

## The Lamplight War

The war between the lamplighters and thieves began as most such wars begin: with a single death.

The first of what would become many victims was One-Eared Azra, who worked the three westernmost miles of Silver Street. His brother Belial found him but struggled to cut the body down from the lamp where it swung in the summer breeze.

Belial was light on his feet, and could clamber high enough to reach the noose around his poor brother's neck. However, he could not slash the rope while keeping the corpse aloft, so he called for help.

Silver Street has never been a place where warm welcomes are offered or expected, but Belial's pleas eventually attracted a small crowd who stood in curious confusion below the broken light and broken body. They were careful to avoid the wet red circle that had formed where Azra had been swinging. They also kept away from the words written in the dirt, in a mixture of blood and oil: *No more lights.*

With support at last from two burly slaughtermen, Belial lowered Azra to the floor and pushed back those eager to discover just what had happened. It was immediately obvious that it

was not the rope that had killed the lamplighter: a slash through his overalls revealed a stab wound that had ripped open his chest.

“He was cut from gut to chinstrap,” explained Belial an hour later as he sat, shaking with misery and fury, at the guild house. Hands clasped around a cup of steaming chocolate, he rocked back and forth as he informed his fellow lampmen of what had become of their comrade. “They tore him up, then hanged him.”

“What of the lights?” came a voice from the back of the crowd. Every face turned to see Rhame striding forward from his office where the calculating engine, then as now, updated reports of the day’s progress. “Did he finish the Silver Street lights before . . .”

“*Did he finish the lights?*” Belial sneered back. He would have risen on the attack if wiser hands had not firmly pressed him to his seat. Striking the guild’s director would have meant dismissal and all the poverty that entailed. Back then, the city did not look kindly on those who ruined themselves.

Rhame pushed closer, using his clipboard to carve a path. All the night’s operations had ceased once word of the killing spread, and the room was crammed with men, women, and equipment. The persistent stink of steam-soaked copper was strong.

The director said: “You were working on that network as well, Belial, were you not? The eastern half?”

“Yes,” came the reply through gritted teeth. “I had finished and went to find Azra so we could take the last ’ship home together. But he wasn’t at the junction, and most of his half was getting darker, bit by bit. I ran to look for him, and heard all this smashing glass from the end of the street. I would have gone on to investigate, but there he was. Hanging. Dead.”

Belial ran out of words, and there was a tense silence. Rhame tutted quietly and made a note. (A few of his papers from this time were recently sold at auction to Professor Undermar of the university, and the professor confirmed to this author that one sheet was marked simply: *Azra: Zero completed.*)

“This is wrong, Director,” said Tin Willem, raising his replacement hand to Rhame’s shoulder and gently turning him to face the rest of the guild. “We know who has done this, and they have to pay.”

“Oh, Willem? We *know*, do we? We have *proof*, do we? Witnesses? Evidence?”

A long pause. “We just know, sir. We’ve all heard the talk, around the docks and the low streets. The School of Whispers are not happy with us spreading the lamps through the city.” There were nods of agreement. “The light can give them away when they’re about their business.”

“Yes, I expect they would prefer darkness. They would be wrong, of course.”

The director was famously dismissive of anybody who failed to understand that progress was inevitable and advantageous. As the few witnesses who are still with us will tell you, Rhame was happy to ruin those who resisted the expansion of steam power and the turbines that drove the lights, but he prided himself on never being malicious, only efficient. “We have contracts to complete. We will go on. Azra would have wanted us to finish our work.”

Belial gave the director one single, piercing look, and then lowered his head to mourn his murdered brother.

The lamplighters were a hard breed, but the death of one of their own shook them badly and some were quick to seek revenge despite their leader’s command. Whatever obedience they felt

to the guild was overcome by the idea that somebody, anybody, would dare to impede their work.

Of course, their opponents were quick to respond, and in days the bodies began to mount across the city.

I doubt you have seen any illustrations—although you are welcome to search for them, if you have the stomach for it—as few were willing to record such terrible deaths for posterity. Furthermore, as detail after detail changed during the journey from mouth to mouth, we have been left with few incontrovertible facts. However, we know that by the time the latest rumours reached White-Faced Sal, they involved a band of lampmen searching the streets for anybody even remotely connected to the assorted bands of thieves who comprised the School of Whispers. The School’s members were being lowered into the steam pipes and burnt alive, people said. “This is for Azra”, they were told before the white-hot jet scalded them into eternity.

So it was that the first-floorers, dippers, tiptoe boys, and others who gathered in Sal’s hideout by the river were a bundle of nerves. Their reputation as daring criminals spoken of only in whispers would not last if they did not settle.

“This won’t do,” she began, turning up the lights. It was hard not to laugh at the irony: the hiss of steam and resultant warm glow provided by her enemies’ hard work made meetings like this so much more practical. “We must have peace if we are to profit. Let us have no more killing.”

She was met with silence, although a few shook their heads. Then a lone female voice piped up, hidden among the throng of figures: “They’ve gone too far, Sal. The lads an’ me, we see lights everywhere. All night they’re on. Every night. They’s got to stop ‘em, or we can’t work. If we don’t work, we don’t eat. You know how it is. Things ain’t like they were.”

“That’s as may be, Black Mary,” replied Sal. “But we have all heard of the deals the lamplighters have made. Real coin is at stake. They won’t stop just because one of their own has swung and others might join him. No: they want blood while their work goes on. Our blood.”

Murmurs rolled around the thieves’ den, and Sal caught a fragment: “. . . Not like her father.”

She rose quickly, thrusting her hands on her hips as she said, “My father *was* strong, yes. He fought for the Whispered Ones against our enemies, yes. And where is he now? Prison, and he’ll never come out on this side of death. Fight the guild and you will join him, in the next cell or the next grave.

“If you want to live, you will listen to me.”

News of the violence attracted widespread attention and sides were quickly taken. The lamplighters found friends among landlords, night-watchmen, coach drivers, and those who worked the streets that they hoped would remain illuminated. They also gained the favour of airship crews who used the spreading web of lamps for navigation; many thieves tumbled to their death from a dirigible. The School of Whispers gathered supporters among the rat catchers, the whores and pimps, the candle- and lantern-makers, and any others who benefited from permanent shadows.

However, these auxiliaries could not stem the tide of blood, and the casualty lists grew so long that newspapers stopped printing them for fear of upsetting their more gentle readers.

The violence continued for weeks. So did the work, although as soon as many a street had been illuminated for the first time the lamps were smashed, the steam pipes broken, and a message sent: *No more lights.*

No doubt word of the struggle would have eventually reached the prison, high on its black hill overlooking the city. Its occupants could have seen whole neighbourhoods lit one night and extinguished the next; Ezrael the bookmaker reportedly offered his fellow inmates odds on which area would be the centre of the next evening's battle. Nobody had ever escaped from the massive stone edifice—nor ever would, all assumed—and only a handful of inmates were ever freed. Still, the gunshots and moans from the combatants in the streets below were undoubtedly an interesting diversion.

One prisoner did not enjoy the spectacle, it has been said. Instead, in the topmost cell in the highest block, Mister Pinch simply waited. Thanks to the lamplighters and their science, his quarters had enough illumination that a visitor (if one had been allowed, which was impossible) would have seen a steady smile on his face.

Due to his new airborne allies, Rhame was able to look down on the streets sliding beneath the airship and mark his map to show every street that was filled with lamps. He called to the crew's quarters, which sat above the observation deck upon which he stood. "I think that's enough for this evening, Captain. I'm expecting more progress tomorrow night."

*Progress.* That was the key to everything, the lamplighters' leader always said. Steam would transform everything if people gave it a chance, and his guild would be consulted by *everybody* once the pipes began to power more than just lamps. Bringing a glow to streets, homes, and factories was all well and good, he told anybody willing to listen, but what if the steam could drive engines? Then his guild would be at the forefront of the city, with Merrell Rhame at its head. Let his father bemoan his choice of profession then!

Whatever plans he may have been making were interrupted by a sudden sting in his side and a woman's voice in his ear: "Step lively, Rhame, to the rear if you will. Or you might follow all of my friends who 'fell' from that door."

The hand not pressing the dagger against his ribs pushed him firmly into the darkness at the cabin's stern, and far enough away from the stairs that led to the crew. As he stumbled back, Rhame felt the ship turning south to return to its mooring station.

"Quietly now," said the woman from behind him. "I want only to talk. If I wanted you dead, you would already be nothing but a smear on the soil."

Mute with fright, he found himself in a corner where no windows allowed the moonlight to enter. Turning to face his attacker, he struggled to see her features; only a white-painted face that was almost hidden inside the stolen hooded uniform of an airman that was several sizes too large.

"The name's Sal," she said, careful to turn her dagger so it caught what little light there was. "I represent the School of Whispers."

"Of course." Rhame probably tried to sound confident, but would have failed. He was an organizer, an administrator, and she was a killer.

"We want peace and you will bring it, lamp man."

"Oh, I think not. You have killed many of my members—"

"—And you have killed many of mine. Nevertheless, we are willing to forget all that, and let you continue your work. We will admit defeat, of a sort. Under certain conditions."

"Well—"

“—First, you will inform us where and when you will be working. Let us plan our business so that we are not suddenly bathed in light we come out of a property. Second, if we ask you to temporarily black out a street—problems with the pipes, let us say—you will do so.”

“What will we have in return?”

“We will stop the bloodshed immediately. Your agents will also be protected from attacks from street toughs while they work, and we would be willing to help against any of your rivals. We have a very broad reach, believe me.”

There was a long pause, during which both would have felt the airship descending. Above them, the crew would be more active.

“Very well,” said Rhame at last, his confidence returning. “*You* appreciate that we have work to do—progress cannot be stopped, after all—and *we* appreciate that you have to make some kind of living. We would do better together than tearing each other apart.”

“I am very glad you agree.”

Rhame made for the windows so he could enjoy the sight of the buildings seemingly ascending all around them, but Sal grabbed his elbow hard. “I have one more favour to ask, lamp man,” she said. “Something simple.”

“Oh?”

“We would be grateful if you would cut the supply of light to the prison tonight. At twelve bells, say? For an hour or two.”

“Surely somebody is not planning an escape? The prison cannot be breached, you know.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, sir, but it will be. Do you know why nobody has survived long enough to free themselves? The prison has never been in darkness. First there were candles, oil lamps, and more, so the guards could see any movement around the walls and shoot any shadow.

Then came you and your pipes of steam, making the entire building as bright as day. You were so good at your job, truth be told, that the warders have done away with every other form of illumination. They love progress as much as you, and are most happy to see the bulbs glowing in every cell of every wing. They saw no need for their store of candles or their supply of oil, and sold the lot. So I expect they will be most surprised, and helpless, when those bulbs go black on a moonless night.”

“Twelve bells? Perhaps there *could* be a fault for an hour. As a show of good faith, a sign that we are willing to work together for our mutual benefit. But no longer than an hour—we do have a reputation to maintain.”

“Quite. And perhaps the Whispered Ones will be on hand when you expand your business across the country. It would be difficult for somebody to compete with you if their offices and bank accounts were emptied, wouldn’t you say?”

There was brief exchange of nods, and then Sal was fleeing through the door, jumping the last few feet to the ground before the first mate came to tie off the cables.

Rhame had a broad smile on his face when the airman entered, and he could not help but say one word: “*Expansion!*”

So it was that the prison overlooking the city of lights found itself, for the first time, in absolute darkness.

Few of the prison’s records survive—the School of Whispers have always been very thorough—but we know that the warders heard a metal object hit the top of the main exterior wall just after the great clock tower by the river struck twelve times.

Later investigations would reveal that it was a grappling hook, thrown by a well-trained climber who must have scaled the outer stonework and then hurled the same hook to the top of the tallest cellblock. Nobody witnessed it: those warders who were not frantically peering into the pitch-black that had descended all around were kept busy calming the hundreds of prisoners who suddenly woke en masse to make as much noise as possible. It was almost as if they had been told to rise at twelve bells, Warder Jimmet told his friends later as he settled his broken nerves with a welcoming pipe of opium.

The din from the prisoners crying and shouting into the claustrophobic darkness would have been more than enough distraction for a skilful thief, and White-Faced Sal was very skilful indeed.

Climbing the wall was impossible if even a single bulb was still lit, as the silhouette of anybody ascending was all too visible to the circle of watchtowers. Instead the total, comforting darkness left Sal blissfully ignorant of her height while shielding her completely from any threat of gunfire.

None of the warders were able to testify that they had heard somebody scale the ten floors below Mister Pinch's cell, but Sal could have told them that it was hard work after the seventh. Her hands ached from gripping the rope, and the tension of climbing ever higher while avoiding discovery left her head pounding.

However, the night and her reflexes were with her and she reached the tiny window of the final cell intact, swinging back and forth just a few feet from the guttering and roofline. There were no bars: generations of jailers had decided that nobody had the ability to descend from such a height without equipment, and the prison was frequently searched and secured so that absolutely no item present could be made into any kind of rope. Mister Pinch and his

quarters always received particular attention, although the guards had known that even if he could somehow climb down from his cell, a struggling man bathed in the score of lights constantly directed at his cellblock would have been an extremely easy target for even the poorest rifleman.

Now there were no lights, and no alternative means of preventing darkness from blanketing the prison.

So Sal was smiling as she reached through the window space and felt a hand grasp hers in return.

The delight in Mister Pinch's voice was all too obvious as he said, "Good to see you, my girl. Tasty bit of climbing."

"Easy enough once the lights went out," she replied, taking a firm hold on the ledge to stop herself swinging any more. "But time's a-wasting, so what say we be on our way?"

Clambering onto a chair, he quickly pushed himself through the opening and onto the ledge as Sal lowered herself a fraction to make room for him. She held the rope calmly, despite the vertiginous drop, and smiled as the most famous thief of all took a firm hold, both hands close to the grappling hook.

With his muttered "Go", they set to with a will, clambering down as fast as they judged to be safe, a speed that would have impressed anybody who might have seen them. However, confusion still reigned. Warders searching for a way to restore the brightness to which they had become so accustomed had no time to spot two figures dropping fast beside the thick cellblock wall.

Kicking themselves away so they could land on the exterior wall, Mister Pinch and Sal quickly made their way hand over hand to the ground, laughing at the disturbance ringing

through every part of the prison. The cries of the prisoners causing a distraction, prompted by one of Sal's messengers, mingled with anxious cries of guards and the hissing from steam pipes suddenly turned off.

In her final days, after a career of crime that plumbbed depths the likes of you and I can only imagine, Sal's mind was not what it was and the papers in which she recorded her story became confused. However, she did recall that as they stepped into the shadows, she and Mister Pinch laughed like children.

"I'm very proud of you, my girl," he said, rejoicing in the feeling of space. As they headed further into the city, streets blazed with light but they were unafraid.

"When did you come up with this little scheme?" asked the old thief.

"Oh, as soon as I heard they had installed the steam lights in the prison," Sal replied. "I could not turn them off myself; I tried, but I don't have the brain for so many cogs and gears. The lamplighters would never have made the prison dark if we had simply asked—they are earning too much money from this work to upset anybody. But if a black-out meant the end of a war? All I had to do was kill one of them, string him up from his own lamp, and off we went. You would have enjoyed it, father.

"We can't stop progress—they are right about that. But there is still some darkness and still opportunities for people like us. It is simply a case of knowing where to push."

"Oh, we will always know where to push. This might be a world of brass and copper and tin, and they might be relying on their steam, but there will always be shadows somewhere. Their technology cannot reach everywhere, can it?"

As they disappeared into the night's embrace, both sounded confident. But Sal knew Mister Pinch was wrong.

That night she wrote in her journal, a record that has somehow survived in much better condition than the diary kept by Merrell Rhame before his nervous collapse and the incidents that led him to the scaffold. Blood has coated most of the relevant page, but one line of Sal's flowing penmanship is still visible: *The future was here, and it was bright.*

The End

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