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## Intruders

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Most of the Guardians of Gore had gone off on separate tasks. Gilead and Pyroh were using the library in Tavor, doing spell research and delving into dragon lore. Groop had gone to visit Targo at the Forge. Renn retreated into the forest for introspection and more training with the Order of the Bow. Purdue and Nimbus were headed to Sogenhal, the monk for training and the warmage to dispose of the Deadly Vipers' weapons. Elayna was in Sylvangard learning about the Drow.

As a result, only Cori and Dimdar and Bullseye were in residence on the morning of 2A19 when an eagle landed in the courtyard. The eagle landed on the doorstep and immediately turned into the druidess Velana.

Velana carried disturbing news: a party of warforged had entered the Tanglewood and seemed to be taking up residence in a particularly hallowed part of the forest, Halviren's Grove. The grove was a special place, the former home of the halving druid Halviren who had passed some 100 years before. So powerful and revered was Halviren that even after his death spirits of nature kept the grove neatly groomed, a peaceful haven for all creatures of the woodlands. But in recent days animals had been fleeing that area in a nonspecific fear that usually means a strong predator has moved into an area. Knowing the party's interest in the warforged and feeling outraged at their invasion of the holy place, Velana sought the party's help in learning what was up.

Those in residence agreed to the mission easily enough. They augmented their numbers by picking up the young monk Jonquil from Bainard's Keep and, along with Velana's two animal companions, set off into the woods.

They soon came upon a set of tracks that Cori recognized as being made by warforged feet. The warforged were traveling single file but Cori noted evidence of at least one warrior and one charger. Following that trail led them by nightfall to an unexpected sight: a campsite, apparently a day old, featuring a used firepit. Warforged would have no need to camp at all, let alone light a fire; Cori reasoned that at least one non-construct must be among them.

In the morning they took up the trail again. Velana was distressed to see that it seemed to lead directly to Halviren's Grove.

The party reached the grove at mid morning and proceeded to search for signs of the invaders. It didn't take long – Bullseye spied a metallic foot up in the tree limbs just as two arrows flew out of another area of trees toward Cori and Dimdar.

A melee began quickly as three human-sized figures dropped down to surround Bullseye, Velana and her companions. An elf in dark armor wielding a pair of elven lightblades

dropped in front of Bullseye and wounded the halfling. The other two were warforged wielding double-ended longspears.

Seeking to take the fight into the open, Velana retreated into the clearing with her companions. The elf and one warforged followed. Velana cast *Call Lightning* and began calling lightning bolts down on the warforged while the elf closed on Cori.

More unpleasant surprises came from the west side where Cori, Jonquil, and Dimdar searched for the source of the arrows. Cori cast *Entangle* on the treetops and the hidden enemies responded with a volley of *Magic Missiles* before dropping to ground level and revealing themselves to be two warforged scouts. They fired again and the party saw that each scout had a wand embedded in the right forearm, reminding them of the partially completed arm they had found at the Forge.

A warforged charger rushed at Cori from its hiding place behind a low hut but missed at a powerful charging attack. The elf engaged Cori with his weapons, striking swiftly and drawing blood more often than not. The style of attack and weapons struck Dimdar as familiar; she recalled stories of Bencolin, a famous ranger and mercenary. Cori didn't need to be told that his adversary was a seasoned ranger, but it did help him with target selection – he focused his attention on the elf, aided quickly by Jonquil.

That left the charger with a clear shot at Dimdar, which it took with great effect. Dimdar was knocked down and battered by the beast. She rolled away and hid in the trees, using her size and skill to avoid the hulking construct.

Meanwhile, Bullseye used his stealth abilities to avoid the warforged in his own area. He climbed a tree and positioned himself for a carom shot with his war sling. The projectile barely scratched the hardened metal body of his adversary, though, so Bullseye went for a more effective attack: readying his new +2 keen kukri, he dropped down on top of the warforged and held it by the head. He tried stabbing attacks and did more damage to the enemy as it struggled to fling him off.

The battle was running about even when Velana became aware of an ominous presence in the pond nearby. What few birds had remained in the trees took flight and her animal companions became noticeably unnerved. Bencolin and several of the warforged turned their attention to the pond, adopting defensive postures toward the party and not attacking.

Sensing a change in the fortunes of the battle, the party turned their attention to the pond as well. Velana and Cori spied a disturbance in the water that resembled a dire crocodile. The “crocodile” realized it had become the center of attention and rose from the water, revealing the head and neck of an adult green dragon. It opened its mouth and blew a cone of acidic gas at the warforged charger, its closest target. The charger sustained the full blast but remained standing.

Without pausing to discuss it, both parties acknowledged the dragon as a common enemy. Bencolin sank arrows into the protruding neck and Cori followed in kind, pausing long enough to cast *Protection from Energy (Acid)* on himself as protection

against the dragon's breath.

The warforged charged the dragon in the water, using their longspear to attack with reach. The dragon fought back with a bite and then took to the air, swooping over the main force low enough to strafe them with its caustic breath. Cori and Jonquil avoided damage but Dimdar suffered enough of the effect to make her glad she'd cast curing spells on herself just before.

Velana saw an opportunity and dismissed her *Call Lightning* spell in favor of summoning aide in the form of two juvenile arrowhawks, creatures she knew would be immune to the dragon's breath and almost impossible for it to harm through physical attack. The arrowhawks also had a breath weapon: a bolt of electricity that they could easily bring to bear on the huge, far less nimble dragon. The arrowhawks materialized and began attacking, strike the dragon repeatedly.

The dragon was already committed to another target, though. It swooped downward, staying on course, and grabbed up the ranger Bencolin in one of its powerful claws. The dragon ascended and curved around toward the pond with the elf in its grasp, unable to match the dragon's strength.

The missile and energy barrage continued, with the warforged scouts using their built-in wands round after round. The dragon focused its attention on them, flinging Bencolin furiously into the water and breathing again on the charger and warriors. Both warriors took heavy damage. One paused and touched a metal disc embedded in its chest plate; to the party's surprise, it seemed to magically recover damage instantly. The witnesses filed this observation to share with the party at large later.

Dimdar saw an opportunity and used one of the new capabilities she had learned from the aquatic elves. Calling upon the powers of primal music, she unleashed a cone of fire that burned the beast as it flew overhead.

Fortunately for Dimdar, the dragon's poor agility would not allow it to change course and retaliate. Instead it landed with a thundering crash, flattening a tree but clamping down one powerful claw on each of the warforged scouts, who had just hit it with yet another volley of *Magic Missiles*. One jerked and went still as the massive fingers crimped the scout's metal body. The gnome didn't escape all attention, though – a mighty slap of the dragon's tail bruised Dimdar.

As Bencolin's limp body floated down the river the rest of the party concentrated on the dragon. The arrowhawks kept up their attack, along with Cori and Dimdar. Velana cast another *Call Lightning* and struck the beast from above with what proved to be the fatal blow. The dragon howled and fell as the second warforged scout wiggled out of its failing grasp.

With the dragon beaten, both parties turned their attention to the still figure of Bencolin, which lay trapped against some rocks in the stream. The warforged charger reached him first and dragged the elf to dry land, alive but unconscious. Cori administered a *Cure Light Wounds*, watched carefully by the warforged, and brought the elf back to

consciousness.

A wary conversation took place between the two parties. Dimdar related what the heroes knew of the Dark One and his plans, including the making of an army of warforged. Bencolin declined to reveal the plans as he knew them but did indicate that the story he and the warforged had been told was quite different. "One of you is lying," he noted, "and my instincts tell me it isn't you."

In the end, an accord was reached. Bencolin told the party that his team had come to the forest to engage the dragon, which had been harassing the warforged in their encampment. He and his students (for Bencolin acknowledged being hired to train the warforged in combat) had tracked the beast to this clearing. He thanked the party for their part in the win and the warforged departed, taking their broken comrade and stating their intention to leave the wood. The party was left with a dragon carcass and undisputed access to the creature's lair, wherever that was.

They found the lair quickly enough thanks to a *Water Breathing* spell from Velana. An underwater tunnel below the waterfall led to a modest open cavity. There wasn't much treasure there by dragon standards, but the group did discover a decent cache of coin and gems and two special items, a headband and a staff.

Velana used magic to preserve the dragon corpse, more to protect the grove than out of concern for spoiled meat. She claimed responsibility for restoring the grove to its former condition and Cori volunteered to find a knacker in Crossroads that would dispose of the dragon carcass.

Back at Castle Gore, the party used the Rod of Insight to determine the nature of the headband and staff. The headband proved to be a *Headband of Wisdom +4* and the staff a *Staff of Size Adjustment*. Both are major magic items. Based on the value of these items and the relatively low amount of other valuables in the dragon's lair, the party came to a hypothesis: the dragon must have been chased from its lair, probably by the warforged, and was forced to grab only its most prized possessions and a minimal amount of treasure as it fled. Dimdar recalled that green dragons had been known to lair in the Valley of Mists; perhaps this one had taken offense at the arrival of the warforged only to be overpowered by their numbers or by Tavor's magic.

It was as good a clue as any.

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