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10/17/04 -- Queen Bitch of the Forest  
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The party gathered at the request of Simon Gore. He told them of a growing problem in the northern woods: farmers and merchants trying to bring their goods to Gore's Cliff for sale were being attacked by vicious animals. He asked their help, citing a suspicion that the animal attacks were in some way related to the druid Velana, who had escaped their encounter at Bainard's Keep where the group had slain Silas Rook.

Simon conducted the group to the Temple of Njord, where they met a farmer named Pritchett. Pritchett had been coming to town with his son and farmhand when they were attacked by three huge wolflike creatures. The son and farmhand had been slain, and Pritchett was badly wounded. Only a passing party of clerics had been able to save him. Pritchett reported that the woods north of Bainard's Keep have grown dense and foreboding in the past month, and stories have begun to circulate about a Lady of the Forest who commands the animals to kill people. Pritchett doesn't believe in fairy stories, but he was attacked by animals shortly after seeing a lone woman walking along the road. He described the woman as human size, with fair skin and dark hair, dressed in hides and a green cloak. The description matched Velana as she was last seen by the players.

Having only a passing knowledge of druids, the group called upon an elderly druid named Radagast who lives just outside Gore's Cliff. Radagast knew Velana and could testify that she was full of rage at all people, but especially the ones that had killed her lover. Radagast counselled patience and forbearance, but she was having none of it. When he refused to join her in revenge, she left in anger and he hadn't seen her since.

Radagast was able to give the party a rough map and directions to find Velana's grove in the Tanglewood Forest. He offered some information on her animal companions and advice on druidic abilities like Trackless Step. Armed with this information, the group headed north.

Their first stop was Bainard's Keep, the scene of their first battle with Velana and Rook. The players were surprised to find the place occupied not by their friend Hardin but by a group of strangers called the Sane. Their leader, Wuatto, invited the players to forswear all violence and join his people. The players' attempts to gain useful information from Wuatto yielded only lectures about the evils of violence. The one new piece of information they gained was that Hardin had, as planned, come back to the Keep to take possession but the Sane were already in residence and refused to move. Hardin's party could not bring themselves to fight a group of unarmed men who refused to defend themselves, so he had left the Keep in Wuatto's hands.

The players took their leave of Bainard's Keep and headed north on the road. They found the site of Pritchett's attack, including the bodies of his son and hand. They gave the bodies proper burial.

A few minutes further north came the point where the players needed to leave the road. The forest had become extremely dense and forbidding. The horses would not be able to negotiate the thick woods, so the players left them with water and set out on foot towards Velana's grove.

Four miles off the road, the players came upon a peaceful-looking grove ringed by tall briars. Huge old oaks and small dark-colored bushes dotted the perimeter as well. After some discussion of strategy, the players entered the grove and moved right, staying near the edges.

As the line passed the first bush, it sprayed a burst of thorns at them. A second bush did the same at the party's rear, causing minor damage to several players. The players reacted quickly with the obvious weapon, fire. Phyro cast a fireball at the cottage across the glenn while Gilead

tossed a vial of flaming oil into the nearest attacking bush. The bushes squealed and writhed at the flames, sending forth a burst of flaming thorns.

The fire did some damage to the bushes, but caused an unintended side effect. The huge oak next to the first bush revealed itself to be a treant. Enraged by the players' use of fire, the treant animated two ancient oak trees and attacked the group. At the same time the skies opened up into a heavy, oppressive rain that obscured the players' vision and impaired their ranged attack abilities. It also put out the fires in the bushes. To add to the players' troubles, bolts of lightning began to rain down on them one at a time from the skies above.

Between the thorn attacks from the bushes, the lightning, and the savage slam attacks of the treant and trees, the group were hard pressed to stay on their feet. Corey had an inspired idea and threw his cloak over one of the bushes, effectively preventing it from firing thorns at anyone while he and Groop did battle with an animated tree. Perdue saw that the treant was resistant to his open hand attacks and switched to his kamas, a slashing weapon. Groop felled one of the trees with mighty blows from his axe, then urged the group to focus their attacks on the treant itself. As soon as they destroyed the woodland being, the second animated tree went still.

The group had no time to congratulate themselves before a trio of dire wolves appeared behind them and attacked. The wolves proved easier to hit and damage than the trees, but also more deadly. First Bullseye, then Corey went down after savage bites from the vicious creatures. Gilead summoned two celestial dogs to help in the battle. Elayna grabbed her newly-crafted Shroud of Healing and started passing it around to keep heal others as they fought. Perdue used it and then laid it on Corey, who recovered enough to continue the fight. Phyro used Mage Hand to pick up the Shroud and cover Bullseye, bringing the halfling back from the edge of death. Then a lightning bolt struck Phyro and he pulled the Shroud back, narrowly avoiding death himself.

Meanwhile, Dimdar and Gilead searched the grove for Velana, whom they knew had to be watching the battle from somewhere nearby. Dimdar found nobody in the cottage, and Gilead found nothing behind it. They both spotted a pair of brown bears in the orchard watching the fight but saw no signs of the spellcaster. Watching their behavior, Gilead rightly concluded that they must be shielding Velana, enabling her to cast spells from the cover they afforded.

When the wolves fell, the entire group turned their attention to the bears. Phyro cast a fireball at them, but the effects seemed to be neutralized somehow. Gilead used True Strike combined with Melf's Acid Arrow to seek out Velana, revealing that she was actually in wild shape as a third brown bear, hiding behind the first two.

The rain stopped, and the group concentrated their efforts on the bears. One of the bears slew the two celestial dogs, only to then fall from a mighty chop of Groop's great axe. The second bear moved to protect its mistress, who was taking missile hits from multiple sources. When it seemed the druid's wounds were growing, the bear transformed into an eagle and took flight. Gilead managed a parting shot with a dagger, but it was not enough to bring the bird down. Velana had escaped.

With its mistress no longer there to protect, the final bear turned and fled the scene. The group allowed it to leave unmolested.

Druids tend to live simply. The battle yielded relatively little in the way of spoils. There was 300gp in mixed coin in the cottage, along with a number of druidic infusions -- the herbalist equivalent of potions, but able to contain the power of any level of spell. There was also a bedroll that radiated magic. These items were gathered up to take home for identification.

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(Aftermath:)

The party moved back through the woods, reaching their horses at dusk. The horses were rested and the evening sky promised a clear night, so they began the journey back to Gore's Cliff instead of camping out for the night by the road. The ride was uneventful. The party noticed several of the buildings visible from the road bore white PLACE OF SANITY signs, similar to the one at Bainard's Keep.

It was late at night when the adventurers arrived back at Gore's Cliff. Even from the edge of town, though, the band recognized that something was wrong. There were too many lights in the windows of the guard tower. As they approached the tower, which is the home of the town watch, a head poked out. "You'd better get to the castle," the guardsman called out. "Something ugly is going on."

Rather than stop to ask questions, the group spurred their mounts and made all speed for Castle Gore. Robb was pacing in the yard when they arrived. "I don't know nothin'," he said in response to questions. "They won't even let me inside the main house."

Another watchman was posted in the doorway of the main house. "There you are. It's about time!" Then he turned his head toward the inside. "They're here!" he cried, and stepped aside to wave the adventurers in.

Cryden, captain of the guard, was in the main hall. "There's been a break-in and a murder," he announced. "On the third floor. Come up with me."

The players followed Cryden upstairs to what had been Marcellus Gore's private suite. Osgood sat on a padded chair, looking ashen. On the floor, in a pool of his own blood, was Simon Gore. His throat had been slit and the blade wiped on his clothes.

"Manservant found him," Cryden commented, "about an hour ago. Nobody saw him come into the castle and nobody knew he was here; Osgood just came in to put out the lights and found his body on the floor. Last time anybody saw him before that was late morning."

Osgood was moaning. "Who would do such a thing? Mr. Gore wasn't a threat to anybody."

Bullseye, Phyro and Elayna took a quick look around the room. "Nothing seems to be missing," Bullseye remarked. "Not from this room, anyway."

Phyro stepped around the body and peeked into the trophy room. He swore loudly and turned back to Cryden. "There's something missing from this room," he said grimly. "Marcellus Gore's armor."

Everyone started talking at once. Elayna drew the Staff of Life from its sheath on her back. "I know you guys would probably like to have a meeting and discuss this," she said, "but I'm doing it anyway. If you don't like it, we can fight about it later." She spoke the command word and the staff glowed brightly for a few seconds.

Everyone watched in silence as the gaping wound on Simon's neck closed and vanished. His chest swelled with a new breath, and his eyes opened. "Thieves!" he cried, choking slightly. "Assassins!" Then he looked around and saw the adventurers circling around him. Corey and Gilead helped Simon to his feet and guided him to a chair.

"I was down at the docks," Simon explained after he'd had a chance to recover his wits. "It was early afternoon. I just happened to look up at the castle and saw two dark figures scaling the cliffside wall. I remembered what you said about thieves looking to steal artifacts and hurried up

to the castle to protect my father's armor. When I got to this room there were four people, all dressed in black, carrying the armor. I grabbed up a poker from the fireplace and moved to block the doorway, but a fifth person grabbed me from behind. A male voice said something like, 'Sorry, old man,' and then I felt something slice into my neck. There was blood everywhere, and I fell, and when I looked up I saw that farmer Pritchett standing over me, wiping his dagger on my shirt sleeve. Then everything went black until I woke up a few minutes ago."

He paused. "I didn't get a very good look at anyone else," he confessed. "They were wearing black leather armor with hoods and masks. I think they were women, but it's hard to be sure." Then he looked at Elayna. "You saved my life tonight. Thank you for that."

With the murder victim alive and the perpetrators obviously gone, there was nothing more for Cryden to do. He and his guards left, wishing the adventurers good luck in finding the thieves. The players escorted Simon and Osgood back to Simon's home, then retired for the night.

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Let me know how your characters react to the events, and any actions you'd like to take in response before we get together again.

BTW, somebody left yesterday with my Player's Handbook. I'd appreciate a phone call to let me know who has it.

<MR>