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## Escape to the Hidden City

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The heroes of Castle Gore hastened down the hidden tunnel, eager to put as much distance between themselves and Sheoloth as possible before the drow had a chance to organize a pursuit. Nazir's plan was to lead the party into Lowerdark to his home city, the hidden city of Immaskar, where there would be mages able to open a gate back to the party's home world.

Elayna held the Staff of the Spider Queen. The Staff spoke to her telepathically, relating its powers and abilities in an attempt to establish relations with its new owner. To speed the party's progress, Gilead created a *Tenser's Floating Disc* for Bullseye and Dimdar to ride on. The party made respectable time and even managed to pass the Shroud of Healing around to recover from their battle wounds.

A few hours into the descent, Elayna felt an urgent message from the Staff: the party was being pursued. The Staff sensed a half-dozen drow approaching at great speed. Elayna warned the party and a strategy was hastily formed.

The party stopped and prepared for battle. They heard armored footfalls approaching quickly. The fighters readied their weapons and Dimdar began to sing, only to find her voice smothered by a sudden blanket of silence that settled over the area. They quickly worked to determine the boundaries of the silent zone but were interrupted when four drow temple guards charged into their midst at double normal speed. The guards hacked away at the party's defenders with a greater fury than they had shown on their own temple stairs. The party fighters held their ground and absorbed the attacks.

Pyroh found a spot outside the *silence* radius and cast his favorite combat spell, *arc of lightning*, and damaged two of the armored temple guards. The drow leader, a cleric dressed in fine armor, revealed herself and retaliated with *flesh ripper*, a claw of pure evil energy that ripped into Pyroh and wounded him deeply. Gilead drank a potion of *dragon breath* and prepared to use it against the cleric.

Another ugly surprise came from an unseen point: an explosion of vile energy similar to a dark *fireball* burst in the party's midst. As the heroes recovered from the blast the lead temple guard broke through their front line and charged Elayna. She held forth the Staff of the Spider Queen and used its power to stagger her would-be attacker with a full potency *harm* spell. Pyroh seized the opportunity to finish off the guard with a slash of his elven thinblade.

As Cori and Gilead closed on the drow priestess she cast another spell and sprouted two monstrous pairs of spider-like legs. The legs allowed her to rise up and climb the rock wall of the passage, which put her beyond Cori's melee reach. Gilead attempted a *baleful polymorph* on the cleric but was unable to overcome her spell resistance.

The melee turned against the temple guards quickly even as another evil-charged *fireball* blasted at the party. Bullseye delivered a devastating sneak attack on one temple guard while Nazir and Purdue ganged up on another. The fourth guard foolishly tried to wrest the Staff from Elayna only to have her recover the artifact and *disintegrate* him with it where he stood. Nimbus cast his own *disintegrate* to destroy the drow cleric, leaving only the unseen mage alive.

The party quickly found their enemy clinging to the ceiling in the form of a small monstrous spider. They attacked with ranged weapons and knocked the spider to the floor, where it returned to the form of a drow male and ran at full *hasted* speed back toward Sheoloth. Cori and others pursued but the sorcerer got enough of a head start to allow him to stop and cast *wall of force* to seal the passage behind him.

With most of their spells depleted the party risked a little more distance down the tunnel and then stopped for a much-needed rest. They posted triple guards in shifts while the spellcasters rested, watching both directions for signs of any more pursuit. They were not disturbed.

Back at full strength, the party continued down the tunnel to Lowerdark. Ahead the tunnel opened out into a long, deep chasm. Once again Elayna felt a sharp prod from the Staff and a warning that there was a party of intelligent creatures waiting for them at the tunnel mouth.

The party huddled inside the entrance and worked out a strategy. Pyroh and Nimbus peppered the outer edge of the tunnel with *fireballs* while Dimdar sent a cone of flame through the center. Another pair of *fireballs* cleared the flank and allowed the fighters to run straight out into the canyon beyond with weapons at the ready.

The party realized quickly, however, that all of their magical fire had done nothing but use spells on empty space. The enemy, it turned out, was thirty feet above them. The fighters were dive-bombed by four humanoids with bat-like wings and barbed tails that stung with a poisonous tip. Two more swooped in and attacked with longaxes from ten feet above the fighters' heads while another two hovered nearby directing the attack. One chanted and waved his arms and a blood-colored gem appeared in the air above the fighters. Pyroh recognized the manifestation as a *bloodstar*, a necromantic spell that drains blood from creatures wounded in combat, and warned the group to be careful.

Since the enemy was airborne and out of melee range, the party switched to ranged weapons and spells. This proved more difficult than expected, though, as the bat-creatures were incredibly hardy, possessed of both damage reduction and resistance to every energy type. Groop scored a moral victory when the necromancer tried a *burning blood* spell only to have Groop reflect it back with his Mind Over Magic ability.

With the fight outside seemingly even, the axe-bearing enemies swooped into the tunnel in search of Elayna and the Staff. They tried to wrest it from her grip and failed, Elayna again calling on the Staff's power to *harm* an assailant. Pyroh use the sphere application of *wall of ice* to place a protective barrier around Elayna and the Staff. While the creatures worked to break through the ice, the party was able to target them for effective ranged and spell attacks. More winged creatures came in to assist and were met with stronger spells and weapons. As the wall of ice broke down Dimdar had the idea to cast *gaseous form* on Elayna, turning her and all of her possessions – including the Staff – into a form that could not be attacked or grappled. A few moments later all but two of the enemies were dead and the survivors were in full speed flight away from the party.

During the combat the Staff was able to sense that the attackers had been sent by Nyrelda to retrieve the Staff for her own use. Nazir explained that the creatures were varrangoin, a race of batlike creatures native to Lowerdark who often hired out as minions to evil powers. While the varrangoin failed to capture the Staff, they had succeeded in using up a large share of the party's resources. With a

known illithid hunting ground ahead, the party grudgingly chose to take another rest. Elayna used her *power nap* spell to give herself and the spellcasters an accelerated recharge. After a two hour rest and an hour's study, they were ready to face the hostile ground ahead.

The deep cut trench opened out into a wide cavern dotted with stalagmites and stalactites. The party moved swiftly with an eye out for any sign of the mind flayers Nazir knew frequently hunted there. Bullseye had a vague sense that something was odd about a stalagmite they had just passed and he stopped to investigate. The thing that had looked like a stalagmite opened a huge red eye and lashed out at the party with sticky tentacles. Bullseye felt the strength leave his body as he was dragged toward the gaping mouth of the attacker. Two other hidden creatures revealed themselves and also flailed at the party, one attaching a tentacle to Renn.

Nazir recognized the abominations as urophions – the result of implanting an illithid tadpole into a roper's body – and shouted some quick advice to the party. Groop moved quickly to cut Renn free of the strand that held him. Cori took aim at another creature with his bow but the arrow caromed off its hide and hit Purdue. Pyroh tried a *fireball* but failed to overcome the urophions' high spell resistance. Elayna moved quickly to the middle of the fray and cast *Invoke the Cerulean Sign*, a powerful anti-aberration spell that stunned and sickened two of the urophions.

As the fighters moved in to destroy the subdued enemies, four more creatures entered the area. These large creatures looked like golems fashioned from raw brain matter. They advanced on the party and attacked with massive slamming fists. The remaining aware urophion unleashed a mind blast that stunned Nazir just as a brain golem closed in on him.

Pyroh sent another *fireball* at the first two golems and was relieved to see them take damage from the blast. Elayna called on the Staff of the Spider Queen to *harm* the third urophion, which allowed Bullseye to kill it with a slash of his kukri. Cori ignored the constructs to focus on felling the remaining urophions. Dimdar stepped in with her *song of unmaking*, a form of primal music with the power to damage constructs. The heroes gained the upper hand.

From above the fray, two more creatures appeared – mind flayers. They blanketed the party with mind blasts but failed to incapacitate anyone. The party turned their focus to the hovering figures and peppered them with ranged weapons and energy spells. When they saw that the mind flayers had protected themselves from fire and electricity they switched to acid and sonic energy. The mind flayers retaliated with powerful psionic attacks that gravely damaged Gilead and Bullseye, but with their golems and urophions destroyed the illithids were no match for the party. Elayna destroyed one by using the Staff to cast *power word kill* and the other fled only to be shot down by Groop's mighty longbow.

The group took what valuables they could find off the mind flayers' bodies and hurried out of the hunting ground. As they reached the far side of the cavern Elayna felt another warning from the Staff: they were being pursued by demons. The group took battle positions and held their ground in a wide passage. Bullseye climbed the tunnel wall and positioned himself to drop onto the nearest enemy while Nimbus readied a *defenestrating sphere*. Elayna cast *align weapon* on Purdue's gloves so that they could overcome the demons' damage reduction. Soon the bebiliths closed the distance and attacked.

Renn aimed carefully and let fly with a devastating precision shot from his bow. The lead bebilith took the arrow in a vital spot and died instantly. The party cheered wildly and hastened to attack the other

demons with spells and weapons as Dimdar sang her *frozen dirge* song.

While the heroes focused on the demons before them, a massive spider-like construct appeared at their flank where the mages were lined up. A ray of fire shot from one of its four eyes and blasted Renn where he stood. Elayna retaliated by using the Staff to cast *implosion* and damage the creature, which she recognized as a retriever – a demonic construct usually sent by powerful demons to hunt down objects and creatures. The mages quickly backed off, but not before Gilead suffered a devastating claw hit.

Groop charged the retriever, leaving Purdue and Cori to finish off the wounded bebiliths. His attacks, combined with well-aimed spells from the mages, quickly took the creature down, but it got in one last powerful attack when it turned a fleeing Pyroh to stone with another eye ray.

The last bebilith was still oozing blood when a party of humanoids approached the exhausted party. They wore ornate armor and fine cloaks, and appeared to be of Nazir's race.

Nazir identified the newcomers as an Immaskan patrol and stepped forward to greet them. He engaged the leader in an extended talk punctuated with gestures at the party and stern words. After several minutes, Nazir informed the party that the patrol leader, a wizard named Harud Silneval, had agreed to allow the party into Immaskar, the hidden city.

They followed Harud's men through a maze of mist-filled tunnels that left most of the party completely lost. At a dead end Harud performed a practiced gesture and incantation and led the party through the apparently solid rock face and through the entrance to Immaskar.

Harud took the party to a large, comfortable room he described as an off-duty room for some of the city guard. While emphasizing that the heroes were not captives in any sense, he requested that they remain in the room while he and Nazir met with Harud's superiors. Fine food and beverages were brought in and the door left ajar for the party's comfort. Nimbus and Elayna bartered with guards to exchange their drow chain mail for suits of Immaskan plate mail, which was made of a metal similar to mithril and unharmed by sunlight or removal from the Underdark.

The party relaxed and enjoyed their first taste of civilization in weeks. For an hour and a half they rested and talked while they waited for Nazir and Harud to return. Then the door quietly closed and acquired a magical aura that Groop detected. The party looked around cautiously and noticed that the guards who had been stationed nearby were gone.

The reason for the sudden change became clear when a perfect circular hole suddenly appeared in the wall of the lounge room. Bullseye barely escaped being *disintegrated* along with the wall section and was the first to see a huge spherical head float through the new opening – a beholder. The beast was followed immediately by a familiar humanoid figure, the Immaskan mage the party had last seen during their encounter with Vendelorbris.

The heroes acted quickly and focused on the beholder. Nimbus let fly with an *orb of force* and Renn struck the aberration with a precise arrow shot. Gilead created an *antimagic field* around himself and moved to protect as many allies as possible from eye ray attacks.

The Immaskan cast *Evard's Black Tentacles* in an attempt to restrict the party's movement and attacking ability, but Gilead's field neutralized much of the affected area. Groop broke free of the

tentacles' grip immediately and attacked. Elayna called on the Staff one more time to cast a maximized *flame strike*, and Nimbus followed up with a *disintegrate* spell. The beholder counterspelled Nimbus with its own *disintegrate* eye but then fell to another carefully placed arrow from Renn. The mage fled for his life through the hole in the wall.

Immaskan soldiers returned, dispelled the *hold* on the door, and seemed relieved to find the party intact. They had been distracted by a group of quaggoths who somehow gained entry into the city and then realized that it was a diversion to cover an attack on the guard house. The party described their assailant and Harud said that it must be Kedar Haniros, a renegade sorcerer known to have a fascination with beholders. He and Nazir surmised that Kedar must have persuaded the beholder to assist him in gaining the Staff but underestimated the party's capabilities.

The attack unnerved Harud to the point where he was no longer content to seek permission from his superiors to help the party – they had to leave Immaskar immediately. He cast a *gate* spell on the round opening left by the beholder and transformed it into a temporary portal to the Material Plane. The party thanked him and stepped through. Nazir went with them, having changed out of his drow armor for the journey.

The heroes found themselves in another underground cave. This one was small and cramped, but had an obvious and climbable exit. They emerged from the ground and took their bearings, then realized they were in the hills near Heroes' Tomb. The air was cold and the sky showing twilight, so they hastened to the nearby city of Tiburon.

Even before reaching the city, it was clear to the heroes that something was amiss. Security near the city was highly elevated, with more than double the normal guards on duty. They recognized the party as friendly and allowed them into the city. The party was greeted by Farzic, captain of the guard, with disturbing news: Thorauk Tiburon was missing, as was Theo Gore.

Purdue used his speechlink coin to contact Theo and learned that the wizard was in hiding at Bainard's Keep. The group teleported there and learned of the major changes that had taken place during their journey. Artemis Tavor had revealed himself before the Council Arcane and challenged Romney for the Magistracy on the grounds that Romney had failed to protect the dangerous research that Tavor had ordered sealed upon his death, resulting in Tavor's illegal resurrection. The Council endorsed the challenge and Romney met Tavor atop the tower to battle for the job. Tavor used lethal force and prevailed, nearly destroying Romney in the process. Theo, acting as Romney's second, managed to get the former magister out of the city and the clerics of Bainard's Keep healed his wounds.

Tavor had moved quickly to secure his power. Under the guise of rooting out “corruption” in the government, he dismissed the guard and replaced them with his warforged soldiers. He began an “investigation” into his own illegal resurrection that led to the formal indictment of Barnaby for criminal misconduct and treason. Barnaby, according to official accounts, committed suicide rather than face trial and Tavor himself destroyed the body. At Barnaby's funeral Tavor spoke of “those who used Barnaby to further their own selfish ends,” a subtle but unmistakable accusation aimed at Theo himself. Theo was now considered an outlaw, along with the party – his allies – and all were forbidden reentry into the city of Tavor.

Theo and the party took refuge in the caves below Castle Gore to plot their next moves.

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