

Cliffhangers Adventures

Unearthing the Past

by Jesse Decker

"Unearthing the Past" is a four-part Cliffhangers adventure for 3 to 5 1st-level characters. Characters who survive the adventure should advance to second level. DMs can easily modify the adventure to accommodate higher level characters by increasing the number of foes in each encounter. Many of the villains are humanoids, so another good way to adjust the Encounter Levels within the adventure is to substitute more powerful humanoids in each encounter.

Adventure Background

This adventure takes place around the village of Travensburg. The town has had a rough winter, and although the promise of spring seems just around the corner, the town has had to purchase food from a nearby village. The area feels peaceful, but the winter has driven a few small bands of humanoids to search for food outside their normal territory. To protect the valuable shipment of supplies, four guards were sent to escort the wagon. Now the shipment of food is overdue.

Character Hooks

The village needs the shipment of food. The characters can become involved if one of them is beholden to a prominent villager for a past favor. Perhaps they seek the modest reward offered for return the food, or simply see this quest as an act of goodwill.

Travensburg (village): conventional—noble ruler; neutral good; 200 gp limit; 5,000 gp assets; 500 population; Isolated (95% human, 3% halfling, 1% half-elf, 1% other races)

Authority Figures: Alexi Traven (ruling noble), male human, fighter level 6

Important Characters: Duncam Rolwit (head priest), male human priest of Pelor, level 5; Audsun Meller (miller and merchant), male human expert, level 6

Meeting the Locals

As the adventure opens, the party encounters Alexi Traven (male, human, Ftr6). Depending on the hook used to bring the group into the adventure, Traven might have posted a reward, the party could owe him a favor, or he may have simply sought out the party in the local tavern.

When Traven joins the scene, read or paraphrase the following aloud to the players:

A man stands before you, looking worried and impatient. He introduces himself quickly as Alexi Traven, the lord of the town, and gets down to business. "We've got a missing shipment of food," he says. "Two boys went out to meet the wagon this morning, and no one has returned. I'm busy here until the morning, and I need someone to go check on that wagon. The village needs the food -- scraping up the money for it was no easy chore."

At the Wagon (Encounter Level 2)

The wagon lies surprisingly close to town. Just over 5 miles down the road, the party comes upon the wagon and its attackers.

As you crest a small hill, the fate of the food wagon is revealed. Below you, two figures bundled against the cold struggle to lead a resistant horse off the road. Two orcs are standing guard; one of them watch the wranglers with apparent amusement. The snow-covered ground is stained red in places, and a half-dozen bodies lie in the snow.



Seeking to gather supplies to maintain their exploration of a nearby dwarven ruin, two brothers in the service of Wee Jas, the god of magic, have ambushed the wagon and plan to make off with the food. The brothers, Marsem and Aldin Trember, are in charge of the humanoid workforce the servants of Wee Jas employ to turn the nearby ruin into a hidden base of operations. While the exploration and preparation of the dwarven complex is going well, the place is larger than the brothers anticipated, and they need more supplies to feed their surly employees.

While Aldin keeps things moving at the ruin, Marsem has left with some of the orcs to capture supplies. With the help of his orc companions, Marsem has already dispatched the guards sent with the wagon and the two boys sent to meet it. He has just begun to calm the frightened draft horse still attached to the wagon and is about to head for the new base. The groups get their first chance to spot each other when they are 3d6 x 10 ft. apart. An individual must succeed at a DC 20 Spot check to see the other group. (This Spot check is unopposed, as it takes place before either party has any idea of the

other's presence.)

If the party attempts to approach silently, the PCs must make Move Silently checks opposed by the orcs' Listen checks (the orc watching the horse wrangling suffers a –2 penalty to his check). If the party does not attempt to approach silently, or if they roll lower than the orcs, one or both of the orcs standing watch near the wagon hears them. The orcs cry out a guttural alarm to the others and make a Spot check opposed by Hide checks from the party.

At that point, the orcs move to attack, while Marsem hangs back, casting *shield* in preparation. Once combat is joined, he casts *true strike*, then attacks the next round with his crossbow.

Orc (2)

CR 2; SZ Medium-sized humanoid (6 ft., 6 in. tall), HD 1d8; hp 4, 5; Init +0; Spd 20 ft.; AC 14 (+4 scale mail); Atk +3 melee (1d12+3/crit x3, greataxe); SQ –1 penalty to attack rolls in sunlight; AL CE; SV Fort +2, Ref +0, Wil –1; Str 15, Dex 10, Con 11, Int 9, Wis 8, Cha 8.

Skills and Feats: Listen +4, Spot +3; Alertness

Special Qualities: Orcs suffer a –1 penalty to attack rolls in bright sunlight or within the radius of a daylight spell.

Possessions: Each orc has scale mail, a greataxe, and a pouch containing 20 sp

Marsem Trember, male human Sor1

CR2; Medium-size humanoid (6 ft., 1 in. tall); HD 1d4 +2; hp 5; Init +3 (Dex); Spd 30 ft.; AC 15 (+2 armor +3 Dex); Atks +1 melee (1d4+1/crit 19–20, dagger) or ranged +3 (1d8, +1 within 30 ft./crit x3, crossbow); AL NE; SV Fort +4, Ref +3, Wil +2; Str 13, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 10, Wis 11, Cha 15. Spell failure: 10%.

Skills and Feats: Listen +2, Spellcraft +4, Concentration +6; Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot

Possessions: Leather Armor, light crossbow 10 bolts, dagger, cold weather gear, pouch containing 15 gp, pouch of spell components.

Spells Known (5/4): 0--*detect magic, mage hand, read magic, light, 1st--true strike, shield*

The Cliffhanger

When the fight is over, the party can search the area. A DC 5 Search check reveals the bodies are those of the four guards and the two teenage boys sent to meet the wagon. In addition, the bodies of two other orcs lie amid the carnage. If any of the PCs return to Travensburg with the news of the wagon, a group of villagers will come back with them to claim the food wagon and deal with the bodies of the slain.

A DC 10 Search check in the area reveals a large group of tracks coming from the west. These are the tracks made by Trember and the orcs as they prepared to ambush the wagon. The tracks -- easy to follow, once discovered -- lead three-and-a-half miles into the wilderness, back to the ruin that the Trembers are exploring.

The tracks end at the entrance to a shallow cave. The area around the cave mouth looks heavily trafficked, showing several different sizes of boot print. As the party members approach the cave and take a cursory look around, each one may make a DC 10 Spot check to notice movement inside the cave's mouth.

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Adventure Background

The second episode of "Unearthing the Past" takes place in a dwarven ruin located a few miles northwest of the village of Travensburg. In episode one, the players have the opportunity to trace a group of human and orc raiders back to these ruins.

At the Cave Mouth

The episode opens with the party outside of the cave mouth. Any character who succeeds at a DC 10 Spot check notices movement within the cave mouth.

As you approach the cave mouth, you notice that the area outside of the cave is well traveled. Dozens of different boot tracks have trampled the light covering of snow into the mud by. All of the prints appear to come and go from the cave mouth.

For characters who made their Spot checks, you may add the following note:

As you glance around the area, you see the shadows within the cave shift: Something inside obviously moved.

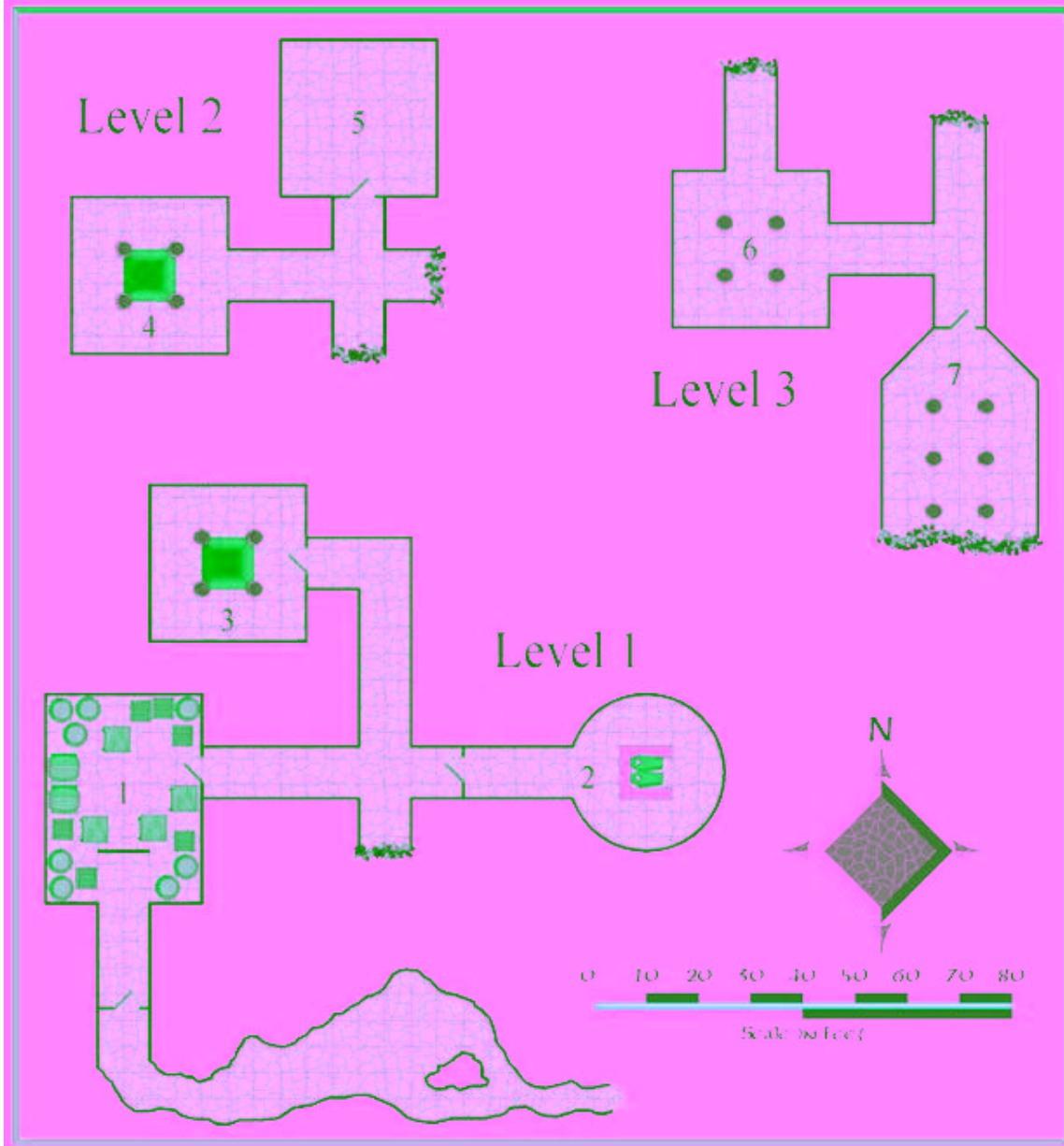
Inside the Cave

Inside the cave, two orcs stand guard with crossbows. Marsem left them with instructions to guard the cave entrance until he comes back. The two guards have a good chance to see the party before anyone notices them, because the cave shelters them, and the party is on open ground. At a distance of 3d6 x 10 ft., the orcs need to succeed at a DC 20 Spot check to see the party. The party, on the other hand, is looking into total darkness and won't be able to see the orcs unless they have darkvision and are within 60 feet of the cave entrance. (Those with darkvision can see them automatically if they draw to within 60 feet.)

If they see the party, the orcs slip to the back of the cave and attempt to shoot at the party from the cover of darkness. If one of the orcs falls, the remaining orc will attempt to flee to alert the orcs in area 1.

After the fight, read or paraphrase the following description.

The cave is roughly hewn and holds little of interest. A well-worn path leads from the entrance to the back of the cave. The back wall of the cave actually appears to be shaped stone. The shaped stone corridor leads to a stout-looking door.



1. Supply Room

This room is used by the Trember brothers and the orcs as a staging and supply area. The walls of the room are lined with tables, boxes, and barrels of all shapes. There are picks, shovels, and other tools for digging and hauling dirt. There are weapons, including 60 crossbow bolts, five spears, two damage suits of scale mail, three spare hafts for greataxes, and one light crossbow. The other useful equipment in the room includes 150' of heavy hemp rope, 2 dozen spikes, 3 small hammer, two lanterns, four flasks of lantern oil, and ten large sacks. Most of the boxes and barrels held food and are now empty. There are a few days worth of iron rations left.

Four orcs are working here. To hear the door opening, they need to succeed at a Listen

check. The DM should set the DC based on how quietly the party moves. If the party makes no attempt to be stealthy, the orcs must succeed at a DC 10 Listen check to hear the door open. As soon as the orcs are aware of the characters, they attack. If they have been alerted to the group's presence ahead of time, two of the orcs will have light crossbows and begin firing at the PCs as soon as they open the door.

Orcs (4)

CR 2; Medium-sized Humanoid (6 ft. 6 in. tall), HD 1d8; hp 4, 6; Init +0; Spd 20 ft.; AC 14 (+4 scale mail); Atk +3 melee (1d12+3/crit x3, greataxe); AL CE, SV Fort +2, Ref +0, Wil -1; Str 15, Dex 10, Con 11, Int 9, Wis 8, Cha 8.

Skills: listen +2, spot +2

Possessions: Scale mail, greataxe, pouch containing 20 silver (At this point, it might become obvious to the PCs that the orcs have all been recently paid.)

2. Crypt

The door to this chamber is barred from the outside. The ruin was haunted by a ghoul, but the priests of Wee Jas were able to control it long enough to force it into this chamber. Unable to break through the stout door, the ghoul waits just on the other side for anyone foolish enough to let it out.

The ghoul waits just inside the room. Knowing that the door can easily be barred again, the ghoul won't attack until the group enters the room. Once at least one PC is in the room, make a contested skill roll between the ghoul's Hide skill and the PC's Spot roll. Only PCs in the room get an attempt to spot the ghoul. If the ghoul is successful, it gets a free surprise action. Because it's watching the door intently, the ghoul cannot be surprised.

Although the ghoul keeps no treasure, there are two locked coffins at the back of the large chamber. The coffins are dwarf-sized and contain the remains of two nameless dwarven warriors. A masterwork battleaxe lies in each coffin with the remains. The handles have rotted away, but the blades are still in good condition. If fitted with a new handle, the axes retain their masterwork qualities.

Ghoul (1)

CR 1; Medium-sized Undead (5 ft. 4 in. tall), HD 2d12; hp 14; Init +2 (Dex); Spd 30 ft.; AC 14 (+2 Dex, +2 natural); Atk +3 melee (1d6+1 and paralysis, bite), and +0 melee (1d3 and paralysis [x2], claws); AL CE, SV Fort +0, Ref +2, Wil +5; Str 13, Dex 15, Con —, Int 13, Wis 14, Cha 16.

Skills: Climb +6, Escape Artist +7, Hide +7, Intuit Direction +3, Jump +6, Listen +7, Move Silently +7, Search +6, Spot +7, *Feats:* Multiattack, Weapon Finesse (bite)

Possessions: none

The Cliffhanger

As the group readies to head down the corridor to room 3, any character who succeeds at a DC 15 Listen check hears the lift in room 3 operating.

As you start down the corridor, you hear the muffled rattling of chains sliding over metal. The sound is coming from just around the bend in the corridor.

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Adventure Background

The third episode of *Unearthing the Past* takes place in a dwarven ruin located a few miles northwest of the village of Travensburg. In episodes one and two, the players traced a group of human and orc raiders back to the ruins.

Area 3: Lift Room

The first thing the Trember brothers did when they occupied the ruin was to get access to the lower levels. The brothers found and repaired an ingenious dwarven lift. The lift uses a series of pulleys, cranks, and catches to give access to the two lower levels of the ruin.

The lift moves between levels very slowly. As a standard action, one character on the lift may attempt to move it 5 feet up, or control the lift's speed and descend 10 feet. To raise the lift or to control its descent, the character must succeed at a DC 10 Strength check. The crank apparatus on the lift was designed for only one person to use. In a pinch, one person can assist.

As the PCs approach the lift, they have a chance to hear its chains moving through the pulleys. Characters within 30 feet of the door to the room who succeed at a DC 15 Listen check can hear the chains rattling. Five rounds after the rattling begins, the orcs arrive at level one, and the noise stops.

Orcs (4)

CR 2; SZ Medium-sized humanoid (6 ft., 6 in. tall), HD 1d8; hp 4, 5, 5, 6; Init +0; Spd 20 ft.; AC 14 (+4 scale mail); Atk +3 melee (1d12+3/crit x3, greataxe); SQ –1 penalty to attack rolls in sunlight; AL CE; SV Fort +2, Ref +0, Wil –1; Str 15, Dex 10, Con 11, Int 9, Wis 8, Cha 8.

Skills and Feats: Listen +4, Spot +3; Alertness

Special Qualities: Orcs suffer a –1 penalty to attack rolls in bright sunlight or within the radius of a daylight spell.

Possessions: Each orc has scale mail, a greataxe, and a pouch containing 20 sp.

Area 4: Lift Room, Level 2

The second-level lift room contains support beams and part of the pulley system, but nothing else of interest. Because of their fear of the choker in Area 5, the orcs and the Trembers pass through this area as quickly as possible.

Area 5: The Cliffhanger (EL 2)

This room, like the lift room on this level, has been left relatively untouched by the Trembers and their humanoid servants. The orcs that first explored the level were killed by the choker that hides in the rubble at the end of the southern corridor. The choker dragged the bodies into this room after finishing with them. Characters who succeed at a DC 5 Spot check notice the bodies right away.

The door to this room lies broken in the passageway. There are old, dried bloodstains on the floor, big enough to be noticeable even in torchlight. Unlike the rooms of the first level, this chamber shows few signs of recent occupation: two bodies that seem to have been dragged there.

Choker

CR 2; Small Abberation (4 ft. 2 in. tall); HD 3d8+3; hp 18 (wounded, currently 16 hp); Init +4 (Improved Initiative); Spd 20 ft., climb 10 ft.; AC 16 (+1 size, +5 natural); Atk +6/+6 (1d3+3 [x2] tentacle slap); Reach 10 ft.; SA constrict 1d3+3; AL CE; SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Wil +4; Str 16, Dex 10, Con 13, Int 4, Wis 13, Cha 7

Skills and Feats: Climb +16, Hide +7, Move Silently +4; Improved Initiative

SA—Haste (Su): The choker may take an extra partial action each turn as if affected by the *haste* spell.

SA—Improved Grab (Ex): To use this ability, the choker must hit an opponent of up to Large size with a tentacle attack. If it gets a hold, it can constrict.

SA—Constrict (Ex): A choker deals 1d3+3 points of damage with a successful grapple check against Large or smaller creatures. Because it seizes victims by the neck, a creature in the choker's grasp cannot speak or cast spells with verbal components.

The choker hides in the rubble at the end of the southern passage. As the party leaves the area, the choker attempts to Move Silently and grab the last member of the group. Because it has used the rubble many times, the choker gets a +5 circumstance bonus to its Hide check while in the rubble.

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Adventure Background

The fourth episode of *Unearthing the Past* takes place in a dwarven ruin located a few miles northwest of the village of Travensburg. In episodes one and two, the characters traced a group of human and orc raiders back to the ruins. In episode three, they discovered the lift mechanism that allows access to the ruins' lower levels.

Area 6: Level 3 (EL 4)

The lowest level yet discovered by the Trember brothers, this area boasts sturdy-looking walls, a relatively debris-free floor, and more evidence of the dwarves that once inhabited these caverns.

Two orcs are busy clearing the passageway leading to Area 7. They double as sentries for Aldin Trember, who is currently searching Area 7 for a hidden passage that might lead deeper into the dwarven city.

Orcs (2)

CR2; SZ Medium-sized humanoid (6 ft., 6 in. tall), HD 1d8; hp 4, 5; Init +0; Spd 20 ft.; AC 14 (+4 scale mail); Atk +3 melee (1d12+3/crit x3, greataxe); SQ -1 penalty to attack rolls in sunlight; AL CE; SV Fort +2, Ref +0, Wil -1; Str 15, Dex 10, Con 11, Int 9, Wis 8, Cha 8.

Skills and Feats: Listen +2, Spot +2; Alertness

Special Qualities: Orcs suffer a -1 penalty to attack rolls in bright sunlight or within the radius of a daylight spell.

Possessions: Each orc has scale mail, a greataxe, and a pouch containing 20 sp

The orcs waste little time asking questions; as soon as the lift has come to a halt, the orcs see that there are intruders and begin attacking. They yell for their leader in Area 7. If Aldin Trember succeeds on a DC 5 Listen check, he arrives after two rounds of combat. If he fails the Listen check, he may try again during each successive round of combat. Since the orcs yell only for one round, the Listen check during subsequent rounds has a DC of 10.

Aldin Trember, male human Clr2 (Wee Jas)

CR2; Medium-size humanoid (5 ft., 10 in. tall); HD 2d8; hp 10; Init +0; Spd 20 ft.; AC 16 (+4 armor +2 shield); Atks +4 melee (1d8+2/crit x2, heavy mace); AL LE; SV Fort +3, Ref +0, Wil +6; Str 15, Dex 11, Con 10, Int 11, Wis 16, Cha 14.

Skills and Feats: Spellcraft +4, Concentration +5, Heal +7, Knowledge (Religion) +1; Combat Casting, Scribe Scroll

Make sure these skill points add up.

Possessions: Scale mail, masterwork heavy mace, large wooden shield, holy symbol, cold weather gear, scroll of cure light wounds, pouch containing 13 gp.

Spells Known (3/2+1): 0--*light, mending, read magic*; 1st--*cure light wounds, entropic shield, cause fear*

Area 7: The Grand Hall

The Grand Hall is the current focus of Aldin's investigation of the ruin. The design on the floor (see below) hints that there is a secret exit from the room, but Aldin has been unable to locate the hidden door.

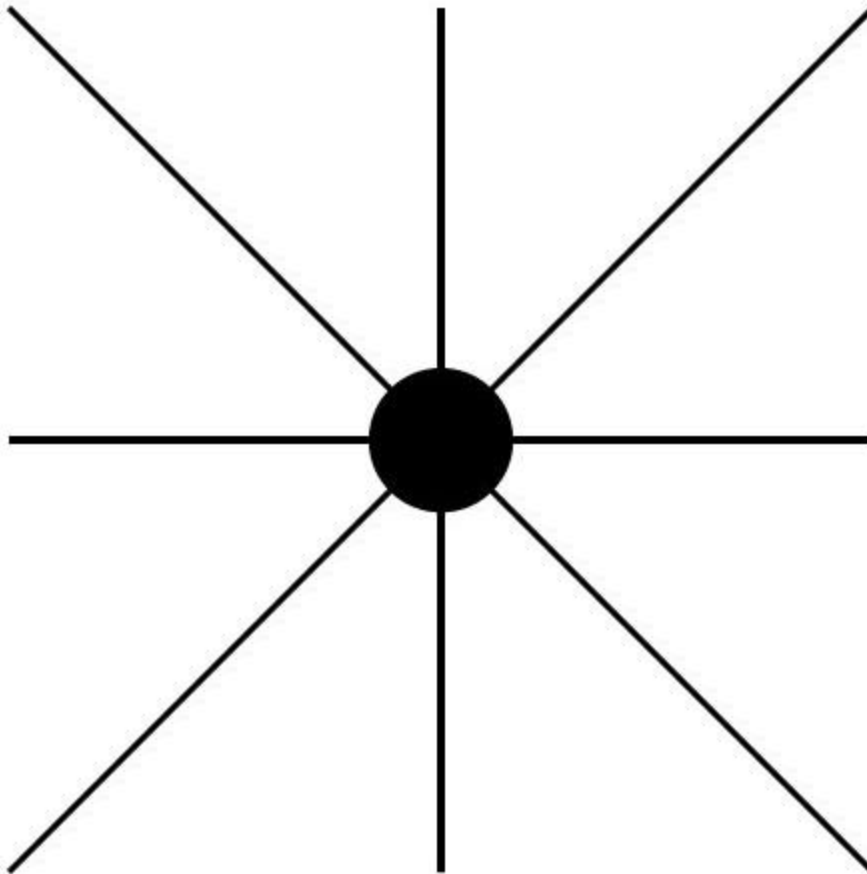
Supplies are stacked along some of the walls near the door. Once the crews finished clearing out the rubble, Aldin planned to consecrate the hall to Wee Jas. Anyone searching the supplies who succeeds at a DC 15 Knowledge (religion) check can identify the purpose of the supplies. The boxes hold little of interest, but two fine tapestries depict important scenes from the teachings of Wee Jas. If the party can find an interested buyer, the tapestries could be worth as much as 50 gp each.

A secret door leads out of Area 7. Characters who succeed at a DC 20 Search check can find it in the center of the east wall. Aldin has found the door, but has not yet figured out how to open it. The door has no visible opening mechanism, and it is protected by an elaborate "puzzle" locking device (see below).

One of the most striking features of the room is the design on the floor. A shallow circular indentation occupies the center of the room, with six shallow grooves leading out of it to the edges of the room and continuing under the walls. Characters succeeding at a DC 25 Search check notice two key details about the design: (1) There is a slight crest to the floor, the lip of the circular indentation being slightly higher than each of the places where the grooves go under the wall, and (2) the grooves themselves get slightly deeper as they approach the wall.

An additional clue is written in Dwarven at the entrance to the chamber. The letters, carefully engraved in the stone, say: "The dwarven spirit is filled with secrets."

The design looks like this:



The solution to this puzzle is simple: Fill the circular area with water. The water flows down the grooves and under the walls. Its movement releases hidden catches that cause the secret door to open.

Deeper Into the Ruins

With Aldin Trember's death, the party ends the danger to the inhabitants of the nearby village of Travensburg. However, if the DM wants to allow the party to continue searching the underground dwarven city, the adventure could continue through several possibilities. One of the best is to use the dwarven city map tiles from "Shards of the Day" by Randy Maxwell, a mid-level adventure from [Dungeon](#) issue #60. The encounters in that adventure are too difficult for a party that has just completed *Unearthing the Past*, but the tiles offer a quick and effective way to let the party explore an entire city. As another possibility, the passage from Area 7 could lead to part of the [Sunless Citadel](#), an introductory **D&D** adventure.