

2/13/05

It was good to be home. For the adventurers of Team Gore, it was even better to be home with 36,000 gold pieces and the championship trophy from the Kensai Tournament in hand.

The party, less Groop and Perdue, arrived in Gore's Cliff on Firstday Autumn, the date of the annual Harvest Festival. They spent that day resting from the journey and then started individual projects. Elayna made a new Shroud of Healing to replace the one given to the team called Anathemas at the tournament. Then she and Pyroh collaborated to create a Stoneskin Robe for the sorcerer's personal protection.

Dimdar filled some of her spare time performing at Rosie's Pub, singing songs and telling tales and dipping into local gossip. Gilead also kept close to the grapevine.

An away team went to Crossroads to exchange updated information with Foulon. They learned that no further artifacts have been stolen while you were away, and none have been offered up for sale on the black market. Neither have the materials stolen from Tiburon, despite their high value. They also learn that Foulon shares their instinctive mistrust of the cult calling itself the Sane. Backing up the bad feeling are dark tales of people resistant to the Sane's philosophy who suddenly capitulate a day or two later. Foulon likened the change to the fate of some individuals who oppose his organization, although his methods are admittedly far from pacifist.

From the Magister of Tavor, an away team learned that there has been little progress in solving the theft of Tavor's spell books. The Magister is certain that the man called Lucius, allegedly cousin to Barnaby, stole the books and that the Chief Librarian is covering for him in some way. Barnaby is beloved of the people and well supported by the Council Arcane, however, so he dares not move openly without concrete evidence. Theo Gore has been checking on Barnaby's family tree and is equally certain that Barnaby has no close cousins and that what distant ones he has are too old to be Lucius, who disguises his appearance but has the voice and body language of a man in his mid 30's.

With good reason to believe that uninvited guests would be a common future occurrence, the party arranged with Phindall's Livery and Courier Service to obtain three bearhounds, magical beasts with extremely good hunting skills and an inborn resistance to poison and physical attacks. The animals arrived a few days later. They were trained by Cori with some input from Radagast and were named Ursa, Bathor, and Tobin. Ursa is an adult female, Bathor an adult male, and Tobin their one-year-old cub. Their appearance is very intimidating and they have shown that they will be outstanding guards in the party's absence.

Groop and Perdue returned from their training and studies on schedule to find the rest of the team well rested and informed. There would be little time for them to do the same, though, as the next morning Charlotte Gore came calling with a mission.

While the adventurers were engaged in their information gathering and shopping, Gore's Cliff was rocked by the apparent murder of a prominent citizen, one Hiram Mongren. A young man named Galen Raines, son of a competing merchant, was arrested on the strength of an argument he had with Mongren, some physical evidence, and the testimony of two roughnecks from the dock that Galen had been near Mongren's house the evening of the festival. The amount of blood on Mongren's floor made it likely he was dead. Galen was tried by a panel and convicted of murder. He was sentenced to execution but could commute that by disclosing the location of Mongren's body.

Charlotte was convinced that Galen, a childhood friend of hers, was innocent and the evidence a frame. She asked the party in no uncertain terms to save the boy's life, putting no restrictions on how they do it.

The party agreed to investigate. They started by getting the facts of the crime from Cryden, chief of the watch. He listed the evidence, offered his opinion that it seemed a bit too conveniently damning, and was cooperative. Galen described how he had drinks with two men, Dugan and Jones, and had no memory of anything after that. Simon Gore provided some information about Mongren along with the opinion that Raines "should be given a medal for community service" for committing the crime rather than being punished. He also told the party a tale about his recent dispute with the dead merchant that had ominous undertones involving the Sane. He then surprised them by suggesting that they pay his normal feed dealer, Luther Foreman, an "attitude adjustment visit" because Foreman was refusing to sell to Simon due to influence of the Sane.

Next the party visited the scene of the crime. Mongren's daughter let them in and Elayna used the Rod of Insight to learn what she could about the crime. She saw the murder reenacted in a vision: two men accosted Mongren in his study, murdered him with a dagger, and dragged the body away. The Rod also provided a message:

*Justice through evil is evil still. Mongren feeds the scavengers while his blood damns the innocent. The fallen one celebrates in secret.*

Based on this information the party summoned Cryden and had him use the Rod. He agreed that the men looked like Dugan and Jones, not Galen, but expressed doubt that a magical vision alone would convince the town council to reverse the conviction.

The party turned their attention to locating Dugan and Jones. They went first to Rosie's, where the men tended to spend their money. Sure enough, two men spotted them outside and ran out the back door at full speed. The party pursued, chasing the suspects through the streets and down to the north dock. Cori, Groop and Perdue were in front because of their faster running speed with the rest catching up as quickly as possible.

The fleeing suspects made it to the dock with Cori, Groop and Perdue on their heels. They called out for help and a dozen men on the dock came to their aid, brandishing clubs improvised from crate shards and muscles tempered by heavy lifting.

The dock thugs were no match for the Guardians of Gore. None landed more than a glancing blow as the stragglers caught up and joined the fray. The Guardians, on the other hand, never failed to land brutal but nonlethal blows on the dockmen thanks to their combat training and experience. One by one the thugs fell, knocked unconscious by bare-handed blows. Perdue put three on the dock in a single combat round before being bull-rushed into the water by two others, who were quickly subdued by Groop. The last two jumped into the water themselves rather than face the fighters.

In the heat of the fight a few members of the Sane appeared on the dock, decrying the display of one-sided violence. Dimdar responded playfully with her Magic Wedgie spell, giving the Sane something else to think about and making them look foolish.

Meanwhile, Elayna stopped Dugan from escaping with a Hold Person spell and Cori caught Jones in a grapple. They were both subdued and tied up, then questioned by Groop and Cori. After some blatant intimidation by Groop, the pair confessed that they had killed Hiram Mongren. An unknown man in a blue cloak had paid them 250gp each to kill Mongren and throw his body off the cliff. The thugs also admitted that they, acting under instructions from their benefactor, drugged Galen and told him a fake story accusing Mongren of engineering the recent sinking of a merchant ship carrying cargo for Raines. Jones admitted planting a bloody shirt and dagger in Raines' back yard and both lied in their statements about seeing Galen near Mongren's house the night of the crime.

The party took the thugs to jail and met with Cryden. The watch chief completely agreed that Galen was innocent, but lacked the authority to set the man free. He volunteered to request an emergency meeting with the town council, which would take several hours to engineer.

Still working on loose ends, the party paid a call on Oliver Raines to find out more about the sunken ship story. Raines provided as much information as he had about where and when the Dorothy Mae went down, then asked the party's help in discovering the fate of the crew. He offered a reward if they could recover some or all of the cargo as well.

The suspected wreck site wasn't far from town, so the party set sail immediately, pausing only long enough to stock up on weapons usable under water. Gilead used a Seeking spell to navigate and they quickly found the site. They lowered anchor and dove, using a Water Breathing spell from Elayna to allow them to breathe in the ocean.

About 180 feet down, the party was attacked by a dire shark. The creature swept in from beyond vision range and grabbed Gilead in its jaws. A few of the adventurers managed to get blows in as the huge beast passed but it was too fast to pursue.

Fortunately the creature was hungry. It swallowed Gilead whole, banked, and shot back toward the clustered adventurers. The party was ready and struck several good blows. The shark veered right and managed to gulp down Dimdar as well.

The two trapped characters worked to cut themselves free before the shark's stomach acids could kill them. Gilead slashed into the belly with his dagger but wasn't able to do enough damage to make an opening and his health was dropping fast. Dimdar used a Gaseous Form spell to turn the wizard into vapor, allowing him to float above the acid and remain unharmed while she continued taking damage.

The shark's hunger turned out to be its undoing. By doubling back for another meal, it gave the party more chances to attack. Pyroh put Magic Missile spells to good use while Groop, Renn, Cori and Perdue struck with their weapons. Pyroh's Magic Missile spell killed the creature just as it was pulling out of weapons range. It stopped swimming and began to sink. The party chased the body and succeeded in cutting the swallowed characters free. Dimdar and Gillead used the new Shroud to heal themselves and the group resumed their original mission.

The Dorothy Mae lay at the sea bottom, about 300 feet down. When the group found her they immediately noticed a massive hole in her port bulkhead big enough to pilot several smaller boats through. The mast was broken off and missing as well as the lifeboats.

They found no sign of the crew. The captain's log was intact and contained a final entry: *"We've been rammed and are going down. The men are in the lifeboats. They just rammed us and backed off. Why?"*

More disturbing, the characters found that the cargo hold was not only intact but still held all of Oliver Raines' cargo. The pirates who had attacked the ship hadn't stolen anything, it seemed.

As the group pondered this oddity a party of aquatic elves approached. They returned friendly greetings and the leader, an aquatic elf bard named Sevrin, opened conversation by asking about their purpose. Sevrin and her team had seen the attack from a distance. A long, fast ship with an iron-clad prow had stalked the Dorothy Mae under cover of an Invisibility spell which lapsed as soon as the pirate ship rammed the Dorothy Mae. The attack ship backed off after one attack, tossing a chain and breaking off the merchant ship's mast. Then, when the lifeboats were launched and clear enough of the sinking wreck, the attack boat ran over the lifeboats and destroyed them, leaving the crew to swim or die.

The crew were too badly injured to swim or unable to avoid the down current created by the sinking ship. There was nothing the elves could do to save them. They did, however, undertake another grim duty: because of the violent manner of their death many of the crew became undead, either lacedons or drowned. Sevrin's party slew the undead, gathered the bodies of the rest, and buried them all properly in an undersea cave a mile or so from the wreck site.

Wondering at the brutality of the attack, the party transferred the cargo and the captain's personal effects to their ship and headed for home. Dimdar obtained directions to Sevrin's undersea village and to the burial cave.

Upon returning to the castle the party learned that Cryden had set up a council meeting for that evening. They planned their strategy and headed for Town Hall.

Elayna took the lead in presenting the case for releasing Galen. She described the vision she had at the crime scene without going into detail on what the scrying method was. She related how the party tracked down Dugan and Jones and extracted their confessions. Some on the council expressed concerns that the confessions had been coerced and had the prisoners brought in.

Now protected from the threat of an attack, Dugan and Jones denied everything. They had told the party what they wanted to hear, the thugs said, because they feared for their lives. They were cross-examined at some length, and at one point there was a recess while Cryden searched the thugs' rooms for evidence linking them to Mongren. He returned with a signet ring and coin purse that were identifiable as Mongren's. The thugs claimed they had been given those items by Galen, further proving his guilt.

The lie seemed obvious. When the council voted, though, they proved to be split. Two voted Yea to release Galen; two voted Nay. Simon Gore, as chair of the council, cast the deciding vote: Nay.

The party entreated Simon to reconsider, but he said that the evidence wasn't convincing enough. At best, he offered to commute the sentence from beheading to hanging, which would allow a resurrection later if Galen proved innocent. The meeting adjourned on that note.

Team Gore returned to the castle highly disturbed at Simon's behavior. They laid out what they knew, verbally going over all of the information in their possession. They mused aloud about the possibility that Simon had hired the killers and the pirates. They planned moves to confirm or disprove the idea.

The next day, Dimdar asked Simon to join her at the castle to talk about some of the artifacts in the trophy room. While Simon was talking about his favorite subject, others of the party visited Charlotte.

Renn and Groop noticed immediately that Charlotte was sporting a new black eye. She didn't say so, but they got the distinct impression that Simon had struck her when he returned from the council meeting. She did confirm that Simon had been very irritable and moody since his resurrection, but put it down to stress from the robbery and from frequent indirect run-ins with the Sane such as the Luther Foreman situation.

While Renn and Groop talked to her, Perdue snuck into Simon's chamber and went through his wardrobe looking for anything to tie him to the murder or the frame. He found a dark blue cloak and secreted it in his robes.

Meanwhile Elayna met with Pastor Orgenthal, head of the local Temple of Heironeous and one of the council members who voted to release Galen, looking for insight into rumors of a rift between Simon and the Temple. Orgenthal confirmed that since his raising Simon has not come to church and has stopped contributing to the church. He has not made himself available to talk about it, but Orgenthal thinks that Simon is angry because the church did not send a cleric to raise him immediately after the attack -- the fact that the local Temple doesn't have a cleric of sufficient level to raise the dead notwithstanding. Orgenthal has known Simon for a long time and believes him to be a good man who is currently having trouble dealing with the recent events in his life.

Back at the castle, the adventurers pooled their new information. It strongly appeared to them that Simon had turned evil and was behind the whole murder plot. Using the Rod on the blue cloak resulted in a vision of Dugan and Jones receiving money from the cloak wearer, further indicting Simon.

Elayna brought up possibly using the Rod to look into the death of Camille Gore, thinking that perhaps the legend of a curse of madness in the family may be true. Renn had already done that, however, and could verify that Camille Gore had died in a tragic accident and was neither a suicide nor a murder victim.

Talk turned to other aspects of the Gore family history. Dimdar related the story of Simon's late brother Marius and the conflicting tales of his death, resurrection, and second death a month later. Again, Renn surprised the group with a revelation: Renn, he confessed, had been in Marius Gore's unit and had been close to Marius himself. Marius, Renn said, had in fact been killed by field trolls and raised from the dead. But when Marius returned, he was not the same man. Marius had turned evil, and in a very short time he turned on and murdered one of his own captains. Marius was executed for the crime and the truth covered up to avoid tarnishing the reputation of the military and the Gore family. Renn, appalled at the entire thing, deserted his unit and has been a fugitive from the Northern Alliance military ever since.

Dimdar put the pieces together with a flash of insight. The curse on the Gore family, she realized, was actually a curse on the Five and their ancestors -- a curse that causes anyone raised from the dead to come back evil. The party now knew why the Five had adamantly ordered that their bodies be destroyed and never raised.

With less than a day before Galen's execution, the party formulated a strategy. They would confront Simon with their knowledge of his involvement in the murder and use that, along with the truth of the curse, to blackmail him into changing his vote and setting Galen free. That would save Galen and, at the same time, establish a state of detente that should keep Simon's evil in check.

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That's as far as we got last night, of course. Assuming that the whole group is involved with the meeting with Simon, here's what happens (subject to revision if someone doesn't like what I had their character do):

Simon listens as you lay out what you've learned: that he hired Dugan and Jones to murder Mongren in retaliation for the feed quarrel; that he further coordinated the frame of Galen, including the hiring of the pirate ship to sink the Dorothy Mae and establish a motive; that the curse on the Five caused him to return from the dead as an evil man.

At first Simon's response is, "Prove it."

"We don't have to," you pointed out. "All we have to do is let Dimdar walk into Rosie's Pub and start telling the true story of the Curse of the Five. You know how people like to talk. By the next morning people will be crossing the street to avoid passing you by; by the day after that your fellow council members will be politely suggesting that you take an indefinite leave of absence. What suppliers you have left will dry up and blow away. You'd be ruined in a matter of weeks.

"Or," you further suggest, "we could just make you disappear. We'd spend months searching for the villains who kidnapped you, of course, but in the end we would discover that you'd been murdered by a tribe of goblinoids and the body destroyed. A sad tale. The failure to save you might tarnish our reputations a bit, but we'd get over it."

Simon thinks in silence. A long minute later, he sighs. "What do you want?"

Cori and Groop lay it out for him. "First, you are going to reconvene the council and tell them you've changed your mind and now believe that Galen is innocent. You will have the conviction overturned. If you want to push for Dugan and Jones to be executed, we have no problem with that because they willingly accepted your money to commit two murders -- three, if Galen had actually been executed.

"Second, you will start practicing restraint in how you conduct your affairs. Any murder or kidnapping or act of piracy that smells even remotely suspicious to us will result in your being exposed. We have potent magical means of uncovering your schemes if we have to. Use your intelligence and fake the morality that you used to practice.

"Third, you will continue to be publicly supportive of our presence and activities, including issues before the council."

Another long pause from Simon. "And in return? Surely I get something other than freedom from your unprovable allegations."

"You get to live," Groop points out. "You get to stay a respectable leader of the town."

"And," Cori adds, "when we find a way to lift the curse, you get your morals back."

Simon smiles a thin, nasty smile. "What if I don't want them back?"

"You would if you could see yourself through Charlotte's eyes."

Groop grunts. "Speaking of Charlotte: if we ever see another bruise that she doesn't want to explain, you die and all bets are off. We intend for her to receive an invitation to Tavor for a long visit with her uncle. I strongly suggest you encourage her to accept it."

Simon glares at you all in silence.

"Time is short, Simon. Do we have an agreement?"

He waits another three beats. "Yes, damn you all, we do."

<MR>