



STUPEFYING
STORIES
102

This is STUPEFYING STORIES Volume XXI, Number 1, Whole Number 102 and is the first membership-saving minac I've put in FAPA for a while. I have to think about that. This is Operation Crifanac 615, and

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It's Eney's Fault
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NARRATIVE APPENDIX, DEPT.: In the latest GOLIARD Karen Anderson discussed her encounter with the Dungeons & Dragons addicts and described some characters she'd made up to use in play. She hadn't then actually played -- her first expedition was at Boskone this year -- and couldn't include an account of a game.

By chance I had to keep notes, not long ago, for the benefit of a couple of friends who had to drop out in the middle of an Expedition and left their Characters -- both low-level Fighters, fortunately, and easy to play -- for Sjanna Johnson and myself to play until we got out of the Dungeon. It was a smaller expedition than most (eight Characters is more typical) and my Therevada monk, Vaisravana, at Level IV was stronger than any of Karen's Characters, but the adventures Siobhana, Bear-Daughter, Grone, and Zindorag had could very well have happened to Vertegonelle, Miriel, and Nyrath. For those of you who haven't met the game yet, this may serve as a description of the sort of things that happen to a Dungeon-exploring party in one of the less murderous parts of the Universe...

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CROWN OF THE GNOLLS

All this started when we got an invitation to check the new Transporter in the town of Carnelian, which is the surface level of the Dungeon of the same name. A few minutes after we'd entered the Transporter room -- it was a 30x30 square with pillars around the sides and a yard-cube thingy in the center -- we found ourselves in a dusty and ill-litten room of the same appearance Somewhere Else.

By "we" I mean our Expedition: Vaisravana, the Cleric/IV I mentioned; Siobhana, a Level II Magic-User of the Tuatha de Danaan (who are considered Elves for game purposes, whatever Walt Willis may have told you); Bear-Daughter, a Novice Magic-User whom the Dungeonmaster had entrusted to Vaisravana's care; Grone, a Level II Dwarf Fighter; and Zindorag, a Level I Human Fighter. We had Vaisravana's mule along, too, for load-carrying. Optimistic us.

We were showed out of the lower-level Transporter room by an irritated Ticket Agent and took a convenient tunnel to see what could be seen, which is the way to have adventures and find Good Stuff in a Dungeon. It is also the way to get Characters killed, but never mind that. We found an adventure, at least, quite soon: a whole bunch of Goblins who attacked us when we opened a door. Touchy little things.

Goblins aren't very tough -- which may be why they attacked on sight -- and it turned out our two fighters were: they held the door while Siobhana and Bear-Daughter threw a Sleep spell that bowled over most of our assailants. After a second's pause to determine what effect it had had (I'm not going to load the inexperienced up with technical details about melee rounds and recuperation after the use of magic) Vaisravana followed up with one of his Clerical spells, Hold Person. This too worked well, Goblins being too low in the scale of humanoid life to have much resistance to magic, and at the same time -- having lost more than half their numbers -- the Goblins had to make a dice roll for morale and failed

to score their minimum...er...I beg your pardon: I mean to say, at the same time the surviving Goblins panicked and fled.

We entered the room to see what wasn't nailed down (transferring property rights in a Dungeon is a rather informal process), but didn't get far: there were some screeches from the direction the Goblins had fled, and, a second after we had the chance to see that the room was L-shaped rather than simply rectangular, there came from around the corner we hadn't noticed a group of Bugbears.

Bugbears are related to Goblins, but bigger, stronger, and more resistant to attack. Vaisravana had time to command the Goblin he had under Hold -- which is a spell of hypnotic control -- to fight on our side, our two fighters let fly with their bows and got a couple, and then we kept them at bay briefly with hand-weapons until the Magic-Users could recover and hit most of this bunch with Sleep.

We relaxed -- it had been a closer call than that sounds like -- and checked one another over; Vaisravana, as I recall, used his Clerical power of Healing on the two Fighters. Then, as we began to look for the room's contents, slow heavy footfalls became audible from around that same corner.

Noisy things like battles naturally attract attention from the neighbors, but this was ridiculous. (You do get strings of lucky and unlucky dice-rolls now and then, of course...) Around the corner there appeared, for Ghodsake, a Troll.

With their power of regeneration, Trolls are too strong for a low-level party to tackle with impunity. We decided to content ourselves with getting out alive and, with Grone in front where his Dwarvish senses could guard against traps (which Dwarves perceive more readily than other humanoids), we hurried off down the hall the way we'd been going.

The Troll wasn't likely to follow us with so much free lunch in the room with him, but we went a ways for safety -- ducked under an underpass, found and opened a door, and discovered ourselves facing a curtain wall with gaps at either end through which an indefinite number of Gnolls could be seen.

Gnolls -- it's a typo for Dunsany's "Gnoles", which is tolerated in D&D because these are slightly different from those Dunsany wrote of -- are fairly easy opponents who tend to have treasure and are Chaotic; that is, automatically hostile, so we had to either attack or flee. Vaisravana hadn't the resolution to seem timid when the others were bold, and they all wanted to fight, so our Magic-Users, Siobhana and Bear-Daughter, threw Sleep and the others -- Ferdinand, the Goblin we had under Hold, and Grone and Zindorag right behind him -- charged in to capture the survivors; Vaisravana, keeping his Hold Person spell in reserve, followed behind them with a bullet ready in his sling.

((At this point we had to settle with the Dungeonmaster -- Sherna Comerford -- how much a Hold Person link could communicate. Obviously it wasn't full perception: that would make it a form of telepathy. But there must be some connection: otherwise the spell would be useless without the appropriate language. We finally settled on having the spell-caster able to perceive strong feelings but not get any messages or visual/tactile images.))

As soon as Ferdinand got into the room Vaisravana got a strong shock of fright from him and an instant later realized what was up when somebody using Command Voice roared, "TAKE PRISONERS!"

Vaisravana jumped into the room at once (bumping Zindorag, who missed the crossbow-shot he'd been about to take) and threw his Hold Person spell on the Gnoll King, Deniz, who had been seated behind the curtain wall. Over a hundred Gnolls were getting over their surprise and making for us, including a band who were dashing through the far archway to surround us, as Vaisravana bowed and took the instant necessary to concoct an unobvious verbal form for a command:

"Long life, O King! I charge you to greet us in friendship!"

Deniz grinned broadly and answered: "Welcome! You Fighters -- you come eat with us!"

Wasn't quite as unobvious as he'd hoped. One of the guards -- the Gnoll King has 1-4 Troll-strength Praetorians -- exclaimed: "That magic! Me King now!"

The result was a confused melee. The other two guards, commanded by Deniz to kill this usurper, attacked the King instead. We tried to support the King with fire but missed badly with our shots; Grone, with allight crossbow, was the only one who even inflicted a wound. The gang trying to outflank us was hit by both the girls with Sleep, but lost only half a dozen (possible: 32). Vaisravana, as soon as he recovered, threw his Hold Person at the new claimant to the throne. This one -- Bomp was his name -- not at all bothered, whipped out his sword and charged the monk, who barely got his mace and shield up in time. The Gnolls in the main room were closing with the Fighters and Ferdinand; for a wonder, the Goblin killed one on the first exchange of strokes, while the humans missed with spear and battle-axe. Siobhana, who'd won some magic armor on an earlier trip, pushed Bear-Daughter back toward the rest of the party and drew her dagger as the flanking party charged the two.

((At this point God informed us that we could all see that the Gnolls were so close that the next turn of fighting would have two Gnolls engaging each of our party. The others, with their steel plate, might last a couple of rounds, but our Magic-users -- being, as Magic-users, under Gels to wear no armor but leather and use no weapons but hand-knives -- were almost certain to be killed.))

Vaisravana choked but made himself ask Bomp: will you accept our surrender? Bomp did so, rather cheesed off at being balked of a bloody fight. Deniz was commanded to go to sleep through the Hold spell that was controlling him. As a token of good will Vaisravana did a partial Healing on Moose, the guard Grone had pinked with a bolt, and was about to cure Deniz when Bomp realized what he was up to and stopped him.

((Another discussion and God ruled that the healing spell Vaisravana was using -- Cure Light Wounds -- worked only at touching range.))

As Siobhana wakened all the Slept Gnolls (spells work by willpower and can be removed by the caster without effort), Bomp explained why he had been interested in taking prisoners. There were two groups of Gnolls down here, and the other one had the ancient crown of the Gnolls. So he was going to send us after it (here Vaisravana intuited, to his horror, what was coming next), and would keep Bear-Daughter prisoner. Being stupid Lawfuls, we were certain to come back for a woman. Vaisravana, trying to keep his voice from squeaking, demanded to stay in her stead but she sensibly refused to hear of this. Quite unable to speak, he put his arms around her for a moment, and the rules of the Sangha be damned...

Meanwhile, the rest were looking around, but nothing was evident beyond the fact that this was a very dirty feast hall. The monk was too distracted to think of any-

thing but getting the quest under way; Grone, however, stopped this with a reminder that we all needed rest and food.

After we'd gotten that, the partially-cured guard, Moose, lead us off toward the other Gnolls' place, starting off through a double door and down a long corridor. In Gnoll fashion he apparently felt some gratitude -- Chaotics don't do much healing on their enemies, come to think of it -- for as soon as we got out of earshot of the new king, he suggested we fortify ourselves with a stop at a bar. Vaisravana, though he foresaw that his Fivefold Vow was going to need laundering after this trip, was not so dizzy that he couldn't play up and offer to buy Moose a drink.

The latter promptly led us to a bar with a clock, counters, and a vending machine. It was run by a 6'4" foot tall Irishman, Smithareen, who reacted very well to Siobhana's blarneying, but not to the point of giving us any information. She and Moose had Guinness, Vaisravana orange juice, and the others, after a warning look from the monk, disgustedly ordered ginger ale. (While Vaisravana and Siobhana went to look over the vending machine -- it sold random magical goodies -- Zindorag hastily changed their order to Guinness. Smithareen was delighted.) Eventually Vaisravana paid 500 gold pieces -- double normal rates -- for a dose of Healing Potion that Siobhana could carry, Just In Case. He never noticed that the yellow fizzy stuff the others were swigging wasn't the same yellow fizzy stuff he'd expected to see. Finishing our drinks, we followed Moose back to the main corridor and then south to a double door.

"Gotta go tráo dere," explained Moose. "Tough place -- for fighting men only", he added, with a glance at Siobhana.

"You mean, people who can fight only", Vaisravana corrected politely.

"Inn' that whut I said?"

The monk looked at the elf-maiden, who was trying not to laugh, and shook his head. "Damned ff I'm going to argue semantics with a Gnoll..."

The double doors required all six of us to open, and only led us to a barricade that had to be opened by one of the levers behind secret doors on either side. The secret door on the north -- Siobhana's Elfin senses quickly picked it out -- had slithering sounds behind it; that on the south, scratching sounds.

"Bugs", Moose explained when asked. "Squishy ones" (gesturing north) "and crawly ones" (south).

Gnoll taxonomy is evidently not a highly developed science... We decided to open the door on the south. Vaisravana was upset to find that the inhabitants were giant animals -- collie-sized ants -- but we took these out with the oil flasks we'd rigged as Molotov cocktails, opened the panel and dashed through. Further east we found a series of big ceremonial doors. Moose told us we only had to go through these. (Vaisravana guessed from the evidence of the doors that this was the Gnolls' original site and therefore the others were a splitoff group. However, the question of dynastic legitimacy among Chaotics was a point that didn't really cry out for resolution.)

So how do we get in? Moose advised us to offer Baval -- the other Gnoll King -- a drink. Siobhana *tsked* that we hadn't thought to bring a bottle of stout from Smithareen's, but there's no planning for everything. Now, it had been highly upsetting to us that a stupid Gnoll had spotted immediately that the other King was under a spell, so we tried to find out whether there was any chance to get the crown

out without trusting to anything but stealth. Nobody could suggest anything better to simulate a friendly visit than trying Moose's suggestion of offering the King some of our wine...

((A dice roll at this point determined that it was a good Rhenish, which was lucky because the Gnolls were used to beer.))

...The door opened readily at a knock, Moose identified himself, and we were let in. Hmmm. Gave the sergeant of the guard a taste of wine and a gold piece to buy more at Smithareen's and, warily circling around the outside of a mass of feasting Gnolls, went up to King Baval and offered him a drink. He held out a tankard that must have held a quart and smirked at Siobhana (the only one of us who spoke Groll) and slugged the whole thing down with appetite. He hadn't any hesitation about showing off the crown, either; it was on the throne, at the end of the room most distant from the doors, in plain sight and obviously impossible to filch by stealth.

It appeared to be an old battered helmet, but we were told it was a Magic Crown. All of us made respectful noises. Ferdinand the Goblin told us he'd heard that it lighted up. The rest of us searched our memories for Magic Treasures that Lit Up when worn...aha!

Vaisravana (despising himself for deceitfulness) mimed special awe and warned Ferdinand away from the thing because such crowns were for Kings alone. Now there was a problem of coordinating our actions...a thought popped into Vaisravana's head which made him blush visibly, but the situation was too rushed for him to think of anything else. Gesturing with his ale-cup toward a group of Gnolls who'd just burst into song, he put an arm around Siobhana's shoulders and, apparently, kissed her on the cheek.

((Desperately hoping that she wouldn't be offended. A Buddhist monk's training hardly fits him to appreciate that a damsel of the Tuatha de Danaan regards such gestures, within decent limits, as a pretty girl's natural right.))

What he whispered in her ear was: *Sleep his bodyguard while I hit the King with Hold Person!* Despite his original misgivings, it worked; in the distraction of having the guards pass out (they were laughed at as drunks) nobody noticed Baval pass from a smirk of conceit at our flattery to a glassy-eyed stare.

Now came the pitch. Why not reunite the two nations of Gnolls and stand together against the rest of the Dungeon Monsters? How this would go over was doubtful -- obviously Baval and Moose were friendly, though of different groups, and they might have some sort of cooperation going already. But the other Gnolls thought it wasn't a bad idea (Baval himself of course was agreeable) and Vaisravana pointed out that Honor could be Saved by letting a third party hold the crown. So Baval fell in his guards and cronies (we were trying to leave the remaining Gnolls with too few leaders to organize a pursuit) and we went back to the cave of the first group of Gnolls.

This time we didn't scout around, for we had to act before the others could respond to the surprise of Baval's arrival. Vaisravana and Siobhana hit Bomp with spells; he with Hold and she with the similar but weaker Charm Person which was all a Level II could handle. Bomp missed one of his saving throws or the other, and it was soon agreed that the great feud was over. Three cheers and let's go fight Goblins.

"All right," said Grone, a little crogged by all this, "let's go fight Gob-

lins, then." The rest of us gave him Such a Look... The Gnolls began to mutter as the crown was handed over and Siobhana, perceiving this, muttered to Bomp:

"Butter him up -- you can be generous now you have the crown!" Whether Bomp would have anyway is unknowable, but they started a party.

We had Bear-Daughter brought back; though shaken, she was unharmed, and both Vaisravana and Siobhana embraced her with much emotion. We recovered the stuff that had been on the mule, too, but not the mule; Vaisravana felt worse about that than he'd expected, even though the beast had been so ornery that he'd named it Devadatta.

I think Grone and Zindorag would have joined in the reunion -- Bear-Daughter isn't picture-pretty, but she's an attractive girl -- if they hadn't been otherwise occupied. Bomp had no more ventured to put the crown on than had Baval: he'd set it down on the end of the nearest table, not sorry to get his fingers off it. These were rather slapdash trestle-tables of loose planks and Grone happened to bang into the other end of this one, nearly upsetting it. The crown fell off and rolled under the table and...

At that point there was a yell from the door. The door-guards had come to join in the drinking, left the door unlocked, and though it now came pouring over 200 Goblins.

Our party hadn't been sloshing it down (quite aside from the strain they were under, the Gnolls brew small beer that's usually flat) and weren't surprised enough to miss a first-round counterattack. Grone dropped one with his crossbow, Siobhana and Bear-Daughter slept 17, and Vaisravana put a Hold Person on the Goblin leader.

"Watch me snow these dudes", he said -- talking out of the corner of his mouth, I swear -- to Baval and Bomp, and the Goblin, under his control, shouted:

"Look out! It's a trap!"

Part of the Goblins stopped and their entire array promptly disintegrated. The Gnolls, seeing this, countercharged them with glee, the two Kings and their guard joining in. Zindorag, inconspicuously, stooped and flicked the crown of the Gnolls into his belt-pouch...

"Hey!" said one of the guard. "That ours!"

Zindorag looked indignant. "You don't want to leave it here where the Goblins can reach it, do you?"

The Gnoll thought, if that's the word I want, for a second and brightened. "Yeah. KILL GOBLINS!"

He dashed off, plunging into the scrimmage with such vim that by the time Zindorag had loaded his crossbow to arrange an accident the creature was unidentifiable. We hurried long enough for the Magic-users to chant up their spells afresh, and then backed clear. As we did so a stream of Gnolls rushed from behind the curtain wall -- fortunatley not from the entrance we were making for -- to reinforce their side. We just made it past the wall as the door they'd come through was closing.

Vaisravana nearly burst into tears when Bear-Daughter identified the door as that to the room in which she'd been held prisoner and added (a) there had

been lots more gnolls in the reinforcing party than could have fit in there and (b) there'd been a secret door, which she hadn't tried, in the north wall of the room.

It might be better than the direct and obvious way out, at that: Obvious Moves have a way of being wrong, in Dungeons. We found behind the door what Grone easily identified as an officers' cubicle, with an enlisted barracks area behind the secret door Bear-Daughter had noticed. In the latter -- which had nothing but a litter of straw pallets -- everybody but Siobhana spotted another secret door in the northwest wall (normally Elves are quicker at that than other humanoids), but she made up for this by noticing a hollow panel in the southwest wall.

The Fighters looked at Vaisravana and Vaisravana looked at the two girls and they looked back as if worry about pursuit had never occurred to them. We pried the panel open and there was a chest...

There was still a clatter of steel from outside, so we risked it. Spike the inside door closed, pile pallets in front of it ready to ignite, loop the rope around the chest and, standing well clear, drag it out. Clunk, *slosh!* ...*slosh??* Vaisravana, puzzled, went over to it and...

Grone realized what the Monk was thinking -- or rather, doing without stopping to think -- and made a frantic, successful grab before the other could touch the chest. Doing his Dwarvish trap-detection thing and finding nothing he pried the chest open with the tip of his spear and found it full of *gold*. It was under some stuff that looked like water but, to Vaisravana, smelled funny. So we piled up some of the straw pallets to absorb spillage and dumped it. The straw promptly changed color. Some manipulation got a gold piece apparently dry, but when Ferdinand was commanded to pick it up he got a painful burn that didn't stop on dropping the coin or washing with water; it had to be washed with wine.

There were well over 4000 gold pieces and a leather bag in the chest. We hadn't enough wine to wash the gold and Vaisravana, despite the continuing sounds of battle, was about ready to climb the walls, so we contented ourselves with washing the contents of the bag -- five reddish and two goo-covered gemstones. Grone recognized the goo as the stuff used to protect opals from desiccation, or we'd have left them behind on the assumption that it was a precipitate from the mysterious poison.

Packing these goodies (carefully; opals are fragile and the others might be) we got going before Vaisravana quite lost his mind, and didn't loiter on the way, either. (Everybody really knew we had taken an insane risk; it was just that the monk was the only one not too proud to admit being scared.) Well, the secret door led us to the underpass and from there we knew our way out. In the room where we'd killed the goblins and bugbears we found nothing but bloody troll-size footprints. At the door to the Transporter room we paused and, having found in an earlier adventure that Dungeon creatures like Ferdinand couldn't get back to safety this way, Vaisravana asked the goblin if he could get home from here. He could. So Vaisravana gave him 10 gold pieces, a silver crossbow-quarrel -- it would do as a dagger in a pinch -- and two days' rations and sent him off. ("Evade danger and fight off attacks just as if you weren't under a spell.") Ferdinand gawped at him for a second and then mooched off, muttering something that sounded very like *These Lawfuls are crazy!*

The rest of our party looked as if they agreed with this appraisal but were trying not to say so. Vaisravana managed an expression which combined contrition and defiance. "I had to do something about my Karma", he said defensively...

The Agent wasn't around, so we had to find out ourselves that the Transporter on this Level wasn't attendant-operated, but worked off a coin-fed automatic switch. One gold piece each, punch the button, and we found ourselves back on the surface.

At Sutra Diamond and Jewelers we found that Grone had been right: the goo-covered things were fine opals (2900 and 3800 GP value). Still, the prize was the five reddish gems; after careful cleaning -- we'd described the peculiar protective solution before letting them be handled -- they proved to be a set of matched star rubies that brought 25,000 gold pieces.

The helm was a different puzzle. Sutra is not a magic-oriented outfit. But Papa Sylvester's place was open and we found him having tea with a friend we hadn't met. Both were glad to see us and quizzed us closely on the mysterious solution, though neither could figure out what it might be.

Though we handled it carefully, since it gave a strong MAGIC! signal to a Detection spell, analysis of the crown was easy: it was a Helm of Brilliance. None of us had actually seen such a thing and Siobhana had barely heard of it. Papa Sylvester looked pleased at this news and, with the air of a person introducing friends to a special treat, asked Siobhana to look in his mirror and put it on...

There was a subdued *pop!* and even the two merchants, who had some idea what to expect, were dazzled. The battered helm had become a crown of ruddy gold, gemmed with rubies and beryls. Siobhana's fair skin and flowing hair shown with elflight, and even her garb -- sturdy *cuir-bouilli* and twill -- gleamed like patent leather and silk.

Siobhana herself was overwhelmed for a moment, but then recovered superbly. In slow motion she brought her hands down, curtsied to her image, and with all the grace an elf can show stepped through a measure of some pavane. After the first seconds Bear-Daughter, herself a gifted story-teller, realized what she was doing: leading our emotions through a full cycle -- perception, contemplation, satisfaction -- with her little dance. It was just as most of us were regaining the ability to think about anything else that she made one last pirouette and in the same motion raised her hands to the crown.

Then came a jarring discontinuity; Siobhana made a couple of efforts and found she had to look away from the mirror before she could bear to do off that lovely thing. It was, of course, too valuable for any of us to afford now that it was activated; thank heaven Siobhana had strength of will enough not to show any regret at its loss.

Dividing up back at the bank we found, to Vaisravana's quiet satisfaction, that this hadn't been a particularly bloody expedition; only 350 experience points apiece from Monster slaying. But it had been astonishingly profitable: though there were no magic artifacts to keep, we'd gotten away with 15,373.4 gold pieces each in loot. Well, with profits like that, maybe anybody interested can go back down to Papa Sylvester's and do some shopping.

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