

FRIGID WOE

S THE SUN SETS OVER PALEBANK Village, casting a warm glow, the adventurers return to Gramini's shop. Seeking answers about the mysterious blue powder, they notice a familiar sight—their own traded t-shirt featuring Scanlan Shorthalt, now framed above a lipstick-stained autographed card, and priced at 500 gold pieces. Unfortunately, Gramini has no insight to offer, but does recommend speaking to Elro and to a retired wizard named Westeroff.

On the way back to the Jolly Dwarf, the party encounters Elro. "Hail, my friends. What news do you bring?" he asks.

Elara explains all that has happened in the cavern: the bandits, the frogs—especially Old Croaker, and Hulil's role as the leader. Elro responds, "That explains the deranged dwarf our Glassblades caught running by town with his hands bound. He's now in jail. I thank you for ridding our village of the scum. There was a bounty on that gang: 75 gold pieces. You've earned it."

Kragor blurts out, "Have you heard the name Irven Liel?"

"No," responds Elro. "Should I have?"

"I don't know. But we found a journal of Hulil's, and it recorded that she sold an Aeorian artifact—a blue vial—to one Irven Liel. We believe this vial is connected to the sickness." Kragor goes on to explain Hulil's condition, the blue powder seen in the chest, and the vials.

"That does seem consequential. I will post a message to Syrinlya about this. It's an outpost of Uthodurn on Foren, one of the Isles of Eiselcross—perhaps they can make something of your tale." says Elro. "Meanwhile, I suggest you ask about town for this Liel fellow."

THE LIEL-TETHWICKS

Once the party arrives at the Jolly Dwarf, Elara approaches the bar with a knowing smile. "We'd love to get some dinner, Arl," she requests smoothly, sliding six silver pieces across the counter. "Coming right up," Arl replies, flashing a grin as he pockets the coins.

Once seated, Elara's gaze lingers on a nearby family she recognizes from earlier. They seem a motley bunch: two adult men and twin tiefling girls. Curiosity piqued, she leans closer and asks Arl, "Who's the family over there?"

Arl scratches his beard. "Oh, them? That's the Liel-Tethwicks. Irven there is a bookseller, traveling far and wide. On their way to Uthodurn, they are."

Halite perks up at the mention of books. "A bookseller? Fancy myself a reader," he comments, a hint of enthusiasm in his voice.

Irven Liel, overhearing, turns to them with a friendly wave. "Indeed, we are booksellers," he confirms. "Irven Liel, at your service. This is my dearest husband, Fenton Tethwick; and our two lovely daughters, Honor & Magic. We take orders and ship to stores from here to Uthodurn—wholesalers. Even Gramini is planning to stock some of our best sellers."

Recognizing the name "Irven Liel" from Hulil's journal, Whisper, ever the blunt one, asks outright, "How about vials?"

Irven's expression briefly turns guarded. "Uh, who have you been talking to? I don't know about any vials."

"What kind of books do you sell?" Elara asks, trying to avoid spooking the merchant before having the chance to get his whole story.

Irven, his caution momentarily set aside, says "Oh, 'Feather Leather' is flying off the shelf these days." He laughs at his own joke.

Halite gives a good-natured sigh, a touch disappointed that Irven isn't in retail business directly. "Shame you're not a typical bookseller; could have browsed all afternoon."

Elara leans in, her voice lowered and serious. "We're on a quest to solve the popsicle sickness affecting the village. We came across some blue vials, and your name is connected to them."

Irven swallows visibly, his glance darting to one of his daughters before he replies, "The vial... I hope it has nothing to do with the sickness." His voice gains a note of concern.

Halite, sensing a deeper conversation is needed, suggests, "Perhaps we should speak privately." Irven nods, then turns to his husband. "Fenton, could you keep an eye on the girls?" To the tieflings, he says, "Daddy's just going to discuss book business with these fine folk."

Fenton Tethwick nods in understanding and begins talking animatedly with the twins, keeping them distracted.

In a quieter corner of the tavern, Irven reveals a small blue vial from his coat, a hairline crack marring its otherwise perfect surface. "I bought this from a woman named Hulil who needed quick money. Met her on the road," he explains, a touch of defensiveness creeping into his tone. "Is this related to the disease? She claimed it was a magical artifact from Aeor, something that would fetch a high price. I paid 40 gold with the intent of selling it for much more."

Whisper, sensing the urgency of the situation, interjects gently, "Perhaps you'd allow Scarlet to check for the disease?"

Irven nods hesitantly, his anxiety clear. "My whole family has touched this..." he confesses, fear evident in his eyes.

Scarlet focuses, fetching something from her pouch and murmuring an incantation under her breath. A soft glow emanates from her hands as she confirms, "It's the same magical contagion, just like in the chest we found." She gives Irven a serious look. "I think you should

spend some quality time with your children," she advises. Irven blanches. His shoulders slump, his fear for his family's safety evident in his eyes. Doctor Pepe takes the fragile vial into his pouch with extreme care, remarking, "Best not to touch this further."

Halite adds, "Anyone in the family showing any symptoms? Blue streaks on the skin? Inner chill? Slowed movements?" Irven shakes his head, his relief tempered by worry.

Elara gives him a hopeful smile. "Don't lose hope. You've met the right people. We'll find a cure and return."

Irven does his best to smile, gratitude momentarily overshadowing his anxiety. "Thank you. If nothing else, perhaps I can get you a signed copy of 'Feather Leather' when this is over."

Their conversation concluded, the party returns to their table, now laden with an evening meal of salt fish, squid, and bread. As they eat, Whisper suggests, "Maybe we should talk Arl into a deep clean of the area, just in case."

Halite calls Arl over, his voice bearing the gravity of their findings. "Arl, we suspect that some of the items linked to this accursed disease might have been handled here. A thorough cleaning is advisable to ensure safety."

The dwarf's eyes widen, the jovial air around him dissipating like mist in the morning sun. His hands flutter nervously. "You're saying... here? In my inn? By the gods, what if it's already spread?"

Sensing his rising panic, Elara steps in smoothly, her voice a balm of reassurance. "Arl, take a deep breath. We've caught this early enough, and with some care, we can prevent any further trouble. Trust us, we're on top of this."

Arl nods, though his brow remains furrowed with concern. "Right, right. I'm on it. I'll have the place spick and span before the next round of guests even consider laying a foot in

here!" His voice quivers with determination as he hurries off toward the back. But before he retreats entirely, he turns back toward the adventurers, his eyes pleading yet grateful. "Make sure Elro knows what you've uncovered. If anyone can coordinate the village through this, it's him. And thank you... truly." He disappears into the back of the inn, leaving the party in the flickering warmth of the common room.

THE CAUSE AND THE CURE

The lingering warmth of the Jolly Dwarf fades as the adventurers step into the chill evening air, the glow of lamps casting long shadows across the path. They gird themselves for another trek in the icy wilderness, but the promise of knowledge draws them toward the dwelling of the wizard Westeroff.

Just as they're about to depart, Elro approaches with hurried steps, his breath visible in the cold as he greets them. "Ah, just in time," he says, voice laced with urgency. "I've received word from my contacts. They've confirmed some crucial details about this disease— called the Frigid Woe."

The party gathers closer, attentive. "Frigid Woe?" Elara echoes, eyes wide.

"Yes," Elro affirms, nodding gravely. "It is a weapon that originates from Aeor, and it is familiar to the folks of Eiselcross. But there is hope—a cure exists, stored in golden vials by the Aeorians—a milky white liquid. Wherever Urgon found the blue vials, that might be our best hope of finding a cure."

Kragor scratches his chin thoughtfully. "And you believe the Aeorians created this... to fight the gods?"

Elro nods. "Precisely. They despised the gods, and Frigid Woe might have been some experimental weapon against them." He reaches into his satchel, producing a small pouch and extending it to them. "This is

100 gold pieces. Your reward for solving the mystery of this sickness."

Before anyone can respond, he inquires, "Have you accounted for all of the powder?"

Doctor Pepe steps forward, "We've managed to gather all we could, from both of the vials that Urgon found."

Elro continues, "I want to hire you to travel to Foren and retrieve this cure. There's a ship, the Remorhaz, that will take you there. Find the cure, use of it what you need, but the rest... At Syrinlya, you'll find an elf, an Uthodurnian, that goes by the moniker 'The Buyer'. Give the cure to him, and he can teleport it back here to Palebank. Do this, and you will be rewarded 200 gold."

Elara, ever the bargain hunter, stirs the conversation. "Considering the journey's danger, perhaps we require a bit more compensation for our troubles..."

Elro gives her an appraising look, recognizing the negotiation for what it is. "I'll tell you what—securing these blue vials is vital. We can't risk any more exposure. I'll give you 200 gold now for the both of them."

Satisfied with the transaction, Elara turns to less mercantile matters. "What about Irven's family, Elro? They've handled the powder."

Understanding the weight of her concern, Elro promises, "I'll see to it that they're looked after." The sincerity in his eyes reflects his commitment to his people. "But their best chance is for you to find the cure. Join the Remorhaz at the docks tomorrow morning, and godspeed in your search."

NOVICES BECOME ADEPTS

As night casts its velvet cloak over Palebank Village, the adventurers decide to postpone their errands until the next day. They return to the warmth of the Jolly Dwarf, each contemplating the challenges to come, and each

preparing to rise to meet them in their own way.

ELARA'S MELODIES

Elara sits cross-legged, her harp resting in her lap. Her fingers begin a gentle dance across the strings, pulling forth harmonies that weave enchantments into the air. Each note is a thread of light, etching new incantations into her soul. She breathes deeply, and with each exhale, she unlocks a melody for healing, soothing as a lullaby carried on a gentle breeze.

Her focus deepens as the harp sings secrets and tales untold. A profound understanding blossoms within her—an unfolding of expertise perfectly attuned to performance and persuasion. The music whispers of connections, of influence, and suddenly, untapped potentials reveal themselves. She feels an unexpected strength, as though no skill is beyond her grasp.

As the final chord fades like a promise into the air, Elara stands, her heart ready to enchant the world beyond the tavern's doors. Her melody is an invitation to the stories waiting for her.

WHISPER'S SILENT GROWTH

In a shadowed corner of the bustling tavern, Whisper meditates, her eyes closed to the revelry around her. The scent of ale and roasting meat drifts past, unnoticed. Deep within her, a soft glow emanates, invisible among the clamor. She envisions her paws moving with blinding speed, imagining a flurry of precise blows. Her mind crafts a dance of agility, untouched and swift.

Her meditation grows deeper, unlocking secrets of uncanny resilience. An internal wellspring reveals itself, capable of conjuring healing warmth in times of need. The tavern's noise recedes as strength flows through her veins. Whisper opens her eyes, calm and recharged, ready to step into the world beyond with renewed vigor.

SCARLET'S COMMUNION WITH NATURE

Scarlet stands by an open window, the night air alive with the scent of pines. She surrenders to the rhythm of the earth, her pulse syncing with the heartbeat of the soil. Against the swirling snow, an owl materializes from the darkness, its eyes twin moons reflecting wild mysteries. It lands on her shoulder, bringing with it an aura of calm authority.

In that silent exchange, Scarlet absorbs knowledge and guidance from the owl, feeling its ancient wisdom permeate her. She learns to embrace the forms of earthly creatures, realizing that these shapes are not mere disguises but expressions of the natural world's spirit.

Her mind envisions herself as a lithe wolf leaping through snow, a spider weaving webs, a silent rat, a charging boar. With her companion perched beside her, Scarlet feels ready to delve into nature's mysteries, newly emboldened by the owl's presence.

HALITE'S MARTIAL RESOLVE

By the hearth, Halite sits enveloped in the glow of crackling fire. Snowflakes strike the frosted windows, whispering secrets of distant mountains. His mind drifts back to battles past, his tactical acumen sharpened over countless conflicts.

With the heat of the meal and hearth, a shift occurs within him. His warrior spirit thrums louder than the winter winds, power tingling through his veins. He imagines the battlefield where, when stakes are highest, he might unleash two brutal strikes in a heartbeat.

His strategic mind sharpens, foreseeing paths to success even in uncertainty, channeling physical and mental stamina into piercing clarity. Halite rises, his eyes gleaming with the promise of battles yet to come, thankful for the land's icy gifts shaping his destiny.

KRAGOR'S ARCANE RESONANCE

The wind howls as Kragor sits alone, tracing patterns in the frosty air. He dwells on the night before—a restless night as if he had nightmares he could not remember. Upon waking he'd found his fingernails cracked and caked with mud, despite recalling his fastidious evening routine. Lost in these thoughts, an arcane potential vibrates in the air unnoticed.

As he absent-mindedly mutters an incantation, the cosmic swirl of his thoughts unlocks a hidden door. An esoteric rite unfolds, and to his astonishment, a warm surge of magic fills him, restoring some of the energy he expended earlier—a tether to a newfound reservoir of power.

Kragor feels further pulses of unfamiliar eldritch energy. Tentatively, he pulls at invisible strands of weave, knitting a protective cocoon around his form. As the surge reaches its zenith, he senses new ferocity in his ability to blast foes with beams of crackling energy. This agonizing blast will now carry his own formidable willpower in every cast, more impactful than ever before.

Empowered, Kragor contemplates this new reality, still alone yet invigorated, clutching these gifts like lifelines against the cold.

DOCTOR PEPE'S SUBTLE MASTERY

In the dancing shadows, Doctor Pepe reclines near the hearth, his mind whirring through possibilities. As a rogue, his path is a tapestry of subtlety and effectiveness, and tonight, he seeks to enhance these skills further.

Sipping spiced cider, an internal shift sharpens his senses. Every sound—the clink of tankards, the creak of floorboards—crystallizes into focus. He realizes time yields to his will, revealing an ability to exploit the lulls between heartbeats.

Grinning, he tests this newfound quickness, running a stealthy route between tables up to the rooms, completely undetected.

Each moment forms with unclouded insight, readying him to weave through shadows, more agile than swirling snow.

As night deepens, each adventurer, transformed by their experiences within the Jolly Dwarf, readies for the unknowns awaiting on Foren. Outside, whispers of snow and secrecy abound, but with increasing potential, each one braces for the stories and trials of tomorrow.

PREPARE FOR DEPARTURE

The next morning, the adventurers awaken well-rested and invigorated. The warmth of the inn lingers like an inviting blanket, fortifying them against the chill that awaits outside. After a hearty breakfast and a few shared laughs, their eyes are set on the tasks ahead.

Their path leads first to Mathias's Stuffs, an establishment with all the disarrayed charm of a barn filled with a collector's treasures. There, the party quickly trades with the harried elf proprietor Mathias to procure equipment and provisions for their expedition: a quarterstaff for Whisper, a few javelins for Halite, bolts and arrows for Doctor Pepe and Elara, a unique two-billed olive drab hat for Doctor Pepe, and a month's provisions. They more than offset their purchases by selling the scimitars and crossbows they acquired from the defeated bandits.

Thanks to Kragor's curiosity, they also learn a useful tidbit about Eiselcross from Mathias. The lands are inhabited by "wild folk" who largely keep to themselves, except for one group among them: a violent group whose members have black streaks across their faces.

Anxious to discover as much as they might about the Aeorian artifacts Urgon found, they make their next stop the home of Westeroff, the retired wizard mentioned by Gramini. But, they learn little to help them: Westeroff is not a fan of music; a spellcasting costing them five gold reveals the dagger is magical; the remaining items are mundane although

valuable.

During the discussions, Halite eyes a crystal appropriate for arcane focus. He is taken by it, although he is no spellcaster himself, and agrees to pay ten gold for it from his own stash.

Surreptitiously, Doctor Pepe slips aside with Westeroff to identify the properties of a garnet he has been concealing, the exchange of five gold pieces masked beneath the party's ongoing conversation. Whatever he learns, he keeps to himself.

Errands concluded, the six depart to meet their ship and begin their journey to Eiselcross.

THE REMORHAZ

The docks of Palebank Village are beginning to bustle as the adventurers approach the sleek silhouette of the Remorhaz, its sails furled and ready. The icy wind nips at their cheeks, adding a rosy hue to faces already aglow with anticipation. Elro greets the party, his presence a reassuring anchor amidst the chaos of departure preparations.

"When you arrive," Elro instructs, "find Orvo Mustave in Syrinlya. He knows the lay of the land. Remember, send back the cure once you've secured it—the Buyer can teleport it directly to us."

Kragor nods, his grave expression matching the gravity of their mission. "Snowshoes—are they useful for the ice?" he inquires. Elro chuckles dryly. "On Foren, where lava sometimes flows under a thin veneer of ice, yes, they'll come in handy."

"How big is this Syrinlya? And how long will our trip be?" Scarlet asks.

"Oh, I'd say there's about 250 souls there. And the trip is not too long. I expect you'll arrive about four days hence," replies Elro.

Whisper surveys the Remorhaz as the party is brought on board. It is a small ship with three sails, armed with two ballistas, one fore

and one aft. "A fast ship meant as a scout and message courier," she thinks to herself.

Aboard, Captain Stonebeard presents a polished performance. His eyes twinkle with exaggerated warmth as Elro steps aboard, each syllable dripping with supplication. "Ah, welcome to the Remorhaz, Master Elro," he croons, offering a low bow as if addressing nobility. The captain's voice is rich as cream, his deferential tone almost theatrical.

Elro acknowledges him with a nod, the hint of a smile touching his lips. "I trust you'll see them safely to Syrinlya, Captain. Their mission is of utmost importance." Stonebeard gestures expansively around the ship, his posture rigidly respectful. "But of course, Master Elro. We are honored to have them."

Even as they talk of weather patterns and navigation routes, Stonebeard's demeanour remains flawless. His subordinates echo his pleasantries with subtle nods and murmurs of agreement. The atmosphere is one of airbrushed civility—concealing the practical grittiness essential to life at sea.

However, the moment the Remorhaz pushes past the harbor's mouth and Palebank diminishes into a mere silhouette against the frosty horizon, a discernible shift occurs, like the release of a drawn bowstring.

Captain Stonebeard's genial façade melts away, replaced by the steely visage of a seasoned mariner. "Alright, enough pandering," he declares brusquely, rolling his shoulders as if shedding a constrictive garment. "This ship won't sail itself, and there's work to be done."

The party exchanges looks of mild surprise, prompting Stonebeard to offer a half-smile. "Don't look so shocked," he rumbles. "Out here, we run a tight ship, which means everybody pitches in."

Whisper, ever the quick study, steps forward. "What can I do? I have... some experience at sea," she says humbly.

Stonebeard appraises her lithe, efficient frame.

"Help Haldor with the rigging. Keep those sails tight."

Whisper nods and springs into action, her tabaxi agility well-suited to the task. The ropes hum under her deft hands as she climbs, earning an appreciative nod from Haldor.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew—First Mate Ironfist, navigator Mera, chef Ingrid, and various deckhands—move about the deck with practiced ease.

Ingrid leans over the galley's entrance, her voice booming, "Who among you knows their way around a kitchen?"

Scarlet raises a hand with a grin. "Cooking up something warm sounds perfect right now."

Halite joins Scarlet in the kitchen, exchanging pleasantries with Ingrid as they prepare a hearty stew, the aroma rich with spices mingling in the cold air.

THE SNOWY PLOVER

Doctor Pepe, Elara, and Kragor set out to fish off the stern, each facing the sea's challenge in their own way. Doctor Pepe excels, deftly handling his rod, while Kragor grumbles over his struggles, recalling the scarcity of such opportunities in Bladegarden.

Elara's net returns empty, sparkling with only water. She muses, "The ocean guards its treasures today." Kragor, undeterred, hauls in his net with effort, a mystery weighing it down. "I've got something... big!" he exclaims, sweat betraying the cold air.

Haldor helps him retrieve the load, revealing an ancient, barnacle-encrusted anchor inscribed with faded letters, ".he ..owy plover." Whisper's eyes light up with recognition. "The Snowy Plover!" she gasps, recalling tales of a privateer's elusive ship. Captain Stonebeard, intrigued, examines it, seeing a storied addition to the Remorhaz.

Meanwhile, Doctor Pepe succeeds in bringing in an abundant catch, his net teeming with fish. The captain, pleased, acknowledges

their efforts. "A week's provisions," he claps, satisfied with both Pepe's skill and their stroke of oceanic luck.

THE UNEXPECTED GOURMET CHEF

Below deck, Chef Ingrid commands the kitchen with precision, a moon-and-rune amulet around her neck softly clinking. She casts an appraising gaze at Halite. "We will teach you to cook," she declares, and he nods with curiosity.

The galley buzzes with warmth and laughter as Ingrid demonstrates her ritualistic cooking methods. "Here, like this," she instructs, guiding Halite through chopping vegetables with tactical precision.

"Start a restaurant when this is over!" Scarlet jokes, sparking a twinkle in Ingrid's eyes. As Halite presents their culinary creation, the table transforms into a feast: roasted fish glistening with oils, spiced vegetables, and golden bread.

A reverent silence follows the first taste. Elara's eyes widen in delight. "By the stars, what sorcery is this?" she exclaims. Kragor, usually stoic, is awed. "This could rival any feast in Bladegarden," he admits. Agreement ripples through the adventurers.

Whisper purrs contentedly while Doctor Pepe grins roguishly. "Ingrid," he proclaims with a fork's flourish, "your cooking is divine ambrosia."

Ingrid, though gruff, smiles slightly, her amulet flickering like a secret torchbearer. "Serviceable, then?" she asks, already knowing the answer.

Scarlet ceremoniously reaches for seconds. "I could believe this meal holds a druid's magic," she chuckles.

THE BARD PERFORMS

After the meal, the night sky sprawls over the ship like a grand tapestry spun from a dark

magician's loom, stars embedded in the fabric in shimmering constellations that dance in tune with the gentle swells of the sea below. The vessel cuts a silent path through the water, its sails billowing like the unfurled wings of a great celestial bird.

Halite stands towering and firm, with broad shoulders reminiscent of his mountain home. In his gentle hand, he lifts Elara, who now wears an ensemble similar to the garb of dryads and nymphs. She spins, her skirts capturing echoes of ancient songs, her voice a melody above the waves captivating all aboard. Her feet barely graze the timbers, yet it seems the deck itself moves to the rhythm of her bewitching performance.

The seasoned crew, hardened by the sea, find themselves enchanted, moving as if under a benevolent spell, their feet tapping and bodies swaying in time with the bard's ethereal dance. Even the ship's wheel turns with newfound joy.

At the helm is Mera, the usually stern navigator, now smiling widely, her eyes twinkling. She joins in, clapping to Elara's tune, her warm voice breaking the night's rhythm with laughter.

"You," Mera announces, "are the liveliest group we've ever shared this deck with!"

Amidst this spellbound camaraderie, sea and sky blur, the ship an island of revelry on endless waters. The adventurers and crew retire well-fed, sleep coming easily... for most.

A FLUMPH FEVER DREAM

Scarlet drifts into a fevered dream, where she transforms into a flumph in a surreal Underdark kitchen. Her halfling form dissolves, and her senses morph— colors become emotions, and telepathic whispers surround her.

As a flumph, Scarlet floats through this otherworldly kitchen, propelled by gentle bursts of gas that emit soft notes harmonizing

with her thoughts. Her new perspective reveals the flavors of the Underdark: savory spores from glowing mushrooms, earthy cave lichens, and the briny essence of an underground spring.

Scarlet uses her tendrils to sense psychic vibrations from ingredients, uncovering their essence in waves of color and emotion. She crafts dishes with instinctive precision, her mind orchestrating each task like a conductor.

Communicating with ingredients via telepathy, Scarlet coaxes out hidden qualities and balances flavors into a dance on the palate. She infuses each dish with psychic energy, transforming the meal into a nourishing, enlightening experience.

As the fever dream weaves its finale, Scarlet's consciousness begins to ebb back to reality, her experience as a flumph leaving an indelible mark on her aspirations and inspirations. Awakening with a start, she finds herself back in the familiar surroundings, her halfling body reclaimed but her gastronomic spirit forever expanded by the echoes of her uncanny adventure in the Underdark.

IRON CHEF

The day dawns dull and gray, with flurries meeting the sea's gentle waves. High above the decks on the Remorhaz, Whisper and Haldor bond against the ship's soft creaks. "I've never known a day without snow," Haldor admits, his fingers tracing the ropes.

"Truly? Not once?" Whisper asks, intrigued.

"Born in it," he replies. "Though fishing runs in my veins. Glassblades pay well, but the peace of fishing is unmatched. Everyone should learn to fish."

Whisper nods, recalling her warm southern seas where the sun dances lazily on the waves. "The water there welcomes you like an old friend," she says.

Haldor listens, enchanted by the idea of warm seas and ... swimming! "Sounds wonderful," he

says longingly. “I must learn of these waters.” He shows Whisper how to tackle stubborn ice frozen into the ropes, his fingers deft from life in icy lands.

Kragor steps onto the deck, shivering but focused, and casts his net into the sea. As he hauls it back, he’s caught by surprise—not just fish but a barnacle-crusted brass oil lamp lands in his hand. “There’s something to polish,” he murmurs, weighing it in his palm, assessing the worth—a silver’s gain, perhaps.

Elara joins the hunt as well, casting her net into the swirling depths. But it is met with cruel resistance, and the fibers rend and tear. Undeterred, Elara rallies a few seasoned crew hands to help her mend and weave the net whole once more.

Halite’s and Scarlet’s efforts pay off as their nets bring up a writhing mass of fish, including an iridescent marlin, tuna, and musk flounder, making quite an impression with the crew.

With the day’s catch secured, the adventurers gather in the ship’s warm galley. Chef Ingrid, eyes bright with pride, welcomes them with a smile.

“Gather ’round, friends! The sea has blessed us, and I invite you to craft a feast worthy of our journey,” she announces, gesturing to the array of fresh fish. “I’ll share the secrets of a meal so fine, even the gods would envy us.”

The galley buzzes as the adventurers gather around Ingrid, each busy with chopping and seasoning under her watchful eye. Three particularly adept students catch her attention: Kragor, Halite, and Doctor Pepe.

Kragor, with surprising delicacy, carefully fillets a fish. “Didn’t know I’d be good at anything more than swinging a war hammer,” he muses.

Ingrid nods, adjusting his grip. “Precision is key, Kragor, whether in the kitchen or on the battlefield.”

Halite, assessing spices for his rub, observes, “It’s like a strategic battle plan. Each

seasoning has its purpose.”

“Well said, Halite,” Ingrid replies, admiring his work. “Strategy is both simple and bold, in combat and flavor.”

Nearby, Doctor Pepe peels vegetables with the finesse of a master thief. “Cooking is like planning a perfect heist,” he jokes. “But the treasure’s tastier.”

Ingrid chuckles. “You’ve certainly stolen the show, Doctor Pepe.”

As the meal’s aroma fills the galley, Ingrid gathers them around the table. “Feast your eyes and senses,” she declares. “This is more than food—it’s the fruit of your labor.”

Each adventurer basks in a warm glow of satisfaction. Their hearts are as full as their bellies; the bonds between them strengthen with shared laughter and the subtle symphony of clinking plates. Chef Ingrid, her eyes twinkling with a mixture of pride and mischief, approaches Kragor, Halite, and Doctor Pepe. With a flourish as grand as any mage’s spell, she unfurls a satchel of gleaming cooking utensils before them.

“Behold,” she declares, her voice a melodic lilt that dances on the evening breeze, “for you have not merely consumed a feast of meals, but of knowledge. You have stirred the cauldron of curiosity, seasoned your souls, and now, you too are alchemists of flavor. May these tools guide your hands as you concoct dishes that rival the nectar of the gods themselves.”

As he admires their handiwork and their instructor, Kragor’s curiosity is piqued by the amulet dangling from Chef Ingrid’s neck. It is a grand silver talisman of a crescent moon alongside an array of arcane runes. His deep voice gruff yet oddly gentle, he asks “Chef Ingrid, what is that shiny thing around your neck? Looks... important.”

Ingrid replies, her gaze distant, anchored yet free. “Ah, a trifle,” she murmurs, the moon’s silver glow reflected softly within her eyes. “It is a simple reminder of my connection to the

moon, nothing more.”

Kragor nodded slowly, satisfied with the simple explanation. “Ah, nice. Moon is... nice.”

Ingrid chuckles softly, her eyes momentarily distant as if recalling secrets long kept. But with Kragor content and unlikely to probe further, the moment passes.

THE CRICK QUEEN’S CALL

After the splendid meal, the crew gathers on the main deck, their camaraderie warming the cool sea air. The formal atmosphere dissolves into laughter, drifting alongside seabirds’ cries. Captain Stonebeard, usually stoic, joins them, a rare smile on his lips.

Mera, the navigator, clears a space among the tarps and rigging, revealing a makeshift table from wooden crates. “Shall we play ‘The Crick Queen’s Call?’” she proposes, her tone promising intrigue.

Whisper, perched aloft in the rigging, casts a disinterested glance, her paws busy with knots.

Players gather, each contributing a silver piece to the pot. Mera’s eyes gleam with competitive fire as she begins the opening move. Kragor grins, tusks gleaming as he raises the stakes, challenging with a clink of silver.

Elara, Doctor Pepe, and Halite accept the challenge, sliding their tokens forward. The game is a tapestry of glances, strategies, and the jangle of coins.

Scarlet leans back, watching the tides of fortune. “Some hands aren’t worth playing,” she says, folding.

Elara, graceful as in her musical performances, reveals “The Even Hand,” drawing groans and applause. “I hope you’re not always this lucky,” Kragor grumbles, amused.

Coins shift toward Elara, but Doctor Pepe grins, eyes gleaming. “Time for a rematch,” he challenges. Another round, with spirits

undeterred.

This time, Doctor Pepe’s luck turns, his hand a bounty of surprise. Applause follows his victory.

“Kept a few tricks hidden, rogue?” Elara teases, recognizing shared cunning.

As night deepens, the game winds down, and players and crew retreat to their bunks, content with the day’s camaraderie.

SHAPES SHIFT IN THE NIGHT

In the heart of night, Halite and Kragor awaken to a cacophony of crashing and banging, immediately vigilant as they identify the disturbance as emanating from the kitchen. Within moments, they nudge Elara and Scarlet into wakefulness.

Alert and battle-ready, Halite takes point, leading the quartet down the narrow, creaking passageway to the kitchen. There, as the lamplight spills through the doorway, they behold First Mate Ironfist and Haldor, both wide-eyed and tense with faces set like stone, confronting an icy-furred adversary—a fearsome winter wolf with eyes burning frost-blue.

Kragor’s gaze darts about, landing on Ingrid’s amulet, discarded and glinting forlornly on the floor beside one of the bunks. His brows furrow in recognition and curiosity. Without hesitation, he whispers a few arcane words, summoning a protective embrace of magical frost that envelops him, shimmering with power.

Next, Kragor conjures a spectral, floating hand and sends it rushing past the wolf in an attempt to use the ethereal appendage as a distraction. The wolf, however, remains undeterred, its focus shifting toward Ironfist with almost predatory tunnel vision, yet restraint holds its posture for the moment.

Sensing a chance for diplomacy, Elara plucks a

few strings of her harp and chants “Vobiscum natura loquor”. Her voice then rings soft yet authoritative, seeking connection. “Calm, my friend, we mean you no harm. How can we help you?” But the wolf regards her with unwavering silence—this creature is not born of mere wild instinct. Tension thrums through the air as it seems moments away from lunging.

Scarlet withdraws a yew leaf from her pouch. She presses it to her forehead, eyes closing as if to draw insight from ages past. Her arm extends gracefully, and in a swift flick of her wrist, she casts the energy outward. Her voice resonates through the cabin: “Oculi Naturae, aperite ad veritatem; quod latent, patefaciat.” A subtle gleam envelops her, the spell woven, as she opens her senses to all signs of poison and disease. She finds a darker truth beneath fur and fang: lycanthropy dances along the wolf’s essence, a curse as old as time.

The commotion draws more of the crew, Captain Stonebeard included. “What the hey??” he exclaims.

Understanding dawns as suspicion edges Scarlet’s voice: “I think... that... That’s Chef Ingrid!”

Whisper, earlier roused by the clamor, stealthily emerges, taking stock of the escalating scene. She moves with feline grace, fluidly dodging her companions to retrieve the amulet. She pivots, holding out the amulet and asking Haldor with uncertainty, “This should be with Ingrid, shouldn’t it?”

Haldor glances at the amulet, confusion clouding his features. “Ingrid holds that dearer than anything,” he says, clearly puzzled. “She’d never be without it willingly.”

Whisper attempts to withdraw and take the amulet to safety, but the startled wolf lunges, its jaws closing around her arm with a merciless bite. Agony explodes through her senses, and she collapses to the floorboards, desperately clawing for traction to right herself.

In the chaos, Halite takes swift action. With practiced precision, he hurls his net, ensnaring the wild beast in a tangle of coarse fibers.

Kragor sprints forward, snatching the gleaming amulet from Whisper’s trembling grasp. Intent on his objective, he attempts to fasten it around the wolf’s neck, yet the snaring net hinders his movements. Even as he wrestles with the tangled mess, the wolf thrashes free, its eyes ablaze with the primal instinct to flee. It stands cornered, frantic and dangerous.

Amidst the tumult, Elara approaches with an uncanny tranquility. With a deft and unwavering hand, she settles the amulet upon the wolf’s neck. As its fangs snap perilously close to her, an ancient magic unfurls; the transformation is violent and beautiful. Muscles ripple and contort beneath the sleek fur, bones audibly crack and reform with a sickening yet mesmerizing fluidity. The lupine snout retracts painfully back into a familiar dwarven face, eyes flicker from feral to intelligent with startling clarity. The wolf’s savage growls fade into anguished cries as claws withdraw into slender fingers. In mere moments, the fearsome beast dissolves to reveal Ingrid, collapsed and vulnerable, her form shivering under the strain of the metamorphosis.

Silence reigns as Ingrid stands, sheepish and shivering, caught between fear and relief. Elara, compassion in her heart, drapes a blanket over the chef’s shoulders. Captain Stonebeard, with weary authority and a tone brooking no argument, commands, “Everyone back to bed! Nothing to see here!”

As the adventurers retreat upstairs, faintly echoing behind them is the Captain’s low voice, tinged with inevitable frustration, “Well, why the hells didn’t you tell me before??”