arms told him the fighting was still raging.

That much vigilance would have to be sufficient. There were other things he wanted to do that night.

El stopped at Sneel's body, turned it over, and looked around to make sure no one was watching. Then he conjured a little light to see by and carefully shifted his own likeness to match the unlovely looks of Lorkus Sneel.

Dragging what was left of the real Sneel to the jakes he'd earlier thrust Cadathen's body down, he tipped Manshoon's best spy down into the sewers.

The eels would soon devour it, beneath the reeking waters and drifting filth, and—

His eyes narrowed. Instead of the wet, sloppy splash he should have heard, there'd been a distinct *thud*. Hurriedly he conjured light again and looked down.

Bobbing in the waters below was a dead man, face up and palely staring, several threads of red gore trailing from him into the waters around. It wasn't Sneel, nor Cadathen for that matter.

It was Amram Sarbuckho.

Elminster blinked. *That fast, they'd got to him?* Or was the Sarbuckho who'd come storming "back" to Wyrmhaven not the real Sarbuckho at all?

For a moment he contemplated just waving this mystery away and getting on with the business of undoing Manshoon's evil just as swiftly as he could. Then he sighed, waved that thought away instead, and teleported himself back to a certain balcony.

The room it opened into was as dark and deserted as before. Cautiously he stepped out into the hallway beyond. No guards, no one lurking with a crossbow . . .

Here deep in Wyrmhaven, things had quieted down. A lot of the shouters and sword-clangers had, it seemed, perished, and the survivors were running out of foes to loudly fight with.

Up on this high floor there were no signs of life—or any evidence that the fighting had ever reached this far.

El stood against a wall like a thoughtful statue for a breath or two, pondering. If he had been Amram Sarbuckho, where would his grand personal bedchamber be?

High in the mansion, probably on this floor—for the levels above must be smaller expanses, broken by the separations of turrets and towers rising apart, and it seemed only wizards preferred such smaller, rounded privacies—and most likely toward the back of Wyrmhaven.

In other words, right this way . . .

As he went, El turned one of the rings he wore, to call up a protective mantle that would make him like smoke to metal weapons, and turn back many magics too. He moved along the hall as quietly as he knew how.

It made a right-angled turn, to meet with the end of a parallel hallway running down the other side of the main bulk of the mansion—and in the center of that cross passage was an alcove, whose back wall was a pair of high, rounded, ornate doors.

Trapped and guarded or not, they were what he'd been seeking. On the far side of them . . .

He drew off Sneel's boots, thrust his hands into them, and took a door handle between them, turning it. Locked, of course.

As he let the handle quietly return to its former position, he heard something he'd been expecting: faint feminine sobbing from the far side of the door.

Stepping smoothly to one side of the doors, he asked firmly, "Lady? Lady Sarbuckho? Are you in need of aid?"

The sobbing caught in a great gasping of breath and sniffling, then became a choked and tremulous voice replying in the negative—and furiously ordering him away.

Elminster frowned. Making no reply, he moved along the passage to its far corner, where he found what he'd hoped there would be there: a much smaller, plainer closed door.

It was locked, too, but a swift spell seared through it, leaving the lock holding a half-moon of door separate from the larger rest of it. El gently pushed that larger panel open and stepped inside, finding himself in a dark robing room lined with wardrobes. The weeping was louder now, coming from a gap in the wardrobes along the side wall, where a curtained archway obviously led into the main bedchamber.

Elminster peered through the gap where the two curtains met, satisfied himself that there was only one person—hunched over on the floor at the

foot of a gigantic canopied bed, and trembling—in the room beyond, and glided soundlessly through the curtains.

His first act was to kick away the bloody knife in front of the sobbing woman, his second to do the same to a black gem the size of his palm that positively crawled with magic, and his third was to kneel swiftly and take her by the arms.

She raised a tear-streaming, bleeding face of misery to him, staring in fear. “S-sneel? Here?”

“No, I merely wear his shape. I’m not of the keep, Lady. Ye *are* Lady Sarbuckho, are ye not?”

She nodded, drawing her head up but spoiling the proud movement by sniffing like a young lass getting over a tantrum. “Yavarla Sarbuckho I am, saer. Are you here to kill me for what I’ve done—or for my jewels, or for who I am?”

“I’m not here to slay ye at all. But tell me now, what have ye done?”

By way of reply, she shook her head and looked away, trying to jerk free of his grasp.

“Ye sent your lord husband down dead into the sewers, did ye not? Using yon knife, aye?”

Yavarla Sarbuckho went rigid in his arms, then sagged limply and whispered, “Y-yes.”

“Why?” El asked, as softly as any comforting mother, gathering her against his chest.

She burst into fresh tears, in a flood of uncontrolled weeping, and struggled incoherently to say something through it. Elminster daubed at the blood on her face—one eye was swollen almost shut, and she might have a rather piratical scar down the line of her chin, if she lived long enough for things to heal—and murmured wordless comfort, rocking her like a child.

Eventually words came to her. “He—he burst in on me, in a rage . . . beat me! He’d learned . . . what I’d done!”

“And what have ye done?” El murmured into her ear, holding her tight.

Yavarla drew in one shuddering breath, and then another, fighting for control. “L-lord Manshoon came to me . . . alone. He was very kind, comforting, the very sort of lord I wanted—ohhh, kind gods deliver me!”

She burst into tears again, sobbing wretchedly, and Elminster rocked her and murmured, “Ye and the First Lord lay together, and he was kind and understanding and tender, and ye talked. He asked questions, like a kindly friend, and ye answered them, and he learned much about the Darkways, and Lord Sarbuckho’s dealings in Sembia, whom he traded with, and who else in the city used their Darkways in like manner . . . am I right?”

She managed a nod as she shuddered her way through hard breathing again, fighting her way out of weeping once more.

“Just now, thy lord husband burst in on ye in a rage, and tried to force ye to—what?”

“G-go straight to Manshoon, and touch him with the gem.”

“Did he say what would befall then?”

“N-no. I knew. We both knew. He got it years ago from adventurers who plundered a Netherese tomb. When awakened, you touch it to the one you named when awakening it, and it will explode.”

“With force enough to turn Manshoon—and ye—and probably most of whatever tall keep ye’re standing in—to dust.”

“Y-yes. It’s awake now.”

“So ye both knew he was sending ye to death. Ye refused, and he beat ye, and ye snatched out his own belt dagger and stabbed him . . . and he died. So ye stuffed him down yon garderobe.”

“I did.” Yavarla was past tears now. She stared at him almost defiantly. “And I regret it not at all. I have hated him for a very long time.”

Elminster nodded. “With good cause, I have no doubt. Come; time is running out for us both.” He pointed at the robing room he’d come through. “Choose thy two most favorite coverings—everything, from toes to top of head, mind; gems and underthings, main garments, and the cloaks and wraps ye wear when stepping out into snowstorms—and thy least favorite wear; three entire outfits. Bring it all in and toss it on thy bed. Be swift and quiet, and run right back in here if anyone sees ye through the ruin I made of thy robing room door. Do not flee out into the house beyond, or ye’ll surely be slain. Brutally, by Zhentarim who have invaded thy halls, not by me.”

Yavarla stared at him for a moment, then rushed into the robing room. Elminster went straight to the gem and sent it somewhere far away and safer. Then he plucked up the dagger, wiped it on a white fur rug that was already spattered with much of Ambram Sarbuckho’s spilled blood, then kept the dagger and sent the rug on the same journey that the Lord of Wyrmhaven had recently made.

By then, Yavarla was done, and standing anxiously by the bed.

“Find thy most precious jewels, and all coins ye can lay hand on, that are in this room,” El told her.

She held up a small coffer already in her hands. “No-no coins would he allow me, and his are locked in vaults down below, not here.”

El nodded and waved at her to drop the coffer on the bed with the rest. She did, and he gathered up the thick coverlet, with its glossy shimmerweave skin around overlapped and sewn-together thick wool blankets, around all she'd gathered. The bundle was nearly as large as she was.

"Fight me not, now," he murmured, settling the bundle on one hip and sliding his other hand around her waist. "Hold very still."

She obeyed, and that gave his hands freedom enough to work a teleport spell, and whisk them both to an alley that was becoming all too familiar.

#### *We All Wear the Masks We Need*

El looked up and down the gloomy alleyway. Seeing no one, he swiftly spread his bundle out on the filthy stones underfoot, in a spot where a shaft of moonlight fell fair upon it.

"Stand on that, strip, and get dressed in thy best," he ordered, hurriedly unfastening his own garments.

Yavarla was trembling as she stared at him, eyes large with mounting fear. "What—who are you?" she whispered.

"A friend," Elminster replied, his face and body melting and shifting under her stare. Sneel's rippling garments falling away or hanging limply.

Yavarla fought back a scream. A moment later, she stared at a woman of very much the same size and build as herself, a rather plain woman she'd never seen before.

"Is . . . is this . . . am I seeing who you really are?" she blurted out.

"Nay," the unfamiliar woman told her flatly. "We all wear the masks we need."

At that moment, Yavarla felt her own flesh beginning to creep and crawl . . .

She did scream and try to flee, then, but deft hands whirled her around, carried her back to the midst of the moonlight, and tripped her.

She landed hard on her knees, grunted in fresh pain, then shivered. It was *cold*, out here in the night . . .

"Hurry," her rescuer—captor?—said in her ear. "I'll help; what need ye first? Clout? Dethma?"

Feeling dazed, Yavarla gave in, getting dressed in greater haste than she had for many a year. She scarcely noticed that whenever she made a choice of garment, the woman—or was he really a man, as he'd first appeared?—donned one of the two like garments she'd not chosen. It was all done in panting haste, and she'd barely gained steady breath before she was fully dressed, cloak and all, and being towed firmly by the hand along the alley by her strange escort, who now carried a rather smaller bundle.

They came out into a street, and turned right. Despite it being deep night, quite a few quiet, furtive folk were walking purposefully along, hands on weapon hilts, or meeting side by side with their backs to a building wall, where they could look this way and that while they muttered whatever business they were transacting. A few cloaked and hooded women silently parted their cloaks to show bare leg or hip at their approach, but made no reaction when they hastened on past.

The noblewoman shuddered, perhaps wondering if her future included becoming a desperate streetskirt. Elminster gave her no time to ponder; the lamps of the inn he sought were only a block away.

He tugged her close for a moment, to murmur in her ear. "For now, ye are *not* Lady Sarbuckho. In fact, Yavarla, ye have forgotten how to speak at all."

She made no reply, but went meekly with him and stood hooded and silent as the unlovely woman her escort had become briskly took a room for them both, snapping that they'd been forced to flee the place they'd been staying after it was "invaded by men fighting each other, with wizards and spells, too!"

They were behind a locked door and inside a warding spell stronger than any she'd ever seen cast before ere Yavarla caught sight of a mirror—and caught her breath, feeling herself on the verge of tears again. The face staring red-eyed back at her in the feeble light of the lone lamp was not hers.

"You have stolen my very self from me," she gasped.

"Only for now," the woman murmured from behind her, taking her under the arms as if to keep her from falling. "Sleep now, Yavarla."

And Yavarla fell down a great dark shaft into an endless rushing abyss of hatefully shouting, then gasping in pain and horror Ambrams, a plunge from which there was no escape . . . ever . . .

#### *New Lives, and Strangers to go with Them*

When Yavarla came awake, the light flooding through the filthy window told her it was near highsun, and she was lying in an inn bed answering questions. Whispering long, detailed, involved answers about every Darkway she knew of, and their owners, the names of the high houses that held those gates, and the names and whereabouts within the mansion walls of the chambers that

held the flickering portals. Not that she knew much, but she heard herself eagerly spilling forth every hint and rumor and scrap of half-heard possible truth she remembered, and far more than she ever knew she'd remembered.

"You—you are using me," she gasped then, coming fully awake and staring up into the eyes of . . . yet another stranger.

A bearded man whose eyes were sometimes as blue as a clear day's sky, and at other times as silver-gray as a sword drawn in a fog, and most of the time somewhere in between.

"Aye, I am," he replied gravely, "for it is needful. In return, I offer ye a new life, far from cold Zhentil Keep and its cruel lords and crueller wizards. Somewhere will ye'll never have to face death for slaying thy husband, or feel the sting of Manshoon's betrayal—before that betrayal kills thee."

"I . . . I—" Something welled up in Yavarla then and burst out of her, leaving her weeping as she thrust herself up and bawled at him, "No! *Never!* I am of the keep, this is my *home*, this is—Manshoon will never—"

Even as she said it, she knew otherwise. That cold and gently smiling man would break her in an instant if she stood in the way of his most idle whim. He had used her already, far worse than this man she did not know had used her, and—and—

Tears overwhelmed her again, and she covered her face with her hands and fought to cling to herself through them, fought until rage made her beat her fists on the bed sightlessly and cry, "I know how to do *more* than weep, damn all Watching Gods, I do!"

"Easy, lass," the man murmured, touching her cheek gently. The pain that had been there since Ambram's ring had laid it open vanished, and so did her grief, under a vast wave of weariness followed

by lighthearted cheer, a euphoria that came out of nowhere with the scent of lemons and vague visions of green trees and dappled sunlight and laughter . . .

"Magic," she said calmly. "You're using magic on me."

"I am. I want ye calm, Yavarla, and happy. Clear-headed to choose."

Yavarla drew in a deep, tremulous breath and said firmly, "I am calm. I can choose. And unless you intend to be my jailor, I tell you again: Zhentil Keep is my home. I want no new life far from here. I know full well how dangerous it will be, I know I love the First Lord and he loves me not . . . but I wish to stay. Even if it means my death, I am of the keep."

"So be it. Ye shall stay. Or rather, return to Wyrmhaven—if there's still a Wyrmhaven to return to—in a day or two, after I'm done causing a storm that may well sweep ye away, if ye are not kept safe. Think of this, then, as a vacation."

The light around Yavarla changed, and the bed beneath her became the cold flagstones of a stone floor somewhere in a forest under the open sky, with great old trees looming in a ring around her and stretching off into vast green distances beyond. The bundle of her shimmerweave coverlet lay on her shins, and a tall, beautiful, silver-haired woman was laying aside a harp to rise from rocks and bend over Yavarla in pleasantly surprised greeting. She wore foresters' leathers, and had none of the wrinkles of age that should go with silver tresses.

"Well met, Lady, I am Storm Silverhand, the kettle is just boiling, and there will be hot buttered biscuits very soon. Will you take tea?"

Which was when Yavarla discovered she was ravenous.

As she tried to smile and find words of answer, the woman bending over her was hearing other words in her own head.

*Storm, this is Yavarla Sarbuckho, of Zhentil Keep. She just slew her husband, with good reason. Give her gentle slumber with thy spells and herbs, and keep her that way for this day and mayhap the next.*

Storm smiled, inside her head. *Of course, El. If you decide what to do next for once, rather than just rushing out and doing it.*

*Fair enough, Stormy One. Fair enough.*

And it was. Moreover, the biscuits were delicious.

#### Done by Next Highsun

Thus far, this highsunfeast had gone better than he'd expected. Fzoul Chembryl's eyes told Manshoon clearly how furious the priest of Bane still was over Manshoon's seizing of power, but the First Lord's guest had obviously decided to be civil. For now, at least.

"I've never had any intention of deciding everything, and ruling the Brotherhood," Manshoon said carefully. "I want you to be—need you to be—a full partner in all decisions. So we are met not just to gorge ourselves on this superb cheese and haberry jelly—pray have more, won't you?—but to decide how to proceed next."

"In all matters of governance over the keep and the Zhentarim?" Fzoul asked calmly. "Or just in your—pardon me, *our*—war upon the waylords?"

"All, of course, but let us leave those decisions to later meetings, which I agree to hold at your behest and not mine, when this matter of the waylords is

done with. First upon our mutual platter: Sarbuckho, and his defeat of our men at Wyrmhaven."

"You lost more than a dozen wizards, I've heard," Fzoul commented to the cheese he was slicing. "Let us begin by your trusting me enough to unfold clear truth about all of our losses. How many mages—and just how many warriors and spies can we add to that?"

"Ten and four wizards," Manshoon said quietly. "Five of accomplishment, the rest ambitious mage-lings or aging hedge wizards. Three or four spies—I'm still waiting for a certain man to report back to me. Almost twoscore warriors; the total depends on whether or not some recover. Sarbuckho's men used poisoned quarrels."

"Lorkus Sneel being that certain man?"

Manshoon nodded. "Do you know something of his fate?"

Fzoul shook his head. "Nothing. Truly. Well, I am for the utter destruction of Sarbuckho and his mansion. Present an example to anyone else contemplating any sort of challenge or resistance to the Brotherhood. Muster all we have for a very public assault in which Wyrmhaven is dashed to rubble. We hurl all our keep-shattering spells, and leave all loyal citizens thinking."

Manshoon's sudden smile was as bright as it was genuine. This was precisely what he'd been planning to do, priests or no priests. He liked the entire might of the temple behind it far better than otherwise.

They swiftly and easily agreed that Wyrmhaven's fall should be accomplished "by next highsun." Fzoul offered to set his upperpriests on rooftops to smite armsmen sent out to fight the Zhentilar—as well as any of the pitiful remnants of the city watch

unwise enough to presume to challenge the authority of the Zhentarim.

It took but a few words back and forth for them to further agree to then sit back and wait for the cowed surviving waylords to suffer the effects of their portals becoming deathtraps. They would, of course, destroy any independent wizards who approached any waylord mansion, not wanting the waylords to be able to hire anyone who might be able to make the Darkways safe again.

"The waylords will fall, we'll rebuild the watch as ours, outright, and the council can meet as often as they like and say whatever they like," Fzoul gloated, over his sixth flagon of wine. "Zhentil Keep will be ours."

He was gratified by Manshoon's eager smile, and they clinked flagons together.

Fzoul Chembryl was enjoying this.

For this first time in far too many days, Manshoon really needed him.

Which meant no sly or savage attack would fall on him, here or elsewhere, for days to come.

More than that, the ever-mounting death toll among the Brotherhood mage-lings would give the Rightful Hand of Bane real say in the Zhentarim for some time to come; Manshoon was fast becoming one man, standing almost alone against all the might of the temple.

Alone indeed. Last night a beholder had come floating into Fzoul's private chapel, turning aside the guardian spells with contemptuous ease, to hiss a private message.

"Expect Manshoon to receive no aid from any of my kind in this fray over the Darkways," the eye tyrant had said. "We regard this as a test of Manshoon's strength and fitness to lead the

Brotherhood. So fear not, Fzoul Chembryl—if Manshoon calls on us to crush you or your temple underlings, we shall not hear."

#### *A Spell of Simple Remedy*

"Keep back!" Elminster snapped, as guards pounded up, glaives lowered and reaching for him. "I'm undoing Manshoon's evil, so all can safely use this Darkway again. Harm me, and you doom him, and all your livelihoods."

"Back, men!" a deeper voice rolled out, from behind the guards. "Who are you, wizard?"

"Elminster," the bearded wizard replied—as the floor rocked under their feet, and distant thunder made glass lamps tinkle and the entire mansion shudder around them.

"What's going on?" the waylord demanded. "That's been happening most of the day, now!"

"Ambram Sarbuckho killed many Zhentarim last night. Manshoon is now busily destroying Wyrmhaven as a warning to all the rest of you."

"Meaning?"

El shrugged. "He intends to crush all who don't kneel to him. So, some of ye may elect to use thy gates to flee the keep, with all thy riches and retainers. Yet ye're Zhents, so most of ye will probably vow to fight Manshoon to the death. Me, I must use the time while Manshoon's indulging himself at Wyrmhaven to undo the fatal spells he worked on every last Darkway, to make them all safe again. So I'm off to the next one now. Lord, ye have a decision to make."

## A Warm Welcome

Yavarla swam up out of a pleasant slumber to find the sun warm on her face, and herself snugly wrapped up in her own shimmerweave coverlet. Storm had put her coffer in her hands and produced a soft pillow from somewhere to cradle her head. Yavarla could hear the beautiful, liquid swirling of her harp from off to her right, not too close, and smiled to herself.

She did not let that smile reach her face. Nor did she open her eyes.

This was all very pleasant, but it was a trap.

The man who'd snatched her out of Wyrmhaven last night was keeping her here, away from the keep, for reasons of his own.

She had to get back—to Manshoon—before any more time passed.

If this silver-haired harpist hadn't robbed her as she slept, she had the means to do it, too. Under the coverlet, Yavarla opened the coffer a crack with her thumbs, feeling carefully for the ring with the sculpted wing thrusting up from it.

There it was, amid everything else. Her wealth was untouched.

The harp music swirled, rising and falling. Storm Silverhand was strolling around the glade as she played.

Eyes shut, Yavarla worked to get that ring on her finger. She knew what she'd see if she looked over at the harpist. Those long, long silver tresses would be swirling and coiling like lazy snakes or stretching cats, curling leisurely in time to the music. The harpist's magic must be strong—so she, Yavarla, would have to be fast.

*There!* It was on, and snugged up against her knuckles. Close the coffer, think of the street in front of Manshoon's house, for it would be foolish to try to teleport into a wizard's home, with all the wards he'd have, and—

—Faerûn whirled around her—  
—she was blinking in the bright sun of the keep, standing on the cobbles outside Manshoon's gates, her coffer in her hands. Grim guards were already lowering great glaives to menace her.

"I," she told them calmly, "am expected. Conduct me to First Lord Manshoon. Without delay, if you please."

The nearest guard inclined his head. "Lady, your name?"

"I am Lady Yavarla Sarbuckho. Wife to the Lord Abramam Sarbuckho, of the keep."

"Admit her," a young wizard's voice called down from somewhere above, and the great gates opened.

Yavarla kept a serene smile on her face as she was whisked up stairs and across polished marble halls and up more stairs, climbing ever higher. Twice her skin tingled, the ring on her finger burning her like fire, as unseen spellcasters probed her for magic. The second time, a man she'd never seen before stepped out of a door to bar her way and demand, "Remove your ring. No such magic in the presence of the First Lord."

"You," she replied coolly, "are not the First Lord. I have seen him—all of him—and I know."

Unimpressed, the man reached out for her coffer. After a moment, she put it into his hand.

"This shall be returned, unopened by me," he told her, his other hand still out. "The ring."

Silence fell between them, until she sighed, removed the ring, and dropped it into his palm. He

bowed, indicated the door he'd come through, and glided away, murmuring, "Lord Manshoon awaits you."

Yavarla opened the door. The room beyond was a richly paneled study full of books and a massive table and highbacked chairs, like many she'd seen in the mansions of the mighty. Standing by the table was—her heart leaped anew at his dark, handsome looks, and the smile growing on his face—Manshoon.

"Lord, I came to tell you my husband is dead. I killed him last night, after he came to me wanting me to slay you. He—"

"Yavarla," Manshoon said warmly, opening his arms to welcome her.

As she rushed into them, fire kindled in his eyes. With that same widening smile still on his face, he drawled, "Your usefulness is past."

Fire coalesced out of the air around her, binding her like chains—and then started to sear her.

"And you bore me," he added, as she tried to scream . . . and fell to ashes, instead.

His second spell kept even the smallest of them from reaching the carpet.

From a chair on the far side of the table, Fzoul Chembryl watched as the ashes roiled, then spiraled in the air like dark water going down a drain, and vanished.

Then he nodded approvingly.

A ruler free of entanglements is a leader free of weaknesses. He'd do the same thing.

He smiled crookedly, thinking of certain rather eager priestesses back at the temple. He might soon have to.

*The Time of Reckoning*

At least this, Elminster thought rather wearily, was the last.

He'd told a seemingly endless succession of angry waylords what he was doing to their Darkways, and why—and now here he was in the luxurious black marble rear hall of Swordgates, looking up into the frightened face of Mantras Jhoszelbur . . . and he was done at last.

He straightened with a yawn, dusted his hands together, and told this last waylord, "I'm done here. If ye'd be rid of First Lord Manshoon, hounding him out of the keep is thy work to undertake. If ye prefer a life of slavery, let him proceed down the path he's chosen, and ye'll enjoy that status soon enough!"

Before Jhoszelbur could think of something suitably testy to snarl, El was through an archway and back along the passage that led to the rear door he'd come in by. He wanted to get clear of Swordgates before Manshoon finished destroying Wyrmhaven and came looking for other foes to reduce to rubble.

Guards scuttled hastily out of his way. El gave them a reassuring smile—no sense in having a few spears hurled at the back of your head, even if you did have a mantle to stop them—and then opened that door and ducked out into the alley beyond.

And the world exploded.

When he could see again, he knew what had happened. His mantle had returned half a dozen hostile magics to the various Zhentarim who'd first hurled them, then failed, overloaded by the onslaught.

Those backlashes were still causing various buildings where Manshoon's mages had been to slump or topple, up and down the alley—and the flood of still-rolling rubble had just swept him right back into Swordgates.

Thankfully, Jhoszelbur's guards were fleeing in all directions, not throwing spears, and there was no sign of any of the Stormwands.

Elminster fought his way free of all the stone—and then stiffened, as Mystra spoke briefly and firmly in his head.

*Not that way, El. 'Tis time to teach Manshoon a lesson.*

He sighed, looked longingly at the last Darkway he'd altered, then murmured, "As ye wish, Great Lady of Mysteries," and started walking briskly through Stormgates.

He strode the length of that sprawling, many-pillared stone mansion, raising a new mantle around himself as he went, to the front doors of Swordgates.

Jhoszelbur's house guards threw them wide at his approach, and Elminster strode out into the sunlight—and the welcome he'd been expecting.

Zhentilar javelins cracked and shivered on the descending flight of steps in front of his boots, and behind the massed black-armored horde of warriors happily hurling them, El saw baneguards advancing, upperpriests of Bane commanding them. More priests stood on roofs and balconies all around, and there were Zhentarim, too, some of them in the saddles of foulwings flapping and circling overhead like great black bat-winged toads.

The triple-jawed aerial steeds of the Brotherhood croaked and hissed harsh unpleasantnesses to each other, their red eyes burning, eager to enter the fray.

Swordgates occupied a corner where two streets met, and similarly grand mansions lined both of those routes—high houses whose streetfront windows and balconies were crowded with priestesses of Loviatar, presumably aiding the Brotherhood to gain Manshoon's favor.

Manshoon? Ah, *there* he was, standing with Fzoul Chembryl on a high mansion balcony right across the road, ready to gloat as the lone wizard on the steps got destroyed.

The Rightful Hand of Bane held two dark rods in his hands, and Manshoon hadn't forgotten to bring a long, fell-looking staff.

"Oh, *dung*," Elminster said sourly, clawing in a pouch for his least useful enchanted rings, so as to feed his mantle with *something*. This was going to hurt.

"Care, lords, I beg of you!" the owner of the mansion whose balcony Manshoon and Fzoul were standing on shouted then, from the room behind them. "If much magic is unleashed here, the destruction will be ruinous! Zhentil Keep's fairest houses could well be—"

Manshoon lifted one hand and made a lazy signal, without even bothering to turn around. The wealthy merchant gurgled in midprotest as his throat was slit, the ugly sound lost in Fzoul's thunderous, "Destroy him!"

The priest of Bane brought his arm down with a flourish, pointing right at Elminster.

Zhentarim, Banite priests, and priestesses of Loviatar all unleashed deadly spells, hurling them with glee, all wanting to be part of obliterating that lone figure on the steps.

Elminster's world became roiling flame, tongues of fire that swirled like white snowflakes in a roaring, purple-black darkness as the Weave was torn, Faerûn

shrieked aloud, and he was plucked off his feet, shaken like a doll, and hurled—

Nowhere at all, as Mystra manifested all around him in an armor of eerie blue light, dancing sparks that dazzled the eyes with their hue.

Two huge and long-lashed eyes opened behind Elminster and drank in the darkness, and nine silver stars blossomed out of those sparks. Two of those stars darted into Mystra's eyes, and the other seven began to circle her slumped, pain-wracked Chosen.

Gathering all the magic hurled at him . . . and slowly, one spell after another, sending it all back whence it came.

The huge floating eyes of the goddess swept across the shouting Zhentarim army, regarding them with something like sorrow, then lifted to meet Manshoon's astonished and outraged gaze.

As he stared at Mystra, and Mystra stared back at him, the First Lord of Zhentil Keep began to scream in terror.

Beholders appeared, rising menacingly into view over rooftops with their eyestalks writhing, gliding forward with fell intent—only to melt away in an instant. A moment later, every last foulwing faded to nothingness, spilling shrieking riders out of the sky.

The balcony where Manshoon and Fzoul stood broke off the front of the mansion it adorned and fell to earth, slowly and soundlessly. Clinging to it, the two mightiest of the Zhentarim bawled like babies, clawing at the stones.

It came to rest very gently, with no crash at all, but the two men pitched forward onto their faces, trembling in fear. Fzoul fainted, and Manshoon hid his face in his hands, daring only to peek between them.

He saw Mystra bend her will and power on the army at the foot of the steps. Baneguards vanished in bony silence, black armor was suddenly gone from hairy and horrified men, and spears and swords were swept away from their hands.

As they broke and fled, pelting away down the streets as fast as they could run, moaning and trampling each other in their fear, the goddess roared up into a spire of blue flame.

That great tongue of fire rose with a thunderous snarl, to tower high over Swordgates, to loom into the sky above Zhentil Keep and catch distant, awed eyes—then flashed, blinding many watchers, and—vanished.

On balconies and rooftops, down alleys and in windows, every last priest and priestess collapsed, all dashed senseless at once.

Silence fell. Mystra was gone.

Leaving Manshoon weeping and trembling, and a weary and wincing Elminster regarding him with disgust.

Stumbling in obvious pain, and trailing a scorched smell, El came slowly down the steps. Over the rubble, over the bodies of the trampled, over fallen weapons and spilled blood, across the street to where the First Lord of Zhentil Keep cowered.

Citizens were watching, peering from windows and alleys, from doors and from atop carts down the streets, as Elminster came up to Manshoon.

"For years, ye have owed thy life to a promise," he told the leader of the Zhentarim quietly. "Ye almost threw that life away this day. Try to learn some wisdom."

On his haunches, Manshoon spun around and covered his ears, turning his back on the bearded Chosen.

Who rolled his eyes, drew back one dusty-booted foot, and gave the First Lord a solid kick in the pants, pitching him over onto his face.

Then Elminster stalked away, not looking back.

Face down in the dirt and furious, Manshoon snarled.

"I swear," he whispered, knowing how many eyes were upon him, "I'll slay you some day, Elminster. And work it so that as you die, you know full well who has slain you."

He kept still, hunched down. For now, though, he must play the overconfident fool, to avoid being destroyed by Mystra as too dangerous. Yet at the same time work, with infinite patience and contingency upon contingency, scheme overlapping scheme, toward ultimate triumph.

Oh, the things he could do without being hampered by Elminster's meddlings!

Hah, the things he could do to Elminster if the old bearded goat didn't have the goddess protecting him!

"There will come a day, Elminster of Shadowdale," Manshoon announced to his own spellchamber quietly, as he teleported back to its dark, deserted safety, "when my chance will come. A day when you aren't cloaked and armored in the favor of a goddess."

He turned slowly on one heel, to look around at the quiet darkness. "And on that day," he added with a crooked smile, "Manshoon will laugh—and Elminster will die."

**Find out what happens when Elminster faces off against Manshoon alone in *Elminster Must Die*.**