

# Tales of 'The Scourge'

## Of Olde Gutrot and Grog Isle

**A Short Story by G.D. Bartle**

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## *Of Olde Gutrot and Grog Isle*

It is known to many – within The Scourge, the Pirates’ League, the Viper Faction and beyond – that Mercurius Stark has in his employ a certain ‘Olde Gutrot’, responsible for producing the fine wines and liqueurs for which The Scourge encampments are famed. Hearken, to a tale not oft told, of how that arrangement came to be...

The time is The Gathering of 1111. A shore party from Mercurius’ ship, the *Lunar Storm*, attends as part of a mighty force from the Viper Faction. The Vipers are in full panoply; their puissance at arms, their cunningly worked magicks and skilful divinations have attracted the attention of Akari Daemons. Their encampment has been under attack from wave after wave of these creatures aided and abetted (or some would say hindered) by snivelling Tarantulas skulking in their wake trying to pick up scraps of glory, as the hyaena will indulge in the slaughter of the dying when the savagery of the noble predator is replete. In the depths of the night, keen-eared William Saxon, Quartermaster aboard the *Lunar Storm*, overhears a whispered conversation in deep shadow near the Tesseract. Those Tarantulas who consort with daemons, in their spite, summoned the Akari hoping that they could do what that miserable Faction could not. Defeat the Vipers.

Their plan fails in its totality. The Akari are wiped out and the Tarantulas so humiliated that very little is seen of them for the rest of that Gathering. Such was the lesson meted out to them by the Vipers that to this day, their cowardly cutpurse proclivities have all but disappeared.

To celebrate, Mercurius Stark, William Saxon and Skum, a leading hand, repair to the tavern. Seated comfortably in the covered yard, close to the entrance with faces to the portal and backs shielded by the wall, tales are told, toasts offered and foaming tankards clash. Skum, quick-witted and always with half an eye on the next ‘opportunity’, spots

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a group of goblins working the clientele, seemingly offering wares for sale from a leathern satchel slung over the spokesgoblin's shoulder. Taking the long way there and back from a visit to the stables, he catches their names: Goblin, Goblin, Goblin, Goblin, Goblin, Goblin, Goblin and Goblin. Vials of liquid of varied hues are withdrawn and their supposed powers both arcane and mundane expounded: here a sleeping draught, there a potion that will paralyse the imbiber. One that heals, one that corrupts, one that cures seasickness, one that forestays drunkenness, one that causes a flux.

A clan of uruks in the company of a fey – her guards, she says – demand a potion that will turn their hides into impenetrable armour. Growing restless at the endless, incomprehensible witterings of the goblins, an uruk snatches a vial at random from the satchel, rips out the stopper with his teeth, spits it out and drains the draught in a swallow.

Instantly, the goblins fall silent and still, as does the uruk. The fear is evident in their eyes. The uruk's fellows wait in expectation, making wagers as to what will happen next.

Slowly, oh so slowly, the uruk's skin turns into impenetrable armour. A comrade shoves him. The statue wobbles, topples and shatters as the petrified uruk's head strikes a boulder weighing down a corner of the yard's sailcloth roof.

Uproar.

As the uruks and goblins melee, the fey flees and the other drinkers realise they have urgent appointments elsewhere, the *Lunar Storms* conspire.

“Well, they certainly do something,” opines Mercurius.

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“We know someone who can tell us what,” contributes Will.

“What’s my share?” asks Skum.

A plan is quickly formulated. Mercurius picks up his own bag from where it has been laying unseen by the side of the upturned half barrel that serves as a table, and dumps the contents onto the tun between himself and Skum, then passes the bag to Will. Skum slithers to the stoop. They wait. The spokesgoblin’s bag drops from his shoulder, unnoticed. Feigning drunkenness, Mercurius edges round the periphery of the brawl. The right opportunity arises, and a flung elbow seemingly sends him sprawling on the floor, his tricorn spinning from his head.

Imperceptibly, William raises a thumb. Mercurius scoops up the satchel, pours the contents into his upturned tricorn and staggers to his feet, clutching his hat in his hands. With his face towards Will and standing between him and close to the ruckus, he waits for the slightest contact with his back, using it as an excuse to fall forward. He does so, sprawling across another tun and banging into their table, emptying the contents of his tricorn into the waiting bag held open by Will, who deftly swings it round his blindside in to the waiting hands of Skum, who cheerfully saunters from the scuffle with the swag to the sanctuary of their camp. Mercurius slumps back into his seat as Will consoles him over their spilt beers and helps him pocket his possessions. They head to the bar for replacement ales, chortling and congratulating each other on a plan well executed.

Emerging into the sunlight, in the yard all is quiet. A half-dozen well-armed individuals wearing tabards in the white-and-blue quarters of the Treaty Militia have restored order and are questioning uruks, goblins and the fey. There are wounds to both sides, including the spokesgoblin himself. Surreptitiously, Mercurius and Will slip into fresh seats, as far

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away as possible from the inquisition while still in earshot. A militiaman confronts the spokesgoblin. He recognises him, and suspects him to be Goblin the Poisoner, wanted by every Faction and Guild in Erdreja. The fey's accusations are only half-believed. The fey's racial detachment from reality and predilection for tale-telling is well known. The dull intellect of the uruks means they cannot remember why they were fighting the goblins, except that it had something to do with some broken stone. The goblins claim innocence. The satchel is searched. It contains no trace of poisons, even when scryed for. With no evidence, no reliable witnesses and the goblins now shouting about being victimised to any passers-by that will listen, the Militia discuss their next steps. Cries for aid from their own Guild headquarters, which is under attack from entropic skeletons, helps them decide there is nothing they can do, despite the shattered stone uruk on the ground.

The Militia lumber off as fast as their weapons and accoutrements permit, bare steel clearing a path to the Pavilion of the Guilds. The goblins decide that now is a good time to make good an exit. As they do so, the flash of glass glinting in sunlight catches their attention.

Mercurius is wagging a vial of orange coloured liquid between finger and thumb. Will motions the spokesgoblin to sit. Cautiously, he does so, surrounded by his fellows. Mercurius repockets the vial he had pushed into the soft earth under the table when he took his dive, and speaks.

“We need to talk. You and one other. Two and two. Not here. The Harts. Their tavern's open house.”

After a brief discussion, the goblins agree. The spokesgoblin dismisses all bar one. As the *Lunar Storms* and the two remaining goblins

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head for the encampment of the Harts, the spokesgoblin tries to start a conversation with Mercurius, but is rebuffed.

“Not yet. Too many sharp ears and too many flapping tongues.”

As it is mid-afternoon and Mercurius and William Saxon are familiar visitors to the Harts, they are cheerily waved through the camp gatehouse unchallenged. Mercurius despatches Will to buy four shots of their chilli brandy for appearance’s sake and selects a table where it is quietest. Given the time of day and the good weather this is not difficult, as the communal part of the camp is virtually deserted. The four sit, Mercurius and Will in piratical garb and the goblins in typical robes and cowls of midnight hue. Weapons are placed on the table in plain sight as is the custom. Mercurius gets straight to the point.

“One. I know where yer stuff is. Two. You owe us yer lives. Three. Ye’re gonna need help.”

“But you stole it!” the spokesgoblin whines.

“*I saved yer miserable lives, is what I did!*” hisses Mercurius, fiercely. He sighs. “Don’t make it have been against me better judgement.”

“Ahhh,” sneers the spokesgoblin, malevolence in both eyes and tone. “Keep, eh, one of each for your trouble, we’ll be on our way, and there’ll be no retribution.”

“**RETRIBUTION!**” spits Mercurius, grabbing Will’s left wrist and hauling him back into his seat, from where he has half-stood and made for his weapon, a hand-and-a-half elven darkblade. The goblins flinch.

“Don’t talk to me about retribution,” he continues more calmly, “when we both know ye’re well and truly fucked.”

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The goblins feign innocence. Mercurius presses home his case rapidly, ticking his points off on his fingers, giving the startled goblins no time to interject or think.

“Ye’re Goblin the Poisoner all right. Yer voice give you away as Teutonic, yet you ain’t no Viper or we’d know. Yer worked for the Cobras against King Gustav, and now ye’re exiled from Viper lands on pain of death, right? Yeah, I’m right. So now yer freelance and everyone hates yer. Everyone wants yer dead.

“So why are you here? Lemme guess. Smash-and-grab raid, yeah? Transport in, sell your shit quick as, transport out. Yeah? Except the Militia will have the transport circles covered by now, and they’ll be looking for yer. No way out. Like I said, you’re fucked, and ye’re gonna need help.”

“But they let us go, didn’t they?” sniggers the spokesgoblin.

“You don’t know Commander Tine,” says Will in his cultured voice. “I do. Whatever was going on at the Guild, he’ll have made time to get a report, and if he’s got even the slightest suspicion you’re around, he’ll do what he can do get you.”

Goblin the Poisoner looks less sure of himself. Mercurius points at his companion, then presses home his point.

“You. Brandies. Here’s the deal. You’ll work for me, and me alone. I’ll get yer out of here, give yer sanctuary. Somewhere secret. You’ll be kept provisioned. Give me something else to sweeten the deal.”

“Wine,” quavers the hitherto silent goblin as he stands to go to the bar. “We make wine and liqueurs, chocolates too.” He darts off as Goblin the Poisoner stands to cuff him.

“Interesting,” opines William, satisfaction in his tone.

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“Add that to the list of yer services,” growls Mercurius at the goblin. “But bear this in mind. Any of me and mine get even the *slightest* hint of bellyache after drinkin’ yer stuff, so do *you*. Of the kind yer get from a sharp, metal pointy thing.”

Goblin the Poisoner considers, his brow furrowed. As his compatriot returns, he stands and takes a shot glass from the tray.

“Interesting proposal. However, I don’t need you, but I *will* see you again to collect on what you owe me for the goods you’ve got.”

So saying, he downs his shot in one and both goblins stride away.

“When you change yer mind, meet me in the casino at midnight!” Mercurius calls after them.

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At the Witching Hour, the casino is packed. Cloaks and weapons are checked in at the door. At the dozen gaming tables, up to six players take part in Poker, Blackjack and Roulette, the house dealing. Many of those playing have guards standing behind them, alongside those whose purses have been emptied at the tables and now merely observe, considering what might have been, or marking those whose winnings they intend to procure on their departure. Servers come and go, bringing drinks from the tavern across the way from the stables. An ideal situation for cutpurses to ply their trade and escape with little chance of detection. The pavilion is loud from cheers, groans and shouted conversation, the atmosphere hot and stuffy from the many lanterns and braziers as well as the press of people.

Mercurius Stark, William Saxon and Skum arrived two hours earlier, commandeering a high stakes poker table in the far corner and flooding the playing places with *Lunar Storms* brought in from the port as reinforcements. For every *Lunar Storm* playing, another crewman works the room acting as lookout or guard.



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At five minutes to midnight, Goblin the Poisoner, Goblin, Goblin, Goblin, Goblin, Goblin, Goblin and Goblin enter the casino. Forewarned, a *Lunar Storm* points out Mercurius' table. A relay alerts him to the gobins' presence. When they have made their way through the press, three *Lunar Storms* give up their places, leaving Mercurius at the table with William, Skum and three goblins. Goblin the Poisoner is manhandled into a seat between Mercurius and Will. The stacks of chips left by the departing *Lunar Storms* are shoved to the goblins.

As the croupier distributes two cards face down to each player, the attention of most observers is drawn to the poker table closest to the entrance. Two cheerfully drunk barbarians have noisily started winning big. One, a burly, tanned fellow with a muscular physique, fair stubble on his head and clad in furs, cheers in a deep, booming voice. The other, smaller, fairer of skin and with dark hair, wears an elaborately decorated black breastplate and stands, punches the air, and yells "*CROM!*" whenever he wins. Both keep up a constant stream of banter with those egging them on.

Mercurius shouts into Goblin the Poisoner's long, green ear as the three Community cards are dealt and bets laid.

"So ye're here. I guess I was right. You're fucked."

Goblin the poisoner waits as the Flop is dealt, places a bet. By the door, a huge roar goes up as the big, blonde barbarian wins again. As Mercurius flips in a chip and sips beer from an ancient pewter tankard, Goblin the Poisoner leans in.

"The Militia are everywhere," he moans, and they've got Mages and Incantors with them!" He pauses as the Turn card goes down, and checks the bet. Across, a cheer goes up as the dark haired barbarian flamboyantly lays a massive bet on his two cards without looking at them.

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“The transport circles are guarded,” he continues, “And every road. Everyone leaving is questioned. They’re using detection magic on any goblin they see!”

“So you *do* need my help.” Mercurius’ words are a statement, not a question. The River card goes down. “Fold,” he orders.

Mercurius folds himself. The crowd cheer another outrageous bet by the dark-haired barbarian. Mercurius pushes a parchment into Goblin the Poisoner’s lap. The goblin looks into his face, surprised.

“A contract,” he shouts into the goblin’s ear, as loud as he dare. “Read it and sign it, or sod off. You got until the next hand’s dealt.”

The onlookers go wild as the dark-haired barbarian wins a huge pot and cleans out several others at his table. As others take their places and on the *Lunar Storm*’s table another hand is dealt, Goblin the Poisoner reads. At a signal from William, an inked quill is passed from behind.

Goblin the Poisoner sighs, takes the quill, and signs. Will passes the quill back from whence it came, and shouts something the goblin can’t hear over the hubbub to the fellow he hands it to. The blonde barbarian and his smaller fellow are standing and toasting the latter’s win loudly.

“Two more hands,” shouts Mercurius at Goblin the Poisoner, “Then we leave.”

The hands are played, the table vacated, and its former occupants make their way to the exit. Remaining chips are cashed in (and the goblins’ coin carefully pocketed by Skum), and receipt tokens handed back at the cloakroom, where weapons are strapped back on and the *Lunar Storms* don long, deep-cowled cloaks. The party steps out into the night, to be greeted by the squad of *Lunar Storm* crew who had been loitering inside the casino. They, too, wear hooded cloaks.

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“This way,” mutters Skum, and the party head off warily, eyes scanning for the slightest sign of followers or undue interest. They pass the stables and the tavern, skirting the brightness of its torches, and on past the now-closed stalls of the traders. Far enough on that they cannot be accused of planning a raid, the group stealthily steal into deep cover under thick pines, two hundred yards from the port road.

“What’s this?” asks Goblin the Poisoner, a hint of fear in his voice.

“Yer ticket outta here,” replies Mercurius. “Cloaks off, boys.”

The *Lunar Storms* remove their cloaks. Some of them are goblins. They pass the garments to Goblin the Poisoner and his party.

“Boys, this here is *Olde Gutrot* and his band. He’s our vintner.” The name is heavily emphasised. Goblin the Poisoner nods in understanding.

“He makes wine,” interjects Will, in answer to the looks of confusion on some faces. Mercurius addresses Olde Gutrot directly.

“Skum here has been to the port and back with these lads all afternoon and evening. He’s got the gift of the gab, so the Militia on the gate there know him. All they’ll see is the same group of cloaks and some gobboes under some of ‘em. Let Skum do the talking.”

“And if it goes wrong?” queries Olde Gutrot, uncertainly.

“We’ve got a couple o’ lads hidden nearby who’ll use distraction magic while you run like buggery. Go.”

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Mercurius Stark and William Saxon take a circuitous route to the tavern. At an hour-and-a-half after midnight, it is the safest place to be outside of camp. They buy ale and join a slightly built blonde girl sitting

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at a table by herself. Will greets his daughter with a hug and a fond kiss on the cheek. The tavern is otherwise empty bar the odd table of twos and threes engaged in low conversation. The sensible are already in their tents, sleeping.

“You got here alright, then.”

“I knew you two weren’t far away if I got into trouble. Our Mage at the port gate gave me the right signal.”

Will breathes a huge sigh of relief. “It worked, then.”

“Never doubted it for a second,” smirks Mercurius.

“He could still have tried the circles or the gates!”

“Not after Molly here told Commander Tine that Gutrot the Poisoner was definitely around and she could give him a description after that ruckus. It’s kinda hard to avoid missin’ the fact that someone’s lost the tip of their nose when ye’re looking for it. And nobody even noticed that she was stackin’ the deck so Facesmasher and Deathman would win while we got on with business in the casino. Great distraction!”

“If you’ve got a croupier in the family, why not exploit it?”

Molly’s face was a picture of total innocence.

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So why do I tell you all this, my friend? Because it is a good tale, and worthy of the telling.

Besides, nearly ten years have passed, and Goblin the Poisoner is long forgotten. The tales we put about in dribs and drabs, here and there, meant that his demise was accepted as fact.

Until now.

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We took Olde Gutrot and his followers to an island I know of, way off the traditional shipping lanes. It is lush and benevolent, but far from shore across difficult seas and surrounded by treacherous rips and currents. It may only be approached safely in a small ship's boat piloted by one who knows the eddies as I do. The wrecks that garland it deter those few who pass from attempting a landing. It is unnamed on the charts. We call it Grog Isle.

At our last supply visit, Olde Gutrot's usual cheerfulness was shadowed by anxiety. Most years, a vessel would be sighted once or twice. Now he sees them once or twice a month, usually on the horizon, but with some creeping closer. In answer to his concerns, I placed a lookout with a powerful telescope on Grog Isle. Yesterday, I received a message, and it seems that Olde Gutrot's instincts are correct.

A dromond passed, only a mile offshore, on the very edge of the reefs. Several of its crew were looking at Grog Isle. One, my lookout's message tells me, was stupid enough to be wearing a Militia tabard. Skum, damn his eyes, has sold us out. I *told* him that raid he insisted on trying went beyond risky and was doomed to fail. That lousy chancer has cut a deal, the bastard.

So this is why I tell you this tale. Olde Gutrot's usefulness to us has gone beyond his fine wines and liqueurs. We have had need to call on the product of his other 'talents' from time to time. Besides, we signed a contract. He has held up his end of it, and so we are obliged to do the same.

A new Grog Isle is required, and I thank my good First Mate, Everon, for providing it. I shall say no more for now. Go now, muster the other Captains of The Scourge! There are plans to be made, and deeds to do!

Mercurius Stark

Master of the *Lunar Storm*

Six Bells of the Afternoon Watch, the Second of July, 1120