

THE COLD WELCOME

The eleventh dawn breaks over Foren, a cruel, indifferent sun struggling to pierce the leaden sky. The wind scours the endless snowfield, carrying with it the fine dust of shattered ice.

Whisper, her keen tabaxi senses always alert, moves with fluid grace beside Elara. Together, their combined navigational instincts—Whisper's innate connection to the earth, Elara's celestial guidance—cut a precise path through the featureless expanse. The miles, once agonizingly slow, now fall beneath their snowshoes with a renewed, almost desperate urgency.

Then, Doctor Pepe, ever watchful, stiffens. His eyes, narrowed against the glare, discern subtle disturbances in the shimmering distance. Not a drift, not a mirage, but *movement*. Three tiny, flickering motes of azure against the infinite white, too deliberate for natural phenomena. Two hundred, perhaps three hundred feet away, they hover and dart like malevolent gnats. Suddenly, recognition dawns. "Ice mephits," barks Doctor Pepe brusquely.

This must be it. The long, brutal march finds its end, or perhaps its true beginning. The presence of the elemental pests, just as described by Orvo, can only mean one thing: Salsvault.

The space between them and the mephits closes swiftly, each crunch of snow beneath their boots swallowed by the vast silence. Sixty feet separate them when the creatures, like shards of living ice, suddenly surge forward.

Scarlet, her staff already half-raised, acts with the swiftness of a winter storm. "*Radices glaciei!*" she chants, invoking the ancient power of the frigid earth. From the ground, spectral, icy tendrils erupt, snaking outward with horrifying speed. Two of the mephits, caught in the unexpected tangle, shriek as they are ensnared, their ethereal forms struggling against the binding magic. The third, a blur of malevolent blue, darts free.

Halite charges forward, unstoppable as an avalanche, and closes half the distance to the one mephit that escaped Scarlet's icy vines. His powerful arm whirls, and a javelin, a dark streak against the snow, flies true. It strikes the mephit with a sickening *thunk*, biting deep into its crystalline form. The creature, struggling to maintain its erratic flight, wobbles precariously in the air. Doctor Pepe advances, quick as a winter fox, his crossbow already rising. The bolt snaps forward, *thwack!*, burying itself into the same wounded mephit. The creature shudders, a faint, desperate whine escaping its form, barely audible over the wind. Elara's shortbow sings its defiance, an arrow arcing through the crisp air. It finds the injured mephit, striking with precision. With a brittle *pop* and a soft shower of ice shards, the creature explodes, its essence dissipating into the freezing air like a breath on a cold morning.

Whisper, her movements a blur of feline grace, dashes across the snow, ignoring the lingering shivers of the mephit's demise. She reaches one of the entangled mephits, its struggles futile against Scarlet's magic, and with a series of impossibly deft movements, binds its ephemeral limbs with a length of rope from her pack. Kragor, his war hammer blazing with radiant energy, curses under his breath as fuchsia energy leaps forth but screams wide of his target, vanishing harmlessly into the infinite white.

Gerhard, however, takes careful aim, and with arcane focus releases an arrow toward the mephit that is not subject to Whisper's ministrations. It rips through the air and buries itself deep into the creature's form.

The bound mephit, though restrained, is not yet defeated. It gathers its icy fury, and a blast of frigid air erupts from its spectral maw, slamming into Whisper. Her fur freezes, and frostbite spreads across the skin of her upper arm. The second mephit likewise exhales,

and a shroud of dense, swirling fog descends, clinging to the ground and obscuring all sight. The world shrinks to a claustrophobic white.

Halite, a silhouette in the sudden gloom, throws a second javelin. It vanishes into the swirling mist, guided by sheer will and years of honed instinct. A wet *thud* echoes from the fog, followed by a faint, brittle *pop*. Then, as abruptly as it appeared, the fog cloud thins, then dissipates entirely, revealing the mephit dissolved into vapor and ice.

Doctor Pepe, his senses unhindered by the fleeting mist, lines up his shot. His crossbow twangs, and the bolt screams forward with unnerving speed. It strikes the remaining, struggling mephit with a sickening *thwack!* The mephit shivers, a pathetic wail escaping its form. Elara's follow-up arrow strikes, the driving deep into the creature. It sways, its form dimming, barely holding itself together. Whisper attempts to knock out the mephit, launching a flurry of unarmed blows. Her first attack, a precise jab, glances off its form, but her second, fueled by an almost exasperated urgency, connects and inadvertently takes its head off. The body of the mephit wobbles, then with another brittle *pop*, it explodes, scattering shards of ice that sting Whisper.

The silence that follows is absolute, broken only by the wind's eternal sigh. The battle is over.

Beyond the scattered ice dust, almost lost in the vast, white expanse, a structure is visible. A building, sloped and ancient, partially swallowed by the snow, its strange architecture hinting at Aeorian origins. But even as they watch, a fresh tremor shakes the ground. The structure, scarred by time and impact, begins to slip further, slowly, inexorably, beneath the surface of the frozen, unyielding earth. The entrance to Salsvault, it seems, is not merely guarded, but actively sinking into the depths.