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## Eye for an Eye

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Fresh from their victory over the crime lord Maglus Kurr, the Guardians of Gore debated whether they should return to the Trade Zone to replenish the supplies they had used in battling the arcane ooze. Upon realizing that this would mean a full day lost in the journey to Sheoloth, the party opted to keep going and seek opportunities to resupply on the road.

They moved steadily toward the borders of Middledark along a broad, featureless path. Near the end of the travel day they encountered an apparent strong-arm robbery in progress: a svirfneblin that the party recognized as Mordak (of Mordak's Mobile Magic Shoppe in the Trade Zone) was surrounded by dwarf-sized, blue-skinned creatures that Nazir identified as derro. The derro were agitated and shrieking at Mordak, who held out a silver rod menacingly but was unable to keep the hint of fear out of his voice. One of the derro was actually a stone statue, presumably a magical transformation by Mordak.

The party moved in with authority, intending to scare the aggressors away with a show of strength. It might have worked on most any other group, but derro are congenitally insane. Rather than back away, the derro pulled repeating crossbows and attacked both the party and Mordak. Renn received a minor nick from a crossbow bolt and returned fire. Mordak was hit twice, seemed to sicken, and then dropped to the ground and rolled under his wagon, where he drank from a potion bottle. He was recovering when Renn checked on him.

Recognizing that the derro were using poisoned crossbow bolts, the party focused on ending the encounter quickly. Gilead used *Evard's Black Tentacles* to grapple the derro and prevent them from going after Mordak. Pyroh used his new *Arc of Lightning* spell to set up a current between two derro that proved fatal to both. Groop demonstrated effective use of the greataxe on one, only to have Elayna step in for the kill. Nimbus and Gilead dispatched the last trapped derro with *magic missile* spells.

Mordak showed his gratitude for the rescue by giving the party his Rod of the Medusa, a magic rod with the ability to invoke either *Flesh to Stone* or *Stone to Flesh*. The rod had only eight charges left, enough for four uses, but it represented the best item Mordak had to offer. Mordak also invited the party to his village to spend their rest period.

The elders of the svirfneblin village expressed delight to meet the party that had chased Maglus Kurr from the Trade Zone. A feast was quickly begun in the party's honor, and Dimdar was able to spend an exciting evening swapping stories with the elders. She got to hear the story of the Five Heroes' years in the Underdark from the svirf perspective, and was able to fill in some gaps at the end of the story (the Underdark residents did not know that the Five reached their home world alive, for instance). The elders also knew a little more of the Obsidian Dragon: it serves out of magical bondage rather than choice

and it is summoned from its lair by magical command using an item held by the high priestess of the Church of Lolth. The dragon's breath weapon is a cone-shaped mist that disables those in the area of effect, but it does not appear to be one of the standard energy types (fire, cold, electricity, acid, sonic).

The party left the village after a restful night with full bellies and a few more precious arrows. They spent an uneventful day on the road and camped within a half hour's march of the Sunless Wood, the next landmark on the journey. They camped inside a ring of natural columns with a fire pit.

Cori was the first to sense a problem when he overslept for his watch – Nazir had failed to wake him. Cori looked found signs of a struggle and of a body being dragged away from the campsite. He woke the rest of the party and then, with Purdue, Dimdar and Bullseye, followed the trail.

It led them to a wide cavern overlooking a sheer cliff. Dimdar surveyed the area in gaseous form and noted the presence of three drow assassins and a robed person, a magic user from his garb. She also saw a stone statue that looked exactly like Nazir.

The party regrouped and prepared to attack. As soon as they entered the room, however, a malevolent presence revealed itself: a beholder. The eye tyrant used its telekinesis eye to lift up the stone figure of Nazir and hold it over the open chasm, 300 feet above a rushing river.

The aberration, whose name proved to be Vendelorbris, had a proposition for the party. In another cave about five miles away, it said, another beholder named Eldrethmaloren kept a lair. If the party agreed to slay Eldrethmaloren and bring the dead carcass to Vendelorbris, then Vendelorbris would return Nazir to the group unharmed. Otherwise, he would keep the statue or drop it off the cliff to its destruction.

Having no particular aversion to slaying an evil aberration, the party quickly agreed. They received directions to the other beholder's lair and some tips on what they might expect to find there, then returned to their campsite for rest and to retrieve belongings.

In order to reach the lair of Eldrethmaloren, the party had to cross through a fringe area of the Sunless Wood. As they entered the wood they noted the twisted, malevolent look of the trees and bushes around them. Some had bits of armor and weapons embedded into them, and Dimdar imagined seeing a tortured face in the bark pattern of one tree. She mentioned being warned by one of the svirfneblin that everything in this forest was poisonous, from the water to the trees to the fruit they bear.

Partway through the forest they came to a fork in the path. Two trees in the middle of the fork were playing host to a pair of large, elaborate creeper vines with orchid-like flowers. The flowers exuded a strong but pleasant aroma. Elayna and Nimbus found themselves captivated by the aroma and sought to get closer to its source. Cori and Groop sensed danger and tried to stop them.

The plants quickly justified the fighters' misgivings. Vines reached out and grabbed Groop as he grappled Nimbus to keep the young warmage from entering the plant's folds. The grapple loosened his grip on Nimbus and allows Nimbus to embrace the plant. Both Nimbus and Elayna seemed undisturbed by the small vines that attached to their heads and seemed to take root there.

Pyroh reacted in his usual manner, with a fire spell. His *lesser orb of fire* set one creeper aflame, doing damage to it and to Elayna who stood inside it. She endured the burning without complaint, seemingly in rapture. Dimdar tried to attack a creeper with her longbow but found that it was exceedingly difficult to hit a moving mass of thin vines and leaves with a missile weapon. The creepers were easily damaged by Groop's greataxe and Cori's falcata, though the comrades inside also took some damage from those blows.

As Groop and Cori hacked at the vines, four more figures came to the plants' aide. They appeared to be humanoid of varying sizes, but they moved more like zombies. The ranged weapon specialists focused on those solid targets while Gilead and Pyroh used *magic missile* spells to help kill off the creepers.

When the second vine withered and became inert the humanoids fell spontaneously. A quick search of the bodies and area turned up basic adventuring equipment including a scroll with three instances of the spell *Antimagic Field*, one of which had been used. Gilead took possession of that with the aim of adding the spell to his spellbooks and the party continued on.

They reached the edge of the wood and spied the cave opening that Vendelorbris had described as the entrance to Eldrethmaloren's lair. Three giant-sized creatures spotted them on the approach. Before the athachs could act, Pyroh lobbed a *fireball* at two of them. This enraged the three-armed giants and prompted them to launch a volley of rocks at the party, hitting three of them.

The party spread out to present a less concentrated target as the lead athach charged toward the magic users. Groop, Cori and Purdue met its charge and began to melee the creature, which fought viciously with three stone clubs. Pyroh sent another *fireball* into the cave and suffered for it as the athach he targeted pummeled the sorcerer with well-thrown boulders. Pyroh hid himself inside an *obscuring mist*, hoping to avoid further attack, but was pursued by the lead athach and hit one more time.

Meanwhile, Purdue and Dimdar charged to engage the third monster. Dimdar used her size and hiding ability to provide cover. Purdue streaked forward to strike with his fists but tripped and landed on the ground in front of the creature, which pounded him with clubs. His was not the only mishap, as Renn had an uncharacteristically bad time with his own accuracy and hit first Groop and then Elayna.

Coordinated tactics went out the window quickly in the party's zeal to end the encounter. Dimdar used her *flaming melody* to damage one foe while Gilead used his new wand of *lesser sonic orb* to good effect on the same target, but then Nimbus used a full-powered *magic missile* spell to fell the creature when it was clearly a dagger-thrust from death.

Purdue smacked at the third creature in between arrows from Renn and Cori until it fell to end the battle.

Inside the entrance of the lair the party found the shiny trinkets of which athachs are fond and freed the humanoid slaves they found in a sunken cage waiting to be sold. The slaves were grateful but had nothing to offer the party by way of information or help. They made for the svirf village and safety.

The party focused their attention on the perfectly round vertical passage they found in the ceiling. Attempts to fire a grappling hook into the tunnel failed for lack of anything for the hook to grab, so Cori borrowed Bullseye's Spider Climb gloves and acted as the party's advance scout. He climbed up and through the maze of horizontal, vertical, and U-bending tunnels, securing climbing ropes with pitons as he went so that the party could follow. He found a refuse cave populated by gas spores and carrion crawlers and another chamber filled with swarms of rats. The rat room, he discovered, led to the rest of the lair.

The party used Elayna and her *repel vermin* spell to get through the rat room unscathed and climbed up into another chamber, apparently the home of Eldrethmaloren's warrior vassal. The vassal was nowhere to be found.

At the end of the maze the party came upon Eldrethmaloren itself, apparently sleeping after a sloppy meal. As soon as they moved to enter its chamber, however, the beholder fixed its antimagic eye on them and expressed no surprise at their arrival.

A brief parley ensued. Eldrethmaloren expressed disgust at the machinations of Veldelorbris and revealed that Eldrethmaloren had actually spawned Vendelorbris. It warned the party that Vendelorbris did not necessarily have the means to restore Nazir from his petrified state.

Cori had a flash of devious brilliance and suggested that the Eldrethmaloren return to the site of the deal with them, feigning death, and face the younger beholder himself. The creature liked the idea and quickly agreed, then revealed to the group his vassal who had been waiting invisibly in case of an attack: an ogre mage named Pragar.

The party returned along the same route they used to reach the lair. Along the way they noticed that the zombie-like creatures that had come to defend the creepers had begun to sprout small vines of their own from their heads. The party wisely paused long enough to burn the bodies and destroy whatever was growing from them.

During a rest period, Dimdar took the opportunity to speak with Eldrethmaloren and learn about beholders. She learned that although Vendelorbris was Eldrethmaloren's child there was no affection or even tolerance between them because beholders do not raise their young. Blood notwithstanding, they were rivals. The beholder also made an offhand remark about Vendelorbris' mage vassal, referring to him as a "pet Immaskan." This brought up thoughts of another campfire story Dimdar had heard about a legendary lost city called Immaskar.

The party returned to the site of their bargain exactly 24 hours after leaving it to find the drow assassins and the immaskan mage in position and waiting for them. Eldrethmaloren lay on a *Tenser's floating disc* pretending to be dead and Pragar used his invisibility ability to remain hidden.

Vendelorbris appeared from below the chasm lip with the petrified Nazir at his side on a similar *Tenser's floating disc*. At the party's urging it lowered Nazir to safety and then used its telekinesis eye ray to lift the body of Eldrethmaloren and draw it forward. The senior beholder lashed out with an eye ray in a surprise attack and missed.

Full combat ensued. Elayna chose to charge the drow assassins and attack, only to find herself surrounded by them and subject to sneak attacks from all three. Purdue, Pyroh and Nimbus charged to assist her. The mage pulled out a metal sphere similar to those the party had seen Nazir use and nailed Purdue on the head, knocking the monk unconscious for a few seconds. Pyroh took a hit from a poisoned drow dagger and lost consciousness as well.

Dimdar, with the Rod of the Medusa at the ready, waited for an opportunity and then restored Nazir to flesh, cutting his bonds to free him to act. Nazir started by throwing a sphere at the mage but missed. Groop charged the spellcaster with great energy but tripped and fell at the man's feet. The mage cast *fly* on himself and floated safely out of the warrior's melee range.

Meanwhile, the two beholders battled each other in the air over the running river. They jockeyed for position, Vendelorbris trying to keep its parent in its antimagic ray while Eldrethmaloren moved in three dimensions to escape the ray for quick strikes. Both the party and Pragar tried to hit Vendelorbris's central eye with arrows but the beholder ducked and moved out of the way each time, taking body hits instead. Finally the senior beholder bobbed out of the antimagic cone and hit Vendelorbris with a *flesh to stone* ray. The creature failed its save and turned to stone. Lacking the bouyancy of beholder flesh, the petrified creature plummeted 300 feet and smashed into the rocks in the river below, breaking into a thousand pieces.

Nazir barked a commanding sentence to the mage in a language unknown to the party, and the mage responded by fleeing as quickly as possible. The drow assassins saw no upside for themselves in the battle and surrendered. The party was content to accept that, but Eldrethmaloren had other plans. One drow was zapped and turned to stone, another slain with a *finger of death* ray, and the third screamed and wriggled as its body rose from the floor and floated toward the beholder's drooling mouth.

The party exchanged respectful nods with Eldrethmaloren and Pragar and withdrew from the scene. Their journey to Sheoloth took precedence over the beholder's leavings.

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That was a very interesting session, gang. Kevin's idea of pitting the two beholders against each other is a definite candidate for Sneaky Bastard Move of the Campaign so far. Based on your strategy for combat with Eldrethmaloren, it probably saved a couple of lives.

Note for possible future reference: *Lords of Madness* advises those who plan to face a beholder in combat to rely on a barrage of normal ranged weapons from the protection of an antimagic field or similar barrier. When a party spreads out, as you were planning to do, it gives the beholder more opportunity to use its eye rays. It can use each one as a free action, subject to the limit of no more than 3 aimed in any 90-degree arc. Your strategy would have subjected you to 6 or possibly 9 eye ray attacks per round instead of 0-3. Any time you let the beholder use *finger of death*, *flesh to stone*, *disintegrate*, *inflict moderate wounds*, and one other ray effect in a single round you're giving it a tremendous advantage because sooner or later anyone can fail a saving throw.

Strategic note: based on some of the spell selection yesterday, I think it might be good to review what spell resistance (SR) is and isn't. Every creature with SR has an assigned SR value; for instance, a drow has SR (10 + class level), so a 6<sup>th</sup> level drow fighter has SR16. That means that when you cast a spell on that fighter, you must first succeed at a caster level check – roll d20, add your caster level, and if it's under 16 your spell fails and is wasted. If it's 16 or over your spell might work, depending on saving throws as usual.

I get the feeling some of you think SR is an impenetrable barrier. That's probably my fault because the first enemies you faced with SR were constructs and that arcane ooze. Those things have Spell Immunity, which is basically SR (infinite). They are the exception rather than the rule; the overwhelming majority of creatures with any anti-spell features have SR, not immunity. Since a creature's SR tends to be 10 plus its challenge rating, you'll be rolling against SR values of 20-23 most of the time, which means you'll generally be slightly better than 50/50 to overcome SR against the average opponent. You have every right to build your spell selections around the “SR: No” subset of your known spells, but it's probably a mistake to overcompensate that way.

Next session is set for Sunday 9/11 at Anne's house in Frederick. Let's start at 11:00. First up will be crossing the Sunless Wood; depending on what happens in there we may or may not also experience the Boneyard in that session.

<MR>