Secrets of Croaker Cave

The party retraces their steps to the *Jolly Dwarf*, where warmth greets them like an old friend. As the tavern's door swings open, hearth light flickers along the walls, merging with murmurs and the clinking of mugs. After a day of skirmishes, they retire to modest rooms, voices still echoing with plans.

Morning in Palebank Village dawns with a crisp, biting air. Frost clings to windows, and the adventurers rise at half-past seven. Below, a kettle hisses, and the aroma of breakfast fills the inn. Unusually quiet due to the port's closure, the inn hosts only one other group— a family, a weary pair of men with twin tiefling girls. And even they soon depart, the door framing their retreat in the morning light.

Arl, the innkeeper, greets them cheerily. "Elro was around last night, looking for you lot," he says, "He'll be back soon for news."

As Halite asks about Croaker Cave, Arl's expression shifts subtly to one of caution. "Croaker Cave, you say? They call it that for good reason— the croaks of giant ice frogs echo from there, a sound that'd chill your bones if the cold hadn't already. None of the village folk dare set foot inside. They know where to find it, sure, but it's an unspoken rule here: no one goes into that cave."

Taking a seat, the party enjoys breakfast— warm bread, stew, and fish; a bargain at only five silver pieces— while Kragor inquires about Hulil, Tulgi's sister. Arl scratches his beard thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing as he sifts through what bits of information he possesses. "Ah, Tulgi," he begins slowly, weighing his words. "Can't say I knew she has a sister. These folks from Shadycreek Run— always a tangled web with them. Their kin aren't exactly welcome in Palebank. Suspicion tends to follow their kind."

Ever the pragmatic, Kragor poses another question: "What about healing potions? Do you know where we might procure some?"

Arl advises, "Try the docks. There's an old elf woman, Gramini, she sells them. Pricey, but worth it."

As breakfast concludes, Elro joins them, concern in his eyes. Scarlet updates him on their findings: connections between Tulgi, Hulil, and the village's affliction, and the tragic fate of Verla from Pelc's Curiosities. Elro nods, confirming suspicions about the Shadycreek Run families. News of dispatched bandits lightens his demeanor. "Less to worry about," he says, intending to send his men over to the shop to clean up.

Still curious about their next venture, Whisper inquires, "What makes Croaker Cave particularly dangerous?" Elro turns towards her, his gaze steady. "It's the giant ice frogs. Those are the reason folks steer clear."

Scarlet, drawing from her vast trove of natural knowledge, leans forward. "How large are these frogs?" she asks.

"About the size of a large wolf," Elro replies, conjuring a vivid image in their minds.

Scarlet nods, familiar with their temperate climate counterparts. She addresses the party. "I recall they aren't venomous, but they can certainly swallow a person whole. Their stomach acid dissolves their prey, and while they're smarter than regular frogs, they're not what you would call cunning. I knew a teacher once who kept one as a pet."

Before departing, Elro implores, "Root out those Shadycreek folks. The village would owe you greatly."

The party, girded by Elro's trust and responsibility, reflects on the tapestry they are unraveling— a tapestry that now leads them to the hidden depths of Croaker Cave and the shadows lurking within.

Adventuring is hard, let's go shopping

Braving the biting cold, our adventurers reach the docks— a sprawling network of paths and shanties, each whispering tales of a bygone era. They navigate these lanes, finding the shack they seek: a dilapidated structure with an askew "Goods for Sale" sign dangling overhead.

Elara steps forward as the negotiator. Halite opens the door, releasing the tinny clang of a bell. Inside, flickering firelight reveals shelves groaning under the weight of indescribable trinkets. Behind the counter emerges a wizened elf whose blue scarf and loose coat defy the chill that seeps through the shack's walls. Her eyes, sharp despite her age, study the newcomers with cautious curiosity.

"Well, well, what's this? Adventurers, by the look of you." Her voice, both raspy and warm, mirrors the fire's flicker. "What brings you here? Looking for trinkets, or is it something more substantial?"

Elara approaches, broaching the need for potions. "You must be Gramini. We seek anything to combat the freezing illness cursing this village."

The woman's expression shifts, a glint of sympathy mixing with practicality. "Ah, if you mean Urgon's ailment, that mystery is beyond my humble potions. But I have supplies for those brave enough to venture to Eiselcross. Dangerous place, that is."

She presents four health potions. "Usually 60 gold apiece, but business has been slow lately. I'll sell them for 50 each."

Seeing an opening, Elara leans in. "Could you let them go for 30 each? The road ahead is perilous."

Gramini chuckles, a sound steeped in kindness and shrewdness. "Below cost, Sweetie? But you've got charm, I'll give you that. Alright, 48 each. A gesture of goodwill."

The negotiation leaves Elara hopeful. With business nearing conclusion, curiosity tickles her again. "Heard any tales or warnings of late, Gramini?"

Leaning back, the old elf sighs. "Troubling times, indeed. The port's closed— no ships. Palebank seems to hold its breath, waiting for a storm to pass." Her voice drops to a whisper, eyes locking with Elara's. "That freezing disease, eating at the core. Aeor is where its dark magic likely thrives. Everything from that land carries a cost, mark my words."

Elara then suggests, "We're short on coin… Perhaps a barter?"

Kragor, catching on, brandishes a shirt emblazoned with the name Scanlan Shorthalt. Gramini's eyes gleam with recognition. "Him! I've seen him perform." Fond remembrance softens her demeanor.

She proposes, "I'll give you 15 gold off the potions for that."

Donning the bard's shirt with delight, Gramini is transformed into a giddy teenager for a few moments. "Scanlan was so charming!" Her laughter chimes like a song, sealing the deal.

As the party exits, spirits buoyed, Gramini's unexpected joy lingers, a beacon against the looming shadows.

Doctor Pepe

As the party approaches Croaker Cave, they note smoke spiraling upward from a natural chimney, etching the sky with its ashen tendrils. Despite the spectral warning, the front opening of the cave appears unguarded.

Unbeknownst to them, the rogue that Whisper had previously encountered lies in wait, having shadowed the party from Palebank. As they draw nearer, he steps free of the forest's embrace, his presence a sudden ripple in the serene tableau.

"Hail, Friends! I mean you no harm," he calls

out, raising his hands in a gesture of peace. "I have something I believe you need to know."

Scarlet and Whisper exchange glances before fixing their gazes upon the rogue. Recognition flickers in Whisper's eyes, a soft chuckle escaping her lips as she recalls their prior exchange on the rooftops of Pelc's Curiosities. Scarlet's expression is more guarded as she steps forward, her tone firm yet open. "Who are you?" she demands, her eyes narrowing with a blend of caution and curiosity. "And what do you want?"

The rogue spreads his arms in a gesture of openness. "Let me introduce myself. I am called Doctor Pepe," he announces. "I assure you, I was not a party to the bandits you encountered before. Like you, I've been drawn into the orbit of this mystery, investigating the source of this debilitating disease afflicting the village."

Kragor steps forward, his bearing equal parts caution and curiosity. "Well met, Doctor Pepe. What do you know of this cave?"

"Just before daybreak, I witnessed three cloaked figures enter the cave— a dwarf and two elves, if I'm not mistaken." Doctor Pepe's eyes, sharp and perceptive, scan the adventurers' faces, gauging their reaction. "Whatever transpires within, it may well relate to the affliction that has beset Palebank."

The party exchanges thoughtful glances. After weighing their options, the adventurers come to a shared conclusion. Offering the rogue a nod of acceptance, Kragor extends the group's unspoken consensus. "Then let us consider you an ally, Doctor Pepe. Together, we may better contend with whatever lies within the heart of Croaker Cave."

Trepidation's threshold

As the party assesses the scene at the cave entrance, Elara's sharp eyes catch sight of myriad footprints— heavy and light, large and small— tracing paths both in and out of the cavern's yawning mouth.

Gathering in a tight circle, they weigh their options and decide on a reconnaissance mission. It is swiftly determined that Doctor Pepe, with his keen investigative insights, and Whisper, with her silent grace, will venture in to scout the darkness and report back to the group.

To aid them in the shadowy depths, Elara steps forward and gently strums her harp, weaving magic through its strings. She sings, "Sol invictus," and with her melody, a spare dagger that Doctor Pepe holds aloft begins to glow. The light emanating from the blade now serves as both a beacon and a ward against the shadows lurking within the cave.

As Doctor Pepe and Whisper step cautiously into the cave, the world narrows around them to the soft glow of magical light. The air grows cooler, the dampness clinging to their skin like an insistent whisper. About ten feet in, they encounter a pool of water, its murky depths disturbed only by the occasional ripple from droplets falling from above.

Whisper, pausing to scan the area, notes that the ceiling, though ten feet high, bristles with stalactites, reducing the navigable space to eight feet. The constant drip of water echoes in the chamber, joined intermittently by the deep croaks of unseen amphibians. These sounds seem to resonate with the very bones of the cave, sending a shiver across her fur.

Doctor Pepe, moving with deliberate quiet, approaches the pool's edge to gain a better vantage. He squints across the still water, and on the far side, he discerns the tip of a wooden beam jutting slightly from the shadows. Suddenly he recalls that the three figures he saw entering the cave earlier were carrying a beam: this must be the way across.

Ambush

Whisper's usual grace falters when she hits a jagged stalagmite, unleashing a sharp hiss that pierces the cave's silence. Instantly, the murky

pool erupts, and two mastiff-sized blue frogs emerge, their slick bodies glinting ominously.

One frog leaps at Doctor Pepe, its jaw snapping with ferocious hunger. His reflexes, sharp from experience, save him; he sidesteps as its maw closes on empty air. But the second frog's attention locks onto Whisper. With a sudden lurch, it fastens its jaws around her, seriously wounding her. Its coarse tongue feels rough against her fur as it pins her with a vice-like grip. Whisper's world constricts around the raw strength of the creature, her body momentarily immobilized by the force of its bite.

Her once luxurious fur matted with blood and frost, her breath shallow and labored, Whisper summons her inner strength to claw free, leaving shallow crimson trails across the frog's blue skin in retaliation.

Outside, Elara leads the party at the cave entrance. "They're in trouble," she asserts, urgency lacing her voice. "We need to move!"

Within, the rhythmic echo of boots suggests more danger is approaching, but out of necessity, Doctor Pepe and Whisper remain focused on the immediate threat. Doctor Pepe turns his attention to the wounded frog threatening Whisper. His shortsword pierces its slick flesh, and his dagger follows, sinking deep into its massive head. The creature shudders, momentarily stunned. It recovers but has had enough, and slinks back into the pool, dodging a strike from Whisper's claws.

The second giant ice frog snaps at Doctor Pepe, its powerful jaws gripping him tightly. He grunts in pain, fighting against its hold.

Fighting through the pain of her wounds, Whisper turns to help Doctor Pepe, her claws slashing his assailant and drawing blood. Realizing she can't endure another attack, she makes a calculated retreat, slipping gracefully back to the cave's entrance, trusting that Doctor Pepe can handle the encroaching threat momentarily.

Reinforcements

As Whisper emerges from the cave, Halite quickly gauges the peril, his resolve igniting. With swift strides, he charges inside, his trident a formidable comfort.

He finds Doctor Pepe still struggling against the frog's relentless grip. Halite drives his trident into the creature's side, but its hold does not falter. Observing the struggle, Elara weaves a melody with her harp, instilling Doctor Pepe with courage. "Remember your agility and cunning!" she calls, the sound of her voice and the vibrations of her harp soothing. She then summons the power of the stars, launching a mote of radiant energy with precision. The frog releases a guttural croak, convulsing under the assault before it releases Doctor Pepe and collapses lifelessly into the pool.

Grateful and relieved, Doctor Pepe quickly regains his composure. Meanwhile, Kragor taps into his ancestral power, muscles tensing with readiness. Yet danger lurks in the shadows. Suddenly, a crossbow bolt strikes Doctor Pepe, drawing a pained cry. Another bolt narrowly misses Halite, while a third strikes him, but only bruises his resilient skin.

Halite spots the assailants: a dwarf and two elves across the pool, crossbows poised. Outside, Scarlet rushes to Whisper's aid, healing her with soothing energy. Renewed, Whisper re-enters the cave, her sling delivering a precise blow to one of the elves before she again retreats gracefully.

Inside, Doctor Pepe, undeterred by pain, fires back with his crossbow but misses. Halite steps forward, throwing a javelin that fells the injured elf with precision. Elara, considering but deciding against leaping across the pool, channels more divine energy, striking the second elf squarely. Kragor whispers a curse, dark power seeping from his words, then unleashes tendrils of energy that knock the remaining life out of the elf. The body plunges into the pool's depths.

Frustrated and fearful, the remaining dwarf curses, raising his crossbow in desperation. He takes aim at Elara, embedding a bolt into her thigh. She gasps, momentarily swaying, her focus clouded by the sting.

Retreating further into the cave's depths, the dwarf's footsteps echo and fade, leaving only the rhythmic drip of water and the murmur of unseen currents.

Crossing the pool

Faced with the challenge of pursuing a dwarf across a frigid pool, the party assesses their options. The wooden beam that seems to have been used by the bandits sits tantalizingly across the water.

Scarlet throws the grappling hook she found at Pelc's in an attempt to catch the beam, but misses. As she draws the hook back in for another throw, it snags something underwater. Halite steps in to help, and together they haul up a mass: a dead bandit and a distressed but living frog!

Kragor, sensing danger, hexes the frog and targets it with an eldritch blast. The frog disintegrates under the force of the blast.

Elara, steadying herself, heals her thigh wound with divine magic. Scarlet mirrors her, healing Doctor Pepe with nature's energies.

Their reprieve is brief. The dwarf reappears, firing a bolt that bounces off Halite's armor. "Damn it," Doctor Pepe grumbles, frustration etched into his features. "We need to see!" He hurls his enchanted dagger, and it thuds into the beam, revealing the far shore with its glow.

Driven by urgency, Whisper leaps onto the wall, climbing swiftly and landing silently on the far side, her eyes finding the dwarf hidden in shadows.

With a flick of his wrist, Halite takes a turn throwing the grappling hook, and this time it secures the beam. He pulls it towards him until it rests fully across the pool, then charges confidently across, joining Whisper. Kragor and the rest of the party follow, anticipation fueling each stride.

Scarlet conjures a flame to illuminate their path. Doctor Pepe retrieves his glowing dagger, its light warding off the gloom, as he brings up the rear.

Seeing them approach, the dwarf panics, firing wildly. The bolt clatters harmlessly off stone.

Interrogation in the Depths

In the dim cave light, Whisper, poised and predatory, lunges at the dwarf, her speed a shadowy blur. Yet the dwarf's shield deflects her strike with a resonant thud that shakes the cavern. Halite follows swiftly, his javelin piercing the dwarf with deadly precision, bringing him to his knees.

Elara arrives, agile and commanding, her voice sharp with authority. "Tell us the secrets of this place."

Despite his pain, the dwarf's eyes remain dull and silent. Kragor steps forward, his voice echoing with Elara's urgency. "When a lady speaks, you damn well better listen."

"What family are you with?" Halite's voice booms.

"The Uttolot family," the dwarf finally admits, defiance lacing his words.

Halite's massive frame looms over him. "And what are you doing in this cave?"

The dwarf swallows hard. "We… we feed the frogs," the dwarf confesses. "I work here. For Hulil. Train them to carry us. They used to eat more— whatever Hulil wanted."

Scarlet's eyebrow arches. "More what?" The dwarf squirms. "Bats, small game, even people. Hulil trained them."

Doctor Pepe notices a bucket… on closer examination, it is full of dead bats. "Interesting. These bats could distract the frogs— a tactical edge."

Halite's gaze darkens. "Tell us about Hulil." The dwarf blanches. "She's sick. Sent several of us to town for a clue to the disease— but none returned. She plans to sell Tulgi's loot in Shadycreek Run. Hoping for a cure."

Whisper leans in. "Are there traps here? Tell us what you know."

The dwarf nods toward the sleeping quarters. "A pit, covered by a bedroll."

Halite growls, "You'll live. For now." The dwarf's resigned eyes hint at fear of what's to come. Doctor Pepe binds the dwarf with rope from his pack. Halite stands guard, an imposing sentinel.

The others turn their attention to the grim task of searching their fallen adversaries. Kragor retrieves a crossbow. "Still serviceable," he notes.

Scarlet counts out coins from a waterlogged purse. "Seven gold, ten silver," she reports, the metal catching the dim light with a dull gleam. "Not exactly a king's ransom."

Dungeon crawl

In the cave, the prisoner shuffles under Halite's stern watch, boots scraping the stone floor. They reach a makeshift camp, a fire pit in the center. Whisper conjures a flame with a soft "Lux naturae," illuminating the scene.

Doctor Pepe's keen eyes catch a bedroll lying suspiciously flat. "It's the pit trap of which the dwarf spoke," he warns, pointing to the hidden danger.

Scarlet uncovers an unopened bottle amongst the camp supplies. "Bald Dwarf whiskey," she notes, smirking. "Made by elves."

"Elves making dwarf whiskey? A fine tale," Kragor chuckles.

"Nice. That might fetch as much as 25 gold pieces," Doctor Pepe notes, his rogue's mind already calculating potential value.

The party's attention shifts to two corridors leading away from the campsite. Halite suggests exploring one, with Doctor Pepe following. The corridor gradually widens, opening into a larger cavern. As their eyes adjust to the dim light, they realize they are surrounded by hanging bats.

Suddenly, the bats stir. Their collective movement creates a rustle of wings that fills the cavern with an ominous sound. Halite, startled, begins stabbing wildly with his trident. The weapon misses the bats entirely, instead striking a nearby stalagmite with a sharp crack.

"We need to go!" Doctor Pepe insists.

The two of them retreat, joining the others who are exploring the second corridor. "Bats," Halite explains simply.

Old Croaker

Kragor is the first to notice the expansive underground pool, its dark waters stretching beyond the reach of their light. The cavern seems to breathe with subterranean stillness, broken only by the occasional drip of water from unseen stalactites.

"What's across there?" Kragor demands, turning to the wounded dwarf. "How do we get over?"

The dwarf's eyes dart nervously across the water. "Well," he says, his voice trembling slightly, "Old Croaker ferries people across."

Before anyone can ask who or what Old Croaker is, a massive shape begins to emerge from the murky depths. Even among giant frogs, this creature is truly enormous— easily the size of a small boat, its skin a mottled green and blue, eyes like dark pools of ancient malevolence.

Scarlet steps forward, her movements calm and deliberate. In her hand, she holds one of the dead bats from their earlier discovery. "Easy now," she murmurs, her voice a soothing melody of nature's own language.

With extraordinary skill, Scarlet reaches out with her hand, gently stroking its massive head.

To everyone's amazement, the creature seems to relax under her touch, its previous menace transforming into something almost docile. "We need to cross," she tells it softly. Old Croaker, understanding, moves to the pool's edge.

"Well," Elara says, stepping forward with a mixture of excitement and trepidation, "I'll go first." She carefully climbs onto the frog's broad back, her movements careful but confident. Old Croaker begins to swim across the underground pool, Elara perched atop it like an unlikely queen of this subterranean realm.

Tiamat's priestess

Elara clings to Old Croaker's back as they glide across the underground pool. Dismounting with practiced grace, her sharp eyes survey the cavern. An enormous fire illuminates a scene of unsettling drama—shadows dance across stone, cast by two robed figures kneeling before a tapestry depicting a fearsome multi-headed dragon.

The robes of the dwarf woman and the male elf match the tapestry's hues. The dwarf's blued skin betrays the creeping freezing disease.

Pressing against the cavern wall, Elara watches as Old Croaker swims back for her companions: Halite, Doctor Pepe, Kragor, and Scarlet. Whisper stays behind, guarding their captured dwarf informant.

When the party finally joins Elara on the far shore, Scarlet studies the tapestry with a scholar's precision. "Tiamat," she murmurs, more to herself than to her companions. "The scaled tyrant. Embodiment of greed. One of the betrayer gods, sworn enemy of Bahamut, the Platinum Dragon."

"A betrayer god?!," exclaims Elara.

Startled, the robed figures turn. Their fire-cast shadows loom monstrously. The dwarf is undoubtedly Hulil Lutan, Tiamat's priestess.

"Halt!" Hulil barks, her voice crackling with authority. Her diseased skin gleams with those telltale blue streaks. "Who dares approach our sacred space? Drop your weapons and explain yourselves!"

Elara steps forward, her diplomatic mask sliding into place. "We are sent by the dragons," she says smoothly, "to understand the origin of this disease."

Elara's deception falls flat, and Hulil lets out a sharp, mirthless laugh. "Lies! You're nothing but intruders!"

Kragor responds, a sickening glow crackling as he hexes the elf. From his outstretched hand a purple shock of darkness blasts forward but misses and strikes stone harmlessly.

Scarlet charges, swinging her quarterstaff fueled by druidic power, but misses the elf by inches. On the other hand, Doctor Pepe's crossbow bolt finds the elf's neck, silencing him forever.

Halite throws his javelin with horrifying force and it pierces Hulil's hip, pain twisting her features. "Flee!" she commands in response, magical compulsion threading her words. But Halite's will remains unbroken.

A spectral sword materializes, its pommel shaped like a dragon's claw. It swings at Halite, missing him by a hairsbreadth.

Elara's shortbow sings, her arrow finding Hulil's shoulder. The dwarf winces but remains standing.

Kragor now turns his hex on Hulil, firing another eldritch blast that goes wildly off-target.

Doctor Pepe's next shot is solid, sinking deep into Hulil's shoulder and driving her back momentarily.

Hulil's hand summons a sickly green, jagged blade. She swings it at Halite, but his armor deflects the strike. Then, with practiced motion, she pulls out a potion and drinks. Instantly, her wounds begin to heal.

In the dimly lit cavern, Elara's fingers dance

over her shimmering harp. Hulil pauses as the chilling notes paint vivid fears across her mind, yet, fortified by sheer willpower, she resists the full force of the arcane assault.

With a gesture imbued with ancient malevolence, Kragor again unleashes his eldritch blast, a tendril of otherworldly light that tears through the fabric of reality, wrapped in the chill embrace of necrotic energies. This time the blast impacts Hulil, and it seethes with the whispers of forgotten realms, unraveling her very essence beneath a suffocating miasma of decay. The force spreads like a dark plague, methodically consuming vitality and sowing despair in its wake, leaving naught but a hollow echo of cosmic dread.

Allowing no time for Hulil to recover, Scarlet channels natural energy through her quarterstaff, its wood shimmering with an ethereal glow. As the staff connects with Hulil's jaw, Scarlet's druidic power amplifies the force of the strike, delivering a bone-jarring impact that crackles with mystical energy.

Hulil staggers to her feet, fury and agony blazing in her eyes like twin infernos. Doctor Pepe, with ice-cold precision, discharges another bolt, tearing into the dwarf priestess's abdomen.

Nearby, Halite hears a splash behind him but remains steadfast. With a swift motion, he plunges his javelin into Hulil's heart. Her eyes wide, the fire within them slowly extinguishing as she collapses, she rasps a final curse: "May you be consumed by endless desire… let your victories sow only tyranny and ruin… may all… you covet… turn to ash in your grasp."

Beast gonna feast

Meanwhile, hearing the sounds of battle echoing across the cavern, Whisper knocks out the bound dwarf. Determined to join the fray, she attempts to scamper across the cave wall. Instead, she slips and falls with a splash into the water.

Old Croaker startles at the sudden disturbance. The massive frog's head snaps toward Whisper, jaws wide, but miraculously misses. Whisper swims away from the predatory amphibian and begins climbing the wall again.

Old Croaker leaps at Whisper but cannot quite reach her, its massive form creating waves in the underground pool.

Elara attempts to calm the massive frog. "O magnificent amphibian, if you take us back across," she offers, "we'll give you more food." But Old Croaker has other ideas. "Kitten sandwich," the frog seems to communicate, eyeing Whisper with hungry intent.

Kragor hexes the frog and attempts to blast it with eldritch energy. "Damn it!" he curses as the blast goes wide.

Doctor Pepe also shoots wildly into the darkness, his bolt disappearing without effect.

"Who needs enemies with friends like these," Elara sighs.

Whisper manages to scramble away into the main cavern, and drops to the floor. "Fucking frog!" she mutters.

Halite surveys the aftermath of battle, a grim idea forming. With raw, brutal strength, he reaches down to the fallen elf and— with a sickening tear— removes a hand from the corpse. He tosses it to Elara, who catches it with a mixture of horror and fascination.

Old Croaker lurches toward Elara, its massive form seeking a meal. The frog's jaws snap, but miraculously miss her. Elara, her stomach turning, holds out the elf's hand. The massive amphibian sits back, mouth opening like an oversized baby bird expecting a treat.

"Lovely," she mutters. She tosses the hand into the frog's waiting maw. Old Croaker catches it with frightening efficiency, then silently slips back into the pool, leaving nothing but ripples in its wake.

What lies within

The party scans the room. Beyond the bodies and the imposing altar, a single chest sits conspicuously against the cavern wall. The massive Tiamat tapestry looms overhead, its multi-headed dragon seeming to watch their every move.

A quick search of the bodies yields eight gold pieces and five silver pieces, but no keys.

Doctor Pepe approaches the chest, his rogue's eye immediately drawn to its unusual lock. Shaped like a dragon's head, the lock bristles with intrigue. Small pin holes pepper its surface, each filled with a fine blue powder. "Interesting," he mutters, carefully examining the mechanism.

Using a leather pouch to protect his hand, he begins to extract the blue powder. It's abundant, but his practiced fingers manage to contain most of it within the pouch.

Scarlet steps forward to examine the chest. She closes her eyes and murmurs, "Revela nocuit et morbus." As the words weave through the air, a soft luminous aura emanates from her hands, casting an ethereal glow.

"There's magical contagion in the pouch," she warns. "And in the chest itself." She pauses, her gaze shifting. "Oh, and Old Croaker? Definitely venomous."

Working together with Elara, Doctor Pepe carefully picks the lock. The chest opens with a soft click, revealing its treasures: a gilded scroll case, a jade statuette of a storm giant, a quiver with six clearly magical arrows, a silver ring set with a jasper stone, 800–900 coins, and an old notebook.

"These," Doctor Pepe says, "match the items on Urgon's receipt. Except the two blue vials are missing."

Doctor Pepe beckons the others closer. With meticulous care, he removes the chest's contents, ensuring no blue powder is disturbed. He begins to count the coins, his fingers moving methodically. "Let's see," he mutters. "415 copper pieces, 234 silver pieces, 43 electrum pieces, and 112 gold pieces."

Halite takes the notebook, his massive hands carefully turning the pages. His eyes narrow as he reads Hulil's journal. "This is interesting," he says. "Hulil was trying to collect funds to purchase a cure for her disease. She sold one of the blue vials to someone named Irven Liel."

The party exchanges knowing glances, the weight of their discovery hanging in the air like a promise of deeper mysteries yet to be unraveled.

With nothing more to explore, and exhausted from the morning's events, they decide to leave. They coax Old Croaker once more with bat treats, using the massive frog to ferry them back across the underground pool. Retracing their steps, they exit the cavern.

As they step outside, they find the sun high in the sky, its warm light a stark contrast to the damp, dark world they've just left behind.

Whisper looks back at the cave entrance. "Fucking frog," she mutters under her breath.