The Waterdeep Herald

Hammer Edition

1372DR, Year of Wild Magic

[]

| HAMMER 2 |

For several days now, the lower Wards of Trades, South, and Castle have been struggling with an infestation of flying, swarming, and stinging creatures known as "stingflies." Those citizens travelling outdoors must not only brave the harsh winter elements, but the merciless clouds of biting pests as well. Sages versed in such matters have advised the Lords that the creatures are common in the Vilhon and surrounding lands. Although the cold weather is killing the airborne bloodsuckers in relatively short order, it seems that their high reproductive rate has kept them around thus far.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED: A mismanaged portal opened within the confines of the wizardly Kolat Towers brought forth the swarms of irritants. Due to the unfamiliar terrain and harsh winter weather the tiny beasts will soon die out, but not before more than a few citizens and beasts of burden are made to suffer.

As for the entomology of the stingfly (courtesy of Ed Greenwood): "...resembles a thumb-sized housefly with a scorpion-tail, barbed stinger and all. It likes the ears, underchin, and neck of humans, striking to draw blood with its tail and then sucking at the gore with large, spongy mouthpiece -- just for an instant, before springing away. The bites DON'T itch, and stingflies don't strike at eyeballs or fly into mouths or nostrils, but they DO strike at genitalia and breasts, and the feel of a stingfly bite is like being firmly jabbed with a pin. Sleeping through stingfly bites is impossible for many folk, who when they must slumber in the open often roll in mud to stop stingflies from trying to bite. If one had to travel or labour all day amid clouds of stingflies, the blood loss would probably equal 1- 2 hp damage, plus a chance of bloodborne disease...."

| HAMMER 10 |

Swarms of stingflies still haunt sheltered back alleys and protected courts of Trades and South Wards, although their numbers are quickly diminishing. In Lord's Court yestereve the mage Alcedor Kolat offered the services of what he called "a highly trained flight of stirge-bats" in attacking the airborne pests, but was firmly denied by the assembled Lords. Given recent rumors that the irritants originated from the shuttered abode of the wizardly Kolat Brothers, such a denial may only be expected.

| HAMMER 11 |

The reputed smuggler and notorious Dock Ward ne'er-do-well Buldath of the Coppers disappeared from his cell in the Castle this morning, literally right out from under the noses of his gaolers. The Watch and Castle guardsmen remain silent on the matter, and it is thus far unclear whether the prisoner was rescued by compatriots, abducted by ransomers, or quietly disposed of by an enemy (or the Lords themselves). As his nickname suggests, Buldath was the leader of the Cod Lane Coppers, a Dock Ward fellowship of cutpurses and street toughs. He was apprehended in the last tenday by a large force of Watch and Guard officers who stormed the wharfside lair of the gang.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED: The feared Xanathar has collected that which belonged to him. Buldath was a minor operative in the crime syndicate, in charge of running the beholder's southern Dock Ward interests. Using his Hand operatives as well as several allies within the Castle, the eye tyrant liberated the smuggler from his cell. Unfortunately for Buldath, the Xanathar does not reward failure or capture well. The erstwhile escapee is now imprisoned in a Xanathar safehouse, until his fate is decided.

| HAMMER 14 |

Passerby in Virgin's Court today were witness to an astonishing display of martial combat. Armed with only a stout length of ironwood, Padriembor the Pale, a recent arrival to the city, took on and soundly defeated four fully armed and armored swordsmen. After the bout, the victorious Padriembor announced today his intention to take students in the art of unarmed fighting. Some of the onlookers to the duel, such as the renowned arms-tutor Myrmith Splendon, were openly skeptical of the easterner's fighting prowess, and charges that the contest was rigged with hireswords bought by Padriembor soon began to circulate through the crowd. It is being whispered that the incensed foreigner later challenged Splendon to an honor duel, but that the black-robes of the city have declined to sanction such a contest.

| HAMMER 16 |

Buldath of the Coppers, the smuggler and Dock Ward gang leader who disappeared from his cell in the Castle some days ago, was discovered and killed in a hidden Trades Ward lair today. He was discovered not by the Watch or the Guard, who have mounted a citywide search and rousted the lairs of his "Coppers" street gang, but by the mage Randulaith of Mirabar, one of a number of bountyhunters and headsmen who took the Lords up on their offer of a reward for the capture of the escapee. In what is being described as quite a titanic struggle, the escaped felon was incinerated by a fire spell cast by the valiant mage. The charred remains were positively identified by some personal effects, including several pieces of gold jewelry, and by a recognizable tattoo on the left arm of the victim that escaped the burning.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED: As noted earlier, the Xanathar was none too happy with the captured Buldath. The publicity and contacts made today (in addition to those garnered in the Eleasias efforts to succor the ailing merfolk of the Harbor) will serve Randulaith -- and thus, the Xanathar -- well in his desire to become one of the Hidden Lords of the city.

| HAMMER 23 |

A number of officers and mages of the Watch raided a Trades Ward warehouse today, carting off several wagons full of merchandise and issuing an arrest order for Flalghest of Elversult, the merchant who leased the hall. The watchmen were observed removing a number of "topkegs" (barrels built with a separate, smaller "top" compartment, usually used to store quantities of ale and rum), leading to rumors of illegal contraband -- everything from stolen gemstones to Gondish smokepowder to the blood of elves or unicorns -- hidden in the smaller compartments.

| HAMMER 25 |

The notorious freebooter (and alleged black-sail) Jardhan Ilvhmost was slain in a brawl with the Swords of the Lucky Lady adventuring fellowship last night, in the Bloody Fist tavern in Dock Ward. During the chaos, which started when a member of the freebooter party charged the Swords with cheating on a game of dice, Jardhan was laid low by the sorceress Raesalra "Hurlstars." The surviving members of Jardhan's party (including his lieutenant, the half-orc Grundhas One-Eye) retreated to their ship, the Black Maiden, where they are said to be arming themselves and preparing to revenge the death of their captain.

| HAMMER 27 |

The Valiant Wind, a merchantman out of Myratma, exploded in a deadly blast this evening, sending the Harbor into chaos and confusion. Passerby report the ship, sitting at anchorage with a full cargo of passengers, household goods, and horses and wagons, erupted without warning. The blast destroyed the ship and killed at least eight crewmembers. Large pieces of the ship's upper deck flew as far as 300 feet into the harbor, while other pieces damaged the warehouses and merchant offices fronting the wharf. A large timber was thrown right through the facade of the nearby Haelembryn's Fine Footwear, striking and killing the owner. At least 13 other crew members and passengers were injured, although a full accounting has not yet been made by the Watch.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED: The cause of the explosion can be blamed on one of the passengers, a Calishite mage named Alhagamn "of the Flaming Fingers." Alhagamn booked passenge on the ship intent on returning to his native land after a lucrative trip to the City of Splendors, to sell several bound fire elementals. The sale of such creatures is forbidden by the Watchful Order, and for good reason; elementals are dangerous to trap and contain, and such practices are fraught with danger. One of the last elementals Alhagamn had in his possession weakened the bonds of its prison just enough, causing a magical backlash that blew the upper deck (where the mage's private quarters were located) to smithereens. The other three fire-creatures, still entrapped within their wards, were flung far from the ship, and now presumably lie on the harbor bottom, or on some Dock Ward rooftop.

| CALENDAR DAY - MIDWINTER |

In taverns and festhalls across the city the Midwinter holiday starts off as normal, with the ale flowing freely and citizens gathering to make agreements for the upcoming trade season, spin tales of heroes long gone and battles hard fought, dwell on the latest gossip (the political intrigue surrounding the vacant office of Knight-Champion of Lathander and the always-popular "who's-a-Hidden-Lord" guessing game seem to occupy the majority of such taverntattle), and make predictions for the newly-born Year of Wild Magic.

A small circle of Auril-worshippers gather on the slopes of Mount Waterdeep at daybreak, clothed only in short shifts and huddled deep in prayer. As the first rays of the sun crest the Mount, soft nimbuses of bluish light envelope the gathered faithful and, moments later, a light snowfall begins. Shortly thereafter, the Frost Maiden's supplicants end their prayer and disband. The snowfall continues for some hours afterwards, but never gathers in any appreciable amounts in the streets of the city.

Later in the morn, in a solemn ceremony, the druids of the Quiet Place (the chapel of Silvanus) cut specially-blessed mistletoe from their indoor gardens. Along with Lord Piergeiron and Guardcaptain Rulathon (both bedecked in white-tabardded chainmail), and an honor escort of city guardsmen, the druids make a circle of the city, stopping at each massive city gate to ritually hang sprigs of the mistletoe (a tradition dating back to the days of the Fallen Kingdom, designed to bring peace to all within the city walls for the next year).

However, the gathering twilight brings a sudden and dramatic change to the day's events, and a heavy pall descends over the normally festive night. Across the darkened city, many citizens report feelings of great unease and unexplained fear, and soothsayers and prophets across the city claim to have visions of tyranny and flame and, more specifically, of eyes of red blazing flame, surrounded by utter darkness. Many of Waterdeep's spirit denizens rest uneasy this night also, and there are sightings in all Wards of a marching column of hooded, cloaked, spectral beings, whose heavy boots and inhuman chantings strike fear into the hearts of even the bravest nocturnal inhabitants.

These unnatural events fade with the coming dawn, but in their place is left a new mystery; the mark of a mailed black fist is found incised into the doors and entry portals of many buildings across the city -- apparently by magical means, as there is no charring or flame-marks on the edges of any of the brands. Places so marked include the private abodes of the necromancer (and reputed Cyricist) Stavros of the Skulls, the courtier Colstann Rhuul and the mage Nain Keenwhistler, and city landmarks such as the Plinth and the House of Wonder.

WHAT THIS MEANS: Bane, the Black Hand, the Tyrant Lord, has returned to Faerūn. Throughout the Realms, the Midwinter festivities are subdued and fraught with visions of fear and ruin. The mark of the mailed fist is meant as a warning to those who oppose the Lord of Acheron, such as faithful of Cyric, meddling adventurers, and followers of the "lesser gods."