

A Friend In Need

4/24/05

Secondmonth Autumn 1, CA329

Groop returned home to Castle Gore on the evening of 1A28, marking the full reunion of the Guardians of Gore. He brought new weapons and tokens made for the group by the grateful dwarven smiths of Tiburon and the welcome news that Targo and his team were in residence at the Forge of Garodeus.

Early in the morning, the team was alerted by the bearhounds to a solitary figure scratching at the castle gates. It was Bullseye, the Halfling who left the team in Sogenhal after being disqualified from the tournament. He was bloody and weak, and his skin had the dreadful pallor of disease. While Elayna cured his wounds and sickness, Groop and Renn were summoned to the castle.

Once restored to his senses, Bullseye recounted what had happened to him since leaving the party:

Bullseye joined with the Halfling Cleanup Crew on a treasure hunt in the swamps of the Southern Republic. According to a lizardfolk warrior the Halflings had met, there was an abandoned castle on an island in the swamp. Beneath that castle was reputed to be a wealth of magical and golden treasures for the taking. The lizardfolk didn't have the resources to mount an expedition themselves, but for a twenty percent share they'd provided an old parchment map and directions to the swamp.

Things went well at first. They rented a pair of canoes in Togun Yao, a small port city east of the swamps. The boat guy made them leave a deposit when he found out they were going to the swamps. That should have been a clue.

Toward the west side, they came upon the castle on a little island. They tied their canoes to a cypress tree and marched through the soggy ground. They were expecting an unoccupied building, and there was nothing about the exterior to suggest otherwise, but to their surprise there was an eccentric gentleman living there. Bullseye didn't get his name -- it sounded like 'Kenther' or something like that. The gentleman treated the Halflings to a small banquet of meat and vegetables.

Over dinner the group told the gentleman of the map and the story. He laughed and said they were not the first to come seeking the treasure, and probably wouldn't be the last. Unfortunately, he explained, there was no treasure. His great-great-great-grandfather had been an eccentric nobleman of some means, but the successive generations had not been able to hold on to most of it. That doesn't stop the rumors from bringing hungry adventurers, though, he remarked.

The castle owner explained that he had no guest rooms, but said they were welcome to spend the night in the dining hall rather than camping outdoors. The group accepted and fell asleep within a very short time.

Bullseye woke up that night to loud cries from Antonius, one of the fighter/rogues. A big bat was biting his throat, and Gorum (another fighter) was tugging at it. Tandsis (wizard) cast *burning hands* at the bat, but instead of being killed it turned into Mr. Kenther! He just looked at Tandsis and she dropped her dagger and materials bag as if she had forgotten what she was doing. Gorum stabbed the awful thing in the back but didn't hurt it a bit.

Then the vamp gave a strange, piercing cry and lots of bats came fluttering in through the doors of the dining hall, which opened by themselves. Not normal bats -- big, tropical, carnivorous ones. Bullseye pulled out one of his adamantine daggers and stabbed at them, but they were in his eyes and he couldn't see well. Gorum was bellowing with rage. Antonius stopped screaming but Bullseye could hear Malrynar and Dalsor crying out in pain. Under cover of the swarm of bats, Bullseye ran from the castle. The bats followed, swarming around him and blocking his vision. Somehow Bullseye managed to find the canoes, jump into one, and cut it free. The bats seemed to lose interest in him as soon as he entered the water, enabling Bullseye to paddle frantically away.

By midday the next day he had made it to the ocean. He ran into a merchant ship heading north who spotted him adrift in his canoe and rescued him before the sea currents took him away. They were already bound for Gore's Cliff, so they gave him a ride.

Having told his tale, Bullseye asked the Guardians to help him avenge the vampire's treachery and save any of the Halflings who still survived as his thralls or slaves. The group quickly agreed and spent the day preparing for encounters with the undead. They stocked up on silver-tipped arrows and crossbow bolts from a dealer in Crossroads and reviewed what they knew about combating undead opponents. Dimdar shared what she knew of the legend of Kenither the Gaunt, a ruthless king from 800 years before who had made and then broken a pact with Orcus, Lord of the Undead. According to legend Kenither was abandoned by the demon in a tiny castle in the swamps, forbidden to leave lest Orcus take his soul. Bullseye's vampire "gentlemen" sounded very much like Kenither to the bard.

The next morning they boarded ship and set sail for the swamps of the Southern Republic. It was a three day journey along the western coast, past the Jungle of Fear and down to the edge of the massive swamp. They anchored their ship in a small cove and left the warmage Nimbus to stand guard over it. The rest of the group switched to canoes and paddled their way into the marsh.

They got within sight of a tiny castle when an eerie, melodious song reached their ears. Dimdar was fascinated by it; the creature was beautiful and mysterious. The others recognized the creature as a harpy and her song as a powerful charm. The group quickly spotted the harpy and two more of her kind flanking their boats and opened fire.

The lead harpy, a red-haired sorceress with a pronounced mustache, retaliated against Renn with a sonic attack while her cohorts fired on the second boat. Cori's merciful bow dealt the witch a powerful blow, though, sending her falling into the water before she could cast any further spells.

The remaining harpies used aerial maneuvers to enhance their attacks but were no match for Gore's archers. Elayna backed them up with Deific Vengeance and Searing Light spells, grievously wounding one harpy and killing another as it tried to carry off Bullseye.

Cori called a halt to the fighting as the final harpy flew away. The team rescued Bullseye from the water and bound the helpless lead harpy. Under questioning the harpy said they had attacked the party out of hunger, being tired of eating snakes and rats every day. She knew nothing useful about Kenither and was more than happy to swear off any further attacks in exchange for her life. She even had fresh food in the form of her dead comrade.

The Gore team continued on their way toward the castle. On a neighboring island they found an interesting relic: a huge statue, apparently of the demon prince Orcus, sat on the island facing the castle. Although the passing centuries had worn down the stone, the gloating face of the demon prince was still clearly visible.

From there the team slogged through the muck to the next island. High on a small hill they found the remains of a small graveyard. Cori snuck close to observe the humanlike shadows they spotted from afar and discovered that the place was home to three wights. After a short debate the team advanced on the wights, ready to do battle. Elayna began by presenting her holy symbol and damning the creatures. They disintegrated before her.

Before any celebrating could ensue, however, the group encountered a new and possibly more disgusting sight: a swarm of tiny rat-like skeletons advanced on them, engulfing Elayna and beginning to tear at her limbs with an unnatural hunger. Again she raised her holy symbol and the undead were destroyed. Elayna took only minor damage.

The team advanced on the tiny castle and knocked on the front door. It opened by itself to allow them entry into a dusty dining hall. They had only a moment to contemplate the rotting food on the table before they were greeted by a young Halfling female.

Bullseye recognized the girl as Tandis, the halfling party's wizard. Her vacant stare and lethargic movements indicated that she was under a strong enchantment. She spoke vaguely of "His Majesty" and while she recognized Bullseye and the group, she seemed to have no curiosity as to why they might be there. She also professed little memory of what became of her friends.

Pyroh and Gilead remembered the antidote potion they had taken from Bainard's Keep long before and offered it to Tandis as a treat. She drank the potion and awoke from the vampire's domination, furious over being turned into a mindless chambermaid and used as food for the creature. She confirmed Bullseye's account of the battle for as much of it as she could remember but was unable to say where the vampire slept or what had become of the others. Bullseye lent her a dagger and she joined the group in looking for the rest of the party.

In an upstairs bedroom they found another Halfling tied to a bed: Antonius, one of the fighter/rogues of the Halfling Cleanup Crew. He was weakened by blood loss but otherwise unharmed; like Tandis, Kenither had been sustaining himself by taking just a little blood each day, enough to satisfy his thirst without killing the halfling prematurely. His bonds proved to be

a Rope of Entanglement, magically preserved and impossible to cut. Pyroh's new Wand of Dispel Magic rendered it inactive long enough to be untied and stowed, though. A search of the room turned up Antonius's armor and sword, some rare and aged coins, and a Chinese puzzle box. Bullseye opened the box to discover an iron skeleton key.

Also in the upstairs the group found Kenither's study, a room filled with ancient tomes of arcane magic. The vampire, it seemed, had a strong interest in the rituals and methods of summoning powerful demons. Gilead identified several books on the subject, including one especially valuable-looking and old one. They noted a summoning circle on the floor, which Cori deliberately broke for the fun of it. They also found a gilded cage containing a booka, a harmless bird native to the swamp area.

This booka, however, was unusual. It seemed to recognize the party and acted very anxious to keep their attention. Pyroh used his Dispel Magic wand on the bird and it transformed into Gorem, another of the halfling fighter/rogues.

Gorem told the party the story from his perspective. Kenither had summoned a horde of dire bats to his aide, which attacked the halflings. Gorem, Antonius, and Dalsor fought back with all of their might and, as Dalsor fell, Gorem tried to engage Kenither himself. The vampire waved and chanted and Gorem found himself transformed into a powerless little bird, which Kenither swept up and locked in the golden cage. Gorem had been stuck there since, sitting by in a cage while Kenither drank the blood of his friends and whiled away his hours studying his musty old books. Gorem was able to confirm that Kenither spent most of his time in the study and seemed obsessed with demonology. He also told the party of an ugly flying beast that Kenither kept as well, a minor servant of some sort.

Gilead recognized Gorem's description as a homonculous, a minor sort of construct available to arcanists and useful for surveillance. They found the beast quietly hovering near the ceiling, keeping watch on the party. Kenither, they realized, had been watching and listening to them through the creature perhaps since they'd entered his castle. They briefly debated destroying the creature but opted against it in favor of searching for the other halflings.

They ascended to the roof and found nothing but an old watchman's office with a few coins and a magic dagger, which Bullseye took for his own. Kenither's crypt, and possibly the remaining halflings, were apparently below ground.

The party climb down the winding staircase to the basement, where Bullseye's iron skeleton key proved necessary to open the locked gate. At first the basement seemed a dead end, with nothing but a few barrels of oil and empty coffins. Elayna detected a powerful unnatural presence, however, lurking in a corner. Cori investigated, touched a coffin that had been leaning up in the corner, and in so doing alarmed the room's magical guardian -- a grave dirt golem. The party took in the size and apparent power of the golem and made a tactical retreat up the stairway.

Dimdar had the idea to use her Gaseous Form spell to slip past the guardian and see what lay behind the coffin. She slipped through the gate and past the golem, which flailed harmlessly at her incorporeal form, and discovered that its coffin hid a secret door. She flowed through the

crack and into a hidden room with a trap door. The door had holes drilled in it, making it easy for her to flow downward and into the crypt below. There Dimdar discovered a room with nine stone sarcophagi, including one exceptionally ornate one of black marble that held an empty rosewood casket with a crown and scepter of astounding workmanship and value.

When Dimdar related her findings to the team, they developed a plan to enter the crypt without having to face the golem. Elayna used Stone Shape to make a hole in the floor of the kitchen, which lay directly above the secret room guarded by the golem. The Gore team climbed down on a rope to the secret room, opened the door, and entered the crypt. Space was extremely limited, so Gilead and Renn remained in the middle level on watch. The rescued halflings guarded the kitchen area to provide early warning of a flanking move.

The party began to open the stone crypts. As they did, a gaseous cloud seeped through the doorways and collected at the head of the crypt. It coalesced into the form of an ageless gentleman in fine clothing, sitting casually on top of the sarcophagus – Kenither the Gaunt, in person.

The vampire chided the group for looting his home. Cori opened negotiations, suggesting that things need not degenerate into combat if the vampire was willing to release the halflings. The vampire sneered at him and promised that nobody would leave unless they returned his property. Then, perhaps as a show of power, Kenither made a tactical error: he tried to use his Dominate Person ability on Groop. The occult slayer shook off the mental attack and immediately charged the vampire with his axe in hand.

Kenither relied on his vampiric and spellcasting abilities. He took hold of Bullseye's mind and caused the halfling to begin attacking his own party, using all of his rogue skills and the newly-found magic returning dagger. Meanwhile, his damage resistance allowed him to withstand Groop's ferocious attacks. He cast an ancient, dark spell that caused a huge wall of flailing spiked chains to appear at the back of the room, cutting off the rest of the party and leaving Groop and Cori to face Kenither without help.

The vampire also summoned aid. The halflings in the kitchen called out the alert, warning that a swarm of dire bats were approaching. Gilead closed off the floor opening with a Web spell, allowing only one bat through, and jumped down to assist the rest of the party.

Aside from the chain wall, whose whipping strands damaged all who stood within five feet of it, the greatest threat to the bulk of the party proved to be Bullseye himself. Under the vampire's influence and direction, he sneak attacked Purdue and then Pyroh. The sorcerer weakened Bullseye with a Ray of Enfeeblement and tried grappling him to prevent more attacks, but the halfling slipped out of his grip and fought on tenaciously. Renn and Elayna engaged the bat while the halflings in the kitchen fought off its kin.

Meanwhile, Groop and Cori engaged the vampire. Each round they would land blows only to have the vampire turn gaseous and move, then cast a spell back at them. Determination and courage helped the fighters to avoid the worst effects and keep their minds under their own control. Finally, as their comrades managed to rend the chain wall, they cornered Kenither atop

his own sarcophagus. The vampire cast one final spell that caused his right hand to separate from his wrist and latch around Groop's throat. The casting gave Groop an opportunity for one last strike, which proved enough. Kenither's body, including the strangling hand, dissolved into gas and seeped into the coffin to regenerate.

Team Gore moved quickly to seal the coffin, preventing Kenither from escaping in gaseous form, and discussed how to put an end to the vampire. Remembering Dimdar's story, they judged that Kenither would not succumb to the usual treatments; the only way to destroy him, they thought, would be to carry him across the border of his "kingdom" so that Orcus could take his soul. Groop and Cori hefted the coffin and the team carried it outside. As they carried the box its occupant began pounding and calling to them from inside, but they paid him no attention.

As the coffin crossed the water, they heard loud screaming inside and then nothing. They set the coffin down in front of the statue of Orcus, which now held an even more malicious expression, and opened it. Only the crown and scepter remained.

With Kenither dead, the party turned their attention to his remaining servants. They opened the rest of the sarcophagi in the crypt and dispatched a mummy and a mimic that the vampire had kept on hand to defend against intruders. Then they turned their attention to the grave dirt golem. Spells would be largely useless, so the fighters surrounded the creature and attacked it with blunt weapons until it dissolved into a pile of inanimate dirt.

Finally, there was the question of the missing halflings. The party turned to the Rod of Insight and learned the rest of the story. After seeing Bullseye flee successfully, the cleric Malrynar tried to follow suit but ran straight into Kenither, who drained the cleric's body of blood. She rose a few rounds later as a vampire herself and found Dalsor, dazed and near death, trying to escape. Now evil and hungry, she turned on her friend and Dalsor, too, became a vampire. Both halflings were too advanced in life to become thralls to Kenither but too weak to face him directly, so they left his kingdom together with vengeance against the lizard men topmost in their minds.

Outside the castle, a grim discussion took place. Malrynar and Dalsor could not be allowed to continue, yet the party had no way to locate them. The halfling crew in particular felt the need to hunt them down and either destroy them or save them. In the end it was decided that Antonius, Tandis and Gorem would return to the Eastern Realm and seek out their undead friends, then send word to Castle Gore and assemble the party to take them on. Bullseye opted to return to Gore's Cliff, having had his fill of the other realms – and vampires – for now.

Team Gore and the halflings shook hands and separated, the Gore team taking the bulk of the treasures as thanks for the rescue. They returned to their ship and sailed for home.