

THE RECOVERY OF THE MOONSTONES

Volume One:

The Stone of Compassion

written by

Mariah

FOREWORD

After months of coaxing from the various men and women who accompanied me throughout my expeditions (with one recalcitrant bard in particular giving me no end of trouble), I have at long last been convinced to set this record of my journeys to parchment. As is well known to those familiar with the project of the Revocanda, it was my part in that great undertaking to retrieve the eight moonstones, which had been scattered by means of the Imbalance's magic across the realm.

As a woman better accustomed to holding a quill than a blade, I cannot say that my adventures were of the sort I thought particularly worthy of enshrining in memory, as they dealt, in truth, largely with the mundanities of studying a problem, rather than with the excitement of solving it. I will grudgingly confess, however, that there are elements of this long tale that have some air of romance to them, and I hope that they will prove pleasing to thee, gentle reader, as thou purusest these volumes. There is also much from these four years of effort that toucheth on greater things, and while I am personally not convinced that my thread in this tapestry is a particularly interesting one, I hope that it may giveth whomever reads it some perspective on the greater image of which it is part.

- Mariah

PRIMARY EXCAVATIONS AND SUBSEQUENT STUDY

It was in the late Spring of 382 when I set out on the task of recovering the moonstones, and the arms I carried into the first round of battle were naught but spades and shovels. Earlier in the year, the Revocanda's council had determined that at least one of the stones was, in fact, in need of recovery after an attempt to unearth the moonstone on Verity Isle had resulted in the excavation of where I unearthed a curious blue hued mineral quite unlike the black and white spheres known to record. A second excursion to the site of the former gate upon the Bloody Plains netted us a worn bronze circlet bearing the emblem of a stylized cormorant, and only served to confirm our fear that the magics of the teleportation storms had transposed the moonstones, scattering them to places unknown. When it fell to me to begin my investigation, there were still six sites which had not yet been examined, and the first order of the business with which I was tasked was to dig them up.

It was with a small party of hired hands out of Vesper that I set out on this task. Our summer was occupied with a relatively uneventful trek across the mainland as we set about recovering whatever was buried beneath the sites which formerly housed moongates near Britain, Trinsic, Yew, and the Skara Braen coast. Our efforts netted us, a very badly corroded locket; a rather crude looking woven basket of silverleaf bark; a small humanoid skull covered in a series of notch-marks; and a book writ in a foreign script that was neither runic nor Gargish.

While I had long held some natural inkling that the mystery of the basket would be found in the Great Forest where silverleaf trees grew, none of the other articles gathered suggested to me an immediate source. Not wanting to tarry until I had complete set of items after which to inquire, I had my little group press

southward, taking a ship to the Valorian isles where we found the chillingly familiar form of one of black badges which saw use in the days of the distant Oppression, albeit one that was curiously encrusted with a feathery growth of calcified coral. Our final destination was New Magincia, a large brown-husked seed the size of my fist and did not appear to be the product of any known native plant.

With all the palpable clues to the moonstones' location now in my possession, I dismissed my hirelings, sending them back toward Britain with gold in their purses and my thanks echoing in their ears. It had not been by chance alone that I had chosen the lonely isle of New Magincia as my final destination, as the secluded city housed the long-abandoned laboratories of the great sage, Alagner, and I thought it mete to pursue his holdings before setting back to the Lycaenum for a formal study. The long dead scholar had been, by all reports, a man with a keen interest in astonishing and rare items, and I held out some hope that his collections might inform me as to some possible origins of my own.

I spent the first month of the autumn occupied almost entirely with study, spending my days and nights in a dead man's house as I combed his library for clues. The gentle Katrina, who like myself once numbered among the lost Avatar's companions, was kind enough to offer me company during these days, and provided some much needed reminders to rest and occasionally relocate to the Modest Damsel for a plate of mutton. It would be dishonest to say that this initial period of study was dull to me, but I'm sure that it would quickly bore whomever reads this account to hear of all the details. I learned much on that quiet island as I pored through Alagner's work, but sadly little of it had any bearing on the moonstones. While I found some fascinating records indicating the cormorant as being both the hereditary seal of the Sosarian warlord Rondorin as well as a part

of the crest of the Old Magincian trade family Vulticalivar, I had no luck with such enigmas as the seed, the blue stone or the untranslatable script, and I was uncertain whether or not the scant facts I discovered with regard to the circlet could lead me anywhere. The black badge was a commonplace enough object at one point that it could have come from any corner of the realm, and skulls, notched or otherwise, were often unfortunately to be found in the wilder and more lethal regions of the kingdom. The locket was barely to be recognized for the glut of corrosion. It had been four weeks of tierless work and I thought myself to have no further leads than I began with, and I was on the verge of heading back North in search of silverleaf groves or larger libraries when I finally made a discovery.

The breakthrough I made was completely serendipitous. It happened one day as I was attempting to make it through a book on extraplanar languages that I upset one of the many vials of unknown compounds that littered the shelves of Alagner's former alchemical workshop, and it fell, by chance, upon the locket. I was rather frazzled by this turn of events, fearing that the article would be damaged, and did my utmost to remove what traces of the liquid I could with a cloth. To my astonishment, the chemical managed to cut through some of the accrued corrosion I had spent so many fruitless hours attempting to clean away, such that I was finally able to examine it more thoroughly. After a good quarter of an hour's work, I discovered that the piece of jewelry had been inscribed, and I could make out the following lines.

*“To the fairest Gwenllian whose laughing voice rings
Like nightingales piping in deep forests' grove.”*

JOURNEY TO AN OLD FRIEND'S HOME IN THE DEEP FOREST

The name was one I recognized, and knew well, for Gwenillian is the proper name of the good woman Gwenno, who had long been my friend and boon companion in the Avatar's company. While I did not discount the possibility of it belonging to another woman, the musical nature of the inscription furthered my suspicions that the ornament numbered amongst my acquaintance's possessions, as her husband Iolo had long been well known as one of the realm's foremost bards.

It was a clue which was furthermore convenient to investigate, as the household of Gwenno and her spouse still lay untouched in the depths of the Deep Forest near Yew, a location which would also ideally position me to look into the origins of the silverleaf basket. As I had made no progress with regards to any of the other objects, I made arrangements to take the next ship out of sleepy New Magincia and head for Britain, such that I could consult with Lord British before making a search of my old friends' home. It ought be remembered that in those days, Iolo, Gwenno and the ranger Shamino had not been heard from in nearly twenty years, and that many presumed them lost forever along with the much mourned Avatar. While I do attempt to maintain a mage's objectivity and keep myself removed from superstition and sentimentality, I will confess that there seemed something not right about the business of rummaging about in a house belonging to those only known by the vague adjective "lost" which falls so terribly short of the word "dead," and I reckoned that the formality of asking my liege's permission might set my conscience at ease.

British, who was himself an instrumental part of the Revocanda, received me happily, and after bestowing some reserved praise for what little work I had already done, he gave me his express permission to search the ground, going so

far as to offer me a key which his old friends had entrusted to his care. I thereafter began another uneventful journey across the mainland, pushing west alone on horseback as the trees around me began to shed their colors and the wind grew cold. A week and a half out of Britain, I reached my destination, completely unaware that events unfolding in the city I left behind would soon weigh heavily upon my search.

I found the dwelling in complete disarray, and thought at first glance that it had been ransacked in the decades which had followed the disappearance of the bard and his wife. (I later learned that Iolo's housekeeping was responsible for this, and that the house had long been in such a state without the assistance of interloping brigands.) My search, by and large, consisted of overturning a few drawers and then sorting out the thin carpet of clothing and bowyer's tools that lay strewn over the floor. I spent a little more than a day thus engaged with no success, and while I cannot say I was terribly surprised when I failed to find the moonstone, I will admit that I was disheartened.

I was fast approaching an end to the clutter around sunrise, and without anybody as sensible as Katrina to drag me to dinner or to bed, I had completely forgotten the necessities of food and rest. It was therefore in an insomniac half-dreaming state that I witnessed what happened next. The door to the small cottage opened before me, and in strode its owners, jubilant and unfazed as though they'd only departed the day before.

I doubted at first the reality of my senses, and after shooting a brief look of disbelief at the two spectres before me, I turned to finish untangling a mess of bowstrings, being more or less convinced that they would soon vanish. It was only when Iolo began to laugh that I stopped what I was doing and fully realized the

reality of what had just transpired. My friends, who had been thought dead for so many years, were alive and standing before me.

“Lord British told us that thou might be about!” Iolo exclaimed rushing towards me with open arms, “It's a shame thou missed us in Britain!”

“He didn't mention that thou wert undertaking the grim task of cleaning this place,” Gwenno added with a sly smile, “What crime didst thou commit to warrant such a punishment?”

I was still feeling the effects of sleeplessness as embraces and words were exchanged, and my rather dry travel journal I'd been keeping at the time didn't contain much which would assist me in summarizing that joyful reunion. I quickly learned, however, that the two of them, as well as Shamino and the former tyrant Blackthorn of all people, had landed a small skiff in Britain's harbor but a single day after my departure, and had come bearing news and treasure such as to set the city rejoicing. After twenty long years, they had finally won their way back from the distant lands of the Serpent Isle, and managed to bring with them the lost holdings of the vanished Britannian mint!

The shock of the news was enough that the topic of the locket quite slipped my mind, so happy was I to see them and so curious was I about the details of their arrival. I remember asking a flurry of questions: about the returned Lord Blackthorn, about the still absent Avatar, about Batlin and Serpent Isle and whatever it was that they had been doing in their long absence from fair Britannia. I was little able, however, to absorb all the answers directed at me that morning and it was only after collapsing on my bedroll for a few hours that I regained the

composure to be much in the way of good company, let alone a good conversationalist.

The rest of that day I heard their stories, most of which have since passed into the realm of common knowledge. I learned of the origins of the Imbalance, of the death of Batlin, of the release of the Banes, of Sir Dupre's tragic death, and of the Avatar's assumption of the duties of the Hierophant of Balance and his strange disappearance at the culmination of that final ritual set to restore the Great Earth Serpent to power. I heard tell of how Blackthorn, reformed and humbled by his days amongst the monks of Xenka, eventually found the little party of wandering survivors amidst the ruined cities, and how he assisted them in returning to Britannia once again. After hours of tale-telling, a round of Pawsian cider, and some pointed inquires as to what became of Smith (who had apparently left the area in search of somebody to once more furnish him regularly with hay), our discussion once again turned to what exactly I had been up to when the couple came upon me trying to bring some measure of order to the entropy Iolo had left in his wake.

I explained, as best I could, the business of the Revocanda and my still fruitless search for the moonstones, and produced the silver locket which I had found buried beneath the circle of stones demarcating the gate site between Britain and Paws. Gwenno's eyes lit up when she saw the object, and Iolo was struck with a look of happy surprise. He asked to hold it, and gazed upon it with a wistful look, as old men get when they think on the past.

After a few moments, he explained that I had been mistaken in thinking that the origin of the locket had been his home, for he had lost it many years ago, in those early days of the kingdom when we were all coming out of the darkness of the

Sosarian age and the Quest of the Avatar was not yet complete. Apparently, the locket had been a gift he had given to Gwenno while the two of them still lived on distant Earth, and she had given it back to him as a token of remembrance when he first heeded the Avatar's call. Much to his dismay, it had been misplaced somewhere in the maze of caverns which formed the road to the distant dungeon Hythloth, and had not seen it in the more than three centuries which had passed between those halcyon days of virtue and our present age.

THE ROAD TO HYTHLOTH

Determined to follow the lead I had to its end before tracing another, I made the decision that I would explore the passage Hythloth in search of the moonstone. In those days, the area was not a particularly dangerous one as the track of caves which linked the dungeon to its hidden mouth near Castle Britannia had long ago been converted into extensions of Britain's sewer system, and as such the majority of the original traps and pitfalls had been removed for the sake of allowing maintenance workers access. While there were still a few hostile creatures who no doubt dwelt there, I had little fear of encountering any beast that couldst not be handled.

Iolo and Gwenno, apparently still having a taste for adventure even after their recent sojourn, insisted on accompanying me, and I was glad for their companionship. We made the ride back to Britain in good time, arriving back in the capitol just as the first frost of the season covered the green vales of the Serpent's Spine in its whorling lacework. Lord British was only too happy to equip us with arms and money for the expedition, and bade us good luck as we descended into the bowels of the city's sewers.

The first day was spent navigating a labyrinth of bridgeways and water systems, doing our best to cut a path to the ancient passageways which had not been fully incorporated into the network of drainage tunnels. There is little to tell about this venture, for we met with nothing of interest save for a few giant wolf spiders, which scurried away upon our approach.

When we finally came upon the dusky ruins of the dungeon pass, there was a quiet which fell over us. Beneath the wet loam and crumbling brickwork, there

seemed to be a sort of grim presence that set us back to thinking of years past, when all three of us had, together or separately, marched through this gloomy expanse in the Avatar's company. There was a palpable sort of tension as we trod over places where once our footsteps had fallen; and although we knew that we were unlikely to encounter anything as dangerous or terrible as we had in the Hythloth of our memories, all three of us walked with guarded steps.

It was another day into the expedition when Iolo observed something to put us even more on edge, even though we had seen neither hide nor hair of any creature since we entered the older tunnels. While the old bard hadn't the sharp eye of a ranger, it had dawned on him nevertheless that there were, here and there, human footprints that matched none of our boots, and that they must have been impressed in the damp muck of the dungeon floor rather recently. Between us, we could think of no sound reason any human being would want to venture to where we were headed, save that some errant adventurer might be eager to plumb the dungeon merely for the thrill of exploration.

As our search for the moonstone continued, we all came to observe further signs that Hythloth was not as abandoned as we had first believed. There were bits of jutting stonework that had obviously been used as hand holds, and here and there we found half-decayed remnants of food: orange peels and lamb bones. As we cut our way closer to the route which would bring us to Hythloth's lowest depths, we found markings etched on the walls: strange signs and symbols. Gwenno observed they seemed similar to the secret "cant marks" employed by the archaic Guild of Thieves back in the 150s, which had supposedly long ago fallen into disuse after their meaning had been deciphered by the British guard. The good woman had studied such things long ago, being a woman with an admirably voracious appetite for knowledge.

Although Gwenno freely admitted that the script we saw was far different than the one employed centuries prior, she was able to inform us that several of the rude pictograms appeared to be related to the old signs for “safe house” or “freehold.” Curious as to what they might indicate, I decided that we should follow them to their eventual end, as I thought we should all feel safer pursuing the moonstone once we had some clue as to whoever else it was who had been skulking about. Following these marks, we made our way through many a narrow and winding passage, and in time we came to a rocky grotto near to the banks of an underground river. As there were further signs to indicate someone had passed here before us, we searched the area diligently until Iolo uncovered a small indentation in one of the cave walls, and upon reaching inside of it, was able to touch upon a small rope that revealed a hidden door when pulled.

Cautiously, we proceeded, and found a moderately sized room secreted within the cavern walls. To our fortune, we did not come at a time when the hideaway was occupied, for our lantern revealed an unsettling sight, casting its light upon a twinkling horde of rusted bronze and steel as we looked about. The walls of the room were piled high, not only with weapons, but with staves and icons bearing a symbol familiar to us all: a stylized triangle composed of the letters T, W, and U. In 382, some twenty years after its official disbandment, we had come upon what appeared to be some lingering outpost of the Fellowship!

Iolo, who had far more experience with the group than I ever had, suggested that we make a thorough sweep of the area, as he held out some hope that we might find evidence of whomever it was who had set up here. It was a bit of a mess to unravel, as it soon became apparent that those who used this room had been stockpiling items of various sorts, many of which appeared to have been salvaged from the dank environs of the dungeon itself. There were piles of swords, armor,

pieces of half disassembled mail... things that one might find amidst the depths of a dungeon where so many brave warriors had passed and perished. In a battered and mildewed copy of The Book of Fellowship, we found hastily scrawled lists of gathered equipment written across the blank back leaves, giving amounts and prices which seemed to indicate a thriving trade with someone known as Budo V. On a small table we found a rucksack filled with coins and blackrock chits, and folded alongside them, a scrap of paper bearing a strange cipher similar to the ones which had led us thither. Next to it lay a small coffer, which was revealed to contain dozens of tiny vials of silver-green fluid, a substance which we all recognized as the intoxicating venom of the silver serpent.

We made quick copies of the documents, not wishing to arouse suspicion by removing evidence, although at Iolo's suggestion we confiscated three medallions and a staff from the high-piled stacks of Fellowship paraphernalia. It was his hope that we might be able to pose as adherents should we come upon whoever it was that had been traversing the pass, and he thought there was some chance that these articles would not be immediately missed, given their number. We thereafter left the chamber in a hurry, doing our utmost to leave it in as near as possible to the exact state in which we had discovered it. Our unease was growing, and for my part, I desperately wished that we might find the moonstone quickly, such as that we might hie away from this place where our enemies walked so freely.

There is truly not much to tell about the next several days of the search, for I'm sure that whomever reads this does not need much prompting to imagine the monotony of looking for a small rock in the midst of a labyrinthine cavern spanning from Britain to Hythloth. While I had prepared some crude cantrips designed to alert me to objects possessed of a magical aura, the process of combing the caves was nevertheless tedious, and we soon grew disheartened as we

delved deeper and deeper toward the dungeon without success. At one point we did, at long last brush against our mysterious visitor, but the meeting proved anticlimactic. A week and a half into our quest, we awoke to the sound of approaching footsteps, and upon lighting our lantern we saw the thin profile of a young man drawing near. Iolo made a hasty gesture to his medallion as he passed, and the youth merely nodded, his face obscure by shadows as he marched on heedless of our presence. It was a somewhat frustrating occurrence, for we all ached to know more of this man and his business, but felt that it was best to not meddle in his affairs lest we alert whomever his allies might be to our interest. Looking back, it may be that we erred too far in the name of caution, and I know that had I been travelling in the company of other friends (one Minxoian tinker springs to mind in particular), I might have made some attempt to capture and question our fellow traveler that day.

In any event, we continued to press on, and as we did so, I became more and more apprehensive that the moonstone might never be recovered. At long last, some eighteen days into the journey, we entered a passage dimly lit by what appeared to be daylight, and following it, came to a narrow opening which opened out onto green land. Quite unexpectedly, we had found another entrance to Hythloth, and upon emerging from it we saw that we stood on a cliff overlooking the deep blue of the Britannian ocean.

BUCCANEER'S DEN

Having been removed from the light of the sun for nigh three weeks, we were more than grateful to reacquaint ourselves with the bright surface world, and despite knowing that there were many more gloomy caverns awaiting our efforts, the three of us quickly agreed that we would stay above the soil for at least one evening, further deciding that it would be in the kingdom's interests to discover where it was we had emerged and if the location bore any relation to the operations we had discovered.

The answer to our inquiries was soon given us. Iolo scouted ahead to the next rise of the hill, and gave a laugh as he gestured for us to follow. No sooner had Gwenno and I gotten to his point of vantage than we saw the salt-stained piers of Buccaneer's Den unfolding in the valley below.

“It's the same trick they used two-hundred year ago!” Iolo said with a grin, “The Guild really needs to change tack.”

It was explained to me thereafter that there had long ago been tunnels connecting this infamous isle to the mainland via the caverns that led into Britain's sewer system and that the entrepreneuring thieves which gathered here had made use of the route to steal from the capitol. As the three of us walked toward the pirate city, we pieced together bits of the story upon which we'd so recently stumbled. It had been well known that the Fellowship had many of their foremost holdings in Buccaneer's Den during the height of their activity, and having been tied up in the gambling dens and houses of ill-repute, it would be no small surprise if they were involved with the supposedly defunct Guild of Thieves, or whatever remained of it. If the Fellowship had, from what we'd observed, gone rather literally

underground, it would not be a stretch to imagine that they might have access to former hiding places of the Guild.

The revelation was enough that I quite nearly insisted we immediately return to our task, or even head back to Britain empty-handed to report what we'd uncovered. Iolo, however, was quick to convince me to linger, explaining that there were loose lips enough in the Den that we'd be foolish not to at least consult the taphouse before taking our leave.

I affectionately give my friend here the benefit of the doubt in assuming his intentions to be for the most part pragmatic, although I believe that he might well have had secondary motivations in the form of a dry palate and a tired body. Thus we headed down towards the swell of civilization, leaving the staff we'd taken under some rocks and foliage and concealing our medallions. Even in a city such as Buccaneer's Den, we doubted it was customary to wear the trappings of an outlawed organization so brazenly.

The Fallen Virgin was packed to the walls when we arrived, brimming with the noise of human voices and the scent of spilt beer. Iolo scanned the room thoughtfully for a moment, and then cut through the crowd to where a silent and solitary man sat nursing a mug by the bar, gesturing back at us to leave off as he summoned the barkeep and took his place beside the stranger. Gwenno, who had also spent much of her life as an entertainer, shared her husband's knack for teasing out gossip, and she led me to a table of gaudily attired women towards the back of the room, hoping no doubt to also make some inquiries. The loud raucous atmosphere, however, was not to my liking, and as I felt my presence did little for my companions' aims, I soon excused myself, deciding that I would venture to the market and replenish some of our waning provisions.

A half hour later, after being courted endlessly by the cries of fish vendors and junk peddlers, I made my way towards what appeared to be a general store and set my sights toward getting some lantern oil and hard tack. The obsequious merchant who ran the shop seemed keen on following each glance I paid his goods with some speech as to their quality, and I confess that I did my best to ignore him at first. It was only when he let slip his name (with a well oiled “Let Budo do what aught he may for thee, lovely lady!”) that I finally allowed my gaze to fully rest on his figure, and saw to my complete surprise and astonishment the very thing that had been the object of my past month of questing.

There, dangling from a gold chain and encaged in a filigreed mesh, hung Britain's moonstone, suspended on the shoulders of Budo V. Once more, I found myself in a situation where I doubted the validity of my senses, for it seemed absurd that after nearly three long weeks delving through the underworld that I should find the moonstone worn as a pretty bauble by the first shopkeep I met. Mouth agape with incredulity, I made the subtle gesture of a cantrip, and saw that the stone glowed with a faint blue aura which I knew proclaimed it to be genuine.

I stammered a bit as I asked him where he'd obtained his pendant, and he began to sing me the high praises of the craftsmen who had wrought the goldwork, pointing to the small selection of similarly worked amulets and ornaments he had on display. When I asked after the stone, specifically, I was merely told that it was a curious piece which his suppliers had sold him, and that as it did not have much sale value aside from looking pretty, he'd had it set and worked into a necklace. The connecting lines of the stone's legacy were now becoming clear to me, and I saw how it had moved from the location of the transposed locket to the hands of our unknown smugglers, and from there to the unwitting man who stood before me.

Thus what should have been the conclusion of my quest therefore met me with little fanfare. I threw down what gold I carried with me and made the man an offer for the ornament round his neck sans metalwork. He surrendered it without haggling, thinking I had overpaid him threefold or more for the piece, and not suspecting anything by it. Overjoyed, I turned my steps back to the tavern, eager to tell my companions that we should soon set back to Britain.

THE GUILD AND THE FELLOWSHIP

I returned to find my two friends drinking in the company of a handsome, pale-haired, young man, who stopped talking the moment I came to the table. Sensing that I was interrupting something, I tried clumsily to indicate that I had some announcement to be discussed in private, and was about to retreat from the alehouse again when Iolo tugged on my sleeve and introduced me to the gentleman in question. For reasons which will no doubt become clear as I continue, I will not put down his full name to parchment, for he was and is involved in matters not lawful.

This stranger, S---, mentioned in a low voice that we ought be more circumspect in our inquiries, as his employers would no doubt take note of three unfamiliar faces asking questions. As if to underscore his meaning, he pulled the neck of his tunic to reveal a small triangular medallion and made a gesture to it exactly mirroring the one Iolo had made to the unknown man in the caverns. He did not say much of substance after that, making insinuations rather than statements, but it soon became clear to me that this man was either ill-contented with the Fellowship's presence or very much wanted to convince us that he was. He asked in roundabout terms for a meeting in a more private location to better discuss his grievances, and Iolo quickly agreed to see him down by one of the abandoned wharves later in the evening.

S--- left us with a gentleman's goodbye, kissing my hand and Gwenno's before he glided out of the taphouse. I was more than a little skeptical of his barely outlined intentions and asked my companions rather pointedly if they did not think this might be some manner of trap. To embolden my point, I produced the moonstone, and was thereafter gifted with an expression from Iolo which was

worth every sovereign I'd just paid for the artifact as I tried my best to make an argument for heading back to the mainland with our quest now completed. I did not much like the thought of tarrying here and getting entangled in the affairs of one criminal group or another.

Iolo, however, was quick to argue that we had some duty to investigate what we had uncovered and that it would serve the kingdom best if we stayed to see it through. He said that he had spoken much with S--- and that while he struck him as a rogue, there was an honesty underlying the vagabond's half-truths that made him suspect that he fell short of being an outright villain. Gwenno likewise rallied to the stranger's defense, and implored me to at least let them follow up on the matter if I wouldn't. Seeing myself out-numbered, I decided to accompany them to their clandestine appointment, feeling that I owed it to them to be on hand should anything go awry.

I was much relieved that night when our charming contact did, in fact, meet us and meet us alone, and in the warm night air he told us at length how the Fellowship had latched onto the Guild long ago and had battered upon it like a parasite. Apparently, it was the crumbling structure of the Guild which had preserved those dissidents who adhered to Batlin's teachings after the Reconstruction, and that now, years later, the two organizations had become hopelessly entangled, such that a gentleman could not keep true to the alliances of his forefathers without donning the triangle.

I was glad for the information, of course, but I knew not why this youth should be telling us such things, and I was perhaps overhasty in pressing S--- as to what he wanted us to do with this information.

“I want you, good ladies and the good master FitzOwen, to assist me in righting the order of things,” he replied firmly, emphasizing Iolo's surname. “Those who walked in the Avatar's shadow aren't particularly welcome in these parts, and I suspect it would be in your interests to remove the obstacle of the Fellowship before ye make your journey back through their dens.”

There was silence which seemed to freeze the still balmy air of the island around us. Iolo looked more than taken aback, as he had not anticipated that he should be recognized, and eventually his hesitation drew a laugh from S---.

“Well that was a gambit I guessed right on. Word from Britain runs fast. Suffice it to say that thou might want to makest thineself look a little less like Johnson's famed portrait. The guildmaster is quite the art connoisseur.”

It was clear that we were at an impasse, and that S--- had us up against a wall. As much as I was loathe to enmesh myself in the politics of thieves, it seemed clear that ill fortune would await us back in the caverns should we deny this man his petition, and having lost the bulk of our funds in securing the moonstone, I had no hope of finding us passage back to the mainland via ship.

It is my regret to say that we capitulated, although as the course of events would run, I do believe that our involvement ultimately proved a boon to the realm. S---, after securing our loyalty with his unvoiced threat, outlined a rather bold plan of action. We were to present one amongst ourselves as an interested initiate with him as our sponsor, and from there we would be assisted by him in securing evidence to bring the Yewian courts full wrath upon those who headed the Guardian's cult, leaving, as he explained, a void of power which could be filled by

gallants such as himself, who had no ideological aims higher than a fat profit and a lean profile.

I must admit that he made a fair case for his coup, explaining that a more business-minded organization would have less interest in attacking merchant ships or sending men to skulk about Britain. Work that might hamstring the Britannian government was something the current Guild felt duty-bound to undertake, and, as S--- explained it, such activities were often more costly than profitable. He assured us with a thief's charm, that the new Guild he envisioned would no doubt precipitate a drop in the increasingly common plague of piracy, confining itself to pursuits which would engender fewer grey hairs on our good sovereign's head.

Given that I was the nominal leader of our little group, I made the decision that I would undertake the S---'s risky plan. Iolo had already proven himself more conspicuous than our needs would want, and his visibility could be a danger to himself or to his wife should either of them be placed in harm's way. Due to the effects of the ravaged ether of the early 300s, I had spent the high days of the Fellowship in a madwoman's seclusion and I hoped that this would work to my favor in infiltrating them. Over the next few days our "friend," S---, coached me regarding the name and identity I would present to the guildsmen, whilst I entrusted the moonstone to Gwenno and Iolo along with my instructions as to how they ought continue in the worst course of events.

THE LION'S DEN

A little less than a week later, S--- led me blindfolded to the Guild's current stronghold of operations, which lay hidden in the heart of the island's hills, in a network of caverns not unlike those I had traversed earlier. The introduction made for me was a solemn affair, with much talk of revealed mysteries and harrowing rites. While I primarily know of the Fellowship's original operations second-hand, I noted most curiously that the organization seemed to have metamorphized greatly in the two decades since its official disbandment, taking on a sort of occult mysticism that never displayed itself in the charismatic everyman's philosophy it initially preached. Painful as it was, I lied my way through the questions posed me, and was thereafter given a new medallion and the name of novice.

I was told that I must remain in the Guild Hall for some days after my acceptance, before its true location be unveiled to me as I undertook further oaths. It became clear at this point why S--- had desired an accomplice, for the rules governing who could spend their nights in the Guild's headquarters allowed for only those of the highest and lowest ranks. It was clear to me that my nominal "masters" anticipated that initiates harboring treasonous intent would not leave these dark passages alive.

I had been coached, however, by S--- as to what to anticipate, and I knew the rough route which should spell my escape should I be discovered. I spent my first night doing nothing that might smack of the slightest disobedience, knowing that my keepers would be paying the greatest watch to me then. It was after I had gained the dubious distinction of being able to recite the tenants of the Triad of Inner Strength and several additional vows of personal loyalty to those who held power that I first set out to explore the complex in what spare time was given me.

I was not yet apprised of the names of my leaders when I began my search. I had only been given their titles, and they had approached at all times in rather theatrical hooded cloaks which obscured their faces. I knew that unmasking them and providing evidence as such was a tall task indeed, although S--- had assured me that his knowledge of the grounds was enough of a surety for my success.

There were a lot of anticlimactic failures in the course of my quest. I picked the locks on ancient chests to find they only contained counterpanes and glassware, and my explorations of desks and closets netted me nothing more extraordinary than ink blotters and spare robes. While I managed to conduct my investigation without drawing alarm, I quickly came to despair at my chances of finding the evidence required to release me from this undertaking, and I feared I would soon have no option save to flee or complete my initiation.

Despite the increased desperation that pressed upon me with the passing of time, however, I made no plans to escape, desperately hoping that I could find what was needed before the hour appointed me. It was on the dawn of the final day of my novicehood that success finally confronted me, and it did so nearly as suddenly and unexpectedly as the appearance of the moonstone had a scant week earlier. In the short communal hall adjacent to my chamber, someone unknown had left a small book on one of the benches, and upon opening it, I found it to be full of figures and tallies, accompanied by names clearly implied to be those of men destined to die, with those of the men destined to kill them written in the margins.

I pocketed the book and looked toward making a rapid escape; for I knew that I should be in dire straits should my theft be discovered. However, I found all exits which S--- had given me knowledge of to be guarded, and having but little

knowledge of the Guild Hall's location, I feared alerting the rest of the guild members. Without any other recourse, I returned to my room to silently await my summons and hid the little volume of evidence as best I could.

It was S--- who fetched me, and by means of agreed upon gestures I let him know that we had been successful, although I dreaded what was to come. He led me back to the hall where first I had taken my false vows, and I did my best to seem stoic. The ceremony was much like the last, only it had a greater sense of permanence, as one might feel when witnessing a marriage. I was made to repeat the creeds in which I had been instructed, given a chalice of dark wine in which I was bade to mix my own blood before drinking, and at last, the seeming leader of the ritual gave voice to a question: "Does any man or woman know why this one should not be enjoined to our order?"

The response that broke the silence was everything that I had feared, for I looked behind me to find that a cloaked figure was approaching the altar to which I'd been led, the small book which I'd stolen that morning held firmly in his hand.

I knew then, that I had been ensnared.

A DESPERATE BATTLE AND OUR RETURN HOME

I was hemmed in at all sides, and S--- shot me through with a look that filled me with terror, for I saw in his eyes an unpoised and frightened look which had never before surfaced in the confident young man. There were shouts of "Treason!" as the gathering of thieves pressed round us, producing blades and other weapons from the folds of their cloaks. I took a deep breath as my only comrade in desperation drew a stiletto, and readied himself to die fighting.

As for my part, I quietly intoned two words in the moments before the fray began: Vas Corp. Thereafter, I sunk to the ground, quite overwhelmed by the heady pulse of my own life seeping from my body. Fortune was my friend that day, for the guildsmen had followed the Fellowship in their abhorrence of magic and knew not what I spoke, taking my collapse as a surrender. A darkness dimmed the lantern lights to red as my spell worked its way through the gathering hall, causing the swarm of men surrounding me to fall aside like so many autumn leaves. When I at last regained the strength to stand, I found S--- lying at my feet, the only breathing body aside from my own in a room filled over with death.

I do not know if S--- was aware of my proficiency in the mystic arts, for I had never given him a true name to call me by and never knew if he had recognized me as he had Iolo. He certainly had made no mention of magic in the course of his instruction, and I had not told him how I had pre-prepared for such a moment, sewing dry reagents into the hem of my grey woolen dress lest I have need of some single spell during the term of my stay. It would not surprise me, however, if he knew all, if perhaps he had even been banking on just such a catastrophe to release the full fury of a mage's power upon the organization. However little I know the man that now lies behind the Guild, I never was of the

impression he was a fool, and his stated plan, in retrospect, surely seems a foolish one on the surface.

However we had arrived at the event, the Guild's leadership was dead. Even as weakened as the death spell had left us both, S--- found strength enough to bluster his way past the remaining guards and back to the bright surface of Buccaneer's Den, where Iolo and Gwenno had passed an anxious week awaiting my return. Weak as my magic had left him, S--- ultimately caved to my demands that he buy us passage back to Britain on ship, as after all my trouble I felt he owed us some recompense, and I had little desire to trek back through the long caverns beneath the island. Even with his assurances, I did not trust the Guild in the tumult of transition, and besides, after so many days spent underground, I felt entitled to make my sojourn back in such a vehicle as would let me see the sky.

S--- seemed genuine in his thanks, offering up apologies for all I nearly endured and giving me every surety that things would change for the better once he filled the void of power. For all that occurred, I little know the man; and for all I resent the position in which he placed me, I cannot help but think he was truthful, for the Britannian seas saw a noticeable drop in piracy in the years that followed. While I'm sure that the Guild still deals in all manner of wretched criminality, its operations have not yet become once more visible enough to draw concern. I am not happy that it still operates nor that I should have proved so instrumental to its continuance, but from a pragmatist's perspective, I cannot say that we are worse off than what happened did happen.

Iolo, Gwenno and I left that very night on board the *Grey Lady*, as I had no wish to remain in the city while the aftermath of S---'s coup worked itself out. We arrived back in Britain alongside the first snows of winter, and gave a thorough

report to Lord British of all we had accidentally discovered. After placing the first moonstone in Nystul's care, I took a brief respite from my questing, staying idle in the capitol for a handful of days whilst the Great Council began the deliberations which would end with the Britannian sewers being reoutfitted with traps and pitfalls – measures meant to keep whatever Guild emerged from the recent conflict at bay. It was during this scant rest from duty that I was reunited with my old comrade-in-arms, Shamino, and thereafter found myself unexpectedly drawn into the quest for the next stone, which would take me many miles away to a land long thought lost.