

Tuesday, January 3, 2017

## **At the Tulip Tree Playhouse**

Normally, the Tulip Tree playhouse catered to the nobles and those who wished to be nobles, the rich merchants who were presenting their daughters as possible matches for the idle scions of the less-wealthy blue bloods. Today, however, its elaborately decorated halls were filled with sell swords, cut throats, and bounty hunters.

"We are looking for this man," the soldier said. His uniform identified him as a captain of the Home Guard. He held aloft a sketch of a thin pop-eyed man with a long, narrow nose. The bare fact that expensive paper had been used for a sketch identified the man as a significant target, but when the soldier continued, it became clear how significant. "A reward of five thousand gold marks will be paid to the man who brings him to me alive."

An awed murmur rippled through the crowd. The soldier knew his crowd. He waited until it was quiet again before continuing. "If he is not alive when he arrives, the reward will be reduced to one hundred gold marks." Again, the crowd stirred. A hundred gold marks was a significant sum, more than most would earn in a year, but it was nothing next to five thousand.

Raising his voice, the soldier explained, "The king expects Mr. deRata," here, he gestured toward the sketch, "to provide excellent entertainment. He can't do that if he's dead." At these words the crowd roared its approval.

As the hall emptied, a young man worked his way against the current, creeping forward along the wall as the crowd surged toward the back doors.

"Captain Ogarr?" The soldier glanced down at the short, cadaverous young man standing by his side.

"Yes?"

"What did he do? I mean, five thousand gold marks is a lot of money."

"I don't know for sure. Rumor has it that he seduced the princess and convinced her to steal from the royal treasury."

The young man's face broke into a sly grin. "Well, that would do it." He started walking away, but kept talking, his voice low as if he were talking to himself. "Tugging the king's precious princess, yes indeed, that would do it."

In three long strides, the soldier caught up to the pale little man, catching him by the shoulder. "Oy, I don't want that rumor spread about, you hear me?"

Snorting derisively, he replied, "not worth spreading anyway. Nobody would believe that anyone was in the princess's bed anyway." He twisted out of the guard's grasp and walked out of the room, pointedly ignoring the guard's glowering gaze that followed him as he walked.

Turning into the hall, he mounted the stairs, and knocked on the heavy door at the top. Heavy footsteps clumped across the floor, and the door opened to reveal a huge, fleshy man, his face scowling. When he saw who had knocked, his scowl was quickly replaced with a wide grin.

"Dilla, it's good to see you. Come in, it's been too long."

Dilla glanced around, held a finger to his lips, and whispered back, "It's good to see you, too, Gig." He stepped through the door and closed it quickly behind himself.

High shelves filled with books lined the walls. Heavy drapes pulled back from wide windows to reveal a clear view of the river and the far-off mountains. A desk stood at one end of the room. Behind it, there was a narrow, heavy door into the next room. A man sat at the desk, writing. When Dilla entered, he smashed his palm against the soft wax tablet, obliterating the figures he had pressed into it. He stood, walking around the desk, arms held wide.

"Dilla, welcome. How are you?"

"Tony, you have to be careful. The king is getting extreme. And here you are, living in the same building as his home guard."

Tony's smile faltered for a moment. "What's the reward up to now?"

"Five thousand. That's almost enough to turn your own men against you."

"But not you, surely."

Dilla looked insulted. "Anton," his voice dropped to a whisper, "by now you have to know, I am yours forever."

Tony's arm wrapped around Dilla's shoulder. "I know, Dilla," his voice hushed, "I know." They stood for a moment in silence. By the door, Gig shifted his feet, breaking into their reverie. "So, what did I do that the king will pay five thousand to get me off the streets?"

"What?"

"The reward. What does the king say I did?"

"Oh. He says that you, um, seduced the princess, and convinced her to steal from the treasury."

Tony's sudden laugh sounded through the room. "That's not a bad idea." Seeing the frown on Dilla's face, he hastily added, "don't worry. I'm not going to risk getting myself caught just for a peek under the princess's skirts. The treasury, though, that might be a different story." His smile disappeared. "You're right, though, Dill. I do need to be careful. There are more and more knives in the dark and I still have some things I need to do."

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