

11/14/04

The week following the theft of Gore's armor was one of individual action for the new heroes of Gore's Cliff.

Gillead spent time at Rosie's, and in disguise at Dodger's pub in Crossroads, gathering information and rumor in hopes of finding a clue or two about the theft. He heard several stories and rumors relating to the Gore family, among them that whenever a Gore is raised from the dead another dies in three days. Since neither Charlotte nor Theo dropped dead during the week, that rumor would appear to be well debunked.

The away team that went to Tiburon -- Cori, Dimdar, and Groop -- succeeded in persuading the authorities to substitute another shield for the artifact. A surviving relative of Dumont Tiburon's provided the shield and took the real one to hide, but would not say where. While in town, this group learned that a number of master craftsmen had disappeared recently and that the town has been plagued by the disappearance of large quantities of vital raw materials including mithral, leather and wood. This is seriously hampering the weapons and armor industry in town.

The away team for Tavor consisted of Gillead, Pyroh and Renn. They found and established a relationship of sorts with Simon's uncle Theo. He in turn introduced them to Barnaby, head librarian of Tavor, and the Magister of Tavor. Barnaby was not receptive to the swap plan for Tavor's spellbooks, but the Magister proved more open minded. However, when the group entered the vault to see the books they discovered that they were already gone -- months gone, by the looks of things. The Magister immediately suspected Barnaby's cousin Lucius, who had apparently been allowed access to the restricted vault and had not been seen in a while. The Magister is investigating personally. Meanwhile, the spellcasters availed themselves of the library's facilities to enhance their spell lists. Gillead in particular copied several spells authored by Artemis Tavor himself for potential later use.

By the end of the week the group had reassembled and was ready to set out for Sogenhal, where they planned to participate in the annual Kensai Tournament. They used their ship to sail south to Togun Yin. The inland waterway was too narrow for the large ship, so they rented dock space and two smaller junk-style boats to finish the journey. During the trip, they discussed issues of strategy and ways they could better coordinate their actions during combat.

Midway through the third day the group arrived in Sogenhal, on the south shore of Lake Shuriken. They secured docking space and found their way to the Tournament grounds. Three members of the Kensai Society greeted them, took their information, and explained the Tournament rules.

Before they could be accepted into the Tournament, the group had to pass a qualifying challenge. They stepped into a bare rectangular arena with a team of five minotaurs. To qualify for the Tournament, they had to defeat the minotaurs in battle.

The combat was short. Pyroh cast a *fly* spell on Bullseye, enabling the halfling to move through the air and flank opponents. Gillead cast one of his new spells, *Sticks and Stones*, and entangled two minotaurs in a hail of falling rubble. Pyroh exploded a fireball in the same place, doing serious damage to several opponents. Bullseye landed a critical hit on one minotaur. Cori, Perdue and Groop had little trouble finishing off the rest of the enemies before they could mount any kind of counterattack.

The Kensai honored the group's application, accepting the 1000gp entry fee and assigning them quarters in a tent city established to house the contenders. The group was reminded again of the tournament rules:

- 1> All combatants must present themselves on time for each match or be excluded. If an entire team fails to show for a match, they forfeit.
- 2> The losing team in each match is out of the competition. No team will be asked to fight more than twice in a day.
- 3> Each match begins with a coin toss. The winner of the toss enters the arena first; the loser chooses the arena.
- 4> Each team gets 5 minutes to examine the arena before the first team enters.
- 5> Once both teams are in position, there is one free round during which teams may cast spells, move, or do anything they wish in preparation for battle. They cannot attack, cast spells affecting the other team, or take any other offensive action during this round.
- 6> Combat continues until one side is defeated or surrenders, or when the judges call a halt and declare a winner. Anyone reduced to zero hit points is considered killed, and will be teleported immediately out of the arena, where they will once again be at full hit points.
- 7> No one may enter or leave the arena during combat except by being "killed." No weapons or spells can be cast into the Arena from outside, and no spells used inside the Arena can affect an area beyond its borders. Any personal affect spells cast on combatants before they enter the arena are suspended when they enter, and any cast during battle end when the battle ends.
- 8> Combatants may use any weapon, spell, special ability, magic item, etc. in the course of battle. However, any attempt to dispel or bypass the protective magic of the arena itself will result in disqualification and forfeit.
- 9> Fighting outside the arena is grounds for disqualification.

The group learned through casual conversation with other contestants that the prize for the winner will be 36,000gp and a unique magic item, a Rod of Insight.

The team's first opponent in the preliminary round was a group called Kord's Chosen. The Chosen proved to be made up of two barbarians, two clerics of Kord, and a rogue with a longbow. The Chosen lost the toss and chose a simple arena with a raised platform on each end. The Castle team took positions at one end, using the platform for archers and spellcasters while forming a melee line to protect it. The Chosen also placed their archer on the platform, spacing the rest to guard the staircase.

The Chosen struck first. One of their clerics caused a spiritual greatsword to appear and strike inside the melee line while another used *stone shape* to create a turret for the rogue to use as cover. But then Pyroh let fly with a *fireball* that slew one cleric where he stood and gravely wounded the other. The melee fighters held together and punished the Chosen's barbarians while newcomer Renn finished off the remaining cleric with his arrows. Cori and Groop slew the fighters in the second round, leaving only the Chosen's rogue behind his stone wall. The rogue wisely surrendered to end the match.

For their next match the group was scheduled to face The Cleanup Crew. The word on this crew, from tavern gossip, was that they were a highly feared team of "problem solvers" from the Eastern Realm who were called in when a job went bad and there were multiple witnesses or failed employees to deal with.

The team gathered at the appointed time and faced their new opponent. Surprisingly, the feared Cleanup Crew was composed entirely of halflings in studded leather armor bearing daggers and kukri. With only five of them versus nine on the Gore team, it looked to be a quick fight.

The Cleanup Crew surprised everyone by declaring that they would concede the coin toss. Gillead and Groop realized instantly that they wanted to pick the arena to maximize their stealth capabilities and objected. The judge ruled that the coin toss would be held as normal. The Cleanup Crew lost the toss and chose an arena called The Maze, a 50-by-75-foot room broken

up by 18 brick wall sections 10 feet wide and 10 feet high. The spacing of the walls left few lines of sight longer than 15 feet other than diagonals. There was plentiful cover and almost no chance to use ranged weapons.

The Gore team paired up and took positions, occupying as much of the northern end of the room as possible so as to leave a minimum number of places for the Cleanup Crew to hide. They crept forward a little at a time, seeking to pen the halflings in and eliminate their cover. Gillead used his new *Sticks and Stones* spell to block off a large section of the halflings' area, further restricting their movement.

The Cleanup Crew had strategies of their own. Capitalizing on their skills in moving silently and tumbling, they struck from cover and ran, doing sneak attack damage with thrown daggers and close-up strikes. One used a magic device to become invisible and snuck past the Gore team, attacking Perdue from behind. Elayna put a stop to that with *Invisibility Purge*, exposing the rogue. The halflings proved difficult to hit because of their size and mobility. Two of them also turned out to be spellcasters. One cast *Tasha's Hideous Laughter* on Pyroh, causing him to fall to the floor helpless. The Crew attacked him and eliminated him from the match. Another put Groop under a *Hold Person* spell, making him an easy target for another sneak attack from a teammate.

Eventually, though, the Cleanup Crew ran out of places to hide. One took a devastating arrow hit from Renn and then succumbed to a Magic Missile attack from Gillead. When Gillead broke the Hold spell Groop retaliated against the nearest halfling, practically cleaving him in twain with his mighty greataxe. Renn switched to his nagaika for close range combat and killed one as it tried to climb the pile of debris. Another succumbed to Gillead's *Melf's Acid Arrow*. Groop killed the final one, who fought defiantly even when left alone. The entire combat took nine rounds.

Having won both combats, the team had the rest of the day to relax and prepare for the next day's match. A win in the next combat will put the team in the quarterfinals, one step closer to winning the prize.

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Morning dawns on the second day of the Tournament. You have one match scheduled today, and it's in the afternoon. This gives you all the morning to either shop, drink (inadvisable), do the tourist thing, or check out your competition.

A quick scan of the board turns up a very interesting entry:

San Hai Monastery  
vs.  
Deadly Viper Assassination Squad

The San Hai Monastery group had been heavy favorites in their previous matches, but in this one they are 10:1 underdogs. The Deadly Viper Assassination Squad is an even money bet to win.

In a hastily-called team meeting, you agreed that this opportunity to scope out your

known enemy was too good to pass up. As the crowd from the early match filtered out, you paired off and took seats in different parts of the stands so as not to be noticed as a group.

The Monastery team appeared to be made up of eight monks, all human or part human judging from height and build. They wore simple tunics and sashes, and most had some sort of bracers or similar gear. Gilead and Pyroh cast Detect Magic and saw that they all had some kind of magical armor enhancement.

The Deadly Vipers appeared second, consisting of four women and a man. The man was normal human height, broad-shouldered, with a nondescript sort of face. He wore black leather armor and a short cape. Next to him towered a 7-foot-tall blonde woman in studded leather who wore a curious translucent lens over one eye. To the man's left was a dark-haired human woman in plain leather. A shorter woman in studded leather (half elf, maybe) and a tall one in a blackened chain shirt completed the group.

The visible weaponry of the DVAS spoke to their Southern Republic origins. The tall woman wore traditional samurai daisho. Another bore a single katana, while the longer sheath on the third woman's belt suggested a no-dachi. The man had a rapier at his side and a short bow and quiver on his back. The smaller woman had a long, thin scabbard at her side and another on her back with a number of small pouches on her belt. The magic users noted magic auras all over the Vipers' armor and most of their weapons.

The coin toss was won by the Deadly Vipers. The monks consulted briefly, then announced their choice of arena: the Statue Garden. A murmur of approval swept through the crowd.

The Vipers entered first and took positions. Vipers 3, 4, and 5, the women with swords, established themselves in the middle of the right side clearing, forming a small circle with their backs to each other. The remaining two took the middle of the other clear space, left of the fountain. The monks formed two lines and placed themselves on either side of the middle, each monk with his back to a statue.

At the start of the preparatory round the monks assumed ready positions but gave no other hint of their plan. DVA 1, the man, made arcane gestures and touched the DVA 2, who promptly vanished from sight. He then leapt up onto the fountain, balancing easily on the lip, and drew his bow. The other three readied their weapons.

The starting gong sounded. Monks 1 and 2 charged the fountain and flailed at the bowman with their fists. He dodged each attack nimbly, smiling as he did it. Monks 3 and 4 advanced on the circle of women. Each woman fought defensively, blocking punches and kicks with their weapons.

Suddenly Monk 2 stiffened and grabbed at his neck. He made a half turn toward the left side, then fell to the ground in a heap. You saw no blood except maybe a drop or two at the side of the neck. DVA 1 fired a single arrow at Monk 4. It hit the monk in the back

and he went down. Moments later the body vanished and the monk reappeared outside the arena looking surprised and annoyed.

As DVA 1 laughed, Monks 5 and 6 threw shurikens. They seemed to bounce off the man's leather armor, doing no visible damage at all. Monks 5 through 8 moved to form a melee line facing the fountain, their backs to the women.

At the beginning of Round 2, Monk 1 jumped atop the fountain and threw a furious kick at DVA 1, who dodged it neatly. Monk 3 landed a blow on DVA 3, but the woman turned with the blow and counterattacked, her no-dachi leaving a long gash in the monk's side and sending him staggering back.

Back at the fountain, Monk 1 collapsed and fell. A couple of you spotted the thin shaft of a blowgun dart sticking out of his shoulder as he fell to the ground near his partner. DVA 1 grinned and began to sing, pretending to strum his bow as if it were a musical instrument.

As his teammates stared at the bowman, Monk 5 charged at a spot to the left of the fountain. Rather than throwing a punch, his hand opened and a cloud of sparkling dust filled the space before him. Almost immediately, the figure of DVA 2 appeared. In her hand was a blowgun. The monk launched a spinning kick and landed it soundly, causing the DVA to drop her weapon. The remaining monks moved to form a line below the ring of swordswomen where they could see every enemy.

Monk 3 opened Round 3 with a flurry of blows against DVA 3. He connected twice for damage. DVA 2, now visible, took a five-foot step backward away from Monk 5 while she drew a new weapon: a kusari-gama. She swung the weapon over her head in a tight circle, gauged the monk's timing, and struck. The chain and blade shot forward like a snake, opening a long and bloody wound on the monk's protecting arm, and drew back just as quickly, ready for another attack. Monk 5 would not see another attack from the whirling blade, though -- a moment later an arrow from the singing bowman pierced his back, and he found himself looking on from outside with his partner.

No longer outnumbered, the Vipers broke out of their protective circle. DVA 3 lashed out at Monk 3 with her no-dachi and dealt a devastating blow to the monk. He felt the slash across his midsection, but before he could react DVA 4 plunged her katana into his side with a twist. He was still reeling from that blow when DVA 4 slashed at his throat with her wakizashi. Monk 3 felt the blade enter, felt himself falling, then found himself standing next to Monks 4 and 5. DVA 4 whirled and struck next at Monk 6, missing. DVA 5, using her katana with both hands, made a smooth power stroke at Monk 7 and barely missed. Monk 8 easily dodged the follow-up blow and responded with a kick for damage.

At the start of Round 4 DVAs 1 and 2 took spectator positions at either end of the melee, the bowman continuing to sing. DVA 4 executed another feint move, this time on Monk 6, but failed and had to be content with a glancing blow. DVA 3 struck at Monk 6 and

missed. DVA 5 lunged toward Monk 7 with a wide, sweeping trip attack. The monk fell to the ground, where he was run through by DVA 5 for massive damage. Monk 8 went into total defense.

In Round 5 DVA 4 shifted left, forcing Monk 6 to choose whether to be flanked by her or by DVA3. He chose to stay with 4 and fended off her attack, only to feel and see the nodachi of DVA 3 go straight through his chest. He appeared outside the ring just in time to see DVA 3 pivot and land a power stroke against Monk 7, beheading him in the act of standing up. The monk felt his neck gingerly and shivered when he reappeared outside the boundary. Monk 8, now alone, surrendered to end the match.

You filed out with the rest of the crowd and regrouped in your tent to compare notes on what you'd seen.

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12/12/04

The Kensai Tournament continued with a final preliminary round. The Gore party was scheduled to face Double Trouble, a team from the Eastern Realm. Attempts to gather any meaningful data about the opponents gained the Gore team little more than winks and chuckles.

Besides that, there was a new problem to deal with: the rogue Bullseye had gotten involved in a bar fight the night before and was disqualified from further competition. Bullseye had jumped into a fracas involving the Halfling Cleanup Crew, who had already lost to the Gore team and had no reason to hold back. The halflings appreciated the help enough to invite Bullseye on a treasure hunt in the swamps of the Southern Republic. Unable to fight in the tournament, Bullseye saw no reason not to take the opportunity and bid his friends goodbye for now.

Word of Bullseye's departure spread through the grapevine and before long a young human, Nimbus Stratovan, offered his services to Team Gore. Nimbus was a warmage, trained from near childhood to cast spells useful in war while wearing armor, and thus brought both additional arcane spells and a capable fighter to the team. The Gore team consulted and accepted Nimbus into the group.

At the match site it appeared at first that Double Trouble was a balanced team consisting of three sets of twins: two human fighters, an elven cleric and rogue, a gnome wizard and gnome monk. Double Trouble lost the coin toss and chose the Columns arena, a large round space with a ring of pillars inside.

The Gore team lined up for combat with the goal of limiting their opponent to half the field. The strong fighters lined up across the middle with archers and arcanists in the

rear. Double Trouble lined up in a single row against the Gore front and took no action in the free round.

At the start of combat, the real reason for Double Trouble's name became clear. Each of the opponents in turn lunged to grapple the nearest Gore member and, as their bodies rolled on the floor, took on the exact appearance of the opponent. By the end of the first round it appeared as if there were two each of Groop, Perdue, Cori, Elayna, Nimbus, and Renn. The rest of the team had a difficult time determining whom to attack, and on more than one occasion an arrow or crossbow bolt accidentally hit friend rather than foe.

Gilead tried out a new spell, Evard's Black Tentacles, to slow down the doppelgangers and try to help distinguish friend from enemy. It didn't help in target identification, but it did effectively compress the field and force the enemy to engage in melee. The superior fighting skills of the Gore team eventually won the day as careful observation allowed them to pick out the doubles.

The field of 72 teams had been reduced to 16, signifying a serious jump in the quality of the competition. The Gore team checked the boards the next morning and found that they were scheduled to face the Keepers of the Shrine, a group of samurai in service to the Shrine of Toh-Jhee. The six samurai were heavily armored, highly skilled in two-weapon fighting, and backed up by two Wu-Jen, elemental magic users of significant power.

This time the Gore team lost the coin toss. They selected the Matrix Lobby, an arena offering a large melee area and large columns to each side suitable for cover. The samurai entered first and took up a standard battle formation with melee fighters in a line protecting two archers and the wu jen. It was a clear invitation for Gore to do the same. Groop, however, had a different idea: he took a position immediately next to one of the wu jen, inside the samurai formation, and at his encouragement Cori and Renn took similarly aggressive spots. The samurai closed ranks to protect the unarmored wu jen, who cast defensive spells on themselves. The rest of Team Gore assembled at a slight distance.

Pyroh looked at the close formation of samurai and saw an opportunity to open strongly with a quick Fireball aimed in the center of the samurai cluster. His tactic came to grief when, after a flash of light from a wu jen's ring, the fireball changed direction and exploded in the center of the Gore team's back line. Elayna, Perdue, and several others took the damage that had been intended for the enemy.

The team regrouped quickly and engaged the enemy. They found that the wu jen, despite the appearance of being unarmored, were extremely difficult to hit with missile or melee weapons. Dimdar had some success with a Grease spell that disrupted the water wu jen, forcing her to move and giving one of the samurai archers a very hard time. The metal wu jen retaliated against Groop for his aggression with a spray of poisoned needles that rendered Groop paralyzed. It took Elayna several rounds to reach Groop and cure him of the poison.

The samurai, as noted, were heavily armored and expert fighters. After a few rounds the Gore team's best fighters were severely damaged and were having a very hard time hitting their opponents or successfully casting spells against them. Elayna broke out the Shroud of Healing and the team passed it around to regain strength.

The wu jen continued to cause problems with their elementally focused spells. The water wu jen let loose an ice storm that eliminated Pyroh and came close to destroying Perdue, although it did also kill one of the samurai in the process. A noxious breath spell did more damage to the Gore fighters. The metal wu jen Held Renn for a round or two before he could break free and cursed Groop's weapon, causing it to twist and attack Groop instead of his target. Groop was forced to drop his axe and go to a backup weapon, the morningstar. As the samurai melee line broke down a spare samurai sword animated and attacked on its own, enchanted by the metal wu jen.

Finally, after eight rounds of combat, the water wu jen fell to Cori. Newcomer Nimbus provided the death blow for the metal wu jen, using his True Strike spell and Melf's Acid Arrow. Groop, Elayna, and Perdue felled melee fighters. The final two samurai submitted, accepting defeat with honor at the hands of a superior opponent.

As Team Gore celebrated their victory, Groop noticed a large, heavily muscled orc watching him from a quiet corner of the recreation tent. The orc introduced himself as Targo of Gru-Daraakh. Targo had been watching Groop fight, he explained, and noticed he seemed to have a hard time with magic users. Coming from Gru-Daraakh, a city often besieged by warlocks and warmages from the human cities of the Eastern Realm, Targo has a particular talent for cutting down arcanists. He offered to teach his ways to Groop, but warned of the commitment required.

1/2/05

As fate would have it, the Gore team's second quarterfinal opponent turned out to be the Defenders of Gru-Daraakh -- Targo's team. The Gore team had seen the Defenders in action before and knew this was going to be a very hard fight. They made plans to protect their mages. Groop and Cori committed themselves to engaging Targo himself with the idea of keeping him contained and away from the spellcasters.

Team Gore lost the coin toss and selected The Bridge, an arena made up of two smallish mesas connected by a 15-foot bridge. At each edge of the combat surface was a steep drop that meant immediate elimination for anyone who fell.



The Defenders surprised the Gore team by adopting a tight formation at the rear edge of one of the platforms. They thought about positioning themselves the same way but opted for a balanced stance with fighters on Targo's platform, archers and spellcasters on the other side, and Perdue and Renn holding the bridge. Pyroh used the free round to cast Bull's Strength on Cori while Gilead used Haste on the whole party besides himself and Pyroh. Both retreated to the far plateau after casting.

Targo and his archers did not move during the free round except to draw their greatbows. All three archers, plus Targo himself, took aim directly at Pyroh. This was not unexpected given the ageless hatred of orcs for elves.

Pyroh's plan was to use his newly-acquired Polymorph spell to take the form of a treant and gain a treant's high armor class, damage resistance, and slam attack. As soon as he started the spell, however, four arrows released and struck him. The size of the arrows and the strength behind them proved just enough to eliminate Pyroh from the match.

The instant kill of Pyroh was the first of several ugly developments for the Gore team. Soon afterward Nimbus was bull rushed off the edge of the platform by one of Targo's fighters. Perdue found himself engaging three fighters while Targo's archers took aim at his back. Seeing the deadly potential of the coordinated greatbows, Perdue charged them to force them into melee. His tactic worked, but left Perdue basically surrounded by orc fighters. He took heavy damage and, cut off from his teammates, was eliminated.

When Gilead saw Perdue fall he seized the opportunity to use his Stinking Cloud spell on the distant platform, which now contained only orcs. One orc, standing too close to the edge, fell off the platform. The rest were either incapacitated or rushed to the bridge. The orc cleric dispelled the cloud but the effects lingered for several rounds to hinder a few of the orc fighters.

That the momentum had turned in Gore's favor was proven by an event that left a hundred gamblers wishing they'd had a chance to bet on it: one of Targo's men tried to bull rush Gilead off the platform. The wizard stood firm and held his ground against a charging orc with nearly double his strength, prompting tremendous applause and surprised shouts from the crowd. Another orc tried to jump the chasm to assist, as the Gore team had the bridge effectively blocked, but jumped short and fell out of play.

Meanwhile Groop and Cori slowly chipped away at Targo, who was clearly enjoying the exchange. Defenders continued to target Gilead, but the wizard had protected himself with a Stoneskin spell that absorbed the damage.

Finally, as both the Haste spell and Groop's rage were about to end, Targo went down. Cori and Groop were in bad shape, but Elayna was able to get the Shroud of Healing to them. Renn killed a fighter and Cori and Groop killed another fighter each, leaving only the cleric and one archer remaining. Renn traded shots with the archer while Cori, Groop and Gilead engaged the fighter. Gilead showed moxy by trying to bull rush the orc off

the platform, failing twice and taking almost fatal damage in the process before giving up. The cleric kept looking to Targo and, despite the presence of two stronger opponents, attacked Gilead whenever he could. Once the cleric was slain, the last remaining orc laid down his bow and shook Renn's hand. Afterwards, Targo was heard praising the planning and execution of the Gore team.

Targo was in the audience at ringside for the Gore team's semifinal match. The opponent this time was a group called Anathemas. Information was sketchy, but the team was able to learn for certain that there were five members, two melee fighters and three of some other sort.

The three were the problem: some said they were sorcerors, some said warlocks, others said they were something else altogether. A fighter who'd lost to them was able to pinpoint the power definitively and told Dimdar that the three were psions -- people skilled in the use of mind power to manipulate the minds, bodies, and environment of their enemies.

Tales came to the team's ears about the abilities of these odd humanoids. One was said to be a kineticist, an expert in manipulating all kinds of energy. One was a shaper, able to modify objects and create new things from nothing at all. The third was said to be a telepath, able to afflict and sometimes control the minds of opponents. Even the melee fighters, it was said, had strange powers, including the ability to teleport themselves across the field and absorb their enemies' strength to heal themselves.

Gilead had some knowledge of psionics from his wizard college. There he'd been taught that psionic affects require only thought to activate, so there would be no tell-tale waving of arms or incantations to alert anyone to the use of a power. He also warned that while psionic powers can manifest many of the same affects as spells, psionics are largely immune to magic-negating abilities because they are not inherently magical. The main vulnerability of psionic power is its reliance on the target's mental state: a strong Will save would negate most psionic powers.

Armed with this knowledge, the Gore team prepared for the match. They saw Anathemas across the arena and noted that, as advertised, they were not human. The fighters were clearly half giants from their stature and coloring, but they had no clue as to the race of the psions themselves. Taller, paler, emaciated-looking humanoids were all they could really see.

Anathemas won the coin toss. Team Gore chose the Lava Pit arena, a vast area designed to resemble the interior of a volcano. Long, thin islands of land ringed an area mostly occupied by simulated molten lava. One step into the lava, the combatants were warned, would cause immediate elimination of that person. The islands were close enough to allow easy jumping from one to the next but there were no easy, direct routes across the pit.

The psions took positions on one of the large islands, stationing a fighter at each edge for protection. The Gore team spread out more, guarding against an area attack and readying to engage the fighters with their heavy numeric advantage.

During the free round the Gore team employed their usual Haste tactic and Pyroh again cast Bull's Strength on Cori before backing out of threat range. The psions each invoked some kind of protective power but took no other action.

At the start of combat, the psions demonstrated some of the danger of their power by each bringing into being an Astral Construct. This increased their numbers to almost match the Gore team. More significantly, perhaps, was that these creatures proved to be brutally strong and very hard to damage.

The fighters also started strong by teleporting into the back ranks of the Gore team. Pyroh ran from one and began to polymorph into a treant, dropping his material component pouch so he could pick it up later and cast spells in his new form. Another shifted past the strong fighters to engage the archers, along with one of the astral constructs.

As Groop, Cori and Perdue closed on the psions' island they manifested another astral construct, this time of Large size and even more terrible strength and resilience. It stood still, menacing the back line, while Groop and Cori charged its creators.

The psions proved vexingly difficult to attack. Their psychic protections made the light armor they wore almost impervious to normal attacks. Cori tried to bull rush a psion into the lava and failed twice. Groop likewise found the psions very difficult to hit. Cori landed one blow on the kineticist and took a lashing of energy damage for his trouble. The kineticist made the issue more pressing by levitating herself 30 feet in the air. Gilead saw the levitating psion as a good target for a lightning bolt, only to have the energy reflected back and receiving as much damage as he dealt.

Pyroh in his treant form was foiled by a warrior, who kicked his material component pouch into the lava. Wounded and holding a slashing weapon, the psychic warrior struck at Pyroh and invoked an empathic transfer power, consuming all of Pyroh's hit points to heal himself. Pyroh vanished and reappeared next to his material component pouch, back in his elf form.

Perdue found himself engaging one of the smaller astral constructs alone. He took major damage from the creature's powerful fists but held on. Groop started to make headway against the psions but found himself encased in a form-fitting cocoon of strange, unworldly material. He strained against his bonds but could not break free until Cori cut him free. No sooner did Groop rejoin the battle than he was attacked mentally by the telepath. Unable to breathe without exclusive effort, he was forced to stand in place gasping for breath until Elayna could come over and remove the affliction.

Nimbus resolved to take the lead in fighting the large construct. Using True Strike and his Scorching Ray, he dealt the creature a massive blow. He followed up with another like combination and the construct was destroyed.

The entire team went on the attack with missile and sword and spell. The psions not only proved unnaturally hard to hit, but showed a frustratingly easy ability to heal themselves of what damage they did take. Perdue destroyed his construct only to be struck by a psychic warrior, who took Perdue's remaining health to heal himself. The telepath took refuge behind a wall of energy that blocked energy spells and dealt damage to anyone who approached.

The battle looked grim for the Gore team until Groop landed a series of well-aimed blows at the shaper that did damage faster than the psion could heal it. Cori likewise struck a brilliant blow on one of the psychic warriors that killed the half giant instantly. Gilead took to the air with a Fly spell and the archers chipped away at the psions and remaining constructs. The telepath tried to control Groop and Cori but failed repeatedly to break their resolve. The kineticist threw bolts of energy in an increasingly desperate attempt to take down the Gore team. One exploding ball eliminated Elayna even as the cleric used Wind Walk to close and strike.

Finally the Gore team felled the last of the constructs, leaving only the two psions and a badly wounded warrior to continue. They had exhausted their power for the day and realized they could no longer attack. Having no way to overcome the Gore team, the psions surrendered.

With the victory over Anathemas, the Guardians of Gore have secured a place in the final match. Their opponent will be the defending champions, the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad.

The arena is a small keep complete with iron gate, towers, and crenellated walls. The winner of the coin toss will decide whether they wish to attack the structure or defend it. All of the other rules remain as in previous matches.

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As of this afternoon, no odds have been posted yet. Those of you who bet on yourselves for the semifinals won 200gp for each 1000gp you bet. It's likely that your odds in the final match will depend on how much money gets bet on the DVAS.

And now, a little surprise:

As you sit at a long table eating a well-deserved lunch, you notice the crowd around you suddenly growing silent. You look to the door and see the Anathemas team approaching. One of the warriors is carrying a cloth-wrapped bundle, the other a large pouch.

The kineticist addresses the group. "Your team fought valiantly today," she says. "In our land, when defeated by an opponent in honorable combat it is customary to present the victor with gifts."

The first psychic warrior steps forward and loosens the bundle. The kineticist removes two ornate leather scabbards with gold, pistol-style handles protruding from them. She draws and lays on the table two exquisite-looking falcatas. "These are the style of sword most common in our land," she explains. "They perform admirably in battle. These are of the finest quality our people produce and they have been psionically enhanced to be even more deadly to opponents."

The second warrior comes forward, opens the pouch, and holds it out. The kineticist removes three silvery pendants and lays them down on the table. Each pendant bears an engraving of a large kite shield with a sun device in the center. "These pendants are likewise psionically endowed. Each provides a psionic enhancement to the wearer's protective armor greater than that of a large shield."

The kineticist steps back and bows slightly. "Will honor us by accepting our gifts?"

(I hope the response is:) Cori rises and bows slightly in return. The rest of you follow suit. Cori thanks the psions for their gifts. They bow and leave.

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So, what did you just get? Cool stuff, that's what.

The masterwork falcatas are +2 KEEN blades with the following stats:

- Size Medium (sorry, Dimdar!)
- Normal weapon damage: 1d8, slashing or piercing
- +2 psionic bonus on all attack and damage rolls
- Threat range 19-20/x2 (including KEEN attribute)
- Blade is superhardened steel, handle is gold. Weight 3 lbs.
- Enclosed pistol-grip handle gives a +4 grip bonus against disarm attempts

The blades also have the psionic property of Molecular Adjustment. By holding the handle and concentrating for one round, the wielder can cause the blade to take on the molecular structure of any other metal. The change lasts until dispelled by the wielder or for 24 hours and can be used twice per day. Need a silver weapon to kill that werewolf?

You've got it. Need a cold iron weapon to overcome a warlock's damage reduction? Done. No adventuring party should be without a couple. ;^)

The pendants are very simple. Each radiates the same psionic power (Inertial Barrier) that the psions used to protect themselves, only less of it. Whoever wears one gets a +3 shield bonus to Armor Class. A shield bonus stacks with normal, natural, or magic armor bonuses, but not with shields or shield-like magic. For example, it would stack with Bracers of Armor (an armor bonus) but not a Shield spell (shield bonus).

I leave it to you to figure out who is going to get the goodies. Here are the limits:

- Anyone can wear one of the pendants, understanding that it will do little or no good for someone who uses a shield or routinely casts a Shield spell.

- Anyone who is proficient with either a longsword or a short sword can use a falcata. All you have to do is spend an hour or two practicing with it to get the feel of its unusual grip and balance.

- The falcata is too heavy to be used with the Weapon Finesse feat. If you have Weapon Focus or Weapon Specialization with the longsword or short sword you can apply those feats to the falcata as well.

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1/29/05

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Morning came on the last day of the Kensai Tournament. The Gore team was scheduled to face the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad in the final match for the championship.

For this match, the rules would be slightly different. The arena was predetermined by the judges and available for study the day before. It was a representation of a simple keep featuring 15-foot-high stone walls with crenellated tops, five round towers similarly outfitted, and a pair of strong iron doors. The inside featured a dirt courtyard with horse pen, well, and a stack of barrels.

The Gore team prepared by stocking up on potions to counter the paralyzing poison used by the DVAS in previous matches or heal damage without needing access to the Shroud of Healing. Gilead focused on preparing spells that the other casters lacked to increase the team's overall versatility.

The DVAS appeared at the arena toting a large chest of equipment. They were intercepted by one of the judges and, just outside of earshot of the Gore team, an argument ensued. In the end the DVAS opened the chest and unloaded some of the equipment into their packs. Renn noticed a steel grappling hook among the things transferred.

There was no discussion of the teams' business outside the arena. The DVAS were quiet as their captain stepped forward for the coin toss. The Gore team won the toss and chose to defend the structure.

Team Gore started out in what has become their standard fashion: Gilead cast Haste on the entire party and they then hustled to their starting positions. They spread out over the upper level, putting a fighter and a spellcaster on each main tower while Perdue monitored the gate. Gilead drank a Fly potion and stood ready to observe the action from the air.

The DVAS started by huddling at the front gate. Each DVA removed a potion vial from his/her pouch, drank, and became invisible.

An eerie silence settled over the field for several rounds as the DVAS moved silently and unseen and Team Gore went on high alert, seeking any sign of their positions. Elayna cast Invisibility Purge and walked the battlements hoping to reveal one or more of the enemy with the spell's 40-foot radius.

Finally, after several rounds, Team Gore heard a grappling hook land on the battlement at the south wall. They saw the hook grab and the rope go tense as an unseen body began to climb it. Gilead tried to throw off the hook but there was too much weight on the line for his strength, so he took to the air. In the next round Groop severed the rope with his greataxe and tossed the hook away. Team Gore was pleased to hear the thud of a body hitting the ground.

As Elayna rounded the corner to hopefully reveal the hidden attacker, though, the Gore team found themselves under attack from their flanks. Small throwing knives struck Nimbus and Groop, doing sneak attack damage to Nimbus and delivering the DVAS' paralyzing poison to both. Antidote potions were administered to both.

From his vantage point on the gate tower, Perdue noticed the iron gate shaking slightly and sounded an alert. Dimdar, backing away from the suspected attacker in the SW tower, was struck in the back with a knife. The poison failed to affect her but she took a painful hit. Elayna also felt a knife embed in her back followed by the cold numbness of paralysis. She would remain that way for a short while because Groop, holder of the Neutralize Poison potions, was headed for the gate to investigate Perdue's warning.

Gilead cast a Web to try and prevent further attacks from the western tower. Pyroh had taken a position near Elayna with his back to the direction of the attack that paralyzed her. As he stood there an arrow struck him from behind in a critical spot. Pyroh de-rezzed and was out of the match, the first casualty of this combat.

While Dimdar took a potion from Groop toward Elayna, Perdue felt a sword penetrate his side. He whirled and counterattacked, but was ineffective against his invisible assailant.

Nimbus exploded a Fireball where Dimdar's attacker should have been but there was no way to know how effective it was.

Team Gore knew roughly where their enemies were: one had to be on the gate tower with Perdue, another on the opposite gate tower or near it, one or two on the big tower and one near the SW tower. Gilead hovered over the field growing increasingly frustrated by the inability to target a DVA directly.

While the wizard fumed overhead, Groop's senses detected a scent and movement near him. He swung out with his greataxe and connected with an invisible body, doing damage and causing the body to fall to the courtyard. Nimbus sent a Fireball to the spot on the ground below Groop's position. A few moments later DVA2 appeared outside the arena.

Elayna, having been fed a potion to neutralize the poison, moved closer to the SW corner. As her Invisibility Purge field moved with her, it revealed the half-giant DVA4 on the southern battlement. Groop and Dimdar engaged the assassin. Gilead assisted by using his Spectral Hand spell to deliver a Vampiric Touch spell, draining hit points from the assassin and adding them to his own count. An arrow from an invisible foe struck Gilead in the back after the first touch, negating the gain but doing no serious damage. The angle of attack, however, told Team Gore that DVA1 was in the center courtyard.

Cori had raced over to assist Perdue, who had been trading blows with an invisible assailant for several rounds. Before he could attack Perdue's opponent, though, he was struck himself from behind by an invisible sword. Cori and Perdue took defensive positions, backs to the crenellations, and fought the unseen foes. Nimbus targeted DVA4 with a Phantasman Killer spell, attacking the woman's spirit and mind.

Another Vampiric Touch felled DVA4, freeing Groop to pursue the spellcaster. He leapt gracefully from the walls, garnering applause from the spectators for his style and athleticism, and dodged an arrow from the gate area. Elayna took the stairs down and closed on the middle point of the courtyard, revealing the bard in his position. The bard tumbled backward out of range and disappeared again near the iron gates. Groop pursued and connected with a blow.

Elayna moved again, revealing the positions of DVA3 and DVA5, who were engaging Perdue and Cori on the gate tower. DVA5 catwalked across the top of the gate and out of Elayna's range, prompting Nimbus to send a Fireball in that direction. Perdue and Cori engaged DVA3 and took her out of the match.

DVA1 played a cat and mouse game with Groop, working to stay out of Elayna's revealing radius and get shots in with his bow. Nimbus and Dimdar came down to assist. Gilead tried using Detect Magic to pinpoint the location, but in the magically charged arena was unable to get a precise fix. Groop followed his instincts and swung mightily into a seemingly empty area, connected and felled the bard.



DVA5, left alone against eight opponents, surrendered.

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The crowd cheered Team Gore wildly for their unexpected successful finish. The team took bows and then headed to the recreation tent to collect on their wagers. Several of the team won handsome sums of money from the oddsmakers, who'd been sure the DVAS would win and gave unwisely good odds to gamblers picking Gore.

At midafternoon everyone gathered for the award ceremony. Senzo Ongawa, Grand Master of the Kensai Society, presented Team Gore with individual trophies signifying their champion status and with 36,000 gold pieces in prize money. He then handed them the unique prize, the Rod of Insight.

The Rod of Insight is three feet long and forged from a single piece of mithral. It bears the holy symbol of Boccob, major deity of magic and knowledge, on both ends. The Rod, Master Ongawa explained, has the following powers:

- 1) Anyone merely holding the Rod in one hand gains a +4 divine insight bonus on all Knowledge and Sense Motive checks, including bardic knowledge, and the Uncanny Dodge ability.
- 2) Touching the Rod to the ground and concentrating for one or more rounds reveals information about people and objects in a 30-foot radius:
  - Round 1: awareness of magical auras
  - Round 2: awareness of the existence of traps and hidden doors, plus the relative strength of magical auras
  - Round 3: Alighment ethic (L/N/C) of each person in the area, type of each magical aura, location of each trap and hidden/secret door
  - Round 4: Alighment moral (G/N/E) of each person, exact location of each magical aura, means of opening/disabling all traps and secret/hidden doors
- 3) Touching the rod to a magic item and concentrating for 1 minute reveals the power, activation method, and any necessary control words for a magic item.
- 4) By touching the Rod to an item and concentrating 10 minutes, the Rod can convey to a user Legend Lore equivalent knowledge of the item, its creator or owner, or a legendary (true) story involving the item.
- 5) By holding the Rod in an area and concentrating 10 minutes, the Rod can convey knowledge of a significant event of the wielder's choosing that took place in that location or Legend Lore equivalent knowledge of a person or event connected to the place.

The first power can be used at will. Powers 2 through 5 can be used a total of 3 times per day in any combination.

The team accepted their rewards and watched the DVAS receive their runner-up awards.  
No words were exchanged between the teams.

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