

Excerpt from Greydeere

By Dianne K. Salerni

Each of the two dogs stood half the height of a man, and in the darkness the saliva that overflowed their jaws could have been mistaken for blood. From the top of the wall the thief stared down at them, unafraid despite massing perhaps a quarter of their collective weight. One gloved hand rested firmly upon a squealing, squirming bag.

Initial growls grew louder, becoming snarls and howls that threatened to rouse the household. The thief unsealed the bag and tossed it over the wall, where it seemingly exploded in midair. Three large woodland rodents panicked and tried to run in three different directions before they had even struck the ground. After a moment's indecision, each of the canine pair selected a creature to pursue and hounded it into the shrubbery. The thief ran lightly along the top of the wall, disregarded. A lantern did spark briefly in a first-story window, and the thief fell flat against the wide stone wall—but the light was snuffed out almost immediately, while the dogs snarled and slavered in the bushes.

It was an impressive manor, magnificent in size, designed with a flourish of ostentation and more than a touch of arrogance. There were three massive wings, as well as stables and a servants' house in the back. The largest wing lay behind the other two, at a right angle to their intersection. Its great, wide windows, each flanked by a pair of nightmarish, sculpted faces, stared down upon an ornamental bathing pool and fountain in the back.

When the thief had half-circumnavigated the grounds, the dogs were no longer visible and barely audible. The lithe figure went over the wall, landing easily and sprinting across the open lawn. In the shadow of the servants' house, the thief paused, then took to the nearest tree. It was a small leap from an overhanging branch to the squat, one-story building, and the thief padded over to the corner of the grounds adjacent to the mansion.

Surveying the distance, the black-clothed figure chose the third-story balcony as the best spot for an anchor and began to unroll a spool of thin line. A well-practiced cast hooked a light-weight grapple on the corner of the third-story railing—and the thief followed immediately after. The slim form struck the jutting corner of the second-story railing and clung there briefly, waiting to see if anyone had noticed. Then over the railing and onto the tiled balcony, and there was only one more story to climb. Securing the anchored line around one arm, the thief recognized that one of the ugly white window sculptures would aid the ascent. A foot in its gargoyle-like mouth, a hand atop the elongated head—and the upper railing was within reach. A moment later, the intruder had noiselessly made the balcony and was creeping past dark,

mirrored windows, rolling up the line but leaving it behind with the grapple, hidden, for ease of retreat.

The important doors were located on this third-story balcony, midway along the length of the wing. A slim instrument was inserted between the frames, and with a flick of the wrist the twin glass doors swung silently inward.

The intruder entered. An almost impenetrable darkness lay upon the giant room, but the thief could see, as though shadow upon shadow, the towering canopied bed, indistinguishable furniture along the far wall, and a great cabinet opposite the sleeper on his extravagant pallet.

The trespasser approached on feet so light they might not have touched the ground. Certainly, the sleeper never moved. The massive cabinet dwarfed the slight-figured prowler, who nearly had to stand on tiptoe to reach the fastened latch.

Suddenly the thief's position was bathed in the red glow of a lantern, while the rest of the room emerged from the darkness and settled into soft shadow. The intruder stiffened and turned around.

The young man in the bed sat up, slowly and easily, without alarm. He was fully dressed, the silk of his tunic and trousers scarcely wrinkled. His dark hair was tousled, his mouth twisted in an undeniably amused smile. His soft voice carried clearly across the darkness which separated them, thick as substance. "Good evening to you, Greydeere," this man said. "If you would be so good as to remain where you are...."

The thief did not move, studying the item held in the right hand of the room's inhabitant. It couldn't be, but it certainly looked like ... a wand of power. But magicks were not for mere humans, and this man was not known to be a sorcerer.

Without leaving his bed, the young man pointed the wand at a spot to the left of the thief's head. A flick of the wielder's fingers and a red bolt of light shot out of the wand's front end. Where the narrow beam reached its target, it burned a hole in the wall's masonry.

It was true. Not just any wand of power, but the worst kind: a wand of destruction. The infamous Greydeere was trapped.

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The room's inhabitant approached his not-unexpected guest. He towered at least a head over the thief; his shoulders spanned a breadth nearly twice as great. The black-clothed bandit seemed to dwindle to child-size before him, yet did not betray a hint of fear. Of course, the full face mask that appeared to be carved from ebony wood and the shrouded hood made it difficult to see the thief's face underneath. For this reason, the man with the wand was wary.

“I had expected the great Greydeere to be someone . . . more imposing, I must admit. It *is* Greydeere, is it not?” he asked, as though holding conversation at dinner. “Oh, indeed, it must be. It could be no other person. Greydeere the thief—a legend among us, a villainous rogue, a person to beware, to fear, and if truth be known, to admire secretly. I have been expecting you.”

There was no reply, no movement behind the ebony mask. The other man noted, with a barely suppressed chill, that the sculpted mask vaguely resembled the goblin-like window decorations of his own manor. He was no longer amused. “Speak, man, why don’t you?” he growled. “I have captured you—I will not be your victim, but your master. It is not lightly that you attempt to burgle the very bedroom of your prince, the Marquis of Hael! And it is not without reason that the Marquis refrains from eliminating you on the very spot!”

Still the silent figure did not move. The Ninth Marquis of Hael, losing patience with his intruder, stepped forward and tore away the galling mask. The black hood came away with it, and the Marquis froze in sudden shock. The wand wavered for a brief instant, enough for the thief to shift position—and then the Marquis regained his alertness with an almost visible snap of attention. He dashed the sculpted mask to the floor and, grabbing a handful of thin black cloth, ripped his captive’s tunic to the waist. The thief wore nothing underneath. Thus faced with the incontrovertible facts, the Marquis stepped backwards, amazed.