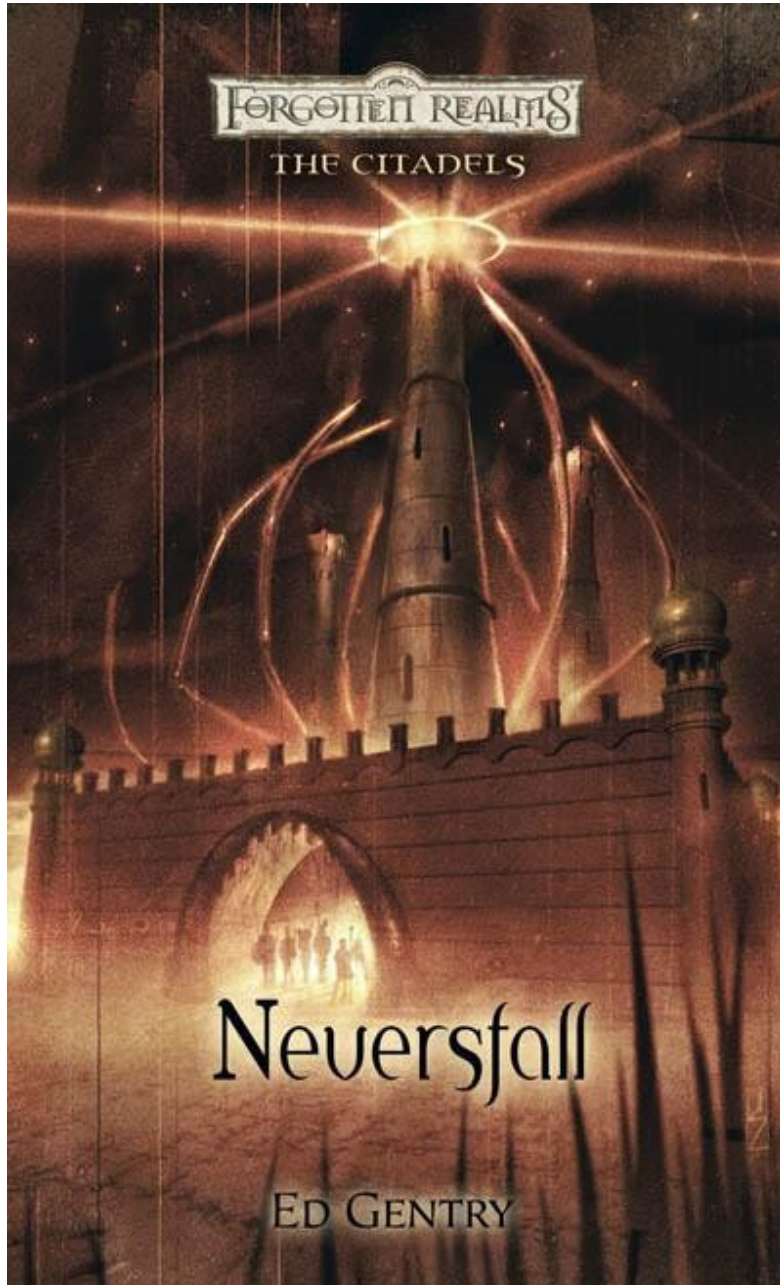


The Way

By Ed Gentry



Corbrinn turned again. Behind him nothing but forest spread out wide, with deep shades of green reflecting their veiled beauty under his scrutiny. The plants of the Aerilpar loomed tall and dense, but not so menacing to one who had spent as much time there as he had.

"Something got you rattled, halfling?" said Resler from beside him, his deep voice shattering the serenity of the woods. "Are the trees taunting you, my friend?"

Corbrinn sighed as he faced the man, his employer, at least for the time being. Short and fat by human standards he was still taller than Corbrinn by a few hands. His round cheeks and a mouth that always smiled made him a difficult man to remain annoyed with. "Just the noise you make," Corbrinn said glaring at the man.

Resler laughed and nodded. "Point taken, scout. Point taken," the man said in a softer voice.

Corbrinn knew it wouldn't be long until the man's booming voice returned. He had warned Resler at least half a dozen times to be quiet, but it seemed to accomplish little. The man abounded with too much life to be contained in a small or soft voice.

"Something troubles you, my friend," Resler said more gently, taking a knee before the halfling.

He might be an oafish lout, but Resler was perceptive.

"Aye. Something," Corbrinn said, looking behind him into the deep woods. "Something isn't right."

Resler followed his gaze and stood. "I don't like what that portends coming from you. It's rare to find a soul as brave as you, and if you're concerned here, in your own demesne as it were, well then. . . ."

"Brave?" Corbrinn said. "What in the hells gave you that foolish notion? Bravery can never stand up to good old-fashioned caution."

"Yes, brave. Why do you think I hired you to lead this expedition?" Resler said.

"Because I saved your hide in that bar," Corbrinn said.

Resler grinned and snorted, then chuckled. "You fought well and that was certainly part of it. But, let's be honest, plenty of others fight better. It wasn't because you saved me . . . it was because you were brave enough to jump in and try when others stood about doing nothing."

Corbrinn shook his head with a chuckle.

"And let's face it, it's not like you're a great deal of fun," Resler said with a wink.

Corbrinn joined the man in a laugh before saying, "If you hadn't insulted that other merchant's daughter . . ."

"How was I to know she wasn't . . ." Resler paused, peering around, ". . . working that night?"

"She doesn't do that sort of work at all," Corbrinn replied.

"Oh come on, you saw the way she couldn't keep her eyes off of me. I know I'm a fine specimen but still . . . there . . . in front of her father?"

Corbrinn rolled his eyes and waved for the man to stop. "We should keep moving. There's a clearing not too far ahead where we can camp," he said.

Resler nodded, offered a bow, and motioned for the caravan of humans, wagons, and horses to continue. All told, twenty-three souls traveled through the Aerialpar under Corbrinn's watch. Twenty-one people and two horses.

One of those horses whinnied as someone pushed it into motion again. Corbrinn jogged to its side and stroked its withers and soothed the horse. The beast knew something didn't feel right. Corbrinn wondered if, unlike him, the horse knew what, exactly, was amiss.

Corbrinn fell into stride beside the animal and sniffed at the air. Heavy and moist, it was, and laden with the scent of soil and animal, growth and decay, and a thousand other odors. He closed his eyes as he walked and slowed his breathing. All of his attention went to his ears, listening for the smallest deviation in what he knew he should be hearing. Nothing amiss with the sounds he heard. Perhaps something he wasn't hearing? Corbrinn let out a deep breath, trying to shake the frustration.

Corbrinn looked to Resler again who smiled and shrugged. Corbrinn rolled his eyes but could not hide a small smile. He was glad he had taken the job. Resler was too entertaining a companion to have missed.

* * *

Bright beams of sunlight pierced the canopy of forest and pried open Corbrinn's eyes. With a slow breath he rose to his feet from the pile of leaves atop which he had slept. The air was already thick and hot, yet the day was still in its infancy. The moisture beaded on his brow before he had even moved.

"Resler!" someone shrieked from across the camp. "Resler!"

Corbrinn dashed toward the voice, hurtling over sleeping forms and packed crates of goods the caravan was bringing back from Mulhorand.

A young woman scrambled about at the far side of the camp, peering into the tents of others. Protesting howls from the rightful occupant came from one as she emerged.

"What is it, Lenar?" Resler said.

"He's gone," Lenar said. Her face was flushed, her breath short. "He's gone, godsdamn you!"

"Herol?" Resler said as he scanned the area.

The woman did not answer but shouted out the missing man's name again as she peered into another tent.

"Someone's missing?" Corbrinn said.

"Herol!" Lenar shouted, dashing toward the trees that lined the path.

Corbrinn moved to stop her but Resler was quicker, wrapping the woman in a hug to halt her movement into the dangerous forest wilds.

"He's just off pissing's all," said a voice from back in the camp. Grunts of agreement echoed across the camp at the statement.

"No! He's been gone too long!" the woman said, struggling against Resler's doughy arms. "His blanket wasn't warm at all when I woke up."

Resler looked to Corbrinn but did not say a word. He didn't need to. A man was lost and Corbrinn was the one to find him as he had so many others in his years guiding merchants.

"The scout'll find him, girl," Resler said, his grip tightening around Lenar.

Corbrinn knelt. He had tracked animals since before many of the humans around him had been born. He puzzled for several moments over what he saw. Even aside from the disturbance Lenar's frantic search had caused, Corbrinn felt certain something was amiss with the scene. The beasts of the Aerialpar weren't picky about their meals, yet he could find no discernable animal tracks. He found boot prints, pressed deeply into the loose dirt of the forest floor. Whoever had made them was large and heavy.

"Describe him. How big was he?" Corbrinn said to no one in particular over his shoulder. When no response came, Corbrinn turned to see Lenar's eyes focusing on the ground near him as though searching for what he had seen.

"How big is he?" Resler said, staring hard at the scout.

Corbrinn nodded. "Of course. I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . ." he started but stopped with a pat of his hands in the air. "How big a man is he? Anyone?"

"Herol? He's a bit shorter than me." Corbrinn turned to see an average-sized man holding his hand before him, just below his eyes. Corbrinn looked to the speaker's feet and shook his head.

"Probably too short to have feet that big," Corbrinn said. "Is he fat?"

"Huh?" said the same man, still holding his hand before him.

"Fat? Is he a big man?"

"He's skinnier than a fence pole."

"Damn," Corbrinn said.

"What is it?" Resler said.

"He was taken, no doubt. See those footprints? And the scuff marks there?" Corbrinn said. "Whoever it was picked him up and dragged him off."

Lenar's quiet ceased with another cry of her husband's name. "Who?" she howled. "Why?"

"I don't know," the halfling answered. Wild animals sometimes ate their prey in dens away from prying eyes, but Herol had not been taken by an animal. A member of the "civilized" folk had taken him. Being eaten might have been preferable.

Another man, a fair-skinned man whom everyone called Rasp due to his scratchy voice, leaned in to Resler, his face wrinkled. "The liquid fire. Herol had the key to the cabinet with them bottles in it, and now it's gone, boss."

Resler's face went white and he tipped over to land on his bottom. "Oh, gods."

"Liquid . . . alchemist's fire?" Corbrinn said.

Resler stared at him a moment, saying nothing until Corbrinn stepped forward with a scowl as though Resler were not twice his height.

Resler nodded. "I figured better to buy it there and sell it back in Var than let those crazy, war-mongering Mulhorandi's hang on to it."

Corbrinn blew out a sigh. "It's volatile and dangerous. Some of the worst stuff man has ever made. I never would have joined this expedition if I'd have known that was your cargo."

Resler started to speak but said nothing, his eyes locked on Corbrinn. "I know," was all the man said.

Lenar let out another baleful moan from Resler's arms.

Resler hefted her up in a bounce that allowed him to readjust his grip on her again and said to Corbrinn, "Get on with it, scout. No matter what you think of me, you have to find him. Get him back here. If there's anything of him to be had."

Corbrinn eyed Resler for a long moment and nodded. He pulled at a string around his neck, revealing a small holly branch. The understanding of its significance passed through his mind, but Corbrinn put aside the memories to focus. He waved his hands through a few simple motions while holding the twig. He would not wander off the path into the dense foliage of the Aerialpar without making sure none of the beasts there could find him. His spell would see to that.

He stepped from their path, no more than a zigzag line of thinner foliage, and waded into the dense woods. The enormous footprints as his only lead, Corbrinn followed them as best he could. He squinted as the light seemed to disappear all at once. The sun could try as hard as it might like, but it would never penetrate fully into the thick flora of the Aerialpar.

The hum of life filled his ears. Insects buzzed, leaves rustled, creatures of all sorts scuttled along the ground in search of food or shelter. The law of the wild was simple: live.

Corbrinn tied a cloth across his forehead to sop up the sweat forming there as he continued farther into the woods. No effort had been made to cover or disguise the tracks at all. The crushed soil and bent stems and leaves rattled loose by rough passage made for an easy path to follow. Few understood that the wilds could hide you if you let them.

Half a bell passed. The difficult terrain made each step a task requiring concentration. The halfling stripped the kerchief from his forehead and wrung the dirty sweat from it before returning it to his brow. The droplets of perspiration reminded him that he needed to drink. Corbrinn climbed a few feet up a nearby tree and perched atop a wide branch. The ache in his legs flared for a moment. The trail was easy to follow, but the uneven ground and thick foliage fought his passage at every step. The path twisted and wound and began to turn, perhaps back toward the caravan, but it was erratic at best and he tried to assume nothing. He had not gone more than a dozen good bowshots by his best guess.

He sat for a few moments, sipping from his waterskin and enjoying the feeling of the smooth bark against his arms before he hopped down from the branch and wandered toward the trail again. Corbrinn looked ahead and began to grow more convinced that the trail turned toward the caravan, when a chorus of screams shredded the enchanting silence of the forest. Thunderous groaning sounds and cries for aid followed.

Over the tree line, Corbrinn saw smoke puff into the air from the direction of the caravan. He broke into a dash straight toward an enormous tree two dozen paces away, its roots starting to show through the ground around at its base. He gripped the holly sprig at his neck in his hand as he ran. Mystic murmurs spilled from his lips as the fingers of his other hand wove strange shapes in the air. He leapt over shrubbery in his path, ducked beneath a low-hanging tangle of vines and centered himself on the huge tree once again. He leapt into the air, headfirst at the tree as the words ceased and his hands fell to the weapons at his belt.

The mottled gray and brown bark of the tree looked like a dead-end. Anyone watching would have thought the halfling a madman for sure. Though he knew it safe, Corbrinn's eyes closed by reflex. His small, round head hurtled toward the solid, sturdy trunk and disappeared into it, swallowed up by the ancient tree. Corbrinn opened his eyes and absorbed the joy around him. He was in another world, a place most would never be allowed to see. Around him, the fibrous wood, the flesh of the tree, pulsed with life. He and the tree were a part of one another, each sharing the same space and life with one another for that moment. His body was as solid to him as it ever was, as the tree was as solid as it had ever been, yet the two were inside, outside, and through one another all at once.

The life of the tree became a tangible thing. Corbrinn closed his eyes and absorbed the sounds and feelings around him, like a child sprawled across its mother's chest, listening to her heartbeat. The fear of the tree pulsed all around him as though it quivered from his invasion. He offered a soothing chant in the language of the fey, hoping the tree would understand. The halfling longed to stay lost inside the tree, to share in its secrets, but knew he had no time. Even from within his wooden womb, he heard another explosion in the distance.

Different paths he could take opened up before his eyes like drawings in a picture book. Hundreds of trees presented themselves for his choosing, and he quickly found the one he needed. With a parting phrase of peace, Corbrinn stepped from the tree and traveled several bowshots.

Corbrinn stepped through to come out on the dark path before him. Outside, the smoke had darkened the sky. He gasped, though he was not short of breath. While he had not been deprived during the journey through the trees, his body felt frozen, beyond his control. The supernatural feeling of sharing the space with the trees had played with his mind, convincing his body it desperately needed air. Corbrinn shook his head, stomped his foot, and sucked in a deep, long breath.

Corbrinn coughed, his lungs filling with dense smoke that sizzled down his throat. He gagged his way through the terrible odor, as though the air itself were lit aflame and had the very life burned from it. Streamers of smoke rose in the air before him and a heat quite unlike the musty warmth of the forest washed over him. The crackle of burning plants sounded like so many cries of pain. Plump, budding blossoms burst from the heat as the burning embers spread among them. A small rodent, unrecognizable from its burns, clawed at the dirt around its shriveled body. Corbrinn knelt, invoking a prayer to the nature goddess. A single twist of its neck ended its suffering.

Life melted away all around him. Crisp plants cracked under each step as he ran. Corbrinn crouched as he went, his hand scooping a bit of singed dirt. He ground the earth into his thighs as he chanted a familiar phrase. Corbrinn leaned forward to pick up speed as he felt as though his legs had lengthened. He knew there was no physical difference, but he felt as though he had the legs of a human, long and lean, as he began to cover ground more rapidly.

For several heartbeats Corbrinn's eyes could not pierce the wall of black smoke. He could not know what was ahead but he had no choice but to push through to try to get to a clearing. He jogged forward but made only a few steps before his right foot caught on a root. Corbrinn's ankle jerked, eliciting a popping noise from the joint as he plummeted toward the ground. His hands shot out before him and found the ground before his nose. The halfling growled through the pain and pushed himself up to tear off at a run again. The thick hides he wore prevented the whiplike branches of the fauna from shredding him as they lashed against him. The smoke began to thin until it was a veil over his eyes. He ran harder, his muscles aching, until he broke through the patch of smoke altogether and found himself on the narrow path where he had left the caravan.

Corbrinn blinked his eyes several times, disbelieving the sight before him. Three of the caravan's wagons lay on their sides, their contents strewn across the ground, and at least one had caught on fire. Leaning against them, Resler and several others cowered, their faces black, soot-covered smears against the rich wooden stain of the wagons. A few of the defenders fired bows toward the far side of the wagons before shouting for more arrows from those around them.

"Corbrinn!" Resler yelled, grimacing in pain as he did.

Corbrinn shook himself from the surprise and dashed hard to the man's side, his spell giving him speed. Several arrows peppered the ground before him from the other side of the makeshift blockade. None came close enough to even slow him, though they startled him no small amount. He skidded to a stop next to Resler, his mind still racing.

"What in all the hells?" Corbrinn said. It wasn't until Resler spoke that Corbrinn noticed the blood spilling from a hole in the man's stomach. His employer's face was streaked with crimson and soot, but it was not enough to hide the pallor that had taken his skin.

"Rasp, Herol . . . I don't know who else," Resler said. "They're traitors. They're fighting with them."

Before Corbrinn could respond, one of the caravan guards, firing arrows into whatever was beyond the wagons, screamed. Corbrinn leaped away. He drew his weapon as he turned to face the sound. Rasp was there, his bony fingers leading him as he scrabbled over the wagon. The scrawny, gravel-voiced man drove his sword into the Bowman. The steel pierced the defender's shoulder and continued into his torso. Rasp crested the wagon barrier and fell atop the guard. The two hit the ground together, but Rasp was quicker to his feet. The Bowman never found his again. Rasp did not pull his sword from his victim's body or pay the guard another moment's notice.

Rasp's head lolled on his neck until he faced Corbrinn. The halfling took a step back when he looked into the man's eyes. There was nothing there. No hate, no malice, no twisted pleasure, no sense of duty or desire or anything at all. Corbrinn had seen many beings attack others, but their eyes had always given some hint to the reason. Passion burned in them, greed darkened them, or duty brightened them, but Rasp's showed nothing, only emptiness.

Corbrinn pulled his whip from his belt and launched the coil at Rasp's feet. With a satisfying slap, the whip gripped the man's ankles and Corbrinn yanked as hard as he could. Even though he was small, the halfling had learned through the years how to make use of leverage. As planned, the back of Rasp's head barreled toward the ground, impacting with a dull thud before bouncing once and coming to rest with a spray of moist forest dirt.

Corbrinn recalled his whip with a deft yank, looking to Resler for more answers. Before he could speak, Rasp rose from the ground with no strain of effort or shock of anger riding his face.

"Kill him!" Resler tried to shout through a grunt of pain as he held his stomach wound.

Corbrinn hesitated but knew the boss was right. Rasp was on his knees, pushing himself to his feet. His head shot up, eyes locked on Corbrinn. Still, nothing was there. Rasp pushed himself forward before he had found his balance, plowing toward the halfling in a scrambling dive. Corbrinn easily sidestepped the charge and looped his whip around Rasp's feet once again. With a sharp pull, Rasp's face bit into the forest floor.

Corbrinn brought his sword up in defense when noise from behind him drew his attention. He spun to see Herol, the man he had searched for all morning, climbing over the wagons. Another defender swung at Herol but missed, his sword biting into the wagon's axle.

Herol's wife, Lenar, shouted from where she cowered behind crates of goods, "No! Don't hurt him!"

"He's not himself! Kill him now!" Resler said, trying to roll away.

Corbrinn glanced at Herol's face for only a moment, but that was all he needed. Herol lurched for Lenar, kicking crates from his path as he went.

Tears streamed down Lenar's face as she pushed herself back from the man she loved. Corbrinn launched his whip at the man's head but his lash went wide, splitting the air with a sharp report. Corbrinn cried out as the heavy branch in Herol's hand sailed toward his wife.

The halfling winced when the crack of impact sounded. Blood pumped from Lenar's chin as she crumpled on her back. Her husband tossed aside the branch and strode toward Corbrinn.

"Kill him, damn you!" Resler shouted between wet coughs.

"Stay back," Corbrinn said to Herol. He knew the man did not hear him -- could tell it from his eyes -- but he felt compelled to try to ward the man off before ending him.

"I don't want to hurt . . ." Corbrinn started to say. The words were stolen from him as Rasp grabbed him from behind and lifted him from the ground.

Corbrinn, no stranger to the tactic used by larger folk, threw his head back into Rasp's face. A stiff crunch, like dried twigs underfoot, told him that he had broken the man's nose, but Rasp did not relent. He did not cry out in pain nor even hint that he had felt the blow. He just squeezed harder, jerking his arms into Corbrinn's abdomen. The air from his lungs poured forth in bursts followed by a strangled, squeaking wheeze.

Unconsciousness called to him but Corbrinn gritted his teeth and launched his head backward again. Warm blood soaked into his hair, matting it and making it heavy. He threw his weight down then, focusing all of his motion into a backward kick at Rasp's gut. His enemy's hot breath crossed his neck in a gale, but Rasp did not relent. Corbrinn squirmed harder until Herol slammed a fist into his face. Rasp squeezed from behind while Herol pummeled Corbrinn from the front, his clumsy fists hitting Rasp as often as Corbrinn.

Corbrinn's head grew light, and his vision swam with dull colors. Panic filled his chest and throat, but still he mused that at least he would die in the forest, where he felt most at home. Corbrinn lifted his head to meet Herol's face as the man whaled on him. Herol bared his dirty yellow teeth not in anger but in effort. The stubble on his face dripped with sweat. Suddenly Herol's throat exploded in a haze of red mist as a sword bit into its side. From behind Herol, Resler moved into view, yanking the sword from the dying man's neck.

"Just kill 'em, I said!" Resler yelled, falling as much as barreling into Corbrinn and Rasp. The hefty man's stumble was enough to loosen Rasp's grip and Corbrinn launched himself from the man's grasp. The halfling knelt on the ground a long moment, sucking in the peaty air. Resler rolled from atop Rasp with a moan. Rasp shot upright and braced his hands to stand up. His expression had not changed. Corbrinn loosed a growl and dove at the rising man, sword leading. The blade pierced through Rasp's thick leather shirt before tearing up toward his right shoulder with a sickening slurping sound.

Corbrinn stepped away, extricating the blade, and let Rasp's body slump to the ground. The man never made a sound. Corbrinn stared in awe. Everything he knew about humans and nature and the world as a whole told him that it was impossible for a living man to experience what must have been excruciating pain without making a single sound.

"They're not natural," Resler said beside him, still lying on the ground.

Corbrinn shook himself from his thoughts and knelt beside the man. He whispered an incantation and wove his hands through the motions before placing them on Resler's wound. The divine energy flooded through him. He closed his eyes as nature spoke to him, reassuring him that he could restore the balance. He was further relieved to hear Resler sigh, the pain easing.

"Thank you, scout," the large man said, sitting up with a heave.

Corbrinn nodded and turned around. Others still manned the wagons, firing shots from crossbows at the other side. At least one more expedition member had fallen, leaving a handful of others left to defend the makeshift blockade.

"What in the hells is going on, Resler? What's over there?" Corbrinn said, still looking at the wagons. He felt as though the world was ending, but he couldn't see it. On the other side of those wagons, something was devouring the land and sky before it in great gulps, and he was the last to know.

Resler spit up a glut of blood in a coughing fit as he lay down again. The crimson fluid dropped from his chin and colored his teeth. "Monsters," he said.

The wagons emitted a long, sonorous creak as they inched forward. The other caravan members shouted in surprise and leapt from their positions guarding it. Resler waved them back toward him and scooted along the forest floor toward the dense tree line. The wagons juttled forward again, the space between them growing as if opened in the middle like a pair of double doors.

Corbrinn took several steps forward, his legs moving faster than his mind. There was nothing for it but to look, he decided. The halfling jumped and grabbed onto one of the wagon's wheels above him. With a grunt, Corbrinn pulled himself up until he was peeking over the edge.

The scene before him bounced around in his mind, unable to find purchase in sense. A dozen humans -- some he had met from the caravan and others he had never seen -- pushed on the wagons. Beside them, working in unison, were goblins, kobolds, and even hulking bugbears. The joint forces heaved again, and Corbrinn fell from his precarious perch on the wagon. He scrabbled backward and found his feet just as the wagons came forward again, revealing a break in the makeshift wall.

The humans and goblinoid beasts burst through the opening, charging toward him. No howls came from their throats, no cries of war or glory. Their faces held no emotion, as if mocking their intent of violence. Corbrinn backed away and stumbled backward over the body of Rasp. He shimmied to recover his feet but stopped when a tinkling sound issued from the corpse's belt as it jostled.

A thin vial of reddish orange liquid hung from Rasp's waist. Corbrinn looked into the faces of the oncoming mob. Their bodies smashed together so much as they ran that he was surprised none of them fell and became trampled. Corbrinn closed his eyes for a heartbeat and offered a prayer of apology to the forest. He opened his eyes. His hand darted out and grasped the glass vial. He tumbled forward, cradling the liquid close to his gut to prevent it breaking. As his tumble ended, the halfling hurled the glass at the attackers, hoping he might be forgiven. The vial collided with the knee of a bugbear at the front of the line. The beast made no reaction to the breaking glass and trudged forward. For half a heartbeat it seemed as though nothing had happened and then the air before the attackers exploded in orange and red. The enemies at the front of the line lost their feet, falling to their backs from the concussive blast. Those behind them fell to the ground in blindness as a line of searing flame washed across their faces.

Corbrinn glanced away but not before watching the flesh of a man's forehead peel away from his skull and fall to the ground in a burnt curl. Choking back the bile in his throat, Corbrinn stepped back and looked up again. Half a dozen enemies lay on the ground, unmoving or scrambling for their feet. The rest came on, skin laid open by the flames. A goblin limped on even as its shirt still burned, the flames licking at its ears.

With the enemies too close, his stomach turning and eyes disbelieving, Corbrinn rolled to Herol's body and found another vial at the man's waist. The halfling snatched the glass with one hand and drew the whip at his belt with the other. He launched the serpentine weapon to a high branch of a tree on his right and tucked the vial into his vest. Hand over hand he climbed the whip to avoid the bull-rushing attackers. They ignored the ascending halfling, barreling toward the remaining defenders who tried to escape into the dense forest. Cries of fear issued from the dark green tree line.

Corbrinn dangled from the branch. The wagons creaked again below him, drawing his attention down. There, moving slowly and steadily in a single file line, he saw ants. Enormous, human-sized ants. One as big as horse, others as small as a dog. Never in his years in the wild had Corbrinn seen such a creature. Never had he imagined such a thing possible. The halfling reached into his vest and pulled the vial into the open. He marveled at how Rasp and Herol had so flagrantly attacked him before, apparently not concerned that the vials made them walking bombs. Corbrinn snarled and launched the vial at the ant-things, hoping to rid nature of the abominations. The glass fractured on the ground near one of the smaller creatures and Corbrinn shielded his eyes from the bright light.

Screams of pain from the defenders tore his attention from the bizarre creatures in time to see Resler fall to his knees, more gaping, bleeding holes adorning his chest. Corbrinn watched as the man's skin paled with lifelessness and his face buried itself into the rich, dark earth of the forest floor. The former caravan members and the goblinoids continued into the forest, searching for the rest of the defenders.

Corbrinn hung by his aching hands and burning arms and looked beneath him again. The ant-creatures were there, seemingly little worse for wear after the alchemist's fire. For the first time in a long time, he trembled with fear. Death had hunted him dozens of times but, staring at the ant creatures, he knew something was different about them. Something was unnatural. They all stared up at him with black, glossy eyes. The antennae of one of the creatures twitched furiously. Corbrinn's breath caught in his chest.

Another of the creatures, the largest, at the front of the line turned its gaze upward. Thin pincers around its mouth clacked, their movement mechanical and stiff. In the forest shadows its narrow face contorted beneath its strange metal helmet. It raised a javelin and pointed at him. Corbrinn pulled hard, trying to climb farther into the tree. He had to escape.

A strange buzz penetrated his ears, as if millions of crickets sang their nighttime songs at once. Feelings of unity, solidarity, and comfortable conformity intruded upon his thoughts. He saw himself working hand in hand with all the other races of Faerûn to build a better tomorrow. Through hard work, order, and structure, they could end all pain and suffering in the world. Everything he had ever wanted could be achieved if he worked with others.

The thoughts poured into him. Foreign but friendly. Strange but they somehow felt right. Corbrinn lowered his gaze once again to settle on the large ant creature below him. A thin ray of sunlight gleamed off its brown carapace.

Corbrinn smiled, shimmying off the branch and landing on the ground.

He nodded twice and, answering the question in his mind, said "Yes, of course I'll help you. We should get to work right way."

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