AMULET FELLOW & THE REGAL ROSE

SHORT FICTION

Story by Andrew Foley

Glint Gardnersonson's charms were wearing thin on Penhale, and Jargo hadn't appreciated them from the start. The blue-haired gnome had introduced himself more than an hour ago, taking a seat at their table and launching into a lengthy, largely one-sided conversation. It had been a long month for Jargo and Penhale. The gnome's attempt to lift their spirits was making it longer.

"It was a mighty oak," said Glint, describing a tree he'd climbed as a child. "Mightier than the Iron Throne at the peak of its power, mightier than any army the Sword Coast has birthed. Why if it wasn't rooted to the ground, I daresay it would rule us all today. You should have seen it, Jargo."

Jargo smiled widely and reached for his war hammer. Penhale shook his head. The Elfsong Tavern's owner didn't tolerate violence in the taproom, at least not from those not in her employ.

Jargo sighed. He wasn't going to have any fun this night.

Or perhaps he'd get to kill something after all. A thin, disheveled, but clearly angry man stalked towards their table. His face was contorted rage, his bony fingers clenched in fists. Jargo gripped his warhammer.

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The angry man marched up behind Glint and, without hesitation, warning, or even an introduction, punched the gnome in the head.

Glint generally thought himself as friendly as the next gnome, but in this he was overly modest. His outgoing ways had earned him many friends and also several punches to the head--so many that Glint made it his habit not to take any assault not involving steel or magic personally. And so he did not pull his attitude stick from his belt or petition Baravar Cloakshadow to curse his assailant.

He simply fell from the chair, rolled to his feet, turned to his attacker and greeted him with a cheerful, "And a good evening to you, friend. Glint Gardnersonson's my name. Please, sit, join me and my friends for a drink. I was just telling them about the time I climbed--"

"I'll not sit, you miserable little pickpocket!" the man cried. Patrons at nearby tables abandoned the pretense of apathy; several openly turned in their seats to watch the confrontation play out. "Give it back! Give it back now!"

"Absolutely! By all means, take it back, it clearly means more to you than it does me." Glint paused then, and as an afterthought added, "What are we talking about?"

"The amulet!" cried his attacker. "The amulet you stole!"

"'Stole' is such a provocative term. I prefer to think of it as borrowing for an extended period." This time he saw the punch coming, and ducked it. "'Stole' it is, then. You say I took an amulet, eh? Could you be a little more specific...?"

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"How many amulets have you borrowed for an extended period?" asked Penhale.

"I'm not sure," said Glint. "I kind of lost count after the first one."

"It was made of gold and had a hippogriff on it."

"Oh, the hippogriff! A fabulous piece. You weren't wearing it."

"No. I was hiding it. In my pants."

"Yes, yes, I remember it now. The amulet, not the pants, no offense. I remember thinking, 'An amulet like that really ought to be worn,' and then I thought, 'I could wear an amulet like that', and then 'I'd look good wearing an amulet like that, and this fellow isn't wearing it.' At that point borrowing it seemed not just obvious but the only appropriate thing to do given the circumstances. And as you can see, I was right: I do look good wearing the amulet."

"I don't care how you look!" cried the man. "I need it back! Where is it?"

Glint frowned. "Maybe it doesn't look as good on me as I thought..." He turned to Penhale and pushed his chest out. "What do you think?"

"I think you think you're wearing this gentleman's pendant," said Penhale. "If I'm right in thinking so, cast your eyes down to your chest and you'll soon realize it isn't the case."

Glint looked down. Instead of the handsome amulet he expected to find dangling on his chest, he found a small piece of card affixed to his tunic by a straight pin.

Glint looked to Penhale and Jargo. "How long has this been here?"

"The whole stlarnin' time," said Jargo.

"And you didn't ask about it? I would've asked about it."

"I was afraid you might answer."

"Where's my amulet?" wailed the man Glint had come to think of as the Amulet Fellow.

the Amulet Fellow.

"I had it when I left the boarding house earlier this evening, I'm sure of it," said Glint. "Unlike some people I could mention, I wouldn't let such a fabulous piece go unworn."

"Gods!" cried Amulet Fellow. "I'm doomed!" He sank down onto the chair he'd punched Glint off of, burying his head in his hands.

A half-elven woman approached the table, tying her long blond locks behind her head. "Is everything all right here?" Her voice was pleasant enough, but there was an edge to it. Those patrons who had watched the scene unfold turned back to their drinks, anxious to avoid her ire.

"Everything is fine, Lady Alyth," said Glint. He gave Amulet Fellow a friendly slap on the back. "Steady on, friend. It's a nice piece of jewelry, I'll grant you, but there are plenty of other amulets in the sea." Alyth gave the gnome a raised eyebrow but said nothing more. She moved back to her place behind the bar counter,

Glint turned his attention back to Amulet Fellow. Something in the defeated slump of the man's shoulders told Glint Amulet Fellow had a tale to tell. "So what's so important about this amulet?"

"It's the only thing I have--I had--that'll get Nozzik to give me the letters back."

"Oh, you know Nozzik?" said Glint.

"Too well."

"I don't know Nozzik," said Penhale.

"I don't want to know Nozzik," said Jargo.

"Well you're probably right about that," said Glint. "It's possible he's not the most unpleasant half-orc in Baldur's Gate, but he's in the running. If he wasn't in the Black Brotherhood's good graces he'd have done a noose dance ages ago. Though hanging would probably only slow him down."

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"I could slow 'im down," said Jargo. He had a soft spot for the weak and downtrodden, and would happily forgo a night's sleep in favor of pounding this Nozzik into bloody pulp on Amulet Fellow's behalf.

"That's doubtlessly true, but let's not resort to violence unless we have to," said Glint.

"Tell us about the letters, and what Nozzik has to do with them."

"My father was a sellsword," said Amulet Fellow. "He met my mother just a week before his employer required him to travel to Calimport. It would be more than a year before they saw each other again. They stayed in contact, though. Wrote each other letters every day, without fail. They fell in love in those pages--they wed the day after he returned."

Glint held his tankard up in a toast. "To love," he said.

Amulet Fellow leaned back in his chair and sighed. "After my parents died, the house and all it held were sold. All I had left was my parents' letters and the amulet--the amulet you stole."

"Borrowed for an extended period."

"I don't care about the amulet. But those letters are all I have--had--to remember my parents by. That damnable half-orc knew of the amulet--he wrecked my apartment looking for it. When he couldn't find it, he took the letters instead and offered to make an exchange..."

"Except you don't have anything to exchange anymore," said Glint. "And neither do I."

Glint unpinned the card and examined it closely. A stylized rose with a thorny stem was stamped on its lilac surface in dark violet ink. Glint smiled wider than usual, which wasn't easy; his typical smile was built for a head larger than his own. But such was his pleasure at the sight of the card that he managed it. "I've been robbed!" he announced, clearly delighted.

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"No, this is definitely a robbery, and I can tell you who did it, too."

"The Regal Rose," said Penhale. Glint stifled his disappointment at the half-elf having snatched a potentially dramatic reveal away from him.

"Who? Wait, I don't care, I just need it back. My parents' letters, remember?"

"What?" said Glint. "Oh, right, the letters. Slipped my mind. Well, never mind them for now, let me tell you about the Rose."

Jargo emptied the pitcher into his cup. To Amulet Fellow, he said, "Settle in. This may take awhile."

"The Regal Rose is a thief among thieves. He, she, or they--if anyone knows who the Rose is, they're not talking--travel the Sword Coast, robbing the rich. And occasionally the poor, if the poor they encounter happen to have any riches. The Rose is so good at stealing, so proud of their purloining skill, that they leave these cards in the pockets, pouches, and apparently pinned to the tunics of all whom they've robbed--an artist signing their work. You've got to admire the flair. Well, maybe you don't.

"Their habit is to find an area and work it hard for a tenday or two, then move on. It seems they've come to Baldur's Gate."

"Good time for it," said Jargo. "Everyone's running from the Shining Lady up north, most bringin' what valuables they have with 'em."

"I need the amulet back," said Amulet Fellow. "If I don't give it to Nozzik, he'll burn the letters and break my legs. If I'm lucky he'll only do the legs."

"I can't help but feel somewhat responsible for this situation," said Glint. "Wearing an amulet that deserves wearing is one thing, but getting a man's legs broken and his parents' love letters burnt... No, it's just not on."

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"So we bust some half-orc head?" asked Jargo.

"We've troubles enough without attracting the Zhentarim's attention," said Penhale.

"The Black Brothers don't respond well to challenges. No, it'd be best if I simply get the amulet back and let our friend give it to Nozzik. Even though it would look better on me."

"Get it back? How?" asked Amulet Fellow.

"How am I going to get it back? That's a good question. How am I going to do that?"

"Penhale could find it," said Jargo. Penhale favoured his friend with a cold glare. Jargo gave him a crooked grin and shrugged. "You're the one who didn't want to bust the half-orc's skull."

A strain of hope crept into Amulet Man's voice. "Can you find it?"

"There is a spell I could do, had I the necessary elements," said Penhale. "Alas, I don't have a looking glass at hand--"

"I do," said Glint.

"A valuable looking glass," said Penhale.

"Very valuable indeed," said Glint. "I use it to look at myself." He rummaged around in his pockets and produced a handheld mirror framed in exquisitely wrought silver.

Jargo whistled softly. "Most valuable lookin' lookin' glass I ever saw."

"Yes," Penhale sighed. "That should do the trick..."

Glint stood on the private booth's table, looking over Penhale's shoulder, trying to glimpse of himself in the mirror. "It'll be usable afterwards, right?" he asked yet again.

Penhale ignored him yet again. He muttered the incantation under his breath, waving his hands over the Rose's card, then the mirror. He closed his eyes--

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"Are you sure you want to close your eyes?" asked Glint. "It is a looking glass..."

"Just let 'im do the spell," snapped Jargo.

After several seconds, the wizard spoke. "Yes... I see the amulet."

"Where? Where is it?" cried Amulet Fellow.

"I see a room... There's a bed... it's an inn. A high quality one. The paneling on the walls is dark... The blankets are silk... Red... Gold trim..."

"The Helm and Cloak," said Glint. "I spent a pleasant evening there not too long ago. Well, I enjoyed it. The owner was less than thrilled. Long story. Go on, what else do you see?"

"A woman, an elven woman. Tall, thin. Long black hair and piercing eyes... She's wearing the amulet--Oh dear." Penhale turned the looking glass face down.

"That doesn't sound good," said Glint.

"Her eyes were more piercing than I thought. She detected the spell."

"She knows someone's looking for her?" said Glint.

"She won't be there long," said Jargo. "If you're going to get the amulet back, you better go now."

"Amulet Fellow," said Glint. "Meet me here this time tomorrow night. I'll have everything sorted out for you then."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Have you anything to lose in doing so?"

The Amulet Fellow sighed. "Fair enough."

And with that, Glint was out the door, racing down the streets of Baldur's Gate as fast as one could race down them in the crowds clogging the way.

The crowds were thinner near the Helm and Cloak, and better dressed. The Flaming Fist was more in evidence here in the Upper City than the Lower. Glint fought the urge to lighten some pockets. If he was to catch up to the Regal Rose he'd need to act quickly.

Glint took the steps up to the Helm and Cloak's main entrance two at a time. Given the length of his legs this was pretty impressive, as he'd have been quick to point out to any who witnessed the feat. Nobody in the vicinity seemed to care, however, and in truth he needed to focus on the matter at hand. He moved to the inn's door, expecting the halfling standing guard at the door to open it as he had for numerous others.

Glint was not to be one of this number, however. By Cloakshadow's grace, he managed to check his forward momentum prior to mashing his face into the oak. "Your pardon," he said to the halfling. "I'd like to go in."

"I can see you want to go in, but the pardoning's going to be trouble." Seeing Glint's bemused look, the halfling added, "I was here the last time, you know."

"I really don't," said Glint, who really, truly did not and was not at this moment inclined to find out.

"The last time you were here. I had to clean the suite."

Glint paused. "I can explain that--"

"Leave!" shrieked the guard. "I'll call the Flaming Fist, see if I don't!"

Glint flipped through the pages of his memory, hoping to recall an alternate way to enter the establishment. The back door was a possibility, but not a good one--the guards hadn't let him in there last time, and that was prior to a memorable night in the royal suite most involved would probably rather forget. The lower floor windows were barred, but he might be able to scale the building to reach one that wasn't...

wasn't...

Before he settled on a course of action, the door was pushed open and the Regal Rose herself emerged. Her gaze settled on the guard. "You open and close the door," she said. "It's not much of a job, but it's not a difficult one. You've no good excuse for not doing it."

"Your pardon, ma'am," said the halfling, glaring daggers and a few poison-tipped crossbow bolts at Glint.

The Regal Rose's long hair and ears were hidden beneath her hood. A veil concealed most of her face. Glint might not have recognized her had she not shared his view that an amulet like Amulet Man's deserved to be worn. Glint had suspected he liked the Regal Rose. Seeing her wearing the amulet she'd so recently stolen confirmed his suspicion.

The master thief moved down the stairs, and joined the river of people flowing along the street. Glint jogged through the crowd, trying to catch up to the elven woman but never quite managing to do it. He followed her through the gates into the Lower City, where the crowd pressed closer around him. He lost sight of her behind a thick-set woman carrying a large wooden barrel under each arm. As he negotiated his way around the barrel-carrier, Glint caught a flutter of purple cloak disappearing into a narrow lane between two buildings. He raced into the alley's shadows, desperate not to lose track of the Rose.

Were he a taller man, the dagger would have caught him in the chest. Were he slower, it would have plunged into his eye. A telltale gleam in the alley's murk alerted him to the danger. He spun to the side, narrowly avoiding a fantastic excuse to don a spiffy eye patch.

The Rose didn't falter. She whirled around, swinging the heel of a well-made leather boot at Glint's face. He dropped to the dirt, rolling out of the heel's path--it took a chunk out of the sandstone wall beside him.

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"I don't want to fight!" Glint shouted, hoping the thief's willingness to engage in violence originated in perceived necessity rather than personal predisposition. "I don't even want the amulet back!"

"What amulet?"

"The one you took from me. I know you're the Regal Rose."

Above her veil, the Rose's eyes turned cold. They were a killer's eyes--Glint's killer's eyes, if he was a split second slower or her dagger the preceding split second faster.

Glint danced around the alley, narrowly avoiding the Rose's blade again and again. He could tell her fighting skills were better than his. His words would reach her sooner than any weapon he might wield. "I just wanted to compliment you on your style," he said, jumping back far enough that the blade didn't reach his throat. "The leaving a card thing? That's smooth. Actually, I'm curious--" He rolled past her, narrowly avoiding a kick he would later swear split cobblestones. "How did you manage to sneak the amulet and pin the card to my chest?" He leapt into the air as her foot swept the ground beneath him. Landing, he capered sideways, avoiding her slashing dagger. "Did you use the Sixth Finger sleight? The Sigil Wiggle with maybe a Good Uncle Over the Shoulder tossed in for misdirection?" He rolled backward and bounced up to his feet, ready for the next attack--but the Rose instead held her position, dagger up in a defensive posture.

"Galad!" cried Glint. "You couldn't have just used the ol' Calimshan Elbow, could you?" He looked at her closely, and was sure of it; beneath her veil, the woman was smiling. "Cloakshadow's cloak's shadow! It was the Elbow!" He bowed deeply. "I salute you, madam. Your skill is matched only by your style, and I daresay your style is without peer."

"What's your name, gnome?" the Rose asked. Her voice was husky, deeper than he'd expected.

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"I am Glint Gardnersonson and it would be my honor to shake the hand of a talent of your unparallelled calibre. Er, I'd rather do it while the hand isn't holding a blade though, if that's possible."

"You don't want the amulet back?"

Glint shook his head. "I'd not admit it to anyone else, but it looks better round your neck than it ever did mine."

With a flick of her wrist, the Rose's dagger disappeared. Long fingers absently caressed the golden hippogriff as she spoke. "You're right about that."

Glint strode forward--not too quickly, he wasn't entirely sure where the dagger had disappeared to--his arm extended. "It was truly a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady. If you're ever in the Gate again, do seek me out. I'd love to discuss the craft with you."

"Perhaps I'll do that." The Rose shook his hand. Her grip was firm and dainty. Glint would spend hours trying to figure out how she managed that (if survived that long.)

"I hope you will," said Glint. "I'd love to talk now, but unfortunately I've business to attend to elsewhere."

"As do I. Sweet water and light laughter until next."

"Forges warm, friend," said Glint. He started moving for the alley's mouth, but stopped almost immediately.

The dagger had reappeared in the Rose's hand, and had furthermore been pressed against his throat.

"No need for that," said Glint. He fished the amulet out of his cloak and handed the Rose's ill-gotten gain back to her. "Admit it," he said. "You'd have been disappointed if I didn't at least try to get it back."

She didn't answer. Instead she stepped away from him, and disappeared into the alley's shadows. Glint judged it wiser not to try and

She didn't answer. Instead she stepped away from him, and disappeared into the alley's shadows. Glint judged it wiser not to try and follow her, and, against all odds, did the wise thing. If he was to solve Amulet Fellow's Nozzik problem, he had no time to spare with frivolities like shadowing a thief or having his throat cut when the thief realized she was being followed.

"You didn't get the amulet back?" Tears welled in Amulet Fellow's eyes.

"No, I did get it back," said Glint. "Briefly."

Amulet Fellow sat at Glint's table and proceeded to wilt. He slumped forward, his forehead slowly sinking down, down, down until it came to rest on the table.

"Don't be so upset, friend," said Glint. "I didn't get the amulet back, but it's not the amulet you wanted."

"I didn't want to have my legs broke. Or my arms. My back. My neck." After a few seconds' contemplation, the forlorn man added, "My skull."

"You forgot your fingers," said Glint.

"Nozzik won't," moaned Amulet Fellow.

"Don't despair. I've something here that's sure to cheer you up."

Despite Glint's admonition, Amulet Fellow continued despairing.

"Stop kissing the table and look up for a second, will you?" said Glint.

Amulet Fellow reluctantly did as he was bid. His eyes widened when he saw the sheaf of papers Glint held.

"I told you I'd sort it all out," said Glint. He slid the letters across the table. "Now when you meet with Nozzik, I want you to say this--are you listening? Say these words exactly as I say them..."

"I had the amulet..." said Amulet Fellow. Nozzik's lips curled back from his tusks.

Amulet Fellow wiped the sweat from his brow. He cleared his throat, then started again. "I had the amulet, but it got stolen by the Regal

then started again. "I had the amulet, but it got stolen by the Regal Rose."

The half-orc's face broke into a sneer. This shocked Amulet Fellow, who thought Nozzik had been sneering to begin with. A low rumbling rolled out of the sneer. It took a few seconds for Amulet Fellow to realize Nozzik was chuckling.

The half-orc held up a Regal Rose card, one that close examination would reveal had two small, pin-sized holes in it. He shook his head. "Stlarnin' cutpurse got me, too."

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