

DUNGEONS & GARDENS — SYNOPSIS

HE ADVENTURE BEGAN WITHIN the salt-scoured winds of the far north, as a motley band of near-strangers disembarked from the longship *Frostwind* onto the docks of Palebank Village. Each of them braved the perilous voyage across the Frigid Depths for reasons of their own, lured by tales of lost cities, potent artifacts, and knowledge beyond mortal ken.

Palebank Village is but a ragged clutch of wooden hovels clinging to the cliffs like frozen barnacles, but has outsized importance as the northernmost outpost of Uthodurn, an independent city-state of dwarves and elves. Upon arrival, the party was greeted not with cheer, but with a funeral procession. Urgon Wenth, a dwarven adventurer, lay encased in ice, a victim of a chilling malady contracted during his Eiselcross delve. A creeping frost stole all his warmth, leaving blue deathly veins in its wake. Elro Aladataur, the weathered elf leader of the village, tasked the newcomers with unraveling the mystery, for Urgon's curse had brought a halt to all expeditions north.

The party's investigation began in the shadow of grief. Urgon's ransacked cabin yielded a clue: a receipt from Pelc's Curiosities detailing the sale of Aeorian relics for a kingly sum of gold. Among the listed items, ominously, were two blue glass vials. Tracks led to the adjacent cabin of Tulgi Lutan, another villager succumbing to the icy affliction. Tulgi, her face a mask of frozen despair, confessed her allegiance to a Shadycreek Run syndicate, revealing she and her sister Hulil had plundered Urgon's findings from Pelc's Curiosities. She surrendered a single, exquisitely crafted dagger, claiming Hulil held the rest in a place of ill repute: Croaker Cave.

Pelc's Curiosities, its door ominously ajar, became the stage for their first bloody ballet. Elara, the aasimar bard, and Scarlet, the halfling druid, startled and blinded bandits inside with a fury of sound and fog. Kragor,

the orc warlock, and Halite, the goliath fighter, made quick work of the bandits, killing two and capturing the remaining two. Meanwhile Whisper, the tabaxi monk, scaled rooftops with feline grace and dealt with a lookout in a tangle of limbs and a sudden, bone-jarring plummet. The interrogation of the bandits confirmed Hulil's presence at Croaker Cave, and revealed she, too, was seeking a cure for the same frost-sickness. As the party searched the shop for remaining clues, they found the frozen corpse of Verla Pelc, the shop's proprietor, a grim testament to the curse's reach.

A brief respite at the *Jolly Dwarf* tavern, punctuated by Arl Bortock's wary tales of Croaker Cave—a place shunned for its giant, man-swallowing ice frogs—did little to soothe their frayed nerves. Elro, learning of their progress, urged them on. A visit to a wizened elf named Gramini at the docks yielded healing potions, bartered down in price with charm & a Scanlan Shorthalt shirt that sent the old elf into a fit of nostalgic glee.

Croaker Cave, its maw exhaling a chill deeper than the ambient frost, lived up to its name. Here, they found an unlikely—and perhaps untrustworthy—ally in the rogue Doctor Pepe, previously encountered on the roof of Pelc's Curiosities by Whisper. Doctor Pepe had shadowed them from there, claiming his own interest in the village's plague. An initial scout of the cave by Whisper and Doctor Pepe erupted into violence as monstrous, mastiff-sized ice frogs attacked. The ensuing melee saw the adventurers rush to their aid, trident, spell, and claw felling the amphibious horrors. But from within shadows deep within the cave, bandits shot crossbow bolts, injuring the heroes. These bandits soon fell to vengeance in the form of javelin, bullet, and radiant blast. The surviving assailant, a dwarf, retreated. A frigid pool separated him from the party, but skillful use of the grappling hook allowed them

to cross and corner the dwarf. He confessed to serving Hulil Lutan, priestess of Tiamat, now also afflicted with the icy sickness. He also revealed Hulil's camp deeper within, and a treacherous pit trap.

The journey through the cave's depths led them past a bat-filled cavern to a vast underground lake, where "Old Croaker," a frog of truly titanic proportions, served as both ferry and ferryman. Scarlet's preternatural calm, plus an offering of dead bats, persuaded the behemoth to bear them across. On the far shore, Hulil and an elven acolyte knelt before a tapestry of Tiamat, the evil five-headed dragon queen. Battle was joined swiftly. Kragor's hexes and eldritch blasts, Scarlet's druidic fury, Pepe's unerring crossbow, and Halite's brutal javelin throws met Hulil's desperate dark magic. The priestess, her skin already marred by the blue streaks of the Woe, fought with the ferocity of the doomed, her spectral blade and life-draining spells a testament to her dark faith. But even Tiamat's favor could not save her. Halite's javelin pierced her heart, her dying breath a curse of endless desire and ruin upon her slayers. Old Croaker, disturbed by the commotion and Whisper's ill-timed splash, threatened to devour the tabaxi, only to be placated by Elara with a severed elf hand—a grisly offering to the subterranean beast. A chest yielded Urgon's remaining treasures: a scroll case, jade statuette, magical arrows, a jasper ring, and a significant sum of coins, alongside Hulil's journal. The journal spoke of selling one blue vial to an "Irven Liel", in a desperate bid for funds to find a cure.

Returning to Palebank Village, the adventurers confronted Elro with their findings, who then went on to send a communiqué to an Uthodurnian outpost on Eiselcross called Syrinlya. They then discovered at the Jolly Dwarf that the Irven Liel they sought was a traveling bookseller staying there with his husband Fenton Tethwick and twin tiefling daughters. A tense conversation revealed Irven possessed the second blue vial, bought from Hulil, its surface ominously cracked. Scarlet

confirmed it radiated the feared magical contagion. The Liel-Tethwick family, having handled the vial, was now at dire risk.

Having conferred with those at Syrinlya, Elro grasped the full horror of the affliction, and returned to the party to reveal its true name: the Frigid Woe, an Aeorian weapon designed to destroy the gods. Yet, hope flickered: Elro discovered through his contacts that a cure existed, a milky-white liquid stored in golden vials; and they could likely be found in the same location as the blue vials had been. He then hired the party to go to Eiselcross to meet Urgon's partner in the discovery of the blue vials, offering passage on the ship *Remorhaz* and a substantial reward, including an immediate payout of 200 gold pieces for the recovered blue vials. That night, a palpable sense of deepening power settled upon each adventurer, their skills honed, their resolve hardened by the horrors witnessed and the trials to come. Kragor, however, wrestled with darker portents: upon waking after unsettling dreams, he found inexplicable earth beneath his nails, and felt a chilling premonition of his eldritch pact exacting a steeper price.

The *Remorhaz*, captained by the initially obsequious, then brusquely practical Stonebeard, set sail for Syrinlya. The four-day journey was a microcosm of their larger quest: mundane tasks like fishing (yielding a barnacle-encrusted anchor from the lost ship *Snowy Plover*) interspersed with moments of unexpected camaraderie and sudden terror. Chef Ingrid, a gruff dwarf with a moon-and-rune amulet, revealed a talent for divine cookery, and, more alarmingly, a tendency towards lycanthropy, transforming into a winter wolf one night. Kragor's nightmares intensified, culminating in a vision of being entombed in crushing blue ice, again waking with perplexingly soiled hands.

The voyage climaxed in a terrifying encounter. Shrouded in dense fog, the *Remorhaz* stumbled upon the wreckage of another vessel, its survivors clinging to flotsam, besieged by a colossal squid. A desperate battle ensued

as the party warred against the beast's crushing tentacles and ship-rending beak. They rescued three survivors: Gerhard Eisner, former captain of the lost *Frostfang*; his young crewman Rorik; and Bret, a cagey wizard of the Cerberus Assembly. Stonebeard noted that the defeated squid had seemed unnaturally focused on the wizard.

Syrinlya greeted them with a howling wind and a landscape of frozen yurts. Bret and Rorik went their own ways, while Gerhard followed the adventurers in some shock. Morgo Delwur, a stout dwarf woman, directed them to Orvo Mustave, Urgon's former companion. Orvo, scarred and grieving his friend's death, revealed the source of the vials: Salsvault, a ruin two hundred miles northwest, guarded by ice mephits and animated armor. He warned of the Thin Sheets, treacherous ice, and the general misery of the journey. The party acquired snowshoes and supplies from Javel, an ancient, coughing dwarf trader, whose wares included a pair of ominously blood-stained halfling snowshoes—a yeti's leftovers.

As they prepared for the arduous trek, they received word that the *Remorhaz* required weeks of repair. Gerhard, broken by his loss but stirred by Scarlet's words of resilience, agreed to join their quest. It was then Kragor, his face a mask of dread, confessed the true nature of his disturbing nights. His pact, struck in desperation on Bladegarden's streets, now seemed to allow his patron influence over his sleeping form, leading to the terrifying visions and the unexplainable dirt. Fear of what he might become, or what his body might do without his consent, hung heavy in the yurt.

The eleven-day journey to Salsvault across the merciless plains of Foren tested their limits under the baleful light of Ruidus. Kragor's nocturnal torments continued, waking with impossible dirt under his nails after thrashing in his sleep. The trek was fraught with perils: a near-fatal fall into a snow pit for Halite, a day lost wandering in circles, and an unsettling encounter with an undead creature searching

for someone named "Lucien."

Their path was marked by a sudden, brutal encounter with a juvenile remorhaz, a monstrous worm of ice and fire. A desperate battle ensued, culminating in Halite delivering a killing blow, though not before he was wounded by the beast's searing heat. Scarlet, ever the naturalist, harvested valuable, fire-resistant scales from its cooling corpse. Their fortunes later improved with the aid of a grateful griffin, healed by Scarlet, who provided aerial reconnaissance and a warning of giants in the far north.

The journey took a bizarre turn when they discovered a massive, three-foot-tall white dragon egg, which Scarlet identified as being close to hatching. Kragor, after a painful incident involving his tongue and the frozen shell, felt a strange kinship with the "orphan" egg. He declared he would protect it, adding an impossibly heavy and dangerous burden to their quest, much to the alarm of his companions.

Then, on the eleventh day, they arrived. Their approach to Salsvault was heralded by an attack from the forewarned ice mephits, which the party dispatched with brutal efficiency. Beyond the site of the battle, they saw it: Salsvault, a sloped, ancient structure, its alien architecture a clear mark of Aeor. But their relief was short-lived. As they watched, the ground trembled, and the entire ruin began to sink, slowly but inexorably, into the frozen earth, its entrance threatening to vanish forever.

Their arrival at Salsvault was a race against the grave, as the ruin sank inexorably into the ice. Scarlet's magic melted the frozen door, only for the party to be met by two soulless suits of animated armor. After a brutal fight that left Elara battered and Gerhard's bow snapped, Kragor's vengeful magic shattered the constructs. Aided by Doctor Pepe's magic ring that could translate the alien script they discovered, they explored deeper, finding more chests radiating the Frigid Woe. Using

Kragor's spectral hand, they activated a hidden incinerator, cleansing the plague from a distance. The cure remained elusive until Scarlet's keen eye spotted a secret door. When opened, it revealed not treasure, but a tide of the vault's shambling, zombified, and long-dead scholars. The things were relentless, rising again after being struck down, their desiccated flesh knitting back with unholy speed.

While this grim battle raged, Halite and Whisper pursued their own strange errand, drawn to a plume of steam on a nearby mountainside. They found not a beast, but a marvel of Aeorian engineering: a vast cavern, warmed by a hot spring, containing a massive, misty-blue sphere. Within it, trapped inside an electrum dodecahedron, stood a giant of living flame, frozen in time— save for a single heel, protruding from a warp in its cage, its licking flames heating a constant stream of snowmelt. A strange console with a light and a lever offered no answers, only more questions. Halite, however, discovered a small, corked bottle beneath it, its contents a swirling, iridescent blue.

They returned to Salsvault to find their comrades still locked in combat with the unending tide of the dead. With the goliath's trident and the tabaxi's blinding speed, the remaining zombies were overwhelmed and utterly destroyed by blasts of radiant energy and druidic fire, the only forces that could grant them final peace. Exhausted, the party retreated to the strange, warm sanctuary Halite and Whisper had found. There, under the silent gaze of the caged elemental, lulled by a low hum vibrating through the seamless marble floor, they took their first true rest, the mysteries of Salsvault waiting just outside in the unforgiving cold.

Refreshed by the impossible warmth, they returned to the sinking tomb. Kragor, his arcane senses awakened, detected not just the familiar schools of magic, but unfamiliar energies radiating from the Frigid Woe chests and the caged elemental— wizardry alien to him. Their renewed exploration began

methodically, a door-by-door cleansing of the zombie-haunted hall.

The first room, a dusty dormitory, yielded only another of the strange, unrotted robes. Emboldened, they split their forces, a decision that plunged them instantly into a two-fronted nightmare. As Halite, Scarlet, and Gerhard investigated a ruined chamber, the very rug beneath their feet rose up, a smothering beast of dust and thread that swallowed the goliath whole. Simultaneously, at the far end of the hall, Elara threw open a door to a kitchen, unleashing a silent, shrieking storm of animated cutlery.

The corridor became a meat-grinder of uncanny steel and thrashing fabric. Knives flew, cleavers chopped, and the rug crushed. Whisper fell, grievously wounded, only to be revived by Elara's desperate healing. Scarlet, trapped by the rug, exploded into the form of a massive draft horse, her bulk tearing her free and her hooves delivering thunderous, vengeful kicks. Elara, in turn, was struck down, a life-giving potion from Whisper snatching her back from the brink.

In a flurry of hexed steel, divine light, and brutal force, the party finally quelled the homicidal housewares and beat the rug into inert threads. A brief respite saw them discover the kitchen's sole wonder: a magical oven that produced loaves of perfectly baked, soul-warmingly delicious bread.

The next door revealed an immaculate, untouched bedchamber. But its chest held one last horror: a hissing, roiling ball of desiccated, undead snakes that erupted to attack. After a short, vicious battle, the swarm was reduced to ash. Within the chest lay a fortune in Aeorian coin, but on the room's desk lay the true prize. A folded letter, written in faded Draconic, which Doctor Pepe translated. It was the last testament of the vault's master, who revealed he had embraced undeath to continue his life's work: concocting a plague to kill the very gods who had allowed Aeor to be destroyed. His final words were not a warning, but an

imploration: find his lab, and finish his work.

The dead man's imploration hung in the air like frost, a blasphemy so vast it almost eclipsed the tomb's immediate squalor. Exhausted, bloodied, and their nerves frayed, the party retreated once more to the impossible warmth of the elemental's cavern, the low hum of the caged giant a welcome lullaby.

When they returned, three doors remained in the long corridor, which they cleared with grim purpose. The first of these opened on a dining hall and six more red-robed zombies, which they dismantled with the brutal efficiency of those who had grown far too accustomed to the dead.

The second door revealed a drowned library, the black water a mirror for the arcane sconces, until it exploded upwards. A slick, purpled tentacle, thick as a man's thigh, cracked the air like a wet bullwhip, then seized Doctor Pepe in a crushing coil, dragging him into the icy depths. A nightmare of bulging mantle and intelligent, malevolent eyes surfaced, its horny beak snapping at the air. What followed was a desperate, chaotic ballet upon the water's surface, as Gerhard and Whisper ran across the pool on magically-solid ground. Scarlet plunged into the glacial dark, her healing magic a desperate pulse of life into the drowning rogue's lungs, only to be ensnared herself. It was Halite who ended it, a titan running on water, leaping to drive his last trident through the monster's skull with a roar of pure rage.

As they gasped on the shore, stinking of the abyss, a new horror found them. A voice in Elara's mind, faint and familiar: *Tulgi has passed away*. The Frigid Woe had claimed another victim in Palebank. Their time was bleeding away.

The last door held four more zombies, dispatched with weary contempt. The hall was clear, but the cure remained unfound. The fight leeched from their bones, they retreated again to the elemental's warmth, Doctor

Pepe overcome with a profound, unnatural fatigue. That night, as Kragor wrestled with dreams of blizzards and falling ice, a real storm descended, burying the world and sealing them in their cave for a long, howling day.

When it broke, they dug their way out into a world remade in snow, the trek back to the ruin a two-hour ordeal through drifts as deep as a man's chest. They ventured south of the entrance, into a cold forge, where a pair of twitching boots protruded from a pile of rubble—another trapped thing, left to its fate. Kragor sensed power beyond the far door—Transmutation, Evocation, and the alien hum of Aeor. With cunning use of illusion and spectral hand, they opened it, revealing a new, unsearched hallway. And from its depths, a sound carried, a heavy and sporadic thumping.

Beyond lay a red-marked door, its crude white "X" a warning unheeded by Doctor Pepe's curiosity. Within lurked a flesh golem, a grotesque patchwork of stolen corpses, that nearly crushed the rogue to death before falling to the party's desperate assault. The opposite door unleashed a whirling storm of animated swords, their steel singing a song of death that felled both Whisper and Doctor Pepe before the party could shatter the enchantments. In the wreckage, they discovered a pristine longsword of thunder-grey steel, its blade veined with silver like a storm trapped in metal. Doctor Pepe, recognizing his own limitations, gifted it to Kragor, who bound it to his eldritch pact with darkness seeping from his palm.

After a fitful rest in the golem's chamber, they discovered a room of scuttling crabs they chose to bypass, focusing instead on the final door. There they confronted Ferol Sal himself, the undead architect of the Frigid Woe, his wight form working frantically in his laboratory. The battle was savage—Whisper's soul partially drained by the creature's touch, Doctor Pepe and Halite battered by animated armor. Yet they prevailed, Kragor's new blade singing its dirge as it severed the wight's head. In death, Ferol Sal left behind two brass keys and

a laboratory of bubbling plagues, but still no cure. Exhausted and wounded, they knew their salvation lay behind one of the locked doors: either among the sea-horrors or deeper still in Salsvault's sinking heart.