

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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Posted by Johnny Elbows in The House of the Rat at 08:46

Tuesday, December 27. 2016

The Bringer

Traer opened the door to his small cottage hung his knapsack on a peg beside the door, and sank into a chair beside the table. Papers stood in careful stacks and careless heaps all over the table. An ink bottle and several discarded quills were scattered among the papers. Traer rifled through one of the stacks, extracting a single sheet, covered on one side and part of another with close, cramped script.

"The last to be mentioned here is Traer. He is variously known as The Keeper, The Bringer, or The Teacher. Not a god himself, he is nonetheless immortal, and possesses some powers beyond those of normal men, though these pale in comparison with the powers of the gods themselves."

"No one, not even Traer himself is sure of when, or where he originated. Since he is responsible for keeping the Pilla, the meeting house of the gods, and since he remembers the origin of most of the gods, some believe that he was made by some being who pre-dated the gods. Others believe that he sprang from the minds of the gods themselves, that they created him as a convenience or as a way of creating their own story. If this is the case, however, the gods won't admit to it. When queried, they always reply that Traer has always been The Keeper, just as they have always been a god."

Traer picked up a quill and held it poised over the paper. He thought for a minute, then tossed the quill away with a disgusted look, got up from the table and began pacing the room.

At last, he shuffled the paper back into the pile and stared moodily into the fire until it burned itself down to coals.

Posted by Johnny Elbows in The House of the Rat at 07:01

Monday, December 19, 2016

An Uninvited Guest

The high peaks of the Blue Mountains form the border between the icy lands of the Normen and the more temperate lands of their brothers, the Harlon. Once, the two lands were one, but the difficult passes, the differences in climate, and more than one succession crisis had separated them. Now they fought as only brothers can, speaking the same language, worshiping the same gods, but hating and killing each other at any opportunity.

Somewhere along that rugged border, a broad circular platform of rough hewn black basalt squatted in the silver moonlight. Animals avoided the place, and the few humans that knew about it did, too; something felt off about that place. No one could say precisely what the problem was, but every one of them felt it, a nagging whisper of wrongness at the back of their mind.

On that night, however, someone was approaching. He was the kind of man that is easy to forget: average height, average build, nondescript features. He walked up the steep trail pushing his way through the undergrowth with a stout staff. He wore a small knapsack and carried an empty bottle on his belt.

When he reached the circle, he sank down onto one of the huge stones with a grateful sigh and lowered his bag onto the stone beside him. For a moment, he just sat there, breathing deeply and staring at the stars. He fumbled with the buckles, raised the flap of the knapsack, and lifted out an intricate marble carving of a strange looking building. It looked a bit like a turtle, circular, with squat pillars around the base, and a domed roof. Seven doors were evenly spaced among the pillars, but each door differed from the others. Grunting, the man stood. He carried the model of the building in front of himself not letting it touch his body. He balanced the building on his finger tips, as if to avoid touching it as much as possible.

At the center of the circle, a cross had been etched into the stone. He carefully positioned the building to cover the cross, then backed away quickly, stumbling over the edge of the circle in his haste. The carving began to glow slightly, then with a grinding, scraping noise, it began to grow. Within moments it had covered the stone circle, and towered over the head of the man who had carried it.

The white marble melted away more slowly, gradually revealing pinkish blocks and pillars of granite, and heavy doors of polished cherry wood. Though the doors were all the same size, each door was different. The man walked around the building once, as if to reassure himself that he had done everything right, then sat down to wait.

He didn't have to wait long. Two men, alike enough to be brothers stepped out of the forest. They were both small and thin and both wore a scheming look on their face. The older of the two was dressed in lightweight cotton; the younger wore heavy wool.

They nodded to the waiting man. "Traer, good to see you."

The man nodded back. "Nero, Ola, it's been a long time."

Nero, the elder, asked "Are we the first to arrive?"

Before Traer could respond, Ola spoke up. "Of course we're the first. All of the others have to show their importance by making others wait."

Two women emerged from the forest moments later. They were identical, from their broad smiling faces to their wooden shod feet. One of them clucked at Ola, then spoke in a cheerful, chiding tone. "Oh come, dear, you have to forgive them their little tricks. They'll be along shortly."

Each of the women took one of the men by the arm, then dragged him over to where Traer was sitting.

Even sitting, Traer was taller than the two little round women. He grinned down at them as they approached, and turned his cheek as they stood on tiptoe to greet him with a motherly kiss. "Oga, Asa, I've missed you."

Nero responded before either of the women could, "He missed them, brother, but not us. Why do you think that is?"

Oga elbowed Nero. "It's because you're always such an ass. If you weren't always looking for slights, people would like to be around you more." Nero grumbled, but gave no audible reply. Traer grinned in spite of himself.

A tearing sound split the air; a lightning bolt smacked the ground. In spite of himself, Traer jumped. Nero grimaced.

"Here comes drama, and it looks like she's in one of those moods."

A second lightning bolt crashed down. Two women emerged from the binding flash. Their faces were identical, one's clothing a mirror image of the other's. In strange unison, the women stepped forward and looked around before settling an icy stare on two large men who were stepping out of the woods.

"Secha, you left your cups long enough to join us tonight? How wonderful." The two women spoke with the same strange unity that they moved with, their indistinguishable voices dripping with icy sarcasm.

One of the big men raised a wooden cup high, grinning broadly and winking at the others. The other spoke, his voice a deep rumble. "Come off it, Lima. Nobody needs to hear your sermon tonight."

Without a word in return, Lima and her twin walked to the heavy door carved into billowing clouds and lightning bolts, wrenched it open, and disappeared into the building.

Ola spoke trying to hide the quiver in his voice. "Should we go in, too?"

"Give her a moment to cool off," said a deep feminine voice behind them. Everyone turned to see four figures emerging from a black shadow in three forest. "She'll be herself in a minute."

Those who had arrived earlier regarded the new arrivals with caution bordering on fear. The new arrivals, two men and two women, seemed to be trying to defuse the tension when when one of the men spoke. "So now we're just waiting on their majesties, the Queens of the Night?"

Asa replied, the scorn evident in her tone, "They're probably out dallying with some mortals." She snuggled closer to Ola, who put his arm around her protectively.

The Queens of the Night arrived from opposite direction, gliding smoothly along silver streams of glittering stars. They stepped to the earth face to face, greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek and a warm embrace, then turned toward the building. "Well then," said the taller of the two, her voice breathy and musical, "shall we begin?"

The couples separated then, each person selecting their own door, and entered the strange building. Traer was left outside. When the last door closed, he heaved a deep sigh, shouldered his now-empty knapsack, and disappeared into the forest, leaving the gods to their own business.

If he had stayed a moment longer, he would have seen a rat run out of the forest and wriggle its way under the nearest door.

Posted by Johnny Elbows in The House of the Rat at 09:50