## The Terrible Conflagration at The Quiller’s Mint

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###### (From the diaries of Finn Teodoros, discovered and edited by Tad Williams)

When I was but a young man newly come to this great city from my mother’s house near the ocean cliffs of Helmingsea, I had no friend or family here who could give me houseroom, so I paid a few copper pieces each week for a bed at the ancient inn known as The Quiller’s Mint. The place was owned in that time by a man named Arvald, although in this our present day it has a different owner. He was a dour and secretive fellow, as are many of the Vuttish who live in the March Kingdoms — he had been born in the islands but had traveled all over the world on merchant ships in his youth, much as had my own father, born in Krace but buried on the foggy hills of Helmingsea. It was a strange thing to see, a Vuttish taverner — odd as an extravagant Settlander or a chaste Syannese — and he was as thrifty with words as you might guess. I think not many people who occasioned the inn favored Arvald much or would have chosen his establishment above any other, but that his prices were low.

I slept near the top of the building, three floors above Squeakstep Alley, in a room with a tiny window that looked out at a dark warehouse so close I could almost touch its timbered walls.. Several others shared the poorly-furnished room with me, most of them merchants staying only a few nights, and even the louse-ridden bed could not be called my own, for Arvald was not prey to the sort of foolish generosity that would let a bed go unused half the day. I slept my fitful sleep in it when the world was dark, and in the daylight hours a riverman who worked at the night-docks outside the walls would make it his. Many were the evenings I came home to find the sheets still dank with river water. Once I found a small fish in the blankets that I suspicion had come from out of his boot, for others who shared the room told me the riverman wore his sodden old pair even in bed.

Before I found my position in the royal tax office, I earned a bit of my lodging-fee back by helping Arvald serve his guests, and a strange, sad lot they were. Even today, when it has a slightly better name for hospitality, the folk lining the tavern benches of The Quiller’s Mint are a motley collection at best, rhymers and other less lawful blather-men, snitches, sharpers, and shave-pennies.

For those who have not visited the place, it stands inside the outer wall of the keep like a man who has been backing away from a brawl and run out of room, between Fitters Row and Tin Street, with Squeakstep Alley running past its front door like a narrow, muddy river. Its painted sign is a faceless woman veiled and dressed in black, for no reason anyone knows. The tavern sits just a short distance from Skimmer’s Lagoon on the Fitters Row side, and while the skimmers themselves do not visit the place — they have their own establishments into which the rest of us are not welcomed — the smell of the lagoon is always in the place, especially when the sun is high or the tide is low, and the cries of seabirds are its usual music, when they can be heard above the bellowing of drunkards and slatterns. It is an old building, and in fact at the rear it is built straightly into the city’s outwall, as though the wall were built around it rather than the other way round. No one claims to know when it was first put up, or even how far it extends. I could not tell you myself, despite having worked there for a year. There are several rooms down beneath the main tavern, pantries and other places I never explored. It troubled my heart to go down there by myself because it was quiet and dark and the corridors twisted most confusingly, and thus kept my visits short. When Nevin Hewney — perhaps Southmarch’s most famous playwright, and certainly its most frequently drunken playwright — is in his cups and claims another entire tavern lies deep beneath the one in current use, deserted but preserved, it will not be me who calls him a liar.

In any case, the Mint (as many called it then and still do) was not so much different in my youth than it is now. Most of the patrons, as is generally the case with poets and criminals, swung between extremes of morbid silence and loud bragging, often prodding each other to some dangerous bet or inflicting childish pranks. One that I remember is when a young poet with a demanding mistress was told that the pie-plant growing in the Mint’s kitchen yard was a sovereign prompter of the gallant reflex. This foolish versifier ate several uncooked stalks and grew so ill he nearly died, prompting amusement in all but the most charitable customers.

On the night of the conflagration, I recall little happening that was not of the ordinary. It was a chillsome late autumn, especially down by the lagoon where the winds blew unchecked, and a fire had been set in the fireplace. The air was thick with smoke and my eyes stung. Nevin Hewney, who was then still such a young man that he had no beard upon his face at all, but only a yellow fluff like dandelion, was bragging about having finished his first play, a piece of what we suspected must be dubious skill and even more doubtful virtue, which told the story of a famous Trigonarch’s mistress. To our surprise, a year later this play, The Eidolon of Devonis, was performed at the Firmament Theater and became quite popular, and Hewney received his first post with Earl Rorick’s players.

In another corner a trio of strangers, who despite the warmth of the room had not taken off their hooded cloaks, drank moderately and spoke quietly among themselves for most of the evening. I have heard it said in after days that these were the Lord Constable’s guardsmen, but what their purpose in the tavern should have been I do not know, and I doubt the story. There are places closer to the inner keep than the Quiller’s Mint where guardsmen can drink, and in fairer circumstances as well. I have even heard it claimed that one of these hooded men was young Prince in disguise — he is said to have liked to sit with ordinary men and women to learn something of their lives — but I suspicion this is a false claim. People will see the hands of princes and hierarchs in any fateful event, but there are fateful events enough in this world that princes and hierarchs would have to forego sleep entirely to have a hand in them all.

A few other of the tavern’s regular patrons were in the main room on that night, including a poet and occasional swindler named Thom Regin (although most who knew him would have said that it was the poetry that was occasional and the swindling his fulltime vocation) and a Jellonian woman named Doras, of whose virtues the most charitable thing that can be said is that she did not haggle much about prices. Doras, who from time to time kept a sort of company with big-bellied, booming-voiced Regin when he was sober, had on this night brought in a stranger, a dark-haired, pale man who she introduced as John Sommerle or Summerlea (I have seen the name spelled in diverse ways) who she said was a sailor. Sommerle himself did not speak much.

As I said, I remember little about the night that was odd or untoward. At one point Thom Regin — who I thought was not happy about Doras keeping company with another man, but had not said so straightly, recited a bit of poetry about a man who beds a fairy-princess and wakes up in the morning to find that the Twilight People have ensorceled him and that his companion is a sow. Sommerle for some reason took exception to this foolish rhyme and threatened Regin with a dagger, although the knife was never actually produced. Arvald the tavern-owner intervened, and only Doras’ tearful pleading kept him from ejecting John Sommerle from the Mint on the instant.

The three hooded men took little interest in this brawl, as far as I could see.

Later in the evening, while I was busy playing potboy and thus did not see what happened, Sommerle and the woman Doras fell into a disagreement for some reason and Sommerle left the Quiller’s Mint. He did not come back, at least while the tavern was open.

When the bell rang in the temple of the Trigon and closing hour came round, the Jellonian woman and Thom Regin seemed to have been reconciled. She was fondling his face and lovingly tweaking his beard while he recited her some bit of doggerel, this one a tale of women who give their hearts to fairy-princes. Since he seemed to be likening himself to such an immortal and magical lover, I thought he was overbuilding himself a bit — Regin was not the most presupposing of men. In any case, that was the last time I saw him. Arvald called for those who were present to empty their scoops. He had not locked the doors yet, and a few of the patrons were still in the tavern when he sent me to my bed. That was the first thing in the evening that felt odd to me, since Arvald generally kept me at my labors until every tankard was rinsed and every bench and table wiped.

I was awakened in the middle of the night by a woman’s voice raised in a scream. My nostrils were instantly full of the harsh scent of smoke. Tripping over the other inhabitants of my shared room, who were slower to wake than I, I made my way to the stairs and started downward. Between the ground floor and the first story I almost ran into a dark figure. It was the woman Doras, her hair and clothes in disarray, looking as though she had just been pulled from bed, although whether also from sleep would have been another question.

“Where is my Riggin?” she said, her Jellonian accent making it hard for me to understand what she was saying. “My Rig, where has he gone?”

I shoved past her and made my way down to the tavern. A fire was burning, not in the fireplace, but in the straw floor on the opposite side of the main room. Lying beside this new blaze but not in the flames was a dark shape. I leaned over to see the poet Regin with his forehead caved in like a broken eggshell and blood running from his nose and mouth. He was lying near one of the room’s wooden ceiling-pillars. I suppose that if he had been running across the room, not looking where he was going, he might have hit the pillar hard enough to crack his poll that way. I am not certain I believe that, but I cannot say it is impossible.

In any case, I had no time to think about it then. The fire was already spreading across the straw and in a moment more I would be surrounded and hemmed in by the blaze. I tried to drag the poet’s corpse with me, although I knew he was already dead, but he was too heavy. It must be remembered that at the time I was only a stripling, and Regin must have carried almost twice my weight.

I ran out of the tavern then and through the inn, shouting for Arvald, calling out that there was fire in the house, fire! Soon the halls and stairwell were full of confused guests and tavern patrons — apparently Arvald had allowed a card game in his own chambers after the main room was closed. I saw Arvald trying to enlist the help of some of the scurrying cardplayers to go to the lagoon to fill buckets of water, but no one paid him any attention in the smoke and shouting and darkness lit only by flickering flames. One man was killed in the crush at the front door, trampled until his ribs cracked and pierced his heart, and several more had broken limbs and other injuries trying to get out. As the fire swiftly spread, some had to leap out of the upper stories into the ordure of Squeakstep Alley. It was only due to the mercy of Zoria, I believe, and of Honnos who watches over travelers, that more were not killed inside the tavern.

But many others did die as the fire spread to some of the nearby roofs, and to the tenement houses on Tin Street where hundreds of people lived in each single three- or four-story house. All told, something more than two dozen folk were killed in the terrible Quiller’s Mint fire and hundreds more lost their homes. The conflagration would have burned far more of the city had not two sides been blocked from spreading by Skimmer’s Lagoon, and one side by the city wall itself.

There was not much strange in the events of that evening, as I said, but there was much that was strange that happened afterward.

Arvald, the owner of the tavern, disappeared within a few days after the fire. Some said that was because there was nothing except an expensive and pointless salvage to detain him in Southmarch any longer and so he had gone back to the Vuttish islands, others suggested it was because his conscience was something less than clean. Why he should have set a fire in his own tavern, though, has not yet been convincingly explained even by those who suggest his guilt.

When Thom Regin’s body was brought out of the ashes, it was naught but black bones and charred meat, and thus nothing I said would have made any difference, so I told no one of how I had found him. I was young and not keen for the eye of authority to fall on me in such an unflattering situation. I might have spoken up if John Sommerle had remained, but he too had vanished, never seen again after Arvald shoved him out of the Quiller’s Mint front door. The Jellonian woman Doras was little help in answering questions. She could never speak of the evening without bursting into tears, and the pox took her within a year or two in any case.

Was it simply by chance that the Mint burned down? It matters little, I suppose, because a new tavern was soon built on the ashes of the old, and because the oldest parts of the place are in any case below ground or in the city walls and thus went unscathed.

It still seems odd that the fire should have started on the opposite side of the room from the fireplace, on a damp night, and that I should find Thom Regin’s corpse on the ground near the place where it had caught. But if John Sommerle came back to murder Regin and set the fire to cover his deed, why did he not simply drag the poet’s corpse out through one of the side doors and leave it in an alley instead? Regin would have been thought only the most recent in a long line of Quiller’s Mint patrons who never made it back to their homes through the Lagoon District’s sometimes inhospitable streets.

There are even wilder speculations, most based around the reputed presence of the man who would someday be our King Olin, but I have never heard one of these tales yet that did not sound to me like the ravings of a madman. The idea that a king who has always shown kindness even to his lowest and poorest subjects would instruct his guards to set a deadly fire simply to hide the fact that he was visiting a tavern... well, there is just no sense to it.

So there it is, the tale of the conflagration that destroyed the old Quiller’s Mint. In fact, I am told that even this terrible deed or accident was merely a reenactment of a larger historical tradition — that the Mint which burned was at least the fourth or fifth building of that name on that spot in Squeakstep Alley between Fitters and Tin. It is that most unsatisfying of tales, a true one. What it means, if it means anything at all, must be up to you, kind reader, to decide.

*— Finn Teodoros, by his hand, on the ninth day of the eleventh month of the year 1314.*