

It was the middle of a damp, clear winters night when my bodyguard, Nice Guy Eddie the half orc, and myself approached our target. The frost was already clinging to the leaves that littered the path and our breath hung heavily (and rancidly in Eddie's case) in the air around us. I was on a mission to find out quite what was going on in a renowned gambling establishment about to stage its annual "Big Game". Eddie was with me partly as someone had paid him to look after me, but mainly on the basis that there would be exotic dancing girls later in the evening (I had acquired a poor quality copy of a print from the latest copy of Playorc and assured him it was a wizardly image from the gambling den). I clutched the hundred gests supplied by my employer to pay the fifty gest entrance fee and support my cover for the rest of the weekend.

Outside a small group of strangely assorted individuals stood waiting to gain entrance. I didn't realise it at the time but I was not the only one trying to discover if something strange was afoot here, and many of those outside had been sent by the same group as I had. I met Farmer John the cabbage farmer who was drinking from a small flask (distilled extract of cabbage as far as I was able to make out) and a friendly human in Lincoln(ish) green called Razzoo. As we filtered into the building we were greeted by an overpoweringly gracious doorman who insisted that all weapons larger than a shortsword were handed over to him at that point then searched for, and deprived of, anything of conceivable use by an overpoweringly overpowering man named Antonio who I was to see a good deal more of.

Once inside the atmosphere was relaxed and jovial as the patrons went about the important business of gradually watching their cash reserves disappear behind the various house tables. There were a number of card tables offering several different card games, a backgammon board, a roulette table and a strange game with glass counters where the house was sucking in money faster than a hungry vampire with the key to the vestal virgin dormitory. There seemed nothing amiss at this point so I set out to flash some gests at the roulette wheel. I spent some happy time at the table meeting other people pretending to be something they weren't, including two orcs claiming to be the brave orcatiers Porkos and Assos and a troll claiming to be Glitter the sprite in "sprightly robes that just look a lot like chainmail". In the end I gave up betting on black and red as I couldn't see which was which anyway due to the dim flickery candlelight (mainly due to the fact the entire table was serviced by two tea-light candles). However, I did finish 15 gests up as the croupier, Sylvester, accidentally paid out twice for bets I didn't win.

And on to the other card tables, the pool table, the roulette again where I recouped my losses on the pool (substantial) and all the time supping the beer which Eddie was dutifully bringing me as he didn't understand the dots on the cards and couldn't count very well. Eddie's cover was a simple one, he dressed in his normal outfit, put on some pinkish face paint and pretended to be human .. simple but useless. All this said we moved to the pontoon table together, and even he won at that. To say the dealer was performing abysmally would be rather charitable, she was not only managing to deal good hands to just about everyone but herself but also showing a compulsive "twist on nineteen" tendency and busting nearly every hand. I followed the form of the husband and wife team of Spats and Spats Capone, and managed to increase the contents

of my cash pouch. We managed to stop Fingers calling for a replacement by generously tipping every disaster, but eventually Antonio spotted what was going on and spoiled the fun by stepping in himself. As the torrent of money began to ebb slowly back to the house the players drifted away and the evening drew to a gradual close.

The following morning after a hearty breakfast and some hair of the dog I was called aside by one of the house employees, who turned out to be a Valley spy. He instructed Razzoo and myself to collect five hundred gests from the remaining Valley plants, in order to bribe Antonio to be somewhere else when a deal went down. An interesting proposition as I wouldn't recognise a Valley member who wasn't disguised. Soon a lot of money was changing hands through a more senior (I think) man called Jemima in a ridiculous hat. My name was given to Antonio as the contact for his cash, a move I was to deeply regret later. We also smuggled some weapons into the grounds of the house under cover of daylight. It was an excellent ruse as we were only observed by the Valley spy and the Don in charge. We managed to get away with this as the Don thought Jemima and I were having an assignation in the bushes, and the spy had nothing better to do with fifteen minutes and subtly made sure that no-one else came to the window. Suddenly two groups of serious people turned up. One was a rival Don and his entourage and the other was a tribunal to pass judgement on an adventuring party led by someone called Amethyst. These events pretty much passed me by as Eddie and I gambled what money we had left at pontoon and pool. Jemima also told me that Antonio no longer needed his payment, so that was a heavy weight off my shoulders. Towards the end of the afternoon some enthusiastic bandits entered the house waving large amounts of money around and being generally abusive. They were all dressed in this years most fashionable shade of grey, offered to lay large bets on anything that moved, manhandled some of the dealers, and yelled at anyone that would listen in a strange accent that spoke of large moustaches and nights drinking Tequila beneath the stars. Finally, having tired of other pursuits they shoved a few guests and staff. The doorman kept the peace admirably by appealing to everyone's better nature ... then they shoved Eddie. All of a sudden the strangers had a variety of large and sharp weapons in their hands and were heading in my general direction. I dived for cover but ended up being backed down a dead end corridor with two of the house dealers and Raven, a young man in colourful robes. Fighting two men with long swords is not easy when all you have is one dagger and some robes that billow well in a crisis. Luckily, as the bandits had the attention span of a goldfish, they soon got bored with poking at the whimpering mass the four of us presented them with. As they returned to hit Eddie some more I made a dash for it. I was almost safe behind a large table (in order to fully assess the situation of course) when Sylvester grabbed me shouting "don't leave him in there on his own" and pointing at a melee of bodies bouncing round Eddie.

Filled with a heroic resolve to protect my bodyguard, and a firm shove between the shoulder blades in that general direction, I headed into the fray. As I dragged my dagger across the throat of one of the strangers some of the other guests suddenly rushed past me and attacked the rest with the weapons they had been hurriedly gathering from their rooms. After making sure my first victim stayed on the floor I blocked a sword blow coming at Eddie's back and headed off

leaving the assailant expressing his regrets to a pair of irritated orc fists. I spotted another of the bandits looming menacingly over someone. As his back was towards me he seemed an excellent target. I crept up behind him and, as he raised his sword to strike, I managed to stand on tiptoe (he was a good deal taller than me) and slit his throat too.

By now, particularly as this was the first time I had ever had to use my dagger in anger, my blood was up and I hurdled a couple of people fighting on the floor and headed for the only remaining person in grey. Any semblance of stealth had gone in my blood lust and, as I clattered up behind him, he turned round with his weapon raised. Then, for some reason, he turned away again so I raced forwards and reached round his neck. Oddly enough, he seemed to object to this and flung me backwards. As I hit the floor it began to dawn on me that I was very small, armed with a dagger and already bleeding quite a lot. In addition to this he was averagely large, armed with a sword (and competent with it), and there were a lot of other fighters about anyway who could have done the job properly. I regained my feet in time to be chased and beaten twenty feet into a doorway on the other corner of the room, and from there into the floor. Just as I lost consciousness I also realised that he was actually on my side.

My good fortune manifested itself again at this point in the form of a handy healer to stop the bleeding and bring me round. After apologising to the magnificent and powerful gentleman (he may see this one day) that I so foolishly attacked in haste, and it has to be said very poor light conditions, I continued with the poker school. This was not so much a group of gamblers as a group of individuals learning how to gamble and included myself, Fingers the appalling dealer from the previous night and Jock McF McSporran, a madman in a kilt who kept offering to subdue people for a fee. While we finished this an exciting game of pool started. As virtually nobody had any money left Antonio was offering 50 gests of house money against a limb of his choice from any challenger. It was a short game that the challenger lost by a very long way. Those of us that had watched the challengers optimism gradually slip through desperation into despair now dutifully filed outside to see the debt paid. It was bone chillingly cold and nearly dark, but it was easy to appreciate the masterful amputation that followed. Antonio took his time lining up his sword stroke then took a swing that started from just above his shoulders. It took three attempts to sever the leg, although I felt that he could easily have done it in less had he not been enjoying himself so much. The crunch of bone yielding to metal was heard across all the gambling tables, but to give the victim his due he only started screaming when he rolled over and bumped into his own rapidly cooling limb. As none of us could heal we went back into the warm. It was at this point that I discovered that Antonio still wanted his money.

I had a brief visit from the Valley spy asking why Antonio was still waiting and suggesting that I might like to pay him if I valued my health. I hastily got hold of Jemima who told me that he had given the money away again to be gambled with. I was rather shocked by this, and fairly concerned as I had seen how much money had been lost to the house during the afternoon.

This revelation was followed by a friendly visit from Antonio who reminded me just how keen he was to receive what he had been promised with a vice like arm round my shoulders and fingers digging into my upper arm like thumbscrews. Jemima was having little luck raising the money again and I soon had a less genial visit from the increasingly impatient bouncer. I tried drinking some more beer with my eyes shut to see if the situation would go away, but over dinner I had yet another meeting with the now unpleasant Antonio. I'm still not sure if he would have removed my internal organs with his bare hands, but he certainly looked like he was capable of it at that moment. Finally he gave up and explained cordially that he would have his money or he would break one leg in five minutes, the other in ten minutes, and suggested that I didn't consider what he would do if he was still waiting in fifteen.

Jemima had managed to raise nearly four hundred gests, and my pathetic appearance collected another sixty or so. After he had been round once more and we were still twenty gests short with about a minute to go he introduced me to a reliable healer. The gambler who had lost his leg earlier suggested that I should just resign myself and face the pain like a man (which I felt I was already doing in an unusual blubbering and cowering sort of way). Antonio turned up promptly and was just swinging his large (about two thirds of my height anyway) club in a determined way when suddenly the troll I had been playing pontoon with produced the missing amount. I don't know if it was his, or if he had just been winding me up for the previous half hour, and I don't really care as it saved at least one leg. Antonio was a gentleman to the end and accepted the money after carefully counting it, although he did suggest I might like to let him break my leg anyway as a token for his inconvenience.

Soon after my narrow escape the big game started. We were split onto tables of four or five people each presided over by a member of the Dons' immediate family. I shared a table with one of the Dons' sons, Raven, Razzoo, and Seamus, a tall man with a broad accent, a generous outlook on life, and a complete lack of luck at cards. Each contestant had five lives, with the worst hand losing one life. The winner of each table went on to the grand table to play the same system for fifteen hundred gests. We were in a room with two tables and one crib sheet showing what hand beat what. Seamus buckled under the strain of never being dealt anything better than a pair of threes and soon departed having questioned the parentage of everyone else on the table a number of times. Raven followed after a bad run, and all the while the crib sheet was passing back and forth between the tables like a hyperactive stag in the rutting season. Soon the Dons' son had three lives left and Razzoo and myself had one and we were offered ten gests each to step out. Having declined Razzoo then lost, and the Dons' son offered me fifty gests to give up. There were half a dozen people watching from other tables that had finished playing and there was a general wave of encouragement to take the money at that point. For some reason, when I went to take the offer, I found my mouth insisting I was going to play on. Two hands later we were at one life each and it didn't seem such a bad mistake. I dealt the final hand. As the light was murky at best both of us were squinting at the cards on the table but it didn't take long to work out that my hand was going nowhere and I also noticed that the Dons' son had a smirk the size of a longbow struggling to stay hidden. I called a halt to the

agony and declared a pair of fours and my opponent grinned and placed one, two, three, four and five of something red (the light was very poor and my enthusiasm was ebbing rapidly away) on the table. He went to shake my hand, but something wasn't quite right. Jemima was stood on the edge of my vision bobbing up and down like a red and yellow monkey with nits. He had obviously seen something so I stared at the cards for a moment. Then it hit me - we were playing aces high only, and the running flush on the table disintegrated delightfully into a hand of ace high. I also noticed that I had suddenly acquired a number of tentative friends.

Clutching the crib sheet and my tankard I approached the immaculate big table with its delicately smoothed baize and an "independent" house dealer. Around the table were Farmer John (the only other person who appeared to be still drinking), one of the Dons' other sons who knew what ace high meant, Antonio and Sylvester. The game started well as Antonio collapsed to the accompaniment of some vicious catcalling from the members of his first table (brave considering his passion for snapping arms and the fact he was now grinning like a skeleton). Then supper was served ... at least it was to everyone in the room except me, a fact made obvious when I noticed that not only the other players were munching away, but the entire rank of spectators opposite me as well. I complained about this and refused to start the next hand until I had been served. The dealer pointed out that this was fine but I would default the game and dealt anyway. Fortunately, now I had an 80% chance of landing the prize I had several offers from the crowd and eventually Woggle (or Lady Woggle or Mad McWoggle depending on which hat she was wearing) went and fetched the food for me. When she came back she commented loudly that I didn't have many dots on my cards, which went in my favour as I did have two aces and two queens. Farmer John was the next to fall, leaving myself and Sylvester with three lives each and the Dons' son with four. I felt I could see the way that this one was going.

There followed the most unfortunate run of hands I had ever witnessed. The only time the Dons' son managed to scrape together two pairs Sylvester and I each had threes, and I was left with only Sylvester for company. Eddie chose this moment to give me a "relaxing massage" which nearly dislocated my shoulders. He was sat right behind me, watching my back with all the other individuals I felt I could trust (luckily I only have a small back). The Don went and stood behind Sylvester, which was quite disturbing, but caused him to lose the next two lives. I tried to bluff my way through the next hand, but with Woggle and Glitter sniggering at my cards I failed miserably to convince anyone in the room I had anything worthwhile. Finally, the dealer dealt me a pair of sixes and another on the table. I waited while Sylvester swithered for an epoch over which card to take, and finally picked a different card. I snatched the six from the table and knocked. Sylvester looked sadly at his cards and admitted he couldn't even muster a pair to go out on. The Don led the applause and suddenly I found I had a number of friends who were noticeably less tentative than they had been before.

Over the next twenty minutes I was offered advice and favours from most of the people in the house (some fairly exotic ones until the Don stepped in and reminded some of his staff that he still had hundreds of times what I had just won). I was also approached by members of two Towers suggesting I might like to pay them a visit, Antonio wanting to know when I was leaving and the man I had tried to throat slit earlier warning me that he had heard a lot of talk about giving me a beating when I left (I found out later that the talk had been coming from his own lips - talk about harbouring a grudge, I'd only attempted to kill him by accident). I took some advice from Jock McSporrnan that there had been a lot of forgeries around and checked the money that the Don gave me. I then made sure I knew who had given their own money to save my legs earlier in the evening (and more importantly who had refused point blank to pay out to help a squitty little unknown in an awkward predicament), and hung round Eddie and Glitter until it was time to leave the establishment.

As far as what was going on there, I'm still none too sure about that. All I know conclusively is that my sponsors were happier that a new Don was installed following the big game, that someone was willing to go to a lot of trouble to "rescue" Fingers, that I now had a roll of gests so big that I could beat goblins to death with it, and that there was a whole new world of opportunity was opening up in front of me. Not bad for my first journey into the murky world of gambling and adventure. And a fine time was had by all. Other individuals may disagree with this and with some of the finer points above ... but I don't care, as that was how I saw it.

Big Al