

ROLLSPELSRUNOR: IT'S A

THIEVES WORLD

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BILD KRISTOFFER ENGSTRÖM

*This issue we shall be looking at an organised guild of cutthroats, tricksters and tomb robbers designed for use with the supplement **Monster Island**, but can be used in almost any fantasy setting. Many thanks are owed to Fritz Leiber and his **Lankhmar** books for their inspiration.*

Men Still Shudder when they Speak of the Crypt of Votishal

The one and only organised guild of thieves in Port Grimsand, *the Brothers of Votishal* appeared in the colony some seventeen years ago. Formed by a gang of misfortunate rogues, transported to the island after a failed theft of a wizard's treasure vault, the survivors hacked their way through the surrounding jungles and found sanctuary in the resettled ancient city.

Soon after their arrival, the handful of survivors took to petty street crime to make ends meet. Yet practicing their craft on a burgeoning population of professional mercenaries and hard-bitten explorers proved nearly disastrous, several of them being caught and summarily executed. So the brethren changed their modus-operandi, setting themselves up as a semi-respectable group providing professional appraisals of treasures and artworks recovered from excavations of the surrounding ruins.

Slowly, but surely, the gang gathered enough finances to setup a pawnshop, using the business as a front for more illicit activities. They provided a confidential fencing for less honest citizens and began to practice the arts of burglary upon rich merchants, who had since arrived in Grimsand to take advantage of its trade opportunities.

Time, disease and accidents began to take their toll, forcing the shrinking gang to enlist others into their brotherhood. Forearmed with knowledge of those already using their fencing service, they began to forcibly recruit petty criminals with a choice of joining or being targeted by the Brothers of Votishal. Most capitulated, giving rise to the establishment

of a sophisticated hierarchical and ritualised guild organisation.

The guild was named by its founders after a minor deity of theft and avarice. Now feared by those who flaunt their wealth or would deign to cross its tenets, rumours abound that the guild members worship the magnificently jewelled skull of their forgotten god, in corrupt ceremonies held on the night of the new moon.

Unlike Men, Rubies and Emeralds Do Not Rest Quietly In Their Graves

Despite its remote and hellish location, a great deal of wealth flows into - and out of - Port Grimsand, some from natural resources culled from the jungle, but primarily the antique treasures discovered in the surrounding necropolises and ruins. The Brothers of Votishal reap their share of this bounty with a number of differing revenue sources, some of which are utilised by the Governor of the colony. Most however are illicit practices, requiring specialised skills or the combined resources of the thieves' guild to succeed.

Appraisal

The first of its two ostensibly legal activities, the guild offers its experience to assess the value of artworks and unusual substances recovered from the island. Almost all of the merchants in the colony will accept an official guild appraisal at face value. Evaluations cost 1sp per object or load of material, and the Governor actually pays for a guild specialist

to be present daily at the Plaza Gatehouse to help judge the taxation of goods brought into the city.

Brokerage

The guild maintains a small pawn shop on Winding Way (the north side of the street between its central zig and zag) for destitute inhabitants to temporarily hock their more valuable possessions at a fraction of their price. Although a legitimate business at face value, the pawn brokers also provides a front for the guild fence who offers 1d3+4x10% of a stolen object's value to guild members in good standing, but only 1d3x10% to independent thieves.

Protection

The guild openly offers a guarantee to anyone willing to pay the fee, that they will be left alone by its members. Whilst seemingly a protection racket at face value, the guild doesn't forcefully pressure merchants or home owners into accepting its protection, nor vindictively targets those who refuse to pay. It merely maintains a list of individuals that none of its members is permitted to rob. Prices are set at 1% of the enquirers' observable yearly income with a basic minimum of 5 sp per month.

Recovery

A lesser known service of borderline legality, the guild will undertake to recover items of sentimental or monetary worth stolen from their rightful owner, for a fee of between 10-20% of its known value. Providing the guild itself was not responsible, this involves shaking down whatever independent thief purloined the object. If faced with intransience the guild will assign one of their own membership to steal back the item, generally taking pains not to kill the original stealer as a sign of professional courtesies.

Alchemy

Available only to its members, the guild sells alchemical concoctions of dubious use to its rogues. As well as those narcotics described in *Monster Island*, the guild also offers a



range of other useful substances as described later. Despite access to more lethal poisons, the guild frowns upon using venom to kill, preferring the application of soporifics and paralytics to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to its activities.

Burglary

Although the guild covers most of its maintenance costs from the previously described activities, it occasionally sanctions burglaries of a more substantial nature. These generally target wealthier individuals such as visiting nobles or successful merchants. The idea is not to beggar the victim, merely steal an article or shipment of high value so that they can be 'milked' again at a later date. Such robberies are usually displays of extreme cunning and trickery, as use of brute force is regarded as beneath the guild.

Tomb Robbing

The guild practices two forms of tomb robbing. The first involves brotherhood members gathering gossip and researching the guild's own extensive archive of maps and records, to locate and plunder hitherto unlooted ruins. Such expeditions are staged at the thief's own risk, but they must pay a tithe of one third of any loot recovered, which is smuggled into the colony to avoid the normal excessive taxation. However, the guild also hires out its members, offering their lock-picking and trap-disarming expertise to adventuring parties wishing to raid a tomb, the price negotiated on a case by case basis.

It should be noticed that the guild condones lesser arts of thievery, such as pick pocketing, mugging or confidence trickery. These are left to independent thugs who are not part of the Brotherhood, the guild knowing full well that to completely stitch-up all areas of criminality will invariably lead to a gang war in the narrow alleyways of Grimsand. It is less happy however, if a non-guild member targets one of its richer patrons who pay to be overlooked; such robberies invariably leading to an undermining of trust and visits by armed warriors seeking recompense.

Whilst the guild brings in a reasonable income from these combined activities, the most significant earnings such as burglaries occur only incidentally and its outgoing costs are a continuous drain - having to pay taxes to the governor, bribes to highly placed individuals to look the other way, and the daily feeding and clothing costs of its members. In addition, key pieces of the finest treasures recovered are hidden away, sacrificed to their deathless god. Thus the Brothers of Votishal maintain only a modest standard of living, rather than living big on their ill-gotten gains. ▶





It's a Maze of the Unknown, a Labyrinth of Forgotten History

The guild maintains several properties in the eastern quarter of the colony, within which are the sleeping quarters and training rooms for their membership. All three are connected, either by being situated adjoining one another, or via underground passage. This convoluted sprawl is known as *the Thieves' House* to its members.

Most obviously and best known to common folk, is the pawn shop found in the central section of Winding Way; nestled on the northern side of the east-west alleyway between two other somewhat ramshackle buildings. Whilst the lower floor is taken up by the pawnbroker, there seems to be no visible method to gain the upper two stories of the building. In fact access is achieved from the rear adjoining property or by climbing up one set of shelves to a concealed trapdoor in the ceiling. Barred from above, it can only be opened by a thief stationed there as guard.

The floor over the pawnshop is taken up by a hammock-filled dormitory utilised by the apprentice and journeyman thieves. The third and uppermost story juts out over the alley. It is subdivided into several private rooms used by the guild masters, who reputedly have small holes drilled in the floor to listen to unguarded mutterings of their students.

Abutting the rear of the pawnbrokers is a second building, itself facing the small cull-de-sac plaza at the end of Lotus Alley. The ground floor of this property is ostensibly a small alchemist's shop, hidden behind a very thick iron studded door. Tiny and cluttered, it is filled with cobwebbed glassware, drawers

of desiccated herbs and a steep staircase leading up. Part of the oddly shaped layout is sealed off with a solid stone wall, secreting a narrow shaft leading between the cellar and the first floor above.

At the top of the stairs is a low roofed alcove before another heavy wooden door, this one bound with bronze. It is sealed with a very complex lock (Difficulty 100%) connected to an array of loaded crossbows mounted vertically above the false ceiling. Failed attempts to open the lock without the key causes anyone standing in the alcove to be hit by 1d3 heavy crossbow bolts (roll 1d10+10 for Hit Location) as well as ringing an alarm.

The rest of the first floor is taken up with a small classroom for teaching skills, such as lockpicking, disarming traps and other less athletic activities; a small armoury containing a few dozen knives, a handful of short swords and crossbows, blowpipes and slings of various makes; and a secret panel opening into the vertical shaft leading down to the cellar. The second floor comprises of several workshop-store rooms containing specialised clothing and equipment used for more sophisticated thefts or tomb incursions. At the very top of the property, the attic has been reinforced as a guardroom for those thieves who defend the roof-top entryway.

Whilst the cellar ostensibly holds food and drink for the guild, it also hides a secret underground tunnel between the alchemist's shop and a private residence adjoining the small plaza at the end of Shadow Lane. Seemingly owned by one of the lesser merchants of the colony, it is actually a combined bolt-hole and back door entrance to the guild. The tunnel passes under Winding Way with several

Alchemical Substances

Beyond the usual narcotics, there are a number of different substances the Brothers of Votishal sells to its members to help them perform their nefarious jobs. Lubricating oils for locks or traps (1sp); step grease to upend pursuers (2sp); strong acids for dissolving small amounts of various stones and metals (25sp); smoke powders of various concealing hues (30sp); tomb dust which causes its inhalers to choke and sneeze (15sp); cosmetics for facial disguises (5-40sp); and a range of polishes and lacquers to enhance the appearance of artworks (10sp). The cost of each is per dose.

vaulted side chambers used for more physical training, additional stores and a guard post to prevent unauthorised access, from which two spike-faced portcullises can be remotely dropped and latched into place, preventing ingress or egress from either end of the passage.

At the far end under Shadow Lane, the tunnel ends in a stair leading up to a concealed door on the ground floor of the merchant house and a heavy stone door into the cellar; which in reality is a combined necropolis and temple, where previous guild members are interred. The bones of its greatest thieves are inset with precious gems and once a month the guild gathers here to pay homage to their restless spirits. There is no obvious way of unlocking the door save from within, and disturbingly it remains barred until the night of the new moon.

Above the cellar the rest of the building appears to be nothing more than a richly furnished house, its windows covered by rusting iron bars set into the stone walls to prevent burglary. In fact it is the personal residence of the guild master, who permits higher ranking members to access to the rest of the guildhouse via its front door during the hours of darkness - no lanterns or torches are permitted to burn in the stygian forecourt. The ground floor comprises of a kitchen and servant's quarters (staffed by two guild enforcers), whilst the first floor is divided into a comfortable parlour and a library filled with an unmatched collection of journals, maps and architectural drawings of many places in and about Port Grimsand.

The second floor is bristling with deadly traps which guard the guild master's bedroom, his study where guild records are kept, a trophy chamber filled with weird and exotic memorabilia, and last but not least, the guild treasury hidden in a narrow space between the three other chambers. Nobody except the lesser masters is ever allowed entry to these chambers on pain of death.

They like to be Mysterious, I Know these Thieves

The structure of the Thieves' Guild follows the guidelines proposed in the *Cults and Brotherhoods* chapter of *RuneQuest 6th Edition*. Lay Members are folk the guild pays for information, bribes to keep silent, or suppliers of illicit substances. Only apprentices and above are considered full members and have to submit to the guild's rigid authority and discipline. Membership grants benefits such as free food and drink, a safe place to sleep and protection against those they have plundered.

Apprentice thieves are recruited into guild from promising freelancers arriving at the colony, then given further training in Thief career skills (*RuneQuest* page 47); the candidates serving as lookouts, guards and general dogsbodies in recompense. Once graduated as journeymen, they are permitted to plan and execute their own jobs, providing they bring in an income.

Master thieves retire to the role of teachers, only undertaking missions at their own whim, each a virtuoso of at least one particular skill. However the position of master thief only opens up when the previous occupant has died, or is otherwise rendered incapable of maintaining the position. For obvious reasons, there is only one guild master, who holds absolute dominion over the entire brotherhood.

The Brothers of Votishal require their members to swear absolute loyalty to the guild, the loss of the tongue being the first punishment for revealing any of its secrets, death the second. Likewise failing to pay the proper guild dues from successful transactions or theft, or attempts to embezzle guild finances, result in the loss of a finger. Since the lure to skim is rather strong in younger rogues, it is not unusual to find many guild members missing a digit or three. Those that fail to change their ways ending up as fingerless, even handless, beggars.

Last but by no means least, is the guild's most unusual rule. No full member is permitted to kill, or even significantly injure, anyone during a heist or robbery. Violence is not only viewed as a serious lack of subtlety, doomed to bring unwelcome attention upon the brotherhood; but it also threatens the goose which lays the golden egg. Woe betides any thief who places future guild earnings at risk by resorting to weapons rather than utilising their cunning. Self defence and guild enforcement are, of course, a different matter.

To emphasise this point, the guild teaches their own unique Combat Style which includes Shortsword, Dagger, Crossbow and

Garrotte. It includes the style trait of Man-catcher, guild members being infamous for immobilising (or rendering unconscious) trespassers and enemies with scarves, laces or short lengths of rope.

Notable guild members

At present the guild embodies 23 full members, the most notable of which are listed here.

Corvaas

Guild master. Short, thin faced and lean with silvering hair and finely trimmed beard. Erudite and always suavely dressed, the current head of the guild wishes to expand its fortunes by undertaking more tomb-robbing missions in the surrounding ancient ruins. Unknown to all, Corvaas lives in terror of the bejewelled skeletons in the subterranean crypt, hearing the demands of their yet departed spirits in his head. He fears that disobeying their (possibly imagined) commands will end up with his throat throttled by bony hands.

Slavzas

Master thief. Second in command to Corvaas, this quiet, compact built man of non-descript appearance seems at first glance to be a mercenary warrior. In fact he is an expert in climbing, sneaking and disguise, with ambitious plans to betray the guild master and seize control if his superior ever shows a hint of weakness. He fulfils the role of enforcer, disciplining members who stray out of line and passing down Corvaas's meticulous orders.

Dammat

Master thief. Another of the masters, Dammat is the guild teacher of evasion, unarmed combat, sleight of hand and fast running. Once a ragged red-haired urchin who relied on pickpocketing to survive, he was a gang member before they travelled through the Smoking Mirror to the colony. Now somewhat older and fatter, he rarely leaves the guildhouse save to track down and chastise apprentice thieves who do not return by the established curfew time.

Ivlis

Master thief. One of the few female guild members, Ivlis trains younger thieves the arts of perception, insight, deceit and acting. Short, brunette and hard faced, she is a recent addition to the group, rising meteorically through the ranks thanks to her ability to judge and manipulate people. This has caused some friction, inspiring some to claim (rightly) that she plans to become the first female guild-mistress in the history of the brotherhood.

Dikkion

Master thief. An old, white haired man of wrinkled face and crooked back. He teaches the arts of lockpicking, trap mechanisms and draftsmanship. A legend amongst every thief in Grimsand, Dikkion is said to be able to bypass any lock ever crafted. He never goes out on tomb robbing expeditions any more, having lost too many acquaintances to the eternally waiting death traps concealed within the unexplored necropolises. Instead he runs the guild's alchemy business, concocting strange substances to keep himself occupied.

Yomless

Master thief. A middle aged woman with shoulder length blond hair and twinkling grey eyes, Yomless acts as the guild treasurer, teaching commerce on the side. She usually fronts the pawnshop, negotiating protection deals and fencing stolen goods. At times she sometimes serves as the chief appraiser at the colony gates, palming the odd trinket to keep her skills in shape.

Fizziv

Journeyman thief. Fat, jolly and as treacherous as a starving viper, Fizziv earns his commissions ostensibly as a trap finder, but in actual fact tricks others into performing the dirty work of a burglary for him, then betraying them to their doom whilst carrying off the ill-gotten gains.

Alexa

Journeywoman thief. Tall and raven haired, this female thief is a cunning lock cracker, who often teams up with Pshwayi, a second story man. He scales the buildings, pulls her up and she breaks into them. Reputed as fearless there is no job she won't accept if it is challenging enough.

Vluck

Journeyman thief. A poser and somewhat egocentric, Vluck is highly skilled in a wide range of criminal techniques. His one weakness is his love for fine clothes, in particular a pair of highly buffed knee-length boots which squeak as he walks, making stealth somewhat problematic.

Other lower ranking members of the brotherhood

- Griph the greasy
- Haughty Snark
- Thjork the cutpurse
- Cut-my-own-throat Oggo
- Pshwayi the cat
- Bullyboy Bashobuck.

The remaining nine are left to the Game Master to develop.