

M.Y.T.H. INC. INSTRUCTIONS



by
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and
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First down the long white aisle came the flower girls, ten of them, dressed in green organza tossing handfuls of petals into the air. I got a faceful of their perfume and sneezed. That expression caused me to bare my teeth involuntarily, causing an equally involuntary back step by the six people standing nearest to me in the great hall of Possiltum Palace. I never expect Klahds to really appreciate Pervect teeth like mine.

I tugged at the tight collar of the formal tunic I'd let Massha talk me into wearing. If she hadn't become such a valued associate of mine and Skeeve's, I would tactfully have arranged to be elsewhere on this, her special day of days. But if you are smart, you will never say 'no' to a woman about to get married, unless you're planning on finishing the sentence with "of course I don't mind you dressing me up like an organ grinder's monkey." Which, naturally, leads your former apprentice and present partner to ask what an organ grinder is. When I explained, he said it sounds like a devious torture device—which, now that I come to think of it, isn't all that far from being accurate, if you consider your inner ear an organ.

The horde of little girls was succeeded by a host of little boys dressed up like pages. Every one of them looked like I felt. I know Massha has a somewhat garish color sense, but I'd have done a little better for these kids than coral and pink striped satin breeches and caps, and bright aqua tunics. All around me I could see optic nerves shorting out, and the bridal attendants hadn't started down the aisle yet.

Before I'd finished the thought, here they came in a bevy. A lot of the bridesmaids were of Massha's globular body type, though none of them matched her in sheer magnificence (this is her wedding day. It behooves me to be more than my usual tactful self). Her confidence and

warmth brought out the best in fellow large ladies of the Possiltum court, who sought her out as a friend and role model, helping them to like themselves as they were. She had plenty of friends there. Even Queen Hemlock, whom I would have voted "Girl Least Likely to Have Friends of Her Own Species," had gotten onto cordial, even warm terms with her.

In an unusual display of insecurity Massha had ran color choices for the ladies' gowns past Bunny, who has a good eye for fashion, instead of a wallow of wild hues, which is what I would have expected, the bridesmaids were all dressed in pale pink silk. In spite of the vast difference in complexions and sizes, the pink served to flatter rather than draw attention. Bunny herself looked glorious and demure in her gown. The pink even looked good against the green of Tananda's hair. She resembled some species of orchid, shapely and exotic. I'd never before seen bridesmaids' dresses that didn't look like bedspreads or horror costumes. Mentally, I awarded points to Bunny for skill and Massha for knowing when to ask for help. It just showed what kind of trust the team inspired.

Subtlety ended with the arrival of an entire marching band. Two women in pink and aqua skirts shorter than anything Tanda had ever worn on a job catapulted into the room and began to turn flips down the white carpet. Behind them, a drum major in bright orange and blue came to a halt at the door and blew a sharp blast on a whistle. He hoisted his baton high and marched forward, leading the Possiltum army's music corps in full dress uniform, playing Honywagen's Wedding March. This was a discordant dirge that had become traditional for weddings across the dimensions, to the everlasting regret of real music lovers. Since the band was a little heavy on bagpipes and horns, the effect was as hard on the ears as their outfits were on the eyes. Since we Pervects have more sensitive ears than Klahds, I was ready to kill someone by the time they finished mauling Honywagen and struck up "A Pretty Girl is Like A Melody."

A full colorguard strode in time to the tune. The eight soldiers took positions at intervals along the white carpet, holding the Possiltum flag high. Ten more soldiers, Klahds in the peak of physical perfection, such as it is, marched in past the flag-bearers, sabers drawn and held erect in front of their noses. At a cue, they formed an arch with their swords.

The band halted in the middle of its song, and struck up the Possiltum marching song. Enter Big Julie, in his best armor, clanking with weapons.

There'd been a lot of discussion about who would be the General's best man, but the former strongman turned out to be the perfect choice. After all, the traditional role of best man was to hold the door and keep unwanted visitors from intruding on the ceremony. Except for me, Guido, Chumley and a few of Don Bruce's enforcers who were present as invited guests, Big Julie was the only person who was big enough and mean enough to prevent any potential interruptions. As soon as he reached the front of the room Hugh Badaxe appeared at the door.

If there was ever a groom who wasn't nervous at his wedding I never met him. The big man had beads of sweat on his forehead under the crest of his helmet. He ought to be nervous; he was getting a terrific wife who had a lot of dangerous friends who'd still be looking out for her well-being even after she married him. The people around me backed further away. I realized I was smiling again. Still, he bore himself with military pride. Pretty good under the circumstances.

Badaxe wasn't a young man, but neither was Massha a spring chicken. I hated wallowing in sentimentality, but it was kind of nice that they'd found each other at a comfortable time of life. I admired him for his honesty. He ran a good army. She was a terrific woman, and a decent magician, even if her power did come from gizmos. It was a good match.

As if he suddenly remembered where he was and what he was supposed to be doing, Badaxe lurched forward, then regained his composure. He walked forward with his head high, smiling at faces he recognized in the audience. I caught his eye, and he nodded to me. I nodded back, warrior to warrior, businessman to businessman. Once at the front of the room, he removed his helmet and handed it off to Big Julie.

A team of acrobats came hurtling into the room, followed by jugglers and fire-eaters. Dancers, accompanied by musicians playing zithers, harps and flutes, undulated down the white strip, flirting with guests and flicking colored scarves around like filmy rainbows. In their midst, eight pink and purple-dyed ponies drew a flatbed cart down the aisle. On it sat a tall, slender, bearded man in black leather pants and a

silver tunic playing arpeggios on a tall, slender silver harp.

"Quite something, eh?" Chumley whispered. Behind me, he was leaning against a pillar so he wouldn't block anyone else's view. I nodded. Neither one of us wanted or needed to be part of the ceremony. It was busy enough without us.

There wasn't a hint of magik anywhere. Massha wanted things to go well, but she wasn't going to force them that way artificially. I thought it was pretty brave of her.

The dancers and jugglers surrounded the altar at the front of the room where a green-robed priestess was waiting with the bridesmaids and the groom.

The harp struck up the Honywagen fanfare, and all eyes turned to the door.

In my wildest dreams I could never have pictured Massha looking lovely. Radiant, perhaps, but something about the look of joy on her face transformed her from plain to fancy. The unspoken rule that crossed dimensions held true here: all brides are beautiful.

The bodice of the white silk gown could have gone around Tananda or Bunny five or six times. It was sewn with crystals, pearls and, if my eye was still good, genuine gemstones. Massha probably had a bundle leftover from her income from M.Y.T.H. Inc., and here was where she'd chosen to spend it. The skirt, which extended behind her into a train five yards long, was picked out in crystals that flashed on and off as she walked, and embroidered with little scenes in white silk thread. I'd have to get a close look at them later and find out what she thought was important enough to memorialize on her wedding dress. She'd never been one to wear shoes just for looks, but today she'd broken her own rule and splashed on crystal sandals with five-inch spike heels. Her orange hair was gathered into a loose knot underneath a wreath of pink and orange lilies and a white veil that flowed down around her shoulders. I wondered about the symbolism of all the white and thought it was quite possible she was entitled to it. Even if the color was purely for the ceremony, it looked great on her. She was like a glistening pearl as she entered on Skeeve's arm.

My partner, who often looked like a kid in spite of his years, looked grave and thoughtful, which went well with his full magician's robes. I thought it was a nice touch: since Badaxe was wearing his uniform,

Skeeve, who was giving away the bride, wore his. I knew Massha and the seamstresses had been working on the outfit while Skeeve was away. The plum velvet was picked out in silver and gold constellations, magik sigils and mystic symbols which, on closer scrutiny proved to be phrases in languages from other dimensions. I particularly liked the one in Deveel near his knee that read "This space for rent." Massha squeezed his arm and he smiled up at her.

I watched them go up the aisle, master and apprentice together. It was hard to know which one was which sometimes. Skeeve seemed to be everybody's apprentice, as well as mine. He learned from everybody he met, including Massha, but sometimes, like now, he was an adult guiding someone who trusted him. He was the only person who was surprised when Massha asked him to give her away. I felt my eyes burn suspiciously.

"I'm not crying," I muttered, my teeth gritted. "This doesn't move me at all." I heard Chumley snuffle audibly behind me.

The general stepped into the aisle. Skeeve met him, shook hands, and transferred Massha's hand from his arm to the groom's. Massha kissed him. Skeeve blushed as he sat down beside the Queen with the other honored guests in the front row. Gazing at one another, the bride and groom went to stand before the altar.

"Dearly beloved," the priestess began, smiling. "We are all here to stand witness to the love of this man and this woman, who wish to become husband and wife. Marriage is a wonderful institution, but should not be entered into lightly. Let those who understand it stay quiet and let this couple learn it for themselves. Let us allow one or both of them to unburden his or her heart to you, but always remembering that it's usually the husband who doesn't understand what the wife is saying and the wife who claims the husband isn't listening to her anyhow and though you may wish to side with one or the other of them you shouldn't do that because they are blessed under Heaven and nobody's perfect; let the chips fall where they may and they will form a more perfect union in tolerance, so they'll both live to a happy old age together, and love is rare enough in this world that you should give them the benefit of the doubt; and should mis union be blessed with children, their names will live on into infinity as honored ancestors and anyhow it's much more fun to spoil grandchildren than children (your

mileage may vary) you can remind them of this day on anniversaries for years to come, even if they don't remember which present you gave them. Do you, Hugh Badaxe, take this woman to be your wife? You do? Repeat after me: with this ring I thee wed. Do you, Massha, take this man to be your husband? You do? Repeat after me: with this ring I thee wed. By the power vested in me by the great gods all around us and the government of Possiltum I now pronounce this couple to be husband and wife for ever and ever under heaven onward into joyful eternity and beyond letanyonewhohasanyobjectionslethim-speaknoworforeverholdhispeace amen!"

"I need a drink," I told Chumley as soon as the wedding party marched out. "Several."

"Unless I'm greatly mistaken," the troll said, "there's Poconos punch in the courtyard."

"Good. If there's any left the guests can have some." I strode through the crowd, which parted like a curtain before me. The Klahds were used to our outworldly appearance by now, but it didn't mean they wanted to be close to us. That suited me just fine.

The first gulp of Poconos exploded behind my sinuses and burned down my throat like lava. I drank down two more cups of the fire-red liquid before sensation returned. I emitted a healthy belch, spitting a stream of fire three feet long.

"That's more like it," I said.

"I say!" Chumley exclaimed, his eyes watering. "I suspect Little Sister had something to do with the mixing of this."

"Tanda always could mix a good drink," I said.

There must have been three hundred people in the palace courtyard. Dancing had already started near one wall. I could tell where the jugglers were by the goutts of fire shooting up into the sky. Deveels and other transdimen-sion travellers were doing small spells to the astonishment and delight of the Klahds (and no doubt to their own profit). Music and laughter rose over the din of people shouting happily at one another. I took my cup and went to stand in the reception line.

Massha and Badaxe accepted congratulations, handshakes and hugs from everybody.

"Dear, I especially loved the birds singing while you recited your

vows."

"The jugglers made me remember my wedding day."

"Hey, what legs! What style! And you looked pretty, too, babe."

Massha showed off the gaudy ring on her left hand, and Badaxe beamed with pleasure. Don Bruce and his enforcers were just ahead of me in line. The Fairy Godfather, dressed in a formal lilac tux that went well with his usual violet fedora, fluttered high enough to kiss Massha on the cheek.

"You take care of her," he warned Badaxe. "Oh. I brought a little something for you." He snapped his fingers. Two of his largest henchmen staggered toward him with a giftwrapped box the size of a young dragon. "You should enjoy it. If it doesn't fit, tell Skeeve. He'll let me know." He turned to introduce the others in his retinue, a slim, sharp-eyed man with bushy black eyebrows, and a stocky, short man with no neck and short, wide hands suitable for making a point without using a weapon. "These are new associates of mine, Don deDondon and Don Surleone."

"A pleasure," Don deDondon said, bowing over Massha's hand. Don Surleone's huge hands folded around Badaxe's. I noticed the general's face contort at the pressure. The burly man must've been incredibly strong.

The dancing and singing continued long into the night. I kept an eye on things to make sure nobody got out of line. I maintained eye contact with Big Julie, who was across the courtyard from me. He had the same idea, especially as so many people from the Bazaar kept taming up to give the happy couple their good wishes. So long as they stuck to that intention, I didn't mind.

"Hey, short, green and scaly, how about cutting a rug?" The cuddly presence that draped itself across my chest could only be Tananda. The pink dress was cut low enough on her shapely *decolletage* to cause traffic jams. I'd seen a few already.

"I appreciate the invitation, but I'm watching," I said.

"Who'd dare to cause trouble here and now?" she asked, but she was a professional. She understood my concerns. Enough of our old clientele and our present neighbors were around to spread the word

across the Bazaar if something blew up and we couldn't handle it. We'd be going back there in a day or two. Fresh rumors would make mat tougher than it had to be. "I'll get Chumley to watch things, too."

Noticing our tete-a-tete, Guido and Nunzio stopped by for a chat, and got my take on the situation. Skeeve was hanging out by himself. None of us wanted to bother him. He'd had enough stress the last couple of weeks, between the near-fatal accident to Gleep and acting as best man. Keeping an eye on his back was only what one partner would do for another. He needed some time to himself. "Aahz, can I talk to you?"

I turned. The bride was there in neon and white. Her face looked worried in the torchlight. "Massha! How come you and Hugh aren't dancing?"

"I've got a little problem," she said, edging close and putting her hand through my arm. Any time someone looked at us she beamed at them, but not convincingly. "We started opening the wedding presents, and one of them kind of blew up on us."

"What?" I bellowed. The whole crowd turned to look. I grabbed Massha and planted a kiss on her cheek. "Congratulations! You'll make a great court magician." Skeeve had let me know about Queen Hemlock's decision. I concurred that it was the best solution for both of them. That way she and Badaxe would have equal status at court. I knew I was trumping Hemlock's own announcement, but it was the most legitimate way I could think of to cover my outburst.

"Thanks, Aahz," Massha said, beaming from the teeth out. The crowd lost interest and went back to their drinks and conversation. She looked like she might burst into tears.

"Which gift?" I murmured.

"Don Brace's."

My eyes must have started glowing, because she grabbed my arm. "Hold on, hot stuff. It's not his fault. If anything, it's ours. When we peeled off the paper there was this big box with a red button on one side. No instructions. My detector,"—she showed me the gaudy bracelet studded with orange stones on one arm—"didn't show any harmful magik inside, so we went ahead and pushed the button."

I sighed. "What happened? What was it?"

She giggled, torn between worry and amusement. "A house. A

cottage, really. It's lovely. The carpets are deep enough to hide your feet, the walls are draped with silk hangings embroidered with all of Hugh's victories, and the windows are sixteen colors of leaded glass. The trouble is it's in the middle of the throne room."

It was. An otherwise good-looking, split-level cottage with a two-stall stable and a white picket fence had appeared practically on the steps of Queen Hemlock's throne. The room had been designated as the repository for wedding gifts, since security there was always tight, and no one was likely to wander in without an invitation, no matter how curious they were about Massha's china pattern.

Tananda and Chumley were on guard in the room. Tanda had taken off her elaborate headpiece. Chumley, a bow tie now undone under his furry chin, sat with his back against the doorpost. Nunzio and Guido, dapper yet businesslike in tuxedos, had arrived. They'd donned their fedoras as a sign to anyone who knew the trade that they were working. Massha's bridesmaids were clustered around a table full of presents. One of them was making a bouquet out of the ribbons. Another had a big bag full of discarded wrappings. Another had a quill and a bottle of ink, and was writing down who had given what.

"Has anyone told Skeeve yet?" I asked, taking the members of M.Y.T.H. Inc. to one side.

"No," said Massha.

"Don't," I said flatly.

"The Boss has a right to know," Guido said automatically, then looked guilty. "You got it. Mum."

"Have you tried to get it back in the box?"

"Of course," Massha said. "But the button has disappeared. So has the box."

I peered at the house. Fairytale honeymoon cottages didn't come cheap. This couldn't be construed as an insult from Don Bruce. Besides, as far as I knew, based upon updates from Tanda and Bunny, we were in good books with the Fairy Godfather. He was a careful man. He would have furnished instructions. So where were they?

"Has anyone else been in here that shouldn't have been?" I asked.

"No one," the bridesmaid with the quill said. Her name was Fulsa. She had round hazel eyes in a round, pink face. "A few people peeked

in. Oh! There was a blue dragon in here for a while. I think he belongs to the Court Magician."

Gleep? I glanced at Massha.

"He just came in to sniff around the presents," she explained. "I think he felt left out, but I didn't really think he was well enough to be in the ceremony." She studied my face. "Any reason I should be worried about him?"

"I don't know," I said. But the two of us went out to the stable to make sure.

I'd never been thrilled that Skeeve had acquired a baby dragon. They live for hundreds of years, so their infancy and youth are correspondingly long. Gleep was still considered to be a very young dragon. He had a playful streak that sometimes wreaked havoc on our habitations. Skeeve believed he was a lot smarter than I did. I was reconciled to his presence, even grateful at times. He was still recovering from having stopped an arrow. The foot-wide trail through the straw on the way to his stall showed that something long and heavy had passed through there at least once.

A scaly blue mass in the corner began to snore as I entered. I went to stand by its head.

"Come on, Gleep," I said. "I know you're only pretending to be asleep. If you're as intelligent as Skeeve thinks I'm sure you understand me."

The long neck uncoiled, and the head levered up until it was eye to eye with me. "Gleep!" the dragon said brightly. I jumped back, gagging. That reptile's breath could peel paint off a wall.

"Did you take a piece of parchment from the throne room?" I asked.

Gleep cocked his head. "Gleep?"

Massha came to nestle close to the dragon. "I know you were there," she crooned, running a finger around Gleep's jowls. The dragon almost purred, enjoying the chin-rub. "Did you take something you shouldn't?"

The dragon shook his head. "Gleep!"

"Are you sure?"

"Gleep!" He nodded energetically.

Massha turned to me and shrugged. At that moment I spotted the corner of a parchment hidden under a pile of straw. I lunged for it. Gleep got in between me and it. I dodged to one side. He swung his

long neck to intercept me.

"All right, lizard-breath, you asked for it, partner's pet or not." I grabbed him around the neck, just underneath his chin and held on. He writhed and straggled to get loose. I let go when Massha retrieved the paper. It was torn at one corner, where it had obviously been ripped away from a tack. Gleep tried to grab it back, but I stiff-armed him. He retired to the corner of his stall.

"It's the instructions," she said, scanning the page.

" 'Choose the location you wish to site your Handy Dandy Forever After Honeymoon Cottage, then push the button.' Then below is an incantation." Massha's worried eyes met mine. "We didn't chant this! What if something terrible happens because we missed out on the verbal part of the spell? It might fall down!" She hurried out of the stable. Gleep let out a honk of alarm and scooted out after her.

"Come back here!" I said, setting off in pursuit. I was not going to let that goofy dragon upset the festivities. It was bad enough one of Massha's wedding presents had misfired.

Gleep was quicker than both of us. To the alarm of the bridesmaids, Gleep blocked the doorway of the throne room and was whipping back and forth, preventing Massha from entering. Guido and Nunzio ran over, their right hands automatically reaching into their coats.

"Grab him," I said.

"Be careful," Nunzio warned. "He's still healing. What's upset him?"

"He doesn't want Massha to read the spell that came with Don Bruce's present," I said. I stopped for a moment to think. That was how the situation appeared, now that I considered it. But that was ridiculous. "He can't read. How could he know something like that?"

Nunzio came up to lay a gentle hand on Gleep's neck. "Maybe he smelled a bad scent on the parchment," he said. "Dragons have a remarkable sense of smell."

Massha held out the paper in alarm. "Do you think its booby-trapped?"

"I don't know," I said, grabbing it from her. I started to read. My eyebrows rose until I thought they'd fly off the top of my head. "I see. Good boy, Gleep!"

"Gleep!" the dragon said, relaxing. He stuck his head under my hand and fluttered hopeful eyelids at me. I scratched behind his ears.

"What is it, hot stuff?"

I snorted. "I don't know how that dumb dragon knew, but his instincts were good. This isn't a barn-raising spell it's a barn-razmg spell. If you'd recited it, it would have blown up the building and everyone inside!"

Massha's eyes went wide. "But why would Don Bruce want to do that?"

I scanned the page again. "I don't think he did. Look, the spell is printed in a different hand than the instructions." The swirling handwriting above was Don Brace's. The message below, though also in lavender ink, was written by a stranger.

"How do we find out who did it?"

"With a little subterfuge," I said. "And a little dragon."

The boom that shook the castle was barely audible above the noise of the crowd and the musicians. I staggered out, supporting Massha. Her dress was torn and patched with black burns, and her hair was askew. Guido threaded his way ahead of us, making sure that Skeeve was nowhere in sight. We all agreed he shouldn't be bothered. I was pretty certain we could handle this by ourselves. He spotted Don Brace and his two associates, boozing it up at one of the tables near the harpist. Don Brace set down his goblet and kissed his fingers at the musician.

"Beautiful .That boy plays beautifully." Then he turned, and spotted us. "Aahz! Massha! What has happened to you?"

"The house," Massha said, playing her part. She let go of me and threw her meaty arms around the Fairy Godfather. "My husband. Oh, I can't say."

"What happened?" the don demanded.

Massha sobbed into a handkerchief. "We only just got married!"

"Are you saying that my present killed your husband?" Don Bruce demanded, drawing himself up four feet into the air.

"If the Prada pump fits," I growled, "wear it. The news will be all over the *Bazaar* in an hour: Don Brace ices associates at a wedding!"

But I wasn't watching Don Brace. I had my eye on his two associates. Surleone's heavy brows drew down over his stubby nose,

but he looked concerned. Don deDondon couldn't keep the glee off his weaselly face.

"I'm good with casualties," he said, starting to rise from the bench. "I'd better go and see if I can help." Suddenly, a blue, scaly face was nose to nose with his. Gleep hissed. "Help?"

The dragon bared his teeth and flicked his tail from side to side. It was all the proof I needed that Don deDondon had had his hands on the parchment I'd had Gleep sniff, but I thrust it in front of his skinny nose.

"This your handwriting?" I asked.

"Gimme dat," said Don Surleone. He looked over the page. "Yeah, dat's his."

DeDondon threw up his hands. "No! I have nothing to do with any explosion! Call off your dragon!"

I did, but Guido and Nunzio were there flanking him, hand crossbows drawn but held low against the don's sides so they wouldn't disturb the other wedding guests. "You can clean up again, Massha. We have a confession."

"Confession?" Don Bruce demanded, fluttering madly, as Massha's braises faded and her dress and coiffure regained their gaudy glory. "What's the deal?"

"I don't know the whole story," I said, sitting down and grabbing the pitcher of ale from the center of the table. I took a swig. Subterfuge was thirsty work. "But I can guess. New people in any organization tend to be ambitious. They want to get ahead right away. Either they find a niche to fill, or they move on. When you introduced these dons to Massha and Badaxe, their names didn't ring any bells with me. At first. Then you said they were new.

"The present you gave Massha was princely, but it also provided a heck of an opportunity to take you down, and at least a few of us with you. The box containing the house had a sheet of instructions-attached to it. How easy would it be to add a booby-trap that Massha would innocently set off when she went to open your present? We trust you; she'd follow the instructions as they were written. At the very least, your reputation for doing business in an honorable fashion would be rained. But your enemy didn't take into account you have a host of intelligent beings working for you from a number of species."

"Gleep!" the dragon interjected. He'd withdrawn to a safe distance, with his head against Nunzio's knee.

"Something with such an easy trigger mechanism wouldn't need extra incantations to operate. The additional verbiage aroused our suspicions, enabling us to figure the puzzle out in time to stave off disaster."

"Then why the costume drama?" Don Brace asked, snatching the pitcher out of my hand and pouring himself a drink.

I grinned. "To draw out the culprit," I said. "If you and your associates were innocent you'd be concerned about the loss of life. And Don deDondon here knew about an explosion even though Massha never used the word. He was thinking about it because he'd rigged one to go off."

"But it did!" the scrawny don protested. "I felt it."

"A little subsonic vibration, courtesy of Massha's ma-gik," I said, with a bow to her. "Nothing too difficult for a member of M.Y.T.H. Inc., which is why Don Brace employs us to watch out for his interests in the Bazaar at Deva."

The Fairy Godfather turned as purple as his suit. He spun in the air to face the cowering don. "You wanted me to lose face in front of my valued associates? Sur-leone, Guido, Nunzio, please escort our former employee back to the Bazaar. I'll be along shortly." The meaty ma-fioso took deDondon by the arm and flicked a D-hopper out of his pocket. In a twinkling, they were gone.

Don Bruce hovered over to take Massha's hand. "I offer my sincere apologies if anything that I or my people have done to mar your wedding day in even the slightest way. I'll send someone with the counterspell to pack the house up again. I hope you and your husband have a long and happy life together. You made a beautiful bride." In a flutter of violet wings, he was gone, too.

"I'm glad that's over," I said, draining the rest of the ale. "Take that silly dragon back to the stables, and let's keep the party rolling."

Gleep's ears drooped.

"Now, Aahz," Massha said, "you owe him an apology. If it hadn't been for Gleep, the palace would have been blown sky high,"

The dragon rolled huge blue eyes at me. I fought with my inner self, but at last I had to admit she was right.

"I'm sorry, Gleep," I told him. "You were a hero."

"Gleep!" the dragon exclaimed happily. His long tongue darted out and slimed my face. I jumped back, swearing.

"And no one tells Skeeve what happened here tonight!" I insisted. "None of it! Not a word!"

"Who, me?" Massha asked, innocently, as Badaxe wandered in out of the shadows, in search of his wife. She sauntered over and attached herself to his arm with a fluid languor that would have been a credit to Tanda. "In a few minutes I'll be on my honeymoon. Nighty-night, Aahz."