

While you are sitting at the celebration feast with Simon and company, Hardin asks a question. "I have noted, Sir," he says to Simon, "that the speech of your people makes frequent reference to heroes. People say 'The Heroes protect us' when speaking of a possible bad outcome, or 'I swear on the graves of the Heroes' for emphasis. Who are these Heroes?"

Simon's eyebrows lifted higher. "I'm surprised you don't know the story, Father, as your own ArchCleric Bainard was one of them. Didn't the elders of your clan share the history?"

Hardin shook his head. "Bainard is seldom spoken of except as an example to be followed; I know little of his actual life."

Simon nodded. "Very well, then. My uncle Theo tells the story better than I do, but he's in Tavor trying to hunt down another rare book. I'll do my best."

He cleared his throat, sipped some wine, and told you the following tale:

(Note: in this land, time is reckoned by years since the start of the Current Age. CAO is the year in which the Treaty of the Three Kingdoms was signed, ending a century of continental war and establishing the Kingdoms as they exist today. At the time of your adventures, it is CA329.)

The Flatland, as our territory is called, has always been a place somewhat remote from the rule of law. The Highland Throne is most occupied with the needs of the Dwarves and Gnomes in the hills and mountains. There is no gold and no gems in the flatlands, so the Throne has no real interest in those who live here. It's the same today, more or less.

The Third Century CA, however, was a time of great violence in the Flats. The Dwarven and Gnome forces of the Highland Throne had largely routed their enemies from the mountains and hills in the East. They needed somewhere to go, so they came West. Soon they noticed settlements of humans and other folk in the Flats and began to raid those for food, slaves, and valuables.

In response, bands of adventurers formed with the goal of beating back the invaders and recapturing what had been stolen. Many also took payments from the settlements for their protection. About the year CA265, a particular group formed that enjoyed widespread success.

The leader of the group was Simon's father, Marcellus Gore. He was a fighter by trade, and a good one. Artemis Tavor, a young wizard of impressive ability, provided arcane knowledge and spellcasting power. Raphael Montagne, a skilled rogue, brought stealth and much-needed if slightly unsavory connections to the group. Augustus Bainard, the Half-Elven Cleric of Pelor, lent his healing and defensive capabilities as well as a highly effective combat arm. Dumont Tiburon, Dwarven Defender, joined the group last and added yet another formidable combatant to the mix. They were staunch friends as well as adventurers, and together they quickly became known as a force to be reckoned with -- or, if you were a goblinoid, to run from.

From CA265 to CA271 they wandered the plains, engaging the invaders whenever they could and invariably leaving only dead goblinoids and grateful settlers in their wake. Other adventurer types began to follow them, enabling the band to take on larger swarms of enemies. It was during this period that Marcellus married. His two sons, Marius and Simon, were born in CA268 and CA271 respectively.

Over time the quality of the enemy changed. The first waves were simple goblins, hobgoblins, and their ilk -- creatures easily beaten by the experienced team. As

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time went on, however, the invading forces grew steadily more difficult, as if they were being trained specifically for warfare. They upgraded from crude swords and clubs to well-crafted blades and bows. More and more of the attacks came from ambush or showed signs of intelligent planning rather than simple savagery. Mages and shamans joined the enemies' ranks, adding spellcasting to the arsenal of weapons used against settlers. Ogres and trolls added their numbers and horrific abilities to those of the common soldiers. The Heroes continued to improve as well, though, keeping pace with the enemy, and continued to push them back toward the mountains from which they had come.

The darkest period of the Savage Raids began with the Battle of the Blood Hills in CA273. There the Heroes, followed by a small army of lesser adventurer types and soldiers, outmaneuvered the largest part of the goblinoid army, including its generals, and boxed them into a canyon. A month-long siege set in, during which the savages tried several times to escape and were beaten back. Finally the Heroes led their troops into battle one last time.

The battle was bloody for both sides. Cornered, the goblinoids fought viciously and with no regard for their own safety. The skies went dark and remained that way for three days, with not so much as a star in sight. As the Heroes slashed and pounded their way through the hardiest of the soldiers, a mighty earthquake shook the land so violently that even the strongest and surest of foot stumbled and fell. A tremendous chasm opened in the ground and men from both sides were sucked into the earth, including the goblin shamans and the Five. The remaining goblinoid forces surrendered and were allowed to flee into the hills.

People all over the Flats mourned the loss of the Five. A monument was erected in their honor at the site of the disaster, which became known as Heroes' Tomb.

But the Savage Raids did not end with that battle. Heartened by the fall of the Heroes, lesser goblinoids again harangued the settlements. Adventurer types banded together and fought them, but none reached the level of success or fame achieved by the Five.

Then, in CA280, came the Week of Darkness. A massive shadow formed in the mountains and expanded to place the entire plains in day-long darkness. The earth began to shake again, the quakes apparent throughout the Flats. Volcanic eruptions in the mountains shot huge loads of ash into the air, coating the land in dark debris.

When the ashen clouds rescinded and the earth stopped shaking, the enemies lost their resolve. They split into bands and fled for the safety of the mountains, taking nothing with them. To this day nobody knows what caused the sudden retreat, or the dark signs that presaged it.

About 90 days later, still in CA280, a group of clerics took a pilgrimage to Heroes' Tomb to pray for the welfare of the settlements. The clerics were stunned when, in mid prayer, five men came down from the hills above the monument.

The Five Heroes had returned.

When the news broke, there were feasts in every settlement on the Flats. All manner of tall stories circulated about the unmentionable evils the Heroes had faced during their seven years in the Underworld. For their part, the Heroes remained silent. "Some things," the Wizard Tavor would say, "are best unspoken of."

In the months following their emergence the Heroes traveled the Flats, seeking unclaimed lands on which to build homes. Marcellus Gore had a love of the sea, so he chose to build a castle on the western cliff overlooking the ocean. ArchCleric Bainard, being of half Elven stock, selected a site at the edge of the forest where both human and elven kind could flourish. The Dwarf Tiburon chose a site in the Bloody Hills, near the scene of that fateful battle years before. Montagne, the Rogue, selected an intersection of several rough paths in the middle of the plains, envisioning a grand trading post for goods and information from all over the Flats.

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Tavor settled on an empty space at the mouth of the Flats near the Elven city of Sylvangard to build his grand tower. The power and prestige of the Heroes was such that, even in retirement, people felt drawn to them. Settlements sprang up around each of the strongholds. Some grew into major cities while others remained small hamlets.

The Five were seldom seen in retirement, though it was rumored they communicated freely across the distances by magical means. They socialized with the citizens of their communities in a limited way, always avoiding serious political entanglements. With the exception of Marcellus Gore, who had already started his family before the Five were lost in the chasm, none of the Heroes took a bride or fathered children. Gore's wife died tragically some months after his return (some say she jumped off the cliff, others say it was a sickness).

The passing years wore heavily on the Five. Gore entertained often in his castle pavillion but seldom appeared in town and was often absent from his own functions. Montagne's palace stood in the center of Crossroads yet Montagne himself was never seen walking its growing streets. Tavor remained secluded in his magical tower while, around him, a major city developed. Even Tiburon and Bainard kept to themselves, the Dwarf in his mines and the ArchCleric in his chapel, seen only by their immediate associates on any kind of regular basis. Rumors spread of a dark curse on the Heroes that sapped their vitality, but none would confirm such a thing.

In the spring of CA305, 99 months after the Heroes emerged from the depths, Marcellus Gore died in his sleep. Clerics were called in from nearby Bainard's Keep but ArchCleric Bainard, himself a frail and old-looking man despite his Elven blood, refused to allow anyone to resurrect Gore. When the warrior's will was opened, it contained explicit instructions that his body must never be resurrected or raised for any reason; instead, it directed that Gore's body be burned and the ashes poured into the sea.

Gore's funeral marked the last public appearance of the rest of the Five, who finally left their fortresses to attend the service. Their time was brief. Montagne died the next day at his palace in Crossroads. A few days later word came out of Tavor of the Wizard's passing. Tiburon expired next, followed by Bainard. Within a fortnight of Gore's passing, all of the Five Heroes were dead. Each had left instructions prohibiting raising or resurrection and calling for their bodies to be destroyed. Puzzled clerics tried speaking with the dead but were rebuffed. Rumors emerged, as rumors will, but in truth nobody living knows what was in their minds and hearts or why they all died, apparently of natural causes, in such a short span.

Simon's voice trailed away, his eyes staring into the distance. One of the councilmen raised his glass. "To the Heroes. May they have found peace."

"The Heroes."

Everyone drank.