

ENTER SALSVALT

THE AFTERMATH OF THEIR BRIEF, violent clash with the ice mephits leaves a profound and unsettling silence. The wind, for a moment, seems to die, and in the sudden quiet, the adventurers' own ragged breaths sound unnaturally loud against the vast, indifferent canvas of the snowfield. Before them, half-swallowed by an ancient snowdrift, slumps the Aeorian edifice Orvo had called Salsvault. Its architecture is a disquieting blend of smooth, impossible curves and sharp, crystalline angles. The structure groans, a low, protracted sound of immense pressure, as it continues its inexorable descent into the frozen earth—a tomb sinking into its own grave.

There is no time to waste. The party trudges forward, snowshoes crunching a solemn rhythm, their eyes fixed on the one feature that suggests entry: a single, unadorned door, its surface a dark, unidentifiable metal.

Doctor Pepe stands transfixed, his gaze locked upon the door as if it held the answer to some cosmic riddle only he could perceive. The long march, the relentless cold, the gnawing weirdness of Foren—it all seems to have finally coalesced into a state of profound, silent contemplation.

“Doctor Pepe, what do you think?” asks Gerhard, his voice sharp with an urgency that cuts through the rogue’s reverie. Gerhard, a man whose patience had been worn thin by eleven days of unforgiving ice, a lost ship, and a very recent battle, can feel the seconds slipping away with every groan of the sinking vault.

“Uh...” replies Doctor Pepe, his focus still distant, lost somewhere between the strange material of the door and the cold that seeps into the bone.

Moments stretch into a tense eternity. The vault groans again, a louder, more final sound. With a curse muttered under his breath,

Gerhard steps forward and raps his knuckles against the strange metal. The sound is dull, swallowed by the immense cold. There is no answer.

“What’s going on up there?” Kragor’s voice rumbles as he approaches with the rest of the party, the massive, unhatched dragon egg still strapped securely to his back, an absurd, chilling monument to his newfound paternal instincts.

“It looks like it is frozen shut,” observes Scarlet, her druid’s eye catching the tell-tale shimmer of thick, ancient ice that has welded the door to its frame, sealing it as effectively as any lock.

While Doctor Pepe remains lost in his fugue, perhaps reliving the horrors of the journey or simply too exhausted to process another obstacle, Scarlet acts. She presses her palms together, her face serene amidst the biting wind. In a voice clear as a winter bell, she utters two words, a simple prayer to a forgotten sun: “*Sol invictus.*”

When she parts her hands, a nascent star, a sphere of liquid gold, pulses into existence in her right palm, casting a warm, defiant glow that pushes back the oppressive gray of the Foren sky. The air around her shimmers with its impossible heat. “Let’s see if we can defrost this thing,” she says, her voice steady.

She presses the miniature sun against the rime-choked latch. The ice hisses, retreating from the heat with a furious sizzle. Water trickles down the door’s alien surface, freezing again near the ground. A faint scent of ozone and melted antiquity fills the air.

“It’s working!” Elara says, her own celestial spirit seeming to brighten in the presence of Scarlet’s light, as she idly strums a ditty from her harp.

After another moment, the last of the ice binding the mechanism surrenders with

a final, sharp crack. Gerhard shoves his shoulder against the door. With a groan of long-dormant mechanisms, it swings inward, revealing a passage into absolute, impenetrable blackness. A wave of air, stale and heavy with the dust of millennia, washes over them.

Scarlet's flame, held aloft, cuts a wavering circle of light into the gloom, illuminating a foyer of clean lines. The dust is thick on the floor, undisturbed for ages. "I don't see anything..." she murmurs, her voice swallowed by the oppressive silence within. She glances back at her companions, their faces painted in the stark relief of her magical light. "Shall we go in?"

ANIMATED ARMORS

Without waiting for an answer, her resolve firm as the frozen earth, she steps across the threshold, plunging into the sunken secrets of Salsvault. The air inside was still, heavy with the dust of millennia and the faint, metallic tang of dormant magic. The architecture was unsettling, all perfect angles and smooth walls beyond human—or even dwarf—abilities. Within the room were doors to the north and south. The southern door stood open, a rectangle of deeper shadow in the gloom.

As she took another step, a shape resolved itself from that southern darkness. Tall, broad-shouldered, clad in plates of a strange, verdigris-stained metal, it moved with a ponderous, rhythmic gait. It was not the shuffling of a living thing, but the measured, relentless cadence of a machine.

Scarlet gasped, the sound sharp in the tomb-like quiet. She threw herself back toward the entrance, yelling, "There's someone here!" Her voice, thin and urgent, carried out to the others, a stark alarm against the wind's eternal moan. Her fingers, nimble as a weaver's, mimicked the frantic growth of plants bursting from the soil. She did not beseech nature; she commanded it. "*Evoca vites!*"

The stone floor around the approaching figure flashed with a sudden, virulent green. Grasping

vines, thick as a man's wrist and slick with frost, erupted from the cracks, lashing out to ensnare the metal man's legs. In the next instant, the halfling was gone. Where she had stood, a wild boar now snorted, tusks glinting in the dim light. It backed away, stamping its cloven hooves, putting distance between itself and the thing in the armor.

The party needed no further urging. Gerhard was through the door in two long strides, Elara a pale shadow at his heels. The ranger raised his longbow and spoke, "*Mors certa,*". For a heartbeat, a ring of ghostly blue light flared around the armored figure before vanishing. The bowstring sang. An arrow, fletched in stark white, slammed into the construct's chest with a sound like a hammer striking an anvil. The figure jerked, a minute, mechanical tremor, but its forward momentum was unbroken. As it tore through the grasping vines with implacable strength, Gerhard saw another, identical automaton step through the southern door behind it. "He's got a friend," he chuckled without real mirth.

Elara swept her harp from her shoulder, her fingers a blur across the strings. A vigorous, commanding strum, and the air around her shimmered with a cascade of rainbow hues. The colors rushed toward the first metal sentinel. "Grovel!" she commanded, her voice ringing with arcane power. The magic struck the armor and fizzled, dying with a sound like water on hot iron. There was no effect. Her mind reeled. It was not a man, not a beast, not anything her enchantments could sway. It was a thing of metal and magic, deaf to her pleas and blind to her illusions. And it was coming for her.

Frustrated, she played a different tune, a swift, sharp melody of courage and martial prowess, pointedly aimed at Kragor, who was even now charging through the entrance. Just as the last note of inspiration faded, the automaton reached her. Its armored fists, clasped together into a single, two-handed bludgeon, descended in a brutal arc. The blow landed squarely on her head with a sickening crunch. Stars

exploded behind Elara's eyes as she stumbled backward, the world tilting, a wave of agony washing over her.

"Pick on someone your own size," Kragor spat from the doorway, his own eyes burning with a protective rage. "*Te exsecro!*" A smoky aura of dark green malice enveloped the armored figure. He stormed forward, his conjured war hammer held high. The obsidian weapon came down, a blur of motion and vengeful fury. It struck the construct's shoulder with a deafening clang. A plate of verdigris-stained metal sheared away, spinning across the floor. Kragor peered into the gap his blow had created and saw... nothing. Empty air. A hollow shell given a semblance of life. He growled, a low, guttural warning to the others. "Empty! These are magical constructs!"

Doctor Pepe, his brief fugue of disbelief shattered by the clangor of battle, sprinted past the boar. Dagger and shortsword flashed in his hands, a whirlwind of steel aimed at the automaton's midsection. His blades clanked and scraped against the thick plate, bouncing away harmlessly. "Shite!" he cursed, attempting to dart away. He was too slow. The construct spun, its fist lashing out and catching him square in the back. The air rushed from his lungs in a pained gasp. He stumbled, catching himself against a sloping wall, and slipped into a corner, melting into the deep gloom to catch his breath and curse his luck. The animated armor then turned its attention back to Kragor, its fist swinging in a wide arc. The blow connected, but it was a glancing one, and the big orc seemed merely to shrug it off.

As the first construct focused its mechanical ire on Kragor and the shadows where Pepe hid, Elara, still dizzy, executed a desperate, lurching cartwheel, putting precious distance between herself and the metal killer.

"This one's mine," Kragor grunted. Gerhard needed no encouragement. His bow sang again, and his arrow found another chink in the automaton's armor. Kragor followed with a

final, crushing blow from his war hammer. There was a screech of tearing metal, a final shudder, and the first sentinel collapsed into a heap of inert, enchanted scrap.

"You're next," Kragor grumbled, repositioning himself between Elara and the second figure. The sickly green aura of his hex detached from the fallen heap and slithered through the air, entwining itself around the remaining guardian.

The Scarlet-boar charged. A blur of bristling fur and righteous fury, it drove its tusks deep into the construct's groin—if such a thing could be said to have one. Metal crumpled and tore away, again revealing nothing but the cold, empty air within. In trade, the armor pounded its fist down onto the boar's back. The beast squealed, a sound of both pain and rage, staggering under the weight of the blow. A deep gash opened on its flank, and its bristly hide was suddenly slick with blood.

The entire party now converged on the last defender. Doctor Pepe, emerging from the shadows, took a pair of crossbow shots. The first went wide, clattering off the far wall. The second bounced harmlessly from the armor's chest plate. Gerhard fared even worse. He drew his longbow, aimed, and released, but the arrow sailed high. As he drew again, there was a sharp *snap*. The bowstring, frayed by the unnatural cold, parted. A small, choked sob of pure frustration escaped his lips.

The boar charged again, goring the armor's leg. The construct pivoted and delivered a bludgeon of such force that the boar's form seemed to dissolve. In a shimmer of druidic magic, Scarlet the halfling reappeared, sprawled on the floor, bruised and gasping for breath.

Spinning a few swift notes from her harp, Elara sent a pulse of healing energy toward Doctor Pepe, knitting his wounds. Then, slinging the instrument over her back, she drew her shortbow. An arrow flew, piercing the armor's chest. Scarlet, scrambling to her feet, channeled her remaining strength into her staff. The yew wood glowed with a faint golden

light as she swung it, the blow knocking away a section of the construct's midriff.

It was then that the final barrage began, a desperate duet of arcane might. Kragor unleashed a blast of eldritch energy, a bolt of purple force and necrotic shadow that slammed into the automaton, causing it to stagger. Elara answered, her hand outstretched as a wisp of pure starlight, radiant and searing, struck the construct's head. With a final, guttural cry, Kragor unleashes one final, decisive blast. The beam of raw magic, a searing fuchsia, strikes the hollow guardian dead center. It shudders violently, then explodes outward. Pieces of enchanted armor—greaves, gauntlets, and a dented helm—are spread in a wide, silent circle across the floor of the south room, immobile at last.

A CAUTIOUS EXPLORATION

With combat over, the party investigates the interior. The room and halls feature sconces evenly positioned around the walls, glowing with an arcane light bereft of flame or warmth. The walls and ten-foot ceilings appear to be made of blue stone, smoother than any mortal could chisel by hand. The doors are of similar craftsmanship and material, but black.

Further, upon the walls of this entryway room are carved a strange script. No one in the party recognizes it... at first. But Doctor Pepe steps forward, pulling a small, ornate ring from his pocket and slipping it onto his finger.

"I, um, I found this in Pelc's Curiosities after the rest of you left," he admits, a touch of sheepishness in his voice. "I paid old man Westeroff to have a look at it. It's a Ring of Comprehension... I think it'll let me read these words." He rubs the ring, and a faint shimmer passes over his eyes. He traces his fingers across the alien writing on the wall. "It's some form of draconic. It says..." He clears his throat, his voice taking on a formal, almost recorded tone. "Welcome to Salsvault.

Visitors, please wait for an escort. Do not touch anything without permission."

He drops his hand. "Hmph. A little late for that."

Scarlet presses a finger to her lips. "We should keep it down. I think those things were alerted by the racket we were causing."

Nods answer across the group. From now on, they move like ghosts.

Searching the room to the south, from which the animated armors came, Doctor Pepe finds two stone chests, both already opened and empty. He reflects on Orvo's story. "These must be the chests that Urgan and Orvo looted," he muses aloud. "Where they found the vials of Frigid Woe."

"Then there's nothing for us here," Gerhard says, his voice a low rasp. "Let's search elsewhere."

Slowly and quietly, Doctor Pepe leaves the plundered room and creeps to the north door opposite. It is locked, but the mechanism offers little resistance to his practiced tools. With a soft click, it opens. Ever so cautiously, he peeks into the next room. There is no movement, no noise. Yet he pauses... and the seconds stretch into minutes.

Finally, Kragor's patience, a notoriously finite resource, evaporates. "What are we waiting for?!" he growls, and gives Doctor Pepe a firm, unceremonious push into the room beyond.

The rogue stumbles, catching his balance with a silent curse for his orcish companion. He, Gerhard, and Kragor make a quick scan of the room. Broken tables are strewn about. Two more stone chests stand along the north wall.

"What was this place?" Kragor asks, prodding a shattered table leg with his boot. "Some kind of lab?"

Doctor Pepe's attention is drawn to a door in the west wall, and next to it, more draconic script. He runs a finger under the letters. "Disease storage. Authorized personnel only."

Meanwhile, Gerhard is the first to notice a large iron lever on the east wall, currently in the up position. Examining it closely, he can see flecks of faded red paint clinging to its surface.

Scarlet and the rest of the party file in just as it appears Gerhard might pull the lever. “Give me just a moment, Gerhard,” she says, her whisper barely stirring the dusty air. “*Morbum monstra*,” she chants, her voice a low hum. She begins to move slowly through the three rooms they have uncovered, tracing unseen wards with her fingers. She finishes her circuit and returns to the party.

“I sense the aura of the Frigid Woe here,” she says, pointing a small, steady hand at the two unopened stone chests. “It’s strong.”

“So, more popsicle sickness in those boxes,” Kragor grunts, gesturing to the chests, then jerking a thumb at the lever. “And a big red lever over there. I’m no genius, but usually, big red levers do something dramatic.”

“It could be a trap,” Gerhard counters, his hand hovering near the lever but not touching it. “Something to incinerate intruders, not contents. Or maybe it floods the room with something worse.”

“A sterilization protocol, perhaps?” Doctor Pepe suggests, stroking his chin. “These Aeorians were advanced. If they were working with contagions, they’d need a way to cleanse a compromised lab.”

“I’d rather not be cleansed, thank you,” Elara says brightly. “Is there a way to pull it from a safe distance? It seems unwise to be standing here when we do it.”

Gerhard nods his massive head. “Agreed. If it does what we think, the backlash could be... significant.”

Kragor’s eyes gleam. “I have an idea.”

With everyone retreating to the relative safety of the entryway, Kragor pulls the north door nearly shut, leaving only a crack. He intones, “*Veni et iuva me.*” A spectral, translucent hand

appears before him. It drifts silently through the gap in the door, glides across the lab to the lever, and pulls it down.

Though nothing can be seen to change, a muffled but loud roaring begins, the sound of a contained inferno. As best as he can tell, the roaring comes from the direction of the “disease storage” door. Kragor’s spectral hand pushes the lever back into the up position, and the roaring stops. After a thoughtful moment, he directs the hand to the stone chests and attempts to open each of them in turn, but they remain sealed.

“Well, that didn’t work,” he grouches disappointedly. “Doctor Pepe, why don’t you have a look at those chests?”

Doctor Pepe returns to the north room and studies them. He finds the draconic word for “ice” inscribed into each lid. While he works, Elara approaches the “disease storage” door in the west wall and finds a small inscription he missed earlier.

“What does this say?” she asks.

Squinting, Doctor Pepe reads, “Huh. It says ‘Disappear’. Ominous.” He tries the door but finds it locked. Pulling out his tools, he gets to work. His brow furrows. “Trapped... I’ll have to be careful.” After only a moment, a faint click echoes in the quiet room. “Ha. I’ve taken care of that little surprise. The door can be opened. Who wants to go first?”

“Absolutely no one,” Gerhard suggests. “Not until we know what we’re dealing with. The lever seems to affect that room,” Gerhard points out, his voice sharp with tactical thought. “We could open the door and *then* pull the lever. Incinerate whatever’s inside from a distance.”

“But what if the cure is in there?” Elara counters, her expression worried. “We can’t just burn everything.”

“The cure is supposed to be in gold vials,” Kragor reminds them. “I doubt they’d store a cure in a room labeled ‘Disease Storage’ and

rigged to an incinerator. That's where you put the problem, not the solution."

"Kragor's logic is, for once, sound," Doctor Pepe notes from the shadows. "Let's not stand in front of the door labeled 'Disappear' when we open it."

They fall into an easy consensus. Gerhard stations himself by the lever, a grim sentinel. The rest of the party retreats again to the foyer, while Kragor's spectral hand drifts back to the now-unlocked western door and pushes the latch.

With the door now open, Scarlet peeks into the narrow disease storage room beyond. It is spartan, containing nothing but six more stone chests lining the walls. She recoils slightly, recognizing a now-familiar, malevolent aura. "These, too," she whispers, her voice tight. "All of them are contaminated with the Frigid Woe."

"Right," Gerhard calls out. "Give that room a wide berth. I'm trying the lever again!"

He pulls the lever down. A wave of intense heat blasts through the doorway as the disease storage room roars with incandescent flames. The light is so bright it momentarily turns the dusty lab into a canvas of stark, dancing shadows. Gerhard quickly returns the lever to its original position, the flames vanishing as suddenly as they appeared. He whistles low. "Efficient incinerator."

"So, we've found the source of the plague and a handy way to destroy it," Kragor summarizes, "but we're no closer to the cure. Now what? Do we just start kicking down walls?"

"There must be more to this place," Elara says, her gaze sweeping across the smooth, seamless stone of the lab. "Another chamber. A control room, perhaps."

"We've checked the doors," Doctor Pepe sighs in frustration. "There's nowhere else to..."

As they debate, Scarlet's attention drifts. Her eyes, accustomed to seeing the subtle patterns of nature, trace the clean, artificial lines of the

east wall. It is too perfect. Too uniform. Her fingers brush against the cold stone, seeking a flaw, an imperfection. *A-ha!* A line so faint it is almost invisible, a seam that does not quite match the others.

"Here," she says, her voice cutting through the discussion. "Look." She points out the faint outline of a door to Doctor Pepe. "Well, I'll be," Doctor Pepe mutters.

"This one might be trapped, too," says Scarlet.

Doctor Pepe already has his tools in hand. He studies the seams, the mechanism, running his fingers along the edges. "I can't discern any danger." With a shared, tense breath, he pushes the secret door fully open and peeks into the hallway.

"Whoops," he croaks, his body freezing in the doorway.

Following his shocked gaze, the party sees them. Down the narrow hall, several figures shamble forward, their movements slow and clumsy. They are zombies, their flesh desiccated and ancient, clad in the tattered remains of what might have once been scholars' robes. And they are coming right for them.