

# A Matter of Discretion

*A “Mystery and Lust at the Gilded Anchor” Adventure*

*A D&D 5e (2024) one-shot for a level 4 party of 4–6*

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*An unmarked ledger by candlelight, a lamplighter's pin gleaming atop it — the crusader's badge, resting on the very secret it hunts.*

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## 1. Overview

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- **System:** D&D 5e (2024 revision)
- **Level:** 4 (party of 4–6 characters), bring your own characters (no pregens)
- **Table:** 4–6 players, single session, ~4–5 hours
- **Setting:** opens at the Gilded Anchor, then out into the Gilt Row and down to the harbor — the campaign’s first adventure to leave the house
- **Pitch:** the Anchor’s one dangerous book — *the Manifest*, the ledger of every secret the house keeps — is stolen and sold to a powerful man who is hiding in its pages. In three nights he means to make it public and burn the sanctuary down. The players and two of the house’s own pull a stylish long con to steal it back — at his own gala, in front of everyone.
- **Play style:** a light heist — banked **Leverage**, retroactive **Flashbacks**, and a rising **Suspicion** track, not a plan that has to be perfect at the door. The players get a one-page *How the Con Works* card [§12, Sidebar: How the Con Works](#) to keep at the table (hand it out at session zero); the DM’s running guide is [§7, Sidebar: Running the Con \(DM notes\)](#).

## 2. Content Note & Safety Tools

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This is the campaign’s lightest adventure in tone — a caper, played for wit and warmth — but it carries a few edges worth naming up front. Its antagonist is a hypocrite: a public “decency” crusader who privately pays for the very pleasures he condemns, and who will ruin an entire community to protect himself. The adventure leans, on purpose, into satire of real-world moral-panic movements and the machinery of anti-queer persecution — meant as catharsis rather than a lecture, but a table should know that edge is there and that it can land close to

home. It also touches coercion and blackmail (a frightened young NPC pressed into betraying people who trusted them), and the house’s usual mature register (seduction as a tool of the con, against the setting’s sex-work backdrop) — always fade-to-black, never explicit.

As with any Gilded Anchor adventure, run a session zero or a table check-in first, and keep a safety tool on hand — Lines & Veils, an X-card, or open communication — so anyone can steer the tone or flag what isn’t landing.

## 3. Background (DM Only — Spoilers)

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For fifteen years the Gilded Anchor has kept one promise above all others: *discretion is armor*. No names, no faces, no business carried back out the door — and almost nothing kept in writing. The one exception is **the Manifest**: a slim, salt-stained ledger in driftwood boards where the proprietors record what running a house actually requires — who booked which Wayfinder, what is owed and paid, which standing arrangements to honor. It never leaves the Captain’s Quarters at all — Milo balances the house’s accounts against it right there, at Kaelen’s old navigator’s table, and it goes straight back into its iron strongbox. And it is written, cover to cover, in a shorthand of the house’s own devising — a private cipher, because at the Anchor discretion reaches even into the bookkeeping. To anyone but the three who keep it, it reads like tide-marks on a page.

**Magistrate Aldous Thorne** (he/him, human) is one of the Lower City’s rising powers: a reformist magistrate who built his name condemning houses exactly like the Anchor, and who chairs **the Lamplighters’ League** — a civic morality movement (motto: “*Lighting the Way to Decency*”) whose populist “**Save Our Harbor**” campaign has the Gilt Row’s more disreputable addresses squarely in its sights. He is also, three times this past year, a *customer* — hooded,

cloaked, paying unmarked coin under a false name for a Wayfinder's private company. He was certain no one saw the man beneath the hood. But reading people is the whole of the house's art, and the Manifest notes, in its quiet cipher, exactly who climbed those stairs each of those nights. **Soren** was the Wayfinder he paid for, and would know him anywhere.

He learned the ledger existed the way powerful men learn everything — by frightening someone smaller. **Wick** (they/them), the young line-cook Milo took on a few weeks back, had forged the letter of reference that got them the honest job they were desperate for. Thorne's people found out. And a magistrate whose own court has ruined outsiders like Wick for far less did not have to raise his voice: help, or be made an example of.

The chance came on the worst night the Anchor had seen in years. When the drowned thing out of the harbor tore open the house's aft and flung the place into screaming chaos (*the climax of "The Fortune in the Cups"*), the Captain's Quarters stood breached and unwatched — its stern wall broken, the household lost to rescue and ruin. In the wreckage and the frantic days of repair that followed, Wick, told exactly what to find, slipped in, took the Manifest, and passed it to Thorne's agents. They have been sick with it ever since.

**DM notes — running this without *The Fortune in the Cups*:** that breach is the intended opening if your table played it, and it sets this adventure roughly a week later, the Anchor still patching its wounds. The Manifest never leaves that private room, so the theft needs something that cracks it open — and if you didn't run *Fortune*, any comparable catastrophe serves: a fire, a burst pipe in the old geothermal plumbing, a break-in on a chaotic night. Wick needed only one such window, and Thorne's coin to find it.

Now Thorne holds the book and a terrible problem: he cannot *read* it. The cipher means he possesses the one document that can destroy him and cannot find his own three lines to burn them — not without time. So he works through it slowly, and until he is *certain* his name is gone he

trusts the Manifest to no vault and no servant: he keeps it on his own person. In three nights, the Lamplighters' League holds its grand "Save Our Harbor" gala at his cliffside manor above the harbor, and there — once he has scrubbed himself clean — he means to produce the Manifest as his crusade's trophy, hand it to the Watch, and see the Anchor condemned, its patrons ruined, and its clifftop shuttered and seized. It is not vengeance. It is a career move and a very human terror, wearing the mask of virtue.

The house has until he finishes. They cannot go to the Watch — that exposes the very people the Manifest would doom — so they turn to the only people they can trust, and to two of their own: **Soren**, who can name the man behind the hood, and **Aris**, who can get into places he should not. Discretion has always been the house's armor. Now it has to be a lockpick, too.

## 4. Adventure Hooks

The party are the house's own — standing friends and trusted regulars, however that came to be true at this table (the same welcome the Anchor extends throughout the campaign). They are here when the theft breaks, and they are exactly who the proprietors turn to: people the house trusts without reservation, whose names are *not* on the Manifest's pages, and who can do quietly what the house cannot be seen to do at all.

**DM notes:** the real hook is the proprietors *asking*. Kaelen, Milo, and Barakos have never once needed saving, and coming to the party for help — unable to go to the law without dooming the people they exist to protect — costs them something to do. Play it as the house admitting, for the first time, a crack in its own armor. (A table that prefers a mercenary framing can lean on the reward and a standing offer to become the house's discreet problem-solvers instead — but the emotional version lands harder, and this campaign trades on that bond.)

## 5. Synopsis

*(Three acts, ~4–5 hours. This is a caper: keep it moving, reward cleverness, and let the players scheme out loud. Beats are a first pass — expect to retune live.)*

**Act One — The Crack in the Armor** (~45–60 min). Milo goes to the strongbox for the week's books and finds the Manifest gone — taken, it emerges, during the chaos when the Anchor's aft was breached. The proprietors, unable to go to the Watch, bring the party in. Three live leads — who could have reached the wrecked Captain's Quarters, **Wick** found hiding and sick with guilt, and **Soren's** own certainty — converge on the truth: Magistrate Aldous Thorne has the book, he is racing to scrub his own name out of it, and he will unveil it at the Lamplighters' League gala in three nights. *End of Act One.*

**Act Two — Casing the Lamplighter** (~90–120 min). Out into the Gilt Row and down to the harbor: learn the man, the manor, and the gala. Turn Wick from a liability into an asset; scout the cliffside estate from the water; work the guest list and the League; and assemble the con — who the crew will be, how they get in, and what they will need. Player-driven and node-based; every scrap of recon buys a concrete edge for the night of.

**Act Three — Save Our Harbor** (~60–90 min). The crew crashes the League's gala and lifts the Manifest out from under Thorne. The complication: it is not where they cased it — he has kept it on his own person, still scrubbing. Run the infiltration as a social heist against a rising suspicion track, spring the moving-target twist, and let the grab turn on wit rather than a health bar. *End of Act Three*, into the denouement — including what the party chooses to do with a book that could ruin half the city.

**DM notes:** the most cuttable material if a table plans fast is Act Two's casing detail (trim scenes to theater-of-the-mind rather than skipping them); the least cuttable is the Act Three grab. Full beat-by-beat for the later acts is [TO DRAFT].

## 6. Act One — The Crack in the Armor

*(Structure note: this heist runs as three acts — a deliberate, stated exception to the campaign's usual two-Part split, because a caper's setup / casing / execution rhythm wants three movements rather than two.)*

### The Missing Ledger

The Captain's Quarters still wear the wound — a week on, the stern wall is a patchwork of raw new timber and stretched canvas where the gallery windows used to be, and the whole room smells of pitch and sawdust. Milo's up here to do the week's books the way he always does, at Kaelen's old navigator's table, the house's iron strongbox open at his elbow. Except the sums aren't happening. He's sitting very still, one hand flat on the empty shelf inside the box, and when he looks up and finds you in the doorway, the grin he usually wears has gone somewhere you've never seen it go. "Tell me," he says, too evenly, "that one of you took the house's book as a joke."

**DM notes:** the Manifest lives in that iron strongbox and effectively *never* leaves the Captain's Quarters — Milo keeps the house's books right here, at Kaelen's table. That's what made the theft so nearly impossible, and why it took a catastrophe: it was lifted during the chaos and repairs after the Anchor's aft was breached (see §3). Milo is only finding out now, days later, because no one had cause to open the box until the week's reckoning came due. Barakos is already prowling the building; Kaelen is already too quiet. Let the party feel how *wrong* it is that anything got past the house's mundane, trust-based security — the Anchor has never needed locks against its own.

## No Going to the Watch

The obvious move — report a theft — is the one door the house cannot open. The Manifest names magistrates, patriars, married patricians, a Watch officer or two; handing that list to the law hands it to the exact people who would use it, and the moralists who would burn the house for keeping it. The proprietors work this out fast, and the conclusion is bleak: whoever took it, the Anchor has to get it back *itself*, quietly, before it surfaces.

Kaelen doesn't pace. They stand at the bar with both hands flat on the wood, the way they stand when they're holding a room together by will alone. "We can't go to the Watch — you understand that. Half of what's in that book is the Watch." A breath. "We've never asked the three of you for anything. I know that. I'm asking now. Find who took it. Bring it home before anyone reads a word of it." Behind them, Barakos hasn't said a thing — but he's already set a heavy purse on the bar, and he doesn't take his hand off it, like letting go of it is the hard part.

**DM notes:** this is the hook — the house *asking*, which costs them (see §4). Milo pivots to practical fast (food, coin, whatever the party needs); Barakos wants to handle it with his fists and has to be talked into letting the party work quietly instead. Give the party room to commit before you feed them the first lead.

## The Trail

Built node-based (design guide §3): three independent leads, and reaching Thorne needs only any two of them. Players can start from whichever thread they grab first.

*Who got into the Quarters.* The Captain's Quarters are private — invitation-only, and until the breach, effectively unreachable — so the theft narrows to whoever had access while the stern stood open and the house was full of hands mending it. **DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation)** — or simply asking Milo or Barakos who was underfoot during the repairs — narrows the field to a short list of recent hires, and **Wick's** name surfaces. *Fail forward:* a failed check doesn't hide Wick — the party just hears it from a gossiping regular a beat later, with Milo's disappointment attached.

*Wick, found.* Wick hasn't shown for two shifts. Run down where they've holed up (a cheap room off the Gilt Row, a cousin's boat at the docks — DM's choice) and the case cracks wide: Wick is terrified, guilt-sick, and confesses everything the moment they're shown a shred of kindness rather than a fist.

Wick doesn't run when they see you — that's the worst part. They just fold a little smaller on the edge of the cot, knuckles white around a cold cup of tea. "I didn't have a choice," they say, and then, immediately, hating it: "That's not — everyone says that. But he's a *magistrate*. He knew about the letter. He said one word from him and I'd be in the stocks by Highharvest, or worse, and people like me don't — " They stop. "His name is Thorne. Aldous Thorne. The lantern man. From the pamphlets." A wet laugh. "He's going to hold up your book at his own party and call it saving the city."

**DM notes:** Wick is a lead, not a villain — play the coercion as real and the guilt as worse than any threat the party could make. Wick knows: Thorne has the book; Thorne's people; the gala in three nights. What Wick *doesn't* know is that Thorne can't read it — that's the party's to discover. A party that treats Wick gently earns an Act Two asset (Wick knows the agents, the handoff, a way in); a party that treats them like a criminal still gets the information but loses the ally. **Never** let this dead-end: if the party can't find Wick, Wick finds *them*, leaving a note at the Anchor rather than let the house fall for their mistake.

Soren knows *him*. The instant "Thorne" is spoken aloud where Soren can hear it, the last piece lands — because Soren has met the man under the hood.

Soren goes very still, in the way that means they've already known something you're just catching up to. "Aldous Thorne," they repeat, tasting it. "He came to me three times. Hood up, coin unmarked, a name that wasn't his. He thought I couldn't see him." The smallest, coldest smile. "I see everyone. That's the *job*." They tilt their head. "He's in the book because I put him there. Which means I can tell you exactly what he's so frightened of."

**DM notes:** this is Soren's hook onto the crew (and their personal stake). It also quietly establishes the cipher — Soren wrote the entry, so Soren can *read* the Manifest when the party can't, which pays off later. Keep Soren's register cool and knowing, never vengeful; this is a professional who has just realized the hypocrite came for *them*, and intends to be there when the bill comes due.

## What They Learn

However they get there, the walls converge on one shape: **Aldous Thorne** has the Manifest; he is working to scrub his own three lines out of it and won't move publicly until he's sure they're gone; and he means to unveil the rest at the Lamplighters' League's "Save Our Harbor" gala at his cliffside manor **in three nights**. The house has exactly that long. That launches **Act Two** — casing the man, the manor, and the party.

## 7. Act Two — Casing the Lamplighter

The crew has three days and a simple, enormous goal: learn the man, the manor, and the gala, and build a way in. This act is **freeform** — the party pursues whatever thread they like, in any order, and the more they learn the better their odds on the night. No forced schedule, no hard countdown.

There is, however, a quiet pressure. **Thorne still can't read the book.** Somewhere across the city a cipher-breaker he's hired is working slowly through the Manifest toward his own three lines — the closest thing this act has to a clock (see *The Cipher-Breaker* and *Sidebar: Thorne's Progress*). The party can ignore it, race it, or — best of all — reach into it and slow it down.

## The Con: Guests of Good Standing

The marquee way in is the funniest: the crew walks through the front door as **donors** — wealthy, concerned citizens eager to support the Lamplighters' "Save Our Harbor" campaign. It's a con that turns the party's least-practiced muscles (respectability, restraint, prim disapproval) into the disguise, and it puts them in the same glittering room as the book. Getting there takes an **invitation** (bought with a fat "donation," forged, or earned by playing the convert), **cover identities** the crew can hold under scrutiny (Soren is a merciless etiquette coach), and the nerve to smile through an evening of speeches against everything they love. Other approaches stay open and can be mixed — the cliff-and-water climb, the service door, the codebreaker's credentials — but the donor cover is the spine the gala is built around.

**DM notes:** lean into the comedy of adventurers playing patriars — the fighter who can't stop standing like a bodyguard, the rogue overselling their piety. Reward players who commit to a bit. Cover isn't one roll; it's a running performance, and slips feed the Suspicion track later (see Act Three) rather than blowing everything at once.

## Casing — the Nodes

Node-based (design guide §3): each thread yields intel and, usually, a concrete **asset** the crew banks for the job (see *Sidebar: Running the Con*). None is mandatory; any solid handful sets them up to win.

*Turning Wick.* If the party left Wick an ally in Act One, Wick becomes the crew's first real edge:

they know how Thorne's agents made contact, where the handoff happened, and — crucially — that Thorne's people were asking after "someone who reads old merchant codes." That's the thread to the cipher-breaker. Wick also aches to help set this right, which a kind crew can spend (an inside hand who knows the house's routines and the agents' faces).

*The Cipher-Breaker.* The trail — via Wick, via Soren's contacts, or via the Gilt Row's discreet-services underworld — leads somewhere no one on the crew is ready for: **Emris Orr** (they/them), a former senior Wayfinder of the Anchor, gone these several years, and the one person outside the proprietors who can read the house's own cipher cold. Thorne engaged them through a fixer, sight unseen, to crack "an old merchant code" — he has never seen their face, and never learned the book is one of the Anchor's own. Emris took the work blind. They understood what it was the moment they began turning up names they'd loved, in a hand they had once helped write — and they have been **stalling ever since**, sick with it, decoding as slowly as they dare, because Thorne holds the one thing they would betray anything to protect: their younger sister, **Tamsin Orr**, whom a magistrate can ruin with a signature.

This is the richest node in the act, and the crew's way to the book. Approaches (mix freely):

- **Reach them first.** Find Emris before the gala, and the recognition does half the work — but turning a terrified person takes more than a reunion; they will not move against Thorne while Tamsin is in his reach.
- **Free the leverage.** Tamsin sits in the city on a charge — real or trumped-up — that rests in Thorne's own docket, his to dismiss or condemn with a stroke; *that* is the leash. Break it (spring her, spirit her out of his reach, or force her release) and Emris is *yours*: a willing inside agent who can hand Thorne exactly the decode he's praying for. Getting Tamsin and Emris to safety is also **Barakos's** payoff at the getaway (§8).

- **Become them.** Thorne has never seen Emris; a crew member can walk in as the awaited expert, straight to the book.
- **Let them finish the con.** The sweetest version: a turned Emris gives Thorne the verdict he's begging for — "*your name isn't in here, Magistrate*" — so he unveils the book believing himself safe, and the crew lifts it, or lets him hang himself, from there.

**DM notes — Barakos.** This is the beat the adventure hands to **Barakos**, and it should be his, not Kaelen's. Years ago, on a night a threat came for Emris's sibling in a crowded house, Barakos — the Shield — had to choose between chasing that one danger and holding the many, and he held the many. Emris vanished with their sibling, and Barakos has carried the arithmetic ever since. Emris walking back through the door is his one unhealed failure made flesh — and his one chance to make it right this time. Play it as stillness and weight, not a fight: the immovable man finally getting to protect the person he couldn't. (*Emris's full write-up, the sibling, and a light stat reference: NPC Roster / Appendix — [TO DRAFT].*)

**The Manor.** Thorne's estate clings to the cliff above the harbor: a grand hall where the gala and his keynote will happen, a service wing, private apartments and a study, and terraced gardens dropping toward the water. Scout it and the approaches reveal themselves — the front gate and drive (the donor route), the service entrance (caterers and volunteers), and the cliff-and-sea face (a boat and a climb, Aris's element, unwatched because no one sane comes that way). (*Full layout + battle map: Appendix — [TO DRAFT].*)

**The Gala & the Guest List.** Learning the event is half the job: the dress, the manners, the running order — a champagne reception, a **charity auction** to fund the "Save Our Harbor" campaign, a "reformed" testimony or two, and Thorne's keynote — and who'll be in the room. What the running order does *not* list, because almost no

one knows it, is the capstone Thorne means to spring: the unveiling of the Manifest, kept back as his own private triumph. Here Soren earns their place — shown the guest list, they can quietly mark the handful of names who have also climbed the Anchor's stairs. Those **fellow patrons** are the act's live wire (lightly statted, below): should the book ever surface, *they're* ruined too, which makes them potential allies, leverage, or panicking wildcards on the night.

**The Lamplighters' League.** Worth a scene for intel and flavor both: attend a public meeting, collect the pamphlets, watch the movement work. It's a legitimate route to an invitation (become a "donor"), and it's where the adventure's satire breathes — the sanctimony, the euphemisms, the collection plate, the "reformed" testimony — all of it hollow at the center, since the man leading it is the worst offender in the room.

**The House's Own.** Between leads, the crew can spend time with the Anchor's people to bank assets: Milo's disguises and a helpful concoction or two; Barakos's buried contacts — mercenaries who once ran security for men like Thorne and know how such a house is guarded; the Tidewrack's fixed extradimensional pockets, good for smuggling a kit past a search at the door; Aris's cliff-scout; Soren's read on what Thorne is truly afraid of. Each is a scene and an edge.

**The fellow patrons (lightly statted).** Three broad figures Soren can point out, for a DM to play as allies, leverage, or hazards (*names and detail: [TO DRAFT] — first-pass sketches*):

- **A nervous young patriar heir** — terrified of exposure, easily turned into a frightened, useful ally.
- **A League co-chair who is himself a secret patron** — pure hypocrite; leverage the crew can wield against Thorne inside his own movement.
- **A Watch captain** — dangerous (they can have the crew seized) but also in the book, and so turnable if handled with nerve.

## SIDEBAR

**Sidebar: Running the Con (*DM notes*)**

The players have their own one-page primer — the **How the Con Works** card [§12, Sidebar: How the Con Works](#), handed out at session zero. This is your operating side of the same three parts, with the adjudication the card leaves out.

*Leverage.* Award **1** for any concrete casing win — intel that matters, a turned or charmed NPC, a forged or bought invite, a scouted route, a smuggled kit. Be generous; it's the fuel the flashback economy burns, and a stingy pool makes the game timid. One shared crew pool, no hard cap; roughly 5–6 banked by the night of the gala is a well-prepped crew.

*Opening position.* Read their banked Leverage as they walk into the gala: **5+ = In Control** (Suspicion starts at 0), **2–4 = Risky** (starts at 1–2), **0–1 = Desperate** (starts at 3). One beat to set it, then cut to the floor — casing is their odds.

*Flashbacks and Edges.* Say **yes**, then charge. A plausible flashback costs **1 Leverage**; a real stretch costs 2 or calls for a roll; out of Leverage, they can still flashback for a point of **Suspicion** instead. An **Edge** — advantage on a roll, an already-unlocked door, a contact who owes them turning up — is the same 1-Leverage spend, cashed in the moment rather than as a scene. Gatekeep nothing.

*Suspicion — the real clock.* A shared track of **six segments**, filled by blown covers, failed high-stakes rolls, pushed luck, or a fellow patron's panic. Announce it climbing; the dread is the point. A few ticks tighten the guards and narrow the crew's room; **full turns the room** and the con goes loud (§8). "Loud" isn't "arrested," though — Thorne's own bind (§8) stops him calling the Watch on them without exposing himself. All of it is first-pass and tunable: keep it moving, and let a good line beat a good roll.

## SIDEBAR

**Sidebar: Thorne's Progress (*the optional soft clock*)**

Thorne's decoding advances along four steps — **Unstarted → Underway → Closing → Cracked** — nudged forward by passing days or a dawdling crew, and *held back* whenever the party engages the cipher-breaker (reaching, turning, or replacing Emris). If it reaches **Cracked** before the gala, Thorne finds and burns his own three lines — his personal risk gone — and the stakes shift: he may destroy the whole book rather than display it, move the unveiling up, or simply relax his guard in a way the crew can exploit. Use it for pressure, not a hard fail: a freeform table can leave it in the background; a table that wants teeth can lean on it. Because Emris is already slow-walking the decode, the clock naturally crawls while they remain Thorne's reader; turning or extracting Emris freezes it outright — though it may push a desperate Thorne to seek another reader, or to destroy the book unread.

**Walking In**

However the crew spends their three days, Act Two ends when they're ready to move — invitations in hand (or forged), covers rehearsed,

assets banked, and a plan loose enough to survive contact. That carries them to the manor gates on the night of the gala, and into **Act Three**.

## 8. Act Three — Save Our Harbor

The gala is the job: the crew walks into the one event built to destroy the Anchor and walks out with the book that would have done it — and, if they choose, leaves the room having turned Thorne’s own sanctimony into the house’s finest night. This is the *crew’s* operation — the PCs, **Soren**, and **Aris** (and a turned **Emris**) inside; the proprietors are far too recognizable to risk in that ballroom. **Barakos** waits at the edge of it, on the getaway, and that is where his part of this pays off (see *The Shield, at the Water*).

### Into the Lion’s Den

Thorne’s manor clings to the cliff above the harbor, and tonight every window of it burns. Inside, the Lamplighters’ League is throwing the society event of the season — its grand “Save Our Harbor” gala: gilt lantern pins at every lapel, banners swagged over the doors, a charity auction glittering along one wall, a dais at the far end waiting for the speeches. The room is thick with patriars, donors, and the fashionably curious, here to be *seen* giving generously to a respectable cause. Not one of them knows what their host means to do before the night is out — that the grand announcement he’s promised, the one he’s asked two senior Watch officers to stay for, is meant to end a hundred of the very people smiling in this room. Only Thorne knows what he means to unveil from that dais. Only you know what it truly is — the stolen heart of your own house, dressed up as his triumph — and that you are here to take it back before he can.

**The opening position.** Before the crew steps inside, take stock of Act Two — assets banked, leads turned, Emris’s status, invitations real or forged — and set their footing in one beat: **controlled** (in clean, cover solid, a plan with

slack), **risky** (in, but thin — a shaky invite, a cover that won’t survive much), or **desperate** (improvising at the door). That’s the one “how ready are we” check; after it, cut straight to the floor. The position sets where the **Suspicion track** starts and how much rope the crew has before the room turns on them.

### Working the Room

Now it’s the con: hold cover, find the book, spend assets and flashbacks, and keep Suspicion off the boil. Soren works the floor, reading faces and quietly marking the **fellow patrons** — the men in lantern pins whose own names are in the very book Thorne carries. Aris finds the ways up and the ways out. The crew drifts toward the magistrate and the Manifest.

**Soren, seen.** Soren is a fire genasi — ember-eyed, smoke-haired, unforgettable — and Thorne has spent three hooded nights in their company. He *will* recognize them. Lean into it rather than around it, and let the moment land.

Thorne is mid-sentence with a patriar’s wife when he catches sight of Soren across the floor, and the sentence simply stops. The color goes out of him. For one long breath the most powerful man in the room is a boy caught out — because the one person alive who can unmake him is standing in his own ballroom in borrowed finery, meeting his eyes, and *smiling*. Then the mask climbs back up, worse for the crack in it.

**DM notes — Thorne’s bind.** This is the crew’s quietest, sharpest weapon, and it runs all night: Thorne cannot move openly against Soren — or the crew — without answering the one question he can never answer, *how do you know that Wayfinder?* He can’t have them thrown out, can’t set the Watch on them, can’t so much as point, without risking the exposure he’d burn a city to avoid. Soren can walk right up to him and, with perfect courtesy, let him understand that the house knows and his whole evening is in their

hands — pinning the magistrate while the rest of the crew works. Play Thorne all night as a man performing calm over terror. (This bind is also *why* going loud doesn't simply end in the crew's arrest — see below.)

**The twist — it isn't where they cased it.** Every scrap of Act Two pointed at a study, a strongroom, a safe. It's not there.

It's on *him*. Of course it is. Thorne hasn't finished scrubbing his own name out of it and trusts it to no vault and no servant — so it rides in a slim locked case he keeps at his own side all night, one hand never far from it, even as he shakes the hands of everyone he's about to ruin.

The crew has to adapt and get close to the man himself: a lift by nimble fingers, a staged distraction, a seduction, a spilled glass and a deft hand — or, sweetest of all, a turned **Emris**, the codebreaker come to “deliver,” the one person Thorne will place the book into willingly. Let a turned Emris hand him the verdict he's been praying for — *your name isn't in here, Magistrate* — and the Manifest passes into a friend's hands in the middle of the enemy's ballroom.

**DM notes:** this is the moving-target complication — reward improvisation; the grab is a problem to solve, not a single die roll. Any of the crew's Act Two work should have a way to matter here. Let the plan cost something (a spent asset, a spike of Suspicion) rather than simply working or simply failing.

## It Goes Loud

However the grab lands, it tips — a guard, a face recognized, Thorne's hand going to an empty side, a fellow patron's panic. Suspicion breaks and the room swings toward the crew. This is the fork the whole adventure has been walking to, and it belongs to the players: they can run for it (see below) — or they can do something braver.

Give them the opening and let them take it in their own words. Cornered in the room built to condemn them, the crew can choose not to flee but to *stand* — to say, however they say it, that there is nothing here to be ashamed of; that the house Thorne came to burn was never the shameful thing. And when a player reaches for that —

- **Emris** is standing among their own for the first time in years, done hiding — the lost one, visible, home.
- The **fellow patrons** are watching people braver than they have ever managed to be. These are men who arrived in the League's own lantern pins with the Anchor's ink in the very book Thorne carries, and some of them, moved past their fear, simply refuse to be the mob he needed. The room turns.
- And the life the crew carried in with them — the house's art, a song, the sheer unashamed *aliveness* of it — takes the very apparatus of the League's crusade, the dais and the auction and the glittering “good cause,” and turns it into something else entirely.

**DM notes — joy with teeth.** This lands only if it's earned and dangerous. The Watch is *right there*; the guards are real; standing instead of running is a genuinely risky choice, and the crew makes it anyway. Play the danger straight and let the *bravery* be what turns the room — not a scripted swell of music. Keep it defiant, a little dangerous, and specific: one true line from a player beats any speech you could write for them. It is not a group hug. It's a stand.

## The Only Shame Is His

Thorne is not dragged out in chains, and the crew does not hold his name up to the room — and that restraint is the whole point. The house does not weaponize the book, not even against the man who would have burned them with it.

He is left with the colder thing. The crew has his own entry; he knows they have it; and he has just watched the people he set out to destroy win by

being unafraid in his own ballroom. He is ruined the moment he moves against the Anchor again, and he knows it — powerless, un-arrested, and left to sit in it.

**DM notes — whose shame this is.** Get this exactly right, because it's the heart of the adventure. The shame Thorne is left to lie in is *his own*, and it is his hypocrisy and his cruelty — **never** the sex work, never the queerness, never his own desire, none of which the Anchor has ever treated as anything to be ashamed of, because none of it is. The crew does not out him; there was nothing shameful to out, and doing it would make them the persecutor he was. What actually ruins him is that he built a machine to destroy people for the very tenderness he was too much of a coward to own — and the people he hated showed him more grace than he ever showed a soul. The Anchor carries no shame out of that ballroom. He carries all of it, and it was always, only, his.

## The Shield, at the Water

Out through the cliff-side dark, the service passages, or the front door on a wave of turned goodwill — and here, at last, is **Barakos**. He has been at the edge of this all night, on the boat below the cliff, because he is the one face that could never walk in. When Emris comes out — and, if the crew freed them, the younger sibling too — Barakos is waiting.

He doesn't say anything. He wouldn't. The big man just steadies the boat, and reaches up, and takes Emris's hand as they climb down — the same hand he couldn't hold onto once, years ago, on a worse night, when he chose the many and lost the one. This time he simply catches them.

**DM notes:** the Shield, finally shielding. Play it as stillness and weight, not words — Barakos's whole arc lands in a held breath and an outstretched hand. If the sibling is here too, let him have that as well: the person he could not protect, and the one they were protecting, both in his boat, both safe. Don't over-narrate it. Let it be quiet.

## What to Do With a Book Like This

The crew ends the night holding the Manifest — every secret the Anchor keeps, ruin over half the city, Thorne among them. What they do with it is theirs to decide, and it is the real ending:

- **Burn it.** Keep the promise the house is built on — discretion, even now, even over their enemies. The purest answer, and the one the whole night has quietly been arguing for.
- **Keep it.** Hold the leverage — over Thorne, over the powerful — safety bought with the exact weapon they just beat. Pragmatic, and corrosive; let the table feel the shadow of what carrying that makes them.
- **Give it back to Kaelen.** Put it in the house's hands and let the proprietors choose — which, knowing them, means the fire, but makes it the family's decision rather than a weapon the party keeps.

**DM notes:** spell the stakes out and let the table actually talk it through — there's no wrong mechanical answer, only the question of who they choose to be. Then close on the house, and on the ripple: no citywide spectacle, but word travels the right rooms, and the Anchor's legend quietly deepens — a tolerated house becoming, in whispers, a beloved one. See *Treasure & Rewards*.

## 9. NPC Roster

**Magistrate Aldous Thorne** (he/him, human) — the mark. A reformist magistrate on the rise, chair of the Lamplighters' League and the public face of

its “Save Our Harbor” crusade against the Gilt Row’s “disreputable” houses. Austere, silver-tongued, genuinely believed by his followers — and, three furtive hooded nights this past year, a paying guest of the very house he means to burn. He is not a fighter and never becomes one; his weapons are the law, the mob, and other people’s fear. His own entry in the Manifest is why he stole it, and why he can’t rest until his name is ash. Undone not in combat but in an exposure he cannot risk and a shame that was always his own (§8).

**Emris Orr** (they/them, tiefling) — the cipher-breaker, and the adventure’s aching heart. A former senior Wayfinder of the Anchor with a dusk-cool beauty gone quiet with exhaustion: deep twilight-violet skin, dark horns swept back low like polished driftwood, pale sea-glass eyes, and the careful, unhurried hands the work left them. Gone these several years, and one of the few souls alive who can read the house’s own shorthand. Thorne hired them sight-unseen to crack “an old merchant code”; they realized whose book it was while decoding it, and have been stalling in horror since. They left the house long ago to protect their younger sister, **Tamsin Orr** (she/her) — a tiefling like Emris, the same twilight coloring, and in a city like this exactly the sort of outsider a “decency” court can ruin on a whisper, which is why Thorne’s charge against her sticks so easily. She’s held now on that charge, resting in Thorne’s own docket — the leash he keeps on Emris. Emris is recognized on sight by Soren, and at the getaway by Barakos, whose one great failure they are. Turnable into a willing inside agent; their homecoming is the emotional peak of the finale.

**Wick** (they/them, half-elf) — the coerced insider. Milo’s young line-cook, weeks into an honest job they forged a reference to get. A magistrate’s court would ruin someone like Wick for less, so Thorne’s people turned them into the theft’s hands. Sick with guilt, hiding, findable — and, met with kindness, redeemable into an Act Two ally who knows the agents’ faces and the handoff.

**Soren** (they/them) and **Aris** (he/him) — the Wayfinder crew (full descriptions in the DM Lore guide; adventure roles here). **Soren** is the inside face and the keeper of secrets: they served the hooded Thorne and can name him, they read the gala and mark the fellow patrons, and they alone can read the Manifest at a glance. **Aris** is the climber and physical infiltrator — the cliff face, the rigging, the ways in and out that no one watches.

**The fellow patrons** (three, lightly drawn; Soren points them out at the gala — *names proposed, swap freely*):

- **Elias Duhr** (he/him) — a nervous young patriarch, terrified of exposure; the easiest to turn into a frightened, useful ally.
- **Percival Gronce** (he/him) — a Lamplighters’ co-chair who is himself in the book; a pure hypocrite, and leverage against Thorne inside his own movement.
- **Captain Rhona Vex** (she/her) — a Watch captain: dangerous (she can have the crew seized) but also a patron, and so turnable by a crew with nerve.

**Thorne’s people** (unnamed) — a handful of hired agents and enforcers who ran the theft and mind the magistrate, plus the manor’s guards and the Watch officers at the gala. See the Appendix for stat references, and note the gala is meant to stay bloodless (Appendix, *Combat footprint*).

## 10. Clues & Solution

This isn’t a whodunit — the party knows at once *what* happened (the Manifest is gone) and needs only two answers: *who took it* and *where it is now*. Both fall out of a short, node-based on-ramp (design guide §3) — three independent leads, any two of which reach Thorne, so no single missed roll can stall the adventure.

**To reach “Wick took it”:**

- **The wrecked Quarters** — who had access while the stern stood open and the house was full of

repair hands (DC 12 Investigation, or simply asking Milo or Barakos who was underfoot).

- **The house's own grief** — Wick has missed two shifts and is dodging everyone; any Wayfinder or regular can point at the new cook who's gone to ground.

**To reach "Thorne has it → the gala → three nights":**

- **Wick's confession** — the whole shape of it (Thorne, the coercion, the gala), given freely to a crew that shows kindness rather than a fist.
- **Soren's recognition** — the instant Thorne's name is spoken, Soren knows the hooded client and can say exactly what he's so afraid of.
- **The cipher-breaker thread (Act Two)** — chasing whoever Thorne turned to for a reading of the book leads to Emris, who knows his plan from the inside.

**Guidance if a lead is missed:** none of these is a choke point. If the party never finds Wick, Wick finds *them* (a note left at the Anchor rather than let the house fall for their mistake). If they never press Soren, Soren volunteers it the moment "Thorne" surfaces. The destination — the gala, three nights out — is reachable from any direction.

till — a debt of the family's own, and not one they'll hear argued.

- **Legend, in whispers.** No citywide spectacle, but word travels the right rooms after the gala: the house that stood, unafraid, in the room built to burn it. The Anchor's standing quietly shifts — tolerated-and-stigmatized softening, in the circles that matter, toward *beloved and quietly protected*. A soft, ongoing campaign-level lift; log the outcome if you carry it forward.
- **A keepsake with no magic and no need of it** [*proposed — confirm*]: the proprietors trust the crew with the one thing the house guards above all — its own hand. Each of them is given a small driftwood token inscribed in the house's shorthand, a single line only the family can read: *you are one of ours*. In a house whose whole soul is discretion, being handed the key to its secrets is the highest honor it has to give. (*Alternatives if you'd rather: Thorne's own gilt lantern pin, kept as an ironic trophy; or a parting gift from Emris.*)
- **The Manifest itself.** What the crew does with the book is the adventure's final beat, not a reward line — see §8, *What to Do With a Book Like This*.

## 11. Treasure & Rewards

This is a level 4 caper; the payoff is people, not loot.

- **The people they saved.** The real reward, and the whole point: the Anchor stands, its patrons safe, its promise kept. The crew leaves bound tighter to the house than ever — to Soren and Aris, to a redeemed Wick, and, if they earned it, to Emris and the sibling they brought home. This is the campaign's "Friends of the House" bond deepened past standing into something like family.
- **Coin.** 75 gp per PC, pressed on them by Kaelen personally rather than drawn from the house

## 12. Appendix

### Combat Footprint

This is a social heist — built to be won with wit, nerve, and charm — and the gala is meant to stay *bloodless* unless a table forces otherwise. Real violence belongs to the clue-gathering stages: a scuffle with Thorne’s agents while running down Wick or the cipher-breaker, not the ballroom. If Thorne escalates at the climax, steer the party toward *subduing* him and leaving him in his own shame rather than killing him — a corpse makes a martyr, and blood is the one thing that could turn the house’s finest night into a scandal. Keep him the coward, not the victim.

### Stat References

No custom monsters are needed; the opposition is human. Use SRD blocks, named and flavored per design guide §6:

- **Thorne’s agents / enforcers** — the SRD **Spy** (the fixer who hired Emris; the ones who leaned on Wick) and **Thug** (muscle), as needed.
- **Manor guards & Watch officers** — SRD **Guard**, with a **Veteran** for a captain. Present in numbers at the gala, but there to be *avoided*, not fought.
- **Thorne, Emris, Wick, the fellow patrons** — noncombatants; run them from their Roster entries, no stat block required. (If a table truly forces a brawl with the bodyguards, two Guards and a Spy is plenty for a level 4 party — this was never a battle.)

### The Manor — Location / Node Map (DM reference)

Thorne’s cliffside estate, keyed for casing (Act Two) and the gala (Act Three). Six nodes, three ways in:

- **The Gate & Drive** — the front approach; the donor cover arrives here, invitations checked.

- **The Grand Hall** — the gala proper: dais and “Save Our Harbor” program, collection tables, the Watch officers, and Thorne working the floor with the Manifest’s case at his side.
- **The Terrace & Cliff-Gardens** — open to the harbor drop; where the cliff-and-water approach lands (unwatched), and the quietest line to the getaway.
- **The Service Wing** — kitchens, pantries, the caterers’ door: the below-stairs route.
- **Thorne’s Study & Private Apartments** — the obvious place to case for the book, and the red herring: it isn’t here, it’s on *him*.
- **The Cellars & Cliff-Base** — an optional grimy climb up from the water for a crew that wants one.

**Three approaches:** the **front** (donors, invitations), the **service door** (caterers, League volunteers), the **cliff & water** (a boat and a climb — Barakos’s getaway line). (*A rendered player map isn’t required for a social finale; a visual can be added later if wanted.*)

## SIDEBAR

**Sidebar: How the Con Works**

*A player handout — non-spoilery. Reproduce it and hand it to the table at session zero; it's theirs to keep at their elbow while they play.*

This is a heist, not a dungeon. You won't win it with a perfect plan at the door; you'll win it by gathering an edge, staying cool, and trusting that *"oh, we thought of that"* is always on the table. The whole system fits right here:

**1 • Casing earns Leverage.** Every time you lock in something real during the run-up — case the place, turn a servant, forge an invitation, scout a way in, charm the right person, lift a key — your crew banks **1 Leverage**. It's a shared pool; track it with tallies or a handful of the house's tide-shells. Leverage is just "we came prepared," made countable — and the more you gather, the stronger you begin (see 4).

**2 • Spend it on a Flashback — the fun part.** When a problem lands mid-job, you don't need to have planned for it. Spend **1 Leverage** and declare that you *already handled it*, in a quick flashback to prep you never spelled out:

*"There's a sentry on the side door." — "Right, that's why we stood him a drink last night — and he steps out for a smoke on the half-hour."*

The DM sets the scene, you narrate the flashback, and it's *true*. Reveal your plan as you need it, instead of guessing at it up front. (*Out of Leverage? You can still flashback — it just costs a point of Suspicion instead; see 5.*)

**3 • Or spend it on an Edge.** Cash Leverage in the moment for a concrete advantage: advantage on a roll, a contact who owes you turning up, a door already unlocked, a distraction ready to spring. Same idea — your prep, paying off when it counts.

**4 • Your prep sets your footing.** When you step into the big job, the DM reads how much Leverage you've banked and sets your starting position — **In Control**, **Risky**, or **Desperate**. Casing isn't busywork; it's literally how good your odds are when the curtain goes up.

**5 • Suspicion is the danger — not a health bar.** You're not tracking damage, you're tracking *heat*. Blown covers, bad rolls, and pushed luck fill a shared **Suspicion** track. Keep it low by playing smooth; let it fill and the room turns — the con goes loud, and you're talking (or running) your way out. Suspicion, not the clock, is what you're racing.

**The one rule that matters:** be bold. A stylish, slightly reckless crew that improvises and flashbacks its way through will have more fun — and do better — than one trying to script the perfect plan at the door. Get in. Trust yourselves. You've always thought of it.

## The Manifest — Shorthand Handout

The centerpiece prop: a single page of the Manifest, written in the house's shorthand. To everyone at the table it reads as inscrutable tide-marks — except a player who actually reads shorthand, who decodes it live, exactly as Soren and Emris do in the fiction. A turned Emris — mid-decode, worked pages already in hand — is the natural way to get this page to the party *before* the grab; otherwise, reveal it the moment they've lifted the book. A stenographer at the table becomes the party's own cipher-breaker; every other table just has Soren or Emris read it, using the plaintext below. Two ready-to-print pages close this appendix: the ledger itself (the player's prop) and a decoded copy for the DM, with the translation inked in red above each shorthand line.

### What the page says (plaintext / answer key):

— *Kythorn* 12. Bram, Cedar. Rennick's nephew. Standing arrangement. — *Kythorn* 30. Soren, Smoke. Hooded, "Mr. Lantern." Magistrate Aldous Thorne. Coin, unmarked. — *Flamerule* 8. Aris, Riggings. Two regulars. — *Flamerule* 19. Soren, Smoke. "Mr. Lantern" again. Thorne. Second visit. — *Eleasis* 2. Soren, Smoke. Thorne. Third visit. — *Eleasis* 5. Toren, Iron. First-timer.

*(Design note: kept terse, like a real ledger, so there's less for a stenographer to decode — and no editorializing in the book itself. The smoking gun is simply the fact of it: three dated visits from the magistrate, logged alias-and-true-name both, in Soren's own discreet hand among ordinary bookings. The house saw through "Mr. Lantern" every time.)*

The house's shorthand is a real stenographer's hand: rows of letters, one stroke per beat, plain to anyone trained on a steno machine and

inscrutable tide-marks to everyone else. Proper names come out spelled a stroke per letter (e.g. `T` `H` `O` `R` `PB` `E`), exactly how a stenographer writes an unfamiliar name — so a player who actually reads shorthand can sound the page out live, decoding it just as Soren and Emris do. For any table without a steno reader, the plaintext above is the key.

Two finished, print-ready pages follow: the ledger prop to hand your players, and a decoded copy for you — the crew's translation inked in red above each line.

## Register of the House — Private

| Date         | Particulars                                                                                                       |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kythorn 12   | PWRAPL SAOE/TKER R*/E/TPH*/TPH*/EUKR*/K*/S*<br>TPHEF/KWRAOU STAPB/TKEUPBG ER/AEUPBLG/PHUPBT                       |
| Kythorn 30   | S*/O*/R*/E/TPH* SPHOEBG HU/TKEUD PHEUS/TER<br>HRAPB/TERPB PHA/SKWRUTS/RAEUT AL/TKUS THAURPB<br>KOEUPB UPB/PHARBGT |
| Flamerule 8  | ER/AOES REU/TKPWEUPBGZ TAOU REG/KWRU/HRERZ                                                                        |
| Flamerule 19 | S*/O*/R*/E/TPH* SPHOEBG PHEUS/TER HRAPB/TERPB<br>U/TKPWEPB THAURPB SE/KUPBD SREU/STKPWEUT                         |
| Eleasis 2    | S*/O*/R*/E/TPH* SPHOEBG THAURPB THERD<br>SREU/STKPWEUT                                                            |
| Eleasis 5    | TAU/RUPB AOEU/ERPB TPERTS TAOEU/PHER                                                                              |

*The Manifest, decoded — DM reference. The red hand is the crew's interlinear translation; the three dated visits from "Mr. Lantern" resolve to Magistrate Aldous Thorne, alias and true name logged together in Soren's own entries, among ordinary bookings that decode to nothing.*