
INTO THE DARK

Secondmonth Autumn was coming to a close when the Guardians of Gore received a message from their ally, Theophilus Gore, summoning them to Tiburon. The party gathered in the library of the Dwarven city on 2A27 to hear what the old wizard had to report.

His collaboration with the Elven sage Maritae had produced results, though not exactly in the way they had wished. Theo reported that the spell he and Maritae had been working on, Bainard's spell to recombine the split souls of the Five, was beyond human power and could not be made to work. However, Maritae entered communion with Corellon Larethian and made a bargain with the elf god: Corellon pledged to provide a magic item with the power to end the curse on the Five if the party would steal the Staff of the Spider Queen, a drow artifact, and destroy it on an altar of Corellon by daylight.

The party already knew that the Staff was housed in the Great Temple of Lolth in Sheoloth, a Drow city located deep in another material plane called the Underdark. Finding the city and the Staff, however, would require the assistance of someone well versed in the ways of that foreign realm. Theo, through his friends in Tiburon, put out word that there was an adventuring party seeking a guide that could take them to Sheoloth. Of those who responded Theo selected Nazir Behilan, a member of the Darkrunner Guild, and brought him before the party for their approval.

Nazir answered no questions about himself but many about the Underdark. The party learned about the structure of the plane, the political landscape, travel, and some basic information about Sheoloth and the dark elves. Nazir seemed extremely knowledgeable and carried the endorsement of his guild, a professional organization of explorers and guides. Though he declined to discuss himself it was clear from his appearance that Nazir was a native of the dark realm. The party agreed with Theo that Nazir would be their guide to Sheoloth.

Over a two-week period the Guardians made their preparations for what was likely to be a month-long journey. Pyroh completed research on a new spell and shared the spell with Gilead, who used the time to stock his spell books with new material suggested by Nazir's description of the Underdark. Elayna prepared a few minor magic items including a pair of daycrystals, items Nazir taught her to make that keep time based on the home world of the maker. Others used the time to train and lay in supplies.

The chill of autumn was growing deep when the group reconvened in Tiburon on 3A10 to begin their dark adventure. As an accommodation to Nazir they agreed to travel by night to the portal, which lay several days off in the northern mountains.

All went smoothly for the first two nights. After the party bedded down to rest after the third night, however, the silence was broken. Pyroh, taking his turn at watch duty, was

struck by sling bullets fired from cover in the trees around the party's campsite. He rushed to awaken the others as hail of additional sling bullets sailed at him from multiple directions.

The party sprang into action as they awoke. Elayna sent a *Sonic Burst* into the trees from which the initial attack had come. Renn spotted two of the enemy – wiry, halfling-sized creatures with a nasty look to them – and opened fire, wounding both. Nazir spied a leader of the enemy lurking in the trees to the left and hurled a curious-looking weapon, a metal ball with raised bumps dotting the surface. The sphere struck an enemy and knocked it from its perch. Cori took aim at another with his Merciful bow and hit squarely, rendering the creature unconscious.

When its comrade went down, one of the enemy made a foolhardy charge at Elayna and Pyroh in the open field. It was quickly brought down by Renn and Elayna. At the moment of death the creature seemed to dissolve, leaving only a tooth where it fell.

Purdue circled around to the party's right flank, where the initial attack had come from, and found three of the creatures hiding in the trees. Dodging sling bullets, he helped point out the enemy to the magic users and was ready when a hail of magic missiles sent one falling to the ground.

Nazir, meanwhile, closed on the left side enemy. He drew his blades and engaged the scythe-bearing creature. Nazir slashed and blocked in symmetrical patterns, attacking with both blades at once in a unique combat style that left his enemy confused and off balance.

As the party's physical attacks pierced their cover and their magical attacks wounded or entrapped them, the enemy began to flee with surprising speed for creatures so small. One more fell, disintegrating except for a single tooth, and one slipped free of Gilead's *Bands of Steel* spell before hobbling into the woods. The rest scattered as fast as they could.

By the enemies' over sized scythes and the single tooth left behind at death Dimdar recognized them as redcaps, evil fey that prey on mountain travelers and soak their caps in the blood of vanquished enemies to gain power. Polite but insistent questioning from the group led Nazir to explain that his unusual weapons and two-handed style were common among his own people. He declined to give any more specifics.

After resting for the day, the party broke camp and covered the final miles of the overland journey. Nazir led them to a cave opening in a small valley. Inside the cave a winding staircase descended slowly, its features lit by torches along the walls. An hour later the stairs ended in a massive chamber, an underground crossroads for the goblinoid tribes that lived in the dark places.

As the party approached the portal, Nazir stiffened. Instead of the svirfneblin toll-takers that normally worked the portal a pair of bugbears sat on rough stools, with a trio of bored-looking cave trolls nearby as backup. A new sign proclaimed the toll for passage

through the portal to be 25gp per person, a vicious leap from the 2gp charged by the builders of the portal.

The party consulted in haste. The bugbears bore the mark of Maglus Kurr, an orog whose criminal gang had been seizing more and more power from the established duergar and svirfneblin rivals. The party was more than capable of driving Kurr's gatekeepers off or killing them, but they had more pressing business than the machinations of Upperdark politics. They each took in hand the required payment, leaving their other gold out of sight in Purdue's and Elayna's haversacks, and passed through the portal peacefully.

On the other side the party found themselves in a massive marketplace. Wagons and tents clustered together to form improvised alleys as merchants and craftspeople of all descriptions and races offered their wares. Nazir announced his need to leave the party to retrieve some property from a trusted associate and suggested the party look around unobtrusively and meet at Githnar's pub, an open-air bar near the middle of the concourse.

The party split up to explore. Renn spied a pair of deep gnomes offering pack lizards, horse-sized reptiles with wide, flat backs. He purchased one to carry the smaller party members and some of their gear. Other team members checked out the offerings of Drokar, Master Weaponsmith; Clozien, a human alchemist; and Mordak's Mobile Magic Shoppe, where various magic items were for sale.

A short time later the party began to converge on Githnar's, a friendly-looking place with a bar, tables and a stage which, according to the signage, was shared by Githnar the Illusionist and The Lovely Felsythia, Exotic Dancer. Nazir appeared, now wearing exquisite-looking black chainmail beneath his grey cloak ("I got it from a drow who no longer needs it," he casually explained when Groop remarked on it).

Despite Felsythia's best efforts, the party found their attention drawn quickly to the bar. A group of bear-like humanoids stood at the bar arguing, it seemed, with two deep gnomes behind it. The larger creatures were quaggoths, Nazir explained – brutal, simple-minded thugs often used by Maglus Kurr as low-level enforcers. The quaggoths, like the bugbears at the portal, wore the Red Hand symbol of Maglus Kurr. As the party approached they saw one quaggoth draw a wicked serpentine dagger from his belt and drive it through the hand of one of the svirfneblin, pinning the smaller creature's hand to the bar. The svirf screamed in pain while his partner stepped back in horror and the quaggoths laughed at his misery.

Nazir was visibly steamed. The svirfneblin, he explained, were allies of his and the owners of the best intelligence network in the Underdark. Nothing more needed to be said; in moments Nazir stood face to face with the quaggoth bullies while the rest of the party backed him up. He exchanged a few sentences with the thugs in a language that was close enough to Common that the party could make out a phrase here and there. He told the quaggoths that they were picking on the wrong people and that they should leave. The quaggoths laughed and dared Nazir and his "outworld trash friends" to make them leave. Groop adopted his best intimidating stance, hand on axe, while others drew their weapons and took on similar postures.

The quaggoths showed their limited intelligence by initiating hostilities. One pushed back at Groop while another took a swing at Nazir but missed horribly. Purdue and Elayna walked around the fray to tend to the injured bartender while Renn, Cori and Nimbus joined Groop and Nazir on the attack. Bullseye tumbled through the slow-moving quaggoths' legs and positioned himself for sneak attacks.

The quaggoths were badly outmatched and fell in seconds as the crowd at the bar stared in amazement and thinly-veiled delight. The quaggoth leader, felled by Gilead's *Ray of Enfeeblement*, threatened vengeance on everyone.

In another quick consultation, the party determined that they had two options: sweat the location of Maglus Kurr's base from the captive and make a preemptive strike, or flee from Upperdark as quickly as possible and let the svirfs fend for themselves. It wasn't a difficult choice – the svirfneblin could be valuable allies and the party truly despised bullies.

In the face of Groop's menacing questioning, the lead quaggoth quickly gave up the location of Kurr's lair. They dragged the captive out of sight and left the svirfneblin bartender in charge of his fate.

Any hope of catching Kurr's thugs by surprise were dashed on the final approach to the lair when the party came upon two niches filled with shriekers. The creatures' wailing was as good as a hail of trumpets announcing the party's arrival.

The passage ended in an iron door with a peep hatch. The party banged on the door and a quaggoth face regarded them suspiciously from the hatch. Again Nazir spoke for the party, and again the natural belligerence of the quaggoth came forth. The floor beneath the party dropped away and most of the group fell 25 feet into a spiked pit, the rest left clinging to any available ledge. Another rude remark from the quaggoth prefaced a hail of heavy stones which fell from above onto the party, knocking the clinging members into the pit. The quaggoth laughed and slammed the door again before anyone could limb out.

Cori used his *Easy Climb* spell to get the party out of the pit and they began searching for other entrances. Pyroh spied a thin seam in the wall and called Bullseye over. The halfling's trained eye quickly found the secret door and the means to open it.

The party followed the secret corridor to another iron door. Dimdar used *Gaseous Form* to slip through the door and reconnoiter, then came back to report that there were eight quaggoths massed behind the door ready to fight and three bigger, stronger-looking fighter types with pole arms giving them orders. From Dimdar's description Nazir identified the larger types as orogs, an Underdark species descended from orcs.

Speed was a priority, so the magic users devised a quick plan. Elayna used *Stone Shape* to pull the passage wall away from the iron door. Nazir threw one of his metal spheres, nudging the door inward, just as Pyroh and Nimbus sent *Fireballs* through the opening. All eight quaggoths were caught in the overlapping blast zones and fried instantly.

The orogs fled down a hallway as the fighters burst through the opening and past the smoldering remains of the quaggoths. Cori and Purdue, being the fastest, pursued them. Cori reached the end of the corridor only to be stopped in his tracks by a pair of massive morningstar blows – two more orogs had been lying in wait on either side of the opening. With Cori in front of him and no space to move around, Purdue found himself standing by watching as Cori engaged four orogs, two with morningstars and two more reaching through with their pole arms. He made out another figure deeper into the room, an orog in fine plate armor bearing a masterwork warmace – Maglus Kurr himself, the ranger had no doubt.

The fight did not go well at first. Cori took serious damage from his four opponents, including a devastating blow that might have felled him if not for his Ring of Regeneration. He yielded his position temporarily to Groop, who forced his way through the front line leaving bodies in his wake. Pyroh and Nimbus provided artillery support with more *fireballs* before their teammate entered the space, weakening the enemy to the point where they were easily felled by the fighters.

Maglus Kurr recognized the hopelessness of his situation and fled the scene, dropping a pair of portcullises behind him as he ran to a room at the back of the complex. Pyroh used his new *Dimension Jump* spell to follow and saw the orog break a tile in his hand and begin flying, escaping through a round tunnel carved in the ceiling. Groop and Cori managed to lift the gates and jam them with the orogs' pole arms so that the party could pursue.

Pyroh cast *Fly* spells on Purdue and Cori to enable them to follow Kurr. Bullseye used his Spider Climb gloves to accompany them. They were all struck by the shape of the tunnel – a perfect 10-foot circle in section, with walls as smooth as glass. The upward tunnel met with a horizontal one, which the flying heroes followed to another vertical tunnel. Purdue and Cori split up. Cori went down 10 feet and his *Fly* spell suddenly failed, sending him falling 90 feet to a stone floor. Purdue floated upward more cautiously and spied a rune and circle scribed in the tunnel. As he examined the rune he felt his own *Fly* spell fail; Purdue fell 110 feet to join Cori in the lower passage. Bullseye tried to climb down to help them and his gloves failed, causing the halfling to plunge down with his friends.

The lower tunnel ended in a hole that opened onto an open thoroughfare with no sign of which way Kurr may have gone. The party used ropes and climbing gear to get back through the tunnels and had to settle for ransacking Kurr's quarters for his valuables.

They found a considerable bit. Groop helped himself to a masterwork warmace. In a hidden strongbox they found a good amount of gems and gold, along with a potentially valuable item: a drow house medallion bearing the crest of House Clynestra, the noble house of the late priestess Eclavdra. The presence of the medallion suggested a connection between Kurr and Clynestra, who had connections with the black market as well as the slave trade. More disturbing was the escape tunnel network, with such perfect geometry and smooth walls. Elayna used the Rod of Insight and learned that the passages had been created by a beholder using its Disintegrate eye ray. Whether the beholder was

in league with Kurr or not they couldn't tell, but either way it was a bad sign because beholders, according to Nazir, are not normally found that far from Lowerdark.

They paused only long enough to let Githnar know that Maglus Kurr was on the run, probably hiding out among his own kind. Githnar thanked the party for their help and assured them that the svirfneblin would be happy to help them in their mission, whatever that might be. The party then headed out on the path for Middledark, where Sheoloth lay several days away.

They camped for a rest break in a large common cavern with many caves lining the walls at several levels. It was a well known campsite, Nazir explained, used by travelers in the upper reaches. They found themselves a suitable cave and settled down to rest.

A short time into their rest time, the magic users felt a creeping chill assault their senses. A few of them felt a pulling sensation as magical energy was absorbed from their brains. They woke to find a massive green ooze crawling along the ceiling of their cavern. The arcanists recognized the creature as an arcane ooze, a rare slime creature with the power to absorb magical energy from spellcasters and convert it to life energy for itself.

It was a difficult fight. The ooze proved immune to almost all spells and had incredible toughness. A steady barrage of arrows and sonic energy spells (some of the few that worked) took its toll, though, and the creature eventually succumbed and dissolved into a puddle of mildly acidic slime. The only mishap was an errant arrow shot from Groop, who accidentally sent one sailing into an occupied cavern beyond, injuring a duergar traveler. Nazir and Elayna smoothed that out while the others collected up a good quantity of the goo, which Nazir told them could be cooked down to create a very useful acid paste. Not a great reward for the large expenditure of precious arrows, but it was something.

The party bedded down again to rest and prepare for the next stage of their dark journey.

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