

ECHOES OF AEOR

 ORNING IN THE MOUNTAIN'S heart is a strange and silent affair. Not the gray wash of a Foren dawn, but the steady, eternal glow of the caged elemental. The low hum that vibrated through the marble floor last night is a constant presence, a sound felt more than heard, the deep breathing of a sleeping, fiery god. Kragor is already awake, kneeling in a far corner, his back to the others. His guttural whispers are a counterpoint to the cavern's hum, a dry, scraping litany as his black-nailed finger traces a sigil in the thin grit on the seamless floor. After ten minutes, the drone in his throat ceases. He squeezes his eyes shut, then opens them, a faint, arcane tingling now alive behind his senses.

For Kragor, the vast blue globe now bleeds a visible power, a seething corona of ghost-light that his mage-sight drinks in. His mind scrabbles for a name, a category, a dusty page in some grimoire that might define the hue of this energy. Abjuration? Transmutation? Evocation? No, none of these, and no other known school, either. This was some other thing entirely, a cipher of wizardry to him.

"Anyone got coffee?" Gerhard's voice is a gravelly complaint from near the cavern's entrance. He sits with his back against the stone, looking out at the wall of steam, a man thoroughly unimpressed by wonders.

From the hot spring pool comes a splash and a contented sigh. Whisper, unburdened by gear or modesty, is soaking again, the picture of feline indulgence. "Better than coffee," she calls out, her voice echoing slightly in the humid air.

Scarlet, already fussing with her pack, summons her companion. A flutter of silent wings, and Sparky the owl materializes on her shoulder. "Ahoy, Sparky!" she chirps.

From across the cavern, Gerhard gives her a sideways look, the kind of weary glare a

seasoned sailor reserves for a landlubber playing at being a pirate.

"Well," Halite rumbles, cracking his massive knuckles. "The spa day is over. We have a cure to find."

"And I've still got the chill of that place in my bones," Kragor adds, rising to his feet. "Let's get it done."

The mood is decided. They gather their gear, the warmth of the cavern a memory before it's even fully left behind, and trudge back out into the biting cold. Kragor pauses by the great white dragon egg he left outside the entrance, patting its frozen shell. "Be back for you, little orphan," he mutters, then follows the others toward the sinking tomb of Salsvault.

THE CHILL OF THE PAST

They find the ruin just as they left it: a silent, sinking scar on the landscape. Halite, with Kragor at his side, pushes open the great door. The strange, cold, arcane light within spills out, revealing the entryway, the shattered remains of the animated armor, the open doors leading into deeper shadow. All is still.

"Comrades, a moment," Kragor says, holding up a hand. Once more he performs the ritual that makes magic visible to him. This time he notices that the walls and doors of the place pulse with abjuration magic, while the arcane lights are powered with evocation. While passing the chests presumed to contain the Frigid Woe, he's taken aback: "This, too, is a form of magic I've never encountered—and it feels different than what I sensed around the elemental! Let's not linger here."

"Agreed," Halite says. "Let's return to the hallway where the dead men walked, and investigate one door at a time."

There is a chorus of grim assent. They move as

a single unit, a seven-headed beast of leather and steel, cautiously exploring the silent stone corridor where they had put the zombies to their final rest.

"This one," Elara says, pointing to the first door on the right. "Doctor Pepe, if you would be so kind?"

The rogue steps forward. "If you'll all give me some room. And quiet, please." He pulls his tools, kneeling before the door. He listens, he probes, he works. A moment later, a soft *click* echoes in the hall. "No traps, and I've sprung the lock."

Halite nods and grips the handle. "Ready?"

He pulls the door open. It swings inward on silent hinges, revealing not horror, but a scene of baffling mundanity. It is a small dormitory, coated in a thick, even layer of dust. Four simple stone beds, four stone footlockers. Nothing moves.

Kragor grunts, unimpressed. "A dormitory. Let's check the boxes and be done with it." He barges in, his heavy boots leaving the first clear prints in the ancient dust.

He kicks open the nearest footlocker. Empty. The second. "Here now," he says, pulling out a folded bundle of dark red cloth. It's another of the strange, fibrous robes, identical to the ones the zombies wore, but this one is clean, untouched by time or decay.

"This one is nice, 100% less zombie gore," Whisper purrs. "Who hasn't got one?"

"I'll take it," Elara says, donning the pristine red robe. "We're looking more and more like a troupe," she grins.

Halite checks the third and fourth footlockers. Empty. The room offers no other secrets. They step back into the hall, a little more confident, the tension eased by the anticlimax.

TWO DOORS, TWO DANGERS

"Right then," Scarlet says, pointing to the door opposite. "Next verse, same as the first?"

Elara speaks up. "Why don't we split up so we check the rooms more quickly?" She's clearly itching to discover all the secrets of Salsvault.

"Split the group. That's always a great idea," mumbles Kragor sarcastically.

After a brief discussion, Halite, Scarlet, and Gerhard take the door for the room next to the dormitory, while Elara and the others move to the head-on door in the corner.

Halite pauses at the door. He listens, then studies the door, carefully checking the hinges and the handle, before giving a thumbs-up. "Seems clear."

He opens it. Darkness. He peers in, but without darkvision, he sees nothing but the light from the hall spilling onto a floor choked with rubble.

"Can't see a thing," he grunts.

"Maybe Sparky can. Sparky?" Scarlet whispers. The owl flits from her shoulder and glides silently into the blackness. Through her familiar's eyes, Scarlet sees a room in ruins. The walls are cracked and collapsing, the wreckage of what might have been shelves and furniture strewn across the floor. And half-buried under the debris, a large, patterned rug.

"It's just a collapsed storage room," she reports. "Nothing but rubble and an old rug."

Meanwhile, Elara's group has reached the door at the corner. "Are we going to stand here all day?" she says, her curiosity getting the best of her. Before anyone could answer, she strides forward and puts her hand to the handle. "Wonder what is in here..."

"Wait, let Doctor Pepe..." Kragor cautions, but the aasimar has already thrown the door open.

It is a kitchen, coated in grime and frost. A

crack in the far wall lets in the soul-numbing cold of Foren, and patches of ice coat the floor. Desiccated, unidentifiable foodstuffs litter the counters. And on the far wall, a rack of knives and other cooking utensils.

The instant the door is fully open, the kitchen comes alive. Not with a clatter, but with a horrifying, silent purpose. The knives—cleavers, paring knives, great chef's blades—lift from the rack as if held by unseen hands, turn their points toward the door, and fly.

"What the!?" Kragor barks in surprise, a half-second before the first one is upon him.

Simultaneously, in the ruined room, Halite steps across the threshold to get a better look, his large stride landing on the rug. The moment his boot touches the woven fabric, the rug rears up like a striking cobra and envelops him in a dusty, suffocating embrace.

The hallway erupts into a cacophony of two separate, sudden battles.

"Get him!" Scarlet shrieks, seeing Halite vanish into the woolen maw. She thrusts her hand forward, her nails momentarily elongating into vicious, acid-dripping claws. "*Prīmaeva saevitia!*" she snarls, raking her claws across the animate carpet. The acid sizzles, and some of it seeps through to splash Halite. A jolt of pain from the acid tells him his allies cannot quite distinguish him from his captor!

Gerhard, standing in the hall, curses and fires an arrow into the thrashing bundle. The shaft pierces the rug and begins to pierce Halite, but his goliath skin momentarily takes on the resistance of stone, stopping the arrow before it harms him.

In the other doorway, a ballet of blades and other implements unfolds. Immediately seeing the danger, Kragor places his curse upon one of the flying utensils—a hog splitter—and projects a blast of dark energy at it. He misses the huge but quick metal blade and instead hits the back wall of the kitchen. The hog splitter is joined by a bird's-beak knife as they hurtle toward Kragor, who manages to deflect

both with his war hammer.

Elara barely dodges a skinning knife intent on tearing the flesh from her bones.

Whisper is not so lucky. A cleaver swings for her head; she ducks, but a flensing knife catches her across the ribs... Before she can recover, a boning knife slips past her guard and stabs deep near her kidney, and she crumples to the floor in a heap, unconscious and bleeding.

"Whisper!" Elara cries out. She pirouettes desperately past the deadly swarm, her hands glowing with celestial light. She presses her palms to the tabaxi's chest. "Not yet!" A surge of healing energy flows into the monk. Whisper's eyes flutter open. Elara, not finished, sings a sharp, clear note—a healing word—and another pulse of life knits Whisper's wounds.

Kragor, seeing his friend fall, roars with fury. A shimmering frost-armor of pure vengeance crackles into existence around him. He again attempts to blast the hog splitter. This time the bolt of pure eldritch power slams into it, sending it flying across the kitchen to shatter against the far wall. One down.

Doctor Pepe, his face pale, finds himself much too close to the kitchen nightmares. He swings once, twice, thrice at the filet knife, but fails to land a blow against the tiny target. Cursing, he melts back into the shadows of the hall and adds some much-needed distance between himself and the melee.

Back in the rubble-strewn room, Halite is fighting for air. He feels the crushing weight, the dusty taste of ancient fabric filling his lungs. With a surge of goliath strength, he flexes, pushing against his fibrous prison. For a moment, nothing happens. Then, with a great tearing sound, the rug rips, and he bursts free, gasping for air. He doesn't hesitate. He brings his trident down in a brutal, vengeful stab. The three points punch through the rug, causing it to jerk back and fall to the floor upside-down, writhing. Seeing his chance, Halite scrambles back out into the hallway, just

in time to see the wave of cutlery come spilling out of the opposite room.

The goliath can hardly keep track of the flying utensils as they tear and slash and stab at Elara, Kragor, and Whisper. The bird's-beak knife hits Kragor, and ice crystals immediately form along the blade. The knife jerks back and momentarily slumps in the air. In a wide, sweeping slice, the flensing knife makes a deep cut across Whisper's thigh. Elara adeptly dodges a stabbing fillet knife, and its momentum embeds it into the door behind her.

Scarlet sees the rug twitch and begin to rise again. "Oh, no, you don't!" she yells. But as she moves to engage, it surges forward, wrapping itself around her instead. Trapped, she feels a crushing pressure and does the only thing she can think of. She calls on the wild shapes of her childhood. In a dizzying flash of green light, the halfling is gone, and where she stood, a massive, snorting draft horse suddenly stands, its bulk crowding the narrow hall, the rug falling away from its expanded form. With a defiant whinny, the horse-Scarlet delivers a thunderous kick with its back hooves, striking the rug square in the center. It falters, visibly damaged. She then charges out of the room and back into the hallway.

Gerhard, bewildered by the sudden appearance of a horse, tries to climb over it to get a clear shot. He slips on the smooth stone, falling flat on his face with a curse, but scrambles back up, his face red with embarrassment. "Bloody hells!" he spits, and finally lets an arrow fly, finishing off the wounded rug for good.

"*Fae ignis!*" chants Elara as she bangs out a mystical rhythm on her hand drum. Three of the animated cutlery begin glowing with a faint light.

"Now we're talking!" the goliath bellows, and hurls his trident down the hall. The projectile takes the cleaver mid-air, slamming it into the stone wall with a *thunk*. Kragor calls his hex down upon it, following up with a swing of his war hammer. On contact, the cleaver flashes with burning light. It clatters to the

floor but rises again, sagging. Whisper, back on her feet, uses the chaos to her advantage. She dodges a blade, runs up horse-Scarlet's back, and launches herself into the air, a flurry of blows disabling the cleaver mid-flight. She lands atop the startled draft horse, crouching like a panther on a steed.

The corridor is a meat-grinder of uncanny steel, a shrieking whirlwind of silent, murderous intent. A boning knife, thin as a viper's tooth, slithers past Kragor's guard to bite deep. "Carrian!" he bellows, not in pain, but fury. The vitreous shell of frost protecting him explodes at the point of impact, encasing the blade in ice; it hangs, shivering, its attack thwarted. The armor around Kragor dissipates into a puff of vapor.

Across the hall, the knife in the doorframe rips itself free. Horse-Scarlet answers with a mule-kick of impossible force. Hoof meets steel with a crack that sends the thing spinning into stonework like a thrown star. "Got one!" Doctor Pepe cries, his shortsword a silver blur that batters the flensing knife. He nocks an arrow, overconfident. "And another!" The shaft flies short, skitters off the flagstones, and rolls to a stop by Kragor's boot.

"Aim, you fool!" Kragor roars, swinging his hammer at a shimmering, fae-lit blade. He feels the blow slide wide, then snarls, twisting fate itself. The hammer connects with a sun-bright flash, obliterating it. Halite, seeing another glowing blade dive for the warlock, hurls his javelin. "To the forge with you!" the goliath thunders, and the heavy spear erases it from the air.

But the last fae-lit horror finds its mark. It scythes across Elara's torso. She gives a soft, surprised sigh and plummets. "Elara!" Whisper shrieks, already at her side, forcing a vial to the bard's lips. As life rushes back, Kragor pivots, hexing the knife behind him and crushing it flat. Revived, Elara rises to one knee, daggers flashing. One flick of her wrist fells a blade. The last one turns on her, but Halite's trident screams down the hall, pinning

it to the wall like a collector's specimen.

STRANGE TREASURES

Silence falls, broken only by the ragged breathing of the adventurers and the soft clopping of a horse's hooves on the stone floor. Scarlet transforms back, looking shaky. "Right," she pants. "No more splitting up."

They take a short rest in the relative safety of the main entryway, patching their wounds and trying to calm their racing hearts. As the arcane tingle behind his eyes faded during the rest, Kragor takes several moments to perform the ritual once again, reviving his magical senses.

"That was a shit-show," Gerhard mutters, checking his bowstring.

"But we're alive," Elara says, her voice still a little breathless. "And I think we've earned a look at what we were fighting for."

Once rested, they investigate the rooms they so violently cleared. In the collapsed chamber where the rug attacked, a thorough search of the rubble by Whisper uncovers another pristine red robe. She promptly trades her tattered one for it.

The kitchen is even colder now, due to a crack leading outside. What appears to be a magical oven on the far wall is dark and silent. Halite and Kragor, their shared interest in cooking piqued, give it a wide berth at first.

"I sense magic from it," Kragor rumbles. "Transmutation, I think."

"An oven?" Halite asks, approaching it cautiously. "How does it work?"

It is a simple black box with a flat top and a door with a bar-handle. "Let's not stand in front of it... just in case," Kragor suggests. "Allow me."

After a few seconds of Kragor's guttural chanting, a spectral hand appears, drifts across the room, grasps the handle, and pulls. The door falls open like a drawbridge. A fire roars

to life inside the box, and a wave of warmth washes over the room, along with the rich, maddening smell of baking bread. A moment later, a stone tray slides out from the opening, bearing ten small, perfectly formed loaves, golden-brown and steaming.

"Is this... a magic bread machine?" Whisper asks, her head cocked.

After a nervous ten minutes while Scarlet checks for poison or disease—finding neither—Whisper shrugs, grabs a loaf, and takes a bite. Her eyes go wide. "It's... good," she says, her mouth full. "Really good."

They pack the other nine loaves away, a strange and welcome treasure from a place of death.

Returning to the hallway, they eye the nearest unopened door.

"Another one," Halite says, his hand on his trident. "Well, let's see it through."

Elara approaches it. "Locked," she announces.

"My turn again," Doctor Pepe sighs, pulling out his tools. With an ease born of long practice, he works the lock. With a final, satisfying *click*, it springs open.

Elara again takes the initiative, pushing the door open and peering into the room beyond. She gasps.

Unlike every other room they have seen, this one is immaculate. A large bed is perfectly made. Two nightstands sit beside it, free of dust. A stone desk and chair are neatly arranged against the far wall. The only thing that seems out of place is a heavy stone chest built into the floor at the foot of the bed.

There is no dust, no decay. It is as if its owner had just stepped out.

"Someone... lives here," she whispers.

Kragor steps in, his eyes scanning the room. His renewed magical senses pick up nothing but the standard background hum of the walls. "Let's see what's in the box." He summons his mage hand once more, not wanting Elara to

stand too close. The spectral hand floats over, grips the heavy lid, and heaves it open.

For a heart-stopping second, nothing happens. Then, from the dark interior of the chest, a roiling, hissing ball of tiny, desiccated, undead snakes erupts into the room, lunging straight for Elara.

“Snakes!” Kragor yells. “Motherfucking snakes in a box!”

Elara reacts instantly, a discordant whisper of magic flying from her lips. The ball of snakes shudders as the psychic assault hits it, but it does not stop. Kragor hexes the mass and brings his hammer down, but in his haste, he misses entirely, the blow striking sparks from the stone floor. The swarm envelops Elara, and she cries out as dozens of tiny, dead fangs bite at her. She feels a burning venom, but her aasimar blood resists the poison’s worst effects.

The battle is short and brutal. Halite’s trident and Whisper’s fists seem to do little against the squirming mass, as the creatures have some resistance to normal weapons. But Kragor, focusing his rage, unleashes a final, devastating blow from his hammer, imbuing it with searing radiant energy. The hammer connects, and the ball of dead snakes dissolves into a pile of gray, greasy ash.

Shaking, Elara approaches the now-open chest. Inside, nestled on a bed of rotted velvet, is a king’s ransom in rare Aeorian coins.

While the others count the treasure, Scarlet moves to the desk. Among a bottle of dried ink and a few used quills, she finds five sheets of blank parchment and a single, folded letter. The Draconic script is faded, but legible. Doctor Pepe takes it, slips on his ring, and reads it aloud, his voice low in the suddenly silent room.

“To whomever finds this: All my people are dead. My family, my friends, and my workers. I, too, am dead.”

He pauses, swallowing hard.

“Were it not for my quick thinking and prowess

with necromancy, our important work at Salsvault would be over. I continue to labor in my undead form, trying to find a sickness that can infect the gods themselves. If I have perished, I implore you to find my lab, find my notes, and finish my work.”

Doctor Pepe lowers the parchment, his face a mask of awe and horror. He looks at the others, his voice barely a whisper as he reads the last line.

“The gods must pay for Aeor’s destruction.”

The words hung in the chilling air of the immaculate room. For a moment, no one spoke. Doctor Pepe’s gaze dropped to the very bottom of the page, to a final, elegant scrawl of ink.

“It is signed,” he breathed, the realization dawning on his face. “Ferol Sal.”

Elara gasped, her eyes going wide. “Salsvault,” she whispered, the name of the ruin suddenly taking on a terrifying new meaning. “This is *Sal’s Vault*.”