

The Night Thelva Clovenaxe Flew

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CHAPTER 1: IN THE HOUSE OF THIRST

Folks called Ruthgular Clovenaxe “the Bearded Barrel” for good reason. It didn’t take a keen eye to notice that he was larger around than he stood tall. Moreover, he was getting larger, and he lurched through most days with at least one strap of his suspenders flying free. All those suspenders had seven

straps of the stoutest leather he could find, and his best pair had nine.

His wife Thelva was even larger. Between her magnificent bosom and her girdle-girt hips, her tummy thrust out at the world like the bulging flank of a well-fed ox. This comparison was not, as Ruthgular had learned, one that was safe to voice in her hearing.

Neither of the Clovenaxes was built for running, forging, climbing, or mining. They were best suited for what they did—working long days and nights as

strong spirits blenders in Dlarthen’s House of Thirst in Trades Ward. Though neither had been sober for as long as either could remember, their inebritation was a condition reached honorably. While awake, they were nigh constantly sipping to judge the tastes of Dlarthen’s specialty blends.

Ohlmar Dlarthen, a dashing young dwarf entrepreneur, had developed a system for getting the most from his liquor investment. For the past nine summers, he had been buying up odd ends of liquid cargoes cheaply from creaking holds and forgotten corners of warehouses, spicing them with the contents of casks salvaged from the waves (often tainted with seawater), and then blending the results with known better quaffs. In this way, he stretched otherwise wasted swill into vats of acceptable throatslake that could fill many a tankard.

This technique had made Dlarthen quite rich, but he couldn’t have done it without the Clovenaxes, and they knew it. They were proud of their work, and well paid—yet like many dwarves, they were dedicated to getting as rich as they could, as fast as they could.

To that end, on this particular stormy, rain-drenched night hard on the heels of Halaster’s Highharvesttide, the rotund dwarf couple sat in the cavernous back room of the House of Thirst. Though sunset had come and gone hours earlier, the Clovenaxes were still belching and mumbling their way through a long line of tankards, in hopes of hitting upon the right blend to fill the large, sagging vats looming behind them.

“Well?” Thelva asked hopefully.



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Ruthgulur spat what he was tasting into the battered funnel whose attached hose led through the stained and much-patched floorboards and down into the sewers—where, he suspected, dozens of drunken eels greedily clustered unseen. “Tastes of owlbear eggs. And dung,” he announced sourly.

His wife’s bristling eyebrows shot upward. “I’ll not ask how you know the taste of that particular combination,” she replied. “Increasingly, I’m glad you’ve never shared the details of your wild youth with me.”

Ruthgulur snarled something she didn’t quite catch (and was rather grateful she hadn’t), then added, “I’ll be needing yon bucket to clear my mouth of that foulness. Your turn.”

Thelva handed him the bucket of diced raw turnip, picked up her tankard, and made a note on the parchment in front of her. “Three parts *I Love Eberon*, one part *City of Doors*, one part *Watershallow*, and one part *Pixie Lich*. Here goes.”

“That’s *Pixie Lick*,” Ruthgulur corrected, around a mouthful of turnip.

Thelva sighed, nodded, and wrote down the correction. Making sure her false beard was hanging on a hook a safe distance away, she hefted her tankard, tried to ignore the ominous bubbles arising from it, and took a cautious sip.

Ruthgulur watched her face harden. She couldn’t suppress a shudder.

“Bitter. Way bitter. Strong, warm, hearty aftertaste, but. . . .” Thelva shook her head. “Too bitter for Waterdeep. Humans like to taste more than just their first sip of the night. Bucket.”

Ruthgulur handed back the turnip bucket and read out his own blend as he wrote it down. “*Essence of Vampiric Chicken, Good Gravy, More Than Fifty Shades of the Minions of a Gray Succubus*—where do distillers come up with these names? Oh, and *Blind Seers Smell the Future*—all equal parts. Now I’m stirring *The Druid Ducks* into it—one part.”

Together they watched the new mixture erupt in a sudden shower of bubbles, then emit a thin plume of smoke that swiftly faded away in winking sparks. “What’s up?” Thelva asked suspiciously. “Duck?”

Ruthgulur shrugged. “I’m getting paid for this,” he mumbled, and took a sip. His face twisted, he swayed, then he slammed one fist down on the table in agony before spitting into the funnel and pouring the rest of the mixture into it. “A decided ‘no,’” he announced when he could speak again, writing down that same judgment with emphatic strokes.

Thelva chuckled. “The question is, are we getting paid enough?”

“At times like this,” Ruthgulur replied gloomily, “you know the answer.” He surveyed the line of waiting casks. “So, is *The Druid Ducks* the problem here? Is there *anything* we’ve managed to blend it with? Er, successfully?”

His wife ran one pudgy finger up the long, long list of blends and verdicts. “*Underscribe of the Understair* and *The Merry Maid of the Middens*,” she reported at last, “but that mix ate the bottom out of a cast iron tankard and dissolved the glaze on a fired one, so we got rid of it—fast. I liked the taste, but—and I quote myself—my gut felt like the last thing the right hand of Vecna touched.”

“So, not successful,” Ruthgulur pointed out. He looked at the casks again. “How much of *The Druid Ducks* do we have?”

“Too much,” Thelva replied after a brief examination of the cask markings. “That old battered one, and both of these big ones here.”

“Too much to pour away.”

“Oh?” Thelva waved a hand, as if to encompass the whole room. “Less than pouring away everything else here—and if it ruins everything we mix with it, that’s just what we’ll end up doing. Dead loss for the House of Thirst.”

Ruthgulur sighed. “Well, we don’t have to decide just yet. Not with all these tankards to get through.

Speaking of which—enough stalling, Shieldbearer of My Heart. Your turn.”

“I’m aware of that, Softbeard Mine.” Thelva consulted a scribbled note, then dictated aloud her latest addition to the list. “Equal parts *Shaking Spears in the Park*, *Satirical Fakir*, *Topiary Dragon*, and *A Fighter and a Thief Walk into a Bar*—with just a dash of *Kobolds Punting Kobolds*.” With a flourish, she speared her pen back into the sea-sponge that served as its holder, saluted Ruthgulur with her tankard, took a cautious sip, smiled . . . and started to glow. Her eyes took on a faraway look as she chugged the contents of the tankard, head tilted so she could gaze fixedly at the ceiling, as if she saw something miles beyond the walls of the room.

Ruthgulur stared at his wife. Was she getting . . . taller? She must be, because she was at least a head above him now.

The blue-white glow radiating from her skin waxed beacon-bright, and Thelva Clovenaxe floated up into the air, her favorite pointed-toe buckle-boots kicking gently at nothing at all as she rose up—and up.

“Thelva!” Ruthgulur shouted, bounding up onto the table to make a grab at her. Fortunately for him, she had a lot to grab. Her empty tankard bounced off his already-battered nose on its way to the floor, but he kept his grip, digging his fingers like claws into her best leather breeches. Thelva’s belt groaned under the strain of Ruthgulur’s weight as she rose obliviously toward the bare-beamed ceiling, silently staring at nothing at all.

Ruthgulur rose with her, dragged up into the air as if by a mighty, unseen titan or giant. She was as bright as any ceiling-wheel of lanterns now. The fierce glow came from her very skin, apparently all over. As Ruthgulur marveled at the brilliant light his wife gave off, her belt-clasp groaned, loud and long, and slowly undid itself.

A sudden, sickening descent followed as the breeches dropped to her ankles, Ruthgulur with

them. He tried to claw his way up Thelva's legs, but he was slipping. He kicked wildly in an effort to gain enough momentum to clamber up her body, just as her arms and legs jerked in a sudden violent spasm. The toe of one boot caught the Bearded Barrel hard under his chin.

The edge of the table was hard. So was the full cask from which Ruthgular's head rebounded during his tumbling plummet to the floor. The floor wasn't any too soft, either.

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Ruthgular Clovenaxe blinked up at the exposed rafters, wondering dazedly just how long he'd been lying here. Sunlight filled the room—er, no. The light came from his wife, shining brightly in her oblivious silence, floating amid the beams, breeches dangling from her feet.

"Thelva!" he groaned. "Thelva?"

She gave no sign of having heard him. Ruthgular stared wildly around the room. It had no windows, thank the gods. Heavy casks stood atop the two old dump-hatches that led down into the sewers. She was far too large to fit down the spit-funnel, and the room had only the two doors, one of which was securely barred.

Ruthgular stumbled unsteadily to his feet and made for the other door. He could bar that one from the outside, and he intended to do so. Then he planned to run like he'd never run before, to do something he'd sworn he'd never do—hire a wizard.

CHAPTER 2: ALL OUR PIGEONS ARE MISSING

"The Watchful Order of Magists and Protectors is not a cat rescue service," Maerlus the Magnificent

informed the old woman coldly. "We deal with magical crises, threats to the very existence of the Realms, wild creeping horrors that seek to devour all Waterdeep—that sort of thing. We do *not* fetch down cats from balconies where they've fled because their owners wanted to bathe them in fish oil. Fish oil is best used for romancing mermaids."

"And you have to go somewhere of-fish-al to get it!" quipped a much-scarred man waiting in line right behind the old lady. As she turned slowly and fixed him with a withering glare, he chuckled and added eagerly, "Get it? Heh-hah! Get it?"

"You're not helping," Maerlus told him frostily. Then, as his first step in ignoring the insistent and catless woman, he looked past her and addressed the scarred man. "And what are you here for?"

"Lost a bet," the man replied cheerfully, "and now I have to provide the winner with a chocolate syrup elemental or a mermaid succubus who's human from the waist down—by nightfall tomorrow."

"Or—?"

"Or I get turned into a lawn gnome. Or a myconid holding a selection of vegetables while endlessly filling a fountain bowl—you know, by watering it with his fleshy waterer. Mushroom men do have waterers, don't they?"

Maerlus sighed. Duty nights on the Order Desk were getting wilder and wilder. "And with whom were you wagering?"

"The Blackstaff," replied the scarred man. "Khelben Arunsun."

"Really?" Maerlus replied witheringly, making his disbelief plain to everyone in the room. "He called himself that, did he? Describe him for me."

"Pepper-and-salt beard, snotty manner, black wizard's robes, rings on his fingers, and staff floating around upright just behind his left shoulder. Oh, and he said he owned the Dungeon of the Crypt and would be happy to entomb anyone who crossed him in it, without them necessarily being dead first."

Maerlus sighed. "The description fits, but no one has seen the Blackstaff for *many* years, and the general consensus is that he's dead."

"So?" countered the scarred man. "Death hasn't seemed much of a career handicap for wizards, has it? All right, let's put it another way: I lost a bet with someone who looks like the Blackstaff, calls himself the Blackstaff, and has magic enough to be the Blackstaff, and I need to bring him the sweet brown elemental or the sucking mermaid—and I'm willing to pay!"

Maerlus nodded. "For the appropriate fees we can provide you with a short-term semblance of either. But just how do you know this obvious impostor has magic enough to be the Blackstaff?"

"He summoned a flying island. He said a spell and the sky tore open to let in this island with a blamed big castle on it, then patched itself up all blue again. One of the other jacks at the gaming table said anyone with enough coins could buy an illusion of anything, so a flying island was proof of nothing. The Blackstaff said that was true enough—said it with a nasty smile, too—and teleported us all into the throne room of the castle. He told us to look out the windows back down at where we'd been standing, so we would know he wasn't fooling.

"But we weren't alone. On the throne sat a cloud giant, who threw a raging fit—shouting, pounding on things, and coming at us. He wanted us all dead in a hurry, so we got teleported back again. Then the Blackstaff waved his hand and sent the island away, turning end over end through the sky. He called it the lost Netherese enclave of Orbrorth, *and* warned us that the last person who'd doubted his power and defaulted on a wager ended up as a mutant zombie leprechaun hoarder who's still cleaning private museums around Waterdeep with his tongue. So here I am."

"All very interesting, but what about my cat?" the old woman snapped. "I've paid my taxes for seventy-two summers, and this is the first time I've ever

expected anything in return. I don't care about foolish wagers with wizards or rude lawn ornaments, I want—"

"Wants are what turns the wheels of commerce in Waterdeep, madam, but I find myself asking if I'm being petitioned for a rescue, or hearing a boast about wanton cat abuse," Maerlus said dismissively. "The Order must investigate."

"My darling Talonamono can't wait years for wizards to invest—"

Maerlus stood up, fixed her with a glare, swept one arm out dramatically—causing several people in line to cower—and pointed. "See that young man sitting beside the door? Take him home with you, show him your balcony-adorning cat, and be guided by his wise counsel."

"Wise? He looks about ten years old!"

"He is, in fact, twelve—and in matters of the Art, brilliant. If your problem is beyond his powers, have no doubt he'll report as much back to me, and the full might of the Order shall be brought to bear. Go, madam. Go now. There's no telling what mischief an attendant cat can get into on a balcony."

"That's true," the old woman agreed glumly. She turned and headed for the young man by the door, who blanched visibly and sent Maerlus an imploring look.

Maerlus sent him back a look of cold promise and turned back to the idiot who wagered with wizards. No wonder the man had such an impressive collection of scars.

"You, saer, had best go down that hall, open the third door on the left, find a wizard high Angrobal in the room beyond, and politely ask him to provide his choice of the two, ah, creatures you've mentioned. Pay whatever he asks without dispute, and don't be surprised if he and half a dozen other Order members accompany you to meet with Blackstaff—or the man calling himself Blackstaff. If it is a man at all."

The man nodded, gave Maerlus a cheerful smile and wave, and headed for the indicated door.

"Not the second door, if you want to live," Maerlus called out after the retreating man. Then the wizard put on his flimsiest false smile for the next person in line. "Yes?" he asked. "And how may the Watchful Order help you this fair night?"

That next person was a short, bearded man who was bare-chested under his cowed full-cloak. Catching a glimpse of something odd, Maerlus peered at him more closely. "What are you?"

"A cook. A *gourmet* cook," came the dignified reply.

"No, I meant what race are you?"

"A satyr," the cloaked figure snapped, pulling up the cloak to reveal one raised hoof. "So, yes, before you descend to the tired jest, I'm a galloping gour—"

"Let's neither of us descend there," Maerlus interrupted him heavily. "Just tell me why you're here. I haven't got all night."

"That much is certain," the satyr replied. "I bring a litany of problems before the Order."

"First, every last pigeon in the city has gone missing. It might be prudent to find out why."

"Second, you know they've taken to burying pets in the graveyard out east of the city? Well, a tiger has risen from the dead and is devouring people out there right now. Judging from the number who fled toward our gates, it's headed this way right now."

"Third: a portal opened in the sky above Mount Waterdeep, and something called a warforged fell through it, pursued by half a dozen rust monsters. Two of them survived the fall and pursued the metal man into the sewers. Presumably they are all still at large, and should be dealt with before your sewer gates and gratings are all destroyed."

"Fourth, it seems a band of outland adventurers on holiday paid a visit to the Blushing Mermaid to taste some mermaid charms at the same time a wemic claiming to be a captain in the City Guard did. We've received word from Yeveldra's orphanage in South Ward that seven or eight half-mermaid bundles of joy, plus a half-wemic, are now showing up

on the orphanage porch every morning. A halfling appeared among them one morning, but they're fairly certain he wasn't all that young—only small. He's suspected of busily making babies disappear—perhaps down into Skullport, through a hidden hatch in the wall of his bedroom, an adjacent jewelry shop, and a secret passage from the shop to Down Below. When we questioned him about it, he wanted you to know that one of the mermaids in the Blushing Mermaid is really a magically changed beholder, and—"

"Hold on," Maerlus interrupted. "Who's this 'we,' and who specifically are you? A satyr and a cook—*gourmet* cook—yes, but who are you that you can hear or see all these things? Or are you merely delusional?"

"I," the satyr said flatly, "am Ederic Jhellowshooturs, and I work for the Folk for the Ethical Treatment of Dragons."

"The *what*?"

"A union begun by—well, all dragonkind clear across the Realms, to work against dragonslayers. We want to see the taking of a dragon's life made a crime, with the harshest punish—"

Maerlus beamed down at him from the high podium. "Thank you, Ed. I am so glad you came to the Order before any of these threats to our fair city got further along. Your valuable counsel will enable us to begin work on proper laws regarding attempted dragonslayings, and counter these insidious threats to the city. But you must hurry down yon hall and open the black door at the very end there, where the most senior Order members on duty are waiting to talk to you. Just tell them everything you've told me, all right? And please accept our *deepest* thanks and gratitude. If all citizens were as diligent and civic-minded as you—"

"*The world would be a better place!*" the satyr roared. Maerlus joined in the last few words heartily enough to bring a smile onto Ederic's face. The satyr fairly galloped down the hall, and Maerlus watched him go.

Ederic was just opening the black door when the public door of the ready-room, behind the line of waiting Waterdhavians, banged open, and the Bearded Barrel burst through it.

"Help!" he panted frantically, reeling as he sought to slow down and keep his balance. Citizens turned; the reek of spirits emanating from the dwarf was like a mighty invisible wave of alcoholic fury.

"It's my wife! She's flying—it was something she drank! Wild runaway magic! You've got to come help, before she goes out a window or something, soars aloft, and is *gone!*"

Maerlus sighed. Oh, it was going to be one of those nights.

CHAPTER 3: HUMORING ALL WAITING WATERDEEP

"And is your wife a dwarf?" Maerlus asked carefully, casting a swift glance down the hall to make sure the satyr had indeed gone through the black door—which did not, in fact, conceal an endless supply of on-duty Order mages. A tenday back, a novice had been killed by an angry housecat tossed into his face by an angrier owner, leaving the Order offices more shorthanded than ever. Satisfied, Maerlus turned his attention back to the latest arrival. Perhaps he was a simple drunkard who was seeing things, thanks to what he'd imbibed. Perhaps.

"Yes," the rotund dwarf gasped. "Looks just like me. Except, you know—" He waved at his chest. "Oh, and she took off her false beard for the tastings."

"The tastings?"

"We—uh, Thelva and me, that is—I'm Ruthgular Clovenaxe. We're the blenders at Dlarthen's House of Thirst. We mix and taste."

"Tough work." Maerlus tried and failed to keep the dripping sarcasm out of his voice. Judging by the

various murmurs from the waiting line of petitioners, many of them felt just as he did.

"Saer Wizard," the dwarf said fiercely, "whatever you may think of my employment, you've *got* to help me. I'm desperate."

"So am I!" someone waiting in line snapped.

"Aye," someone else agreed. "I'm desperate, too!"

"So am I," rumbled a third citizen. "Some druid cast veganism on me! Me, a half-orc sorcerer, reduced to munching leaves!"

"I kill chickens for a living," said a fourth Waterdhavian mournfully, "and someone accused me of murder most fowl. The Watch was on the way, so I ran here. Desperate, see?"

"That's nothing!" said the man behind him. "I'm a bard, but some fiend made me deaf with a spell, and his magic changes what I look like all the time! One moment an ugly old man, the next a fetching young lass! I—I'm *desperate!*"

Maerlus rose to his feet and made quelling motions with both hands. "You see?" he told the dwarf. "Desperation abounds; you'll just have to wait in line."

The dwarf stared at him. "Thelva's in danger right now! Moments count! How long—?" He peered along the line, spat out something that sounded Dwarven and very rude, then threw up his hands, wheeled around, and ran for the door.

Maerlus shrugged as it banged in the dwarf's wake. Everyone was in so much of a hurry, these days, so convinced their needs must come before all else, so—

"Lord saer wizard," the foremost man in line said wearily, "I know it's hard dealing with all Waterdeep bringing its troubles through these doors, but my problems aren't going to go away with more waiting time."

Maerlus sat down again, nodded glumly, and said, "Thank you for being so understanding, citizen. And just what might your troubles be?"

"I have two feuding merchants staying in my rooming-house, and the situation is getting

nasty—*magic* nasty. The Watch told me to consult the Order, so here I am."

Maerlus tried and failed to suppress a sigh. "Tell me more about these two merchants."

"One is from Westgate. He says he represents an order of paladins who ride only carnivorous apes, and he is looking to fill their order for a dozen matching apes. Oh, and another of his clients wants breeding pairs of pygmy carnivorous tree elephants."

"So he came to Waterdeep."

The man shrugged. "All Faerûn does, right? The other merchant is from Amn—I *think*. He can speak full sentences only when he's standing on his head, so most of the time he just gets a few words blurted out. He claims to have several picky clients. One is a rakshasa trying to learn how to juggle, who needs just the perfect balls of yarn to do so. Another is a mermaid succubus paladin who says the Lords of Waterdeep have retained her to "entertain" at a new park somewhere in the city, which they'll establish when they've gathered taxes enough to pay for it. She wants the merchant to find her an otyugh to serve as her mount, because she "desperately loves" otyughs. Another of his clients is a mind flayer belly dancer, who of course wants brains—ettin brains, for choice. Failing that, she wants the brains of madwits people who think they're one person part of the day and other folk at other times. The more crazed the better, of course."

"Of course," Maerlus said dryly. "Do you regard either of these merchants as particularly dangerous? You mentioned nasty magic; they can both use the Art?"

"Can't everybody, these days?"

Maerlus bit back an angry dismissal and decided to humor Waterdeep again, so he sighed instead. He was doing a lot of sighing, these days.

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Ruthgular burst through the door of his third tavern, fought for breath, then lurched to the bar and gasped, "Is there a wizard here I could hire? I can pay!"

The tavernmaster stared at him, then raised his voice to bellow across the crowded taproom, "Is there a wizard in the house? Dwarf here, looking to hire!"

A moment of silence ensued, and then the hubbub of normal hearty converse started up again, without any reply. The tavernmaster tried again. "Sam-rathren? Ilingruil? Anyone?"

Once again, his query received no reply. The tavernmaster gave Ruthgular a shrug.

The dwarf fished his chest-purse up into view by hauling on its chain and removed the heaviest gold coin in it—a thunderer, the best old Clan Flamefist minting, as thick as a grown human's little finger. "I'm *desperate*," he said, tossing it across the bar.

The tavernmaster slapped one hairy hand down on the coin, examined it, and made it disappear. Holding up a "wait right there" finger, he hastened down the bar.

He returned moments later dragging a tippy little pixie along the bar, as drinkers hastily snatched their flagons and tankards out of the way. She might have been more alluring if her skin hadn't been wrinkled, gray, and beyond rotten. Here and there, it bore stains that looked as if mildew had been scrubbed away. She stank of strong perfume that was obviously covering a worse reek.

"This," the tavernmaster announced, "is Dreetha."

The pixie regarded Ruthgular sourly. "Before you ask, I'm a lich—a pixie lich. And a secret army of faery zombies does my bidding, so don't cross me."

Ruthgular shook his head. "Lady Dreetha, I'd not dream of it. I just want to hire a wizard to rescue my poor wife. Can you help?"

"Take a spell off her?"

"I—" Ruthgular shrugged. "You tell me. She drank something that made her float up to the ceiling. If she

gets out of the blending room, she could blow away anywhere. She's scared stiff."

"Wise of her." The pixie tapped her own nose in thought. "Not my specialty, I'm afraid. Let me think who might serve."

"Norgluth?" the tavernmaster suggested.

She shook her head dismissively. "He got hired by a treant hungry for a fix of elemental fire, and hasn't been seen since."

"Amalaree?"

The pixie snorted. "Came to a sticky end, as one might expect for an arcane trickster obsessed with magically snapping her fingers against behinds from a distance. She goosed the wrong person and got blasted clear through a wall. I understand they're still finding small scraps of her."

"Lathangoleir?"

"Now that's a sad, sad story. Got turned into a gelatinous cube, couldn't get turned back, and tried to kill himself. Became something of a hero. Got a broadsheet to print a banner proclaiming his desire for 'a solid relationship'—and some mermaid paladin showed up to answer it. He fled from her and ended up at an orphanage, where he donated himself to be served up as dessert to the orphans. They refused at first, of course, but someone in Mistshore gave the orphans poisoned candy. So they gave tiny slices of him to the dying as a desperate curing attempt—and it worked; eating him got rid of the poison. He sacrificed himself and saved them all." The pixie lich shrugged. "So, no more Lathangoleir."

The tavernmaster threw up his hands. "Can't you think of anyone?"

"That we can *find*, hereabouts, on short notice?" the pixie lich snarled. "Don't want much, do you, Hulburk? Why, I doubt we could—"

She stopped, blinked, snapped her fingers, and said, "Jhalang. Jhalang the Crazy. Come, desperate dwarf."

She was down off the bar and darting through a forest of legs in a twinkling. Ruthgular lowered his head and charged after her.

The tavernmaster watched startled drinkers surge into the air in a line, right across the room, and flung up one large and hairy hand to hide his grin. Dreetha was something when she got going. And that dwarf looked more like a walking barrel than anything else. "Mind you come back and tell me what befalls!" he shouted.

A good tale would entertain his patrons for an evening. Hulburk knew that his job entailed both quenching the thirst and entertaining the befuddled minds of all Waterdhavians who walked through yon doors. His task was to humor them, amid all their passing troubles.

In the wake of the hastening dwarf, men whose drinks had spilled came down wet and angry and looking for someone to blame. "Humoring all waiting Waterdeep, that's what I do," he muttered, watching the fights break out.

Someone hurled a spell through the growing fray, and he sighed. Of *course* there'd be a wizard here now. Never one when you wanted one, but underfoot and everywhere when you didn't.

He reached under the bar for his secret weapon, just in case—not that he'd use it yet. The Watch would be less than pleased to learn he owned a rod that turned all targets into dinosaur-riding halfings—if that's what it really did. Wizards selling magic gew-gaws were liable to claim just about *anything*.

CHAPTER 4: IN THE HOUSE OF CURSES UNLEASHED

Ruthgulur Clovenaxe was clear out of breath and staggering. It had taken him the better part of two ill-lit city blocks to rid himself of the angry half-drunk humans draped over him, with their curses and reeking sweat and wild punches. All that time the undead pixie ahead of him had raced along like lightning in a hurry to be elsewhere.

He'd only just managed to keep her in sight, and right now she was plunging into the heart of what seemed to be an illicit late-night street meeting of shady traders trying to trade useless wares with other shady traders.

"Ah, but it's past time for a new *Cookbook of the Realms!*" the nearest one was saying excitedly, waving a thick chapbook. "I've new cockatrice recipes, and a dessert that calls for self-dividing, swashbuckling gelatinous cubes! The waiting world shouldn't be deprived of such culinary brilliance one moment longer!"

"Just one? You amaze me! Now, I have here in my very own hand something that should consume far more than just one moment of anyone's life! See this globe? Gaze into it, and you'll see moving scenes of bared lust that'd arouse even a mind flayer with amnesia! Certain backsliding clergy in this city can't get enough of these globes! This one shows lovemaking among the merfolk of Waterdeep Harbor; we call it 'splash fiction'! It even has a plot! The mermaids are guarding a nine-sided icy crystal, determined to keep it from an underwater druid and his snarky dolphin companion—and you know what jerks dolphins can be! And it's a steal, too! Not since a thieves' guild went on strike have there been prices as low as ours! And if children walk into the room, one word—*one word*—can have the globe showing games of musical chairs with

wemics! It's unbelievable, and not available in any shops! It—"

Ruthgulur's stumbling hurry thankfully took him out of earshot, but right past someone who was issuing a dire warning. "There's more need for our talismans than ever before! Why, the myconids are as mad as the Nine Hells, and they're just not going to take it anymore! And in Red Larch—yes, *that* perilously close to the city—they just had an avalanche! It was the latest in a veritable plague of landslides, all started by intelligent pebbles that gather together and start their own avalanches. Seems some of them dream of joining the traveling circuses and are trying to get noticed. Makes you wonder who these pebbles were, before some mad mage shapechanged them into little rocks."

Ruthgulur shook his head and ran on. Ahead, down a more deserted street, the pixie lich had turned to make sure he saw which door she was about to open and step through. He forced his weary legs to take him along even faster.

"Get it here! *One Hundred and One Uses of a Magic Dagger of Minor Healing!* Be the first in your ward or town to know just what to do with a knife besides stick it in someone! Why, this book can transform your life!"

That voice faded as a new and deeper one drowned it out. "Ah, but this particular greatsword can *think!* It has a great admiration for archers, but is insanely jealous of their bows! And you can have it, this night only, for a mere—"

The voice of that last trader faded away behind Ruthgulur as he plunged through the still-open door—into a scene out of nightmare.

What looked like a naked and near-skeletal mummy—mere brown, shriveled skin wrapped around long, grotesque human bones—was sitting at a table laying out cards like a fortune teller. Above each card swirled a plume of what might have been smoke—if there'd been a fire to generate smoke, and if



smoke had held tiny sounds and gleaming lights and momentary vivid glimpses of scenes from afar.

The pixie lich was standing on the edge of the table at the mummy's elbow, watching long brown skeletal fingers unhurriedly place card after card. "Jhalang the Crazy," the undead pixie announced to the breathless dwarf.

A skull that had wisps of long hair clinging to its brown scalp plates turned to regard Ruthgulur with eye sockets that held twinkling black flames. "At your service," it said, in a husky, disturbingly sexy contralto. "If you can pay, of course."

* * * * *

"Gods above and below, but I was glad to see the end of that shift," Maerlus the Magnificent said sourly, shaking his head. "You won't believe what walks through our door, demanding the Watchful Order drop everything and deal with their particular wild problem right now, before the Realms explode and burn! Why, we even had a dwarf come running in, wanting to hire us to cure his wife of flying after she drank some unlabeled potion or other!"

"We had him in here, too," the tavernmaster replied, setting the wizard's preferred tipple before him. "The one they call 'the Bearded Barrel.' Fair desperate he was. Dreetha took him to see Jhalang the Crazy."

Maerlus cursed. "The Hells she did!" He drained the bubbling flagon in a single long pull, then gasped and shuddered involuntarily as he set it blindly back down on the bar, his shaking hand making it clang and rattle. Then he half-fell off his stool and made for the door. "The last time Jhalang took on a mission, we lost a dozen warehouses in Dock Ward, with twenty dead, and gained a mass breakout from the dungeons under Castle Waterdeep! If anyone from the Watch, the Guard, or my Order comes in here this night, Hulburk, tell them I've gone to deal with Jhalang and need all the help I can get!"

"How will they know where to find you?"

"The warehouses and bodies being blasted into the sky ought to provide them with a subtle clue!" Maerlus called back bitterly. Then he was out the door and gone.

The tavernmaster watched it swing closed and frowned. There'd been a time when he could keep up with doings in the city and know where he stood, but these days . . .

"Hulburk! Hulburk! I'll have a Fire-Throwing Troll, and Ethla here wants to try a Druidical Pet Cemetery! Oh, and mix us both a Fifty Hues of Force Gray, for after, will you?"

The tavernmaster shook his head. He was getting too old for this.

* * * * *

"I can pay good gold," Ruthgulur panted.

"Oh, but it's not gold I want," the mummified thing at the table replied, its jawbone somehow shaping an eerie smile. "It's a little of your life."

"What?" The dwarf felt a frisson of fear.

"A little of your life force, so I can live again for a brief time."

"And if I do that, you'll make my Thelva safe again?"

"No one in Faerûn is safe, Stalwart of the Clovenaxes, or ever can be," Jhalang replied. "But I can make her stop flying. You might want to carefully dispose of whatever she drank that produced this effect—or better still, sell it to me."

"I—I'll do it. Take some of my life force," Ruthgulur said in a rush. "Do it."

"A little up front," the mummy-thing replied, "and the rest when we're done. Come sit here beside me." Skeletal fingers patted an empty stool.

Ruthgulur clambered up onto it, trembling. Icy fear was clawing at his heart now, sinking cold fingers into his innards. He forced himself to hold still and keep his eyes open as that skull loomed nearer, and nearer.

What felt like dry paper brushed against his lips, growing softer and more yielding in an instant. The contact was so cold that he was shocked frozen, unable even to swallow, and he couldn't have drawn a breath to save his soul. Then the cold lips locked against his, and a tongue like an icicle was thrusting into his mouth.

Ruthgulur found himself on the floor, feeling sick and weak and, well, *drained*, with a nasty ache at the back of his head where it had just met unyielding flagstones. He stared up at a brown and mummified skeletal thing that now had a long-haired feminine face of dancing-eyed beauty, and a throat and shoulders to match.

"I'm sorry," it told him huskily, with a tone of true regret. "I couldn't stop myself. So *hungry* . . . I took all you should yield, Ruthgulur Clovenaxe; I'll be taking no more from you later. Be welcome in the House of Curses Unleashed, and come sit beside me again. I promise I'll take no more from you. Please."

The pixie lich looked from Jhalang to Ruthgulur, and tittered. "I think she likes you," it told the dwarf on the floor.

"I . . . if she can cure my Thelva," the Bearded Barrel growled grimly, clawing his way up the stool, "then I like her, too. Very much."

He looked at Jhalang, eye to eye, managing not to tremble. "So, when can we get going?"

Jhalang smiled. "I go nowhere. Not with what's left of these joints." She pointed with still-skeletal fingers. "The cards. I work my magic through the cards."

The dwarf followed her pointing finger to a card on the table, and the scene swirling above it. "What is that?" he asked, astonished despite himself.

The cards were laid out on the table in a complicated array that shaped nothing he could identify. Each was the size of a chapbook—much larger than the cards with which he'd played various games of chance, and a scene limned in glowing smoke hovered and swirled above each of them.

The one he was staring at showed two bearded men floating in midair, faces contorted in anger, hurling wildly colored lightning bolts at each other.

"That," said Jhalang the Crazy a little sadly, "is how foolish wizards die."

CHAPTER 5: THE TURN OF CARDS FRIENDLY AND OTHERWISE

"I'm going," Dreetha announced abruptly. "It's not safe for me to be this close to your, ah, cards."

"True enough," Jhalang agreed. She and the dwarf watched the pixie lich scuttle back out the door and vanish into the night. The door glowed briefly around its edges as it closed and resealed itself.

One of the dueling wizards convulsed as his foe's lightning bolt burst through a half-seen glowing magical shield and thrust into his midsection. His head briefly became that of a lion, and his hands became tentacles that writhed in pain. Then he melted away—but not before the horrified Ruthgulur had witnessed his blood boiling off, his flesh and innards splaying out into tatters that became blobs and then brief drifting flames, and worse.

He winced. "My Thelva," he murmured, shaking his head.

"Look at that card instead," Jhalang suggested soothingly, pointing at another. She picked up and moved the card that now had just one miniature wizard dancing triumphantly in midair above it.

Ruthgulur looked, obediently. "A dung heap?"

"Yes, but it's more than that. It's a neo-otyugh with ambitions. Notice the tentacle there? It's watching us now; see the twinkle in its eye? It wants to attend New Ollamh."

"And become a bard?" Ruthgulur asked faintly. "Surely you're jesting?"

"No, Stalwart of the Clovenaxes. I'm telling the truth. Faerûn is, I fear, far stranger than you've hitherto imagined. That very strangeness is one of the reasons these cards can gather so much energy from the Weave and work magic for me, such as taking the flight from your Thelva from afar."

Slowly and thoughtfully, Jhalang started to move cards. As Ruthgulur watched, she identified the people in the scene floating above each one.

"That's Ormitrar, high priest of Mask as the Lord of Mischief, and he's talking with Rauthin the Crazy—yes, I'm not the only one—and Thoulour."

"Who's which?"

"The bald old man is the priest, the bearded beggar is Rauthin, and Thoulour is the faerie he-dragon who can't resist stealing pendants—hence the collection of them hanging from him. Rauthin is a wise sage but looks like a beggar because few folk pay him for his advice. He always qualifies everything he says, usually contradicting himself. Ormitrar mistrusts both of them, so he must be desperate for guidance or aid. I suspect the god he serves is giving him a bad day—which may explain what befell your Thelva, come to think. Let me spend a little magic here."

Jhalang drew a card from a row of face-down cards along the darkest edge of the table. It flared with a sudden milky radiance, like moonlight, as she turned it over and slid it under the card depicting the priest, the sage, and the little dragon. The sound of their voices faded into hearing.

"The worst day of my life," Ormitrar was saying bitterly. "I am bidden to work practical jokes and pranks to venerate the Masked Might I serve—and every last one of them I've attempted, this day, has gone wrong. Every one. Mask must be mightily displeased with me."

"How can you be certain it's His displeasure?" the sage asked. "Do the Lords of Chaos not do battle from

time to time, thwarting each other's servants with their own, or even directly interfering with one another's plans? And does not what befalls during Halaster's Highharvesttide spur such a struggle every year?"

The faerie dragon giggled, its merriment a high glissade of chiming bells. Whatever it started to say after that was lost as all sound faded. Jhalang looked sharply at the card she'd drawn and slid underneath. Its glow had flickered into dimness.

"Warded. Ormitrar must have a ward up against scrying," she muttered, and returned to rearranging cards on the table. "Patience, good Ruthgulur. We'll soon reach out from this room to Thelva, in hers."

The dwarf nodded, then frowned at the scene above the card she was moving. "What's that?"

"Blackstaff Tower," replied Jhalang. "Gone purple, perhaps for good. The apprentices have been experimenting with color magic, and it's been disastrous."

"Color magic?"

"Faerûn is stranger than you thought it was, remember? Now *this* particular chaos is inside Blackstaff Tower, right now. It seems some overly ambitious fool of a mage thought he'd take the shape of the notorious Volo, then show up to help the apprentices toss out old broken furniture and the leavings of yesteryear—probably in the hope of pilfering something more valuable. That banner they've just wrapped him in is a relic of the Seven Sisters saving some whales, a century or so back. And the man in black who's helping trundle him out was one of the Blackstaff's much-maligned manservants—his staff-polisher, among other things."

"He served the *Blackstaff*? How old is he?"

Jhalang shrugged. "Some centuries. I'm not sure he's entirely human. Khelben summoned him with what he liked to call his 'uppity servant spell.' He's the one who once proposed that lands no longer pay their debts in gold, but rather in hats."

"Hats?"

"I did tell you strangeness abounds in the world, Ruthgulur. Now, if his idea had been adopted—"

"That would have been strange," the dwarf agreed, trying not to let his impatience show. Thelva was alone and terrified, and if anyone walked in on her, with the sea breezes rising as they did most nights, his wife would be gone.

Jhalang moved another card. "Here we have a cemetery that may soon become a park. Most of the monuments are so old that they're nigh buried, and the folk entombed beneath them have been forgotten. The dead were greengrocers, most of them, but that odd-looking one commemorates a centaur who fell in final battle against his mortal enemy—a flight of stairs. The one next to it marks an ettin who lost a weight-lifting contest with himself. When he picked up a boulder larger than he was, it bore him down and gave him just one headache, but it was a big one. Once, this burial ground was exclusive to those who served Chaos."

Ruthgulur peered. "Does that headstone say 'Fluffy'?"

"Yes. Some pets are buried there. The cemetery didn't stay exclusive."

She moved another card.

"A dwarf?" asked Ruthgulur.

"And not just any dwarf. This is the infamous Galathen the White—he who forged the Sword of Tunes. You can see he's an albino, but what you can't see is what the illithids hunted him tirelessly to get. Seven different dwarves live inside Galathen's head. And he's wearing the Cursed Talisman, which forces you to voice your innermost thoughts, no matter how inconvenient and imprudent the timing. He's guarding a long-forgotten portal linking where he stands with Selûne."

"The moon?"

"Indeed, the moon. Some children found it by accident. The individual he's warning away from the portal is the only half-elf, half-dwarf scholar mage I know of."

"Half-elf, half-dwarf?" Ruthgulur shook his head, then added, "Looks like a barbarian."

"For the very good reason that he is a barbarian. Almost done; just a few cards more."

"What's that?"

"Look away; that chaos is from the past. It shows a cursed day when everyone had to speak in rhyme, or sing lies. A day when a miscast spell turned the most powerful wizards in the world into toddlers with fingers too small to work most spells. The day when Lord Piergeiron made an inadvertently funny joke. A day when alcoholic drinks of all kinds were banned in Waterdeep for a tenday, until the citizens rioted—"

"I'll bet!"

"—and Khelben, Volo, the young lord Danilo Thann, and Elminster in his female guise of Elmara all got temporarily imprisoned in a magic vault by an unknown prankster. Some say it was Fzoul Chembryl, who vanished for almost a month and later claimed to have been on vacation. But I met him once, and I doubt he had either the wits or the magical might."

Jhalang moved one last card. "And this is a cursed lanceboard game that's still going on somewhere in the Moondark Mountains. Once you start playing, you can't stop or depart until the game is done. All the pieces are living creatures. The unicorn moving right now is something of a philanthropist and has always claimed to have a halfling mother. I don't credit the tale, though; this same unicorn also swears the King of Cormyr was replaced with a bear in a fez, magically disguised to look like the real Obarskyr, and no one noticed for ten years."

"Right," Ruthgulur said, rather dazedly. "And just how is all this going to help my Thelva?"

"Feel the power, radiating above the cards? If I've arranged them right, we'll have called quite a bit from the Weave—and when I start turning cards face down, that power will be concentrated above the few that are left. Then I'll send it out through your Thelva and ground her—literally, as it happens."

"Let it be soon," Ruthgulur said fiercely. "Sooner or later, someone will see that door I barred from the outside, and wonder why, and open it. And if she gets out of the blending room, on a night this windy—"

"Is anyone likely to see the door in these wee hours? I'm familiar with the street down one side of the House of Thirst, but what stands on its other side?"

"A pickle factory, where orphans work night and day," the dwarf said bitterly. "They get into *everything*." Jhalang turned a card face down. A muted snarling was audible in the air above the others—a roiling of power that looked like tiny blue lightnings flickering amid the swirling smoke.

Nodding as if satisfied, she turned over another card, which promptly burst into flame. A tongue of fire soared to lick at the ceiling for a moment, and then was gone, leaving behind nothing but ashes and a terrible reek.

Jhalang sat back, looking grim. "That's not good," she said quietly. "Does your Thelva have any enemies? Anyone who can wield magic?"

"N-no," Ruthgulur said doubtfully. "None that I know of. We rarely set foot outside the House of Thirst, these days—very rarely, for her. No. No foes I know of."

A second card burst into flame while Jhalang's fingers were still poised over it, and she breathed a soft curse that froze Ruthgulur's heart. She sounded both awed and scared.

CHAPTER 6: OF RUST MONSTERS, WARFORGED, AND MAGICAL MELEE

"Just where are you headed in such haste?" Dreetha asked menacingly, her tiny withered hands raised. One of those hands held a glowing rod, pointed

directly at the wizard before her. "I very much doubt Jhalang invited the likes of you to her home—or would welcome you."

"Out of my way, undead meddler!" Maerlus the Magnificent snarled. "I'm on official Order business!"

"Oh, no," the pixie lich replied softly. "You don't frighten me, and I happen to *like* these particular cobbles I'm standing on. Take your official Order business elsewhere, and leave my friends alone."

Maerlus raised his staff. "I've warned you!"

"So you have, and I've warned you. Which of us will prove wisest, I wonder?" The cobbles shifted under the pixie lich's feet as she fell into a stance, giving the Watchful Order magist a wintry smile.

He strode toward her, leveling his staff like a spear. Blue-white flame raced along its length, gathering at its head in a whirling ball of magical fire.

"Rod of one-minute monkeys," Dreetha murmured quickly, "empty yourself." She knelt and pointed her rod at the cobblestones in front of her. Suddenly, the street was full of monkeys, all looking intently at Dreetha. She smiled, hefted one of the cobbles, pointed the rod at the onrushing Maerlus, and ordered, "Quick, my minions! Fling!"

With one accord, the monkeys plucked up cobbles larger than their own bodies, swaying under the weight, and banded together in trios and quartets to throw the stones at the wizard. Maerlus dodged, stumbled as a hail of cobbles struck his legs and ankles, howled in agony as the rocks crushed some of his toes, and finally went down. More cobbles thudded off his hastily raised arms and staff.

Maerlus started to roll in an undignified and hasty retreat, cursing weakly between moans of pain. Then his staff flashed brightly, and he let out a gasp of relief.

"Healed," he snarled, "and less than pleased, lich! He clambered to his feet, staff blazing blue fire from end to end once more. "This is quite enough defiance to justify your destruction by the Order, and when

I've—" Maerlus broke off as all the monkeys simply faded away.

Only the smiling Dreetha stood facing him, intoning a swift incantation.

"Magic missile, fast and quick, hit proud Maerlus in the—elbow."

Blue-white fire raced to meet blue-white fire. The Watchful Order magist roared in pain, his elbow afire, and one suddenly numbed hand let go of his staff.

Maerlus kept hold of the staff with his other hand, but its head swung high and wild. The bolt of lightning that cracked out of it sprang up through the sky to smite a flagstaff atop a nearby building, rather than the pixie lich in front of him.

"Flesh to gelatin," Dreetha purred, and Maerlus felt his body begin to sag and flow. His staff clattered onto the cobbles, and the pixie lich raced over to kick it away down the street.

Snarling incoherent rage as his robes collapsed around him, Maerlus flung his arms around Dreetha's racing legs—or tried to. What actually happened was that two wet, drooping cylinders of goo slapped around the lich's legs and toppled her.

Just at that moment, a Watch patrol burst around the corner, lanterns swaying. "Help!" Dreetha shrieked. "Help! I'm being accosted by this horrible monster!"

Maerlus tried to snarl a denial, and found to his horror that what came out of his mouth was a wordless roaring.

"Are you hurt, miss?" the Watchcaptain shouted.

"Oooh, yes! He touched me with a gelatinous appendage, and it was all I could do to keep from swooning! I—"

"Back off!" a Watchman snapped at her, raising his staff warningly. "You—you're undead!"

"And *this* looks like Maerlus the Magnificent," another Watchman remarked, holding his lantern high and peering at the gelatinous heap on the cobbles. "What have you done to him?"

Dreetha sighed. "You're too stlarned quick. That's the trouble with you Watchmen."

Glaring at her, the Watchcaptain snatched his horn from his belt and blew it, loud and long.

The pixie lich backed away. "Sorry, Jhalang," she murmured, "I bought you all the time I could." Then magic sang around her, and motes of light winked out of nowhere to swirl about her body. When they winked out again, the cobbles where Dreetha had stood were empty.

"She's gone, captain," a Watchman observed unnecessarily.

"I can see that, Valarthaun," the Watchcaptain snarled. "Form a ring around Maerlus until one of his colleagues gets here—all of you. Face outward, and if you see that lich, yell right quick! She might be lurking, awaiting a chance to finish him off."

"She's not," a grim voice said out of the night, "but I am."

The Watchmen turned in unison to behold a dwarf larger around than he stood tall striding to meet them. He looked tired, and some of his suspender straps were undone and dangling. He clutched a wizard's staff in his hand.

"It's the Bearded Barrel!" one of the Watchmen exclaimed. "Well now, you're a long way from the House of Thirst!"

"And just when," the Watchcaptain barked, "did you become a wizard?"

Ruthgulur Clovenaxe regarded him balefully and raised the staff. "There's just one way to find out, isn't there?"

The gelatinous heap strained to say something—something angry, exasperated, and utterly unintelligible.

The thunder of hurrying booted feet and more bobbing lanterns heralded the arrival of another Watch patrol. A young Watchful Order magist darted forward from among them to peer at Maerlus, then ordered, "Stand back, everyone!"

When everyone obeyed except the dwarf, the magist looked up and snapped, "You too!"

Ruthgulur aimed the staff in his hands at the young magist and muttered, "The Nine Hells I will!" To his utter astonishment, the staff roared into life, shooting out a wall of ravening magic that washed over the Watchmen in a bright flood and then was gone again, as suddenly as it had appeared. In its wake lay more than a dozen sprawled and senseless men, several shattered lanterns and as many intact but rolling ones, a gaping but unharmed young magist, and Maerlus the Magnificent—restored and whole again, but red-faced with rage and struggling to rearrange his clothing.

"Give me that!" he roared at Ruthgulur, making a grab for his staff. Rather than yielding it, the dwarf sidestepped and swung it viciously at both magists' ankles, low and sideways. Two icons of the Watchful Order promptly toppled in wildly shouting unison.

"Enough!" a new voice bellowed. The magic that slammed down the street to accompany this demand lifted Ruthgulur Clovenaxe off his feet and left him floating in midair, wide-eyed and oblivious. The roiling amber radiance that suddenly surrounded his stout body floated the staff gently out of his slack hands and sent it drifting away.

A strong young hand beckoned it through the air, then caught it. The owner of that hand regarded Maerlus and the young magist with withering scorn.

"A dwarf who doesn't know one word of the Art bests you and two Watch patrols in the open street! And you call yourself Watchful Order magists!"

"There was a lich," Maerlus muttered, purple with rage and shame.

"Sure there was. And a paladin of the god of apathy, no doubt, leading an army of rust monsters in love with an even larger army of plate-armored warriors, led by several forgotten gods. Pull the other one."

"Lady Shalaerla, I swear it was a lich! A pixie lich named Dreetha, who—"

"A pixie lich. Maerlus, are you *sure* it isn't time for you to go on leave for some sorely-needed rest? For, say, a summer or two?"

"Ask the dwarf. Use spell-tell," Maerlus said sullenly. "I've some unfinished business yonder, in the House of Curses Unleashed—"

"—which can wait while I question the dwarf," Lady Shalaerla finished. "I want to know what's *really* going on before you rush about Waterdeep destroying parts of it—again."

Maerlus flushed a brighter crimson. "That was a misunderstanding, as I've told the Order time and time again, and—"

"And you have heard our judgment of the matter, time and time again. *Stay right here*, Maerlus, unless you want to be dismissed from the Order here and now. Meanwhile—as you suggest—I will spell-tell the dwarf. And no, you won't get your staff back until I'm finished, so stop making grabs for it."

Lady Shalaerla, Senior Investigatrix of the Watchful Order, turned her back on the glowering Maerlus, faced the floating Ruthgulur, and murmured an intricate incantation under her breath that ended with the calm command, "Speak."

Ruthgulur Clovenaxe went on staring into nothingness, but his mouth fell open and then started to move, shaping words. "The orphans refuse to eat their vegetables, but beware the invisible stalker who remembers nothing less than ten years old. The Unseen Battle rages, as two invisible flying godlike turnip monsters fight a cosmic struggle for the fate of all the realms."

The dwarf paused, then continued. "I have seen the halfling, and she is very pregnant. She craves spicy mustard and pickles and ices delivered by a chocolate syrup elemental, though I doubt such a thing truly exists."

Maerlus started to speak, but stopped when he saw Lady Shalaerla's glare.

"I pass the same drunken street-singer every day, and I wish he didn't know only bad drinking songs." "So do I," mumbled a groggy Watchman.

The dwarf continued, oblivious to the interruption. "For a dragon and a gnome were wed, but as they sought consummation, the high priest of the God of Mischief kept pulling the stepladder out from under the gnome. Be glad the couple wasn't a rust monster and a warforged! But as I recall, there was that rust monster that thought all the warriors trying to carve it with their swords were flirting, just offering it metal."

Ruthgulur drew breath again. "School the children by sending them on a field trip into the Dungeon of the Crypt. The drow, now, chide their tutors for not flogging their children enough, and decry the bad influence of rock music, made by striking stalactites in the deep caverns—"

"Bah!" Maerlus spat. "This is getting us nowhere! Nonsense, all nonsense."

"Be still," Lady Shalaerla commanded severely.

The floating dwarf raved on. "It's all stiff, I tell you! An entire new school of magic, all gelatin spells—for who doesn't want to be loved and accepted by all? This whole thing is freaking me out, man!"

"He said that in a different voice!" the young Order magist exclaimed.

Lady Shalaerla nodded, holding up a hand for silence.

"The first wizard uttered a power word 'blond,' but the other responded with the word 'shun,' and the first responded with 'brown,' which in turn was answered with 'kilt.' Then came a bolt of lightning that twisted the gender of all who stood too near."

Ruthgulur droned on. "Apparently, *flesh to stone* is a marital aid." Maerlus smirked, but did not interrupt the babbling dwarf.

"They found a magic item: Thrargul's thrice-used cheesecloth cloak, that renders its wearer invisible but gives off a horrendous stench."

"All the noble ladies of Sea Ward and North Ward wanted the new hairstyle, but it was just an illusion spell, so it lasted not long.

Lady Shalaerla frowned as Ruthgulur continued. "The adventurers tried to flee, but at every turn they found the roads dug up.

"She had a flirtation with Khelben Arunsun, who said, 'I have reason to believe you can light my fire,' but she believed him not." The young magist blushed.

"He was addicted to gambling, but lost bet after bet," droned the dwarf.

"The paladin of Sune was a succubus. She admitted her mount did all the work yet was never credited. She further claimed that her mount did not spend all its time as a horse. An angel, that succubus, and a rooster went into a bar, so that was truly dead cock walking. . . ."

Maerlus frowned and muttered, "My joke!"

". . . and at the scene of the crime lay a wagon wheel, a wineglass, and half a body. The left half."

Eyes narrowing, Lady Shalaerla flung up her other hand, and the dwarf fell silent, his head slumping as if someone had severed cords holding it up.

"That was the crime scene I just left to come here," she spat. "Someone is toying with us."

"That," a steely-soft voice replied, "would be me."

Everyone of the Order and the Watch who was awake enough to stare gaped at a skeletal woman whose bones were wreathed in brown, mummified flesh, but whose head and shoulders looked whole and alive. Her smile was wintry as she locked gazes first with Shalaerla, and then with Maerlus.

"Sometimes," she told them, "the Watchful Order makes unfounded assumptions, rushes in, and does wrong. This dwarf was fighting to rescue his lady—or rather, to buy time for me to do so. I succeeded. Ruthgulur, be released."

The orange glow around the floating dwarf abruptly vanished, and Ruthgulur Clovenaxe fell to the cobbles with a groan. Shaking his head, he turned

to look at Jhalang, saw who was peeping shyly from the doorway behind her, and bellowed delightedly, "Thelvaaaaaa!"

They met at a dead run, squealing as they thudded solidly into each other and clinched, rocking and laughing and trying to kiss each other through their laughter.

"Awwwww," came a comment from behind the stirring, still-dazed Watchmen. Dreetha stood smiling—a smile that went away in an instant as Maerlus and Shalaerla turned to see who'd spoken. The pixie lich had two rods in her hands this time, aimed right at the senior Order magists.

"Why don't we just let everyone be, this time?" Dreetha suggested. "Just to keep my rods from going off, here."

"The Watchful Order," Lady Shalaerla replied stiffly, "does not overlook, nor make exceptions. We're charged to safeguard Waterdeep and its folk from just such perils as you offer."

"Ah. Well, then," Jhalang said gleefully.

The magists whirled around to face her—just as a furious cloud giant on a truly massive throne suddenly appeared right in front of them. It roared in rage and sprang from its seat to charge at them.

"Safeguard away," Jhalang told them merrily and waved her hands. Instantly she was surrounded by an eerie halo of whirling, glowing cards.

Lady Shalaerla spoke a word that numbed every ear, and the cloud giant froze in mid-charge, hanging helplessly in midair.

Something blotted out the moonlight. Overhead, a castle on a cloud came tumbling end over end through the sky, dangerously low over Waterdeep. A moment later, a startled, rotund dwarf couple was soaring up into it.

Jhalang and Dreetha waved, Lady Shalaerla and the Watchmen all stared in open-mouthed astonishment, and Maerlus the Magnificent burst into sudden tears. "It's so—so romantic," he sobbed, as the Senior

Investigatrix of the Watchful Order transferred her astonishment to him.

"So it is," Jhalang agreed. "But it seems no one is looking after the blends at the House of Thirst just now, and I for one am thirsty."

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the FORGOTTEN REALMS® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.