



TALES OF THE LOST LANDS



TALES PACK 6

Bennett, Provine, Wright

This *Tales Pack* is released as a companion to
The Lost Lands: Bard's Gate



FROG GOD
GAMES

Credits

Authors

John Bennett, Jeff Provine, and Kevin Wright

Developer

Greg A. Vaughan

Producers

Bill Webb and Charles A. Wright

Editor

Laura Sheppard

Layout and Graphic Design

Charles A. Wright

Front Cover Art

MKUltra Studios

Interior Art

Artem Shukayev

FROG GOD GAMES IS

CEO — Bill Webb

Creative Director: **Swords & Wizardry** — Matthew J. Finch

Creative Director: **Pathfinder Roleplaying Game** — Greg A. Vaughan

Art Director — Charles A. Wright

Lead Developer — John Ling

Zach of All Trades — Zach Glazar

Customer Service Manager — Krista Webb

He Can Take Him — Skeeter Green



FROG
GOD
GAMES

© 2017 Frog God Games, LLC all rights reserved.

Product Identity: The following items are hereby identified as Frog God Games LLC's Product Identity, as defined in the Open Game License version 1.0a, Section 1(e), and are not Open Game Content: product and product line names, logos and identifying marks including trade dress; artifacts; creatures; characters; stories, storylines, plots, thematic elements, dialogue, incidents, language, artwork, symbols, designs, depictions, likenesses, formats, poses, concepts, themes and graphic, photographic and other visual or audio representations; names and descriptions of characters, spells, enchantments, personalities, teams, personas, likenesses and special abilities; places, locations, environments, creatures, equipment, magical or supernatural abilities or effects, logos, symbols, or graphic designs; and any other trademark or registered trademark clearly identified as Product Identity. Previously released Open Game Content is excluded from the above list.

Table of Contents

“In Through the Out Door” by Kevin Wright	Pg. 4
“Mrs. O’Neal” by John Bennett	Pg. 15
“One Last Commission” by Jeff Provine.....	Pg. 31

IN THROUGH THE OUT DOOR

BY KEVIN WRIGHT

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Heavy

“In Through the Out Door” touches upon two major events in the history of the city of Bard’s Gate: the destruction of the Gray Deacons thieves’ guild and the subsequent rise to power of Duloth Armitage over the Wheelwrights Guild. More importantly, the story reveals the connection between both, in the form of the highly secretive and manipulative consortium of vampires known as the Underguild, including the introduction of perhaps its most infamous member, the vampiress Felicity Bigh. For GMs intending to involve their players in the machinations of either the Wheelwrights or the Underguild (within Bard’s Gate or even beyond its boundaries), or who wish to make use of Felicity Bigh as an NPC for the Bard’s Gate adventure “Slip-Gallows Abbey,” this story contains major spoilers.

IN THROUGH THE OUT DOOR

BY KEVIN WRIGHT



THEN

It wasn't going to end well for Charis.
But he didn't know that yet.

The rogue thought he was still skipping through the fun part of it all, that he was just now cutting into the gooey middle of that sweet apple pie. He was running his game, playing all the angles, thought he had it all figured out.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Charis was on assignment for his superiors in the Underguild, the dreaded *meisterblut*. At their command, he had infiltrated the Gray Deacons, those wily criminals whose slippery fingers held the leash to all that was underhanded and illegal in the great city of Bard's Gate. Proving his skill in thievery to the Deacons had hardly been a difficult feat for Charis — was he not *nosferatu*, one of the Undying? What human could move as stealthily as one who could move through the darkness with no more tread than the night breeze, or cling to the sheerest of surfaces with the agility of a spider in its web? What mortal could hope to be more cunning than the wolf hiding among sheep? He'd concealed his vampiric nature, and they'd welcomed him with open, if guarded, arms. Time and again, through each successful con and profitable heist, he had proven himself and slowly but surely gained their trust.

He had been patient. He had been subtle.

He had made a mistake.

Yes, Charis thought he was on an adventure, not knowing he was merely playing a role in his own bitter and bloody tragedy.

“Stand fast, Elocur,” the spotter whispered to himself, his hushed voice sliding through the darkness. Charis and Six-Toe froze, tense and wary, straining their senses for the slightest sight or sound. Charis pretended to breathe. He knew almost immediately that Elocur was being overcautious; his heightened senses, attuned to the minute sounds and eternal rhythms of the night, detected nothing out of the ordinary in the manor house. The darkness was no hindrance to his enhanced sight, and his acute hearing could detect every exhaled breath, every life-giving heartbeat in the place: three servants sleeping nearby, two adults and three children slumbering above on the second floor. His brother-thieves, muffled and cloaked, were inured to situations just such as this, yet still their hearts hammered within their breasts. Charis wondered how they could hear anything over that delicious yammering. It made him peckish.

After a long and (to Charis) boring moment, Elocur finally moved forward again. Charis and Six-Toe followed close behind. The spotter led them to a wooden door. Deftly, Six-Toe whipped out a can of oil and applied the lubricant to its hinges as Elocur gently ran his fingers along the doorframe and the threshold, searching for any trap or signaling device. Charis inspected the door’s knob and lock. Both were trapped, he quickly ascertained; a tiny metal thorn — presumably envenomed — jutted from the underside of the knob.

Charis pulled a leather muff from his pouch and wrapped it around the knob. Plucking some instruments from his cuff, he probed the lock and disengaged its wards. At a nod from Elocur, he opened the door.

The three thieves slid inside and shut the door silently behind them. Six-Toe produced a bull’s-eye lantern from his pack, lit it, and closed its front shutter. The yellow beam of light illuminated a long, narrow hallway with an ornate rug of crimson and gold running down its middle and its walls and ceiling paneled in dark cherry. The wood was intricately and garishly carved — here narwhals leapt from raging seas to impale hapless sailors on their ships, there a host of orcish archers took aim at a score of sleeping maidens. Something about it made Charis uneasy.

“Step lively,” grunted Elocur. “Charis, lead the way.”

The vampire frowned. “Why should I do it? You’re the spotter.”

“That’s a good point, Ellie,” agreed Six-Toe, shoving his lantern into the man’s hands. “You’re the spotter.”

Elocur scowled and made to spit on the crimson carpet, but then thought better of it. “All right then,” he said and crept down the passageway.

Charis followed behind, with Six-Toe at the rear. The vampire felt a bit paranoid. The lush carpet felt a bit too soft and the dark walls of the corridor felt pressingly close.

Strange that a vampire could even feel claustrophobic, he thought. *With all that time in the tight confines of a coffin, you’d think I’d be accustomed to it.*

Charis’ innate wariness kicked in and he coiled his preternatural reflexes to spring to the nearest wall at the first sign of trouble. In the dark he felt sure his partners in crime wouldn’t notice, but he nevertheless concealed his readiness, aping a typical human gait. He had no desire to trip any traps that Elocur might have missed.

Charis gave Elocur a healthy lead down the hallway. The spotter hadn’t gone fifty feet before he stopped abruptly, lifted his right hand level to his head, and held up three fingers: *proceed slowly*. Charis closed his eyes and listened, but could detect nothing wrong. After twenty heartbeats (if he’d had heartbeats), the vampire ghosted up behind his fellow thief and whispered, “What’s wrong?”

He had let his guard slip only for the slightest moment.

It came as a surprise to no one but Charis when the wooden stakes shot out from floor and ceiling, the long polished rowan wood shafts skewering the arrogant vampire from heel to scalp. Three separate sharpened stakes pierced his unbeating heart, slaying him instantly and freezing what would have been a look of comic amazement on his darkly handsome features.

Not quite sure what to expect when a vampire died, Charis’ false companions waited a long moment to make sure their trap had well and truly put an end to him. The door behind

them opened and a man entered. His pale, knotty arms were too long for his silken coat and his jaw looked like it could crack nuts.

He was their boss, Rawling Jawks.

“Well,” he said, his voice oily gravel, “get ‘im down.”

The wooden stakes that pierced Charis’ chest were carefully detached from the mechanism and left in place. Then Six-Toe pulled a hidden lever in the wall and the remaining shafts slid silently back into their holes. The corpse teetered before toppling to the floor. It was an absolute mess: bones broken, skin ravaged, all of his internal organs pierced and ruined, several wooden stakes still piercing his torso, and all of it stained by black blood and gore.

“Place ‘im outside where the sun will find ‘im in the morning,” Jawks ordered. “Anything that’s left — burn it.”

“What the devil was he thinking? That we’d never seen a bloody vampire before?” Six-Toe asked.

“I guess not,” said Elocur, nudging the skewered carcass with his boot. “Cost us a bloody fortune to set this whole thing up. What do you think he was up to, you reckon? Trying to gain entrance into our cozy little family?”

“Trying to make off with our loot, like as not.”

“Like as not. But is that all? He may have been prying into our most secret of secrets. May have been feeling us out for another organization. Do vampires do that?”

“Well, one thing’s for sure: he won’t plague the Gray Deacons no more.” Six-Toe shrugged as he bent over and poked through Charis’ belongings with the tip of a long knife, undoing the clasp on an intricately worked leather pouch with a flick of his blade and spilling the contents onto the floor.

“Well, he had some good lucre here. Them golden earrings will fetch a pretty penny. And I just know that there ring is valuable. And look at all them rubies!”

Ignoring his underlings’ jabber, Rawling bent to pick up a small red book that had fallen out of the bag. He thumbed through it avariciously, his eyes scowling in concentration.

“Wait a tick,” Jawks said, his eyes widening and the corners of his greasy mouth turning up. “Is this a *treasure* map?”

NOW

Duloth Armitage had his neck on a swivel and an eye painted on the back of his overlarge head (figuratively speaking) ever since his boss — Grath Morentis, the late and lamented former Burgher of the Wheelwrights Guild — had been brutally murdered by those festering scabs in the Gray Deacons, yet for all his egg-shell caution, he never saw the ambush coming until it was too late.

After Grath’s murder and the odd, subsequent disappearance of the Deacons, Duloth wrested control of the guild into his own iron grip, but his command of the Wheelwrights was still sometimes precarious; a quick and sinuous snake whose tail was forever trying to slip out of his grasp. He feared the influence of the other burghers on the Council and he feared a sudden resurrection and reprisal from the missing Deacons. Hence, his caution.

The latest Wheelwrights burgher was leaving the Bilge Club before dawn broke, stepping into the back alley for a smoke, when it all went down. The sun — glorious Solanus as she had been known in days of old — had yet to peek her head above the horizon, but amber tones already graced the clouds. Duloth was unaware of their beauty (being in power will do that to a man). He was more absorbed in making sure he wasn’t stabbed in the back and that his food wasn’t poisoned than in appreciating the wonders of bloody Creation.

Four men exited the club before him: Shanks, his right-hand man and chief leg-breaker, and three of the beefiest enforcers he could muster. Duloth made sure they gave him the all-clear before stepping into the alley. He reached into his pouch for his pipe and some leaf, then heard the door shut behind him, followed by the *thunk* of the bolt sliding home. Whirling about with remarkable speed for a man of his girth, he threw a stout-legged kick at the door, but it didn’t budge.

“Heads up, boys,” he hissed at his compatriots as he pulled a short, thick-bladed sword from beneath his overcoat. “Something stinks here.”

Duloth turned to find Shank and his enforcers spread out in a semi-circle, facing him with weapons drawn and grim expressions on their flint-hard faces.

Shanks shook his head sadly. “The only thing that stinks here is your luck, Dully. You’ve had your fun, but you ain’t fit to lead the Wheelwrights. The Council has decided that it’s time for a change of command. I’m just here to give you your walking papers.”

Duloth took a defensive posture, weight shifting to the balls of his feet and sword held low as he glanced quickly from foe to foe, sizing them up, measuring his chances.

His chances weren’t good.

He could get one of them, he knew, maybe two, but the others would skewer him before he could do more.

He hawked and spat. “The Council, eh? Don’t make me laugh. They wouldn’t never back a muck-eater like you. After I done away with the Deacons, they know my mettle.”

Shanks’ lips narrowed into a cruel smile.

“*You* done away with the Deacons, huh? I still have my questions about that. And maybe I am taking this into my own capable hands. The Council ain’t got the stones to oppose me when they find your fat corpse floating face down in the Stoneheart. So drop that pigsticker and get down on your knees. I’ll make it quick for you, you wallowing hog.”

Duloth knew he wasn’t going to talk his way out of this one.

“Spit on your ambitions, you sackless eunuch. You all may get me in the end, but if I go, I’m taking *you* with me.”

Shanks cursed and pointed his blade at Duloth. His men tensed and shuffled their feet in murderous advance. Rage blossomed in Duloth’s gut and he forgot to care whether he lived or died. He just wanted blood.

“*Ahem*,” a cultured, feminine voice politely coughed from behind the assassins. “Gentlemen, I hate to interrupt this delightful *tête-à-tête*, but I have something to discuss with Master Armitage here.”

Three of the killers whirled, but Shanks never turned away from Duloth, just shifted slightly so he could catch a glimpse of the newcomer from the corner of his eye. There, right on the stench-ridden cobble of Bilge Alley, stood a lady of obvious breeding. She was slender and tall and swathed in a sweeping, crimson dress. Long, silken gloves covered her hands and arms, and her darksome, coifed hair was topped by a small, silver hat. A lacy veil hid her face, but did nothing to disguise her long, dusky throat nor her very distracting décolletage. Behind her stood a handmaiden, similarly but less extravagantly dressed, her eyes demurely downcast.

“What in the Devil’s name are *you* doing here?” Shanks said, ferocity and a hint of genuine curiosity in his voice. Duloth wondered the same thing. The lady’s presence in the alleyway was like finding a jeweled diadem in a dung heap.

The lady covered her mouth with an ornate, golden fan.

“Conducting business, my good man. And, might I add, I appreciate neither your tone nor your language. Your comportment is ghastly and, of course, inappropriate in polite company. Please lower those rude weapons and be on your way. I have a proposal for our friend here, and your odious presence is a most unwelcome interruption to our proceedings.”

Shanks gaped at the woman, flummoxed. She had his full attention now. He glared at her then actually looked back to Duloth with a “*what the Devil is going on here*” look in eyes.

One of his bully-boys chose that moment to step forward and grab the mysterious visitor by the arm to push her on her way. His fingers almost brushed her silk-draped forearm when her handmaid, moving with animal quickness, snatched up his brutal hand in her dainty one, and twisted it until each bone within broke with an audible and frightening *snap*. The enforcer’s agonized cry was cut short as the maid’s fist, augmented by an ornately spiked ring, punched through his teeth and the soft ceiling of his red mouth and into his brain pan. It took her a couple of concerted jerks to free her hand and the embedded needle of the ring from the ruin of his head.

The other enforcers — hard-boiled men and proven murderers both — were so shocked as she shook the crimson gore and gray matter from her delicate fingers that they looked askance at their leader, Shanks.

“Kill...kill her!” he shouted, then found himself in a desperate fight with Duloth Armitage, matching blade with blade. He parried one thrust, then another, then stepped back and back again to get his bearings.

Meanwhile, his cronies charged the blood-soaked handmaiden, their blades scything toward her with metallic menace. The woman weaved snake-like to her left to avoid the first thrust, but caught the full brunt of an overhand cut on the angle where her graceful neck met her shoulder. The sword met flesh with an audible *clunk*, then rebounded so hard its wielder nearly lost his grip on the weapon. Without hesitation or acknowledgment, the maid punched the bully square in the chest. His sternum cracked and the air *whooshed* from his lungs, blood bursting forth from his mouth. He fell to the ground writhing and gurgling, and she stepped toward his prone and helpless figure, stomping down on his chest until the low heel of her elegant boot cracked on the cobbles beneath his body.

Duloth advanced on a suddenly very nervous Shanks, blood-lust flaring in his eyes. He fainted at his enemy’s chest, changed the angle of his blade, then thrust deeply into his betrayer’s thigh. He then bounded back to avoid the inevitable counter thrust.

Shanks obliged, following the expected thrust with another, arching out from the wall and toward his retreating opponent. He had to end this fight soon and escape, or blood loss would soon leave him too weak to fight.

Duloth engaged the oncoming blade with his own, attempted a bind, failed, then thrust his blade into Shanks’ forearm. Blood flowed freely, and Shanks cursed in fear and retreated.

That was his undoing.

In stepping backward, Shanks moved right into the horrific handmaiden’s grasp. She picked him up like a sack of flour and slammed him to the ground again and again, making his body into nothing more than a bloody skin-sack of bruised meat and bone fragments before she was finished.

The last enforcer tried to run. He intended to beat his feet until the sight of Bard’s Gate and the memory of that dark alley were far behind him. But before he could make his escape, the scarlet-clad lady in front of him raised her veil and locked her gaze onto his.

“No, no, my love,” she said gently. “You chose the wrong side in this fight. Please, do us a favor and dispose of yourself.” She shyly cocked her head, her face the picture of sweet innocence.

The man gritted his teeth and grimaced, gathering all of his will to resist her fell command. He tried to fight it, but his strength faltered; he never had a prayer. He shook his head vehemently, fearfully as the beautiful woman leaned forward.

“You do know what I mean,” she crooned. “Do it.”

Her will was his will. Her desire, his. Dropping his sword, he drew a hack-knife from his belt and ran it across his own throat, sawing deep, from ear to ear.

The woman stepped carefully over his still-twitching corpse and looked from Duloth’s sweat-stained face to the brightening eastern horizon. The sun was on the cusp of rising.

“Hmm. I’m afraid that I have come to you at an inopportune time. Would you deign to receive me this evening? We have potentially profitable business to discuss.”

Duloth wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and tried to control the battle-born shiver running through his body.

“Yeah...yeah, I could do that.”

The mysterious woman’s face lit up in a glorious smile.

“Excellent!” she said, clapping her hands together. “I shall come to your office at midnight. Please be prepared to receive me properly. Come, Cordelia, we must get you cleaned up; you look a frightful mess.” The pair turned and sauntered back down the alleyway, disappearing into the last remnant of the morning gloom.

THEN

Charis’ journal did indeed contain a treasure map — a bizarre diagram surrounded by esoteric symbols unknown to even such studious thieves as the Gray Deacons. It cost Jawks two hundred gold harps to hire the best (and least scrupulous) cryptologist in Bard’s

Gate to decipher the strange symbols. It cost him another hundred and several choice, dire threats (at which Rawling Jawks was an artist) to insure that cryptologist's silence.

Two weeks to the day after Charis' gruesome death, Jawks and his crew found themselves thirty leagues east of Bard's Gate and half a league beneath the earth. The symbols had led them to an immense, lightning-blasted tree standing atop a lonely and otherwise-barren hill. In the hollow of that tree, they discovered a spiral staircase leading down into darkness.

Jawks brought with him an elite crew of seven: his own good self; three other rogues from the Deacons, each specialized in lock-picking, trap-finding, and the arts of acrobatic combat, respectively (Elocur and Six-Toe were among these); two meatheads from the Society of Arms, hired to deal with any challenges that stealth and cunning could not overcome; and a member of the Dominion Arcane. This last hire had been extremely expensive, but worth every ruddy coin paid. She had detected an invisible walkway which allowed them to avoid an otherwise grim battle with a chained and undead horror. She had also used her spell-weaving to dispel a deadly arcane barrier and destroy a golem-guardian that even their most ensorcelled weapons could not touch.

Of the original seven, only three remained now. Sad Six-Toe had been sliced and diced by the hatchet-handed golem. Elocur died when he failed to disarm a particularly intricate trap, his body weirdly disintegrated by sprays of soothing music. The meatheads both perished in combat when the crew had been surprised by wave upon wave of stunted, bleach-skinned humanoids. Now, Rawling, the wizard, and his last remaining loyal thief stood before what the Deacons boss knew to be the treasure which they so eagerly and disastrously desired.

They had come to a large, pillar-filled chamber. The pillars had been carved in the shape of bent palm trees, their fronds covering much of the ceiling. Frescoes covered the walls: endless, sandy dunes and pale blue, cloudless skies. The sorceress spoke in awe-filled tones of the chamber's probable Arcadian provenance and the promise of rich treasures dating from the lost days of legendary Aka Bakar¹.

In the center of this chamber stood a pool of clean, sparkling water bearing the faintest tint of mint green. The pool was twenty feet high and twenty feet to a side and it literally *stood* — there was no wall or barrier to contain it in place. The water just remained there, an unsupported cube of glistening liquid.

"It's magic," the wizard said. "There's no trick to it, just magic." Fatigue colored her voice and her eyes drooped in weariness despite her excitement over the find.

No...magic? Really? Rawling thought sarcastically, but constrained his response to a casual glower. He couldn't remember the wizard's name. His mind was normally as sharp as a thorn, and the master-thief knew this was a sign that he was tiring out. They needed to wrap this up quickly.

"Brother-Deacon, inspect and report," Jawks commanded his underling (he couldn't remember his name, either). The rogue snapped a smart salute and jumped to obey. He approached the gleaming cube, carefully inspecting the tree-pillars nearest the watery wonder and the sandstone flooring all around it.

Looks like he's the only one with any juice left, Rawling thought. He looked at the frescoes, the pillars, and the cube. *This room looks like an oasis. It's supposed to be an oasis.*

The thief finished his examination then turned to Jawks. "I got nothing, Boss. Looks clean," he said. He turned back to the cube and stepped closer, peering into its depths. "Looks like there's somewhat in there. I think I can—" Taking a deep breath, the thief stepped into the suspended liquid.

"Wait! Don't—" Rawling began, but it was too late. He could see his brother-deacon clearly as he pressed into the cube; the thief walked to its center, seemed to grab something, then returned. As he stepped out of the cube, the water sluiced off of him and, defying all natural law, ran back into the pool. The thief was as dry as he was before he had entered, and Rawling could see him grin in wonder as he held up something shining in his hand.

"Look at this, Boss! I got it!"

From his hand hung a golden chain, and from that chain hung a large, pear-cut gem, every shade and shine of red and orange caught within its depths — it was a fiery jacinth of

great beauty and inestimable worth. The rogue held it up proudly and carried it to Jawks.

The master thief took it and watched the light from their lanterns catch and reflect in every facet. "It's beautiful," he said, more than a touch of awe in his voice.

"And powerfully magical," the hired wizard said, her eyes radiating with the soft light of a spell to determine its nature.

"And priceless, too, no doubt. Though we'll find a price for it, won't we, Boss?" the under-thief said, turning back to the strange and impossible pool. "I wonder if there's anything else in there."

Barely had the words fallen from his mouth when a watery arm shot from the cube and enveloped him in its fluid grip. The appendage jerked the thief back into its bulk where he struggled vainly, air bubbles exploding from his mouth and nose.

"I *knew* it!" the wizard spat and wove her hands, chanting the words of a spell. Electricity arced from her fingertips and flared against the cube. In the brilliance of that light, the water lost its rigidity and morphed into something vaguely man-shaped. A head-like appendage grew from its top and opened a dripping maw. Its burbling growl shook the fronds of the palm tree pillars, nearly deafening the spellcaster.

She tried to move behind one of the pillars, but a liquefied limb shot from the fluid creature and slammed her to the ground in a roar like mountain-thunder. Her nose and front teeth broken and her face covered in blood, she struggled to her feet as the thing surged toward her, as inevitable as the tide it so closely resembled. As she cast her final spell, she saw the body of the unlucky Gray Deacon floating within the water elemental, his eyes protruding grotesquely from his darkening face.

Rawling Jawks saw none of that. He had been out of the Oasis Chamber and two levels up through the dungeon before his underling had time to drown.

NOW

The woman was punctual; Duloth had to give her that. As the bell tolled midnight, his personal bodyguard rapped on his office door and opened it to reveal the mysterious lady from Bilge's Alley.

The Wheelwrights' burgher had had a busy afternoon. Making his way back to the guild's headquarters as dawn broke over the magnificent city, he went to work doing some housecleaning. He plundered the quarters and effects of his former lieutenant, the unlamented Shanks, searching for any clue that the Council was behind his base treachery. Duloth found none. He then grabbed a runner — a kid too young to be trusted with so grand a betrayal — and had her sprint to the Society of Arms with a bag of gold to bring back reinforcements. Locking himself in his office and trapping the door, he waited for their arrival. At any moment, he expected more traitorous guildsmen to mount an attack on him.

None came.

After an agonizing hour, the girl returned with a dozen well-armed mercenaries. Duloth exited his refuge to give them their orders, then sent the runner to bring him the chief of the Wheelwrights' enforcers branch. Without ceremony, he gave that entire branch the sack. He then sent for the officers and lieutenants of the guild, one at a time. There, in his bloated and wrathful presence, with three battle-scarred mercenaries hulking nearby, he interviewed them one by one, probing and searching for any and all signs of murderous disloyalty. Six hours later, after much shouting and threats — and occasional minor torture on his part and much hand-wringing and sweaty pleading on theirs — he found no one he felt to be co-conspirators with Shanks. Just to be on the safe side, he fired a fifth of them on the spot. *One could never be too careful when one barely escapes murder in a filthy alleyway*, he thought.

Then as Mayor of the Council, he called an emergency meeting of the Council of Burghers. Surrounded by his new enforcers, he put them through their paces, but by this point he knew that Shanks and his three bullies had been alone in their treasonous ambushade.

The rest of the day was spent shoring up his financial and organizational defenses, making sure that there was no further rot in his guild. An hour to midnight found him

exhausted and starving, but he remedied both ailments with food and stimulants. By midnight, he was ready.

The lady swept gracefully into his rather austere office, having donned a high-waisted empire dress of midnight blue. The magnificent, emerald gemstone that nestled in the cleft of her bosom brought out the green in her hazel eyes. Being who he was, the jewel caught Duloth's attention more than either eyes or bosom.

"*Ahem*," she politely coughed, an echo of their first meeting behind the Bilge Club. "My eyes are up here, my good man. I would appreciate your full attention if we are going to be partners in enterprise."

"What?" Duloth said, looking up, not wise enough to feel embarrassed. "I mean...sure. That's just a nice necklace. What is this enterprise you're talking about? And who said we're going to be partners?"

Her thin lips curved into a wan smile. "No one...yet. But I think when you have heard the fullness of my proposal, you will see the astuteness of joining with us."

"Who is 'us,' exactly?" he asked, his padded chair groaning under his weight as he leaned back.

She seated herself and tidied her dress, crossing her hands in her lap.

"My name is Felicity Bigh. I represent a concern known as the Underguild. We are a conglomerate of various monied individuals who have been gifted with a certain degree of business acumen. I am tasked by my overseers with reading the wayward currents of emergent situations that hold the potential for profit. You find yourself riding one of those currents, whether you perceive that or not. We see in your triumph over the Gray Deacons an opportunity; an opportunity to prosper the Wheelwrights Guild and, by the by, prosper ourselves.

"The power demonstrated by your late burgher in forcing the city to grant a holiday in your guild's name — and the corollary message sent to the Deacons — impressed us immensely. It is a pity that he died, but even his death was a signal that your power is waxing. Would your enemies have slain him if the Wheelwrights posed no threat? No, they would not. And we see in you even greater potential than that which resided in your former burgher.

"Yes, yes," she cooed, tapping her closed fan on her lips. "We see much potential in collusion between your guild and ours."

Duloth leaned forward predatorily. "Yeah, we got power — maybe more power than we've shown so far. And with that power, we'll get money. We're the richest guild in the Gate, maybe in all of Akados." The ambitious burgher's eyes were sharp and hungry. He was speaking aloud the secreted desires of his heart.

"And yeah, I got what it takes to get us there. But saying all that, why would we bring you on board? What do you bring to the table?"

The lady Bigh raised a sculpted brow. "What we can 'bring to the table,' as you say, would shake your greediest imaginings. But first, I have a gift for you. It is customary, no? To gift your host?"

Duloth nodded, his eyes straying again to the luminous pendant stone hanging from her elegant neck.

"Yeah, sure. I guess so."

She snapped her long fingers and one of his servants entered carrying a linen-draped box. The burgher signaled for him to place it on his desk. He stood over it, glancing from the gift to his guest.

"Is this safe?" he asked his servant.

"Yes, sir, sure is. We tested it for poison, magic, curses, and whatnot. All clear."

Duloth looked at the box again. "Am I going to like what I see?"

"I think so, sir."

Without ceremony, the burgher whipped off the cover and opened the box. He reached inside and carefully removed its contents.

"Is this...?"

"Yes. We heard you had a liking for the game and thought you might appreciate it."

'It' was a cunningly carved board, octagonal shaped with alternating squares of ivory and jade cut into the rich acacia wood. Duloth set the board on his desk, then reached back

into the container and brought out the game pieces: gold-trimmed, heavy-petaled flowers shaped from shiny obsidian and silver insects, artfully wrought.

“Wasp-and-lotus,” Duloth breathed. “This is the most magnificent set I’ve ever seen. Are you trying to bribe me with it? Do you think it will sway my mind at the bargaining table?”

Felicity’s laughter rang through the room, brightening the shadowy atmosphere.

“By no means, Master Armitage. I mean this as a gift, nothing more. But I am glad that you have bargaining on your mind.”

She rose and pulled her chair nearer the desk, reseated herself, and started tugging off her gloves.

“The Underguild desires certain interests in the Wheelwrights; the Wheelwrights will naturally seek to benefit from the Underguild.” She cracked her knuckles.

“Let us play for it,” she said, and began to set up the game pieces.

Hours later, his head feeling simultaneously boggy and sharp, Duloth Armitage reflected that he had never played a more brilliant campaign of wasp-and-lotus. And that he had never faced a more fearsome opponent.

When his trio of stingers captured her nectar-mother, he’d won from her (and her secretive guild) a one-time pledge of five thousand gold harps when the Wheelwrights gained controlling interest in a certain shipping company in Bard’s Gate. When her silver lotus annexed the southeast board-corner his wasps had been so viciously protecting, she obtained a two-percent stake on every piece of lumber brought into the city for the next five years — a staggering sum. Back and forth, back and forth. Fortunes were won and lost and won again. Favors, money, business, people — all traded hands multiple times. Finally, the game ended, and though his pieces dominated the board, Duloth wasn’t quite sure whether he had been victorious or not.

Felicity Bigh sat back with a long and satisfied sigh.

“That was quite a game, Master Armitage. I believe we have reached several mutually beneficial agreements.”

He thought they had. Actually, he thought he’d gotten the best of her. But he wondered now whether the things he had won from her — and gloated over so gleefully — really held the value he thought they did, or if the truly valuable items were the things he’d given away as rubbish. He may not have gotten the best of the deal after all. It might take years or decades to truly tell.

“Well,” the lady Bigh said, gathering her gloves and rising from her chair, “I must be about other business. This was highly entertaining, though. I’ll send my people around later with the contracts. They will be well-instructed, so please do not try to take advantage of them.”

As she stood, Duloth noticed again the gleaming, green gemstone lying upon her breast. It was a marvel, to be sure.

“Hold on!” he said wearily, trying to gain one more victory. “That jewel at your throat. I want it. What will you take for it?”

“Oh, this?” She grasped the emerald between finger and thumb and held it up to her eyes. “My guild has many wondrous jewels such as this. No, no, it is not for sale; you have to earn this.” The words sounded almost ominous to his overtired ears.

Then with an elegant curtsey, Felicity Bigh took her leave.

THEN

“Was it worth it?” a near-somnolent voice asked Rawling Jawks as he placed the glimmering red-orange jewel in an ancient, iron casket.

“The gem?” The crime boss looked up at his pasty-faced trapmaker, Vaccol. He did not look well; a sheen of sweat showed on his pale forehead, a hint of yellow beginning to show in his rheumy eyes. Jawks briefly considered ordering him to see a cleric before he spread whatever plague he must have recently picked up in the far Moon Fog Hills², but decided it could wait until the morrow after the night’s festivities.

“Was it worth the time and the coin and the lives? I daresay. We are just beginning the research of it, but we already suspect that it came from the hoard of one of the efreet. Just think! This may have adorned the burnished neck of a sultana in the City of Brass! We still haven’t plumbed the depths of its arcane secrets, but I shouldn’t be surprised if this becomes one of our most precious treasures, an heirloom of the Deacons forevermore.”

Gently, almost reverently (though he was incapable of that particular sentiment), Jawks closed the lid of the casket and placed it within a larger oaken chest, shutting and padlocking it all together. He then took the arm of the master of traps and locks and led him upstairs into Slip-Gallows Abbey — the home of the fearsome Gray Deacons and the nest where all their nefarious plots and schemes were hatched — where the celebration of the guild’s new treasure was still underway. When Rawling Jawks finally lay down to sleep, a rare smile graced his hard-bitten face. He dreamed of a pleasant oasis and warm ocean breezes.

Downstairs, gray smoke poured from the chest-within-a-chest. It spewed out from the under-basement and into the abbey above. Every Gray Deacon who inhaled the strange, moistureless mist shrieked in purest agony and suddenly disappeared, as if he had simply ceased to be.

The fog bellowed out of the abbey and across the waters of the river into the city streets, covering the magnificence of Bard’s Gate in its gloomy shadow. The citizens, fearing the worst, fled from its gray embrace, but the haze seeped into every building and palace, every nook and every cranny. The vast majority of the populace experienced nothing but its ominous obscuring presence until it faded with the new dawn’s first rays. Only those who called themselves Gray Deacons died instantly and horribly, their faces etched in terror in their final moments as their seedy souls were sucked out and into the depths of the glimmering gemstone in the basement of the abbey, the work of the Underguild finally made complete.

The barest hint of an opening into the central power structures of the great trade city of Bard’s Gate had begun to appear, though it remained beneath the notice of even the wise and powerful. There was still work to be done by the Underguild, but with the proper guidance and most subtle of manipulations — a whisper in the right ear here, a practiced blade to the correct heart there — it would begin its entry into that underworld hierarchy through a tiny opening; one that, up until moments before, had seemed like nothing more than an abject failure in their bid to gain such a foothold.

Time changes all. For with time, even an exit can become an entrance.

What is time to the Undying?

¹ See *Sword of Air* by Frog God Games for more information on Arcady and Aka Bakar.

² See “One Last Commission” by Jeff Provine in *Tales of the Lost Lands: Tale Pack 6* for details.

MRS. O'NEAL

BY JOHN BENNETT

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“Mrs. O’Neal” gives the backstory behind the moderately infamous Bard’s Gate inn, the Quiet Woman, located in the district of The Hill. The inn is known for its fine-if-modest accommodations and its resident ghost, but most people have no idea of why the ghost haunts the place. The story of the inn’s ghost is not integral to any of the major plots or adventures associated with Bard’s Gate, so allowing players to discover the ghost’s true reason for existence should not interfere with a GM’s campaign.

MRS. O'NEAL

BY JOHN BENNETT



etyr, be a good little thing and see to these, will you?"

The woman wore the latest fashion out of Reme and she was fully aware of it — from the top of her green feathered beret to the tips of her mauve suede slingbacks (last year's to be sure, but her conscious mind couldn't be bothered to register that bit of truth). She didn't even deign to look across the room at the man whom she addressed. To be honest, he was invisible as far as she was concerned — just another cog in the great clockwork machinery of life designed to function silently and efficiently beneath her notice. Functional, she would have thought him, were she ever to think of him at all.

The fellow had barely risen from his knees (where he had been laboriously scrubbing the flagstones to a pearly sheen, elbows deep in the suds of a wooden bucket), before the fine porcelain tea cups fragmented on the floor in explosions of tiny shards. The woman, Eleda St. Rue, had thoughtlessly released both her own cup and the cup of her friend as if the good ostler had been standing right next to her with proffered hands rather than on his knees a dozen feet away. Eleda and her elegant companion walked out the doorway, tittering in high-minded mirth suitable for high-minded folk, without ever hearing the sound of the shattering porcelain or splashing tea. Such things were beneath their notice anyway. A clock ticks; one does not have to listen for it to be so. Their shadows disappeared from the doorway as they continued obliviously out into the sunlight of late afternoon.

"Functional" would have been an apt description for the fellow who had only just regained his feet as the fragile cups reached the end of their short and lackluster flight, however he'd never actually been so-named. For Goodman Petyr Nordin, innkeeper of the Quiet Woman, "stolid" was the more likely descriptor. He had been called stolid before — once. It was perhaps the most colorful adjective to have ever been used in reference to him; he typically incited few adjectives from those who made his acquaintance, or really any kind of comment at all, for that matter. He tended to be rather like a utilitarian rug placed beneath the dinner table: great for catching crumbs but not much of a conversation piece. In terms of the experience of Petyr Nordin himself, however, "stolid" was among the airy heights of poetic praise. And, as was his habit, when he had been graced with the epithet — the one time, some years before — he had accepted it as would be expected: stolidly.

Petyr's bland face barely flinched at the sound of the ruined porcelain. The raspberry tea made a wide red splatter on his freshly gleaming floor, and he could already tell that it was staining the grout and would require hours of scrubbing to remove it. He had a solid jaw without appearing chiseled accompanied by a dusting of straggling whiskers that didn't quite reach the level of stubble; round colorless cheeks just short of jolly; a wide mouth, thin-lipped and not quite generous, but possessed all of his teeth, though just a shade from gleaming; large, light brown eyes that could perhaps best be described as beige, and more prone to watery than soulful; a broad forehead neither smooth nor truly etched with lines of character; and a pate of sandy hair too thick to be balding but too thin to do more than lie apathetically across his scalp. As he continued to look after the now-departed guests, his expression almost darkened to a stormy shade of placid.

The smallest of sighs escaped his wide mirthless maw that would have shocked those who were closest to him — if he had any who were close to him — for its sheer expressiveness, as his glance went from the door to the ruined sheen of his floor and back to the door again, as if wishful thinking might somehow reverse time and erase the incident, returning the world back to its rightful order of unadulterated mundanity.

It, of course, did not.

With his thoughts whirring at their normal strolling pace, he turned back towards his bucket to begin "seeing to" the tea cups as had been requested, only to catch a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. The scrub brush that he had left in the bucket of suds was now rising out of the bucket and presently floating towards the mess, leaving a tiny trail of droplets of soapy water on the floor to mark the path of its flight.

His voice was the barest of whispers. "Why thank you, my dear."

The Quiet Woman was a small-yet-comfortable inn resting at the end of Geddes Row within the Middle Ring of The Hill District. It might not have looked like much, hunched under the shadow of the opulent stone manors preening higher on The Hill, but its appearance was clearly one of pride in quality, and its prices a study in fair value for the middling merchants and lesser notables visiting the City of the Lyre. And for those with the scandalous temerity to outright ask, the inn had a decent sampling of smoking tobaccos as well. The Hill Watch, local guard force for the well-heeled residents of The Hill, kept the worst of the riff-raff away from the Quiet Woman, though, truth be told, the thought of any sort of riff-raff at all desiring the parochial comforts of the Quiet Woman was not one that would have seriously entered the minds of The Hill Watch at all.

No, the Quiet Woman was much like its proprietor: stolid, comfortable, predictable — invisible. In fact, if there was any feature of the inn's boxlike, cream-colored structure that stood out whatsoever, it was the odd sign that hung above the door, swinging slowly in the breeze. Ostler Nordin made sure that the sign's hooks were well greased, so it didn't even enjoy the distinction of so many of its peers of being able to creak — ominously or otherwise — in said breeze. But it wasn't the creaking, or lack thereof, that made the sign the single notable thing about the inn. Rather, it was the image that had been carefully limned upon the sign: the depiction of a buxom serving maiden hoisting an overflowing flagon of ale in each hand — a buxom serving maiden whose neck ended rather grotesquely in a gruesome stump as if decapitated by the vicious stroke of an axe.

Well, perhaps it was disingenuous to say that the strangely out-of-place sign was the most notable thing about the inn, because there was also the ghost, of course. And the ghost had a name: Mrs. O'Neal.

"Maddie, darling, bring that sack of spuds into the kitchen, if you please, so Cook can peel them before they start to sprout," Petyr intoned in his thoroughly uninspiring way. "You know what they say—"

"Yes, Mr. Nordin, I know," the young scullery maid interrupted as she lugged the sack of potatoes past him, blowing a few strands of her red hair out of her face as she went. "'A spud's a sprout that's delicious throughout, but a sprouting spud's a dinner dud.'"

She rolled her eyes as she noticed him silently mouthing the words along with her, the almost-gleeful contentment evident even on his otherwise expressionless face, as if he hadn't said that same thing every day for the last year that she had worked at the Quiet Woman whenever the green grocer dropped off a sack of potatoes. Sometimes she thought she'd rather sprout sprouts from her own ears than have to listen to that maddeningly meaningless homily once more. But the wages at the Quiet Woman were passable — precisely average, in fact — and the ostler was at least good to not pinch the girls' bottoms while they worked, unlike at many of the other inns and taverns around the city.

She suppressed a wry smile at the thought of Petyr Nordin even considering pinching a girl's bottom, much less acting on such a thought. But the smile was smothered and gone before Nordin even noticed. He didn't approve of his hired help 'getting up to all that shenanigans and such.' The smallest of sighs escaped Maddie's lips as she upended the sack over Cook's washing tub. Only three more bells 'til she was done for the day. She hoped she could make it that long without turning a garish shade of off-white and sinking

to the floor to blend in with the rest of the inn's entirely un-noteworthy accoutrements forever and ever — truly a fate worse than all of the Nine Pits stacked end-to-end and stuffed in a barrel of scorpions. She gave a little shudder and kept to her business.

Nordin, of course, had seen none of it, his eyes too busy inspecting the lintel for a stray cobweb that he thought he had seen. But then he suppressed his own chuckle at the notion. *Mrs. O'Neal would never allow such a thing*, he thought to himself.

He was just about to look about for some sign of Mrs. O'Neal dusting, as was her habit at this time of the day, when his laconic search was interrupted by the most unbecoming clamor at the inn's front door. Some sort of monster had just burst in, nearly taking the door off its hinges as it banged against the wall and — he noted miserably — left a small-yet-distinct divot in the plaster, a horrific sight that he knew he would never be able to 'unsee.' The monster crashed into the common room and let out some kind of roar that shook the lamps in their hanging sconces. It appeared to be some species of giant; Nordin admitted to himself that he was not particularly good at telling one type of giant from another. His best guess was some sort of hill or dirt giant (he thought that was the name of one type) based on its garb and disheveled hair — a shock of hair that stood out in all directions from head, cheeks, and chin in the most outrageous shade of orange he could imagine. He quietly consigned his immortal soul to the care of Goodwife Ceres, goddess of the millstone, tightened his grip on the soup ladle he held, and was about to stride forward into battle wondering how The Hill Watch could allow such a beast upon the streets when he stopped cold in his tracks.

Realization dawned on Nordin. The beast's roar was nothing more than a prodigious belch. The reek of death and destruction that suffused his very essence was the smell of sour spirits and unwashed body. And the giant creature of dirt and sweaty thews was the boy, Reginald Holsson (well, not a boy truthfully, for he had reached his eighteenth nameday and truly had the height and girth of a man full grown), the youngest of three sons of Arnuld Holsson, a wealthy and respected merchant from farther up The Hill. Petyr nearly collapsed in terror and anxiety. The Quiet Woman faced its most dire threat yet: it was being invaded by the uncouth son of a man with deep pockets and even deeper influence among the upper echelons of the city.

Petyr knew his doom when he saw it.

Goodman Nordin didn't think his nightmare was *ever* going to end. The Creature (Young Holsson) had been slumped in a chair at one of the Quiet Woman's tables for — well, for an *hour* at least. He just kept ordering ale after ale. And he had his big muddy boots propped up in one of Nordin's chairs, *and was ruining its seat cushion!* What's more Reginald had a moldering old map, and odds and ends of dirty equipment that he called "adventuring gear" spread out on the table holding the map edges down. It seemed the cretin had come of age this very week and had chosen to take up the life of an adventuring hero after the purchase of a highly suspect 'treasure map' in one of the low markets of the city. He had immediately christened the Quiet Woman as his base of operations and had hastily prepared summonses for all his uncouth friends to join him in this new endeavor.

Petyr was beside himself. Reginald's house stood only three blocks away, so his parents *had* to know his whereabouts. And likely because he was no farther away than the Quiet Woman, they felt confident in letting him blow off this youthful exuberance without feeling the need to fetch him back home. What matter was it to them if the Quiet Woman came down around Petyr Nordin's very ears; it was just another inn and eatery. But to Petyr it was his home; his life. He considered then, after long thought on the matter, that he had come very near to crying. On further consideration, he agreed with his initial assessment; his eyes did indeed approach a condition of tearing up. Not that he'd ever really experienced that particular sensation (he had long abstained from what he considered to be wild and risqué activities such as displays of emotion), but this was certainly the closest he'd ever come. It so filled him with pent-up loathing that, on one call for a refill of ale, he didn't

even quite top off the mug. And he left an extra-large head of foam on it, in hopes that the oaf would pick up on the innkeeper's blatant display of derision. Why, he almost didn't even hand deliver all of the mountainous clod's handwritten summonses all over The Hill (and poorly handwritten at that; his syntax was truly atrocious!).

Almost.

Yet, despite his inner fuming, Petyr found himself spending the better part of two hours under the summer sun, sweating through his pristine white linen shirt as he personally delivered each of the notes as requested. A patron of his establishment was still a patron of his establishment. Certain forms must be followed. It was only proper, after all. However, he had given serious thought to *not* doing his best at it.

By nightfall Petyr was exhausted, and all he could think of was his perfectly adequate, narrow bed and its thin mattress. What luxury it would be to rest his weary bones upon those hard planks! But though it was Petyr who was exhausted from the day's labors, it was Reginald Holsson who had to be half-carried up the stairs to his room — the largest in the inn, of course — and helped into his massive bed with its goose down mattress. He had apparently exhausted himself in poring over the enigmatic map while simultaneously quaffing copious amounts of ale. His exhaustion was so complete, in fact, that great rumbling snores were escaping from his gaping mouth, jaw slack in full stupor, before Petyr had even finished wrestling the boy's boots off. The stockings he wore beneath had clearly not seen a laundress in several days, and their sharp, pungent odor almost made Master Nordin swoon. However, so great was the proprietor's own exhaustion that not even the reek of the prolifically unwashed could prevent him from sinking into a comfortable chair near the foot of the bed — just for a moment — to catch his breath.

Petyr thought perhaps he had nodded off, because when next he became aware, he had the feeling of the passage of some considerable time upon him. The room was still dark, and Reginald lay sprawled exactly as he had been: unmoving, snoring as if all the hounds of Hell had been caught in a rain barrel. Petyr Nordin was just about to rise from the chair and make his way down to his own bed when something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he took in a sight that his sleep-addled mind couldn't quite fathom: a ghostly apparition standing silently at the foot of the bed — not three feet from Petyr's own chair — staring intently at the sleeping youth. The phantom's expression was unreadable as her gaze lingered upon the enormous lad.

Goodman Nordin had seen Mrs. O'Neal any number of times — more so than any other living being, he suspected. Yet she was always going about her business of tidying or straightening or cleaning up the inn. Truth be told, she was a most welcome resident of the Quiet Woman, with all of the help she provided free of charge. But never had Petyr seen her so much as take notice of another person — guest and staff alike — much less stand and stare with intense focus, as she did now. And Nordin couldn't shake the suspicion that she'd been doing so for some time as he dozed in the chair not an arm's length away, blissfully unaware.

Nordin considered it odd, but did not feel any fear. Mrs. O'Neal was a part of the inn, a part of him even. He had never thought for a moment that she might harm him. Yet now as she stood and laid that unblinking gaze upon young Holsson, Nordin couldn't help but feel the cold clutch of fear at his heart. What if Mrs. O'Neal intended harm to Reginald Holsson? What if her gaze was merely the superficial manifestation of a lurking malignancy long-buried and awaiting only the right moment to arise and lay waste to its victims?

What if she called Reginald Holsson in his inn?

What if that horrid creature arose as a ghost as well and chose to haunt the inn with his own unbearable presence??

What if the Holssons found out and gave an unfavorable review of the inn to one of the local broadsheets?!?

Petyr Nordin couldn't bear the thought of the agony and steeled his resolve. If it was a matter of him being the only thing that stood between his inn and a substandard rating of the Quiet Woman, then he'd just have to play for keeps himself. Summoning his nerve and banishing his weariness, Nordin sat back in the chair and focused his eyes on Mrs. O'Neal

with the same intensity that she invested upon young Holsson. Just as expressionless as the spirit he intently watched, Petyr thought to himself with grim determination, “Alright then, ghost, we’ll see who blinks first.”

When Goodman Nordin awoke, it was the early hours of the morning. Young Reginald still snored away, apparently none the worse for Petyr’s lack of vigilance (for which he chided himself), and there was no sign of Mrs. O’Neal. At some point during the innkeeper’s involuntary repose, the phantasm had departed unheeded. Petyr himself, figuring that all was well that didn’t involve a ghost hovering malevolently nearby, retired to his own room. Sleep did not find him again that night, and the early light of dawn peeking between his shutters found him still passing time in his slow, solemn thoughts.

Petyr Nordin had spent the night reviewing what he actually knew about his most famous employee, and the conclusion that he had come to was “not much.” The fact that he had a ghost of unknown provenience and questionable motive on premises had never bothered him in the past, but he was nonplussed no more. In fact, he thought perhaps that he was downright plussed. What if this malevolent apparition had meant ill for himself or his guests? What if her helpfulness had been a ruse all along to lull him into decades of complacency for just the right moment to—

To what?

Upon further reflection, he truly had no idea. He couldn’t attest that the expression on the ghostly maiden’s face as she watched Reginald Holsson sleep was one of malevolence at all. It was surely a look of intense focus and concentration, but there was no telltale sneer or grimace, nothing to indicate that she was about to let loose with some deadly howl or blood-chilling attack as ghost stories so often told. But there had to be something. Mrs O’Neal had certainly never behaved in this way before.

Master Nordin took the time to freshen himself and change into a spotless white shirt. He even attempted to plaster his lackluster hair across his pink pate, before emerging from his chamber. A quick look at the large clock on the mantle of the common room (a complex monstrosity brought at great expense all the way from Castorhage), told him exactly where to go. While he may not have known everything about Mrs. O’Neal, he knew exactly where to find her. She was a spirit of routine, if nothing else, which had always made him assume she had been in the innkeeping business during her own lifetime.

Petyr Nordin had come into possession of the Quiet Woman rather unexpectedly in his eighteenth year when his father, always a quiet and unassuming man, had died suddenly in his sleep. The fact that his sleep had been in the bed of a cheap doxy of Turlin’s Well had been a bit startling. However, Petyr reflected, his da had always been a good innkeeper, seeing to his regular guests sometimes even on occasions when they weren’t staying at the inn. One-Eyed Cate had been a semi-frequent visitor to the Quiet Woman over the years, usually when his mum was away with relatives in Taverlan. Petyr ordinarily never actually saw her come in, but the one time he did it was when his da was letting her in through the back kitchen door after dark.

Jonys Nordin had nearly jumped out of his shoes when Petyr opened the door from the hallway. His da then hastily explained how a cat in the alleyway had startled him just before Petyr had entered. Miss Cate had just frozen and stared at him in silence, with eye wide, while Jonys talked. Petyr’s da made hasty introductions and explained to Petyr that Miss Cate was a guest of the inn and how she had volunteered to help with cleaning and other duties while his mother was away and that was that; there was no reason to discuss it further or mention it to his mum, and shouldn’t he ought to be in bed already? Petyr obediently went to his room but could hear Miss Cate helping his da late into the night — it sounded like they were rearranging furniture in the big bedroom upstairs. And come to

think of it, he had remembered the sounds of moving furniture on many nights when his mum had been absent. He assumed she must have left poor old da quite a to-do list that kept him hopping for as long as she was gone.

When they put his da in the ground in the City of Ashes, Miss Cate had been in the small crowd — at the back in a deeply hooded cloak — and had never lifted her gaze or made eye contact. Petyr had wondered if his mum even knew that da's helper had showed up.

When the funeral was over and everyone had departed from the fresh grave, his mum had taken Petyr's face in her hands and said, "Boy, you're the spittin' image of your father, and gods help ya for it, though you've only half his spirit — which is likely too much by half again. But you've a good heart, which is more than can be said of most a' his kin."

Honestly, Petyr had trouble following most of what she'd said. She'd never exactly been close to her only child, and her dry-eyed gaze lingered on the distant horizon as she spoke, rather than meeting his own eyes.

"If there's a place for ya in this world, it's the likes of the Quiet Woman for sure. I'm leaving it all to ya, boy. I never cared much for that place nor its ghost, creepin' aroun' an' such at all hours. I've had a talk with one of the seers out ta' the Tent City an' she said the omens read that I'm to head home ta find my true callin' 'mongst kith and kin. So I'm leavin' ya here.

"You're eighteen now, and man grown enough to be on your own. You can come ta visit me some if ya wish. Just make sure ta send a post first, so I know your comin' ahead a' time. You be a good boy now an' go fetch my bags from home so I can be on my way."

Petyr had walked all the way back to the inn before he'd realized that she'd had her bags with her at the funeral. He rolled his eyes and thought mirthfully to himself, *Oh, Mum, you'd forget your head if it wasn't attached at the collar*, then went inside.

Petyr never saw his mother again. The needs of running an inn had proven too demanding for flights of fancy out to the country. The bannisters weren't going to do a monthly scrape and re-polish of themselves after all. He still thought fondly of his mum, though, and supposed he probably ought to head up to Taverlan sometime soon and see what good fortune the gypsy had foretold for her up that way.

Petyr found Mrs. O'Neal where he had expected; she was in the scullery sorting linens to be washed. Nordin had never troubled himself to figure out a routine for the sightings of the phantom, like so many guests had over the years, but his father had bought the inn when his son was only seven, so Petyr had spent the better part of four decades living with her and had come to know her habits. She principally busied herself with tasks such as sweeping out the rushes in the kitchen, washing linens, collecting dirty dishes for the wash tub, and (thankfully) helping with the account ledgers. Petyr had never had much of a head for numbers — his mum had said it was too stuffed with cotton wool for such high-minded things — and Mrs. O'Neal was much better at keeping the columns straight.

When his family had first come to own the inn, it was already called the Quiet Woman, with its macabre sign and well-known ghost. He'd asked his da about it, but the elder man had only rolled his eyes and gone back to talking to the pretty, young delivery girl who had brought a basket of fresh peaches from the market. It sounded like he was offering her a job but Petyr could not make out all the details. He went to ask his mum and found her sitting in her new room with a half-empty rum bottle in her lap. She had seemed really tired, so he hadn't been able to get much out of her either. So, just like that, he came to live with a ghost who seemed kind and was never scary, and he had never really given it another thought.

Now he looked at her again, as if for the first time, as she stacked the white linen tablecloths separate from the beige silk sheets of the good rooms, and the rough homespun linens of the common rooms. He observed Mrs. O'Neal in this state for some time. The elegant ghost stood nearly unmoving, the hem of her long dress caught in an ethereal breeze not of this world. A thick scarf hung about her neck. Petyr Nordin had never had much of an imagination, but even he presumed a connection between the Quiet Woman's

rather graphic placard above the door and the heavy scarf that Mrs. O'Neal wore. He always rather assumed that the scarf must conceal the ghastly wound that led to her mortal demise. Truth be told, he thought to himself, he had never been entirely sure that she and the poor woman depicted on the sign were one and the same. That had always been the general consensus, but he supposed it was difficult to make a positive identification of someone who lacked a positively identifiable feature — such as a head.

Shortly after assuming ownership of the Quiet Woman, Ostler Nordin had asked around and learned only that the inn's original owner had built it some decades before and had given it its name as well as christened the ghost that apparently came to haunt it shortly thereafter. Who or what Mrs. O'Neal was in life and why she had her head relocated was anyone's guess. That original owner, Polwin Aster, had left the city for whereabouts unknown some years later after selling the Quiet Woman to the owner before Petyr's own father. Apparently that second owner had used the moderate notoriety of owning a haunted inn for the purposes of obtaining the wine, women, and song that he thought such fame would bring him. His proclivities had led to him drinking himself to death and dying in a gutter. With no known family and no will, the inn had reverted ownership to the city which is how Jonys Nordin had bought it on the cheap at a municipal auction. And there the trail had died; with no further leads, Petyr had ceased looking into the matter. Nor had he really even thought about it again...until now.

Nordin watched the apparition for a few moments longer as she went about her task before leaving her to it with a heavy sigh. Perhaps he had imagined everything the night before, or it was just a bad dream induced by the invasion of that lout the prior evening.

That lout!

Petyr hadn't even thought about Reginald Holsson since the night before, and he knew he had not heard his guest's raucous cacophony in the common room yet this morning. Was it possible something bad had happened during the night after Petyr had left Holsson's room?

Petyr rushed up the stairs. The door to the invader's room stood closed, and all was silent from within — no sounds of movement, no snoring like the sound of church bells rolled down from Hill Top. He knocked timidly and waited a moment with no reply before letting himself inside. What he found was horrifying: the dirt giant was gone, but evidence of his stay was everywhere, from the gear and clothing strewn carelessly around the room to the muddied sheets, stained from where his great boots had been on the bed.

The dirty linens were still on the bed. Petyr hurriedly rushed down the hall from room to room. All of the inn's guests were either down in the common room enjoying a late breakfast or had gone out for the day, and none of their beds had been stripped for washing. The linens that Mrs. O'Neal had been sorting must have been from yesterday, which meant she hadn't washed the linens last night either!

Panic built up in Petyr's usually unflappable breast as he rushed down the stairs to the back rooms of the inn. Opening his office door, he looked down at his desk where the ledger lay open as he had left it. Records of the previous day's receipts and expenses lay in a neat pile next to it, alongside a quill and jar of ink. Everything was undisturbed, which meant Mrs. O'Neal hadn't balanced the ledger, the task she had always done first thing in the morning *every* morning for as long as Petyr had owned the inn.

The world had gone mad!

Maddie looked up from the table she was wiping down and looked towards the back rooms just as Cook poked her head out of the kitchen to look down the back hallway as well. They made eye contact briefly before Cook ducked back into the kitchen and Maddie went back to wiping. She'd never heard Master Nordin scream before.

The evening hour found Petyr at the High Sanctum of the Scroll, temple to the God of Glyphs and Writing, on the other side of the river — the 'wrong side of the river' as he thought of it. He had come seeking answers: who Mrs. O'Neal was; what her interest in Reginald Holsson might be; and how to stop her if she decided her days of benign haunting were over and she felt

the need to take a more harmful approach to the Quiet Woman's guests. He hadn't wanted the phantom to know that anything was amiss, so he had made sure to give her plenty to do while he was gone. He set about updating the ledgers and made such a hash of it on purpose that he wasn't sure he could even set it aright. When (or if) Mrs. O'Neal took a good look at that mess, he thought it would buy him at least a couple hours to take care of his business.

After making a modest donation and promising to display pamphlets promoting Yenomesh's services at the inn, Petyr was able to converse at length with a wizened old priest, deaf in one ear and eyes rheumy with age. Unfortunately, he did not learn any tricks or come away with charms to use against a ghostly housekeeper suddenly turned hostile, but he did learn something important. The old man told him that ghosts like Mrs. O'Neal lingered on in the world because of some strong desire or emotion. It could be a task unfinished, a strong attachment to a particular place, or an incident so traumatically scarring they were unable to leave this world. The key, then, to unraveling any potential problem with Mrs. O'Neal, the priest said (between bouts of phlegmy coughing), was to discover what Mrs. O'Neal wanted.

When Nordin reached the Quiet Woman, Reginald had not yet returned to the inn and Mrs. O'Neal seemed to be about her chores as usual again, a relief that allowed him the small luxury of using his spotless sleeve to wipe away the sweat that had beaded on his forehead. He was more than moderately pleased to find that Mrs. O'Neal had carefully corrected the ledger columns and put everything in order with the accounts. He knew that she'd be busy for some time yet dusting the furniture in the upstairs halls, so he set about the task he had decided upon as he had walked back from the temple.

Though he did not know where Mrs. O'Neal's spirit disappeared to when it wasn't about its rounds in the inn, Petyr had noticed that she seemed to favor visiting a small room in the back of the inn, just down the hallway from where he kept his own quarters. He supposed this made a sort of sense; if Mrs. O'Neal was a former innkeeper or maid, she might have quartered herself in this modest spare guest room. Particularly around the time of evening meals, and at night after all the guests' needs were attended to, Mrs. O'Neal would often depart to this room and vanish.

Hoping to chance upon a clue, he investigated the room while Mrs. O'Neal was otherwise engaged about the inn. Again, he realized his ignorance of the ethereal housekeeper as he searched. Since the small, quaint room hardly ever saw use, he had never really spent any time there except to air it out on occasion and shoo the dust sprites out from under its single, narrow bed.

In addition to the bed, the room contained an antique painted wardrobe depicting scenes of the goddess, Muir, and a rickety writing desk with a cracked mirror on a stand. Modest, sparse, simple, but enough. The perfect room for a man of Ostler Nordin's sensibilities, really. He carefully went through the closet and desk, finding both to be empty. He peered under the bed and made a mental note that he needed to sweep under it again soon. No portraits hung on the walls to provide hints at the ghost's past, and all and all it had the feel of a fruitless endeavor. He paused long to consider whether the turnips or the squash would be served better with tomorrow's broth before finally reaching a decision to revisit the debate later and turned to leave the room.

As he started to depart, his shoe caught hard on the edge of a flagstone, causing him to stumble and careen into the closet. Silently invoking the city's gods in order from most to least popular in the most perturbed fashion he could muster, he gathered himself and looked down at the offending stone to estimate what it would cost to have it mortared back in place. However, the edge of his shoe had caught it securely enough to raise the edge of the flat slate and reveal a small hollow beneath — a hollow that just caught the last of the sun's rays as they peaked through the chamber's shutters and glinted radiantly off a golden object below. Catching his breath and wondering at the nearly unfamiliar bout of excitement he was feeling, Petyr reached down under the stone, groping until he had found the gleaming object and pulled it out.

It was a gold heart-shaped locket, broken at its clasp on the left side. No etchings or initials graced the locket but it did contain a cameo portrait of a young woman. The

exquisitely detailed rendering of the woman in such a small locket seemed almost magical to Petyr, who touched it a time or two just to make sure it wasn't some trick of illusion. It was almost as if a larger portrait had been compressed down to fit inside this bauble. Squinting closely at the locket, he realized the woman's facial features were virtually identical to those of Mrs. O'Neal! Was this, then, her? It was hard for him to say. It was obviously at least a close match, but then her present phantasmal state did not exactly provide crystal clear details.

Pondering a moment in reflection, Petyr ran the dish towel he carried across his brow to wipe the sweat beading up from his concentration before unconsciously rubbing it over the locket to polish away the fingerprint smudges he had left. After a few moments he came to a decision. He tucked the locket into his pocket and replaced the flagstone before leaving the room. Goodman Nordin desperately hoped that Mrs. O'Neal would not discover the locket missing, if such a discovery was even possible for a ghost. Mrs. O'Neal did seem to be more than some mindless phantom, though. It was most concerning. Most concerning indeed.

As evening approached, Petyr Nordin made a most uncharacteristic move: he came up with a plan. Not a plan like for hosting a banquet or coordinating multiple deliveries to the inn, but a real plan involving words he had heard before in the penny dreadfuls that he refused to read or allow his staff to read — words like “subterfuge” and “misdirection.” He actually had to poke himself a few times to make sure there wasn't some sort of illusion magic involved. He looked at the shoulder satchel that he carried, with its sheaves of paper both carefully and carelessly arranged — carelessly because they looked like a jumble of crumpled pages stuffed hurriedly into the satchel; carefully because they purposely looked like that in order to conceal the real contents beneath. He felt downright transcendent as he made his way a few blocks higher on The Hill, and wondered for a moment who he even was anymore. Had Mrs. O'Neal's phantom somehow gained possession of his wits and sent him about on errands of tomfoolery and embarrassing confrontations? He had heard they could do that; his mum had told him as much. Ghosts and faeries both could do that sort of thing. He wrinkled the edge of the apron that he had neglected to remove nervously in his hands as he walked.

He reached the grand old home of the Holssons and nearly lost his nerve as he approached the front door. However, at the thought of the locket in his pocket he steeled himself and pulled the bell chain. In short order the door was answered by an elegantly dressed manservant. He gave Nordin one long look up and down and said, “The caterers aren't expected until tomorrow,” before starting to close the door.

Sweat had already sprung out atop Petyr's balding pate, both from the exertion of the uphill walk with his heavy shoulder bag and with the incredulous nerves he felt at the audacity of what he was about to do. Reaching beneath the papers in his bag, he pulled forth a bottle of smoked glass — a 12-year-old Vinewood Cabernet from his own wine cellar — and held it where the doorman could see it.

“Yes, well, ahem, yes,” he stammered. Petyr hadn't thought through a lot of the details he'd need to get in. In his mind he had pictured some barbaric door guard armed to the teeth and only too ready to be bribed by a fine bottle of wine. *That was what barbarian door guards did*, he thought, *bash heads and get drunk*. This doorman didn't look very barbaric, but Petyr had no illusions about who could bash in whose head here. With no obvious drunken lout to bribe (why had he assumed that the family of a disheveled ne'er-do-well like Reginald Holsson would hire guards of the same temperament?), he was at a loss until an idea suddenly occurred to him. The doorman had given him his cover story. Petyr almost stuttered over the smoothness of the lie.

“Yes, of course, my good sir. But there was the matter of the wines they wished to select. I told them I'd bring a sample or two, but it appears that I've carried too much. I don't suppose you could dispose of this bottle here for me. I don't want to look the fool by bringing in too many for a simple tasting.”

The doorman didn't need even that much encouragement and was already reaching for the bottle before Petyr had even finished. He made it disappear up the sleeve of his overcoat so quickly Petyr would have almost believed he had used a spell of some sort.

"I'll announce you at once, Mister..."

"Nordin. Goodman Nordin of the Quiet Woman."

The doorman allowed Petyr to wait in the foyer while he went to find the masters of the house. He soon returned and ushered Petyr into a parlor where the aged Arnuld Holsson and his wife, Aginus, awaited him with matching scowls upon their faces. His arrival preceded that of the house's major domo by only seconds, and this newly arrived elderly gentleman had a look of suspicion upon his lined face that made those of the master and mistress appear outright benign.

"So, Nordin is it?" the elder Holsson began.

Petyr could definitely detect the resemblance with Reginald, though Arnuld's hair and beard were white and neatly kept, whereas his son's orange shock looked as if a harpy had had a seizure in it. Also, the younger Holsson's features were coarser, the facial bones heavier, as if they harkened back to an older day when the blood of the savage Northlanders flowed undiluted in their veins.

"Um, yes, Sir," Petyr began meekly.

"What have you done with my son?" Arnuld Holsson demanded. "I understand he's being held captive in your inn like some kind of drunken commoner."

"Give me back my boy!" Aginus's scream was as shrill as it was disingenuous.

Petyr suddenly realized that this was a show they were putting on, likely for the benefit of the house staff. They meant to use him as a scapegoat for the delinquency of their shiftless spawn. The outrage fueled Petyr's courage. He had thought that they might try something like this, so it decided his course of action for him.

"I?" Petyr positively sputtered, his face flushing to a healthy shade of pink that it had not seen since his youth. "What have I done? What has your son done, I think you mean!"

Petyr grabbed a handful of the pages from the top in his satchel. They were nothing more than mundane shopping lists and delivery invoices, but the Holssons didn't know that.

"Maybe you'd like to have a look at these," he spit vehemently at them. "These are the bills for repairs to my establishment that your son is accruing with his boorish ways: smashing my dishes with his clumsy fingers, breaking my furniture with his giant oafish feet, costing me custom as his late-night, drunken roaring drives away my other guests. He's like a dirt giant in a nunnery!" (Petyr was actually rather proud of that one.) "And that's to say nothing of the charges! For his room, for his food, for his DRINK! And of course that for his entire tribe of oafish friends that he insists on putting up and charging to his tab. Who exactly is going to pay for these, I wonder? That paltry little purse of puerile gold pennies that he's purveying," — Petyr thought he was really warming to the charade — "won't cover the cost of the elven crystal he's shattered much less all of the rest. And the whores! Don't get me started on the tramps that have been tramping about, trampling my rugs with their tramp, tramping...tramps." (He was new at this sort of thing and really didn't know when to stop, you see.)

But, Petyr had clearly hit a sore spot and suspected that his description of Reginald's behavior (as hyperbolic as it had been) had not missed the mark by much as far as their own regarding their ill-mannered offspring. Mrs. Holsson stood white faced, mouth agape and silently gasping. Mr. Holsson, for his part, immediately regained his composure and said only a curt, "Leave us," at which point the doorman and major domo swiftly made themselves scarce.

"I see how it is, then, Nordin," Arnuld Holsson said. "You intend to blackmail us with disparaging reports of our son's behavior. I'll have you know—"

"I have no need to make reports, disparaging or otherwise, Mr. Holsson," Petyr quickly interrupted, positively giddy with the temerity. "Your *son* is making all of the reports that should ever be required to anyone and everyone who bothers to so much as walk past the Quiet Woman...at any hour."

The promised embarrassment seemed to take the wind out of the elder Holsson's sails a bit. "Your bills will be paid, Master Nordin. I assure you that Reginald will not leave your establishment with his house indebted to you. I could buy and sell your little inn a dozen times over. You need not worry about or plan on having any financial claim to hold over my head."

For the first time in his entire painstakingly bland life, Petyr had the urge to press his luck. It had just occurred to him that he could perhaps kill two birds with one stone here — a thing he had always considered to be wasteful of both birds and stones. Likewise for the first time in his life, Petyr did something that would never have even been conceivable to him (he'd never even made a change to the dinner menu without a contingency plan): he jumped in with both feet.

"I'm afraid that won't be good enough, Mr. Holsson. I have no interest in your money, beyond what is fairly owed for the many costs your son has incurred and for which, I assure, I have maintained a most careful record." It suddenly occurred to Petyr that he might be pressing his luck too far and fervently prayed to every god of the city whose name started with a 'T' that Mr. Holsson wouldn't demand to see the alleged receipts that he claimed to carry. Such a revelation as nothing more than the pricing of turnips and estimates of butter usage would surely destroy his ruse. But Thyr's justice and Tykee's luck and Telophus's... whatever a god of crops and seasons might contribute to the situation held true, and Arnuld made no challenge against the purported evidence.

"In fact, what I most desire is in regards to your son, as in, to be gone from my inn, post haste."

Holsson was livid. "You dare to presume to tell me that a Holsson isn't free to walk into any place of business in this city at any time that he pleases! Do you believe yourself to be of the aristocracy, sir? I've half a mind to send a runner to the Guild of Innkeepers to have your membership rescinded," he sputtered.

"It's after hours, Master Holsson, and the guildhall is closed. And good luck finding the whereabouts of Burgher Gunderson at this time of day. You know as well as I that he'll have holed up at one of his haunts to lay low from the tax assessors until morning. But that is not my point at all. As you say; Bard's Gate is a free city. You and your progeny are free to patronize any place of business that you choose. Never would I try to illegally prohibit a member of one of the high families of the city from exercising their lawful right to transact business within its walls. No indeed; I'm merely saying that perhaps tomorrow I'll offer free beer and wine to all comers in honor of my great aunt's nameday. I expect that'll bring plenty of eyes and ears to witness the...the...shenanigans that the future master of House Holsson is about. That ought to do the trick, don't you think? Hmmm?"

"Very well, Nordin. You've made your point. My family has never liked you and your inn with its ridiculous sign—"

"It's depraved is what it is!" Aginus interjected here.

"Peace now, Mother," Arnuld spoke to his mortified wife, causing her gaping mouth to suddenly and finally shut with a click of her teeth. "You'll only make things worse.

"As I was saying, Nordin, your point is made. You'll have your charges paid as soon as I have a fully itemized invoice of all expenses as well as proof of any damages claimed. And I'll have my son out of your damnable inn by nightfall tomorrow. But what I *won't* do is have your plebian hide under the roof of my house for one instant longer. Gregoire!"

It was the major domo who responded this time, rather than the doorman. His scowling face escorted Petyr from the room without the need of a word being said, the sound of Aginus Holsson's sobbing coming from the room behind him along with the soothing rumbles of Arnuld's voice.

As they walked the hall towards the front door and Petyr noticed that the foyer was deserted at this late hour, he saw Gregoire make a sidelong look of appraisal at him.

"I don't believe Master Holsson has had to listen to someone speak to him in that way in many a year. And it's about time someone stood up to him about that boy," he added, still without making eye contact.

Petyr took this for the opening he was hoping for and pressed ahead with his half-formed plan.

"Well, I suppose it was a waste of time for me to bring along this bottle," he said as he drew the second bottle of 3505 Vinewood from its place hidden beneath the jumble of papers in his bag. "I had thought we might be able to discuss the matter over a fine cabernet like civilized folk until he started with the accusations of me absconding with his son. Oh well, it can go back on the wine rack.

"I'm sure it'll keep," he added with a wink.

"No need to be so hasty, now," Gregoire quickly interjected. "The night is not too old for civilized talk."

"I...I suppose not," Petyr replied, admirably feigning a bit of uncertainty.

Looking around to make sure no one was in sight, Gregoire produced a key from the pocket of his coat and unlocked a small wooden door exiting from the side of the foyer. A trip down a short, twisting flight of steps brought him and Petyr into a warming room just off the kitchen. Here, at high wooden table with comfortably worn chairs, amid shelves of dry goods and cooling racks, Petyr and the major domo cracked the libation open and got down to civilized talk. It took more than he had expected, requiring Petyr to produce a flask of Stoneheart Extra Reserve from the very bottom of his satchel, but when he left more than an hour later he had the information that he'd been looking for.

Petyr considered what he had learned from Gregoire the major domo. There was a connection between the Holssons and the Quiet Woman, though an old one, but he was sure it was the missing link he had been looking for. It also made him nervously quicken his pace down The Hill, because he felt he had reason to fear that Mrs. O'Neal might just be planning to harm — or even kill — the Holsson scion, something that would undoubtedly prove to be bad for business...bad for business indeed!

Upon arriving back at the Quiet Woman, his fears seemed well-founded as he beheld the sight of four rough-looking cads fleeing out the front door in sheer terror and trailing blood behind them. Hurrying inside, he found one of the serving girls attending to Reginald, who rested at the foot of the stairway with a dozen kitchen knives and pewter mugs scattered around him. One of which appeared to have brained him, judging by the welt rising on his forehead, which was being delicately dabbed with a clean cloth by the server. Myriad other small cuts and bruises marked his arms and legs.

"Maddie, let him up this instant," Petyr snapped. Though she was ostensibly tending to his injuries, he could tell that the young man was conscious and aware but that the girl had managed to pin him in place by tactical positioning of her hovering face and body. She was practically cooing to him like a child, the enamored look clear in her eyes.

Petyr quickly shooed her squawking back to the kitchen. The lad seemed to be largely unharmed other than a few superficial nicks and scratches in addition to the goose egg forming on his forehead, so Petyr obtained a fresh steak from the ice box to press to the bruise and helped him up to his room where he plied him with generous libation to appease his wounded pride. Then, from talking to the soon-snoring Reginald and members of his staff who had been present, the innkeeper was able to piece together what had occurred.

Apparently the four men had arrived only moments before Petyr himself. They had brandished saps and padded clubs and cornered Reginald in the common room with their weapons bared. They were about to move in on the lad when, out of nowhere, knives and mugs began flying violently about, repeatedly striking the ruffians again and again. The thugs quickly scattered as they found themselves beset on all sides by unseen forces, and though they had managed to lay a few blows upon the lad — explaining the actual source of the welt on his forehead — the relentless assault of flying dishware and kitchen implements proved too much for them and they had retreated in panicked disarray.

A few of the guests and staff nodded knowingly as the various witnesses told their stories to Petyr. All were well aware of the Ghost of the Quiet Woman and knew the handiwork of a haunting specter when they saw it, but one niggling detail just wouldn't sit right in the back of Petyr's mind. While he was in Reginald's room talking to him, the young man had told him that he had recognized all four of the men as street toughs who had sometimes been hired by his father. He assumed that his parents had hired them to bring him home. That seemed likely enough after Petyr's recent conversation with Arnuld Holsson, but it didn't explain why Mrs. O'Neal had attacked them and only them.

Petyr sat up late that night thinking. He sat in a chair outside the door to Reginald Holsson's room and could hear the young ruffian blissfully snoring within. Petyr had even unlocked the door with his master key so that he could keep an eye on him and make sure no harm befell him. During the small hours, Mrs. O'Neal did appear for a time and observe the young Holsson. Petyr tensed, ready to rush in — yelling at the top of his lungs if need be — to save him from a ghostly attack, but she remained only for a few moments before slowly fading away again.

He reviewed the information he had gotten from Gregoire one more time. It was not exactly the connection he had suspected but seemed to fit close enough. A few generations back, not long after the Holssons established themselves in Bard's Gate from their Northlands origin, a prominent client from the North had come to visit the house patriarch, Yardo Holsson, and had stayed at a nearby inn. The Quiet Woman, under a different name, seemed to fit the timeline well. While there, this visitor became infatuated with the housekeeper. Unfortunately for the nameless client, the housekeeper was promised to another — some sort of magician-adventurer who frequented the inn whenever he was in the city between heroic escapades. One drunken night, after again having the housekeeper spurn his advances, the visitor allegedly came at the housekeeper with his axe — a favorite of the Northmen, Petyr supposed. He was said to have murdered the housekeeper by striking off her head from her shoulders. The murderer quickly left town and the Holssons seemed to have thrown enough money around the notoriously corrupt city government at the time to hush up the whole incident and protect their client. They even managed to get the magician-adventurer charged with the murder and banned from the city so he wouldn't be able to return to exact vengeance.

Gregoire, well into his cups by that time, had thought the whole thing positively scandalous and titillating, but Petyr Nordin, thinking of his quiet housekeeper, cruelly murdered, thought it less so. The more he thought about it, the greater his anger grew. Anger at the big oaf who barged into his inn and disrupted his life. Anger at being so easily dismissed by the oaf's rich parents. Anger at the power that money could give a corrupt family who still avoided justice for the transgressions of their kin. Petyr found himself shaking with the pent-up emotion. He couldn't remember ever having shaken like that before.

First light found Goodman Nordin once again at the temple of Yenomesh. Another donation to the poor box had him in their archives, poring over records with a young acolyte holding a candle and assisting him. Now that he had a time frame along with a family name, it was much easier to narrow down the search.

Of course, the Holsson's cover-up was not reported, but the story of a woman's decapitated body found in the Thieves' Quarter was. The magician-adventurer, named as a one Evric Kellidon — or Evric the Ember Mage — was blamed for the murder, presumed to be over an illicit affair with the victim, Sharleena O'Neal. So not only was Mrs. O'Neal murdered, but slandered in death. However, the records traced the inn employing Sharleena not to the Quiet Woman, but the Inn of Six Candles, a prominent and expensive establishment within the Market District. It made sense that the Holsson's affluent guest was staying there, and no doubt its greed-driven innkeepers conspired with the Holssons to cover up the murder once adequate gold had crossed their palms. Nothing like a brutal killing to drive away business, so why not cover it up and turn a tidy profit at the same time. All it cost was one young housekeeper.

The Yenomeshi acolyte helpfully made a query over the sudden tremor that seemed to have seized Goodman Nordin's hands as he grasped the old record, and Petyr responded by helpfully telling the young acolyte where he could deposit that query for storage, in a most un-Goodman-Nordin-like way. Petyr didn't care. He was closing in on the murderer of Mrs. O'Neal. He could feel it.

Arriving back at the Quiet Woman an hour later, Petyr's mind and emotions were awlirl, and the tremor had spread from both of his hands to his body as well. He felt angry over the gross injustice perpetuated on Sharleena O'Neal and the knowledge that the guilty parties were long dead and their descendants had long since profited from it. He felt pity for hardworking Sharleena, now trapped in the world as a forlorn ghost, consigned to working in an inn that promoted itself with a cruel mockery of the crime perpetrated against her.

Petyr felt his anger grow into a resolve. A resolve to not only remove the mockery of a sign but also the person of Reginald Holsson himself. Not one more day would the cretin stay at his inn and force Mrs. O'Neal to look upon the face of one who no doubt closely resembled the ancestor that had covered up the crime — old Yarbo Holsson himself.

Within minutes, Petyr had a ladder out of the small stable behind the inn and had propped it up beside the front door. Cook, Maddie, and several other staff members stood in the doorway and gaped in shock. Never had they seen Petyr Nordin move with such purpose, with such passion. Never had they seen him carry a ladder or climb one. Yet here he was like a man possessed, huffing and puffing as he surmounted the precariously balanced thing and wavered uncertainly at its top. Removing a hoof-trimming knife from his belt, which he had also grabbed in the stable, Petyr began peeling away the layers of paint where the woman's head should have been. Sure enough, after flaking off a few coats, he discovered the faint remnants of a woman's face, not unlike both the portrait in the locket and that of the phantom herself.

His theory confirmed, Petyr seemed to slump in on himself — his ghostly housekeeper cruelly murdered; the injustice compounded by a family residing only a few blocks away; and the humiliation complete that they would rechristen an inn for the sole purpose of mocking her fate. His eyes felt as if they were full of grains of sand, and when his red-rimmed, stricken gaze fell upon the staff members in the doorway, they each let out a little squeak and immediately retreated back into the shelter of the interior.

Heaving a great sigh, Petyr clambered down the ladder and followed them in. Ignoring everyone from the staff to the other guests to big dumb Reginald Holsson sitting at a table obliviously quaffing a breakfast of eggs and ham as if it were his last meal, he walked straight back to the small room at the end of the back hall. Petyr reached into his pocket and pulled forth the broken locket, setting it gently on the desk in the tiny room. He gazed once more at the miniature portrait of Mrs. O'Neal — the Quiet Woman herself — nestled within its golden embrace, the broken hinges of the clasp providing stark symbolism of the shattered life illustrated within.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, his voice slowly gaining strength. "I've brought your locket back. I did what I could," He looked around the room, addressing the empty air. "I found out what they did to you; I'll take down the sign and change the name. I'll ban the entire family for life. But it's been too long..." — his voice trailed off again — "and that family is too powerful, too big in the city, for me to be able to bring you any sort of real justice."

He felt the first hot streak of a tear slide down his cheek and was taken aback by a momentary feeling of wonder. *So this was how hysterics felt*, he thought. It didn't seem so outrageous perhaps. He clasped his shaking hands together as another and another tear joined the damp line of the first.

Through his blurred vision, he saw the locket levitate up, as if plucked off the desk by invisible hands. Slowly, Mrs. O'Neal materialized before him, though she did not look at Petyr or seem to acknowledge his presence. She bore a sad smile on her face as she caressed the locket. Then to his surprise, she began to unwind the spectral scarf from around her neck! Stricken at the thought of this intrusion in her privacy, he considered turning away. But the act of the unwinding, the thought of the gruesome scar beneath as mute testimony of the crime committed against her, held him paralyzed.

Mrs. O'Neal undid the scarf, letting the two ends fall to either side of her, and bared a neck as smooth, pale, and unbroken as cold ivory. Instead of the horrifying wound he expected to see, she instead revealed a chain with the other half of the broken locket suspended at the end of it. So close was he to her, that he could see the ghostly miniature portrait on the half she bore as she placed the golden half next to it. It depicted a man — a man with wild

and unruly hair and beard, who, if not for the facial features, bore a striking resemblance to Reginald Holsson. And now that he could closely examine the locket portrait and Mrs. O'Neal at the same time, he quickly realized that the two were not identical. They could be sisters...or a mother and daughter.

The golden locket fell clanging to the floor as Mrs. O'Neal vanished.

Goodman Nordin reverentially picked it up and placed it within the desk drawer. He knew he had one more visit to make to the archives at the High Sanctum of the Scroll.

Now Petyr searched again for Sharleena O'Neal among the records, and again he found her. But this time he looked among the birth registry. The birth of one Elsie Kellidon to Sharleena O'Neal and Evric Kellidon, also known as Evric the Ember Mage, was noted there, less than a year before Sharleena's death. With it was the pair's application for a permit to open an inn in The Hill District — a permit that was never granted until years later when the application was reopened and granted to Elsie Kelly, formerly known as Elsie Kellidon until her father was convicted of murder in abstentia and forever exiled from the city.

The wanted posters Petyr had found during the previous day's search for the suspected Evric Kellidon were an uncanny match for the tiny portrait in Mrs. O'Neal's spectral locket, confirming the last of Petyr's deductions. Elsie Kelly had grown up without mother or father and with only a locket of their portraits to remember them by. Then she had constructed the inn of the Quiet Woman and created its unusual sign nearly within sight of the Holsson house — to give voice to her mother, murdered most foully, who had never been given a voice for herself or the father of her child. To forever remind the untouchable Holssons of the shame of their crime and the most ignoble history of their supposedly honorable house; a daily reminder every time they set foot outside their door to come down The Hill. And their oblivious son had chosen that very inn for his act of defiance, unknowing of the fresh reopening of that shameful history within the breasts of his parents.

Petyr could find no record of payment for the reward offered for the Ember Mage and suspected he had never returned to the city where he had lost his love and been accused of the crime. He possibly never even knew that he had a child by Sharleena and likely met his own end while off on some adventure or other. For her part, Elsie Kelly ran the Quiet Woman her entire life until her death many years later, her only knowledge of the parents she never knew in the form of a locket that had belonged to her mother. Somewhere along the way in her life it had become broken and half of it lost beneath a loose flagstone so that only the image of her unknown father remained to her — an image coincidentally recalled by the arrival of one of the descendants of the very persons who had covered up the murder of her mother so many years before.

Petyr restored the sign to its original headless condition that very day, his hand not shaking a bit as he applied the white wash. And from his perch atop the ladder, he could just see the top windows of the Holsson house if he looked up The Hill. He fancied he could see the form of old Arnuld looking down, the sign ever in view from his bedroom window, and allowed himself a private smile.

Petyr continued to refer to his famous phantom as "Mrs. O'Neal" in honor of her mother, and she continued her regular routine of cleaning and helping out around the inn, her own way to honor the mother she never knew while waiting patiently for the father who will never return.

THE END

ONE LAST COMMISSION

BY JEFF PROVINE

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Moderate/Heavy

“One Last Commission” tells the story of the final commission taken on by Gray Deacons guildmember Vaccol Quagmolder, trapbuilder extraordinaire, before his retirement from field work. As a story of Bard’s Gate it holds moderate spoilers in discussing some of the inner workings of the Gray Deacons thieves’ guild and providing a few hints to that guild’s subsequent disappearance. If a GM is planning on having his players be involved with the guild’s successors or perhaps even investigating the ruins of Slip-Gallows Abbey, former headquarters of the Gray Deacons, he should be aware of what surprises may be spoiled (including links to both the Mathens and Bolego Deepdigger). However, it could likewise serve to enhance such a game when the players stumble across Vaccol’s old workshop and find evidence of some of the activities mentioned in the story. As a **Lost Lands** story, the spoilers are heavy in that they reveal a great deal about the secret activities and nature of the Mathen family of Malthlyn as described in *Cults of the Sundered Kingdoms* by Frog God Games.

ONE LAST COMMISSION

BY JEFF PROVINE



From the Diary of Vaccol Quagmolder for the year 3507 I.R.¹
 — recovered from the ruins of Slip-Gallows Abbey and
 decoded from his personal cypher

Ardsdag², Eostre³ the Eighteenth: I have at last arrived in the hamlet of Malthlyn today, Diary, on yet another task of the Gray Deacons. My final such task, I must profess. I had thought to put such traveling assignments by the wayside, but our “esteemed” guildmaster convinced me to take this one last commission; that is what it’s all about after all — the commission. The clink of a full coin purse can change the

heart of the most stubborn churl and mask a whole host of broken resolutions. I suppose even I am not immune to its allure. Ha!

I have begun to question my decision, though. Traveling through these Mistwoods has taken years off my life. The carriage journey that began reasonably enough on the well-tended roads near Bard’s Gate gave way to bumbling and bumping along a grassed-over trail that snaked up between the various knolls of the Moon Fog Hills. When we were not stuck deep in some mud puddle, we were bouncing over rocks and fallen branches that seemed to be the intentional targets of the feckless drivers. I have been aboard ships in rough waters that swayed less! The springs built into the carriage gave such miserable wails that I finally oiled them myself, along with a stern lecture to the oaf of a luggage-boy.

As sickening as the ride was, it at least took my mind off the country’s miserable weather. Even though the temperature is fair enough, the damp soaks so deep a chill into the body that no blanket can keep it out. Fog wafts visibly between the trees, just about the only thing that can get between that thick foliage, however in a few places, farmers had managed to carve out small pastures and fields, each a welcome respite from the creeping gray-green of the somber forest. In my mind, we all should begin at the nearest edge of the Mistwoods, uproot their trunks one by one, and use the lumber to build tenement plantations to put the penniless throngs to work — if they could be made to work!

My refuge for the night is the Ore Road Inn — what passes for a roadhouse in this flyspeck of a village. The dwarf keeper, Zedanar, is able enough, but he shares more in his manners with the contract miners: eager for work but wary of labor. Though, when I mentioned my employers, the whole room gave a noisy — if perhaps a bit forced — cheer.

“Fine folk” the keeper called the local lord and lady hereabouts. They seem to share high hopes for the future of this clammy corner of the map. I, for one, shall be glad to have my work done and this forsaken range left behind.

I find myself distracted with memories of the old rants by Bolego Deepdigger. His work took me away from Bard’s Gate from time to time, to secure a vent shaft or devise some new lock, but it was never this far. He used to have much to say about these cursed Mathens and their hare-brained schemes down this way, but a year or two ago, he had an abrupt change of heart. Now it’s nothing but praise for the Family Mathen and their ancestral lands — despite these dank, fog-wrapped hills. Perhaps I should mention to Mathen about his brightening reputation in the City. No, what would it profit me? I’m no bootlick. I perform my work, and the quality of my work is evidence enough of my station. No sycophantic posturing for me! Bah!

Tomorrow I travel to the estate and learn what work this Mathen has for me exactly. Some voice still nags at my mind about this whole trip. That arrogant cajoler Rawling Jawks was vague in his details as he orchestrated the contract, mumbling about plutocracy and trying to fill my ears with honey about my skills. I'm not even certain how he convinced me to travel all this way instead of sending out some ready-made springs and snares...

Ah, I remember now! It was that giant pile of gold coins delivered to my workshop. One last commission, and then it's nothing but in-house work for the Deacons and local commissions deliverable and payable within Bard's Gate itself — from the comfort of my own workshop.

Mootsdag, Eostre the Twentieth: I don't know what's worse: to have been dragged to this drizzly spare room of a land, or to stay here longer than necessary due to the incompetence of the help.

The length of my stay in this grubby town of dirt-pushers was doubled, as their groundskeeper did not come to fetch me until market day, when he came in to load his wagon with supplies. Apparently the cretin was unaware of my importance to his master. I'd half a mind to give him a tongue lashing the likes of which he'd never seen. He is an ugly brute of a man: lanky and tall, and covered in hair except for his face, which leads into his lumpy neck so smoothly that it seems his mother had never heard of such a thing as a chin. I imagined my part would have been all the easier if I were in a crate like the rest of the objects in his errand. The conversation would likely have been just as thrilling. It ended abruptly after I mentioned he should at least grow something to cover that apish upper lip of his.

And to add sugar atop this cake of pedestrian bleakness, his wagon also became caught in the muck they call roads here. Twice.

We didn't arrive until dinner, which the master and mistress of the house held late, waiting for my overdue arrival. Like most efforts made in deference to polite society, it made us all more miserable. My hosts were hungry and the help was tired. I myself was exhausted enough that a simple bowl of stew and a bed would have been the better gift, but they plied me for news from the civilized world. It was bothersome, but a little craft made short work of banter when I lured Mathen into talking about his plan to rebuild the family estate, which sent him into such an ecstasy of oration that I had time at last to fill my belly with whatever sort of creature it was they cook out here.

That was Milo Mathen who spoke, taller and thinner than even the gangly groundskeeper, and a pate shaved completely bald. His wife, Mimi (such a predictable provincial name!), sat beside him, almost silent but for interjecting a few names of acquaintances Milo seemed to have forgotten. For her part, she mainly just watched me with her shimmering green eyes beneath tightly wound black hair, one hand laid atop her pregnant belly. With as round as she was, I could imagine it had to be more than one unborn sleeping away in there.

We were also joined by one Mildridge, the lady's sister. Or was she Milo's sister? No, it must have been Mimi's. She had the same long, black hair down her back and shimmering green eyes, but she did not have quite the practiced discipline. Judging from the amount of makeup troweled onto her face, I imagine she preoccupies herself with trivial bits of fashion and the like. Bah.

They are a dull enough family, one of any number of country-dwelling gentry. Paintings of old patriarchs and matriarchs hang on the walls, detailing a history that no one today could follow, much less care about. The past is all gone and best forgotten. My mind is fit for things more tangible... meaning, of course, machines and money.

After all his blather about family name and ancient traditions and whatnot, I did finally learn from Milo of my first task here: securing the family mausoleum against unwanted intrusion.

Ardsdag, Tiwemond the Second: I've done it! The craftsmanship is a marvel, obviously, worthy as it is to be called my own work; however, it is the artistry that impresses me so. No one would suspect such a fitting addition to a house of the Shadowy Harvester until their head or hands roll free of their bodies.

Every day for nearly two weeks now, I have trod down to the back of the estate where the little stone house rests with its long dead Mathens. Old bronze doors hang with no other entry, so I focused my work there, replacing the clumsy attempt at a latch with a more suitable lock and defensive mechanism. I maintained the bas-relief to hide the clever interworkings, which seemed to have impressed the lord and lady well enough to rightfully recognize my considerable skills.

Upon my success, I took a moment of rest with my traditional celebratory wine bottle, as per the custom of all such Greats. The estate rests at a bluff-top, where the open air keeps at least some of the damp at bay. I found a fallen trunk that made a good seat from which to stare out from the overlook upon the hazy gray and green of the Mistwoods. The lush, close-growing foliage gives the impression that there is something hidden within its depths, lending a sense of mystery and foreboding to those mist-laden hills and vales. Only shadows and veils may be seen of what truly lies beyond. As a man who makes his living through obscuring things which are of grave importance, I can respect that much from this quiet parcel.

My reflections were interrupted by the sister, Mildridge, whom I fear I had misjudged originally. She greeted me with an elaborate proclaiming that my work deserved such deference. I was so impressed by her natural realization of this that I offered to share my bottle. She sat. We spoke, first about my trap-making, then her own interests in matters of nature. Normally I find that physikers are so vague and full of twaddle that I roll my eyes at their speech and yearn for some solid brass to work with, but I found myself hanging on her every word in describing the effects of humors or the muscular action of tendon and sinew, almost as if the human body were a machine itself!

I do not know how long we sat there, toasting my success and sharing our obsessions. All at once, the sun seemed to disappear behind the hills, and the world was cast in darkness as the moons had not yet risen. We ran back to the estate-house through the dark, hand-in-hand like a pair of youthful gadabouts. Her grasp was cold and strong, her skin so smooth.

After another dinner of strange herbs and meat dished up by their halfling servant and that butler who might well be more of a statue than a living being, I was taken on a full tour of the house. I had seen some of it in my days here, but its many stairs and halls never spurred much interest. It's an old, drafty house, built in outdated architecture with needless waste of space in its thick, blocky walls.

Lord Mathen led me first to the family chapel, after his wife excused herself to rest. Mildridge stood by, as quiet as the butler, watching while her brother-in-law wove his shiny words. I felt my heart race under her gaze, although perhaps it was some of that housekeeper's cooking. It was all I could do to nod along to Mathen's words while keeping my own brown eyes from turning to Mildridge's green ones.

The chapel was filled with sculptures and tapestries of amphibian motif, including a fat old thing lying carved in obsidian as an altar. Mathen asked leading questions about the subject matter of the carvings and such, but I confessed I'm more interested in materials and manner of construction, like for instance the clear passage someone had amateurishly tried to hide in the wall.

Mathen seemed embarrassed, and Mildridge turned away, so I quickly suggested we move on. My heart pounded now, frustrated and annoyed, and so I interrupted the lord's repeated description of dusty tapestries with a blunt query of what exactly he wanted want me to do.

His reply with a smooth shrug was, "To ply your craft."

When I pressed for more details of where and what that meant, his answer was music to my ears: "Everywhere. Throughout. Make our home a curse upon anyone who would dare enter."

At last I realized the true secret of the Mathens! It washed over me like a ray of blinding brilliance. These eccentric, frog-worshipping bumpkins were clearly as unnerved as I was being isolated out there in the desolate wilds, and they had brought me in to protect them from roving bandits or drunken adventurers. No bodyguards or battlements would do with their taste; they needed to maintain their primness despite turning their home into a citadel!

Of course!

I found myself running from room to room. Everything could become a defense. Light seemed to burst from the walls to form a mirage before my eyes of what could become.

In the library, give eyes eager for something to read a terrible curse!

In the dining room, an enforced feast of pain!

Each foothold on the stairs turned to a snare!

Trusted inanimates coming to life to trip and maim!

Locks for the windows, secret doors for escape, doors lined with bronze to resist even a woodsman's ax!

The house was built like a fortress, with its heavy walls and narrow loops for windows. It must have been the taste of one of the old Mathens, accustomed to erecting crusader castles, but there could be so much more! I began pacing off rooms and measuring roughly with my arm. With some reinforcement, there was space enough for hidden compartments, even a passageway or two!

The Mathen manor will become my magnum opus. Any trespasser not knowing the many tricks and keys will be reduced to cutlets, his last thought on the irony of living only to die. Even if he were able to get past my mechanics, he would still be driven mad with the magical defenses woven into the very soul of the house.

Here I am spouting claptrap! I must be about the work!

Ardsdag, Daan the Thirteenth: My apologies, Diary, for keeping my reflections in my own head rather than writing them. I find myself so filled with delight that I haven't the stoic sense to keep a record. Of course, there are my many blueprints and notes. I'll review them when my work is complete and I'm back in a decent city (although I do not look forward to the aching backside of another journey).

My hosts continue to be gracious in their words upon my work. Even the child-laden Mimi hurries upstairs to witness a display of my defenses in one of the corridors. I led them carefully through the tunnel I'd had workmen carve into a passage, sticking out a ham from Miss Floris's kitchen. Almost even before I expected it, the first trigger snapped, sending a sharp bolt of iron out from the wall deep into the haunch of meat. It slammed so hard that I lost my grip, and the ham then fell free onto a floorplate that gave way to the shallow, blade-lined pit below. Thankfully, they were not the poisoned blades, otherwise our dinner would have been much leaner.

After the shock of it all wore off, I described the process more slowly, painting the picture of the ham as a torso of an invading body, flailing limbs attached, gurgling screams as first one lung was pierced and then the other, the victim pinned and slowly drowning in his own blood.

Everyone shared a good laugh.

I'm even getting on with their dullard of a groundskeeper, Tronkley, who asked me about a way to keep his personal possessions better guarded. Even a man who spends all day with stinking animals has come around to respect the importance of a well-placed mechanical marvel!

With the manor house well under way and us all in good spirits, I was taken aside one evening after dinner by the lovely Mildridge, who suggested we again walk in the misty night air. It is chill in the evenings, and she has me hold her close. Normally, such an offer would make me cringe, suspicious of a woman after my wallet, but her company gives me a curious sensation no one ever has. We have walked many times, usually to return to our bluff-side seat to talk of our arts. This night she brought me far from the house, down to the abandoned mines where a few workers have begun cleaning out the old tunnels under Milo's insistence and generosity of pay.

By lantern-light, she guided me into a chamber deep inside. She said she had discovered this tucked-away grotto and was so charmed by it that she thought to build a little place for herself inside. Her love of damp and cold are somewhat unique, obviously, but it did make me think of my own workshop among the hidden rooms of Slip-Gallows Abbey. I held the lantern while she danced about before me, describing all she wanted to install to practice her craft. Her hair twisted and whirled with excitement. Her emerald eyes shone

bright in the light. The shoulder of her gown fell, through some incidental fold of the fabric, revealing such pure skin below.

Of course I agreed to help her. With the chamber, I mean, of course. Already I've begun sketches for a door... she is far from the tunnels being worked, but I would hate for her to be disturbed by some lug miner bumbling in. I've planned locks for her personal items, too: a few coinboxes and those spellbooks she reads.

I've peeked into a few of the latter as I took measurements of her bookcase. One of them had her own diary, weakly coded as is so common among those pseudo-intellectuals that believe themselves gifted. It was just a moment's effort for me to crack the code and lay bare her inconsequential thoughts. I was rather bored as I skimmed the twaddle she thought worthy to preserve for posterity until I ran across a name:

Fluoplilth.

Perhaps of the Endhome Fluoplilth's? I know not.

That this Fluoplilth was male was quite clear, and apparently he was quite close to the family. I even overheard Mildridge mention him today as she thought she spoke quietly with her sister. She is obviously unaware of my ear-horn devices that allow for convenient eavesdropping. Does that mean he is here? Why would I have not met him after all these weeks?

Perhaps Mildridge doesn't wish for me to meet him. Or him to meet me. How close are they? As close as we have become, perhaps?

I'm finding myself unable to concentrate fully on my work as my mind turns again and again to those shining green eyes of hers. I do wonder if perhaps I am sabotaging myself, fearful that inevitably my time here, and with her, will come to an end. Perhaps they may have use of me here as an engineer for the reopened mines. Perhaps Mildridge may wish me to stay. Perhaps even I am wishing to stay?

Manesdag, Haymond the... Twenty-first? Second? Days have lost meaning! Oh, Mirkeer! Goddess of the Shadows! Mistress of the Night! I know I have rarely called upon you, but I have never been in such need! You know what lurks in the darkness! Protect me!

Mirkeer, I beg of you in writing as I am too fearful to speak aloud: please reach out and take me under your protection, just as I have spent my life working to protect. My traps, my devices, I dedicate them all to your name if you but let me live through another of your nights!

It happened while I did your work, crafting metal and affixing punishments for those who dare to pry beyond their own guile. Deep in the earth, your daily bed, where I worked for that filthy seductress who cast a spell over my mind. Perhaps it was your castigation that I found myself on the far side when the internal cog snapped. I cursed my luck, but it was *fate* I should be cursing! How could I be led into such horror? What could I have done to deserve this?

I trudged through those endless tunnels, seeking the path back to the manor, but I lost my way. The tunnels led on and on as my hands began to ache from clutching at sharp rock and my legs buckled time and again. I came to what I thought was a dead end, but the walls shifted as I felt them. I tumbled out into the open of an infernal cavern!

Here an obelisk stood, pulsing with wicked magicks that cast a green light drowning out the pure glow of my lantern. Slime covered the floor. In it, twisted and horrible creatures writhed along like half-made dolls. Some of them called out to me as if still sane, while the rest blathered and screamed in undying pain. Enormous moths whined overhead. I tore past them, clinging to the wall in hopes that another might give way and I could find a way out. I dared not breathe, not with that stench!

I escaped only into a larger chamber farther down. My path took me past fat creatures lumbering on a hundred legs and other things I cannot describe without my hand shaking. I ran from all of them, keeping ahead of their dim senses as I scrambled through the caves. Only a voice calling out to me made me pause. When I saw the horrid face bearded with tentacles that had made it, I ran all the more. Mutating my body into an aberration might be one thing, but to lose my keen mind to a vain creature like that?!

Finally I found my escape through the gaping entrance to the caverns. There I stood in the murky woods. Above the noise of my gasping for air, even that cold, wet air of

the forest, I thought I could hear murmurs of voices around me. I thought to run all the way to Malthlyn, but I did not know where to find the road. All I could see in the clouded moonlight was the tower of the manor standing atop its bluff.

Who can know how long I wandered in the woods before deciding to sneak back into the household, retrieve my tools and my bearings, and then hurry away down the road. My mind was made up when I saw that everyone was asleep, or at least their lights were out. Who knows if these despicable frog-worshippers actually sleep? Frogs did I say? No mere anthropomorphized batrachians for these folk? No, but something much darker, much fouler...and older.

I picked my own locks and slipped noiselessly up the stairs to my room. After every step, I listened for an interrupted snore or a creaking door. There was nothing. The house was all but empty. It wasn't until I peeked out the window of my own room that I saw the bobbing light of torches. They're searching for me now. Not all of them are out there, however. I fear one or two may still be in the house.

Mildridge is outside, at least. I saw her face, one I had thought so beautiful, twisted in the shadows torchlight. Her eyes flashed with rage and madness. I don't know that I could bear to be near her now. All her clever philosophy about transforming nature is not just theory. What things she must have done with those cold, strong hands! Perhaps those pitiful things in the cave were some of her early work, cast aside until she has a more suitable laboratory in the rooms I'm building for her.

It is clear they have darker plans for these caverns than merely an industrious mine. Do they have such plans for me when I am done with—

There is a knock at the door.

Mirkeer, protect me. Hide me. I cannot answer, but I cannot escape! I cry out to—

Ardsdag, Blótmund the Thirtieth: Finally, Diary, I am back in Bard's Gate once more. Much of my business away from the city is hazy in my skull, but that may be due to this terrible ache that wracks my stomach enough to cloud my mind. I am only now clear-headed enough to put my words onto paper in this coded text. When I have recovered from this illness that presently besets me, I shall have to take the time to peruse back through your pages and see what I have writ, that it might rekindle my memories of those mist-hazed hills and that trap-laden manse.

I see it's been weeks since my last entry. I must have been working with grave diligence with no thought of record, or perhaps I had nothing suitable to report. Earlier today I did read back over a little that I had written on my recent journey, but I stopped short upon seeing those increasingly flowery words concerning...that woman. Judging from how I traveled back to Bard's Gate alone, it is obvious enough where that affair ended. I don't dare read more to see what kind of nonsense I got myself into, what with my stomach in its current unsettled state. It's seltzer water and early to bed for me tonight, I think.

Meanwhile, better to turn my mind to important matters, like a new machine for my next venture. Reading of those many crates piled upon the wagon that transported me to the Mathen House has given me quite an idea for any would-be bandit of dry-goods. Yet these coils slipping out of spring-shape confound me! As with all problems, though, it is a pleasure when they are at last resolved. How delightful it is to think of the lowly barrel, that no one can ever quite know what is held inside something as seemingly innocent as a cask. Ha. There's philosophy in there somewhere, if I were one to engage in such drivel.

Despite my exhaustion and the groaning in my belly, Jawks is forcing me to attend a banquet tomorrow. Everyone is up dancing with glee about some new heist of theirs that occurred while I was away — a shining stone...glittering gem...or some such nonsense they called it. How I wish I could just stay in my rooms. In fact, if I never leave Bard's Gate or even the Abbey again, I might well be fine with that. Save for that one last commission, my traveling days are done.

Yet a Gray Deacon's work is never truly done.

¹ I.R. refers to the “Imperial Reckoning,” as the years are counted throughout most of the continent of Akados.

² **The Days of the Week in the Lost Lands:**

- Solsdag (Day of Solanus – Goddess of the Sun)
- Ardsdag (Day of Arden – God of Life [now a dead god])
- Djinsdag (Day of Da-Jin – God of Death)
- Mootsdag (Day of Market – day of Man’s commerce)
- Manesdag (Day of Manes – day of Man’s souls)
- Sistersdag (Day of Narrah and Sybil – Goddesses of the Moons)
- Thingsdag (Day of the Heldring assembly [the Thing] – day of Man’s government)

“Dag” is the Heldring word for day and reveals the influence of that language upon the common tongue of Westerling. It is often pronounced with the “g” silent, giving it the more traditional “day” pronunciation, so some purists insist on using a hard “g.”

³ **The Commonly Used Calendar of the Lost Lands:**

Common Name	Hyberborean Name	Named For
Oeros	Firstmonth	Oeros, first Imperator of Hyperborea
Foeros	Secondmonth	Foere, House of Overking Macobert
Freyrmond	Thirdmonth	Freyja (Freya), Goddess of Spring
Eostre	Fourthmonth	Eostre (Muir), Goddess of Virtue
Tiwemond	Fifthmonth	Tyr (Thyr), God of Justice
Daan	Sixthmonth	Daan, Hero of Akados
Haymond	Seventhmonth	Haymaking month
Hummidos	Eighthmonth	Battle of Hummaemidon for Hyperborean independence
Mithrond	Ninthmonth	Mithras, God of War, to mark the final month of military campaigns
Blótmond	Tenthmonth	Annual sacrifices (blóts) of the Heldring
Winterfyll	Eleventhmonth	First full moon of winter
Yule	Twelfthmonth	The Feast Month, Yuletide and Hogmanay