

DEATH MASKS

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Contact Us at Wizards.com/CustomerService
Wizards of the Coast LLC, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057-0707, USA
USA & Canada: (800) 324-6496 or (425) 204-8069
Europe: +32(0) 70 233 277



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in saecula saeculorum

CHAPTER I

A Nice Night for Murder

*My lords, let us sport together a while
For the moon welcomes and the stars are out
The wine is at hand, and I do think me 'tis
A nice night for murder.*

—Amlaric Amend-All, in Act I, Scene II, of the play *Nine Lords Errant* by Narelra Manecandle, Playwright of Athkatla, first performed in the Year of the Blazing Hand

PART OF ME WANTS TO BE BACK HERE, SMELLING THE HARBOR REEK,” Mirt growled, “and part of me doesn’t want to set foot in Waterdeep again. Ever.”

The flickering glow of the gate that had brought them here was fading behind them, but was still bright enough to show the fat and wheezing man the side of Elminster’s face. The Old Sage was nodding in agreement.

“Going home is seldom as satisfying as one hopes, I’ve found,” he said in his dryly half-whimsical, half-mournful voice. “And it grows no easier as the centuries pass and I do it more and more often. I dwelt in the Deep for a time—long, long ago.”

“Before my time,” Mirt added, before Elminster could.

“Indeed. Yet it seems we are *just* in time, for once. Look yonder.”

Mirt didn’t need the old archwizard’s pointing forefinger to spot what had caught his friend’s attention.

He was already looking across the moonlit garden at his home—perhaps former home, for El had told him the Lords of the City had given it over to Laeral Silverhand, and despite it not being theirs to gift to anyone, he somehow doubted she’d want to share the best bedchamber with the weather-beaten likes of him—and finding it as unchanged as if he’d last left it only hours back instead of more than a century ago.

Except, that is, for the tasteful addition of the six men in tight-fitting, mottled gray leathers, complete with masks and hoods, who’d just broken in.

“Assassins,” he growled. “*What* has the Deep come to, whilst I was slumbering? What sort of dolts are Lords of the City now, to let teams of hrasted-near-*uniformed* assassins operate freely inside the city walls?”

“Why, in *my* time,” Elminster growled teasingly, “assassins knew their place, and it was well outside the City of Splendors, in lesser, meaner cities!”

“Well, it *was*,” Mirt snapped, lurching forward. “Come on, El! With my luck, they’ll have orders to play at being arsonists, too!”

He led the way along the winding garden path, feeling to make sure his Ironguard ring was on his finger. Assassins always were in such a hrasted hurry to throw knives and darts and other sharp and nasty things at anyone who saw them, and the moonlight was just strong enough to make a brightly lit stage of the few strides of moss lawn between the garden plantings and the doors the hooded slayers had just picked, or unlocked, to silently pass through.

Moreover, he wheezed so heavily these days that he couldn’t even stand quietly, let alone move about in anything approaching silence. Though as he stumbled out onto the moss, Elminster touched his elbow—and all the faint night sounds of the city went away.

Cloaked in utter silence, they approached the nearest door. El stepped deftly around Mirt, drew it open, and stepped inside, extending one arm like a bar to stop the old moneylender from passing him.

Stepping out of the silence, Mirt guessed. A moment later, El took firm hold of his elbow and drew him to one side, into the lee of a life-sized blackstone statue of a heroically proportioned dancing lady Mirt had purchased in Calimshan long ago because he admired her pose and utter lack of modesty. They stood behind her and her tall plinth as still as two watchful statues while Mirt’s eyesight adjusted to the deeper darkness, and he realized they’d relocated themselves just in time.

One of the six assassins had just thought to look back and make sure no guards or anyone else was moving to block their escape route. His gaze went right past them, to the door, and then swept across the large open room ere returning to what was holding his five comrades rapt—not to mention Mirt himself.

Floating in midair at about head level for a man taller than Mirt was a sleeping woman, spread-eagled and horizontal and oblivious to all intruders. Her silver hair, the tresses long enough to reach to her ankles if

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she'd been standing upright, was spread out around her in a lazily restless cloud, almost a sphere of moving silver strands, and she *glowed*.

Not brightly, but brighter than the moonlight, here in this large and dark garden view room. It was Laeral Silverhand, and she wore only a light gown. A nightgown. Her bare feet were toward Mirt and Elminster as she floated on her back, her tresses drifting around her.

And if the assassins made any noise as they unclipped already-cocked hand crossbows from baldrics, fitted quarrels to them, and fired at her, Elminster's conjured silence swallowed it.

Mirt's shout of warning came out as silence, but even as he barked it, those quarrels were slowing in midair, coming to a halt as Laeral's hair drifted and swirled unconcerned around them.

Only one of the assassins was foolish enough to snatch out a dagger and throw it to try to do what his slender poisoned quarrel had failed to manage. Even as it turned end over end with increasing lassitude, to glide to a halt in midair, five of the hooded slayers had launched themselves into running charges, their own knives—blades painted black to avoid any flashes or gleams of reflected light—held firmly in their hands.

Hastening to kill.

Yet a running man, no matter how strong, swift, and agile, can make little headway if snatched off his feet and ensnared by hair as swift as a striking snake and as strong as a swooping dragon. Hair that could strangle and suffocate with ease, but instead merely pinions, ensnaring wrists and ankles and tugging so powerfully that the five owners of those captured limbs were bent over backward in midair, curled up into helpless arcs, like bent and straining longbows.

The sixth assassin, the one who'd vainly thrown his dagger, hadn't joined in the charge, but he sprinted now. After pivoting on one foot with his first stride, so he hurled himself not at the floating woman but back at the door he'd come in by.

And it was Mirt himself who had the great satisfaction of thrusting out one stout and rising leg at *just* the right moment to trip the running slayer into a face-first meeting with the doorframe.

Whereupon Mirt sat on the man's nearest arm, hard. And had the satisfaction of feeling a wrist and an elbow *crunch* under his considerable weight. He could hear nothing. Even the man's agonized shriek was utterly soundless.

Until Laeral came upright in the air, smiling wryly, and snapped her fingers.

Elminster's silence was gone in an instant, but by then the man under Mirt was merely groaning. Mirt felt him all over for weapons, and plucked out everything he found and tossed it well away. After all, every last pointed or edged thing on an assassin's body might be poisoned.

He glared at the man's hands, seeking sharpened fingernails, but thankfully that seemed a nasty little tactic forgotten in the century he'd been elsewhere—by this particular band of assassins, at least.

"Well met," Laeral said dryly. "You rushed to my rescue? How touching. Yet hardly necessary. I was in reverie, not asleep. None of Mystra's daughters ever need to sleep."

"Reverie?" Mirt grunted.

"Communing with the Weave, if you prefer. Replenishing energies and spells and monitoring the defensive magic of the house—a good network, Mirt, you must have hired the best—so as to watch these dolts attempt their stealthy invasion."

"I did not expect ye'd need any assistance in besting them," El murmured, "but mayhap I can be of aid steadying ye as ye defy Mystra's recent commandment."

"Ah. Well. As to that, you may be right," Laeral agreed.

"Commandment?" Mirt asked, but the two Chosen merely shook their heads and said nothing.

The air around one ensnared and feebly struggling assassin started to glow, as if a window had opened to somehow spill moonlight into just that part of the room, and Laeral frowned, her eyes flaring blue-white for a brief moment.

And then her face grew pained, she started to tremble, and there was suddenly a heavy dew of sweat all over her face.

And then she sighed and looked down, the light died, and the trapped assassin went limp.

"Did you—?"

"He merely sleeps," El replied, moving to take hold of the slayer's body as Laeral's tresses withdrew from him and tug off some of the man's garments to bind his wrists behind his back and to his throat.

"I heard no incantation," Mirt muttered as he knelt to help.

"Weave work, not spells," El replied, his attention on Laeral.

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She gasped, in pain this time, and the Sage of Shadowdale came to his feet in a frowning instant. But she waved him away as the second assassin slumped to the floor and was released, and a glow kindled around a third.

Even Mirt could tell she was struggling by the time she finished with that man; she was breathing as heavily as he did these days after climbing a ladder or steep stairs, and she moved restlessly in the air, buying time before she called on the Weave to assault the mind of the next man.

She was shaking violently by the time she lowered him to the floor, shuddering and spasming, doubling over with her face twisted in pain.

Mirt shot Elminster a questioning look, but the old archwizard merely looked grave and turned casually to look back at the doors behind them to see if any other intruders were in sight.

Laeral was writhing on the floor by the time she finished with her would-be slayers, twisting and groaning and drenched with sweat, her nightgown plastered to her. Mirt had seen people fished out of the harbor who'd looked drier.

El took her hand, but as far as Mirt could tell he was offering the reassurance of a friend to someone wounded or dying, not pouring any sort of healing magic into her.

"Can we do anything for her?" Mirt asked, almost exasperated.

"Change the mind of a goddess," Elminster murmured. "If ye've nothing else to do for the next century or so."

At that moment Laeral let out a long, shuddering sigh under him, and went limp. Mirt leaned forward anxiously, but she'd relaxed, not lapsed into insensibility.

"Well?" the old archwizard asked her, as calmly as if she'd just finished examining an everyday and rather boring ledger entry.

"I could learn nothing from them. They're hired meat who've been disminded by priests of power. All that's left in their memories, aside from endless echoes of Waterdeep so they recall its layout, is mental images of me, the filed-at-the-Palace plans of this house, and that they were to come here and slay me."

Laeral tried to rise then, but her strength gave way. El caught her head before it struck the floor, and then put his arms around her and gently lifted her to a sitting position. "They're far from the first," she added calmly, patting his hand in thanks.

"Fresh gown?" he asked.

"In a breath or two," Laeral told him. "Just let me bide here. I'm still . . ."

"I know," El murmured comfortingly.

"Well, *I* don't," Mirt snapped. "What just happened to you?"

El cast a swift look at the bound assassins all around them, as if to reassure himself that they were all still unconscious, and said quietly, "These days, we Chosen touch the minds of others with magic only when the need is dire. Doing so ruins most minds, so Mystra has absolutely forbidden us from invading the minds of anyone who can wield the Art."

"I kept going, after the first man," Laeral put in, "to try to learn all I could, and because there was no damage I could do—these minds were already ruined. In their greed, they traded a pile of coins for their selves; their memories and everything that made them who they were."

Mirt frowned. "Is that why the War Wizards in Cormyr don't cheerfully mind-ream everyone standing nearby these days?"

Elminster nodded. "Really thorough and prolonged attempts to read minds with the Art have always been risky, for the prober and the owner of the mind. If ye aren't *very* careful . . ."

"You do harm," Laeral offered. "Like a know-nothing warrior with a knife trying to help a wounded friend on the battlefield."

"The likelihood of ruining the mind ye're trying to explore, particularly if it's awake and hostile, has soared over this last century," El said grimly.

Laeral nodded. "So if you can't call on the Weave to steady you, and provide some of the energy, ruination is now almost certain."

"And it has always tired and harmed the wizard trying to mind read," El added. "So Mystra made it hurt so dearly that a mage using spells without Weave-aid will collapse before they learn much of anything. We Chosen can keep going—so she forbade us to probe wizards, and strongly cautioned us against mindreading anyone else. Adding the pain to keep us to that."

"Ah," said Mirt. "So as wizards are now rarer and more precious than ever, you're not to be driving any of them insane."

"*More* insane," Laeral joked—and promptly winced and clutched her head in fresh pain.

"We can still do it, but . . ." Elminster began.

"You're all weaker now, aren't you?" Mirt asked. "Not hurling spells around like you once did, being less bold to challenge or take up fights . . ."

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He let his words trail away as he saw the same bland expression settle across the faces of both Elminster and the Lady Silverhand. A look that he'd once, long ago, termed the "Did you say something? Not that I'm listening or ever intend to answer you" expression.

"Not that it's any of my business," he added into the deepening silence. Then he asked brightly, "How about that fresh gown? You haven't moved the robing rooms, have you?"

"Ah, *such* a diplomat, most senior Lord of Waterdeep," Laeral replied with a smile. "The nearest, left side; any of the three hanging there."

"Only three?" he joked, as he groaned his own way to his feet. "Are you *sure* you're a woman?"

"A *witty* diplomat, too," she replied serenely—and then she looked past Mirt and her face changed. He whirled around.

Elminster had already turned, and taken two steps toward the door he and Mirt had come in by.

Someone had just knocked on it—and then tried it, without waiting for a response, and was now stepping through it.

• • •

EVEN IN THE deepest, darkest Khelben-declaining moments of her dream, Vajra had known she would end up here.

It wasn't her favorite room in the Tower. That would be the room up above she'd just left in her restlessness. Unable to sleep—again—though the night was yet young.

The bedchamber with its round bed and its domed ceiling adorned with all the stars of Toril winking down at her was her preferred room. The bed that felt so empty when she lay in it all alone, but she was never going to bring any rough docker inside the walls of Blackstaff Tower, and they were the only men she both wanted and dared taste these days, on the rare nights when the loneliness raged and she sought the docks in spellspun disguise.

Yet this lower room, the one she was in now . . . it was the room she felt the most at home in, and in which she did the most work.

The round room was dominated by a central tabletop that displayed a magnificent building-by-building map of the city of Waterdeep. Her

city, now, for she was more bound to it than even its Hidden Lords, or the Open Lord in the Palace.

Even if that Open Lord was no longer the arrogant Neverember of Neverwinter but rather the woman who'd called this tower home for so many years. Laeral of the Chosen, with her silver hair stirring about her shoulders and the little leaping silver flames in her eyes as she stared at you.

Stared *through* you, leaving you feeling unworthy, weak, a charlatan in office, a slip of a lass bearing a title that belonged to the man who'd been hers, *the* Blackstaff, the great Khelben.

We can none of us best the dead. For they are not here making new mistakes, for all to see. They are beyond that at last.

Laeral had said that to her, and in a kindly voice, too, but that made it no less of a dismissal of her worth, a measuring of what little she'd done.

Yet she *was* the Blackstaff now. She would show Lady Laeral Silverhand and everyone else that she was worthy of the office.

She would do right by Waterdeep.

This bustling city where everyone else strove to do right by themselves, and complained when the City of Splendors didn't measure up in this small way or that, but lifted no finger to make it better.

She, Vajra, would make a difference.

Though if the wagging tongues in the street ever realized how alone and ignorant she was, they would hurl her down in an instant, like wolves pouncing on the weakest prey.

She must work, and prepare, and work some more. Mustering her magic in readiness, layer upon layer, prepared item upon prepared item, as well as her spells, so that no matter what happened, she could unleash a mighty response.

So strong an answer to foes that no sane opponent would ever think a challenge worth it.

That was the best way. Cow them all into not daring to work their misdeeds.

And part of that work was clearly seeing the coming threats. She'd been slow to see the true rising strength of the Cult of the Dragon, had dismissed their secret chants to Tiamat as so much wishful reverence.

She could not afford—*Waterdeep* could not afford—more misjudgments like that one.

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Something was stirring among the giants now, and she hadn't the faintest idea what. That unknowing must change. There was trouble in the Underdark, too, a part of why some of its denizens were stealing back up into Skullport—but was it no more than the usual skirmishes between and among nearby drow cities and illithids, and all those who stood against them? Or something bigger?

And the Watchful Order was little help. Oh, Bowgentra meant well, but she and faithful Glenmaur were consumed with keeping increasingly fractious city mages like Qasmult or Lavalander, rising new masters of wizardry flush with the coins of nobles and those who wanted to become noble, and, increasingly, the demanding voices of those who paid them so well, from becoming full-fledged tyrants.

Begin with an easy step, she reminded herself. Gain it, stand upon it, and then take larger ones, resisting the temptation to seek out more easy steps and spend time treading them all so the harder, larger tasks can be avoided for as long as possible. That is the courtiers' way, and if we all do as courtiers do, the world is doomed, and us with it.

It was surprising how often she recalled the advice of Elminster these days. A mischievous, lecherous old goat she'd once judged him, and a fool besides, but it was surprising how much wisdom he seemed to have learned in these latter years.

And she could begin to take one easy step here and now, in this room. Padding barefoot on the smooth warm stone, she circled the table swiftly so her nightrobe would swirl in her wake—yes, such childish delights were her entertainment now—and looked along the Roll of Years picked out in gilt rings along the edge of the table.

This was the Year of the Scarlet Witch, and she was come late to this table. She should have been trying to learn just who the Scarlet Witch was, and what that being would do of importance, *last* year, instead of waiting until now, the unusually warm and balmy middle of Mirtul. What was that orc saying? “Burn that bridge when we're standing on it”? Yes, that was precisely what she was risking.

She could well be trying to guide Waterdeep by seeing what lay ahead as it was already happening.

Still, no matter when one leaps into battle, one needs arms and armor, so . . .

The seers may have been mad, or the gods may have whispered all sorts of nonsense to them, and priests in their temples misconstrued it all ever since, but still—

“The name of every year can and should guide us.” She said the old, old temple rood aloud. “None of them are meaningless.”

So, now . . .

Her gaze strayed across the sprawling city map, and then she looked up to scan the great map of Faerûn that curved around so much of the wall. Waterdeep was but a tiny dot in such a vast expanse of countryside, so the Scarlet Witch was so much more likely to arise or do whatever she was going to do out there, somewhere, rather than in the shadow of Mount Waterdeep.

And . . . she hadn’t the faintest who or what the Scarlet Witch was. Had heard nothing, beyond the empty speculations of others who read the Roll of Years and wondered aloud—and of course priests who twisted every single year name into something concerning their deity and their deity alone. Priests who talked little about how *distant* almost every god seemed to have suddenly become, and at least here in Waterdeep were all—every last faith—more cautious and less forceful in matters of local politics. The city had noticed that all the temples were suddenly far more reluctant to try to bring the dead back to life, no matter how much coin was offered for their altars. This city held temples full of priests who probably didn’t have any better idea about the Scarlet Witch than she did.

So, where to begin? Journeying across Faerûn in some wild, wandering search seemed pointless, not to mention irresponsible for someone whose office should mean vigilance here in Waterdeep, even if she dared to use a portal—

Across the room, her remaining fragment of the Blackstaff flared with a sudden rich blue radiance. A thrillingly beautiful glow that faded again as swiftly as it had come.

Vajra stared at that precious black stick, jutting up so still and silent from the stand she’d fashioned for it. What had made it do that?

Was it trying to tell her to use a portal, or shun them, or had it flared for some other reason entirely? It went a more purple hue when someone was trying to use magic to force a way into the tower, but beyond that, she hadn’t the foggiest . . .

Almost before she thought about doing so, she’d crossed the room and caught up the Blackstaff. Its shortened length was more of a rod or scepter for her than a staff, and the gems that had been so deeply embedded in it as to be nigh hidden down its smooth black length now

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stood proud up and down it, like so many glossy knobs on an old man's walking stick.

As she took hold of it, some of those embedded stones winked at her, tiny lights playing in their depths in a brief, welcoming pattern. It felt warm to the touch, as it almost always did, and when she closed her eyes and clutched it to her body there came the usual sensation of sinking down into it, of drawing closer to a great sleeping mind in its depths.

Which was why she so often slept embracing the fragment, learning what she could from the dream visions it sent her.

She would do that now.

She shrugged off her nightrobe, letting it sigh into a silken puddle on the floor behind her, clutched what was left of the Blackstaff tightly against her, and headed for the stairs back up to bed.

Not that she felt the slightest bit sleepy.

Oh, Mystra forefend, let it not be another of *those* nights.

• • •

THE SLENDER, HANDSOME man in skintight gray leathers perched on the roof edge as motionless as any sculpted stone gargoyle, watching would-be murderers at work.

The stars were out and winking down as the cool of night settled on the harbor and the sea fog started to steal in. Soon its damp and moonlit haze would cloak the docks and the moored ships in thick wet shrouds no gaze could pierce, but for now the moon and stars still reigned, and Drake could see the assassins clearly as they scaled the wall that encircled Mirt's Mansion.

It was still called that, yonder darkly turreted and eccentric home nestled into the rising rock flank of Mount Waterdeep, though Mirt the Moneylender had not been seen in Waterdeep for more than a hundred years. The Lords of the City had recently gifted it to the new Open Lord of Waterdeep, Lady Laeral Silverhand.

And before this night was out, Laeral might taste the price of taking that title. No less than six assassins, by Drake's count, were stealthily seeking her life.

No lights shone in the sleeping mansion. The spy sat still and watched the bringers of death sidle across the slender strip of garden, avoiding the

stone bridge that linked the tallest turret to a path meandering over the shoulder of the soaring mountain. It took them surprisingly little time to breach the garden doors, and they did so more quietly than he'd expected.

Well, now. They just might succeed, after all.

Drake sat very still, save for the tips of the fingers of his right hand. They caressed an itch he was unaccustomed to; a tiny, fresh brand burned into the side of his neck behind his right ear. A blood-bond. It would mean his doom if he betrayed the worm who'd branded him—but he was richer now, in just a tenday, than he'd ever been in his life before, and the second promised payment had been on time, and not a gem less than promised. Twelve more such payments, and he'd be wealthier than some noble lords in this city.

And for that, he'd do many dark deeds for many worms.

• • •

SLEEP WAS EVERY whit as elusive as Vajra had feared it would be. The surviving fragment of the Blackstaff was its head and upper shaft, about three feet long in all, as dead black as lightless velvet and usually as cold and malignant as a yawning tomb. Even so, she clutched it when abed, learning far more than any tutor of the Art had ever shown her—and despite the unyielding authority of Khelben that lingered in the staff as if he were still alive and staring disapprovingly at her out of it, the broken remnant of the Blackstaff somehow reassured her more than any mentor had ever been able to.

Right now, she was lightly dozing, dimly aware of the stars in the ceiling above her as the staff vividly showed her several of the Walking Statues of Waterdeep, one after another, as they stood in daylight over this past warming month, frozen just where they'd stopped their rampages after the Spellplague. Though she heard his voice in her mind not at all, she could almost hear Khelben reminding her that awakening the stone behemoths to move again was something she could do, by means of what was left of the staff. She could move them to better locations so rebuilding could occur in the places where they stood now, freeing them to be more swiftly ready to defend the city if an orc horde or more dragon attacks should come.

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A statue is awakened *thus*, and is commanded *like this*, and . . .
Commanded.

Furthering the causes that were right.

Setting Waterdeep to rights.

Using the rightful power of the Blackstaff, the unyielding dark strength that endures, beyond death, despite setbacks, regardless of—

There were no eyes in the round, starry-domed bedchamber at the top of Blackstaff Tower to see what happened to her then, and no mirrors for her to see herself.

Yet her eyes shot open as two royal blue flames, eerily lambent glows without eyeballs, uniform deep ovals of blue fire.

And she sat bolt upright, face curiously expressionless, the Blackstaff clutched to her breast. She rose from the bed, dressed in silent, deft efficiency, and strode out of Blackstaff Tower, the fragment under her arm.

As she stepped out into the night, it winked the same rich royal blue as her eyes—and they promptly lost their fire, leaving behind a dark-eyed, dusky-skinned woman who looked all around her in puzzled apprehension.

Then she lifted her chin, squared her shoulders, and strode off through the moonlit streets with determined purpose, heading south around the Castle Spur of Mount Waterdeep. Sentries on its high battlements saw her, and wondered what urgent business took the Blackstaff out alone at this time of night.

The more cynical among them murmured the same thought: They'd no doubt know soon enough.

• • •

THE SOMEONE WHO came through the door that had been Mirt's, and now was Laeral's, was female.

She was short and dusky-skinned and slender, her dark hair clipped close. Her eyes were large, dark, and grim—even before they saw the sprawled and bound bodies of the assassins.

Elminster indicated her with a flourish. "I have the honor to present," he said gravely, with as much dignity as any herald, "Vajra Safahr, the seventh Blackstaff of Waterdeep."

“Well met,” Laeral offered, and the rote greeting sounded genuine. “What brings you to my door at this hour, Lady of the Staff?”

Vajra nodded a little uncertainly, took a deep breath, and said, “Grim news. A Lord of the City has just been found murdered. Avner Ravelmark.”

“Ravelmark? And Gorlar last night. Two Masked Lords in as many nights.”

The Blackstaff nodded unhappily. “The talk among the Watch patrols I passed on the way here is that this is the former Open Lord’s doing. Revenge for being deposed.”

Laeral reached out to Elminster for support, hauled herself upright by climbing the arm he offered, and gave Vajra a thoughtful frown. “Earlier this evening, I received a delegation. Two guildmasters—Scrope of the Furriers and Woolweavers and Rashenstaff of the Innkeepers—and the matriarch of a senior noble house, Lady Branathleira Estelmer, came to see me about Gorlar’s death. They were concerned by talk they’d overheard, and what they themselves suspected, of involvement by agents of the deposed Lord Dagult Neverember.”

“And?”

“I gave them my opinion, which is this: So far as I can tell, to blame Neverember is an unsupported step too far. The man did leave agents behind to meddle in Waterdhavian politics, as well as mere supporters, and it seems he does not wish me well or that I have an easy tenure, but all I can learn of what those agents did yesterday suggest that he is *not* actively involved in Gorlar’s killing.”

Vajra took a step closer, her eyes narrowing, and hefted the fragment of the Blackstaff. “You’ve not yet heard, I see.”

“Heard *what*?” Laeral asked, that last word soft yet somehow at the same time as sharp as the crack of a whip. The Blackstaff’s head reared back as if she’d been slapped.

“Lady Estelmer,” Vajra said flatly, “has been attacked, and her skull split. Her wits have suffered grievously, and she’s not expected to survive. Guildmaster Aldemur Scrope has been killed in an ‘accident’ involving masonry falling on him from above, in a South Ward backstreet—brickwork that somehow fell outward a good dozen feet or more farther than should have been possible.”

“And Rashenstaff?” Laeral asked sharply.

“Vanished. Not even his family knew, until I came pounding on his door looking for him on my way here. He went to bed with his wife, put

something into her evening broth to make her sleep—she’s still drifting in and out; can’t stay awake longer than it takes her to spout a few sentences—and then got dressed and slipped out the bedroom window. Where someone was waiting for him with a knife. There’s a trail of blood on the ground outside that just . . . stops.”

Laeral sighed, then took two strides so she could bring both fists down on one of Mirt’s best polished tables as thunderously as any furious fighting man, and muttered, “Waterdeep. Bloody *Waterdeep*. The worst of it is, I know I’m going to get used to things like this.”

“I did,” Mirt growled.

“You’re *not* helping, Old Wolf.”

“Want me to hire some adventurers and go hunting missing guildmasters?”

“Not yet. You’d be serving as too tempting a scapegoat for whoever’s murdering Masked Lords.”

Mirt grinned and nodded appreciatively. “Oh, you’re going to be *fine*.”

Laeral rolled her eyes. “I never liked ruling. I like wandering the wilds, breathing the fresh air and looking out over the landscape.”

“While prowling monsters stalk you and wait for the right moment to pounce,” Elminster murmured.

Laeral gave him a hard look. “When you’re a woman with silver hair and *these*—” she gestured at her bosom—“men stalk and pounce all the time. I got used to it quite a few centuries back.”

Then she turned to the Blackstaff. “In the morning will you contact as many of the Masked Lords as you can and have them meet me at the Palace? They need to be warned, and I want to watch their faces as we talk, in case any of them seem just a bit too smirkingly complacent about the deaths so far.”

“If they all head there and the slayer is watching, we’ll be identifying Masked Lords for him,” Vajra replied.

Laeral sighed. “He—or she—already knows how to identify and slay Masked Lords, doesn’t he?”

Vajra sighed as well, added a curse under her breath, nodded, and headed for the door.

“Should you be walking alone in Dock Ward by night, Lady?” Mirt rumbled.

“I’m the *Blackstaff*,” she replied, without turning or slowing, “not a defenseless maiden.”

ED GREENWOOD

When she opened the door, a strong smell of smoke came in out of the night. What Laeral had taken to be harbor fog drifting past the windows held the reek of wood smoke and tar and . . . worse things.

And then she saw the first flickering amber reflections on the highest rocks of the Castle Spur.

Mirt and Elminster were out the door in such a rush they sent Vajra staggering back out of the way.

Laeral sprinted to join them as a crackling roar arose from behind her. It came from beyond the house. From the harbor.

They all turned as the first wash of heat warmed their faces.

And found themselves looking into the leaping flames of the Nine Hells.

Boardwalks and lashed-together ships stood like black sticks, silhouetted against orange-white flames that roared skyward in a crackling hurry to lick the stars.

Mistshore was ablaze.