

# Ambush at the Mouse Ballet

The heroes have ticked off a thieves' guild, group of smugglers, gang of thugs, or other criminal element of the city's underground, and now they're walking into the repercussions. This miniplot is essentially a bar brawl with frills.

*"I don't know what these travellers did, or what they took. All I know is that there are some people in this city, some very fine people who happen to be paying me and by extension, you ladies. Those people want these fools to understand that this is our town, our money, our rules. Make it clear to them, Thatcher—that's what the boss said. And if they still don't take the hint, next time you use crossbow bolts from rooftops."*

Triestan Thatcher

The *Mouse Ballet* is a brothel in which the girls sing, play music, and wheedle drinks out of the patrons. It attempts to attract an intellectual clientele, resulting in a pretentious, artsy atmosphere that often gives way to drunken fist fights, and it has a small stage where travelling and local performers alike are invited to entertain for whatever money the audience thinks they're worth. The establishment's unusual name hails from local slang: A lady of negotiable affections is often called a mouse, and here, the mice dance for your entertainment. Any tavern or brothel of some wealth can be substituted as befits an ongoing storyline.

The *Mouse Ballet* is situated in a district with some residential housing but mostly storage areas and warehouses for the massive amounts of trading goods for the city's large mercantile harbour. In addition, a lively nightlife advertises its pleasures to sailors and labourers of the nearby harbour and shipyards. It's a good area for getting press ganged, mugged, or simply lost—and a natural home to whatever criminal organisation the heroes have run afoul of.

## The setup

For whatever reason the heroes are walking into an ambush, the intent of which is to scare them off. Murder, even among thugs, is a crime carrying heavy punishment in most medieval or early industrial communities; a bit of rough handling tends to get the message through, particularly if it's clear that the heroes are getting one last chance, and there will not be another.

What exactly the heroes have done, and to whom, is not relevant to this miniplot. Make sure they know they've ticked off the local gang, and wait for them to walk into a trap. Or have them be confused for some other guys and walk into the trap set for somebody else in a case of mistaken identities.

## The strategy

Presumably, the heroes are well armed and look like they know how to use the weapons they carry. Rather than turning out forty heavily armed thugs—and attracting

the attention of the authorities—the gang's leader tries to teach the heroes a lesson. Game masters may swap out non-player characters for familiar faces from their ongoing storyline.

The plot is simple: Render the heroes unable to defend themselves (assuming they stay conscious), give them a warning that leaves no room for interpretation, and let them go, humiliated and injured. Message sent; next time, it will be crossbow bolts in the dark.

## Scene: The pale ale

As the heroes make their way towards the *Mouse Ballet*, allow them an Alertness check. Success indicates that they spot a couple of street urchins looking at them and then taking off at a run. These are lookouts running to alert him and his thugs at the *Mouse Ballet* that the heroes are coming. Everything's ready for the ambush at the time the heroes arrive.

At the *Mouse Ballet* nothing looks out of the ordinary. If they are familiar with enforcer **Triestan Thatcher** from a previous storyline he'll stay out of sight; otherwise he'll be in the taproom having a beer by the fireplace. Brothel owner **Felicity Drover** is behind her counter, and **Fanny o'Gold** and **Ginger** are entertaining patrons in the taproom, among them Thatcher's four thugs. Everything breathes peace.

As the heroes approach, Drover suggests that they try her new pale ale. She up-talks her product as a tavern keeper will, and if she feels it's necessary, offers them an introductory tankard each at half price. If the heroes still hesitate, Thatcher walks up from his chair at the fireplace and orders another tankard for himself, complimenting Drover for the particularly nice batch.

If the heroes order anything but the already prepared pale ale **Sweet Safia** is waiting on the other side of the kitchen door and listening in on the conversation in order to 'spice' any other brew or food ordered by the heroes. Drover calls into the kitchen for whatever they order, and Safia delivers. Shame about the ale that was prepared in advance, though.

Drover's pale ale is a good, if not extraordinary pale malt ale. It tastes all right but the poison that's been added to it adds a slightly bitter aftertaste—not unpleasant.

*Heroes with a very high Herbalism skill (60%+) may detect a bitterness in the ale, warning them that it's been flavoured with something that doesn't taste right. Heroes who heed this warning and don't consume more will save against poison effects on 1d Physique instead of 2.*

Aconite, also known as monkshood, wolf's bane, leopard's bane, devil's helmet, or blue rocket, is an incredibly toxic but not all that uncommon medicinal herb. It can be absorbed orally or through the skin,



and as little as 1 gram of the plant can cause death. It is highly effective and works very fast, and furthermore, there is no antidote. Thatcher is a skilled herbalist and has measured out the dose safe to use in advance, carefully diluting it in water—hence the faint, bitter aftertaste of ale or food seasoned by Safiya. Undiluted aconite has a very strong taste.

As the heroes are drinking their beer, eating their food, or otherwise poisoning themselves, other patrons start drifting away. The three or four people who were in the taproom on unrelated business are being quietly tipped off by the mice that now would be a good time to take a walk. As the girls and Thatcher's own little gang remain, however, it is not immediately obvious to the heroes that something is brewing.

And then the aconite starts working.

Symptoms of aconite poisoning include nausea, vomiting, sweating, and trouble breathing (death results from paralysis of the respiratory system or cardiac arrest, but Thatcher made certain that the heroes are not in actual danger of dying). They feel uncomfortable and sweaty and then nauseous—and a minute or two later, they are vomiting and gasping for air.

*The aconite renders the heroes too sick and hard of breathing to fight, or even walk unaided. On a 2d Physique check, heroes of strong constitution are able to continue to function as if they were merely Wounded (half Actions, half movement rate). The check must be made for every single Action they attempt to undertake—aconite poisoning is no joke.*

As the heroes struggle to breathe and rid their bodies of the toxin, Drover and her mice run upstairs while

Thatcher's men encircle the troublemakers. No self-respecting hero responds well to being poisoned and then surrounded, and the enforcers come prepared to handle a fight. Using their saps and knuckle irons, they overpower the heroes and drag them upstairs, conscious or not. The thugs do not use sharp weapons because people turning up knifed tends to bring down the heat.

If there are more heroes than five men can handle, add a few more thugs on the sly. Similarly, if the heroes are capable spell casters, up the number of thugs to make certain they are overpowered (because thugs generally do not defend against magic very well, but mages run out of power).

There is of course a chance that Thatcher's men are not capable of overpowering the heroes even in their weakened state. They will not fight to the death, far from—if the heroes are seen to be winning, the enforcers bail. The heroes, with their aconite poisoning, are not likely to pursue. Next time, it will indeed be crossbow bolts in the dark. Once the heroes are incapacitated, they are dragged upstairs.

**Scene: I'm not feeling so good and this dude just keeps on talking**

Upstairs at the *Mouse Ballet* is a number of private rooms used by the mice and their patrons. The heroes are herded into the largest (first door on the right) by Thatcher and his thugs. While they're busy vomiting and gasping, Thatcher and his companions all pull on black hoods; odds are that the heroes did not get a good look at them earlier, and there's no reason to give them a chance now. Loaded crossbows are procured from a chest and aimed at the heroes.

Thatcher sits down on the bed and tries to determine whom amongst them is the leader or spokesperson. If one of them looks like he or she is in charge, he will address that person—otherwise, he'll speak to the room



in general. Any time a hero tries to interrupt, a thug kicks him or her, hard.

The game master should make any necessary modifications to Thatcher's speech, then paraphrase it to the heroes.

*The fellow in charge carries himself with an air of authority while his thugs aim their crossbow bolts at your chests. Not the most comfortable situation you've been in. "Now, you boys and girls, you've gone and made a mess of things," he says casually. "The people who pay me, they don't like that very much. They think you ask too many questions. Didn't your mums tell you to mind your own business? It's bad for a man's health, asking too many questions."*

*The thugs grunt their agreement. One of them readjusts his aim. You still can't make out their faces under the hoods, and you still struggle to breathe. At least there's nothing left in your stomach now, or you'd still be vomiting.*

*"I bet you're not feeling so hot right now." The gang leader takes out a small bottle and plays with it, passing it from one hand to the other. It contains a dark blue liquid. "This is the antidote. Do you want it? Well, there's a few things you need to understand. We need to come to an arrangement, as they say. Come to terms. Kiss and make up. Well, maybe not the kissing part, I think I'll leave that part to Drover's little mice."*

*The thugs chuckle. Small minds, easily entertained.*

*"See, in a moment, we're all going to walk out of here," the hooded man continues. "And I'm going to leave this little bottle right here, on the night stand. You'll manage to crawl over here if you put a little effort into it, I'm sure. There's enough for all of you, don't worry. And then, my dear friends, you're going to go home. You're going to forget that we ever met. You're going to stay out of this part of town—and if you have to go here*

*anyway, you're going to remember who's boss. We're never going to have trouble with you again."*

*He likes the sound of his own voice, that one.*

*"Next time, we won't ask. It'll be a crossbow bolt in the dark. Poison in your food somewhere you don't expect, and no antidote on the night stand. A knife in the back while you sleep. This town is ours. We don't kill for fun, but we're not afraid to kill—and you need to get that. Don't make me have to teach you. Just move on, get on with your little lives, and don't remind my boss that you exist. Do you understand?"*

*You nod while thinking of all the ways you want to rearrange his face.*

*The thugs lower their crossbows. The leader walks towards the door, and the rest of them follow him out. You're alone, and you still can't breathe right.*

It's entirely possible that the heroes are too stubborn to know when they're beaten and refuse to consent to Thatcher's terms. If this is the case, the thugs will cheerfully kick them black and blue, probably break a few ribs, and blacken their eyes before leaving.

Thatcher gave Drover orders that the heroes were left to recover, and the tavern keeper is not about to argue. The heroes are left undisturbed. They can hear people coming and going in the kitchen directly below, and laughter, giggles and the sounds of gentlemen getting to know the mice intimately in the neighbouring rooms.

*Aconite poisoning takes a while to wear off, even in such a small dose as the heroes had. The time to recover enough to be able to stand and breathe properly (and no longer function as if Wounded) is 24 hours minus per point the hero has in Physique (and half that if they never failed their Physique checks against poisoning to begin with).*

### Scene: I'm leaving a bad review on Yelp!

Eventually, the heroes are going to get up and about. They are likely very angry, not to mention badly in need of a bath after all that vomiting and sweating, and probably not very impressed with the *Mouse Ballet*. It's bound to end with people shouting at other people.

Searching the room will not reveal anything exciting besides surprising amounts of clean linen (because what this room is usually used for dirties a lot of linen, unsurprisingly) and of course the empty bottle that contained Thatcher's antidote.

Tavern keeper Felicity Drover will make no secret of the fact that she aided in poisoning the heroes. She'll make it clear that she never had a choice; disobeying the thieves guild or criminal organisation would have dire consequences. She was given firm assurance that the heroes would not come to any lasting harm and settled for that. She claims to have no personal connections to the enforcers—in fact, she pays them protection money. She has disposed of the poison Thatcher gave her, making it difficult to prove her involvement.

It's possible that the heroes try to get the authorities involved. Drover will deny anything relating to poison, claiming that the heroes got into a fight with some local ruffians. If pressed, she may still end up fined severely for aiding a poisoner but as she never really had a choice, she will not suffer other consequences (though

the authorities are likely to keep her establishment under watch for some time ahead which likely will hurt profits). Drover does not know Thatcher's name nor where to find him. She does know, however, that shop owners who disobey the criminal organisation tend to become ex-shop owners.

Drover's mice are in a similar situation. Depending on whether prostitution is legal in the game setting they may lose their income and even face jail time. They know nothing and were coerced into cooperating.

Where the heroes go from there is difficult to predict. They may back off and leave this part of the city to the criminals—but more likely, they'll take their bruised bodies and egos and go after the criminals with even more intent. They may go looking for Thatcher and his cronies, or go straight for his bosses: either way, more adventure is bound to be had.

*Herbalists who examine the bottle with the antidote carefully may deduct that it simply contains honey water coloured with a bit of ink. In other words, it does absolutely nothing (and never did, because Thatcher made certain to not poison the heroes lethally).*

### Triestan Thatcher

Presence	4	Appearance Charisma Authority	11 11 15	# MS	5 n/a
Physique	10	Agility Strength	17 23	AR DMG	-3 +8
Psyche	8	Intelligence Memory Discipline	15 14 14	HP PP	40 n/a
Potential	1	Power Control	2 5	DEF	(73) 73/58/73
Technology	8	Operation Construction	13 9	Luck ALT INTU	8 54% 29%
Vitals:	Human male adult (in his late 20s), heavy-set, likable face, usually smiling. Dark hair, pale skin, brown eyes.				
Armour:	Leather greaves (d/a d4, pen 1)				
Weapons:	Sap (dmg d4, pen 4)				
Skills of note:	Coolness (22%), Herbalism (48%), Weapon, sap (46%)				

Triestan Thatcher is a heavy-set man with an ordinary face that somehow inspires trust and makes him appear a lot less threatening than his impressive physical strength renders him actually capable of being. He's got a keen mind and enjoys being well prepared, but at times he acts recklessly, relying on his luck to save the day. In this respect, he's a quite bright, happy go lucky paid enforcer who'll challenge you to a game of darts or break your knee caps without losing his smile.

Thatcher prefers to withhold his actions until he sees an opportunity, and then strike once—hard. He's perfectly content to appear less capable than he actually is, if it means someone will let down their defences.

### Thug #1, Cheldric Oaksted, 'the Weasel'

Presence	5	Appearance Charisma Authority	9 10 9	# MS	5 n/a
Physique	10	Agility Strength	19 12	AR DMG	-4 n/a
Psyche	8	Intelligence Memory Discipline	11 10 10	HP PP	40 n/a
Potential	2	Power Control	3 9	DEF	(71) 71/71/71
Technology	4	Operation Construction	11 10	Luck ALT INTU	3 52% 41%
Vitals:	Human male adult (late 20s), fidgety, scarred. Brown hair, pale skin, brown eyes.				
Quirks:	<i>Hard to Kill.</i> When wounded, the character's health may drop to minus 100% (rather than the standard minus 50%) before she dies.				
Weapons:	Sap (dmg d4, pen 4)				
Skills of note:	Coolness (33%), Folklore (28%), Weapon, sap (35%).				

Oaksted is a small, weaselly man with a plain face and a bad attitude. He never managed to find love he didn't have to pay for, and he blames women for it, suffering no compulsions about beating up a woman (quite the opposite, in fact). He is surprisingly resilient in combat for a small, seemingly frail type, and has numerous old scars on his hands, face, and body. Outside of a fight, though, he's popular among his buddies due to his ability to spin a yarn and a tall tale at any given moment.

Oaksted's tactic of choice is to defend and wait for an opening. If he can strike heroes down from behind he'll prefer that to coming at them from the front. He will fight women before men. Bunter and the Waif do not like him very much.

## Thug #2, Honesty Egger, 'the Waif'

Presence	1	Appearance Charisma Authority	9 10 10	# MS	3 n/a
Physique	5	Agility Strength	9 9	AR DMG	0 0
Psyche	5	Intelligence Memory Discipline	14 11 12	HP PP	20 200
Potential	10	Power Control	20 19	DEF	(86) 86/86/86
Technology	4	Operation Construction	6 5	Luck ALT INTU	8 52% 42%

Vitals: Young human girl (late teens), scrawny, bad acne. Dark hair, olive skin, brown eyes.

Skills of note: Coolness (15%), Unarmed Combat (29%).

Spells: Spheres: All. True magic ability.

*Energy Bolt, Sense Poison, Steel Silence*

Egger is a small, plain girl who dresses like a stablehand and constantly picks at her acne. She has a bit of spell casting ability and carries herself like a person of great importance because of it, though in fact she's really more of a sulky teen than anything else.

Egger's tactic of choice is to stand right behind Thatcher and use her *Energy Bolt* spell from out of reach. Once her power is exhausted she'll fall back and let the boys do the hard work.

## Thug #3, Richelde Bunter

Presence	6	Appearance Charisma Authority	13 14 14	# MS	4 n/a
Physique	9	Agility Strength	19 19	AR DMG	-4 +4
Psyche	9	Intelligence Memory Discipline	13 14 14	HP PP	36 150
Potential	6	Power Control	10 15	DEF	(72) 72/57/72
Technology	5	Operation Construction	13 9	Luck ALT INTU	7 54% 29%

Vitals: Adult human female (mid-30s), muscular, wiry. Black hair, dark skin, black eyes.

Quirks: *Focused.* When using a skill, the character is good at focusing her attention. She gains a d10% bonus to all skill checks related to Psyche and Technology. *Jinx.* The character is a public menace. Though she herself is not directly affected she brings bad luck to everyone else within 10 metres' radius in the form of a 1d penalty to all Luck checks.

Armour: Leather greaves (d/a d4, pen 1)

Weapons: Knuckles (dmg d4+1, pen 1)

Skills of note: Coolness (31%), Brawling (43%).

Spells: Spheres: All, Time.

*Double Actions* as a Talent.

Bunter is a competent brawler with a bit of surprise magic up her sleeve and quick to process new information. Unfortunately, she's also bad luck. Dressed like a sailor, she takes no guff from anyone, and her fellow thugs certainly don't try to start anything with her. Bunter's preferred combat style is up in front and

at 'em, using her magic to increase her attack speed, and acting as a meat shield for her companions.

## Thug #4, Alfric Hammer

Presence	6	Appearance Charisma Authority	13 10 11	# MS	4 n/a
Physique	9	Agility Strength	18 19	AR DMG	-3 +4
Psyche	3	Intelligence Memory Discipline	11 10 11	HP PP	36 n/a
Potential	7	Power Control	10 9	DEF	(73) 73/48/73
Technology	7	Operation Construction	9 8	Luck ALT INTU	5 43% 37%

Vitals: Adult human male (late 20s), strong but chubby, short beard. Brown hair, olive skin, hazel eyes.

Quirks: *Ambidextrous.* The character uses both hands equally well and may operate tools and weapons with both hands without penalties for using the off hand.

Armour: Studded leather hauberk (d/a d4+1, pen 2)

Weapons: Knuckles (dmg d4+1, pen 1)

Skills of note: Art, singing (20%), Brawling (62%).

Hammer is a big, burly man with a deep belly laugh and a good, deep singing voice. He loves a good fight, uses both hands equally well, and takes life as it comes. He packs a mean punch but it's never personal—just business. Hammer prefers to get up and in his opponent's face during a fight, using his strength and speed.

## Felicity Drover

Tavern keeper and brothel owner Drover is in no position to refuse to aid the criminal gang or thieves' guild that required her services in order to teach the heroes a lesson. She doesn't like it, but then, her opinion isn't really an issue. She's been promised that she and her mice are not going to get hurt, and that's the best she can do. Sometimes, free enterprise simply has a bad day.

## Drover's mice

Prostitutes Sweet Safiya, Fanny o'Gold, and Ginger—known to their parents as Safiya Draper, Auberce Monsanto, and Cynewise Truda—and cook Lisabete Weaver are all innocents inasmuch as they did what they were told. None of them are in a position to challenge the criminal organisation, nor for that matter, their employer.