

Secondmonth Autumn 12, CA329

## PLACES OF SANITY

The heroes of Gore's Cliff returned home in triumph, having destroyed the vampire Kenither and rescued most of the Halfling Cleanup Crew from the vampire's domain. They also returned enriched at the vampire's expense, bearing another consignment of valuable antique coins and other precious items from the castle in the swamp.

There was little time for rest, however. Jonquil, the team's spy inside Bainard's Keep, reported that the village of Hardby had become a Place of Sanity. Her report, phrased as a prayer to a deity, hinted that the team should visit Hardby right away. They also noted that the Sane had become particularly active in Gore's Cliff.

Before making for Hardby the team split up to learn more about the Sane's local activities. From Simon Gore they confirmed that the Sane were pressuring his suppliers, primarily Luther Foreman, into denying him goods and services. Orgenthal, pastor of the Church of Heironious, told of the Sane's pattern of behavior and the increasing number of citizens pushing for a public hearing on whether Gore's Cliff should become a Place of Sanity. A majority of the council and about half the citizenry seemed to be against it.

Back at Castle Gore, the group planned a counter strategy to check the spread of the Sane by helping to spread true information about the unpleasant fate of Elster, the Place of Sanity that was wiped out by outlaws, and sowing doubt about the wisdom of joining with the cult. Dimdar used her pulpit at Rosie's to start the process.

The team arrived in Hardby the next morning to find the town utterly and eerily quiet. Inside the temple of Obad-Hai they found an unconscious man on the floor of the dais. Normal means would not wake him, but Pyroh's Dispel Magic wand roused the man quickly. He turned out to be Heath, pastor of the church. The first thing Heath noticed on awakening was that several valuable items were gone from the altar area. He told the players that a few days after becoming a Place of Sanity, the locals were having second thoughts. As Heath prepared for services he suddenly felt dizzy and lethargic, and then remembered nothing until waking up surrounded by the Gore team. He had no idea that he'd been asleep for three days.

At the inn the players discovered more sleeping bodies, representing most of the population of Hardby. As with the pastor, the people at the inn had no coin purses and the till was empty.

The general store also featured an unconscious person and an empty till. As the party investigated they heard a door open and a squeaky voice mutter an oath. They chased the voice and discovered a posse of goblins with a wagon full of what looked like the stock from the store.

Groop and Bullseye followed out the back door while the others went out the front to flank the goblins. They quickly discovered that the goblins around the wagon were

backed up by eight more in sniping positions on the roofs and trees nearby.

The battle was short but decisive. Cori moved to disable the wagon by cutting the horses free. Purdue jumped onto the wagon to engage the goblins himself, taking an arrow shot from a sniper behind him in the process. Pyroh used Scorching Ray to eliminate one sniper and Gilead used his Bands of Steel spell to capture another. Elayna disabled the roof snipers with a Sound Burst, allowing fighters to climb to the roof and chase them off. As more goblins fell to spells and weapons the rest fled, leaving two comrades in the party's control.

The captives gave up their story quickly: their band had learned by watching the Sane that Places of Sanity are easy pickings. Several times, they said, the Sane would leave the place a few days later and everyone would be asleep. By following the Sane, the goblins had found a nice source of income. They confessed to having already cleaned out the temple and the inn. The valuables from the temple had already been sold in Crossroads to a fence called Louie the Gnome.

The party returned to the inn and awoke the rest of the victims. They confirmed what Heath had said: the people of Hardby were not in agreement with the decision to adopt the philosophy of the Sane and, in fact, were actively discussing taking down the Place of Sanity sign despite the presence of three of the Sane in the inn at the time. The barmaid said that the Sane had left the building, then a minute or two later everyone felt woozy and passed out. The Rod of Insight confirmed this, and added the information that the Sane had walked to the center of town and read from a scroll. Gilead recognized the effects as being similar to the Profound Slumber spell, a creation of Artemis Tavor.

Now that they had evidence of a link between the Sane and Tavor, the party's resolve to stop the cult's spread deepened. They solicited two volunteers from Hardby to accompany them back to Gore's Cliff and tell their story. They also delegated to Heath the task of checking in with neighboring villages to ensure that others had not also been left vulnerable to looting or attack.

Upon arriving at Gore's Cliff the heroes found an assembly in progress in the town square. Wuatto himself was addressing a mixed audience of townspeople and his own followers, speaking eloquently of his philosophy and entreating all to join him. The party heckled Wuatto with accusations based on their knowledge of the Sane's activities but the cult leader's charisma seemed to outweigh the party's word, at least with that particular crowd. A challenge was issued and accepted to debate the issue before the town council the following evening.

That night, as he retired to his woodland camp, Renn spied four of the Sane hustling a bound, blindfolded woman around town toward the north end. He followed them to the edge of the road, where they loaded their captive into a wagon with two others and headed toward Bainard's Keep. He ran back to Castle Gore to report his findings, and noted in the process signs of unusual evening visitors to Simon Gore's mansion.

When they heard Renn's report the group did some fast calculating. It would take the

wagon two hours to reach Bainard's Keep, they knew. The teleport room would allow them to reach the Keep in just a few seconds, so they had some time to work with.

They used that time to rouse Cryden, captain of the watch, and brief him on what Renn had seen. They also paid a call on Simon and found three other members of the town council meeting with him. Oliver Raines reported that his son Galen was gone, and that there was a note from the Sane saying that Galen had joined them and Raines' support in the meeting would determine whether or not he would see Galen again. Counselor Wells received a similar note about his daughter, as did Counselor Morris involving his wife. The team pledged to rescue the captives and the counselors pledged their support in opposition to the Sane.

With an hour to go before the wagon would reach Bainard's Keep, the team teleported across. They arrived in the Keep teleport room, which proved to be cleverly hidden below one of the round towers in the Keep. Elayna tried to use Stone Shape to carve out an exit but the magically-reinforced Keep walls would not yield. They ended up taking the stairs to the battlements and then climbing down the outer wall to avoid walking through the populated Keep. The team worked their way around the building to the road and set up an ambush half a mile from the Keep, using a charge from the Darkvision wand to ensure they would be able to see better than the kidnappers.

When the wagon came into view, they sprang the trap. Pyroh polymorphed himself into a treant and lay down across the road like a fallen tree. The wagon stopped and Groop demanded their immediate surrender. The wagon driver tried to turn the wagon and was stopped dead when an arrow from Renn tore through her chest. Pyroh stood up and another of the Sane tried to spur the wagon past him, but in his treant form Pyroh easily grabbed the horse and held it. Gilead made further combat impossible by subduing the Sane with a Stinking Cloud that left them helplessly retching. They had no choice but to submit while the party tied them up and freed the hostages. They used the Sane's wagon to return to Gore's Cliff, where the hostages went home and the Sane to Cryden for questioning. Elayna even raised the dead one as proof of the team's mercy and compassion.

The guardians arose the next morning to interesting developments. The usual number of Sane had arrived at the normal time and begun preaching, but Wuatto was not among them. When challenged with the facts of the kidnapping attempt, the Sane dismissed the criminals as a rogue element, people too dedicated to think clearly, and publicly deplored the use of violence even in support of their cause. Without Wuatto's personal magnetism, however, their arguments seemed to have little impact on the more hostile crowd.

The prisoners had remained silent through Cryden's interrogation, refusing even to identify themselves by name. A little creative intimidation from Groop got one initiate to break and confess that they were recruited to the mission by one of Wuatto's Chosen. The captives were to be held at the Keep until Gore's Cliff voted to become a Place of Sanity. The initiate was granted leniency in exchange for her cooperation.

With proof of Wuatto's complicity now in their possession, the guardians took to the

road. This time they would approach Bainard's Keep by road and demand that Wuatto face charges for his actions and the actions of his underlings.

Sentries spotted the team on the road and secured the fortress by raising the door and dropping the portcullis at the main entrance. The party demanded Wuatto's presence and, after a short and unproductive parlay with a Chosen, secured it.

While the main party commanded the Sane's attention at the front gate, a smaller force made up of Pyroh, Gilead, Purdue and Jonquil teleported in and explored the main tower. They found Wuatto's quarters - not surprisingly, the opulent room formerly occupied by Silas Rook - and searched for more evidence. They found a strongbox containing six potions of Eagle's Splendor and an equal number of empty vials.

At the gate, Wuatto steadfastly refused to surrender himself to the party, calling them liars and agents of violence. Cori tried to climb the castle wall but found it too difficult. He tried his Easy Climbing spell and found Tavor's walls just as resistant to his magic as they were to Elayna's. Dimdar stepped up and cast Gaseous Form on the ranger, allowing him to float up to the gatehouse and rematerialize in position to cut the rope to the winch. As he was about to do that, however, Wuatto called to him and Cori suddenly found himself on the cult leader's side. He took a defensive posture and told his teammates that they were wrong about Wuatto and should leave him in peace.

Incensed by the obvious magical coercion, Groop asked Dimdar to cast Gaseous Form on him and likewise materialized at the top of the gatehouse. He took a swing at the rope and frayed it before being pushed off the winch by four Initiates, landing on the ground in front of the gate. Elayna responded by first casting Wall of Stone in front of the gate, then using Stone Shape on the wall she had created to form a crude but effective ladder. Groop, Renn, Dimdar and Bullseye clambered up the structure quickly and charged the Sane.

The inside party heard the commotion and worked their way toward the combat zone disguised as members of the Sane. Gilead took the further step of using Disguise Self to take on the physical form of Wuatto himself and drinking an Eagle's Splendor potion to mimic the leader's high charisma. Seeing Cori fighting on behalf of Wuatto, Pyroh drew his Dispel Magic wand and tried to break the obvious enchantment but failed.

Wuatto followed his bewitching of Cori by turning invisible while his Chosen attacked the party. Recognizing Pyroh as a direct threat, Cori turned his bow on the sorcerer and scored a hit. Pyroh tried to escape further harm by casting Fly and rising into the air, but Cori's bow had more than enough range to inflict two more serious but nonlethal wounds before Gilead managed to break the spell on his mind. Gilead took advantage of Wuatto's invisibility by revealing himself in Wuatto's guise and ordering the Sane to withdraw into the exercise yard for their own safety. Most of the Initiates and even some of the Faithful obeyed.

Wuatto himself proved very difficult to injure, even after Elayna's Invisibility Purge rendered him visible to all. Renn managed a minor arrow wound, which drew two

Chosen to him, but otherwise Wuatto remained unscathed well into the battle. To prevent him from enspelling anyone else Gilead tried to capture him in Bands of Steel. The cult leader avoided complete captivity but was entangled in the bands long enough to give Groop a solid blow against him. Wuatto fell backward and off the wall into the yard below, followed quickly by Groop.

The martial training of the Chosen proved inadequate compared to the armor and skills of the party. One by one the Chosen fell to a combination of nonlethal attacks from Purdue and Jonquil and precision archery from Dimdar, Bullseye and Renn. Still, the Sane fought grimly, inspired perhaps by seeing their leader under violent attack.

Elayna put a swift end to Wuatto with a Flame Strike. Empowered by a divine feat, the flames engulfed Wuatto and completely destroyed him, along with a Faithful nearby. Groop took some damage but was never in serious danger and fully supported Elayna's action.

With their leader dead the Sane lost their will to fight and fled in terror. Gilead used his enhanced charisma and the familiar presence of Jonquil to calm most of the Initiates. The Faithful were kept separate in an inner yard, and the unconscious Chosen were bound and placed in the prison cells constructed by Rook in the basement of the tower.

The march of the Sane was over.