
Desperate Times

Dark days had come for the new heroes of the Flats. While the party was in the Underdark seeking the means to end the curse that had turned Artemis Tavor to evil, the wizard himself had taken control of the city of Tavor and become Magister. The party's ally and sponsor Theo Gore stood accused of treason, and the party itself was barred from the Wizard's Tower and the vital resources of the Library of Tavor. And in addition to their external enemies the party had amongst them the Staff of the Spider Queen, an intelligent item crafted by the goddess Lolth and possessed of extreme power, which would surely oppose the group's plan to destroy it.

The party took refuge in the dungeon below Castle Gore, where Baylor the Bloody had made his home months before and where Groop had made his temporary home. They were joined by Theo Gore, the Darkrunner Nazir Behilan, and Romney, the deposed Magister of Tavor. The older wizards opened their spell books to Gilead and Pyroh, who needed to learn some new spells.

Over the next few days a plan took shape. Theo announced his intention to challenge Tavor for the Magistracy, citing Tavor's duplicity and illegal resurrection of Montagne, Bainard, and Marcellus Gore among other provable allegations. By engaging Tavor in a mageduel, Theo hoped to drain the wizard's spell resources and leave him vulnerable to attack by the party regardless of who actually won the duel. The party made plans to witness the duel and act immediately afterward.

After Theo's challenge was ratified by the Council, a message arrived at Castle Gore addressed to Cori. The mercenary ranger Bencolin, whom Cori had encountered in the forest when they fought a green dragon together, had been persuaded by Velana to reveal the location of Tavor's sanctuary in the mountains near the Valley of Mists. Bencolin's message included welcome news that the warforged were beginning to question Tavor's motives and ethics, and that many were breaking camp and abandoning the wizard's cause. He pledged to do his best to draw off remaining loyal warforged so that if the wizard retreated to his stronghold it would be less defended than normal.

On the morning of the mageduel, Theo and the party teleported to the Wizard's Tower and used Theo's key to go directly to the roof of the tower. Delthanus, Chairman of the Council Arcane, took on the role of judge per agreement. Tavor arrived promptly with his second, whom the party recognized as the resurrected Bainard. The rogue Montagne was nowhere in sight.

Theo won the coin toss for initiative and started by casting *globe of invulnerability* on himself. He'd announced this move to the party in advance, intending it to force Tavor to use only his highest-level spells. Tavor responded with an *incendiary cloud* that surrounded Theo and dealt damage.

Gilead immediately protested to the judge that Tavor was using lethal force, a practice frowned upon in mageduels. Tavor explained that he did not possess the Nonlethal Substitution feat, so he would be unable to avoid doing some damage but had no intention of harming his opponent beyond the needs of the duel. The judge declined to censure Tavor under the rules, which do not outright bar lethal force.

Theo dispelled the cloud before it could do more damage, then found himself surrounded by three bone devils summoned by Tavor. He used *dismissal* to banish the devils back to Hell but was unable to avoid Tavor's *power word stun*, a spell with no saving throw.

While Theo Gore stood stunned, Tavor conjured two *delayed blast fireballs* and lobbed them in Theo's direction while Gilead objected again to the use of lethal force. Theo recovered his wits just in time to cast *dimension jump*, a spell he'd received from Gilead before the duel, and teleport himself clear of the blast area. The fireballs exploded in an empty space, damaging nobody.

After Tavor counterspelled an *orb of force* attempt, Theo cast *sticks and stones* to catch the young wizard in falling debris. Tavor leapt clear and responded with a devastating spell, *crushing fist of spite*. A gargantuan, bloody fist appeared in the air and crashed down onto Theo, who ducked but still took serious damage. Slightly shaken and aware that the fist remained overhead and would continue attacking in future rounds, Theo called up a *Bigby's grasping hand* and succeeded in grappling Tavor with it.

The disembodied fist of spite came crashing down again, but this time Theo used his *dimension jump* to get clear before it landed the blow. He then turned a *greater dispel magic* on the fist and succeeded in dispelling it. While Tavor was still held by the *grasping hand*, Theo used the situation to advantage by lobbing a nonlethal *fireball* at his opponent. Tavor was unable to avoid the blast and took full albeit nonlethal, damage. He then used Sudden Still to cast *greater dispel magic* and destroy the *hand*.

After Tavor counterspelled a nonlethal *cone of cold*, Theo changed tactics and cast *telekinesis* on himself. Tavor also cast a spell on himself, *absorbition*. Gilead recognized the spell and called out a warning to Theo, but Theo also knew what his opponent was doing. Instead of casting a spell at Tavor he used his *telekinesis* effect to pelt the Magister with leftover debris from the *sticks and stones* pile. An angry Tavor dropped all pretense and cast *disintegrate* at Theo. The older man avoided the full effect of the ray but still took damage and staggered for a moment. Breathing heavily and clearly near collapse, Theo mustered his remaining energy and cast a nonlethal *meteor swarm*, an area of effect spell that Tavor would not be able to absorb.

Four orbs surrounded Tavor and exploded with nonlethal force. Tavor was caught in the middle and unable to avoid the damage. He fell to the floor unconscious. The judge announced that Tavor was incapacitated and declared Theo the winner.

As the onlookers cheered for their new Magister, Theo fell to his knees and nearly collapsed. Gilead and Elayna came quickly to his aid with the Shroud of Healing. Meanwhile Bainard ran to his fallen leader and cast *word of recall*. He and Tavor vanished.

The party was prepared for this possibility. They lingered only long enough to see Theo healed, then returned to the teleport room and jumped to Tiburon. Using Theo's *phantom steed* totem they produced enough magical steeds to carry their number and set off for the Valley of Mists at full speed.

The magic steeds carried them through the mountains at furious speed. They covered two days' worth of travel distance in two hours and reached the valley ready to fight. The warforged were nowhere in sight, though the evidence of their camps was everywhere. The party surmised that Bencolin had drawn them off as promised.

Finding the entrance proved more difficult than expected. Cori sought to follow tracks to the right spot but was unable to find a good lead. Elayna surprised everyone by spotting the faintest trace of a path that seemed to run straight into the mountain side. This had to be it.

As the party examined the area, trying to figure out how to open what they reasoned must be a secret door, a volley of *magic missiles* rained down on their backs. The fighters scanned the tree line in search of their enemies, but only Renn was able to spot one: a warforged scout hiding in the trees. He fired an arrow and struck the creature. Purdue ran toward the site and was also attacked from cover.

Knowing that the warforged were not necessarily blind in their loyalty, the party tried to negotiate rather than fight. Elayna and Dimdar led the effort and had some success. The scouts stopped attacking and ordered the party away from the area. Then Pyroh tried to assist in the diplomatic effort only to stumble on his words and offend the warforged, who responded with a concentrated attack on the young sorcerer. A company of warforged chargers appeared and positioned themselves for charging attacks.

Dimdar did her best to smooth over Pyroh's gaffe and her words did seem to sway the warforged to a degree. Renn continued firing on his target, though, and this earned him a concentrated *magic missile* attack in response.

The situation looked bad. The party was pinned down and the actions of the fighters were undermining the diplomatic efforts of Dimdar. Cori urged those at the doorway to get it open so the party could retreat inside the mountain and regroup. Bullseye examined the area and determined that there was definitely a door, but no mechanical opening mechanism. Gilead applied the Rod of Insight and received a vision of someone opening the door with a specific gesture. He duplicated that gesture and the doors slid aside, revealing a wide and tall passage into the mountain.

At the opening of the door the chargers went on the offensive. One charged the doorway to block it while others attacked those nearby. The fighters took heavy damage from the hulking adamantine creatures but stayed in place to cover the rest of the group's exit. Dimdar used her Song of Unmaking to harm the constructs and back up the fighters as they ran one by one into the tunnel. Gilead found the closing mechanism and shut the door behind them.

Fortunately for the heroes, the passage was empty except for themselves. They took a break to heal and then moved forward. Nothing followed from outside, but they quickly discovered that the warforged were aware of the group's entry and had a trap prepared. As the group advanced, a series of iron girders came free of the ceiling and swung down on chains, knocking the party off their feet and doing bludgeoning damage to several.

Beyond the trapped hallway was only one place to go: a squared room lined with archer slits and leading to a huge iron and steel double door. Bullseye's sharp eyes noted movement and he identified warforged fighters lurking behind the slits just before they fired on the group. Pyroh cast *wall of ice* spells to block the archer slits and focused their attention on the door. It was massive and heavy and barred on the other side.

As the first of the group closed on the door a billowy mass of green vapors descended on them. Groop became sick but stayed in the area to examine the door. Bullseye tried to use Pyroh's *dispel magic* wand on the cloud but failed to work the device. Dimdar took a turn and cast the spell, but instead of disappearing the cloud reared up as if it had been struck. Gilead recalled hearing tales of living spells,

semi-sentient anomalies created by excessive magical energies concentrated in one place, and reasoned that this may be one. Purdue tested the idea by grabbing a wand and brandishing it at the cloud, which responded by lifting and pulling away from him. More of the party followed suit and the cloud lifted up and vanished by seeping through an unseen grate in the ceiling.

Groop and Cori led the fighting crew in assaulting the door. They used the iron girders from the hallway trap and some acid to attack the hinges and break them off. Just as the doors began to come free, the sound of a huge impact rang through the chamber and the doors came crashing down on top of Groop, Cori, Purdue and Renn. Two warforged chargers landed on top of the doors, having clearly assisted in their fall. Groop, Cori and Purdue were trapped under the heavy slabs of metal.

Pyroh moved quickly to cast an *arc of lightning* between the chargers, who had shown some vulnerability to electrical energy. One charger roared and slammed its body into the young sorcerer, delivering a mortal blow that left Pyroh bleeding and helpless on the floor.

While the party reacted to the attack more enemies appeared in the doorway: warforged soldiers, the archers from the slits, came forward and fired on the group. Groop and Cori shoved the door aside and led the attack, while Nimbus used his energy spells and Elayna cast *flame strikes* on the enemy forces. Once the first charger fell Gilead took the Shroud of Healing and used it to revive Pyroh. Renn helped Purdue to escape from under the other door and they joined the fight.

The last warforged to be destroyed used his final act to pound on the next massive double door and call for help. No help came, and Gilead ensured a few minutes of safety by casting his own *wall of ice* across the doorway.

The party was now in control of what appeared to be an armory. Racks of weapons lined the walls. The only other exit was another set of steel and iron doors – the ones the warforged had run to and called for help. Healed and ready, the party set to breaking down the next set of doors.

This time nothing attacked them as the doors came free. Beyond the party found another wide, straight, tall passage. This one opened out into a 100-foot circular chamber with arcane symbols scribed on the floor and a balcony overlooking the area opposite the door. Spaced throughout the lower chamber, six huge metallic creatures stood in perfect stillness and silence. The green glow in their eyes reminded the party of the warforged, and the giant-sized greataxe and maul built into the figures' arms suggested a cautious approach.

As the party stood in the doorway debating their next move, a pair of human-like figures appeared on the balcony: Tavor and Bainard. The wizard mocked the party from his perch. “You went to a lot of trouble to get this far, just to end up cowering in the doorway,” he challenged.

Elayna tried to reason with the wizard but he rebuffed her. He either didn't believe or didn't care that a demonic curse had altered his mind. With Cori and Renn showing their longbows, Tavor and Bainard backed out of firing range and waited for the party to approach.

As soon as the party entered the lower chamber, the guardian creatures sprang into action. They moved with an astonishing speed for such large things and the blows from their weapons were devastating. Even Groop dared not stand toe to toe with these warforged titans. Not that he felt the need to – the entire party knew who their real enemies were and focused their efforts on finding a way onto the balcony.

Both Nimbus and Pyroh tried *arc of lightning* spells on the two nearest titans, but did alarmingly little damage. When Nimbus' *orb of force* proved only slightly more effective Pyroh went on the defensive instead. He spent several rounds casting *dimension jump* on Bullseye, then Elayna, then himself to provide some mobility. Gilead used *haste* on everyone still in range, which was all but Groop and Cori.

The party quickly discovered that the main chamber was surrounded by a perimeter corridor with multiple openings in the walls between. This perimeter hall was too narrow for the titans to move in freely, though they could reach well in through the openings to attack those who passed. For a short time it seemed safer than the room where the titans lurked.

That illusion was dispelled quickly when first Cori, then Renn, then Dimdar found themselves subjected to vicious arrow attacks from a concealed source. The deadly accuracy of the missiles made it clear that the rogue Montagne was present, invisible, and roaming the perimeter hallway. Even a *see invisibility* spell did not help Dimdar to locate the rogue, so she focused on staying out of reach of the titans while using her Song of Unmaking to try and bring them down.

As the party searched for a means to reach the balcony Tavor reappeared and cast a spell. A 5-foot circular column of magnetic iron appeared in the corridor where the largest concentration of the party still lurked, anchored floor and ceiling. The force of the column pulled on the metal armor worn by Elayna and Nimbus and held them fast. Elayna was able to *dimension jump* away but Nimbus was effectively grappled by the column and helpless to escape its magnetic pull.

Cori tried climbing a titan to reach the balcony but failed and was attacked by the hulking construct. Renn. Elayna briefly tried to fight with another titan but lost her weapon and wisely *dimension jumped* away after retrieving it. In the perimeter corridor, a wounded Renn located a clue to the balcony access: a handprint carved into the stone outer wall. Purdue, Gilead, Cori and Groop gathered around to pool their thoughts and resources. Gilead used the Rod of Insight to solve the riddle: by placing a hand in the carved print and speaking the word "ascend," one person could be teleported to the balcony.

Gilead ascended first, followed quickly by Groop and Cori. They were greeted by Tavor with another unfamiliar spell that showered them with *magic missiles* that burst from a central point. Bainard engaged Groop in melee, but found himself repeatedly sneak attacked by Bullseye, who used the *dimension jump* spell from Pyroh to full effect.

Elayna reached the balcony by *dimension jump* and rushed to engage the wizard. She swung her holy gutentang only to see it swish through the wizard's body with absolutely no effect. She called out to her friends that Tavor was an illusion only to have her conclusion disproven by the wizard himself when he harmed her with a *vampiric touch*. Gilead realized that Tavor had made himself incorporeal and had an effective counter ready in the form of *Mordenkainen's Sword*. He cast the spell and directed the sword to attack Tavor.

The fight had just about fully moved to the balcony. Bainard found himself dogged by Bullseye even as he sought to evade the halfling's attacks. The party noticed that Bainard and Tavor also seemed to be under a form of *haste* spell that allowed them to move and act more swiftly than even the hastened party members, an advantage that seemed to negate the party's superior numbers.

All during the day, even in the earlier combats, Elayna had felt the Staff of the Spider Queen urging her to take it and use its power. The urging continued as she faced Tavor and Bainard, yet still Elayna refused to give in to temptation. Then, with Bainard a mere few yards away, she felt the Staff grab at her mind and struggled with it for dominance. The Staff won – Elayna stopped fighting, drew the Staff from its sheath on her back, and knew she had to give it to Bainard.

Pyroh saw Elayna and realized what was happening. He cast *telekinesis* and immediately focused his mind on the Staff and wrested it from Elayna's hands. He held it aloft with his mind over the center of the main chamber high above the floor where none could reach it.

Freed of the Staff's influence, Elayna focused on the problem of the incorporeal enemy. She cast *ghost touch weapon* on Cori's falcata to allow him to hit the wizard effectively, then did the same on her gutentang.

Purdue and Renn found the teleporter and ascended to the balcony with their friends in time to see Tavor, under attack from *Mordenkainen's sword*, use *power word stun* on Gilead. That caused the *sword* to return to Gilead and hover aimlessly. Bainard tried putting a *blade barrier* between himself and Groop but the warrior sidestepped the whirling blades and closed again to strike. Renn aimed an arrow at Tavor but his accuracy failed him.

Moments later a trio of arrows in Renn's back heralded the arrival of Montagne on the balcony. The archer staggered and nearly fell but Pyroh *jumped* to his aide with the Staff of Life and healed him. This proved to be a mistake. With Pyroh, Renn, Cori and Elayna clustered together Tavor saw an opportunity and took it. He floated away from the balcony and cast another unknown spell that blasted the group with radiant light energy. The four were stunned and helpless.

With four of their number helpless, the situation was more grim than any the party had faced before. Bullseye quickly joined the gravely wounded when Bainard retaliated for the repeated sneak attacks with a *harm* spell that brought the halfling to near death. Things reached a new low when an invisible knife traced the line of Renn's motionless throat and sliced it open. Marucian Renascor was slain.

The able party members sprang into action. First Groop, then Dimdar, then a recovered Elayna attacked the spot where they knew the rogue had to be and drew blood. Purdue focused on Bainard and felled the cleric with a furious series of blows.

Pyroh saw Tavor hovering in the air and targeted him with an *orb of force*. In his haste he forgot to consider the wizard's counterspelling ability. Tavor reflected the orb back and Pyroh was slain by his own spell. Cori recovered from his daze and aimed a lethal shot from his magic bow at the hovering wizard. The blow hit home and the wizard fell, dead before his body struck the ground.

Alone, wounded, and facing an unlikely chance of escape, the rogue Montagne chose to inflict one last injury on the party. He drew a dagger and dealt a fatal unseen blow to Elayna. As the cleric's body fell to the floor Groop rushed forward and took a swipe at the space where he knew the man had to be. He felt the rogue buckle and fall. Knowing his enemy to be unconscious, Groop found the rogue's neck and cleaved it in two. The *superior invisibility* spell lapsed as Montagne died, revealing a head and body with Groop's axe between them.

The Five Heroes were once again all dead.

In the aftermath of the battle the party collected themselves. Gilead used the Staff of Life to resurrect Elayna, who then brought Pyroh back to life. She approached Renn's body to perform the same service, but Groop stood between them and stopped her. Renn was not to be raised from the dead, he announced; his friend did not wish it so.

As the party listened in stunned silence, Groop explained. Renn, he told them, had not been entirely honest about his past. The story that Renn had been a friend of Marius Gore and had deserted the army after Gore's death was only partly true. In reality, Renn had been Marius Gore. When Marius fell under the Curse and was executed, a circle of friends led by Radagast the druid had taken matters into their own hands. They reincarnated Marius, and in so doing inadvertently drew both the good and the evil parts of his soul into one body. Years of mental training, and dozens of secret rituals by the druids, helped the reborn Marius to find a delicate balance between the warring sides of his nature. But Renn, as he came to be called (as the name 'Marucian Renascor' was actually a loose Elvish translation of 'Marius Reborn'), was never truly at peace.

Renn was also, in multiple ways, a wanted criminal. As Marius Gore he was still under the death penalty, and anyone who brought him back would himself become a capital criminal. And, in another announcement that shocked the party, Groop related that while Renn was not wanted as a military deserter, he had become a murderer again – the day before the mageduel, Renn had quietly assassinated his brother Simon. Renn's motive, of course, was to allow Simon's soul to be repaired by the magic that would end the Curse, but in his and Groop's eyes that did not justify the crime. So Renn's final request, left in a note that Groop read to the party, was to be allowed to rest in peace.

With heavy hearts the party explored the remaining areas of Tavor's stronghold. They found the artifacts stolen from the cities. They found volumes of fresh notes from the wizard on his experiments with the warforged, including improved weapons he was designing and his attempts to create a less free-thinking intellect in future models. They found the magical chests that received teleported goods from his old henchmen Rook and the hag at the Pearl Tower, along with the wizard's remaining funds. And on the wizard's dresser in his private chamber, they were surprised to hear a tiny voice hail them. “Hey, fellas! Over here!”

The voice came from a tobacco pouch – a tobacco pouch with a familiar, animated face on the bottom.

Fred.

With the Five gone, the party hastened to Sylvangard. There they used Pyroh's *telekinesis* spell to place the Staff of the Spider Queen on the altar, where Groop destroyed it with a few well-placed blows from his axe. The shards of the staff burned in the sunlight, and in a flash of intense light a holy scroll appeared in their place. Elayne unfurled the scroll, read the sacred words aloud, and knew in her heart that the Curse had been lifted.

They returned to Gore's Cliff and quietly revived Simon. He remembered enough of his death to know who had killed him, but Simon immediately expressed his understanding and forgiveness. Simon was definitely restored to his old self.

In the days that followed, the new Heroes of the Flats were hailed and praised by the leaders and the people of the Flats. They were seated at the main table for Theo's ascension feast, and an emissary of His Highness Gul-Diran, King of the Northern Alliance, came to Tavor to convey the gratitude of the Highland Throne for the party's actions in protecting the Alliance.

Between the gratitude of the King and of the people in the Flats, the heroes found themselves with no lack of friends or offers for the future.

- Bullseye accepted an offer from Guildmaster Foulon to become a high-ranking captain in his organization, training young rogues and taking a percentage of their earnings for himself.
- Cori learned that Velana and Bencolin had identified and begun preparing a place in the Tanglewood where the ranger might, if he so desired, establish a training camp to pass on his knowledge and skills to a new generation.
- Dimdar found herself courted by the Maverique Bardic College of the Brightwood. The regents were interested in hearing more about Dimdar's experiences with primal music.
- Elayna was offered her choice of stations in the Church of Corellon Larethian, including the building of her own church if she wished it.
- Gilead was appointed by Theo to the office of Chief Librarian of Tavor, a position which includes a standing position with the University as a guest lecturer. Gilead welcomed the opportunity and expressed a desire to launch new, extensive research into the processes that created the minds of the warforged.
- Groop was declared the King's Champion Emeritus, a title that would guarantee him a warm welcome anywhere friendly to the Alliance. Groop declared his intention of accompanying his friend Targo back to Gru-Darrakh, at least for a while.
- Nimbus received a direct invitation from the King to found a war college near the Alliance capital of Odinal. The King had long been intrigued by stories of the warmages of the Eastern Realm and saw in Nimbus an opportunity to learn those ways.
- Purdue received offers from both the Lotus Petal monastery in Crossroads and his home San Hai monastery outside Sogenhal, both to become Grand Master. He is still contemplating his choices.
- Pyroh declined an offer from the University of Tavor to be a professor of sorcery. He wants to continue adventuring for a few more centuries before settling down.
- Renn was quietly buried in the grave he'd dug for Simon, in the woods behind Castle Gore.

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