
Unfinished Business

2A17/329

It had been an eventful week for the Guardians of Gore. It started with their victory over Wuatto and the Sane, followed by a raucous celebration in Hardby, during which the party was hailed as the New Heroes of the Flats. Within a couple of days word arrived from Targo of an attempt by the cleric Bainard and a group of warforged to retake the Forge of Garodeus.

Targo's description of the training and tactics used by the constructs proved unsettling. The loss of Marcellus Gore's expertise had apparently changed the nature of the creatures' training but not halted it. Rather than a mass of construct soldiers waiting for orders, the warforged had evolved into an unknown number of organized strike teams practiced in close teamwork, bolstered by warforged arcane spellcasters, and able to operate independently. Targo's soldiers prevailed but Bainard and a number of the warforged escaped.

A consignment of new arms and supplies from Akuri Sato lifted the spirits of several in the group, but the celebration was short lived. The morning of 2A18 brought an urgent message from Crossroads: the Founder's Cloak, a powerful magic item owned by the late Raphael Montagne, had been stolen in the night. The watch commander asked the party's help in locating the thieves and retrieving the cloak.

Leaving Cori and Dimdar to keep an eye on the castle, the party teleported to Crossroads and presented themselves to Commander Hale. They quickly determined that the stolen cloak was a decoy placed on display by Hale in response to the party's earlier warning of the Dark One's plan to steal it. For security, Hale was actively sustaining the fiction that the actual Cloak had been taken and proceeding accordingly.

The party used the Rod of Insight at the crime scene and discovered that the thieves were three members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. They had disabled the guards with poison darts, bypassed *Glyphs of Warding* to steal the cloak and then escaped via the roof.

A visit to Guildmaster Foulon found the party's old ally in a state of grim displeasure. His intelligence sources had reported the DVAS crossing into the Southern Republic just three days before and none had picked up on their return. Vigorous questioning of local sources turned up no sign of the DVAS patronizing any inn, bar, restaurant or flop-house in Crossroads or of them leaving town since the theft.

The party knew that beneath the city of Crossroads lies a network of sewer tunnels. A small party could hide in those sewers for some time, they reasoned, and then escape with ease once the initial hue and cry subsided. Fortunately, they knew someone with intimate knowledge of that environment.

They found the wererat Templeton and his "children" in his favorite area of the sewer system. Their queries about strangers in the system started the creature wailing instantly over the noise and the stress of having all sorts of strangers wandering around in his domain. Templeton described seeing and hearing people of all descriptions, particularly people in leather and men in heavy plate armor that clanked against the stone walkways. He was not bold enough to confront or follow the intruders, but he could point the party to the tunnel they most often used.

Following Templeton and his companions, the party found themselves in a tunnel at the southeast reaches of the system. Groop spied all manner of footprints: large booted ones, smaller ones in soft shoes, and a number of unusual prints made by two-toed boots – or possibly by the metallic feet of warforged. Elayna remembered being told a story in her training about a hidden temple of Nerull that had been abandoned by the death god's faithful as the city above grew to encroach on its territory. That temple, she reasoned, might be serving as a hideout for the assassins.

The trail ended at a plain wall. Or did it? Pyroh examined the wall and quickly pronounced it an illusion, thrusting his arm through the wall to prove his point. The party walked through the apparition and found another, identical but quite real wall a bit further down. Bullseye found a hidden catch that allowed the entire wall to rise up and out, revealing a hidden stairway carved out of the ground.

By torchlight the Gore team made their way down the staircase, leaving Templeton and his dire rat companions to guard their flank. A foul stench of decay grew stronger as they descended. The stairway ended in a huge underground cavern with a high ceiling above and, 80 feet below the ledge at the end of the stairs, a pool of fetid and brackish water. An application of *Improved Darkvision* improved their sight enough to reveal a similar ledge on the far side of the cavern, 100 feet of empty space away.

Gilead used his staff to explore the space beyond the ledge and discovered an invisible stone path stretching forward over the water. The party followed the path gingerly, using any long pole or device they had to keep feeling ahead for any change in direction or width of the invisible bridge. Sure enough, they found that the bridge was not one continuous road but a series of thirty-foot spans offset from each other, requiring the traveler to step from span to span at the right places in order to cross the chasm. Their poles and staves guided them across in safety.

On the far side the party found a stone archway full of impenetrable darkness. The keystone carried the unholy symbol of Nerull and the entire structure radiated both magic and malevolence. Elayna poured some holy water on the threshold only to see it boil and evaporate instantly, testifying to the evil nature of the structure. Those of Good alignments found themselves unable to pass through the archway, though the Neutrals did so easily. Elayna used *Stone Shape* to open an alternate entrance and the party stepped inside the abandoned temple.

A second archway stood before them, likewise teeming with magical auras. The Rod of Insight revealed the magical trap cast into the stone: any of Good alignment who tried to pass through the portal would be subjected to a *Darkbolt* spell attack. Renn and Purdue, being neutrals, passed through easily to learn what was on the far side.

They found themselves in the temple proper, a vast stone room with rows of benches facing a dais at the far end. On that dais, behind an altar, was a dark figure in plate armor who seemed to be in the midst of casting a spell. As the two watched a pair of demonic spider-like creatures appeared at their flanks. Purdue dashed between them back to the party, but Renn found the way blocked by a massive chitinous claw. Moments later his body was bound tightly in a sticky web that prevented all forms of movement. He struggled to escape the bonds and failed.

Elayna used *Stone Shape* to open a safe entrance while Purdue, Gilead and Bullseye raced back through the arch to Renn's aid. Gilead cut the archer free of the webs while Bullseye and Purdue engaged the nearest creature in melee. Purdue sustained a poisonous bite but Bullseye's small size helped him avoid the huge arachnid's attacks and slip beneath it.

The new opening made by Elayna proved to be directly in front of the second creature. Elayna recognized it as a bebilith, a favored demonic minion of the evil goddess Lolth. She shouted a warning about the bebilith's capabilities as Groop stepped into the breach to engage the demon.

Purdue realized that his best weapon – his fists – could not overcome the damage reduction of the bebiliths, which are fully vulnerable only to good-aligned weapons. He broke off from the melee and ran to engage the armored figure at the altar. He got to a point 25 feet away from the enemy and was repulsed by a magical force of some kind. No effort on his part would allow him to approach any closer.

It quickly became clear to Team Gore that despite their imposing size and demonic powers, the bebiliths were actually the least threatening enemies in the temple. Even at 25 feet Purdue recognized the face of the archcleric Bainard. As he turned to shout this news to the rest of the party, an arrow whizzed over his head and announced the presence of archers in the balconies to either side. The Deadly Viper Assassins were waiting to pick off the heroes as they were weakened by the cleric and his summoned servants.

The situation turned grim. Groop recognized Bainard as the greatest threat and tried to engage him only to

be held back by the same force that restrained Purdue. Frustrated by the cleric's protections, Groop and Purdue jumped to the balconies to engage the assassins and prevent them from taking deadly potshots at the flanks of the heroes' comrades. The DVAS on the east balcony shielded themselves from Groop's attacks by fighting defensively, but on the west balcony Purdue found himself flanked by a pair of DVAS who used a series of trip maneuvers to put him on the floor and make him vulnerable to vicious sneak attacks. The monk felt his health dropping rapidly despite the healing potions he managed to quaff during the fight.

On the main floor Renn and Bullseye fought one bebilith with arrow and dagger while Gilead and Nimbus attacked the other with spells. Elayna worked to overcome the suppressive effects of the unholy location on her magical abilities, having failed to banish the demons to their native plane. Pyroh opened an exchange of deadly spells with Bainard by hurling a *Fireball* at the cleric, who up to then had concentrated on protecting himself from attack. The archcleric shored up his protections with a *Wind Wall* and *Protection from Energy* spell, but the conflict continued to escalate. Pyroh lobbed an *Orb of Cold* at Bainard but missed with all four orbs. Bainard responded with a powered-up *Flame Strike* that burned the young elf to within an inch of his life. Elayna retaliated with a *Flame Strike* of her own aimed at the cleric only to find herself engulfed in unholy fire a few seconds later. She fell to the floor unconscious and smoldering.

A steady barrage of holy-water-filled arrows, sneak attacks from Bullseye, and energy attacks from Gilead and Nimbus finally wore down the demons. Both fell with the warmage dealing the final magical blows. This freed up Gilead to grab the Shroud of Healing and, having received a *Fly* spell from Pyroh earlier, come to the sorcerer's aide. He put the shroud on Pyroh to revive him and sent a barrage of *Magic Missiles* at Bainard. For the first time the archcleric moved from behind the altar. He approached to within 40 feet of the wizard and unleashed *Blasphemy*, a powerful evil spell that left both Gilead and Pyroh paralyzed, weakened and dazed. Nimbus used the Staff of Life to heal Elayna, who then set about helping the stricken magic users as much as possible.

On the west balcony, Purdue was in dire straits. He was still engaging two assassins and bleeding from numerous ugly wounds. On the floor with both enemies poised to strike the death blow, he took the only escape route available to him: a deliberate roll down a flight of stairs. At the bottom he found the time to drink his last healing potion, the temporary quarters of his enemies, and a way around the *Wind Wall* that was protecting Bainard from the party's archery. He used his Speechlink coin to communicate this to Groop.

The occult slayer, meanwhile, was engaged with two assassins of his own. Knowing that they had special tricks that depended on him to attack, Groop resisted the urge to lunge at a defensive DVA and instead engaged the other, driving her off the balcony and down to the floor below. A steady stream of *Magic Missiles* from the spellcasters quickly dulled the enemies' desire to fight; the assassins began to flee.

Gilead cut off their escape with a *Wall of Ice* but Bainard used *Searing Light* to melt a hole in the barrier. Three of the DVAS escaped before Pyroh sealed the hole with a second *Wall of Ice* of his own. A scream and a splash heralded the fall of a fleeing enemy off the invisible bridge. The final two assassins were quickly destroyed by the party.

Bainard was left alone, unable to engage his opponents without leaving the safety of the dais. He cast *Word of Recall* and vanished.

The temple had been abandoned by its builders years before and stripped of any items of value. However, in the possessions left behind by Bainard and his hirelings the heroes found a windfall of magic items and valuables, including the stolen decoy cloak. From the bodies of the DVAS, including the one they fished out of the fetid water, they claimed the magic weapons and armor worn by their dead foes. The weapons were not useful to the Gore team, being products of the samurai culture that dominates the DVAS' homeland, but there was still enough usable and valuable gear to make the struggle worthwhile.

Most of the party were tired and heavily wounded enough that they were willing to let the two remaining foes escape with whatever they were carrying, knowing how the Dark One tends to respond to failure. Renn and Purdue, however, argued against giving a dangerous enemy the chance to regroup and possibly call reinforcements. They grabbed what gear seemed handy and, with Gilead for magical support, set off in

pursuit of the assassins.