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Tahrain cursed. “So they’ve
caught us. . . .”

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CITY OF FIRE

T.H. Lain



CITY OF FIRE

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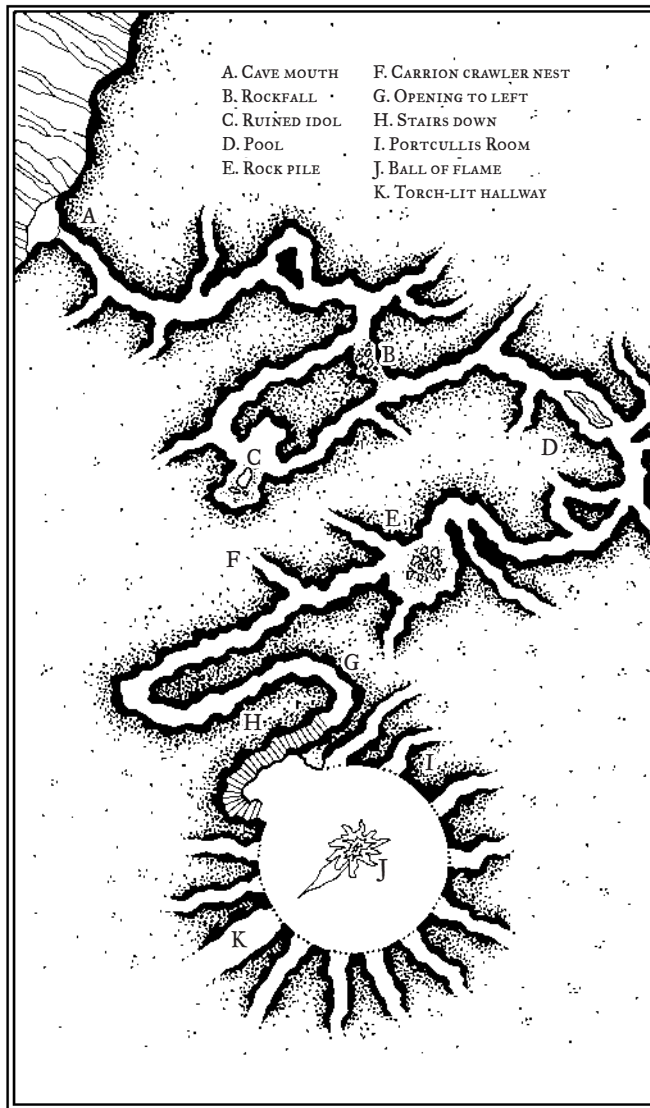
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whose patience, confidence,
and support made this possible.





Prologue... The city burned.

Tahrain wiped his brow and peered into the darkness, straining his eyes to the north. Nothing but sand, he mused bitterly, but he knew that somewhere, perhaps a hundred miles away, Kalpesh burned—if it still stood at all.

And yet he, the city's guard captain and Protector of the Opal Throne, abandoned Kalpesh's defense and fled into the desert on a vital mission that looked more hopeless every hour. For easily the twentieth time that day, his brown, callused hand found its way inside his light chain shirt to the oilskin packet against his right breast. He looked up and scanned his eyes over the faces of the few men and women who now lay in small clumps silently around him. They did not notice as his fingers found the leather thong and checked its secure knot.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, Tahrain turned again to his remaining soldiers. His most loyal troopers, twenty of Kalpesh's finest, followed him into the desert to die without any explanation. Only one man knew Tahrain's true mission in the wastes, and he wasn't even a man by most civilized folk's standards. Most called him "brute" at best, but Tahrain knew differently. He looked for this brute among his exhausted soldiers.

The captain's eyes found the person they sought. Every man and woman in their company lay splayed out under the black desert sky, hoping to forget hunger and thirst in the short respite a fitful slumber offered. Everyone but himself, he thought, and this one person. The brute stood alone, on the other side of their makeshift camp, looking northward into the desert night. When Tahrain had found him, years ago, the creature was alone, dressed in tatters, and nearly dead from numerous wounds. Even now his armor looked as if someone cobbled it together from three different-sized suits, and his weapon, a brutal greataxe, was stained and notched, and appeared as if its haft might break on the very next swing.

If this soldier's kit looked mismatched and ugly, it was simply a reflection of the wearer. Long-armed and grey-skinned, he

appeared to be made of disparate parts himself. His body refused to blend together in the normal way, as if his bulging eyes and jutting chin wanted to escape the confines of his face. His hair looked as if it had been hacked at with a knife, and it was obvious his swollen arms and legs had been, once. He wore no boots on his oversized feet but only light sandals, held on with makeshift straps.

Tahrain rose painfully and quietly. He did not want to wake any of the soldiers that managed to find sleep. Picking his way carefully around the huddled clumps, he moved across the camp.

The man who turned to watch his captain approach was a half-orc. Born almost certainly out of violence, forced to live hard and doomed to die violently, half-orcs looked as if their own bodies struggled to free their separate halves from each other. This struggle, Tahrain had heard, usually spilled out into the world, making half-orcs unpopular in civilized lands. Certainly, when Tahrain brought this one to the city and insisted he be nursed back to health, there had been more than a few who'd wondered (privately or aloud), "Why bother?"

Tahrain hoped to answer that question soon.

"Krusk?" he whispered.

The bulging eyes stared at Tahrain. One fang protruded from the half-orc's lower jaw up over his scarred, thin upper lip. His face twisted into what others might interpret as a snarl. The captain knew it for a smile, as close to one as Krusk could get. That didn't mean the half-orc was happy, though. Krusk was seldom happy.

"They're closer," he growled.

Tahrain nodded. He'd guessed as much. He cursed inventively at his pursuers, but only briefly. Krusk waited, as stoically as ever, for the captain to speak.

"How close?"

"Eight hours. Maybe nine," Krusk grumbled in his deep, gravelly voice.

Tahrain didn't know how the half-orc had divined this information, but he knew it was accurate. Among his soldiers he had many

rangers—he was skilled in the lore of the wilderness himself—but Krusk had something more. If the half-orc said their pursuers were a day's ride from catching them, the captain believed him.

Tahrain shook his head and sighed, "We won't make it, will we?"

The half-orc simply stared at him, then looked away and shrugged.

"They're weak," he said eventually.

Krusk seldom spoke and knew little of tact. The half-orc probably didn't even think calling the best soldiers of Kalpesh "weak" was an insult.

"But you're not," Tahrain finally said. "You could make it? Alone?"

Again the half-orc shrugged. He loomed almost a full head over the tall captain, but somehow the shrug made Tahrain think of a child who had something to say he knew his parent wouldn't like.

"What is it, Krusk?" he asked gently.

Looking off into the darkness, back toward the pursuers they both feared, Krusk shifted his weight, digging holes in the sand.

"I won't go," he said after a long pause. "You saved my life."

"As you've saved mine since," Tahrain said. "If I were a man to keep score of such things, we'd be even. But we don't keep score like that, do we, Krusk?"

The half-orc didn't look back, and Tahrain didn't push. Arguing with Krusk was like arguing with the desert wind.

"Let's get to our lesson, shall we?"

The captain took a few labored strides out into the darkness, farther from the camp, and Krusk followed. Tahrain walked until the two put a small dune between themselves and the other soldiers. He sat down heavily in the sand, with Krusk crouching before him. If the half-orc craned his neck, he could still see the exhausted soldiers. They'd done this for the past six nights, but Tahrain feared this would be the last time.

Drawing the leather packet from inside his mail shirt, the captain opened it slowly. He showed Krusk the brittle papers inside and talked him through the contents of each one, and made Krusk

repeat, in a voice as low as the half-orc could manage, everything Tahrain told him. Krusk couldn't read, but his memory was perfect. When they finished, Tahrain went over everything again. They started a third iteration but the half-orc put a hand on the captain's shoulder. Only then did Tahrain realize he was drifting off, still talking though nearly asleep.

He shook himself and said, "I need sleep..." But as Krusk stood Tahrain grabbed his thick wrist. "Wait! There's one more thing. Whether we make it to the canyon or not, Krusk, this has to get there, and beyond. It has to be kept from the hands of those who even now burn Kalpesh for it, and it has to make its way into the right hands. Even more than the protection of the city, this has been my sworn and secret duty, as it was my mother's before me and her father's before her. Every Protector of the Opal Throne swears to protect this beyond the lives of his soldiers and even the life of the city itself."

Tahrain blinked, for a moment fully awake. He locked his dark eyes on the half-orc's mismatched pupils, trying to will the barbarian to understand.

"I fear, Krusk... I fear my city has been consumed in flames by now," he said, "but that doesn't change a thing. Those who came to Kalpesh came for this. You can't let them take it."

He pushed the packet into Krusk's hands. Taken aback, the half-orc fumbled the packet, then tried to hand it back to his captain. A small, golden disk among the papers shimmered in the starlight. Tahrain pressed the half-orc's hands between his own, tucking the disk back into the pouch.

"No. This goes beyond everything else. There's something I haven't told you."

The half-orc pulled the packet back, but still he hesitated. He waited patiently, though, for his friend to continue.

"The secrets I protect lead to a treasure beyond either of our imagining. If that was all, I would have gladly given it up to save Kalpesh, but the treasure is secondary. These secrets are secrets of

power. This disk is the key to an empire beyond this world.”

Tahrain paused, the adrenaline fueling his tired limbs was spent. The half-orc stared at Tahrain with a look that said he was hearing everything and storing it away, even if he didn’t understand.

“It isn’t just a matter of getting this somewhere safe, or keeping it from those who desire it,” the captain continued. “The attack against Kalpesh is proof that someone else knows about this.” Tahrain wiped his brow and looked down. The disk was still partially visible and he fixed his gaze on it. “I don’t know everything there is to know about it. I’ve told you everything I do know, these last few nights. I know that the time has come for someone to seal the gate and destroy the key. I’m sorry, but it has to be you.”

The captain looked toward the meager camp, but his soldiers hadn’t stirred.

“I’m giving this to you so you can finish a job that began centuries ago. I’ve made you learn every part of it in case we can’t make it to the canyon. You’ve got to get away and carry this knowledge somewhere safe. Find people you can trust to help you, and then do the things I taught you.

“We can’t all make it, Krusk,” he whispered. “Unless a miracle occurs, you’re the only one.”

“No. You’re the captain. You will make it,” Krusk said, as if the strength of his words could make them true, but Tahrain shook his head and smiled sadly.

“I won’t. I can’t leave them—” he waved his hand at the sleeping guardsmen—“Fortune is against me, but my whole life has been dedicated to this task. Through you, I can fulfill it.”

Tahrain put his hand on the packet Krusk still held. He pressed it against the half-orc’s chest. Reluctantly, Krusk tucked it away inside his armor.

When Tahrain finally threw himself down amid his soldiers, his eyes still found Krusk standing alone near the edge of the camp, the half-orc’s face turned toward the darkened desert.



“Captain! Look!” one of the soldiers on point called out, drawing the attention of everyone with any attention to spare.

She waved her arms and gestured toward the horizon. In the light of the new morning, Tahrain squinted ahead and saw the unmistakable outline of hills.

Still far off in the distance, but within sight, he thought as he felt a grim strength renew itself in his limbs. There is hope. The canyon is safety. If we can reach it, we’ll stand a chance.

A cry from the rear of the company interrupted Tahrain’s hopeful thoughts. The warning came from Krusk. Tahrain squinted back toward the source of the sound and felt his empty stomach sink. A cloud of swirling sand broke the evenness of the horizon behind them.

“Dust storm?” Polrus asked without much hope.

Krusk jogged through the company, stoically ignoring the pain and frustration of those around him. Stopping in front of the captain, he gave his report.

“They’re coming, Captain,” he growled. He had his bow in his hands, strung. “An hour back at this pace, maybe less.”

Tahrain cursed. “So they’ve caught us. We can’t reach the canyon ahead of them. Now’s the time.”

He looked pointedly at Krusk. The half-orc ignored him but Polrus opened his mouth to ask a question.

Krusk interrupted, “Can you run?”

Polrus blinked, then shut his mouth.

A sneer came to his lips but Krusk leaned in and growled, “Run or die, human. Your choice.”

The challenge was all the lieutenant needed.

“We can run,” Polrus said loudly.

The soldiers around him looked up, startled. He licked his dry, cracked lips.

“We can run, half-breed,” he said even louder, shrugging out

of his pack and throwing its useless weight to the ground.

Most of the soldiers followed their lieutenant's lead, abandoning everything they couldn't use in a fight.

"Everyone! Get in close," Tahrain called.

The soldiers kept moving forward, but clustered around their captain. They were tired, sore, and thirsty, but they hadn't given up yet. Tahrain blinked in the sunlight. He was proud of them, and he wished he hadn't doomed them all.

"The canyon's ahead," Tahrain called. "It's not close, but if we can make it there, we can use the cover of the rocks to punish them for what they did to our city." It wasn't a rallying cry so much as a statement of hope. "They're close behind. I want everyone to jog, double time, and drain your waterskins if you've anything left."

Some looked at the captain with confusion, but most understood. Water would do them no good if they died before they could drink it.

"Keep them and your weapons, drop everything else. If you can't run," the captain continued, already panting, "don't try." His face darkened as he said what needed to be said, "And don't stop for anyone. If you can't keep up, stop where you are and find cover. Slow them down. Die with honor."

As the captain ran, he looked around and saw grim determination on the faces of men and women he'd known for years. His lieutenant, Polrus, jogged by his side, and when their eyes met, he simply nodded. They trusted him, he knew, and they were content in their duty.

Then they heard the howls.

At first, the sound was like wind raking across the dunes. Then the sound came like dogs baying in a hunt. That would have been frightening enough, but there was something about the howls that didn't seem like the wind, or like dogs, but like a language. The howls had words in them, foul, inhuman words crying out behind the exhausted soldiers.

Soldiers started to run, not jog. Bursts of adrenaline carried a few men and women past the front of the company.

When the captain noticed their discipline breaking, he called out to Polrus, "Keep everyone together! No running—double-time, that's all!"

The captain panted. The lieutenant stumbled but kept up the pace as he moved toward those who seemed on the edge of panic. He couldn't get to them all, but most started to slow, to maintain a steady pace. Those that didn't slow, the company passed in minutes, gasping, struggling on the ground, trying to stand.

"Fight," the half-orc said as he passed the fallen. "Die with honor."

Before long, the howls behind them mingled with screams as the first to fall out were overrun. Tahrain raised his sweat-soaked head, and the nearness of the canyon surprised him. Already they were passing scrub grasses and mounds of dirt. In a few minutes they'd reach cover.

But there were no more minutes. The soldiers could run no farther. Nearly half the company had collapsed already. Tahrain called out to the half-orc, only a few steps in front of him. The barbarian pulled up short and looked back at his leader.

"Now—now's the time!"

Krusk shook his ugly head but Tahrain stopped his refusal with a curse.

"Now, damn it! You've got to get away. I'm going to die here regardless of what you do. My only hope lives with you."

He slammed his palm against Krusk's chest, where he knew the half-orc kept the packet.

But still Krusk refused to part. He gripped his greataxe and looked at Tahrain. When the two pairs of eyes met, Tahrain wondered how anyone could consider this misshapen creature anything but a valiant man.

"Go," Tahrain pleaded.

"Look out!"

The cry came suddenly and Tahrain whirled away from Krusk.

A mounted figure seemed almost to materialize out of the swirling dust and heat shimmers amid the remnants of his company. It drove in among the rearguard—a black horse, a rider clad all in black armor, and a sword upraised like Hextor's own. Tahrain had seen this figure from the city wall, commanding the assault.

Now the bastard's here, Tahrain thought, intent on killing what's left of my company.

Below the knight, a soldier from the rear guard struggled to draw her own weapon, but the knight's arm came down. The black sword fell just as the Kalpeshian's blade cleared its scabbard. The woman cried out as the black blade split her skull. Blood splattered the horse's side as the soldier collapsed into the sand.

The knight spurred the horse forward. Soldiers dived out of the destrier's path, or simply collapsed to the side. The knight ignored them. The full, black helmet fixed itself on Tahrain, as if the wearer suddenly knew who led the desperate company. The horse lunged.

Tahrain readied himself for the charge, but a hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him off-balance. He stumbled and fell. The knight swept over him, the horse's hooves missing his head by inches. He heard the beast stumble on the suddenly rocky ground. As the captain looked back, he saw the knight struggle to stay astride the animal as it tried not to fall or break a leg.

Rolling away and up, Tahrain turned toward his rescuer to tell him to obey orders and keep running, but then he saw the man's face. It wasn't Krusk, whom he'd expected, but Polrus. The half-orc was nowhere to be seen.

Polrus grinned feebly as the knight fought to turn the horse. "My turn, sir," he said. "Get going."

The lieutenant maneuvered so the knight would have to ride over him to keep Tahrain from escaping toward the canyon. He braced his shortspear for the charge.

The captain looked around. Krusk was gone. He'd obeyed orders, finally, and gotten away. Tahrain silently sent a quick prayer to Pelor to protect the half-orc then he drew his own weapon. It

was a long-handled falchion and Tahrain gripped it in both hands. The howls of the gnolls grew closer.

“No, lieutenant. I’m staying with you. I’ve fulfilled my oath. Our mission goes on though we do not.”

Nodding without fully understanding, Polrus turned toward the knight.

“Someday,” he said wryly, “you’ll have to tell me what all this is about.”

Tahrain grinned.



The black knight stood over the bloody, arrow-filled corpses of Captain Tahrain and Lieutenant Polrus. Barks and howls sang out all around, and gnolls, some carrying bloodstained axes and others wielding crude bows, loped up to the armored figure.

“Any survivors?” asked the knight. The voice sounded almost musical, but also cold, even metallic.

The gnoll’s tongue lolled in its mouth as it ducked its head. It bore two weapons, a hand axe and what looked like an oversized scimitar with a cruel, hooked end. A white patch of especially long fur adorned its canine head. Its ears had many notches—marks of challengers to the gnoll’s dominance, all defeated.

It barked a reply in its own language.

“Good,” the knight replied. “We’ll question them, but we must hurry. I need to get back to the army before it disintegrates.”

The gnoll howled quietly. It was almost a whimper.

“Don’t worry; you’ll have your fun. Make them talk. Find out if any escaped. If you can’t get anything out of them. . . .” The knight toed Tahrain’s corpse and the gnoll’s answering bark took on a cruel, snickering tone. The blood from the captain’s body had stopped flowing, but the sand all around it was mud-red. “Well, that’s why I brought the shamans. You’ll get answers. From them, or from him.”

The gnoll bobbed its head and stepped back. The knight

crouched to look at the body. Gauntleted hands gracefully removed the black helmet. Long ebony hair spilled out and across armored shoulders and framed the narrow face of a severe, yet beautiful woman. Her blue eyes traveled up and down Tahrain's fallen form and her fingers felt along the blood-soaked raiment. For a moment, she gazed into the captain's dead, staring eyes, then she stood and walked away.



Krusk watched the slaughter from the relative safety of the canyon's rocky edge. He felt his rage grow until he could barely control it. He hugged the rock to stop himself from bursting forward when the captain dueled the black knight, and he pressed Tahrain's packet to his face when the man was struck down. Never had the half-orc done something so difficult, or that felt so shameful, as hiding while his only friend fought and died. Krusk knew that he couldn't have saved the captain, he couldn't even have saved himself if he'd been with the others. He would be dead, and the woman in the black armor would have Tahrain's papers and the golden disk. If not for his promise, that's how Krusk would have wanted it.

From the rocks, Krusk marked the dark warrior and the gnolls, memorizing their faces and voices. He would take the packet to the place Tahrain described, with or without help, and he would keep his promise. Then, with his oath fulfilled, Krusk would see the knight and the gnolls again.

He would see them again.



THE HUNT

The rain slackened as the hunters made their way through the forest, but the light continued to dim. Early tripped over two logs and what Naull thought may have been a hedgehog, but neither Ian nor Regdar would agree to light torches.

“Ian can see the tracks just fine,” Regdar said shortly when the wizard brought the subject up for the third time, “and I can see him. The rest of you follow me and we’ll make it.”

Naull silently cursed her partner’s stubbornness, but privately agreed it was the wise choice. Orcs, she knew, could see well in the dark—but only over short distances. If the party lit a torch, anybody within a hundred yards would see them coming.

“He’s slowing down,” Ian said suddenly, stopping short. Regdar nearly stumbled over the half-elf and Naull bumped into him, her small body banging against the hard metal of his armor. Trebba put a hand out and Early—now well in the back of the party—managed to hold up. “He’s stopped fleeing. He’s going more carefully.”

Is that a good thing, or a bad thing? Naull thought.

She brushed her black, wet hair back from her eyes and looked around. Trees, nothing but trees. She didn’t like the seeming

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openness. A human through-and-through, she still preferred “adventuring” in caves. The woods looked open and boundless, but all those trees could be hiding eyes, and bows, and arrows.

“Spread out a little,” Regdar ordered.

Everyone, except Ian, who still searched for the fugitive orc leader’s tracks, obeyed automatically. Naull couldn’t help but smile a little. She’d known Regdar for quite some time, but the others had been with them for only four days. She hardly knew anything about them, and they knew a little about her and her partner, yet they followed his direction almost without question. She’d trusted Regdar for a long time, but why did they? Naull looked over each of her companions in turn as they searched the darkness for signs of their foe.

Trebbra, a self-professed thief, picked her way up the slick angle of a fallen tree, probably in hopes of getting a look around in the dim light. She moved gracefully, even over the damp, moss-covered bark. Soon she was nothing but a shadow against the broken trunk.

Off to the other side, a branch snapped and a soft, pained curse followed—Early. The tall man had joined up with them at the village, and Naull knew for certain that he was a local. He couldn’t have been more than eighteen years old. He had no beard and chubby cheeks, but he was very, very strong. The “boy” had submitted to a few tests before being accepted as part of the group. Lightly armored and wielding nothing but a wooden shield and an old, plain long sword, he’d nearly broken through Regdar’s well-trained guard with nothing but strength and enthusiasm. Naull watched him pick his way around a broken tree limb, trying not to make any more noise. He started looking around, squinting into the darkness, as if foes might leap out from behind any tree.

Green, Naull thought, but Early’s actions reminded her she had work to do, too. She did a quick inventory of her spell pouches and sighed. She still had everything she needed to cast

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her remaining spells, but her “big bangs” were gone, used up in the ambush that afternoon. Her web spell had snared most of the orcs at one swoop—all but their leader, who sacrificed his troops to make his own escape. They were tracking that lone orc through the darkening woods, hoping it would lead them to its lair, what remained of the raiding party, and their spoils.

Scanning the woods, Naull tried to locate Ian and Regdar. She found them both quickly. Regdar, the burly fighter who led the group, was easy to spot in his plate armor. He stood almost motionless over Ian.

The half-elf, on the other hand, was an enigma. Except for his chosen vocation—his woodcraft spoke to his part-elven background—he didn’t act like any half-elf she’d heard about or met before. An abrasive mercenary by his own admission, the slight, short man still had a compelling, almost intense, nature. Even his name was strange. Elves, in Naull’s limited experience, usually had longer, more sing-song names. “Ian” seemed too plain, somehow.

Ian’s light hair and white skin, however, went along with Naull’s image of elves. The fact that his clothes somehow stayed inexplicably clean as he searched the dark ground for tracks fit, too. His sharp, ice-blue eyes pierced the darkness and turned toward Naull. He’d sensed her staring at him, she knew suddenly, and he held her gaze for a moment, then turned back to his work.

It never crossed her mind that Ian wouldn’t find the tracks, even in the dark, even after the brief rain shower, and that proved a good instinct. After only a few minutes, the ranger stood up again and motioned the party in.

“He’s gotten away,” Ian said flatly. Early cursed, but Regdar waited and watched the half-elf pause. “Or so he thinks.”

A rare smile graced the ranger’s features, but it wasn’t a pleasant one. The smile was that of a hunter who enjoyed the kill and who knew his quarry had been run to ground.

“I wanted to make sure he hadn’t gotten clever, but I’m convinced he thinks we’re still back at the ambush site, picking through

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the wagons and his fellows' gear. It's what he'd be doing, probably." Nothing disguised the disdain in Ian's voice. But the half-elf grew professional again, turned toward a nearby slope, and said, "He paused here and looked around. He didn't hear us coming." A sharp look made Early blush, but Ian continued, "and he couldn't see us. We were just far enough behind to make him feel confident, so he headed down there."

"Back toward the path?" Trebba asked.

"Yes," he replied. "The path probably leads right up near their lair. Nobody comes this deep into these woods anymore," he added. "They didn't have to hide."

Regdar nodded and asked, "Should we go back to the path, or do you want to follow him directly?"

"The orcs obviously didn't think they'd be followed far into the forest. We found the path after only, what, two days of looking?" Ian continued, not waiting for confirmation. "They stayed careful until they got into the woods, but then they relaxed. I'm guessing they got sloppier the nearer they got to home."

"So we should go back to the path," Early drawled confidently, "find 'em quick, and kick some orc tail. Heat up the oven 'cause we'll be back for breakfast."

He patted his long sword and grinned.

"Well," the half-elf drawled, mocking the farm boy's accent until Regdar's sharp glance cowed the ranger. "If we go back onto the path, we'll almost certainly find the orcs' lair—and probably quicker than if we follow the tracks of a single orc through the forest at night, in this drizzle, but then we'd be coming at them from where they expect. As I've already said, this one we're tracking thinks he fooled us. If we go back, we're doing what he expects—and night is orc time."

"So what?" Early asked, a tiny bit of belligerence creeping into his voice. "There's just the one o' him left. We already killed over a half-dozen orcs in the ambush. If you're thinkin' about Yurgen, well, I'm sorry he's dead, too, but he did a foolish thing, charging

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into the woods alone after this brute. If he'd done like Regdar told him, he'd still be alive. I don't care how tough this orc is, I'm bettin' the five of us can take one more."

As Ian opened his mouth for a scathing reply, he found it hard to talk with two hundred and fifty plus pounds of plate-armored human standing on his toe. The half-elf gasped and Regdar stepped back.

"But consider this, Early," Regdar said as if nothing had happened, "there may be more than just the one we're tracking."

"There certainly will be," Ian grumbled, flexing his mashed toes. "They've been operating out of that lair for a month now. This isn't just a hit-and-run raiding party. I'd guess that at least a couple of warriors stayed behind to guard the other loot, plus whatever others tagged along—young and such. They could still be strong enough to cause us some trouble if they catch us by surprise, or if we just stumble into their midst in the dark." Ian waved back toward the ambush site, several miles behind them and grinned. "Remember how well it worked for us."

Early nodded in understanding and grinned back. Naull looked between the two of them, thinking perhaps the half-elf wasn't as cold as he seemed, and the farm boy wasn't as dumb as he acted.

We all put on our little shows, she thought.

"Hey, Naull," Regdar asked. "What about you? What's our wizard got?"

"Well . . ." she started, fingers automatically going to her component pouches, even though she'd just sorted them out moments before, "not a lot. Don't worry about light. I can take care of that in a hurry, when we need it. And I might be able to distract one or two with some sounds."

"What about the big stuff?" Early asked impatiently.

She realized suddenly that her web spell may have been the most magic he'd ever seen. A lot of country folk had clerics to tend to their ills, but wizards preferred the city life. Books didn't grow on trees, after all.

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She chuckled at her inadvertent joke. Early took it to mean she had something nasty prepared and he nodded.

"Got it. You don't wanna spoil the surprise. No problem."

He gave her a thumbs up and started off. Ian and Trebba already followed the orc's tracks, but Regdar hung back.

"Seriously, Naull," he asked in a low voice, "what do you have left?"

She sighed, "Well, I've got another magic missile, but everything else is pretty defensive. Not everybody can walk around in their own private golem, you know." She slugged his armored side in an attempt at playfulness and was rewarded with a dull clang. "Ow!" As she pretended to suck her knuckles in pain, Regdar grinned.

"Can't blame you for that. I wish we had a healer with us," Regdar sighed. He pulled off one of his gauntlets and put his hand on her back, gently guiding her over and around the underbrush as they walked. "It wouldn't have done Yurgen any good, but . . ."

He went quiet as the two of them followed the rest of the party.

"You couldn't have stopped him, Regdar," she said. She reached around and gave his bare hand a squeeze. "He shouldn't have done what he did, but he died fighting."

"That's the best we can hope for, I suppose," Regdar said.

"Not me! I'm going to die in a big bed at the top of my own wizard's tower, surrounded by dozens of spellbooks and served by hundreds of apprentices!" She smiled lazily and winked. "Maybe you can be captain of my guard, if you play your cards right."

She ran the fingers of her free hand over her tunic, fingering a few of her component pouches. Naull knew the cut of the pouch belts helped accentuate her modest curves and she was surprised to find herself flirting.

He's my partner! she thought, a little embarrassed, but she smiled at the fighter anyway.

Looking down at her, Regdar answered her smile with one of his own. His close-cropped goatee sometimes gave him a violent, even evil look, but now it nearly made Naull laugh out loud.

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"If I have time for it," he said. "I figure I'll be a king and you'll be my court wizard . . . or jester. Depends on if you ever get better at this spell business."

He let go of her hand and raised his arm in mock defense as Naull swiped at him again.

"I guess I'm getting used to this ironmongery after all," he teased as he nimbly avoided another blow. He caught her wrist, lightly, on the third. "C'mon," he said, his voice serious again. "It isn't over yet."

Naull straightened at the change in his voice and she nodded.

Back to business, she thought.

"You're right. Best not wear the crown till they make you king."

It took the party less than another hour to track the orc leader the rest of the way to his lair. Ian was right—the orcs settled in after their first few raids and looked comfortable. They laired in a small valley in the woods, a dell with good tree cover and caves in the northern side. If there were guards, they weren't there now. Perhaps the leader called them in when he arrived ahead of them. Night lay full upon them, and the party moved in a tight, quiet mass.

"Whew!" exclaimed Early. "The smell!"

"Shut up!" Regdar hissed. Early's voice sounded loud in the still darkness. "Everyone, hold up."

Ian crouched near a tree, running his pale fingers up and down the trunk. In the gloom, Naull saw his bright eyes follow his hands, then his whole face turned upward. He pointed and her eyes followed his finger.

Trebba, moving gracefully and silently over the leaf and twig covered ground, came up to Ian's tree and began climbing. The woman moved slowly at first, but seemingly found the going easier than she'd expected. Within a few seconds her black shape disappeared over the object in the tree. A few seconds after that a knotted rope slid down the trunk and into their midst.

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Early grabbed the end of the rope and steadied it for Ian. The elf climbed it nimbly and soon he was gone. Naull wondered if she should follow, but at a sign from Regdar, Early and the rope slid up against the tree trunk, putting it between them and the dell.

Ian and Trebba returned after a minute or two, and the party huddled behind the tree.

Regdar turned to Ian and asked, "Could you see the lair?"

"Yes. They've cleared away a lot of the trees and brush down there. We missed a path they use to bring in their loot; it's in the southeast corner. Their leader knows the area well enough he didn't have to head for it," the half-elf explained. "They've got a rough barricade on it, but I guess they anticipated success. Most of it's been cleared away. Near as I can tell from here, they have a couple wagons filled with junk lying on the road now. Two or three strong orcs could move them, but not quickly. It looks pretty muddy down there."

"Trebba?"

The woman shrugged and said, "Ian saw more than I did. It's dark down there. We're all going to need light if we're going in. I don't know as much about orcs as our ranger here—" Ian snorted at the compliment as if it meant nothing, but he didn't interrupt—"but it'd be simple to place a few traps or alarms on the likely approaches. Even sharp sticks covered with leaves'd give 'em some advantage."

Ian added, "Orcs like nasty little foot- and spring-traps, coated with their own feces or whatever poisons they can find. They'll be unpleasant." He waved his hand in a broad arc. "I'd expect they've got surprises littering the slopes all the way in."

"Why? I thought you said they ain't watching out," Early asked. He pointed to the platform above their heads. "No guards. Most of 'em went out on the raid, right? They ain't worried about anybody finding their camp, you said."

The half-elf answered with surprising patience, "Just because

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they don't expect anyone to find their nest doesn't mean they haven't prepared."

"Right," Trebba filled in. "Step on a caltrop or spring a rope trap and you're going to make noise. Whatever we do, Regdar—" she turned to the fighter—"we'd better be careful."

"And we'd best get going," Ian urged. "That leader's pretty steamed, or he will be. He's had a little more than an hour to think about what happened to him and his warriors, and he's going to realize he got away because there just weren't enough of us to take him. He's either going to want revenge or he'll want to get out of here quick."

"How'll he plan revenge? I doubt he'd know where to find us." Naull asked.

"He doesn't have to find us," Regdar answered. "Orcs don't like even fights."

"He'll try to take revenge against the village," Trebba added, dread in her voice.

Early's eyes widened and the big man cursed.

"He's not in any shape to do anything tonight," Naull cautioned. "We could wait until morning."

Regdar shifted uncomfortably as Trebba and Early nodded. Ian didn't look happy, either.

"What?" Naull asked. "Am I missing something?"

The ranger and the fighter exchanged glances.

"He won't try to get revenge tonight, no matter what," Regdar said slowly, "but he might try to get away."

Naull started to say that was fine with her, but both Trebba and Early jumped in.

"Get away? No!" the dark woman said.

"With all that treasure!" Early cried.

Both had their points, Naull conceded. Trebba wanted revenge for Yurgen, and Early, along with Regdar and Ian, it seemed—wanted what they all thought was the better part of their payment. Their contract with the village was fifty gold apiece, plus

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any of the humanoids' loot they could recover. Even modest estimates put the potential treasure at well over a thousand gold pieces, based on what they'd heard about the earlier raids. The wizard got a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"Surely," she said, "we could at least wait until morning?"

Shrugging, Regdar looked down at Ian. The half-elf delivered the bad news.

"These orcs have been here a while. It would be just like them to have dug out a few more exits from their lair. It's a long time till dawn. If the orc leader thinks we're on his trail, or just doesn't want to hang around now that we've wiped out one of his war bands, they could slip out a tunnel we know nothing about."

No one in the party looked particularly happy with the thought of following the orc leader into his den in the middle of the night, but Naull was particularly unhappy about it.

"I really don't have much more in the spell department," she said again.

"Chances are good," Regdar answered, "that there aren't many orcs left in there. Like Ian said, an orc leader's going to want to keep his warriors close. He probably took nearly all of them out on the raid."

The fighter didn't sound like he'd convinced himself of that, but Naull looked at the faces of the rest of the party. They'd lost a comrade and didn't seem in the mood for rational thought.

"All right, then. What's the plan?"

Ian could see the best in darkness, so he was to head down the slope first. They chose to approach the lair from the southwest, mainly because it looked like the easiest way down, except for the path past the wagons. No one wanted to go that way. If there were any guards, they'd be there. To the north were the caves themselves, and the slope became a cliff that way. They had no doubt that with ropes and Trebba's assistance they could climb down and perhaps surprise the orcs from above, but since orcs could see in the dark and they couldn't, they'd be more likely to

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be spotted and shot full of arrows before they could retreat.

Trebbra would go with Ian. She told the rest of the party to stay back as far as they could and follow their footsteps exactly, but she felt—and everyone else agreed—that she'd have the best chance of spotting a trap before stepping in it than anyone. It would be slow going, but the trees and underbrush provided plenty of cover.

Naull worried about that. What if they were wrong about guards? Orcs could be behind every tree between here and the caves—more than a hundred yards away, if Ian was right—and it would be a simple matter for outlying pickets to let them enter and shut the trap behind them. When she brought this up, though, Regdar's answer was less than satisfying.

“Ian thinks it's unlikely, and we'll have to risk it. I think he's right that the orcs wouldn't leave many warriors behind to guard their loot, just because of the trust issue. If that's true, there can't be more than a handful of warriors down there.”

Define “handful,” Naull mused glumly.

She was to try to stay in the middle of the party, right in front of Early, with Regdar bringing up the rear. They'd used the last of their coalblack on his plate armor and the two fighters' swords in an effort to minimize any reflection there might be in the dim light, but nothing could cover the clanking Regdar made when he moved at any speed. They hoped the orcs wouldn't notice until the vanguard was upon them.

If I'd known we were going to be sneaking around, the wizard thought sourly, I would've brought along a silence spell.

She made a mental note to ask more questions before she prepared her spells every morning. “Are we likely to be storming an orc lair in the pitch darkness tonight?” hadn't seemed like a pertinent question eighteen hours before.

Despite her sour thoughts, Naull kept her concentration following in Early's footsteps. She let a part of her mind review her spells again, desperate to come up with a combination that might

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deal with any surprises. Still, she just didn't have anything that would be much help against more orcs than they hoped to face.

Suddenly, Ian froze. In the gloom, Naull saw him grasp Trebba's shoulder and the thief held out both her hands and crouched down. It was the signal they'd agreed upon to indicate "Stop!"

Whether the cloud cover broke a little, letting the moon's light in just a tiny bit more, or whether cold Wee Jas chose to look down with uncharacteristic kindness on one of her less-devoted servants, Naull found she could make out the half-elf and what lay just beyond him. A damp wind blew through the dell. The light continued to grow as the cloud cover moved away. With a start of surprise Naull realized that she could see the cave mouth they were heading toward. It lay to the left, recessed into the northernmost wall of the valley. Naull could almost feel orc archers waiting there in the complete darkness of the cave mouth, but no arrows flew.

After a minute or more of silent waiting and watching, Ian motioned the others forward again. As Naull closed in, she heard Trebba's whisper.

"I want to check it out," the thief said. "There could still be a trap in the entrance, or an alarm of some kind."

Ian shrugged and prepared to go with her.

"Don't ring any doorbells," he joked.

"Go ahead," Naull whispered. "I'll get Early and Regdar to move up. We can get to the cave mouth quickly from here if you need us."

Trebba nodded and moved off into the shadows.

"Be careful," Naull added.

She wondered if it was too late for any of them to be careful enough, but she drove the thought as far out of her mind as possible.