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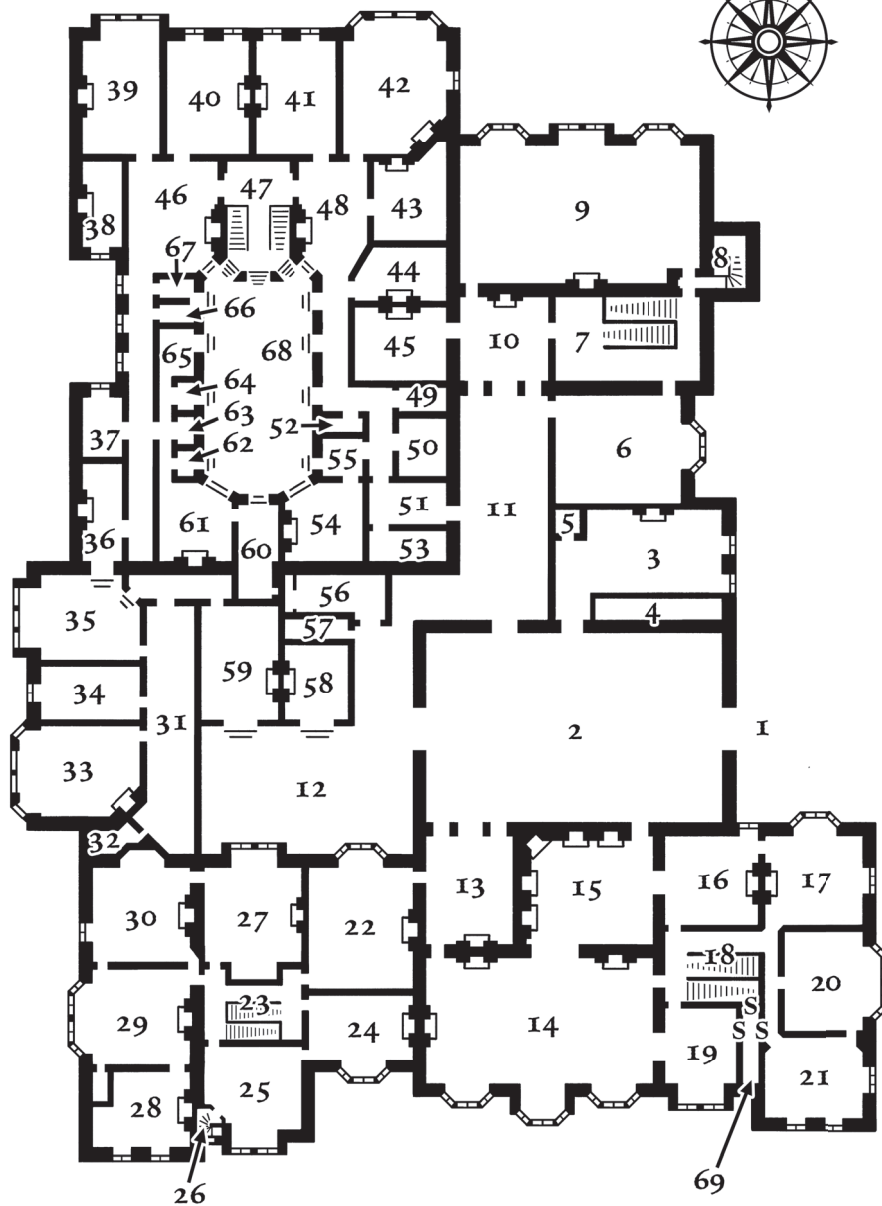
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*To Jenny,
For everything and more.*

OLDSPIRES



1. Front Entrance
2. Great Entry Hall
3. Red Receiving Room
4. Servery (accesses 3 through sliding panels; reached via cellar-level passage from 16)
5. Feast Dumbwaiter Antechamber (dumbwaiter elevator from cellar-level Underservy; also goes to disused upper floor)
6. Library
7. Front Staircase (cellar/ground floor/upper floor)
8. Servants' Stair (ground floor/cellars)
9. Summer Room (lounge)
10. Armor Court
11. "The Passage" (Hall of Ancestors)
12. Blue Chamber
13. Copper Receiving Room
14. Feast Hall
15. Kitchen
16. Butlery
17. Back Kitchen
18. Kitchen Stairs (servants' use; cellars [cold cellar and wine cellar adjacent to bottom of stair]/upper floor)
19. South Servery
20. Pantry
21. Larder
22. Green Audience Chamber
23. South Stairs (cellars/upper floor [upper floor: servants' quarters and storage attics, currently ruinous])
24. Withdrawing Room
25. Parlor
26. Fire Stair (spiral)
27. Guest Bedchamber (assigned to Elminster)
28. Nursery (used by servants)
29. Family Bedchamber (used by servants; assigned to Myrmeen)
30. Family Bedchamber (used by servants; assigned to Mirt)
31. Lord Halaunt's Receiving Room
32. Lord's Wine Antechamber
33. Lord Halaunt's Bedchamber
34. Lord's Wardrobe
35. Lord's Retiring Room/Robing Room
36. Lord's Lounge (assigned to Tabra as her bedchamber)
37. Lord's Study
38. Guest Servants' Bedchamber (vacant)
39. Guest Bedchamber (assigned to Malchor Harpell as his bedchamber)
40. Guest Bedchamber (assigned to Manshoon as his bedchamber)
41. Guest Bedchamber (assigned to Skouloun as his bedchamber)
42. Guest Bedchamber (assigned to Maraunth Torr as his bedchamber)
43. Guest Bedchamber (assigned to Calathlarra as her bedchamber)
44. Guest Servants' Bedchamber (vacant)
45. Ladies' Lounge (assigned to Shaaan the Serpent Queen as her bedchamber)
46. Chamber of the Founder (statue of first Lord Halaunt [used as guests' lounge])
47. Grand Staircase (cellars [furniture repair workshop, bulk larder stores]/ground floor/upper floor [ten vacant guest bedchambers])
48. Statue Chamber
49. Linens Closet
50. Bathing Chamber
51. Trophy Chamber
52. Garderobe
53. Documents Room
54. Messengers' Bedchamber (vacant)
55. Messengers' Lounge
56. Guest Wardrobe
57. Armory
58. Guest Bedchamber (assigned to Yusendre as her bedchamber)
59. Guest Bedchamber (assigned to Alastra Hathwinter as her bedchamber)
60. Guests' Storage Room/Wardrobe/overflow Guest Servants' Bedchamber (vacant)
61. Guest Servants' Hall
62. Storeroom
63. Prayer Room
64. Writing Room
65. Dancers' Robing Room
66. Garderobe
67. Garderobe
68. Dancing Hall
69. Plate and Cutlery ("secret stair" at end, cellars/ground floor/upper floor)

*Seek no morrow, but make war ready; heed what I darkly warn
For you face blood, sorrow, fell treachery, and dread spellstorm.*

Badraskur, Bard of Immersea
A Dark Day for Cormyr
Published circa the Year of the Helm

CHAPTER 1

Sipping Choice Wines at the Dragon Rampant

SPYING ON BEHALF OF THE CROWN COULD GET FAR WORSE THAN THIS. Tarnmark Lionmantle let the rich, tart Brodolvian red sluice its delightful way around his mouth until his tongue flirted with the edge of numbness, then swallowed. It burned wonderfully, all the way down. Truly, the older Chessentan vintages were coming into their own.

And wasn't *that* the sort of arch and airy comment a noble would make. Hmmp.

He still didn't feel like one, thanks to a dead father and an impoverished mother who'd been a commoner for far more years than she'd been styled "Lady." Not to mention how, in his own ongoing service as a wizard of war, he was constantly being told what to do by mages whose every uttered word reminded him, often defiantly, that they came from far more humble families.

Tarn took a suitably dainty forkful of his plum-and-cheese tart, just the thing to cleanse the palate between roast stag and the usual platter of darkwine-drenched eels—ugh—and sat back in his chair. Across the table, his supper companion took this as a signal that Tarn wanted to talk. And since "talk" meant, to Lord Lareth Hardcastle the Younger, "gossip like a chambermaid," that's what Lareth did.

The fair-haired noble with the ridiculous new side-whiskers he was so proud of leaned forward conspiratorially across the table. Breathing great gusts of onion-and-pineapple flummery into Tarn's face, he whispered,

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“Old Halaunt’s come alone tonight. They’re saying he hasn’t even coin enough left to hire a doxy for half an evening. Guess it’ll be a lonely night of looking through the naughty etchings for him.”

Tarnmark carefully did not turn his head to regard Lord Halaunt, whom he’d been watching sidelong for most of the evening. Of all the diners in the exclusive and expensive Dragon Rampant on whom he was spying on this unusually warm night in late Tarsakh of the Year of Dwarvenkind Reborn, Halaunt bore the nastiest reputation by far. Which was a large part of the reason the man was dining alone.

Halaunt had few friends, and no one was likely to strike up an acquaintance with a man so hunched and grim, who glared down at his plate as if he wanted to start a feud with it.

The old noble gave off a tension Tarn could feel, a readiness to erupt that meant . . . *danger*.

And no wonder. Certain senior courtiers were of the opinion that Lord Sardasper Halaunt had run through almost all of his coin, and was now on the brink of doing something desperate to replenish his coffers.

And anyone in the Forest Kingdom whose memory spanned more than a decade or so knew that “something desperate,” among nobles of Cormyr, all too often involved not just the illicit, but also actions dangerous to the realm.

“Perhaps so,” he murmured to Lareth. “Or perhaps he’s here on business.”

Hardcastle snorted. “Business? Since when did yon darkbeak dirty his hands with any sort of work, or warm his brains with trying to count coins? Isn’t that what got him into his present, ah, circumstances?”

Tarnmark shrugged. Darkbeaks were vultures of the Stonelands, and the term was fitting. Lord Halaunt was a nasty, grasping, reclusive widower of expensive tastes, and the Dragon Rampant was the only club in Suzail he’d ever set boot in, so far as the Crown spies knew. The man *did* count coins, and seek to hold on to them, too, sometimes in the face of the royal tax collectors. He’d ruined investors in the past who’d joined him in ventures, when matters had turned sour. As the saying went, he was one of “those who takes care to get more than even.”

“Have you not heard the rumors?” Tarn murmured across the pleasant aroma of their still-steaming tarts, leaning forward and speaking quietly in hopes of keeping Hardcastle quiet enough for the old lord not to overhear himself being discussed. “Regarding the Lost Spell?”

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Lareth smote his own forehead. "Gods above and serpents below! I'd quite forgotten they were buckled to yon old lordship! 'Tis not as if he comes wrapped in the mantle of wizardry when you call him to mind, now, hey?"

"Indeed," Tarn replied warningly, frowning and lowering his voice still further.

Hardcastle finally took the hint, and delivered his next words in a hiss that would have roused any snakes that might have been hiding in the far corners of the room. "I've never heard he had any aptitude for the Art at all! Isn't he one of those who dismissed their father's house wizard, and never hired a replacement?"

"He is," Tarn confirmed, as—with some difficulty through the usual loud laughter of Lord Talcontin—his ears caught "Halaunt" and "spell" from two different tables behind him. Rumors were racing around the room regarding Lord Halaunt; the same talk he'd heard throughout uppercrust Suzail these last two days.

Though the Lord of Oldspires had never shown any aptitude for magic before, it was now being noised about that he'd somehow come into possession of a world-shaking enchantment wizards called the Lost Spell—and was prepared to sell it to the highest bidder.

This might all be so much fancy, of course, but Halaunt himself had been spreading word of it since his arrival in the city five days back. So it was truth, or the least subtle lure Tarn could recall since the matter of Lord Varweather's three daughters . . .

"One last high table ere it's back to fried cows and barn wine, hey, Halaunt?" old Lord Rathdale growled amiably, on his lurching way across the room to his own table.

Lord Halaunt gave him a curt nod. "You'll be welcome at Oldspires *if* your offer is suitably rich," he growled. "Otherwise, Horarrus . . ."

"You prefer prettier guests, I know." Rathdale flung back over his shoulder as he settled himself into his chair and thrust one foot up onto his gout stool with a grateful grunt.

Tarn applied himself to his tart again. So it *was* true; Halaunt would be returning on the morrow to the seclusion of his country mansion, Oldspires, to entertain suitably rich offers for the spell.

It seemed Halaunt's Lost Spell was the most interesting matter on offer in the Dragon that night; Tarn had made his own stroll to the garderobe

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thrice in hopes of hearing better, but all he'd overheard was the tawdry usual. In that corner Lord Alamber and Lord Battlebar were arguing the relative merits of their respective stables from adjacent tables while their wives yawned and frankly dozed, while over there Lord Darstan was smugly informing Lord Harcourt that, as a matter of fact, *he* owned the three fastest caravels berthed in Suzail *or* Marsembler and wouldn't part with them for coin or cozening—though he might entertain parting with them for three castles per caravel, provided they were the *right* three castles.

While over here, in his usual braying high spirits, Lord Talcontin was still trumpeting his triumphs to his table of kin and guests—several of the more impoverished noble couples, like the Orthwoods and the young widow Lady Scatterstars. “So I said to him, ‘Chalauncey,’ I said, ‘that’s not a horse—that’s what happens when a Sembian lets his cattle in to breed with his neighbor’s *giant goats!*’ Aww haw haw hah haw ho *haw!*”

Crown and Throne, but the man was loud!

Tarn weighed the relative merits of “accidentally” moving one of the empty chairs at his table in such a manner as to swing its legs with vigor into contact with the back of Talcontin’s head. Such a tactic would fleetingly win this end of the room a little peace, yet the feuds that would undoubtedly result would last for years, perhaps generations. Regretfully, he decided those disputes would hamper his daily work far too much to be the favored option.

“Well, he was less than pleased, I can tell you! So—”

Talcontin brayed on, but quite suddenly Tarn was no longer hearing him. Rather, he was hastily replenishing his goblet of Brodolván so it could serve as a cover for watching a new arrival cross the table-studded floor of the Dragon’s dining chamber.

He was a stranger, slender and darkly handsome, with the confident air of a lord comfortable giving commands, an unreadable and gently smiling face, and the cold eyes of a ruthless murderer. Tarn dropped his gaze hastily, knowing the man had noticed his scrutiny—along with, quite likely, minute observable details of every other person in the room.

Gazing into the crimson depths of his wine, Tarn Lionmantle knew he’d never seen this man before, and yet . . . knew him. So then, from where?

Ah. Tarn’s momentary frown fled for a moment, only to return full force. One of the “heed all” warnings, that was it. The alerts sent out to all wizards of war, so often these days that they tended to become an unheeded blizzard, one blurring together with the next. The man wending his easy way

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among the tables, headed in Tarn's direction, closely matched a description in one of those warnings. What was it, now? The latest Sembian trying to buy up half of eastern Cormyr on the sly? No . . .

Ah, he had it now. This guest, now indicating to one of the Dragon's deft plattermen the empty table of his choice, which was just the far side of Halaunt, was a powerful wizard seen often in Cormyr; one who came and went as he pleased without bothering to report his strong mastery of the Art to any wizard of war. A dark archmage with frequent dealings in Westgate and Zhentil Keep, two cities that were no friends to the Forest Kingdom. A man to be watched, but also to beware of. Rumored to be the son, or a lookalike of—or even the very same man, kept young over the passing years through fell magic—a powerful man of Westgate. A criminal. Orbakh, that was the name; a Westar said by many to be a vampire.

And if he remembered Ganrahas's words correctly, Orbakh of Westgate had been one of the "many Manshoons" magically crafted by the first Manshoon, the Lord of Zhentil Keep who had founded the Zhentarim.

Wonderful. Why did such things always have to happen on his shift?

This Manshoon had just ordered a meal, and tall, slender bottles of something exotic from the South were already on their way to his table.

Tarn turned his head away and devoted himself to Hardcastle's gossip with far more dedication than it deserved, stroking his chin thoughtfully as he tilted his head just so—so the tall gold-and-silver salt-castle in front of him provided a small but perfect window of reflection that showed him Manshoon.

Damned if the man wasn't winking at him!

Tarn raised his goblet hastily to his mouth, knowing he must be flushing to the very tips of his ears, and—found his attention ensnared again.

And "ensnared" was definitely the right word. This second new arrival was coming from the direction of the Dragon's back staircase, more favored for hasty exits than for entrances, and she was . . . was . . .

Beautiful. Sleekly, dangerously beautiful, and clad in a simple flowing ankle-length emerald-green gown that matched the emerald irises of her disconcertingly direct gaze—a gaze that met Tarn's ere he could look away. He caught his breath in startlement; the black rimmed-with-gold pupils of her eyes were vertical slits, like those of a snake! She crossed the room with a sultry, swaying grace. Those undulations not only drew attention, they made a sensual promise to every watcher.

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It was only when a scuttling Dragon platterman guided her to a nearby empty table and she slid deftly into a seat that Tarn noticed her skin. As one flaring sleeve fell away, he saw that the revealed ivory skin of her shapely forearm had faint undertones of emerald and the soft brown of butter being melted in a pastry cook's skillet. Undertones that showed through her soft white skin in the shapes of many small, overlapping arcs.

The woman had scales.

"Mendep's Morningdew," she commanded flatly, before the approaching wine steward could even open his mouth. "Of the vintage laid down in the birth year of Azoun the Fourth, if you have it. As close thereafter as your cellars furnish, if you do not."

Tarn was as surprised as the wine steward but flattered himself that he hid it slightly better. An old and expensive wine, to be sure.

And her voice . . . a husky purr, with just a hint of sibilance. He'd seen the tip of her very pink and slender tongue only momentarily; had it, or had it not, been forked?

He risked a look at the salt-castle and then an oh-so-casual glance around the room to see if Manshoon's interest had been kindled. It had. The archmage—and possibly vampire, too—was carefully examining his own goblet, a-sparkle with just-poured wine, but he, too, now had the same air of watchful tension about him as Lord Halaunt.

Definitely thanks to this scaled woman.

For his part, Halaunt was carefully not looking at either new arrival, but his shoulders were hunched and his eyes were a-glitter with . . . was that fear?

Tarn didn't even dare sigh. Danger was imminent; he could smell it. Powerful magic rode these two new arrivals like cloaks raging with flames, and even if he could somehow call every wizard of war in all Suzail into this room in time, he dared not try.

He just might be dooming them all.

This haughty, strikingly beautiful woman certainly had scales here and there on her skin, and seemed very well aware—though Tarn could not say how he knew this, he was certain of it nonetheless—of who around her had any sort of mastery of the Art. She was smiling now, and that wide smile reminded Tarn of the fixed grin of a giant snake he'd seen lying dead on the edge of a bog in Hultail once, transfixed by many Purple Dragon spears.

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Right now, as the wine steward hurried off and a hovering platterman turned away to fetch a goblet suitable for a lady of high station, she was . . .

Gods above! She was calmly and quite openly casting a spell! A coercive magic, some sort of mind lock, on Lord Halaunt!

That illegal act brought Lionmantle to his feet, but he didn't even have time to open his mouth in a formal charge and challenge before he felt magic wash over him from behind, the merest tingling touch of something aimed not at him, but at—

Tarn whirled around.

And looked straight into the gentle smile of Manshoon, who'd just finished casting something on Lord Halaunt.

Who was visibly struggling, his eyes wild and his mouth an open and quivering thing that he was fighting to control.

As Tarn stared, all sanity and self-awareness went away in the old lord's lost gaze. Sardasper Halaunt was . . . no longer there behind his own eyes. He started to mew and jerk spasmodically, plucked back and forth in the tug-of-war of the two magics affecting his mind. Halaunt was helpless under the onslaught.

Cutlery clattered as diners shot to their feet here and there in the Dragon Rampant's softly lit dining chamber. Converse stopped, lords and ladies stared, and those now standing moved their hands in intricate gestures as they murmured incantations.

Tarn had known he wasn't the only undercover war wizard on duty in the Dragon, but only one of the spellcasters had a face he recognized.

He hastily ducked down, giving Hardcastle—half-risen, sword half-drawn—a glare that sent his dining companion back down into his chair, and then Tarn started working a swift spell-shield.

Knowing, even as he started spellweaving, that he'd be too late.

The phrase raced out of him, the simple gestures were done without looking, and the spell slammed into something unseen in the air around the scaled woman, a shielding of a sort Tarn had never seen before, a sphere of nothingness that glowed briefly under the crackling lash of the incoming spells.

Yes, spells; no less than three other diners had attacked the woman in the emerald gown. She turned, hissing like a serpent in her fury, to regard them all with eyes that were very large and dark amid gold-ringed rage, and trilled forth an incantation that left no doubt that her tongue was long, slender, pink, and forked.

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"I am Shaaan the Serpent Queen," she told the room with a cold sneer, "and you have all just made the last mistakes of your lives!"

The emerald lightning that lashed out of her then crashed into Tarn Lionmantle's shield like the blow of a giant's fist, almost dashing him off his feet.

Beyond and behind him, Lord Lareth Hardcastle was not so lucky. He and the table and the salt-castle and all that was left of their food tumbled away through the air, hurled clear across the dining chamber.

Nor was Hardcastle the only diner dashed down the room. The air filled with chairs, tables, and flying food.

Tarn gaped at all the tumult, and thought the very same thing that a wart-faced old lord at a nearby table roared out then: "And just who the deuce is Shayan the Serpent Queen, and by what right does she trounce and confound *my* dinner?"

More angry men and women were on their feet now, here and there among the tumbled tables, glows kindling around their hands as they worked magics. A dozen or more mages, many of them folk Tarn would never have suspected for an instant of being wielders of the Art.

The young wizard of war ducked low as a table glanced off his shield and past, shedding a splintered leg as it went, and found himself looking into the furious glare of the scaled woman.

As she faced Manshoon. He still wore his gentle, half-mocking smile as his eyes locked on hers—and a mighty magic was building behind his shoulders like a great gray-black ocean wave topped and lace-edged with wintry white lightnings, crackling and snarling arcs of stabbing light that . . . suddenly rolled across the room and seared furniture and shrieking diners alike.

Only to part in the air right in front of the Serpent Queen, as if on the invisible prow of a sleek and slender ship, to roar past her on either side.

The divided wave of ravening magic struck Tarn's shield like the scornful slap of a dragon's tail, driving him back a few staggering paces—and lashed the far wall of the dining chamber, sending the ornamental draperies billowing up in hungrily writhing magical flames.

"Is *that* the best you can do, Zhentarim?" Shaaan sneered—and threw up both her hands, unleashing ruby-hued magic Tarn didn't recognize, to arrow back across the room, melting all it touched into greasy smoke. Diners fell in limp grotesquerie, their flesh boiling away to join the gray

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billows . . . and when the fading fingers of that ruby death touched the far wall of the Dragon's dining chamber, the wall started to melt and sag, too.

Tarn dared to race forward and take hold of the drooling, sagging thing that had been Lord Halaunt, dragging him from his chair as the emerald-gowned woman and her dark-clad rival traded spells in seeming glee.

Then Tarn started the long crawl toward the back stair, hoping it would still be there when he and Halaunt—a mewling, limply flailing burden he had to haul along the littered floor— reached it. He could scarce believe something like this was happening in the very glittering heart of Suzail, the capital city of a realm that had its own wizards of war. Spell duels like this just didn't *happen* in Cormyr.

As if to mock him, parts of the ceiling started to groan down into collapse, the walls that were holding them up having already been ruined and set afire.

All around him, the Dragon Rampant was being spectacularly destroyed.

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