

CLAWS AND CURES

THE SILENCE IN THE WAKE of the wight's destruction is a physical weight, thick with the stink of ozone, ancient dust, and extinguished evil. Kragor pockets the two brass keys, their cold a small, solid fact in a world of phantoms and horrors. They stand in Ferol Sal's laboratory, a charnel kitchen of bubbling plagues, and the cure they so desperately seek remains a ghost.

"Two keys," Kragor rumbles, the brass clinking like dead men's teeth in his gauntlet. "And the only room left unsearched contains a scuttling horror show."

Doctor Pepe's eyes gleam with a feverish hope. "Where one cultivates a plague, one must keep the cure close. It is professional vanity! Those chests... they hold the anti-plague, I'll wager my last coin on it!"

A sly, dangerous smile touches Scarlet's lips. "Then perhaps we've been thinking with our swords, not our heads. Or, for that matter, our claws." She holds both hands up, mimicing the clasping claws of a crab.

Halite snorts, a sound like gravel grinding. "By the salt-sea's depths, woman, they're crabs. Giant crabs. You propose to parley with an appetizer?"

"Not parley," Scarlet corrects, her grin widening into a feral crescent. "Infiltrate. I will become the crab, my friends. I will scuttle in amongst them, speak their sharp and clicking tongue, and see if their treasure is worth the taking before we spill a single drop of our own, precious, un-shelled blood." She walks sideways, back-and-forth, miming a brachyuran shuffle.

The silence that follows is thick enough to curdle blood, broken only by a low, appreciative chuckle from Kragor.

It is Doctor Pepe who finds his voice first, and it is a thin, reedy thing. "Marvelous.

A crustacean ambassador. While you're conducting shellfish diplomacy, I shall be... securing our rear flank. From that room. Maybe with the door shut." He flits away into the wight's laboratory like a startled beetle seeking the dark space under a rock.

Gerhard watches him go, a wry twist to his lips. "A fine strategic withdrawal, Doctor Pepe. Hold that position with all the valor you can muster."

Whisper does not look up from the gash she is meticulously cleaning on her arm. "I will keep watch here, too," she murmurs, her voice a soft rasp.

The others take positions by the crab-room door, a wary honor guard for the strangest diplomatic mission ever conceived.

"And how are we to know your scuttling is a success?" Kragor grunts, his gauntlet resting on his sword's pommel. "What is the signal for 'the prize is worth the risk' in that clicking tongue of yours?" Scarlet, already beginning to shimmer at the edges of the firelight, flashes a final, toothy grin. "Three sharp raps of a claw against stone, like a beggar at a door. That means the chests are ours for the taking. Any other sound... or no sound at all... means the diplomacy has failed."

"I prefer when diplomacy fails," Kragor rumbles.

Elara touches her harp. "And if it does," she whispers, "I shall sing them to sleep with a lullaby."

OPERATION: CRUSTACEAN

With a final nod, Scarlet closes her eyes. There is a faint, wet crackling, a brief distortion of the air, and where the halfling stood, there is now a giant crab, its carapace the color of dried blood and sea-worn stone. It clicks its

pincers once, twice, then scuttles toward the door.

Kragor summons his spectral hand. It floats forward, grasps the iron ring-pull, and opens the door.

The briny stench hits them first, cold and thick. Scarlet-crab sidles through the opening into a shallow, stinking pool. Two crabs, much like herself, tear at kelp near a pair of iron-bound chests half-sunk in the muck. Their stalked eyes swivel to regard the newcomer, but show no alarm, returning to their grisly meal. So far, so good.

She edges toward the chests, her scuttle a masterpiece of casual crustacean nonchalance. Her new legs, what feels like a forest of them, propel her sideways with an alien grace, slipping into the brackish water with a soft splash that goes unnoticed by the feasting brutes. The water is a cold, foul bath, but the shell around her is an indifferent fortress. She mimics their posture, a scavenger's hunch, and makes a show of scraping at a slime-slicked rock. The two natives are priests at a kelpy altar, their devotions a rhythmic tearing and chewing. She risks a single, soft *click* of her pincer, a question posed in the language of shell and joint. An eye-stalk swivels, a periscope of dull, black glass. It regards her for a moment—a long, cold moment—then dismisses her as just another hungry mouth in the muck. Their minds are as simple and hard as their shells. This is their world: a cold pool, a rotten meal, and the patient guarding of a master's hoard. How to coax a secret from a creature that has no concept of them? She is in, but the prize remains a mystery. She cannot give the signal. Not yet.

Outside, the seconds congeal into minutes. They hear the wet, slithering scrape of chitin on stone, the occasional sharp *clack* of pincers, but they do not hear three sharp raps. To the ears of men and orcs, it is merely the sound of monsters in their lair, and a damning silence where a signal ought to be. Kragor's knuckles are white where he grips his sword-hilt. A

low growl rumbles in his chest, a gathering thunderhead of impatience. His patience, a notoriously brittle thing, shatters like cheap pottery.

"No signal," he snarls, the words a promise of violence. "They have her. The plan is ash."

"Wait!" Gehard hisses, but it is like trying to halt an avalanche with a whisper.

Kragor charges in. The room erupts. As the orc's heavy boots splash into a small puddle of water just inside the door, two more crabs emerge from the depths of the pool. One is a true behemoth, its claws thick as a man's torso, its carapace scarred and ancient. It towers over the others.

The gambit is over. The battle is on.

Doctor Pepe, drawn by the commotion, peeks out from his hiding place and looses a crossbow bolt at the biggest crab. It flies so wide it chips stone from the far wall. "Gods' mercy, Doctor Pepe! Is there no curse you haven't collected?" Elara hisses as he ducks back into cover.

The great crab ignores the errant bolt. It sees only the green-skinned brute who has invaded its lair. It moves with impossible speed, a sideways lunge that ends with a pincer snapping shut on Kragor's leg. The orc bellows as the shell bites deep and holds him fast, grappled.

"An eye for an eye!" Kragor snarls, bringing his longsword down on the claw that holds him. The thunder-grey steel sings its dirge, shearing off a chunk of chitin. A shimmering, spectral frost instantly coats his skin. "Hit me again, you overgrown appetizer! See what happens!"

Whisper is a blur, running into the lab's doorway to hurl a javelin at the monster holding Kragor. It skitters off its armored back.

"Sleep, you shelled monstrosities!" Elara cries, dashing to the edge of the fray. She strums a soft, compelling chord. A wave of soporific magic washes over the enormous crab and

another one near it. Their claws go limp and Kragor is released. They stand perfectly still, incapacitated.

The sudden lull in the behemoth's attack gives Scarlet her opening. Ignoring the remaining, active crabs, she scuttles to the nearest chest and begins to pry at its lid with a pincer, her mind focused entirely on the prize. However, she finds the chest locked.

Halite offers up a bellow that shakes the very salt from the walls. "For the stone and the tide!" he yells, and charges. He does not notice that Elara's magic has subdued the behemoth; he sees only a foe paused, an invitation written in chitin. His trident punches into the creature's side with a wet, grinding crack.

The behemoth shudders, not in death, but in rude awakening. Its stalked eyes snap to attention and the magic shatters like thin ice. "Halite, you calamity!" Kragor shouts. "It was dreaming of maiden crabs and you had to give it a nightmare!"

Elara groans, her fingers still tingling from the broken chord. "All that effort, wasted!"

Her complaint is lost as the other crabs scuttle into a frenzy. One crab, smaller but wickedly fast, clatters toward Halite, pincers snipping the air where his legs were a moment ago. A clumsy third crab, in its haste to join the fray, trips over the swift one's trailing leg and lands on its back, limbs flailing with comical panic. The last of the brood, still lost in the dregs of Elara's song, sways on its feet, confused.

From the doorway, a crossbow *thwangs*. The bolt zings off a far wall. "A ranging shot!" Doctor Pepe squeaks, vanishing back into the shadows.

"He's going to kill one of us before the crabs do!" Elara mutters.

Gerhard, ever the professional, ignores the farce. A ghostly brand appears on the great crab's shell, a target for the arrow that follows an instant later, burying itself beside the wound left by Halite's trident. The great crab,

its slumber so brutally interrupted, swings a claw the size of a tombstone at Halite. The goliath catches the clumsy blow on his shield with a deafening clang.

Kragor gives a snarl of contempt. "Is that all you have, you walking stew-pot?" He hacks again, his dirge-blade howling as it descends, gouging a fresh ruin into the creature's carapace. Whisper, a silent blur, darts in and drives her javelin into a soft joint in the creature's leg with a sickening crunch.

Scarlet-crab, her soul screaming in its temporary chitinous prison, gives the stubborn chest one last, futile wrench. The lock holds. The battle howls. Priorities, a scuttling voice in her mind clicks, must shift. With a shriek of bubbly rage, she pivots and sinks a pincer deep into the leg of the nearest of her ersatz brethren, grappling it.

Elara's own arrow skitters from the great crab's shell like a thrown stone. She curses, a frustrated artist's hiss. Her fingers fly across her harp, changing the tune from violence to pure, unadulterated heroism. "Sing a song of sea-foam and stone, Halite!" her voice rings, a clarion call over the clatter. "Let your fury be the tide that shatters the cliff!" A golden shimmer, the very essence of valor, settles on the goliath's shoulders like a king's mantle.

"I hear the sea's song in my blood!" Halite bellows. He becomes the wave Elara sang of, a charging tsunami of muscle and iron. His trident, blessed by her magic, does not merely pierce the great crab's carapace; it punches through with a ghastly, grinding crack, the sound of a tree split by a lumberjack's axe.

The battle dissolves into a madcap whirlpool of splashing brine and clattering shells. The swift crab lunges at Halite, its claws scissoring empty air. Gerhard looses another arrow that finds its mark with a solid *thump*. The clumsy crab, forgetting the pincer still clamped on its leg, snaps wildly at Scarlet-crab and nearly topples over. A crab with a barnacled shell, still addled by its rude awakening, charges Halite and snaps its pincers at him. Halite's

armor easily repels the attacks.

Through it all, the crossbow in the doorway *thwangs* and *thwangs* again, its bolts zinging off the walls with the casual menace of a drunken hornet. “Sorry! Nearly have the measure of it!” squeaks Doctor Pepe’s voice from the shadows.

Finally, as the great crab rears back, a tower of scarred shell and impotent fury, it exposes the soft, pulpy flesh between the plates of its carapace. Doctor Pepe’s bolt, loosed more by luck than skill, flies true. The monster gives a final, shuddering spasm, a grotesque jig of death, and collapses with a splash that drenches them all in stinking water.

“Now *that* is how it’s done!” Kragor cheers, though his eyes dart toward the doorway with grudging disbelief. He levels the sword at the barnacled crab, and a bolt of crackling, purple energy blasts the creature into a dozen steaming pieces. Whisper, a flowing shadow, follows the blast, her javelin finding the heart of the swift crab just as Elara’s arrow sinks into its shell. One foe remains.

It is locked in a clumsy, sideways waltz with Scarlet-crab, the two grappling claw-to-claw. Emboldened by his fluke of a kill-shot, Doctor Pepe steps into the doorway, levels his crossbow, and squints. “Hmm. Which one is our Scarlet?” he mutters to the empty hall. He shrugs. “A fifty-fifty chance, then.” He fires.

The bolt strikes Scarlet-crab square in the carapace. The shell crunches as the bolt penetrates, followed by a flash of primal light. Where the crab stood a moment before, a very surprised halfling now stands, still held fast by the remaining crab’s pincer.

The sight is too much for Kragor. He collapses against the wall, overcome by a fit of helpless, wheezing, breathless laughter that echoes louder than any war-cry.

“Elara, a little help for the heart-guided!” Scarlet yelps, struggling in the claw’s grip.

“Let your claws find the eyes!” the bard sings out, though her lips are twitching with a

suppressed smile.

Whisper ends the farce. She flows forward, a feline blur ending in flashing claws. A double-flick of her wrists, and she slashes through the crab’s eye stalks. It shudders and falls, its grip finally loosening.

COLD ANVIL

The room is silent, save for the gentle lapping of the water and Kragor’s dying, tear-streaked guffaws. Whisper ignores the living. She pads over to the great crab’s massive corpse, leans down, and inhales deeply from a crack in its shell. A low, throaty purr rumbles in her chest.

“Oh,” she breathes, her eyes alight with a feral glow. “This smells like heaven. We are going to *feast* tonight.”

Kragor’s laughter finally sputters into a ragged cough. He wipes a tear from his eye with the back of a gauntlet, the sound a rasp of leather on leather. His gaze, hard once more, settles on the two iron-bound chests sunk into the stinking brine. “The prize,” he grunts, pulling the brass keys from his pocket. “And I’ve no desire to wade into that foul soup of crab-guts and brackish water. No telling what foul traps the good Ferol left for any would-be pilferers. Best a phantom hand risks the snapping than a flesh-and-blood one.”

His spectral hand glimmers into being, a limb of violet smoke and silent purpose. It plucks the brass keys from his waiting palm and sinks without a ripple into the stinking brine. Motes of amethyst light swirl in the murky water as it glides to the nearest chest, a ghostly lantern in the sunken filth. The first key slides home into the rusted lock with a grating sound that seems to travel up the hand’s spectral wrist to Kragor’s own nerves. A twist, a muffled *clunk*. It drifts to the second chest and repeats the grim ceremony: the grating entry, the turn, the heavy, satisfying *thunk* of an ancient mechanism yielding its secret. Its primary task done, the phantom rises from the murk, water sluicing from its incorporeal fingers. It glides back to Kragor and deposits the two brass

keys, now slick with crab-gut and slime, safely into his waiting gauntlet. Only then does the hand return into the water, a silent, obedient servant. Its smoky fingers wrap around the iron ring of the first chest's hasp. It pulls. The water churns, a small vortex of purple-tinged filth, as the ethereal muscles strain against the dead weight of sodden iron. Its form thins, threatening to dissipate. A groan of tortured, rusted hinge metal bubbles to the surface, and that is all. The chest remains stubbornly shut, a drowned coffin hoarding its secrets.

Halite snorts, a sound like an anchor chain running out. "That is a task for muscle, not for ghosts. Allow me." He wades into the pool, the foul water sloshing around his shins. He braces himself, grips the lid with both hands, and heaves with a mighty grunt. The first lid groans open. Inside, nestled in rotting velvet, are twenty golden vials filled with a milky white liquid. The cure. From the second, he pulls a single, unnerving object: a perfect glass eye, its iris a swirl of gold and silver, that seems to follow him as he moves.

While the others celebrate their find, Gerhard looks back toward the forge. "There's still the matter of those twitching boots."

"Aye," Kragor agrees, getting to his feet. "Let's not leave any of Ferol Sal's handiwork behind."

They return to the cold forge, where the air hangs stale with the ghosts of coal-smoke and quenched steel. Kragor puts his shoulder to a great slab of fallen masonry, grunting with the effort.

"Think he's still under warranty?" Gerhard asks, his voice dry as dust. He finds the keystone of the pile and levers it out with his scimitar's pommel.

"Ferol's work?" Kragor rumbles, heaving another stone aside. "The rot's the only guarantee."

The ruin collapses inward with a dusty sigh, revealing their quarry. It is, as the twitching boots promised, another of the red-robed servants, this one clad in a heavy, scorched

leather apron. It lies with a smith's hammer clutched to its chest, a parody of a king on a funeral bier.

"The forge is cold," Gerhard observes, "but the smith looks ready for business."

As the cold air touches its face, the creature's head snaps up. With the grinding screech of a rusted hinge, it lurches to its feet and swings the hammer in a whistling arc.

The blow rings off Kragor's ribs with the sound of a cracked bell. A spectral frost, shimmering like heat-haze over a frozen pond, erupts from Kragor's icy armor at the point of impact. The zombie's hand, where it grips the hammer, smokes and blackens as if quenched in sorcerous frost-fire. It stumbles back, its dead eyes showing no pain, only a mechanical fury.

"He has the grip of a smith, I'll grant him that," Kragor snarls, shoving the creature back. "But his bedside manner is wanting."

"He's been waiting a long time for a customer," Gerhard notes. A ghostly, wavering sigil appears over the zombie's heart, a hunter's promise of a swift end. "Time to pay the bill."

Gerhard's scimitar is a surgeon's scalpel, tracing the sigil he has placed and biting deep into the undead flesh with cold economy. Kragor's longsword is the executioner's axe that follows. The thunder-grey steel warps the air around it as it descends, howling its one-note dirge of unmaking. The blade strikes home with the discordant shriek of unraveling necromancy. The zombie collapses inward, leaving only a drift of greasy ash and scorched splinters of bone that clatter against the far wall.

The ash settles. Where the unhallowed smith fell, his tools lie scattered in the ruin. They are masterworks of mithral, or were. The same tonnage of rock and iron that entombed their wielder has taken its own toll upon his craft. A hammer's head is split, its haft a splintered memory. Tongs are bent into a useless spiral. A set of fine chisels are snapped like winter twigs.

Gerhard nudges the split hammerhead with his boot, a faint, sad ring of metal on leather. "A master's tools, fit now only for a tinker's barrow."

"As tools, yes, they are ruined," agrees Kragor. "But as raw mithral, Gerhard? The metal itself is worth a king's ransom." Kragor grunts, sweeping the twisted tongs and snapped chisels into a heavy canvas sack. The mithral pieces clink together, a mournful, silver sound.

But Kragor's work is not yet done. A dangerous avarice glints in his eye. "The wight gave up its keys for a reason," he grunts, gesturing back toward the vault's grim antechamber. "Ten chests. Ten promises Ferol Sal made to himself. We shall see them kept."

They retrace their steps, their boots echoing in the oppressive quiet. The ten iron-bound chests await them, a silent receiving line of grim, iron-toothed smiles. One of the brass keys fits the first lock. It turns with a grating shriek of protest. The second chest, the third, all ten yield to the same key, a testament to their maker's cynical efficiency. And the contents of each are identical: a thrice-damned trinity of malice.

Within each, nestled on rotting straw, lie three vials of a thick, swirling liquid the color of a frozen sky before a blizzard. Frigid Woe. A plague in a bottle, concentrated and patient. Thirty vials in all. Weapons of mass destruction.

"No hand of flesh should touch these," Kragor declares, his voice a low command. His spectral hand glimmers again into being. It moves with a watchmaker's precision, as if performing a deadly surgery. The ethereal fingers, more delicate than any living digit, pluck the first vial from its nest. The air around the glass seems to thin and grow colder. One by one, the ghost-hand lifts the vials, ferrying them across the small gap to be tucked deep into their packs. It is a slow, nerve-wracking process, a dance with a death so cold it burns. Thirty times the phantom hand makes its journey, thirty glass-cased

dooms secured amongst their gear. Only when the last vial is safely stowed does the spectral limb dissolve into a final, violet shimmer.

Now Kragor allows himself a grimly satisfied grunt. He hefts the sack of mithral once more. "That is the last of the salvage," he says, the sound muffled in the dusty quiet. He rolls his shoulders, a grimace flickering across his face from where the smith's hammer struck true. "Now, to Syrinlya. That family waits for salvation."

"And a frozen death waits for us in the wastes," Gerhard counters, his voice flat. He gestures with his scimitar toward the passageway leading out. "We are wounded, weary, and walking into the teeth of the Eiselcross night. A foolishness even Doctor Pepe might hesitate at."

"He is not wrong," Elara says, her usual bright tone frayed with exhaustion. Her hand rests on her harp, more for support than song. "The cure does no good if we freeze to death carrying it. And..." Her eyes find Whisper, who is already inspecting a severed crab leg with the focused intensity of a hungry cat. "...we have provisions."

A slow grin splits Gerhard's grim features. "Aye. Provisions. And a hearth warm enough to roast a dragon in." He looks at the others, his gaze a challenge and an invitation. "One night. We rest, we feast, we bind our wounds. We honor the dead..." he pats the bulging sack of crab meat Halite carries, "...by eating them. Then, at first light, we race the dawn to Syrinlya."

Scarlet lets out a laugh that stirs the ash. "A plan with meat and fire at its heart! The only kind worth following!"

The decision needs no debate; weariness is a language they all speak fluently, and the promise of hot meat is a gospel of its own. They turn their backs on the dead smith and his ruined forge, a final exhalation of dusty air against the living world.

FEAST AND FIRELIGHT

Salsvault's entrance is a throat that vomits them back into the jaws of the Eiselcross night. The cold is not merely a lack of heat but an active, malevolent presence, a thing with teeth that gnaw the gaps in their armor and a voice that howls mockery in their ears. They lean into the wind. Snow crunches underfoot like shattered bone. The sack of crab meat on Halite's back is a grotesque burden, and the clink of golden vials in Kragor's pack is a small, desperate prayer against the overwhelming cold.

After a score of minutes, the mouth of their cavern appears out of the white. Steam spouts from it like a furnace-door left ajar.

Before they retreat fully into the cavern's warmth, Kragor holds up a hand, a gesture for patience. "One last piece of business." He turns away from the mouth of the cave, back into the Eiselcross night. The others watch him go, a green-skinned silhouette against a wall of absolute, predatory cold.

The wind hits him like a mailed fist, a physical blow that sucks the breath from his lungs and replaces it with shards of ice. He squints against the blowing snow, a grey ghost in a grey world, and makes for a jagged outcrop of rock not fifty paces from the entrance. There, in a hollow scooped from the lee of the stone, lies the prize he had hidden before their descent into Salsvault: the white dragon's egg.

It lies nestled in the snow, unmolested. Ice kisses its pearlescent surface, a fine tracery of frost on a shell that seems to drink the faint, ambient light. He lays a gauntleted hand upon it. The egg is cold, of course—everything here is cold—but it holds a deeper, resonant chill that speaks not of death, but of a vast and slumbering winter. Satisfied, he gives it a few pats. This, too, will go to Syrinlya. One more secret to carry out of this frozen hell.

He returns to the cavern, the furnace-blast

of heat a welcome scourging. The rest of the party has already begun preparing for the night. Under the silent, fiery gaze of the elemental, a new pyre is built. Whisper, in a state of feral bliss, shows Doctor Pepe the tenderest joints, the sweetest meat, her claws flashing as she works. Soon, the cavern fills with the rich, savory scent of roasting crab, a smell of sea and salt and victory that drives the lingering ghosts of dust and decay back into the icy tunnels.

Doctor Pepe cracks open a great claw, the sound a pistol-shot in the cavern's booming silence. "A king's feast for a king's work!" he grins as he tears into the steaming flesh.

"To our crustacean ambassador," Kragor rumbles, raising a dripping leg of crab-meat like a scepter. He gestures toward Scarlet. "May her future negotiations be less explosive."

Scarlet, picking delicate meat from a smaller claw with the tip of her dagger, gives a grin that is all teeth. "I learned their secret language. It consists of two words: *click* and *scuttle*. The second word means, 'The orc is coming, run for your lives.'"

Kragor's answering laugh is a rockslide. Even Gerhard allows a dry chuckle, the sound of sand shifting over bone.

Halite, heedless of the feast, holds a golden vial of the cure up to the elemental's light, his face a mask of scholarly awe. "Life, captured in glass," he breathes. Then he picks up a flask of the Frigid Woe, his expression souring. "And death, just as neatly bottled. A perfect, damnable symmetry."

"One pays for the other," Gerhard grunts, his good humor vanishing as he eyes the flasks. "The salvation of Palebank Village, bought with a weapon that could unmake it twice over."

A brief, sober silence falls, a chill that has nothing to do with the Eiselcross night. It is Elara who breaks it, her voice soft but clear. "Then we shall be careful stewards." She looks from face to face, her gaze lingering on the

firelight dancing in their eyes. “But tonight, we are not stewards. We are not heroes or grave-robbers or monster-slayers. We are merely the victors. And to the victors,” she smiles, “go the spoils.”

With that, she plucks the choicest piece of crab from the pile. The feast and the laughter begin anew. Their circle of firelight is a warm, savory glow, a defiant fist of life clenched against the endless, biting cold. They have what they came for, and for now, that is everything.

THE WORM’S EMBRACE

The feast is a ghost on their tongues, a memory of warmth and savory meat already fading into the all-consuming cold. Dawn on Eiselcross is not a promise but a threat, a slow, merciless bleeding of grey light into the world. They pack in grim silence, the camaraderie of the firelight replaced by the stark calculus of survival. Kragor, his face a mask of grim determination, straps the white dragon’s egg to his own back, a preposterous, pearlescent burden. Halite watches him, a single eyebrow raised in silent judgment, but says nothing. The time for argument is a luxury they left behind in Salsvault’s dead halls.

They march.

The first six days are a waking nightmare painted in shades of white and grey. A howling wind is their constant companion, a banshee that scours the warmth from their bones and whispers madness in their ears. Snow falls in thick, wet sheets, then in blinding, crystalline flurries, reducing the world to an arm’s length of swirling chaos. Elara, her celestial resilience worn thin by the ceaseless cold, stumbles, her breath catching in her throat—the first tendrils of exhaustion coiling in her marrow. The next day, it is Whisper who falters, her usual feline grace lost in a weary, trudging gait.

“Still think that glorified omelet is worth it?” Gerhard mutters to Kragor on the third day, the words snatched away by the wind.

Kragor merely pats the enormous pack on his back. “It is an orphan. It deserves a chance.”

“So do we,” Gerhard grumbles, pulling his furs tighter.

On the seventh day, the sun breaks through, a weak, watery eye in a bruised sky. And in the distance, a sight both welcome and deeply unnerving: the thin, dark thread of smoke from a campfire, rising from a sheltered valley.

“Company?” Elara asks, her voice a croak. “Or trouble?”

“In this wasteland,” Halite rumbles, his eyes narrowed to slits against the glare, “they are usually the same thing.”

The valley offers a direct path, a shortcut on their agonizing trek. To go around would cost them two days, a lifetime in this cold.

“I’ll have a look,” Doctor Pepe volunteers, his confidence a fragile, rebuilt thing. He cinches his pack and slips away, a grey shape against the grey snow.

“I give him ten minutes before he trips over a monster or gets adopted by one,” Kragor says, settling his weight against a rock.

Doctor Pepe returns in less time than that, his face pale, his breath coming in ragged bursts. “People. A dozen of them. Dressed in furs and skins. Clubs, spears... primitive. But... some of them have black marks on their faces, their hands. And four others... four are tied to a post. Their wrists bound behind them. They don’t have the marks.”

Halite spits into the snow. “I’ve heard tales. Wild folk who wander the wastes. Most are harmless enough, but the black-marked ones... they are touched. Mad.”

“As I was leaving,” Doctor Pepe adds, his voice dropping to a whisper, “some of them saw me. They started following me.”

Even as he speaks, a piercing agony, sharp as a spike of ice, drives through Kragor’s skull. He cries out, a raw, guttural sound, and clutches his temples. “Ah, gods... not again...”

A voice slithers into his mind, smooth and cold and ancient. *Quajath would meet with his chosen. Come. Have a meal with us. We can make the pain stop.*

The world swims. He sees flashes of slick, writhing things, of ecstatic, dancing figures around a great, steaming pot, of blubber rendered down to a glistening, foul-smelling oil. He staggers, his legs buckling.

From the ridge, they can all see it now. Figures are moving up from the valley camp, their steps unhurried, their weapons sheathed. They are not charging; they are inviting.

Elara steps forward, her voice a clear, sharp bell in the frigid air. "We thank you for the offer, but we are on a pressing errand! We must be on our way!"

"Your friend is in pain," one of the figures calls back, his voice oddly resonant. "Quajath's embrace can soothe him."

"Why are those people tied to the post?" Elara demands, her hand straying to the harp on her back.

The figure smiles, a flash of white teeth in a grim face. "Oh, they will be fed, too. We all partake."

A fresh wave of psychic agony crashes over Kragor. He groans, a sound of pure misery, and collapses into the snow, incapacitated. *Partake*, the voice insists in his skull, a command wrapped in a promise of release. *Become one with the Worm.*

"Right," Halite grunts, the decision made. He unslings his pack, pulling out rope and a spare blanket. "We're going around. Gerhard, help me with a stretcher."

As they work, they see one of the black-marked folk emerge from a large tent in the valley below. He carries a wooden box. He walks toward the four bound captives, a grim parody of a steward serving a meal.

They do not wait to see what is in the box. They turn their backs and flee.

THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT

The next four days are a blur of panicked flight and gnawing dread. Halite and Gerhard carry Kragor's dead weight between them, their muscles screaming in protest. The detour is a brutal, winding path that costs them time and energy they do not have.

On the eighth day, Doctor Pepe, scouting ahead with foolish, unearned bravado, nearly stumbles into another band of the black-marked folk. His newfound stealth, a skittish, animal thing born of terror, allows them to slip past unseen.

On the ninth, Kragor finally stirs. He sits up on the stretcher, his eyes hollow, his face etched with the memory of a nightmare he cannot voice. "They ate," he whispers, his voice a dry rasp. "They made them eat."

The tenth day is clear and sunny. And on the horizon behind them, they see it. A large group of people, moving with a tireless, loping gait. It is them. The black-marked folk. And with them, four new figures, their faces now also bearing the tell-tale dark smudges. The captives have joined their captors.

"They're following us," Gerhard says, his voice flat with disbelief. "How can they be following us?"

"The voice," Kragor gasps, a hand going to his head. "It knows where I am."

They run. They abandon all pretense of caution, all thought of conserving energy. They power through the eleventh day without rest, a desperate, stumbling flight toward the distant promise of Syrinlya's encampments. But the pressure in Kragor's mind builds with every league they cover. As dusk paints the snow in shades of blood and violet, he screams and falls again, his body rigid, his eyes rolled back in his head. The voice of Quajath is a psychic storm, and he is broken in its wake.

"Pick him up!" Halite bellows, his own breath

misting in ragged clouds. He heaves the unconscious orc over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, a grotesque parody of a rescuer. "We don't stop! We don't rest! We make it, or we die here!"

Finally, they stagger into the flickering torchlight of Syrinlya's outer camp as the last light dies, a ragged band of survivors pursued by horrors they cannot comprehend. They collapse in their yurt, the world dissolving into a merciful blackness of utter exhaustion.

THE BUYER

Morning finds them bruised, bone-weary, but alive. Kragor shudders back to consciousness, the psychic echoes in his mind reduced to a faint, nauseating hum.

"The Buyer," Elara says, her voice thick with sleep and resolve. "Now."

The Buyer's tent is an impossible oasis in the frozen squalor of Syrinlya. The air within is warm, thick with the scent of sandalwood incense. Plush cushions and low divans are scattered across heavy, intricate rugs. In the center of the tent, a brass brazier gives off a clean, smokeless heat.

And reclining on the largest divan, they see an elf of stunning, androgynous beauty, with silver hair braided with lapis lazuli and eyes the color of a winter twilight. The elf is clad in flowing silks of cream and gold. Curled on their lap, purring like a kitten, is a tiny, iridescent green dragon with wings like stained glass. A pseudodragon. This must be The Buyer.

"You have returned," The Buyer says, their voice a silken melody. It is not a question.

Elara steps forward, her weariness hidden behind a mask of grace. She produces a small, padded case. "We were successful. For the family of Irven Liel and Fenton Tethwick." She opens it, revealing four golden vials of the cure.

The Buyer's smile is small, but genuine. They lift a slender hand, and a servant appears

from the shadows to take the case. "The diarchy thanks you. Your courage has saved a family from a terrible fate. As promised." The servant returns, placing a heavy purse of tooled leather in Elara's hand. Two hundred gold pieces. "And something more. You have proven yourselves capable in a land that devours the weak. You feel it, do you not? A new strength, a new resilience, earned in the crucible of Salsvault." They do. The very air seems to thrum with their newfound power.

"We have other items," Elara continues, emboldened. "Things of great... sensitivity. We would not see them fall into the wrong hands." She lays out their grim inventory: twenty-eight vials of Frigid Woe, nine more of the cure, and the sack of broken mithral tools.

The Buyer's gaze lingers on the blue vials. "The Krynns would pay a fortune for these. Enough to fund a war. The fact that you bring them here... that you trust us with their disposal... is a gesture of friendship the Diarchy of Uthodurn will not forget." They name a price that makes Kragor's jaw drop. A thousand platinum coins, and another forty-five gold for the broken tools. It is a king's ransom, a dragon's hoard.

As the servants count out the staggering sum, the debrief begins. Kragor, his voice still shaky, describes the wight, the ruin of Salsvault, and the relentless, black-marked wildlings.

"Wormkin," The Buyer corrects gently, stroking the pseudodragon. "The chosen of Quajath. A creature of immense and ancient power, a thing that slumbers beneath the ice. It dreams, and its dreams infect the minds of the weak and the lost, promising warmth and communion in this cold, lonely place. A promise that ends in madness and servitude. You were wise to flee."

Scarlet then speaks, describing the cavern with the caged elemental, the dodecahedron, and the strange, iridescent liquid Halite found.

"A stasis bubble," The Buyer muses, their twilight eyes distant. "Aeorian technology. A way of stopping time for a single subject. The

creature within is likely a prisoner, or perhaps a power source. Dangerous toys. It is best that you left it alone.”

It is Gerhard who clears his throat, his gruff voice seeming out of place in the silken quiet. “There is... one other thing. An egg. A white dragon’s egg.”

The Buyer’s serene expression finally cracks. Their eyebrows lift in genuine surprise. “You have taken a great and terrible burden upon yourselves. A white dragon is not a pet. It is a confluence of hunger and cruelty, a creature of pure, elemental malice. They are strong-willed, voracious, and cunning.” They lean forward, their gaze intense. “If you truly intend to raise it, you will need more than good intentions. You will need a will of iron to match its own.”

The Buyer settles back into the cushions, the audience clearly coming to an end. “The *Remorhaz* will be seaworthy in a few days. Rest. Recover. Syrinlya is your home for as long as you have need of it.”

They leave the tent, their packs heavy with coin, their minds reeling with new knowledge and fresh warnings. They are impossibly wealthy, vastly more powerful, and burdened with the secrets of ancient plagues, sleeping gods, and an unhatched monster. The snow-swept expanse of Syrinlya seems less a sanctuary now, and more the edge of a map, beyond which lie only more dragons.