

# THE UNFORKING FAMILY TREE

*The 2013 Spin a Yarn Tale*

*By Ed Greenwood*

*From suggestions by the Spin a Yarn  
audience at Gen Con 2013*

# The Unforking Family Tree

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## CHAPTER I

# ILL MET IN DOCK WARD

“CANDY GOLEM READY FOR LICKING!”

“Flumph on a stick! Flumph on a stick!”

“Maps of nearby ways down into the Underdark! Relative safety guaranteed!”

“Get your cheap Thayan knockoffs here!”

“Belts of gender changing for rent or sale! Change your life in a truly bold way!”

“See genuine dragons of Faerûn dance! As they open the new Draconic Dinery, where the wyrms are patrons, owners, and food—all three! The house specialty: dragonfly stew, with kaijhou-simmered organs! Special appearance, a mutated deep dragon!”

“Join the newly founded Waterdeep chapter of the Fellowship of Farfaring! Blaze new trails, see the world, and get rich!”

“Inventions! New inventions! Gondites and Sunites demonstrate the latest for your pleasure and investment and inspiration!”

“Win your next game! Balls manicured while you wait!”

“Portals created from the Elemental Planes! Surprise family, friends, and foes alike!”

“Cage match! Cage match! Trapped in an ascending cage with an avatar of Sharess! Front-shaft seats available!”

“Tickets here! Tickets! Late-night show at the Yawning Portal featuring halfings and a wand of glowing grease! You have to see it to believe it!”

Emlarlra Baenrae rolled her eyes. The alley markets of Dock Ward hadn’t changed much since her last visit. Well, at least it kept most of the employed leather-lunged in Waterdeep gathered in one place, so the rest of the city could think, or get some sleep.

“The latest! Veteran dragonslayers say dragon tongues are only aphrodisiacs while still attached to living dragons! Stop hiring them to bring back big buckets of tongue!”

“Get your knockoff designer bags of holding here!”

“Read the latest! Harpers meet in the Dales, but nothing happens!”

Emlarlra edged around a drying frame adorned with head-sized balls of hair labeled “Tribbulz from far Tuern and Other Exotic Pets Upon Request,” taking care that her cloak kept clear of the smoke curling up from a bubbling and, ah, aromatic sauce being prepared in the next stall, and—

“Well met,” a voice haled her in dry tones, from somewhere not too far behind her left shoulder. “Might I ask what brings so beauteous a drow to Fishgut Alley?”

Emlarlra stiffened. “You may not. Why, even if I was a drow, I’d not—”

“Oh, cut the tonguesauce, Emlarlra Baenrae. I paddled thy behind when last we met because thy mother begged me to spare thy life, and I can do it again—or far worse. Just now I’m merely curious, not hostile, but don’t ever think thy spells can fool me.”

The drow sighed and glided gracefully sideways, into a deeply recessed doorway that stank of rotten fish, hastily regurgitated wine, and bladder emptyings. “Let us talk.”

She put a deftly welcoming arm around the man who'd been a step behind her and drew him into a chest-to-chest embrace, lifting a spike-adorned knee at the same time as the fanged rings on her fingers sank into his back. He might just be protected against one of the two venoms, but both? And one of them the Kiss of Lolth, at that?

"Cinnamon?" Elminster asked her dryly. "Since when did ye start adding cinnamon to the Kiss of Lolth? It'll make it last a shade more than half its usual time of efficacy, ye know."

Emlarlra sighed. "No, I didn't know, as it happens. Nor, Old Mage, did I think you were allowed inside Waterdeep's walls, these days. Wasn't there an unfortunate incident involving your pipe, a jar of something called 'peanut butter,' and a gelatinous cube? Wasn't the Watch rather, ah, severe with you, last time? I wonder how they'd react if I screamed for aid right now?"

"Aid in walking the streets of Waterdeep freely as a drow wanted for the murders of a thousand Waterdhavians or so?"

Emlarlra practiced sighing again. Then suggested, more hopefully than confidently, "Aren't Mirt's Maidens allowed special dispensation? Conduct of mercenary duties, and so forth?"

"If ye were a member, that might help. Might. As 'tis, however, lady fair . . ."

"Well, at least you deem me fair—and a lady, you lying flatterer—rather than spitting in my face and condemning me for being born drow. What do you want, anyroad?"

"My curiosity satisfied. What's a deliciously naughty drow like ye doing in a tawdry alley market like this?"

Emlarlra dimpled. "My, such compliments! Deliciously naughty, indeed. I just might let you live."

“Oh, goody,” Elminster replied dryly. “I can stop trembling, then.”

“Oh, that’s just the shalaelryn; it’ll wear off in . . .” Baenrae eyes darkened. “Are you mocking me, man?”

“No,” Elminster replied quietly. “Ye were a friend to Qilué Veladorn, when it counted. Wherefore I’ll never mock ye. I will, rather, try to keep thee alive. What ye intend is far more likely to doom thee than exalt ye.”

The drow drew back from him as far as the unyielding door behind her allowed, and asked softly, “And just what would that be, human?”

El sighed. “Don’t think mere mortal human wizards oppose ye. Nor yet a handful of Pawns of Myth Drannor. Assisting in even a failed ascent to godhood is what the priests like to deem ‘deep sin.’”

Emlarlra Baenrae hissed at him like an angry snake, then sighed once more. “You know far too much. You realize I’ll have to kill you now.”

“I realize ye’ll have to try. Welcome to the Late Revel, starring Elminster—”

~ ~ ~

Her transformation was shockingly sudden—she’d been practicing. One moment El had his arms around a cloaked and darkly beautiful drow that the rest of Dock Ward saw as a helmed and armored priestess of Tempus, and the next a surge of black scales and mighty curved bulk beneath them lashed out at him, great-fanged jaws gaping to envelop his head and bite down hard—

El took dragonshape too, seizing her still-forming body in talons placed to grip her with agonizingly cruel force as her body grew, and using magic to fly rather than spending the time it would take him to grow wings. They soared

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up out of the doorway amid shouts, screams, and sundry crashings of shoppers fleeing in terror—and El whisked them out over the harbor before anyone else—including the four or five real dragons who dwelt in human guise down this end of the city—could react.

“Oh, stop struggling,” he murmured to the drow whose fanged head kept thudding hard against his shoulder, blocked by his own growing dragon limbs from getting at his head or throat, but trying for his life with a ruthless persistence. “It’s not as if ye’re a real dragon, forced to wed a Chosen. Nor yet condemned to be a Chosen of Mystra.”

“Always a step ahead, aren’t you, Cleverbrows?” she panted, arching her body in a desperate attempt to break free or at least create enough distance between them to thrust one of her wings through, to smash him away through the air. “Let go of me! I serve—”

“Loth, aye, such a revelation,” El murmured, gripping her all the tighter.

“An alliance of the Holy Spider Queen, the accursed Corellon, and the lesser human deities Cyric and Torm,” she spat. “We seek new Chosen to serve these Four, by slaying the tired Chosen of still lesser gods—”

“Ah, this would be my cue,” El sighed.

“—and finding the new Chosen of the new god who’ll rise to make the Four into Five!” Her voice rose into a triumphant scream. “And make the world new again!”

“Emlarlra Baenrae, what have ye been drinking?”

The only answer she gave him was a manic giggle. And then she exploded.

## CHAPTER 2

# PLAYING THE GAME

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS, SIRRAH?”

Duskrel Bladesemmer’s question was put in a voice neither polite nor cultured. He’d chosen this back room in the Triumphant Tressym for its secluded quiet, not because he wanted to be seen by all Waterdeep this night, nor have his choice of beautiful but less-than-highborn companions remarked upon.

“It’s a game, lord,” the man now standing over the table explained gravely. “We all play *Lords of Waterdeep*, by forcing quests upon others. Latest thing from our shadier city game designers.”

He set down the large, grandly illustrated card so it faced Duskrel, propped up against a nearly empty tall-glass. “Play only if you want to; there’s no obligation. It’s just for fun.”

Duskrel eyed the card and read the words “Foil Mercenary Companies/Give this Mandatory Quest to a noble of our city. Who must complete it within a year or be revealed as utterly without honor./The Guild of Debonair Slayers, the Wizards of the Sword Coast, the Soldiers Flotsam, the Iron Fist Grenadiers, the Red Ravens, and the Flaming Fist are conspiring to create feuds and armed disputes within the city to create employment for

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themselves. Stop them and restore peace.”

“Single-handed? This is a strange sort of ‘fun’ you promote, saer,” Duskrel said sharply, and looked up to tender his best glare—only to find himself frowning at empty air.

“He used the trap door,” the sleek and blue-haired playpretty warming his right thigh explained.

“After showing a Harper pin,” the lush and honey-blonde doxy wrapped around his left arm added brightly.

Duskrel rolled his eyes. Harper nonsense? Again?

“Have you ever heard of this *Lords of Waterdeep* game?” he asked his two hired companions of the evening.

“Oh, yes,” Zelazarelle said brightly, wriggling herself along his right flank in a manner he would have found delightful if he’d not been so disconcerted. “It’s become the rage in the city these past three nights. Forgive me, Lord Bladesemmer, but where have you been?”

“Fishing,” he replied curtly, a little ashamed that the truth wasn’t as prosaic and dashing as befitted a handsome young nobleman. “Family tradition.”

“Want to see my quest?” The blonde—Janathra, that was her name—asked breathily.

“But of course,” he replied politely, wondering just what a Trades Ward doxy meant by a “quest.” A new name for some strategic region of her body? Or—

She undid her tightly-laced corset, spun it around so the back panel was where she could reach it under her splendid breastworks, and slid out from its two thicknesses—until this moment, Duskrel hadn’t even suspected such garments had two thicknesses—another large and grandly illustrated card.

“Strengthen Civic Bonds/Give this Mandatory Quest to any citizen. Who must complete it within a year or be given two additional Mandatory Quests, and in

likewise gain an additional two quests if all three are not completed on the day when another year has passed, two additions being received every year of incomplete fulfillment thereafter./Bring together these four: an illegitimate child of the Waterdhavian nobility; a half-dragon (the other half being a demon, a man, an orc, a penguin, or some sort of vampire) or failing that a fang dragon; one of these three mighty things of magic (Sune's Chastity Belt, a horn or horns of the Crown of Myrkul, and the Holy Porcelain Throne from a major temple); and a Purple Dragon Knight of Cormyr."

Duskrel blinked at Janathra. "And you're taking this seriously?"

"I just have to wait for a certain Cormyrean to make his annual trip here, invite him up—a cut rate ought to do it—on the same night I extend the same offer to the half-dragon and the byblow lordling, and I'll be done!" she replied proudly.

Duskrel decided to graduate from blinking to rolling his eyes.

He was still busy doing that when there came an almighty CRASH from overhead. Dust descended in swirling clouds from the ceiling, and panels of that same ceiling fell or dangled, disgorging the torn, limp body of a tall, gaunt white-bearded man—in a plummeting fall—onto the table.

Which promptly collapsed, amid little shrieks from Zelazelle and Janathra and a startled oath from Duskrel, taking their drinks to the floor—underneath the new arrival.

"And just who by the Seven Lost Gods are you?" Duskrel snarled, reaching for his rapier.

The man regarded him a little dazedly, then coughed and managed to growl out, "I'm what's left of Elminster.

Put that warsteel away, lad, or ye'll get hurt."

Duskrel looked down at the sprawled old man incredulously. "Are you threatening me?"

"Nay. Never bother with nobles in this town. They're too dense to appreciate threats."

The third son of House Bladesemmer scowled. "So you're insulting me!"

El sighed, worked some sort of magic that made a deep blue radiance wash over him with what sounded like the faint, far-off echo of a chiming bell, and replied, "Evidently. Can ye master thy dismay enough to tell me if ye've ever heard of an alliance of gods called the Four? Who wish to be Five?"

Duskrel stared at him, then slowly shook his head. "The sixth wizard I've spoken with in my life," he muttered, "and they were all crazed."

Zelazelle and Janathra had slowly relaxed, but they shrank back with fresh murmurs of fear and a gasped, "Ghosts and spirits!" as loud, hard boot heels were heard thudding across the floor. Stiletto heels, walking with a feminine gait. Though they could see no one there.

Then they all espied the source of the sound: a pair of heels, with pointed black boots slowly fading into view atop them. They strode across the room to stand facing Elminster challengingly.

The Old Mage groaned, rolled over amid the wreckage of the table, and clambered to his feet. By then, he was facing the tops of thigh-high boots, with bare obsidian black thighs above them.

"I thought she was too amused to be facing her doom," he said grimly.

The boots took another step forward, this one slow and menacing, and Elminster and Duskrel stared hard and hopefully at where the body part that should appear next

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would be. The pelvis that should—

There came a snickt and a whoosh—and the legs were suddenly gone from the room. The same room that had abruptly gained an open square hole in its floor, complete with a trapdoor swinging back and forth from one edge of it.

Surprisingly, Zelazarelle and Janathra got there first, to peer down and announce, “No sign of her.”

“That was a drow, wasn’t it?” Janathra added. “I’d kill for those boots!”

“She did,” El informed her a little wearily. “They used to belong to—”

A door banged open, bright lanterns shone on them all, and a deep female voice barked, “Stand, and throw down your weapons! The Watch commands!”

“The Watch commands, and this highborn ignores,” Duskreel Bladesemmer snapped back.

“These weapons?” Zelazarelle and Janathra asked in merry unison, displaying their natural wares.

“By the lost dances of unclad Eilistraee and the forgotten embraces of my Mystra,” Elminster muttered, “why does the Watch always show up at times like these, instead of when you need them?”

“It’s our professional talent,” the Watchcaptain snapped at him. “You a wizard?”

“Some say so,” the dust-covered old man replied. “Others have less polite names for me.”

“So throw down your weapons!”

“As ye command,” El murmured, pointing both hands at the floor and unleashing snarling magic.

## CHAPTER 3

# DIRE CHICKEN ON A STICK

“FIREWORKS! DRAGON EGGS! SLIGHTLY USED HUMAN kidneys! We have it all here! Step right up, gentles!”

The barker flashed very white teeth—teeth that were long and sharp enough to almost be termed fangs. El sighed. He’d filled a room with vivid purple and orange smoke to dissuade anyone hurling blades, and teleported halfway across the city to a nice quiet alley of his frequent acquaintance, and—amnesia of Oghma, had every last alley hereabouts become a loudly unpleasant marketplace?

Citizens and shabbier individuals were milling about in the alley, where back doors and slop-hatches had been thrown open to serve as shop windows, and a young and handsome man was standing atop a massive old barrel barking wares and pointing at the window or door where each could be had, without a pause in his prattle.

“Need a vorpal circumciser? Powdered yeti teeth? Swords of underwear snatching? Virgin blood? A lich’s phylactery? Look nowhere else in all the bright City of Splendors, for our fine establishments provide all, at prices not to be beaten anywhere in all Waterdeep!”

The barker was persistent.

His own patience, Elminster was rapidly discovering, was decidedly less so.

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“Counterfeit moonblades guaranteed to fool genuine elves—or else! Treasure maps, or maps to Skullport, floor plans to the mansions of the city, and deeds to swampland in far and nigh-mythical Flauridda! Important documents forged while you wait! Dispensations from Bhaal, Vhaeraun, Moander, Mask, Myrkul, and your choice of Seven Lost Gods, all signed by the deities themselves, in the blood of verified faithful! Slaves or evil minions by the hour, tenday, month, or year! Killers for hire! Thieving tools for rent by the half-day, forbidden tomes three silver pieces a peek! Bridges for sale! Hair looms—yes, weave your hair into a keepsake, or someone else’s for their shroud—for rent or purchase! Dire chicken on a stick! Let no—”

“Barker disturb my peace an instant longer,” Elminster growled, wagging two fingers as he turned away.

The barker’s next words came out as a series of tiny, high-pitched quacks, which broke off in startlement, then resumed in haste and rapidly ascending register as his alarm grew.

The sounds caused some laughter, and a cold and heavy voice not far from Elminster said, “Someone here has used magic on our hireling. Duty Magist, identify the miscreant and administer punishment.”

As he strolled to the nearest doorway, Elminster turned with a carefully casual air to see who’d spoken—and found himself looking straight into the cold and hostile gaze of an aging man with thickly tufted eyebrows, a receding hairline, and a huge prow of a nose. A nobleman, by dress and manner, but not someone the Old Mage recognized. He’d probably last seen this one when said ornament of nobility was much younger, thinner, and less . . . weathered.

El turned away from the unfamiliar lord and his three hulking bodyguards, and strode through the door,

wondering what kind of a shop would be called, on quite a fancy sign, "Let Sleeping Dragons Lie."

And then he was inside and didn't have to wonder any longer.

It was a shop of paintings, most of them tastefully framed, of a wide variety of sizes, subjects, and quality. Right in front of him was a half-wall with some vivid and enthusiastically limned depictions of dragons, surrounding a little placard that announced: "Dragon paintings our specialty/Beautiful your home."

He recognized a dracolich, though it had obviously been painted by someone more familiar with the skeletons of chickens than of dragons, a nicely done pseudodragon, a splendid rainbow of faerie dragons dancing in the air in a shaft of sunlight lancing down into a glade, a gory portrait of a midair battle between two bleeding, dying wyverns being killed by something Elminster could only term a plaid dragon, and a row of fanciful pictures labeled respectively: "Mouse Dragon," "Ye Spider Dragon," and "Pickle Dragon." Pickle dragon?

"One side, old man; some of us want to shop, not just peer at the pictures," a nasal and unfamiliar voice spat from behind Elminster. In reply the Old Mage muttered something wordless and apologetic, and proceeded farther inside.

His eye was immediately caught by a wildly daubed abstract that looked like someone with a deep love of purple, garish yellow, and three clashing hues of green had hurled successive mugs of paint at a board, let it drip-dry, and then hung it on the wall. It bore the neatly lettered legend "Loth and Corellon go shoe shopping together."

The nasal-voiced patron of the arts pushed past with two servants at his elbows, to peer at some quite

well-done and huge battlescapes—sprawling scenes of massed battle that could dominate large walls, and that bore such titles as “Battle of Dragonspear Castle” and “Civil War in Tethyr” and “Skirmish at Bereghost.”

Elminster didn't have time to see more before someone else followed the retinue of Nasal-Voiced, stopped right in front of Elminster, and turned to confront him coldly. It was the suspicious noble, looking more suspicious than ever, and two of his bodyguards were right behind him, giving El very cold looks. Which meant, of course, that the third one was right behind El.

The Old Mage sighed, reached into his sleeve, and as the noble opened his mouth to say something unpleasant, El brought out the little sack, undid the slipknot that bound it closed with a deft tug—and dashed its contents in the faces of the lord and the two bodyguards backing him, ere he whirled around to face the third hulking armsman and ask brightly, “Did ye paint any of these?”

“Unnhuh?”

This last bodyguard rumbled in utter puzzlement, his huge hands raised in the air, where they'd been ready to lay hands on Elminster's neck and throat from behind when his master's order came.

El snatched up a picture that proclaimed itself a “Shagon”—by the looks of what it depicted, that was some rather drunken artist's notion of a half-shark-half-dragon—and tilted it up to fill the bodyguard's vision. “This one, for instance?”

“Unnherr?” This last bodyguard was quite the conversationalist, it seemed.

“Nay? How about this one?”

Elminster lifted up a garish portrait of a large-eyed, idiotically smiling magenta marriage of a pony and a

plump little dragon into an improbably cute creature that bore the label “My Little.”

“Unnherr?”

“Or this one?” He lifted a larger canvas that was thickly coated in varying layers of unrelieved black paint and was labeled “Ye Fifty Shades of Ye Drow.”

“Unnhuh?” Definitely a devastating conversationalist.

“Or this?”

A canvas depicting a human hand with quill, drawing a straight line and emblazoned with a grand-looking brass plaque that told the world that this was a scene of “Drawing the Shortest Straw.”

Well, ha ha.

Juggling the increasingly heavy stack of paintings in his left hand, El plucked up a row of three canary yellow but otherwise blank canvases that had been nailed to the same board, and brandished it, trying—and failing—to ignore the label dangling on fine chains from that cross-piece that proclaimed the work of art “Ye Pages of Yellow.”

Not waiting for a reply, El scooped up the painting that had been underneath the linked yellow trio. It looked like a pillar of human waste against an unpleasant ochre background; waste that someone had thrust various bird beaks into, to stick out in odd directions. Its label proclaimed it to be “Dire Chicken on a Stick.” Elminster cared most that it was long and narrow, with a frame that looked distinctly sharp-edged.

“You . . . you’re confusing me,” the bodyguard growled accusingly.

“Oh?” El replied, ramming the edges of all of the paintings hard into the man’s face and throat. “Such a pity!”

The bodyguard staggered back, lost his footing in a sculpture that consisted of a mound of dirt with a crater at its heart filled with pointy hats, upthrust shovels, and

a sign that proclaimed this work of art to be “Reclaiming the Dwarven Kingdom,” and fell back into a mass of mauve tentacles and sharp knives labeled “Ye Illithid Brain Surgeonne.”

Where of course, as his screams announced to the world, he got impaled on several of the knives.

Whereupon he, too, exploded.

## CHAPTER 4

# TROUBLE NIGH EVERY TENDAY

ELMINSTER SWAM RATHER BLEARILY BACK TO CONSCIOUSNESS and found himself plastered against a pulped mass of paintings that had been slammed against the back wall of the art shop. A thinner layer of the same, er, evolved art was coating much of his chest and face.

He wiped enough away so he could see . . .

And was not morally uplifted by what he beheld.

He had apparently been hurled over the heads of the noble, the nasal-voiced art buyer, and everyone else who'd been in the shop—except the unfortunate bodyguard he'd confused with art, who'd evidently been reduced to a fine red mist covering everything.

The blast had also caused the noble, his bodyguards, the art buyer, and a half-dozen or so other persons to all experience violent collisions with sharp knives from the illithid sculpture. As a result, none of them looked very much alive any longer.

Which meant, of course, that the Watch would soon show up and look for someone to blame, and being as an explosion had occurred and one of your actual spell-hurling wizards was personally present at the scene . . .

“Hold, you! Stand and surrender, in the name of the Watch!”

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El sighed. On time, for once. Of course.

He peeled a stuffed plush “Drowned & Dreaming” tentacled monster off his head—well, shops like these had to sell something that didn’t cost a month’s wages for laborers—and fought his way free of enough of the pulp to peel free and drop to the floor. He reeled unsteadily through the slippery gore and the maze of sprawled bodies to the wary-looking Watch officers, who greeted him with raised and ready swords.

“Come no closer!” one snapped.

“I’m surrendering,” El explained wearily. “And standing, and holding . . . this.”

He held up a splintered corner of a painting; all that remained of the Dire Chicken masterpiece he’d been holding when the—

“Drop it!” a Watchman bellowed. “Drop it now!”

El obediently dropped it. When it bounced off the floor with a thud, several of the Watch jumped nervously, slicing the air with their blades as if to gut unseen foes.

“What happened here?” the oldest-looking Watchman snapped, striding to the fore.

“One of yon nobleman’s bodyguards exploded,” El replied.

These words were met with a flat, sour sneer of disbelief.

“Truth,” El added gently.

The sneer didn’t change, but spread throughout the Watch officers. El visually surveyed them all—seven men and six women, aside from their captain—and saw the same withering scorn on every face.

“We don’t like liars in Waterdeep,” one of the female officers explained softly.

El couldn’t resist. “Oh? Why do you have so many of them, then?”

The Watch faces swiftly darkened.

The Watchcaptain took a step closer and said coldly, "I'm going to give you one more chance, Nameless Miscreant. Tell us the truth: What happened here?"

El sighed, threw up his hands, and said reluctantly, "I should have known I couldn't deceive the Watch. Well, then, hear and heed. It was the dire sewer beasts."

"Ohh," a Watchman said under his breath, taking a step back.

"That's more like it," muttered the one beside him. "We have trouble with them nigh every tenday."

"Describe them!" the Watchcaptain snapped.

"Sewer-stained ankhegs," El told him. "Leading a motley army of rodents of more than average size, foulspawn, dresser imps, gibberlings, drow sokkur mothers, goblin delinquents emblazoned with crimson crosses . . . ye know; a generous helping of the monsters who lurk under thy bed."

There were mutterings from the Watch officers. Impressed mutterings.

"Peeping werewolves, orcs with sock monkeys, trolls of the Trollmoors, spiders from the Cloak Wood, and vorpal dust bunnies," El added, letting his voice sink into dread. "Dragon turtles, fuzzy turtles, pillow mimics, dancing dryads, baby otyughs, bugbear triplets with pig-tails, plush elementals . . . and children."

That evoked gasps.

El warmed to his tale. "Politicians—" (That brought a shuddering chorus of "Ooohs!") "—clowns—" (more gasps) "—unionized beholders growing greenery on their chitin, displacer kittens playing with rope golems, rogue modrons, yard-tool-borrowing kobold neighbors, and herds of next door ponies."

By now the Watch were retreating, step by fearful step, their swords up.

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“Oh, that’s not all,” El told them. “They were led by Chosen.”

Audible moans of dismay.

“Aye. Chosen of Lolth and Cyric, Torm and Corellon! The rarer sorts, too: those chosen last for a team, every time; those chosen to wed dragons; those chosen to wait in line while all others do things of import; those chosen to empty chamber pots in orphanages; the Chosen of the Library; those chosen to choose the Chosen yet to come; and those Chosen to be here.”

“What did they say?” The Watchcaptain snapped. “Precisely, mind; this is important!”

El sighed. “Ah, but they spoke of many things. Taxes and tithes, arranged marriages, forbidden love, hocking family jewels, breaking open family crypts, slumming it, bitter family feuds and how such will be exploited, fostering lost heirs, a bard and a princess who are really twins separated at birth, quite a few hidden heirs . . .”

“In other words, the usual,” the Watchcaptain interrupted. “We’re most concerned with treason, man, and threats to the city; anything of that sort?”

El shrugged. “Being as Waterdeep has no royal family, they must have been speaking of other places, but I did hear discussion of regicide, plotting against Crowns, replacing someone’s crown with a mimic, kidnapping heirs for ransom, any number of illegitimate children both known to the world and unknown as yet, and luring the War Wizards of Cormyr into attacking a ruler somewhere.”

“Any mention of any of our more unsavory citizens? Elaith the Serpent, for example?”

El frowned. “No, the only crime lord mentioned was Xanathar, and in a nostalgic manner. Oh, and the legendary Szass Tam, and some ‘Manshoonian candidates,’ but

they weren't spoken of as if they were active hereabouts, or likely to be."

"Did anyone talk of the guilds? Or any of the city's noble families? Hiring mercenaries?"

"No guilds. The Thanns were mentioned, and the Uskevrens of Selgaunt will soon be hosting a revel at which all manner of skullduggery is seemingly planned by these Chosen. A disparaging remark was made about the ruling Obarskyrs of Cormyr, too, as I recall. As for mercenaries . . . mention was made of a band known as 'the Cleaners,' of the Bloody Acquisitions Company, and of an unnamed adventuring company in the tavern next door."

The Watchcaptain sighed heavily. "Can you recall any specific sentences?"

"Oh, yes. 'The family line is a lie' and 'We're not out of the Greenwoods yet' and 'New-coin neighbors are always detestable' and 'They have a house mimic, you know' and 'He's not been the same since his Rod of Lardly Meat gave out, and the curse started in on him. He's broken every mirror he owns, and screams and shouts that he's growing a Hlapsberg chin, whatever that is; none of us know, because he never steps outside without a full bucket war-helm on, these days.'"

"Who is this helmed unfortunate who labors under a curse?"

"I'm afraid he, being familiar to those conversing, was not named—but I can tell thee he dwells in North Ward."

"That narrows it down," a Watchman muttered disgustedly, and the Watchcaptain whirled around to give him a hard glare.

And turned back again to give Elminster an all-too-casual smile and ask, "And what did you say your name was, again?"

## THE UNFORKING FAMILYTREE

“I didn’t,” El replied gravely, “but ’tis no secret I tend to answer to the name ‘Vangerdahast.’”

The Watchcaptain’s eyes narrowed. “Vanger . . . now, where have I heard that name before?”

“In a play,” one of the Watchmen piped up helpfully. “*Sword Meets Dusk*, I think it was—or was it *Blades Meeting at Twilight*?”

“Neither,” said a female Watch officer disgustedly. “Your mind is a sewer, Braggyndragyn. It was *Enter the Toothless Dragon*. Vangerdahast was the mage-king of Cormyr, who rules through his puppets the Obarskysrs. A satire.”

“Yet not all that heavily veiled,” El murmured.

“What was that?” the Watchcaptain asked sharply.

“I asked, ‘Wasn’t that the villainess Haeld?’” El replied calmly.

“No, no,” the female Watch officer said excitedly. “She was in *Dragon Mage of Waterdeep*, *Dragon Riders of Evermeet*—she was the high priestess of Loviatar who became the head of Candlekeep, the seaside monastery of learning. My sister played one of the dragons.”

“I don’t doubt that,” another Watchman said dryly.

The Watchcaptain spun around to dispense another of his glares.

Which was when he exploded.

## CHAPTER 5

# ALASTERBOMBAS- TOS, AND WORSE

ELMINSTER SWAM RATHER BLEARILY BACK TO CONSCIOUSNESS. Again.

This time, he was lying half-buried in Watch officers, most of whom looked very dead. Their blood was still welling—or in some cases, spurting—out of them.

A few, however, were groaning. Elminster joined in, because he very much felt like it. He had a headache, a slight ringing in his ears, and pains in his toes told him that at least two of his protective rings had died into dust—something they did while coughing out sparks, leaving painful little burns in their wake. If people kept blowing up in close proximity, he was soon going to be without protective mantles.

“W-what happened?” a Watchman asked mournfully.

“Salangur exploded,” the play-loving female Watch officer replied, from under some bodies. “Always knew he would, eventually. Just not like this.”

“You think the wizard got him?”

“Well, if he did, we’re doomed too, because the wizard survived, and he is listening to us from right there. Look!”

Her blood-drenched hand thrust out from the body pile to indicate Elminster.

THE UNFORKING FAMILYTREE

“Oh,” the Watchman said, gloomily, then thrust aside a torn-open hump of gore and torn armor that had been one of his fellow officers to squint at El and ask, “Did you blast Salangur?”

“No,” Elminster told him, “I did not.” He rolled over with a grunt and staggered to his feet, in case any Watch officers had their swords handy, could still use them, and didn’t believe him.

Only his questioner seemed whole and unencumbered and on the move, and he had nothing except his belt-dagger, which he seemed to have forgotten or felt no need for. El helped him drag two dead Watchmen off the aficionado of plays.

She peered up at them both, gave Elminster a very long look, and announced, “I’ve seen you before, I know I have. You’re Elminster, the Mad Mage of Shadowdale.”

El gave her a bow. “Lady Lawkeeper, ye have the advantage of me. I am indeed the Sage of Shadowdale, and ye are—?”

“Qilué Veladorn.”

In response to Elminster’s stern look, she added rather wearily, “Not my fault. Both my parents had a thing for drow, and I had to be named after someone, didn’t I?”

Elminster winced. “I suppose . . .”

“I was luckier than my brother,” she added, as El helped her to her feet. “He got named Bregan D’aerthe. Cost him his life, that did.”

“This is a Magical Death scene,” her fellow Watch officer reminded her. “We have to call in the Watchful Order.” He gave El a wary look, and added, “And somehow convince Elminster Popethefurst here to bide peacefully here until they arrive.”

“Popethewhat?” Officer Qilué asked. “Why do you call him that?”

“Don’t you listen when the graywhiskers tell tales of olden days in the Watch? There was this citizen of Castle Ward back in the day, Hemophilia or Hemeophilus Popethefurst, or some such, who fell under a curse. Wherever he went, someone standing near him burst. Like a bag of blood, all over everyone—just like what happened here.”

“Mulker, I’ll grant you that people don’t explode every day, at least not in our ward, but we mustn’t jump to conclusions. Just because he’s a wizard, it doesn’t mean . . .”

Qilué’s voice trailed off as she looked around the blood-drenched room. And then she added, in a much smaller voice, “But it probably does.”

And without warning she stooped, plucked up a fallen sword, and threw it hard at Elminster.

He ducked only just in time, but a second and third were coming at him by then, and it took a swift spell indeed to fend them off.

“Hold, Lady of the Watch!” he snapped, “unless ye’d prefer to be a lady frog!”

She stared at him. And then scowled and snapped, “That was Threatening an Officer of the Watch, that was!”

“I heard him, yes,” Watchman Mulker agreed, “but you were throwing swords at him at the time, mind.”

“That matters not! I’m an officer of the Watch, and—”

“Aye, aye, aye,” Elminster interrupted her, “but I’ll have ye know I’m not just a Watch-officer-threatening wizard! I’m a playwright, too.”

“What? You think that has any bearing on—you are?”

“I am indeed. Have ye ever heard of *The Librarian and the Beholder: A Love Story*?”

Officer Qilué gasped. “One—one of my favorites!”

“I wrote it. And staged it first right here in Waterdeep, about seventy years back! And—”

“Hoy!” Watchman Mulker broke in sternly. “Seventy years ago? You expect us to believe you’re eighty or more years old, and . . .”

His voice trailed off under the weight of withering looks from both Qilué and Elminster. “Wizard,” they explained in scornful unison.

“Don’t mind him,” Qilué added, to El. “Please go on! You were telling me about your plays!”

“Ahem,” Elminster replied gently, “Well . . . *A Fey Tale of Waterdeep*, wherein the Masked Lords balance the city budget; that was one of mine.”

Qilué wrinkled her nose. “A classic, yes,” she agreed, “but it’s all arch politics. I hate all that whispering behind tapestries, the cursed items, and the falls from grace. Give me the beds and misunderstandings and pratfalls and true love!”

“Ah,” El replied, “then ye’ll prefer *Numb Punctured with Harper Pins*, and *Skullport Goes Legit*, and *Let the Lying Dragon Sleep*—”

“Ooooh!” Qilué squealed. “I loved that! So clever! The lovers caught unclad who pretend to be nude deity statues, and get away with it until they sneeze!”

“Oh, I remember that one,” Mulker agreed. “That was a hoot! Blockbusklur the Giant, Glarmin the Unerring, the orphans fired over the walls in catapults—and dogapults! Haw haw haw!”

“Alustrial picking a new wall color!” Qilué added, voice rising into similar mirth. “The bag of devouring! The hidden hair-loom! Thoolhu’s long-lost cousin Honeydew! Malik Tarm Teddy, the stuffed owlbear!”

“Just what is so funny?” a new voice bellowed, its fluting enhanced by near-howling fury. “A shop-full of priceless art ruined, and a Watch patrol transformed into veritable buckets of blood! I fail to see what is so amusing!”

The two Watch officers cringed visibly.

“By the First Mystra Most True!” Elminster exclaimed. “Smorghol Smoghwaryng! It’s been years!”

“Years since I went by that name!” the new arrival said severely, drawing himself up to his full seven feet of rouged and dandified height. “Know, Old Mage, that Waterdeep knows me as Alasterbombastos, and trembles at that name! I am the Ghost King of Dragons, and Master of the Half-Dragons!”

“Oh, ye finally got the wrinkles out of thy half-spell, did ye? Half-dragon, half-demon, half-vampire, half—”

“Half-chromatic and half-metallic and will you shut up about my spell troubles? An archwizard on the veritable verge of ascension to godhood has a reputation to maintain, and—”

“On the veritable verge? What madness is this?”

“Elminster, know you that I have read the Tablets of Fate and the Nether Scrolls! I have shaken the Hand of Vecna and tossed aside the Sorcerers’ Stone! I have revealed the Counterfeit Macguffin for what it is, and worn the Glittering Codpiece of Pelor and lived! I—”

“Still suffer from the same delusions of grandeur ye always did, I see.”

“What? What? Whaaaaat? Ohh, I’m going to give you such a smite! Everybody duck and cover, I say! For I am going now to unleash such lightnings as have not been seen since the Crown Wars! Such an inferno as has not toasted parts of Faerûn since Klauth immolated the Devil Dragon’s spawn, or Tia and Tamara Mat perished in the Abyss of Everlasting Flame! I—I—”

Elminster sighed, bent down, and selected one of the swords Qilué had hurled his way, hefted it consideringly, then threw it through the mounting tirade, underhand and with some care.

It struck the raving Alasterbombastos pommel-first in the forehead. He blinked, fell silent, blinked again—and toppled sideways like a felled tree.

And crashed to the floor. Where he . . .

Did not explode.

## CHAPTER 6

# FAR TOO MUCH DRAG- ON . . . STUFF

AS THE LIMP AND UNCONSCIOUS BODY OF ALASTERBOMBASTOS bounced, limbs flailing, into stillness, Watchman Mulker broke into applause.

Beside him, Officer Qilué gazed at Elminster in deepening awe.

“You—but you just—”

“Knocked the Archwizard of Dragons cold? Aye. He more than had it coming. What a blowhard!” El replied. “He was always insufferable—more than me, even, which I must admit takes some doing—but now . . .” He shook his head. “So, does he wander endlessly about Waterdeep laying down the law as he sees fit, these days?”

“Only when he escapes his spell-cell in Castle Waterdeep,” Watchman Mulker informed Elminster grimly. “Which takes help; the enchantments are very strong. Which in turn means things must have gone bad. Very bad.”

Qilué waved at the carnage, disturbing some of the flies now gathering to buzz around in the blood. “As if we needed more proof!”

“Well,” Mulker sighed, “we certainly drew the shortest,

as the saying goes, today.” He looked at Elminster. “Being as the Archwizard here is officially still a member of the Watchful Order, I guess we don’t need to summon any duty magists; one responded, all by himself.” He sighed again. “Mind telling us, just as a favor, Lord Sage of Shadowdale, what by all the paladin penguins of the North is going on?”

Elminster shrugged. “I wish I knew. Time after time, all day long, beings nearby me have exploded. I honestly don’t know why. They aren’t all familiar to me, and so far as I can see, there’s no connection between them.”

“Except standing near you,” Qilué pointed out gently.

El gave her a slow, thoughtful look. “Well said, Captain of the Watch.”

“I’m not a captain, actually—”

“Ye are now.”

Mulker stared at Elminster. “You can do that? By what right?”

“The Blackstaff—the Lord Mage of Waterdeep—and I had an understanding.” The Old Mage turned to Qilué and added, “No doubt the fools in power now in this city have forgotten that ‘little detail,’ as they have so many others, but I’ll make thy new rank stick, I hope. Ye’ve seen to the heart of the matter in an instant, and that’s vital for anyone leading a Watch patrol.” He sighed. “This is aimed at me, either to frame me or to kill me and perhaps remove inconvenient persons in the process.” He waded through the debris of art and death, making for the front door of the shop—or rather, where it had stood. “Let’s go somewhere less bloody, where there are still seats to sit in, and think this over.” Then he turned. “Stand side by side for a moment, will ye? Not touching, but close. Then be still.”

“Why?” Watchman Mulker asked suspiciously.

“I’m going to cast a protective magic on ye, that should keep ye alive through one blast. So if ye’re sitting with me and someone else strolls over and blows up . . .”

“I’m not sure I . . .”

“Mulker!” Qilué snapped. Her fellow Watch officer stiffened and stopped backing away.

“Ye’ve got to trust someone in thy life, sometime,” Elminster told him gravely.

“Oh? Why? Doesn’t seem wise to me! And no offense, saer, but you’re a known crime lord here, and you’re not exactly the one I’d choose to start with my trusting . . .”

“Wise man. So stand clear and I’ll protect just Watch-captain Veladorn here, and ye can take thy chances . . .”

Mulker hesitated. “Well . . .”

Elminster nodded gravely. “I rather thought so.”

He cast the spell on them both, and its radiance had only just died away when a side door opened amid the grating squeals of a heap of shattered paintings shifting reluctantly, and a weathered and unfamiliar face peered into the room.

“Is the battle over?” its owner asked hesitantly.

“One of them,” El replied rather grimly. “And you are?”

“Yhaushri Ghorbrash, but when serving here in the shop, I’m supposed to call myself ‘Dilbro Dragons;’ the owner has given us all dragon names. She thinks it’s cute.”

“There’s more to the shop?”

“Than the highnose and highcoin paintings gallery? Of course; if we were trying to make a living on what was in here, we’d starve. Come on through.”

Rather warily, Elminster and the two Watch officers followed Ghorbrash into a room crammed with curios. Dragon curios of all sorts, mainly sculptures that had a secondary use, like holding bowls of nuts—“Dragon Nuts,” of course—or serving as ashtrays or incense

burners, or . . .

El peered closer. Fat cigars labeled “Puff the Dragon Magic”?

“What dragon magic is involved in these?” he asked.

“Beats me. They come from Shou Lung and have dragons branded on the boxes. That’s all I know. Don’t light one in here; they smell horrible.”

“What is all this . . . ah, stuff?” Qilué asked, peering around at sculpted purple dragons, shadow dragons, entwined pairs of identical dragons from Shou Lung, a cigar-smoking dragon named “Haefestrus,” grinning little things labeled “Bahamut” and “Waterdhavian fang dragon, carved from actual dragon fang” and a proudly grinning dragon-headed man with a scaly tail and little dragonets perched on his shoulders, labeled “Dragon Breeder.”

Ghorrbrash sighed. “It’s a dragon curio shop. We have dragon ale, dragon bait, dragonscale armor, dragon hide for sew-it-yourselfers, sheet music dragon songs, false beards so you can beard a dragon in its lair, costumes so you can form your own dragon cult, books that teach Draconic—the whole alphabet, archaic and current—and books about famous dragon slayers . . . and all these fine wares you see around you. We even have pranks you can stink someone you dislike out of their rooms with.” He reached under a counter and through some skirting and brought forth a small, beautiful dragon studded all over with corks, labeled “Halytoazriss the Enduring.”

“Pull a few of these corks and take them away with you, and what’s bottled up inside here will reek like fish left to rot in your wardrobe all winter.”

“Charming,” Qilué observed witheringly.

“What we are most in need of, if ye would be so kind,” Elminster said, “is a private place with three chairs where

we can sit and talk for a bit.” He stepped gingerly over a gaudy strongchest labeled “Dragon’s Hoard,” peered narrowly at a clear glass sculpture of a dragon rolled into a ball and bound about with a ribbon that read “Clear Dragon/Hurl This and a Foe Won’t See It Coming,” shook his head, and peered about.

“Up that staircase,” Ghorrbrash offered, pointing to a back corner of the crowded shop, where conical shelves of gleaming metal and blown glass dragon lamps rose in glittering formidability. “Around behind the Mountain of Lights, there.”

“Thank ye,” El replied gravely, making for it.

The two Watch officers followed, and as they climbed the steep, open stair—a stout wooden ladder, fixed in place—Mulker muttered, “I can’t imagine a place like this making enough coin, day in and day out, to stay in business.”

Qilué sighed. “It’s a black market front, Mulk. Where someone can come in, ask for a ‘milk dragon,’ or some such, and the keeper knows that’s code for a particular drug. Or that the person wants to sell a kidnapped baby, or buy five thousand gold-worth of false diamonds or “saurial skin” belts and boots that are really Calishite river-gator hide, or some such.”

“Oh. Like that place we raided, that sold rod of wonder enhancers ‘to be a wizard all night long,’ and all that Cor-myrean brandy.”

“Exactly.”

“Ah.”

The Watch officers joined Elminster around what was obviously the shop’s staff tea and covert meals table. An array of cups and tankards held as many samples of cold and moldering forgotten drinkables, amid the ring-shaped stains of many spills of the past.

Elminster was busily snorting at some bad miniature paintings on the nearest wall: "Garagos" and "Sammaster and the Cult of the Dragon."

"What's wrong?" Qilué asked him.

"Neither look in the slightest like who they purport to be," El explained. "Utter fancies, both of them."

"What's that one supposed to be?" Mulker asked curiously, pointing at a third picture. "Erevan Ilesere on a bender?"

El peered, and informed him, "Good guess. It's labeled 'Elven Deceit.'"

The Watchman shrugged. "Guess they bought it because of the frame. Look; carved into dragons swallowing dragons, all around."

He looked curiously at a row of canvases leaning against the wall beside the table. The outward-most was "Picnic Battle of the Army Ants." The larger and swirlier one behind it was labeled "A New Deity of Orphanages, Lost in an Infirmary." He sighed.

Just then, the shop exploded.

## CHAPTER 7

# SUMMERSTAG, THORNAR, AND SUCCESSION

“ELMINSTER, SAER? ELMINSTER?”

“Aye, I’m still alive,” El replied sourly, and opened his eyes. Watchman Mulker was leaning over him, looking anxious.

“W-where are we?”

“Oh, aye.” Elminster sat up. “Welcome to Shadowdale.”

His spell had worked perfectly. They—the three of them, and a fourth, brought here separately—were in the forest behind Storm’s farmhouse, where the little trail she took to bathe in the creek came down to the mossy bank. In front of them, the creek chuckled endlessly and unconcernedly past.

Off to El’s left, Watchcaptain Qilué was lying sprawled on a bank of rather crushed ferns, smiling as she turned her head to look all around.

“This place,” she announced happily, “is beautiful.”

“I’ll grant that,” Mulker agreed, “but if I remember my maps correctly, Shadowdale is a long way from Water-deep.” He shot Elminster a look. “Can you get us back? Soon, I mean?”

“Before ye’re discovered to be missing from among the bodies in the dragon shop, and wind up suspected of killing the rest of thy Watch patrol, ye mean?”

“Yes. Er, exactly.”

“Aye, I can do that. And will, I promise. Just as soon as I question someone.”

“Well met.” The two Watch officers flinched in surprise at the rich, low-pitched greeting coming out of the trees so close at hand, but El was used to how silently Storm Silverhand could move when she wanted to. She gave them all a welcoming smile.

“Back from Waterdeep so soon? Found the Gutbuster Brigade already?”

“Nay,” El replied, “I got tired of people exploding around me and came home early. Any chance of tea?”

“That and more. Laid on in the kitchen when you’re ready. Be welcome, long-suffering officers of the Watch.”

And Storm turned and was gone. Mulker’s eyes followed her shapely back and behind until they were out of sight, but Qilué used that time to look at Elminster and ask quietly, “Question us, you mean?”

“Nay, lass,” Elminster replied rather grimly. “Question him.”

He pointed off into the forest on the far side of the creek, then crooked his long pointing finger in a hooking “come hither” gesture.

Heels skidding over roots and through moss and dead leaves, the obviously unwilling figure of the shopkeeper came crashing into view, pulled along toward them by unseen magic through trees and clinging vines and bushes.

A roiling sphere of vivid blue-white radiance surrounded one of his hands, and out of it was thrust a wand he was clutching.

Even as Mulker and Qilué gaped at him, the wand spun away through the trees, trailing blue-white flames, leaving him weaponless and panting in front of them.

“So, Yhaushri Ghorrbrash—or Dilbro Dragons, if ye prefer. I doubt ye’ve given us anything close to thy real name,” El greeted him a trifle wearily. “Care to explain why ye’re persistently trying to so messily slay me, and slaughter so many innocent Waterdhavians in the process?”

“I never—”

“You repeatedly.”

“I . . .”

“For a mageling, ye seem curiously unobservant. I would spot a floating eyeball flying through the air behind me, following me where I go.”

The shopkeeper seemed to sag.

“I watched thy every move,” El added severely. “The moment we were on the ladder, ye snatched two wands out of hiding, tapped some glass globes ye had hidden with them, set them on high shelves not all that far beneath us—and fled from the shop like a rage of dragons was on thy tail. Yet found time to prop the shop door open—doubtless so that thy line of fire would be unhindered. Shortly thereafter, ye unleashed one of thy wands back through that open doorway, and the globes obligingly exploded, destroying the rest of the dragon shop, presumably thy employment, and—ye no doubt hoped—the three of us. Explain.”

Ghorrbrash said nothing. He stood before them dejected, all vitality seemingly fled from him, his gaze fallen to the creek flowing tirelessly past.

Then he let out a great sigh, and muttered, “So kill me. It’s over.”

“What’s over?” Mulker demanded gruffly. “We’re the Watch. We like to know these things.”

## THE UNFORKING FAMILYTREE

“None of your affair,” the man who was not Yhaushri Ghorbrash replied.

“Oh, but it is,” Qilué said crisply, rising and striding towards him. “Name, saer. Place of residence. Favorite food. Last known—”

“Dragon eggs, over easy,” came the sullen reply. “And my favorite vacation would be to voyage, shrunken down to the necessary size, through the innards of yon Old Mage, with a bomb in my hand. In a miniaturized Apparatus of Kwalish, I suppose.”

“I’m aware ye enjoy explosions, and that ye desire my demise,” El said dryly, “but I’m still mystified as to why. So far as I know, we’ve never met before, and there’s no quarrel between us.”

“There isn’t,” the man he’d teleported separately to Shadowdale replied reluctantly. “You were just . . . in the way. I had my quarrels with Emlarlra Baenrae, Imgrith Salangur, and Lord Teryth Lathkule’s bodyguard Ordren Halthond, yes—and they’re all taken care of, now. I saw to that much, at least.”

“Lad, ’tis the nature of archmages to be ‘in the way,’” El informed him. “We’re notoriously difficult to get rid of. Why doth eliminating Elminster of Shadowdale aid thee?”

“Elminster Aumar dead and gone lets me reclaim the crown of Athalantar,” the man on the far bank muttered.

“Reclaim the crown of a kingdom gone more than a thousand years?”

“With the last prince of the royal line gone, someone related to later rulers can inherit. And that’s me.”

“Inherit what?”

“The title King Duar Obarskyr conferred on you some ten centuries ago, for your part in helping him reclaim—or hold onto—his throne.”

“The lordship of Summerstag? Lad, I let that lapse back into the hands of the Crown three centuries back!”

“Yet it’s still on the royal rolls. Held in abeyance, not dissolved. And in the heraldic grant, the lordship is given to ‘the last of the blood royal of Athalantar that was.’”

“Which would be the last descendant of Helm Stoneblade—ye?”

The man nodded. “Once you are dead. There’s a note filed with the grant, in the hand of Vangerdahast, saying ‘blood royal’ means Elminster, and only after your death is proven can the lineage of Stoneblade be considered.”

“Lad, I have had issue,” El said quietly. “So Summerstag remains out of thy reach. Tell me, though, why ye feel so fervent a need to seize an empty Cormyrean title? ’Twill be given grudgingly, and the haughtier highborn won’t accept ye; they’ll deem ye some commoner ennobled on the sly for some secret service rendered the Obarskys, not a ‘proper’ noble. Not for generations.”

“Because I’m about to lose my own title, and all that goes with it. And Summerstag comes with quite a nice mansion in Suzail, and extensive woodlots and farms northwest of the city; better than what I now possess—for a few more months, at most.”

El sighed. “So now we come to the time for thy true name and heritage. Who are ye?”

“Lord Thornar,” came the reluctant reply. “For now.”

“You’re the son of Alauntran Thornar? The two of ye look nothing alike!”

“Grandson,” the man on the far bank said sullenly. “Goreld Thornar. Except I’m not, really. And the polymorph spell I had put on me at great expense is gone—and the heralds were getting suspicious of me well before that. And I’ve gone through three wives but can’t, it seems, sire

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children. Not their faults, any of them, but what shall they eat and buy firewood with, when I'm ruined?"

"Ye're 'not, really'?" El asked gently. "How can that be, exactly?"

"It's a long tale."

"Lad, I'm an archmage, and a sage, and these two are Watch officers. We're all used to long tales—some of them even true. Try us."

The man on the far bank sighed, turned his back, did something with his belt buckle—and then stiffened in surprise.

"Nay," Elminster said grimly, "no more exploding. Thy remaining wand won't work whilst my spell grips it. So rather than dying, turn around and talk."

The false Lord Thornar sighed and seemed to sag again. Then, slowly, he turned around.

## CHAPTER 8

# THE FATE OF A FALSE NOBLE

“I . . . I WAS SO MUCH BETTER AT SELLING PAINTINGS than I’ve been at this. I painted endless copies of the Battles of Icewind Dale, fanciful Twilight War dragon struggles, even comic scenes of the Goblin Grenadiers and their Improvised Artillery—and sold most of them.”

“Since ye arrived in Waterdeep.”

“Yes.”

“Lad, talk of thy earlier days. Thy birth, for instance, and how ye came to counterfeit Lord Thornar.”

The man on the far bank sighed, spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, and said, “I am, apparently—I know this only from a letter left me by my father, that I burned once I’d read it, as he commanded me to thrice in its scree—the son of some unknown stalwart of one of the militias of the Dales. Who looked very like the real Goreld Thornar when a babe—which is when we were switched, because my real father was dead and my widowed mother desperate for coin, and Lord Riviltar Thornar had got himself embroiled in a stupid feud with some Sembian wizards and was convinced curses would be cast on his son. So to keep the real Goreld safe . . .”

“And instead, the Sembian mages slew Lord and Lady Thornar, and ye became lord when very young.”

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“And my real mother was so terrified of the mages coming for her that she took ship to Impiltur, changed her name, and vanished,” the man across the creek said bitterly. “Even the War Wizards assisting the heralds in disgracing me haven’t been able to find her. Yet. But they will, sooner or later, and I only escaped being mind-reamed by fleeing to Waterdeep. If they learn of my dealings with the drow, I’m doomed as a traitor anyroad.”

“And that’s how Emlarlra Baenrae fits into this, aye?”

“Yes. And Halthond; he’s—he was—one of her spies in Waterdeep. And Salangur was the friend of a War Wizard, who spell-spoke him from Suzail to look out for me; he’d been around the shop four times staring hard at me and asking where I was from. If only I’d dyed my hair, or grown a beard, or—”

“Tell, me, lad,” El asked quietly, “there were two attempts on my life here in Shadowdale on the same day two months back. By professional slayers, whom someone blew apart when they failed and fled from me. Thy doing?”

The false Lord Thornar turned away. “Just kill me now,” he said over his shoulder. “Get it over with.”

“So ambition was your undoing,” Mulker muttered.

The man across the creek turned around and corrected sharply, “No. I’m fighting to keep what I have. What I grew up thinking was my birthright, until I could read. I stand to lose title, lands, and esteem. I’ve never much liked the hills upon hills of well-worn sheep pasture nigh Immersea, and gloomy, crumbling Thornartowers, so if I could replace them with the Summerstag lands . . .” He shrugged. “A slim chance gone to none, now.”

“Nobility was thy undoing,” Elminster murmured.

“Yes,” the false Lord Thornar agreed. “It’s the unforking family tree that does it.” He shrugged again. “I suppose

many a lord or lady has faced being the last of the line, or even losing all the land and wealth that goes with the title, or even being exiled and stripped of a title.”

“Inheriting a dusty old title isn’t the endless revel many imagine it to be,” the Old Mage told him. “Nor even being born royal, as I have good cause to know. Yet most of those many must work hard all their lives, without even dreaming of title, land, or riches. And as much as they despair at times, or envy and even hate others, most of them will never do murder to advance themselves. Once, let alone several times.”

“So?” the man across the creek asked coolly. “You know what you have to do. Do it.”

Qilué and Mulker exchanged glances filled with unease, then looked at Elminster.

“We uphold the law and arrest miscreants,” Qilué said. “We’re not executioners.”

“I, however, am,” Elminster said grimly. “Another of my burdens. Not that I haven’t thousands of burdens already. Supporting the wife of this man, and the two he has set aside, will join them.” He locked eyes with the man across the creek, and asked, “And thy accomplices in Waterdeep, or in Cormyr? Hast thou any?”

“In Suzail, a limping sailmaker who can’t go to sea anymore, hight Orlor Draghyn, but he doesn’t know my darker deeds; he merely gets me drink and weapons and the like, for fees, no questions asked. In Waterdeep, a hound.”

“A hound?”

“A dog. About ten-weight, brown hair, answers to Spot.” In answer to their looks, the false Lord Thornar added defiantly, “I tell truth. That’s it; no other lurking allies. The magic I used, I paid for. Such training in the Art I’ve received . . . I paid overmuch good coin for that, too.”

## THE UNFORKING FAMILYTREE

“And have you left any magical traps behind?” Qilué asked suddenly. “Devices we should know about? Schemes about to unfold?”

The false Lord Thornar sneered. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Then he stiffened, his face changed, and he stared at Elminster in mounting horror.

“We all would, aye,” El told him grimly. “Wherefore, here’s that mind-reaming ye fled Cormyr to evade.”

The man across the creek rose onto his tiptoes, shuddering and convulsing, the flesh of his face rippling, bulges racing across it like swift little waves. And then he slumped down, staggered, and fell.

“Nay,” Elminster said wearily. “Many small and nasty plans, but nothing left ready.”

Across the creek, the false noble got unsteadily to his feet, turned his back on them, and fumbled again at his belt.

This time he got the wand out, and whirled to face them with savage triumph on his face, the wand glowing in his hand as he aimed at them.

“Thought you were so smart! Hah!” he snarled. “Die, Elminster! Die! DiiiiiiiieeeEEEEeah!”

The wand spat bright blue fire in a flash that—back-washed over its wielder, and left him a blackened, staggering thing of ash that collapsed onto the face it no longer had, shedding cinders that spun about it, obviously constrained within unseen walls of magical force.

“Live by the wand,” Elminster murmured, “die by the wand. Think me such a fool as to drop the spells surrounding thee? I merely gave thee freedom enough to use the wand—but not to use it on us. Fool.”

Qilué and Mulker were both staring across the creek at what was left of the false Lord Thornar.

Elminster watched them both shudder, and turned away.

“There’s tea,” he said gently, and led the way.