

# Masdy's Silver

*by* dj barber

Thran peered through the inky blackness. There were Trolls here—he was sure of it. Best not to run across that lot, he thought. And where in blue Hades was that damn Blitz? Was *supposed* to be here, by the gods. ‘And here I am,’ thought Thran, ‘stuck out here in the pitch of night with Trolls lurking about, damn their bloody arses!’

A branch snapped not too very far away. Thran heard murmurings, gruff, not Dwarfish to his ear. He collapsed to the forest floor and then rolled under a wetberry bush. He closed his eyes tightly as heavy feet plodded close by his hideaway.

Trolls! Thran held his breath, hoping against hope that they'd not smelt him already. If he survived this hour he'd throttle that tardy little bastard Blitz—and he could bet on it, huh?

They stood just above him, the Trolls, speaking their sewer-talk, the filthy things! Thran's heart marched at double-time and he felt the sweat trickle down his spine.

‘Goat-dung-eating-bastards!’ Thran thought. ‘If you know I'm at your feet be quick about it.’

But after a few more guttural syllables the two Trolls strolled off, one slapping the others' shoulder in an apparent admonishment and then laughing. ‘Huh,’ thought Thran. ‘They was scared too!’

Thran crawled out from under the wetberry bush and suddenly Blitz was beside of him. Thran nearly wet himself and then realized who was there. “Ya damn fool!” he sputtered, “Ya nigh scared me witless.”

Blitz squinted his eyes. "Don't be daft, Thranny," he said, "I was lost and all of a sudden you come poppin' up like old Masdy at *Last Call* in Garley's Pub. *You* was the one what scared the crow out of *me*."

Thran grunted, "Well," and then they were both off, striding briskly now in the opposite direction the Trolls had taken. They had a meeting across the river with Mudge and Harley. A small burgle was in the offing.

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Higher up in the mountains where the trees thinned and the Dwarves thickened, old Masdy was being shown the door by Garley himself, "I ain't a-tellin' ya where to go, Masdy," said Garley for the twelve-thousandth and first time, "But ya can't stay here."

Masdy mumbled in his normal drunken way and sauntered out of the pub. He turned left and took a step or three, then turned roundabout and started for home; such as home was. His missus had died in the fourth year of Thrimby's reign (Thrimby being the fair and great Dwarf-King) and Masdy had taken to drink. His poor sister, shamed by her brother's drunkenness had moved far and away where she oughtn't to have news of Masdy's daily inebriated activities.

Inside the old pub, Garley bolted down the doors and shutters and then ambled towards his small cave. The coin from tonight's till was safely tucked in his pockets. He gave no thought to robbers or thieves; for they were beyond his experience. But tonight would be different; for tonight mischief was loosed.

Meanwhile, our four hopeful burglars were heading home; their plans secured and the promise of tomorrow's till itching their

somewhat small brains. Blitz, much to the others' misgivings, had written the entire scenario out. How was he to know whither what evil his way come?

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'A long way,' thought Blitz, 'a lot of work for a handful of coins—and *that* split four ways.' Blitz went home; his wife already abed and snoring. He sat at the table under the flickering candlelight from the wall above. Pulling out his plans he studied; it still seemed small change for the risk. If they were caught—if that crusty Sheriff Portlee got hold of them and brought them before the King--why the punishment would be the same as if'n they stole a thousand-fold this meager handful. Still, a few coin was better than no coin, he supposed. Blitz wadded up the bit of paper with the plans and tossed it in the fireplace. There was no fire at present, but he'd rekindle one at dawn. He stood, stretched, and walked towards the bed where his mate's snores called.

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Cheater was a Goblin. He carried a long knife, not quite a sword, but more than your average pocket blade. He'd left hearth and home, that being a hole on a muddy bank of the river, near where the four plotting Dwarves had crossed earlier. He saw them clearly in the black night and drew nigh. It seems they were planning a theft; coin of the realm. The silver and gold of Garley's Kingdom spent well wherever one traveled so Cheater stealthily followed the dwarves through the night on a long trek back into the higher mountains.

Cheater didn't care for the high mountains for there were too many Dwarves here. And Dwarves would kill a Goblin first, ask questions later (If questions were asked at all) But the allure of an easy mark bade him continue.

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Cheater slipped the long blade of his knife through the space between the door and jamb and forced the wooden handle up and then pushed the door wide. It was warm and dark inside, even though the fireplace was dead cold. Cheater crept toward the pair sleeping sonorously upon a wooden-decked bed when a floorboard creaked and the Dwarfess sat up with a start. "Who's that?" she cried, casting her eye about. "Who's that now? I can hear ya, ya knows."

Cheater could see the male was slowly rousing, so he leapt toward the bed and slashed the Dwarfess' throat with a wide thrust. Grabbing the male by the throat (who was fully awake now) he demanded to see the paper with the robbery plans he had heard the dwarves all speak of.

Terrified, Blitz told the tale, a purseful of coin at most, to be split four ways. Cheater let go his grasp. "You stupid little twerp," he snarled. "A handful of coins and you lot are talkin' like you had a dragon's hoard? Oh, you stupid, stupid thing!"

Cheater left the two bodies, blood covered but no longer bleeding, on the bed. He strode toward Garley's Pub in hopes of at least a small morsel and a few spare coins. He entered through a window whose shutters were a bit loose at the hinges and prowled about. He found left-over stew in a pot in the back room and ate the cold and greasy gruel greedily. He poked about in this nook and that cranny, but found no coin. As he was turning to leave, the front door burst open and there stood Garley; ax at the ready. The dawn had come and caught Cheater unawares.

Cheater rushed forward, but Garley threw his ax which caught Cheater full on the face. He fell dead—no longer a threat—just a miserable dead thing, loathed by all, loved by none.

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Garley fingered through the Goblin's pockets. *It--wasn't there.* 'May the gods be praised,' he thought. He ran into the back room and yanked the false bottom out of the old oaken desk, pulled out the cloth-wrapped parcel, and set it on the desk. Slowly Garley unraveled the parcel and a wooden box was revealed. Garley opened it and inside, upon a velvet lining, laid the talisman.

Solid silver it was, shiny as the sun, by all's in Hev'n and Hell. The shape: the likeness of a man, laying on his back with his knees together and pulled up. Arms outstretched, away from the body. The face was triangular shaped, tongue protruding from under an upturned mustache, and horns, one just above each ear. The T-shaped figure was about four inches long, nearly as wide. The talisman felt heavy for its size in his hand.

Garley noted the sweat now beading on his brow, his heart racing. 'Oh, dear--dear,' he thought, 'this was much too close! I must be more careful with this accursed thing.' He reset the talisman back in the velvet-lined box, closed it tightly and rewrapped the cloth back around it, albeit messily. His hands shook; he wiped his fevered brow with the back of his left hand. "I promised Alamas the Elf I'd keep this monstrosity safely hidden." He sat heavily on the stool before the desk, breathed deeply, once, twice, once again...and then no more...

Some little while afterward, the cloth-covered box was opened and its contents secretly stuffed in a deep pocket by the old sheriff, Portlee.

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Thran, Mudge, and Harley sat at a small table in the corner of Garley's Pub. The new owner, Wallowy, was a big, old, fat Dwarf who'd spent many an hour a-leaning on the bar. The only difference now was he was a-leaning on t'other side. The three conspirators held their heads close together. The noise of others throughout the pub covered their conversation.

"What happened to Blitz," Thran was saying, "has nothing to do with us."

Mudge was shaking his wide head. "I dunno, Thranny," he said. "It's awful funny, strange—ya knows—Blitz getting' it like that. And don't forget it was the same one what got old Garley too."

"What are you flittering about, Mudge? Garley's heart stopped--that and nothin' more."

"I dunno," interposed Harley. "I thinks maybe Mudge's got a point."

Thran sighed deeply. "You boys ain't buggerin' up *now*, are ya? Cause if'n ya ain't interested in an easy bit of burglin', then what good are ya?"

Wallowy approached and the three all quieted. "You boys looks thick as thieves over here with your heads all pulled together." He laughed a deep rolling guffaw. "One's put to mind that ye'd be creeping about like that foul Goblin what killed Blitz 'n Purry. Ya ain't planning murder are ya?" Wallowy roared with laughter, the

threesome sat red-faced and quiet. "Ooo-Kay," he spat, "Ya wants another round, boys? I musta hurt your feelings so's it's on me, eh?" He roared with laughter again and Thran, Mudge, and Harley all nodded in favor of the free ale.

#

Alamas the Elf was a thief. He lived in the Thorny Forest many miles southwest of Garley's Pub. He rode like the wind, the third day now—*someone had used the talisman!* The Witches of Eleanor, with their huffing and puffing, had attached the talisman to him--poor Elf--by some witchy mischief. Whenever someone used the foul thing he'd get a burn in his gut like a molten fire.

He'd stolen it from the Witches, of course. But how was he to know they had brewed-up some deviltry? But so it was. Anytime the damnable object had been held in a hand and used--this gut wrenching fire took him. Some spell which could have befallen anyone, Alamas supposed.

Five days ago the pain first hit. That was when he *knew*--he hadn't felt that familiar torture in nigh four years. Thought it would be safe, he did. Garley, the old Dwarf--something had happened to him, surely. The old boy was afraid--too afraid to wield that thing's power of his own accord. Nay! The poor old boy must've passed.

Alamas had been stopped by the pain only once since leaving the Thorny Forest. He hoped against hope the talisman's new bearer knew not what he now held.

And Hell's Fire knew, he couldn't just ride in there amongst the Dwarves; for they had no use for Elves—thought the whole lot frivolous, always singing, working odd magic, believed them not industrious one tad or tittle. He could bluff though--some injury; loss of memory perhaps; thump on the head, eh? But Dwarf medics were of the broken bone, deliver a child, and hangover remedy variety.

They knew naught of the higher crafts, but at least even *they* acknowledged there was something to them; madness, memory loss, possessions. Stealth might well be a better tact, though—stay out of sight—out of mind.

Alas, he must steal his way to Garley's Pub. It had to be somewhere inside there. Garley'd have never had the cursed thing in his own home. And one couldn't just put it in a hole somewhere around—not a hunk of silver like that! Certainly not amongst the noses of thousands of Dwarves—they'd have sniffed it out of the ground the first hour. Alamas sighed a deep sigh. 'No,' he thought, 'it must be in the pub.'

#

Portlee the sheriff had a fairly simple life: A fat wife, six fat children—so far—and a monthly handful of coin without ever having to enter the mines. Real work that! But for Portlee life wasn't arduous, as it were for most.

He'd took that thing from Garley's Pub that day; knew it was wrong, but Fire 'n Hell! Wasn't he only doing his job? Took it out of the box, he did. And when he gazed on it he couldn't help himself. It was as if the damned thing had stolen *him*!

He carried the talisman around in his deep pockets, daring not to leave it home. Its anatomical correctness would have offended the wife and it's a cinch one of the kids would have found that thing--Dwarfish nature being what it is 'n all.

Portlee did notice a change that first day however. The Dwarfess' seemed to be a tad more friendly, stood close, swore he could've taken any one of them into a dark corner and done whatever he wished. And that was an odd feeling for a middle-aged Dwarf with an extended belly.



By the second day he couldn't dismiss this newfound attraction he seemed now to possess. So he took full advantage. At day's end he was exhausted, felt as if he's pulled a twelve-hour in the mines. Six encounters in one day—and each lasted over an hour! 'By the gods,' he thought, 'what has happened to these usually shy creatures?--and what of me? I'd have never believed, at my age, I could've performed so well.'

He kept the thing put away, deep in his pockets, and took no notice when the females stood near, called to him even. Nay! Couldn't have another day like that! Why I'll get the chopping block if the Dwarf-Council hears of this—married Dwarfess', young, single Dwarfess', any one of them—no matter! What shall I do?

He'd have to be rid of this cursed thing, that's what! But where to put it? And then he realized he could merely return it to whither it came...

#

Wallowy slapped the door closed behind the last of today's patrons; Masdy needing a special invitation to depart. He called to the serving wench he had kept on after he'd bought the place and bade her sweep up after the nightly tins were washed. He stretched his arms high as he walked to the little back room. He'd need to order more kegs and send a courier over hill and dale to see if the wine was yet in season. He entered the small room that served as an office and noticed immediately the wooden box on the desk. He approached with some caution, tapped the lid, finally slid the top off and gazed at the lump of silver. He pulled it out of the box and examined it closely.

'Nice weight of silver,' he thought, 'fine craftsmanship, but by the Deep o' The Mines, what a *hideous* thing!' It felt fine in his hand,

though—right nice feel. He was going to set it back in the box, but found it difficult to set the damn thing down.

At this moment, his serving wench, the young Dwarfess entered the room. “Clean-up's all finished, Master Wallowy, anything else?”

Wallowy turned still holding the talisman. He was about to dismiss the lass, but the cat seemed to have his tongue, he stammered a bit as the lass approached, her eyes wide, her smile knowing and mischievous.

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Alamas had little problem bypassing the outer fringes of the Dwarf sentries. He left his mount along the banks of a stream, (away up from the hole where Cheater had dwelt) tied where the soft grasses and water were in the creature's easy reach. Alamas hoped the escape would be as quiet as the entry, but Ellerquoy, his horse, would be well rested if needs be for a quick escape.

He walked slowly in the post-dusk gloaming. No need of hurry. He had all night. His sword was drawn, bow across his back, quiver full of arrows. It was a long march, which was fine though, as he purposed to arrive late. That old pub of Garley's would be open late, as always, no matter who was proprietor now.

Sometime after midnight Alamas fell to the ground, grasping his stomach. “Ooo, my-my!” he groaned, and pulled himself into a ball. After some time, Alamas didn't know how long, the pain subsided. He rose slowly, weakened by the bout of pain. But he steeled himself and continued; figuring whoever had the accursed talisman was sleeping its effects off at the moment.

Alamas entered the Dwarf-Town. A fountain loomed at the center, large caves, some with wooden-structured fronts, lined the square. He made straight for Garley's Pub.

The pub was still there, just beyond the blacksmith's—right next to a mine shaft that dropped into the realm of stone sparklies the Dwarves so loved. Sword in hand, he entered the pub. It was odd, the door being unlocked, a low fire burned toward embers under the mantle, and a small light escaped from the nearly closed door toward the back.

Alamas entered the back room; and there on his back upon the floor lay Wallowy; one of Garley's regulars as Alamas recalled. He was dead, trousers around his ankles, smile plastered across his pasty, dead face. Pursing his lips tightly Alamas figured there be worse ways to die, but where was the talisman? Or better--where be the Dwarfess that left Wallowy in this sad state? For that would be where the talisman lies.

Looking across the little room Alamas saw the box upon the little desk. The very box he had given to Garley--poor Garley, dead now—that was certain. He looked around the pub, spied a washer's rag and thought 'A serving wench!--that's who has it. But where? Where has she gone?' Alamas went to the back door—no tracks there, so he returned to the front. Outside faint dwarfish footprints led away on the crushed stone surface of the street. Tracking was difficult, but Alamas picked up her trail. It led down a hill away from the square to a low line of small caves. The same footprints led right up to a cave with a wooden front and boardwalk. He sheathed the sword and pulled out a knife—the door opened without a sound.

A small fire flickered on the hearth, candles lit here and there, and suddenly she came into view from the back of the little cave. She was older than Alamas would've thought, but nay! These were

Dwarfs--looked ancient after only a century. She approached, hand behind her. "What brings you into my home, Elf!" she barked.

"If that's a blade you hold behind you, you'd do best to drop it. If it's what I believe it to be, I'd appreciate the return of my property."

"Just like that, then?" she said. "You give this bewitched and foul thing to some ogre like Wallowy so's he can make sport of me? What kind of devilry is it, then? Huh? You high and mighty Elf! I'd never a let an old leech like Wallowy ever touch a hair of me head, but you go and give him *this*," she brought it from behind her, firelight danced and reflected from the talisman, it was as if it were—*alive*!

Alamas felt a slow and steady pain arise in his stomach. He held out a hand, "Please. You misunderstand..."

"Misunderstand? I haven't misunderstood."

"I--" he stuttered and fell to the floor, brought his knees up and retched in pain.

She approached slowly—the Elf lay gasping, glancing up at her. She seemed prettier to his eye, *but no!* It was the damnable talisman, that and nothing more. She put the hunk of silver in a pocket and Alamas' pain began to subside once again.

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Thran, Mudge, and Harley crept slowly into the unlocked pub. No coin was found, but the amateur thieves did happen to notice Wallowy. Mudge went after the sheriff and the others pondered Wallowy's fate.

"Didja' ever see a sight like that?" Harley asked. "What ya suppose he was up to?"

Thran curled his nose. "Seems he was at a bit o' sport, poor, fat slob."

"How'd you tell that, Thranny?"

"Ain't that wad you got on yer face a nose? Can't you smell?"  
Thran sniffed twice as instruction.

Harley sniffed. "Oh...yes, I 'spose you're right, Thranny."

About this time Mudge showed up with the sheriff in tow.

"What's all this? What's all this?" barked Portlee.

Thran and Harley stepped aside as Portlee gasped.

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Masdy awoke with his normal dry mouth. "Whew, I needs a bit o' water," sighed the still unsteady Dwarf. He stepped to the commode, but the jug was drier than his mouth. He stumbled back over by his bed and put on his tunic, sat on the bed and pulled up his trousers and then made for the front door, jug in hand.

It was dark. He glanced up into the starry night sky and smiled. The coolness of the air awoke him somewhat. Masdy walked, rather steadily for once, and aimed himself towards the Fountain in the Square.

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Sheriff Portlee spied the empty box on the desk, the velvet lining showing the imprint of the talisman. "All righty now, boys--where is it?"

"Where's what?" asked Thran, scratching his chin.

"The little item that was in that box there on the desk," replied Portlee.

Thran's forehead furled as he turned to the desk, "Box on the--"

"Don't play the fool, Thran." Portlee turned to the others. "You boys! Got something to say? 'Cause now's the time.

The three would-be criminals were led away to Thrimby's Dungeon. Portlee didn't know what happened, but it wasn't going to befall him! No Sir! These three were hooked, and hooked hard. After all, someone was responsible.

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She got an ax, the old one her father had used back during the Goblin Wars. It was a weapon that brought Death quickly. Alamas, at first, could only weakly hold up a hand as she bludgeoned him repeatedly until her arm grew too tired to rise.

She walked to her table. The pitcher was empty before she was cleansed properly and so she decided she'd stop at the Fountain on her way to fetch Old Portlee here to do something with this awful Elf.

As she reached the Fountain, she spied someone there. Oh!—it was only that drunk, Masdy. He was drinking from a jug and then plunged it back into the water. She approached, less cautiously after identifying Masdy and plunged her own pitcher into the water as well.

"Hi there, Cootsy," said Masdy. "You have a dry mouth too?"

She proceeded to wash and then Masdy noted the stains on her skirt, tunic, and face.

“Have ya had a bit of an accident, lass?” asked Masdy.

She still didn't answer as shock had settled in. Cootsy had had a rough evening, killed a Dwarf and also killed an Elf, one with sex, t'other with an ax. No!--she wouldn't—probably *couldn't*--speak at all.

Masdy walked slowly around the Fountain and came close up beside her. Her hand drew quickly out of her pocket. “You take this,” she said. “Put it away someplace safe.”

He felt a cold metallic object thrust into his hand and looked in awe at it. “This is lovely, Cootsy. Where'd you get it?”

As he held it, she drew close, mischievous smile back on her face. They walked along back to Masdy's cave.

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In the dawn Masdy awoke, alone. He got slowly up remembering vividly the wild dreams of last night. He stumbled out of the cave, shaky now and in need of a drink. The whole town was alive with dreadful news. An Elf had been found dead at Miss Cootsy's, chopped to pieces—and good riddance! In Garley's Pub Wallowy was found dead by some mischief or other at the hands of three tweenagers, who ought to've known better. And poor Miss Cootsy, after apparently dealing with the foul Elf, she, it seems had hung herself--*and right on the Fountain in the Square!*

Not too surprising word had it that the old sheriff, Portlee, was saying she'd been distraught, ever so, since old Garley's death, her being his serving wench and all.

Masdy tried to comprehend all these things as he ambled towards Garley's Pub. He was dumbfounded to find the place closed. It had never known a closed day, but Portlee was still investigating a murder—covering it up and dumping it on three would be thieves, if truth be known. And looking for that damn talisman, too!

Portlee shooed Masdy right out of there without so much as a sniff of brew. "Damned inhospitable," cried Masdy as he was pushed outside the door.

He turned for home, hoping against hope there was a finger or two left in an old bottle tucked away under the commode; when he reached in his pocket, felt something hard and cold, and then brought out the talisman. Its silver surface brightly shined in the morning sun. Masdy jammed it back down deep inside his trousers.

In his head he wondered if this here thing were what all this mischief was about...and then he grinned. 'It should well bring a handsome sum, this be-deviled thing,' he thought. 'When the pub re-opens I shall offer it to the new owner--whoever that might be--after demonstrating to him the value of such a prize as this. It may well be worth a king's ransom in drink.' Masdy reached a hand into his pocket and grasped his silver talisman with thoughts of oceans of ale.

THE END



