

PROLOGUE

HE SALT SPRAY STINGS YOUR FACES as the longship grinds against the icy pier of Palebank Village. The groan of splintering ice mixes with the cries of gulls and the shouts of dockworkers bundled in furs. Palebank Village greets you with a blast of frigid air, a stark contrast to the relative warmth of the southern seas you've left behind. The sky above is a perpetual gray, heavy with the promise of more snow.

You've endured weeks at sea, braving treacherous currents and icy squalls aboard the *Frostwind*, a sturdy, if somewhat cramped, longship captained by a weathered and taciturn dwarf. The journey itself proved more than just a test of sea legs; it was during those long, monotonous days and nights that your paths first crossed. Over shared meals of salted fish and hardtack, huddled around the meager warmth of the ship's brazier, you discovered a shared purpose beneath your disparate backgrounds. Perhaps it was a whispered conversation overheard in the galley, a chance encounter on deck under the pale moonlight, or a late-night debate in the cramped crew quarters, but you each realized you were drawn north by the same alluring whispers: the rediscovery of Aeorian ruins, remnants of a lost civilization swallowed by the Frostfell. Tales of lost cities and powerful artifacts have spread like wildfire, carried on the winds and traded in taverns from the Menagerie Coast to the shores of Wildemount. These stories have lured explorers, scholars, and fortune-seekers alike to this desolate land, and fate, or perhaps something more, has brought you together on this shared voyage.

Palebank Village, a ramshackle collection of wooden buildings huddled against the harsh landscape, serves as the primary gateway to the frozen Islands of Eiselcross to the North. Here, amidst the bustle of fur traders, fisherfolk, grizzled explorers, shady mercenaries, and hopeful fortune-seekers, you disembark.

The air is thick with anticipation, a palpable sense of excitement mixed with a healthy dose of apprehension. The promise of uncovering lost knowledge, powerful magic, and perhaps even unimaginable wealth hangs heavy in the air, a beacon in this frozen wilderness. But the frozen shores of Eiselcross hold many secrets, and the ruins of Aeor are guarded by more than just ice and snow. Ancient dangers stir beneath the frozen surface, and the secrets you seek may come at a terrible price. Your journey into the heart of Eiselcross begins now, the moment your boots touch the frozen ground.

WELCOME TO PALEBANK VILLAGE

PN THE FROSTY EXPANSE OF THE colder reaches of Wildemount, in the Greying Wildlands south of the Islands of Eiselcross, lies the haphazard cluster known as Palebank Village. It is a place more cobbled together than planned, with just over a hundred cabins and shacks pressed against the northern cliffs that rise a mere fifteen feet against the lapping rhythms of the icy harbor waves. The docks, busy with the absence of departing ships, whisper tales of neglect and wariness.

On this frigid day, the village is subdued, gathered in mournful procession for the unfortunate Urgon, a dwarven adventurer whose final journey is to the graveyard west of the harbor. There, encased in a casket more suitable for a relic than a beloved friend, he lies suspended in a state of frozen eternity. Villagers whisper tales of his return from a year-long venture into Eiselcross, burdened with treasures and a chilling affliction. Despite countless efforts, Urgon was never able to find warmth. Eventually, blue streaks marred his pallor, snaking through his veins, until his entire being succumbed to the grip of frost.

The adventurers follow the procession, taking note of the landscape dotted with quaint inns and supply shops. Amongst the mourners stands a weathered elf adorned with the insignia of a “Glassblade.” Introducing himself as Elro, he shares that the usual voyages to Aeor have ceased, a silent testament to the mystery shrouding Urgon’s demise. Elro seeks their help in unveiling the source of this insidious curse, admitting that Urgon’s home remains unexplored.

Word reaches the adventurers quickly that another villager named Tulgi shows similar symptoms— her fate seemingly entwined with Urgon’s. Fortunately, their cabins stand in proximity.

BEER WITH THE LOCALS

In the heart of the village, a jovial dwarf Arl Bortock tends bar at the local tavern. Elara, ever inquisitive, engages Arl in conversation about Urgon’s recent exploits. A night’s rest is negotiated— two rooms for eight silver pieces— before the adventurers are served beer by the bucket and a meal of squid rolls.

Bill, a stalwart Glassblade at one of the tavern tables, emphasizes that due to the danger of the curse, all boats are being warned off from Palebank’s docks. Meanwhile, the adventurers learn Tulgi is a solitary trapper, her life a mystery to most.

THE CABINS OF URGON AND TULGI

With this knowledge, they venture to Urgon’s cabin where another Glassblade vigilantly stands post. Halite leads them inside, where chaos has left its mark. The mounted head of a snowy beast with gray horns seems to oversee the search. Books are strewn about, gear tossed aside as if someone has desperately sought something. Scarlet’s keen eyes catch sight of a grappling hook, swiftly claiming it. Meanwhile, with a sharp mind for details, Halite discovers a receipt within a book. Dated two months prior, it records the sale of Aeorian items at the local Pelc’s Curiosities for a handsome sum of one thousand gold pieces. Among the items: a dagger, a scroll case, a jade statue, a quiver of arrows, a jasper-set silver ring, and two blue glass vials.

Their eyes trace tracks leading to Tulgi Lutan’s snow-burdened cabin. The warmth of a fierce fire belies the untouched exterior and shuttered windows. Scarlet’s knock brings a curt response, followed by Elara’s soft words which coax the door open. Tulgi’s face, marked

by the same blue streaks that have doomed Urgon, is a testament to her shared affliction. She admits her illness, confessing that she and her sister Hulil, newcomers from Shadycreek Run, are in league with a crime syndicate. They have been sent to pilfer Aeorian treasures. It is they who have ransacked Urgon's home, and Tulgi now surrenders a finely wrought dagger into Kragor's keeping.

She says that her sister Hulil holds the remainder of the treasures in Croaker Cave, though Tulgi has not seen her in weeks.

ONWARD

With their next destination clear, the adventurers hike to Pelc's Curiosities. They find the shop marked by a dragon-gilded "P," where the front door sags invitingly open, beckoning them into the next chapter of this unfolding tale.

PELC'S CURIOSITIES

PHE PARTY STANDS OUTSIDE PELC'S Curiosities, the door slightly ajar. Suspecting intruders, Whisper closes her eyes while softly purring "Maior et Fortior". The air around her shimmers momentarily as she draws on her inner ki in concentration. She then peers through the doors and windows of the building. Despite her efforts, she cannot make out very much, though she hears enough rustling to make her hairs bristle. It sounds as though there are several inside ransacking the place. Scarlet joins Whisper's investigation, attempting to divine whether the noises might simply be animals, yet she senses no wildlife inside.

Preparing for potential conflict, Kragor stands up straight and stretches out his arms as if to grasp a weapon. In a loud yet distant voice he exclaims "Malleum Evoco". Suddenly ethereal shadows stream in from all directions and coalesce into an obsidian black war hammer with an angular and brutal head. Its every surface is etched with subtle twisting runes. Kragor hefts the weapon with both hands, then widens his stance with feet planted firmly on the ground.

The goliath Halite likewise readies himself, his massive frame towering above even Kragor. With deliberate, practiced movements, he adjusts his gleaming bronze shield, its surface etched with intricate clan markings. In one enormous hand he carefully grips his trident, its three wickedly barbed prongs designed not just to pierce, but to tear and rend flesh. The trident promises not just death, but a savage, lingering demise.

SURPRISE

Inside Pelc's Curiosities lie the answers to the freezing curse. Anxious for action, Elara takes a deep breath, tapping into her well of magic. Her fingers trace the air, summoning the rhythm of a battle drum. Her magic ignites, sending an illusory racket echoing from

within the shop's shadowed walls. Startled into silence, the adversaries within hold their breath, their schemes momentarily unraveled. As Whisper crouches beside her, she senses the tension mounting. Without warning, a crossbow bolt whistles past, narrowly missing her. Elara's calculated ruse works, urging their foes to react blindly. The door slams shut, a temporary barrier between them and danger.

"So much for the element of surprise," mutters Kragor.

Undeterred, Elara shoulders the door open again. Darkness seeps around her like ink in water, yet her keen eyes, accustomed to shadow, discerned the outlines of two startled bandits amid the cluttered ruins of the shop. Ancient relics lay strewn about like casualties of an invisible war; toppled bookshelves and shattered relics spoke of a hasty, chaotic search.

The bandits, their nerves frayed by Elara's eerie magic, released their crossbow bolts in a jittery frenzy. The bolts missed their marks, striking harmlessly against worn brick and aged wood. Assessing the chaotic tableau before her, Elara hesitated; caution whispered in her ear, suggesting a withdrawal from direct assault into strategic retreat.

INSPIRATION AND FOG

She retreats to her waiting comrades, her mind spinning a fresh tapestry of strategy. Checking again her surroundings, Kragor meets her gaze with a blend of curiosity and gruff admiration. Her eyes locked with his, and in that silent exchange, understanding was born. Elara struck her hand drum, each beat a pulse of power transmitted through the air, wrapping around Kragor like a cloak of inspiration. The rhythmic symphony reignited his focus, sharpening his spirit for the clash ahead.

But as this is happening, Scarlet quickly reacts. “Voco Nubes!” she bellows while raising her gnarled staff to the sky. Her eyes close in concentration as she summons nature’s veil. Wisps of mist curl around her fingers before surging toward the building. The vapor seeps through cracks and under doorways, expanding rapidly into a dense, swirling fog that blankets the room. The once-clear space becomes an opaque, ethereal haze, obscuring vision and muffling sound. The druid smiles, knowing the shrouded interior will confound any occupants, granting her allies the advantage they seek within the murky cover of the fog cloud. She wastes no time taking advantage of it herself: she sneaks into the building and hugs the wall, moving to the right. She can hear others moving inside as well, but can make out nothing through the fog.

FIRST BLOOD

Watching one of his allies attacked and another diving into the fog and what must certainly be mortal danger, Kragor strains to think. He feels like a sitting duck outside with obscured enemies inside, ready to make a pincushion out of him with their crossbow bolts. Taking a deep breath to overcome his fear, he too rushes through the doorway into the shrouding fog, gripping his massive conjured war hammer tightly. Unable to see, he positions himself protectively before where he believes Scarlet to be, straining to detect any threats hidden in the mist. A sudden noise to his left spurs him into action. He swings wildly, the war hammer arcing through the air, and feels a heavy impact followed by a muffled crunch. The enemy’s body collapses to the ground with a lifeless thud.

THE ROOF

Outside, Whisper’s sharp tabaxi senses are attuned to every movement around her. As her gaze sweeps upward, it catches upon an unexpected anomaly: a crouched form perched on the rooftop. Though the figure’s features are obscured by distance, their posture is a

tapestry of uncertainty, a riddle waiting to be unraveled. Without hesitation, Whisper draws upon her innate agility, launching herself up the building’s facade, her movements a dance of precision and power. Within moments, she alights upon the roof beside the puzzled figure. As she closes in, a momentary clumsiness intrudes upon her fluid motion; her limbs entangle with the figure in a grapple that is awkward but surprisingly effective. Despite the ungraceful tangle of arms and legs, her determination holds fast, securing her quarry beneath the vast blue sky. The figure, now clearly a rogue based on their dark attire and tools of the trade hanging from their belt, desperately attempts to free themselves from Whisper’s grasp, to no effect.

COUNTERATTACK

Halite now grasps the perilous choice the party has made in their recklessness. With a fierce resolve etched in the hard lines of his goliath visage, he charges through the fog-choked doorway, instinctively veering left to secure the flank opposite Scarlet and Kragor. The mist clings to him, a shroud of uncertainty, yet he moves with the confidence of one accustomed to the unseen. A bandit lunges at him, the attack a mere whisper of danger that dissolves into emptiness. Seizing the opportunity, Halite’s fingers tighten around his trident, that harbinger of despair. With an expert thrust, the weapon slices through the fog, hungry for blood. It strikes true, embedding itself deep within the bandit with a sickening resistance, as though the weapon savors its work. Halite has to struggle to wrench it free from the bandit with raw power, the action accompanied by a dreadful noise that the fog quickly absorbs.

While recovering his favored weapon, Halite hears the “whoosh” of a crossbow bolt. He flinches, but he is not the target. He hears Kragor cry out in desperate pain. The bolt strikes Kragor just below the collarbone, close to his heart. Blood flows unchecked, staining his leather armor.

Seconds later, another bolt pierces Scarlet and a sharp pain flares beneath her ribs. Blood seeps into her cloak, mingling with the forest's earthy scent.

ROGUE FALL

Whisper, poised at the edge of the rooftop's precipice, maintains a firm hold on the rogue. Despite the rogue's cunning and agility, he struggles to free an arm to launch a counterattack with his dagger. Nevertheless, Whisper's sharp claws and expert grip keep him securely restrained. Beneath her, the store's chaos swirls, a symphony of survival and sorcery; each cry, each clash a note struck sharp in the chord of battle below. Her decision solidifies with the clarity of ice forming, abandoning subtlety for swiftness. With a sudden, fluid ferocity, she thrusts the entangled rogue from the roof, the figure plummeting and landing with a sickening thud upon the hard earth. The world contracts around her as she vaults down, feline grace reclaiming momentum in mid-air, her heart a steady drumbeat beneath her silken fur. She lands silently, flowing through the doorway like a stream of midnight water into the tempest of friend and foe, ready once more to thread her prowess into the weaving of combat's fierce tapestry. The thrown rogue, battered and broken, lies forgotten amidst the rubble.

Elara is startled by Whisper's sudden reappearance. Despite this, she remains focused on the building, her senses registering enough to grasp that her companions are in grave danger. She urgently calls out to Scarlet, telling her to dispel the fog cloud, which Scarlet promptly does. Without hesitation, Elara rushes to join her and Kragor inside. Whisper follows but pauses in the doorway, alert for threats inside or out.

MEDIC!

Surveying Scarlet and Kragor's injuries, she quickly assesses that Kragor's condition is more critical. She places her hands gently on the grievous puncture wound left by the

crossbow bolt, her touch glowing with divine energy. The healing light rapidly closes the wound, restoring vitality to his mottled green-gray skin. Kragor, caught off guard yet deeply appreciative, meets Elara's kind gaze, and a silent bond is forged between the orc and the aasimar.

FINAL BLOWS

As Elara is tending to Kragor, Scarlet runs towards a nearby bandit that is just now orienting themselves after the fog dispersed. Eyes glowing with untamed magic, Scarlet calls upon nature's wrath. With a fierce, primal incantation, her fingertips elongate into razor-sharp claws, dripping with corrosive acid. In a swift motion, she lashes out, and her savage strike lands true. The bandit staggers back, pain etched across their face as the toxic claws rend through leather and flesh, leaving a searing wound. The druid's usually gentle demeanor is momentarily overshadowed by raw, feral power, as the bandit teeters on the brink of defeat, humbled by nature's unforgiving might.

Halite steps forward with a grim determination, his massive form casting a foreboding shadow over the bandit struggling to stay upright from Scarlet's fierce attack. With a swift and fluid motion defying his immense size, Halite shifts his weight back, then lunges forward with an uppercut trajectory. It pierces through the air with a whistling sound, meeting the bandit's chest in a visceral collision. The force of the jab lifts the bandit off his feet momentarily, his final gasp cut short by the weapon's deadly embrace. Life flickers out of his eyes, and the limp body slides down the trident's length. Halite grimaces, more out of reflex than malice, as he shakes the bandit free with a swift, practiced motion, the lifeless form dropping to the ground with a thud.

Now sufficiently recovered to rejoin the battle, Kragor focuses his attention on the bandit far across the room that he suspects of shooting him. Although he can't be sure of the bandit's guilt, he raises his war hammer toward his

target and shouts, “Te Exsecro!” The air shimmers with malevolent energy as a cold, dark aura coils around the bandit like an invisible serpent. Without hesitation, Kragor follows with another spell, yelling “Dolor,” and unleashes a surge of eldritch energy from his war hammer that strikes the bandit square in the chest. The impact of the blast results in an ugly wound. Immediately, shadowy tendrils twist and curl over the shredded flesh causing it to blacken and crumble, leaving the bandit teetering on the brink of death.

SURRENDER

Halite, his towering form casting an imposing shadow across the cluttered interior of the ransacked antique shop, moves with purpose toward Kragor’s target: a bandit whose bravado has been seared away by the crackling energy of the orc warlock’s magic. The air still shimmers with the fading traces of arcane power, and the bandit, already on the brink of collapse, can only watch as the goliath fighter closes the distance between them like an inexorable force of nature.

The trident in Halite’s grip gleams with an unsettling menace, its barbed points promising a swift and painful end should it be called upon to deliver one. The bandit, a mere lithe elf in the presence of such formidable warriors, feels the weight of his own mortality for what seems like the first time. His sword clatters to the wooden floor, a hollow sound that resonates through the shop, punctuating his surrender.

“I yield,” the bandit croaks, his voice strained with fear and desperation. He raises his hands, palms open and empty, a universal sign of capitulation. His eyes dart to his remaining comrade, wide with silent urging.

The last standing bandit, who watched the battle unfold with growing dread, knows the odds all too well. He witnessed the fate of their fallen companions— three already dispatched with ruthless efficiency by the duo of Kragor and Halite. The decision is not a difficult one.

He drops his own weapon, a well-worn crossbow, to the floor and raises his hands above his head in submission. “We don’t want any more trouble,” he says, his voice carrying a tremor that matches the frantic beating of his heart.

Kragor surveys the scene, his eyes, glowing faintly with residual magical energy, meeting Halite’s. An unspoken understanding passes between them— this victory, as hard-fought as it was, need not claim further lives.

With the tension of combat beginning to ebb, the antique shop’s air feels still, though the echoes of the skirmish linger. Surrounded by overturned furniture and scattered relics of a bygone era, the bandits’ surrender marks the end of the struggle, their lives spared by the mercy of those far mightier than they.

Whisper, having ensured the rogue she tossed from the roof was no longer a threat, finally enters the antique shop and closes the door behind her. As she did, the rogue moves to a crouched position around the corner, relieved that his theatrics were successful. Intending to enter the building when the coast was truly clear, he remains vigilant, pressing his ear to the cool glass of the window to eavesdrop on the victorious adventurers.

INTERROGATION

Elara and Scarlet eye the bandits with intensity, their curiosity piqued by the confession of surrender. “Who are you and what were you doing here?” Elara demands, her voice steady yet demanding answers.

The first bandit, regaining a bit of composure but still visibly shaken, replies, “We were sent by Hulil, a priestess of Tiamat. She instructed us to search this place. Two months ago, there was a robbery here, and now Hulil’s got this strange freezing sickness. She hoped we might find a clue here in the shop. But we found nothing.”

Scarlet’s gaze remains firm as she presses further, “Then why did you attack us?”

A hint of embarrassment colors the bandit's cheeks. "We were spooked. We heard some weird noise, then you guys barged in. Especially that chick with a horn on her head," he gestures toward Elara. "We panicked. We're not used to dealing with people like you."

In the meantime, the rogue outside, crouching below the window, absorbs the exchange, piecing together the dynamics at play.

Scarlet produces a weathered receipt with notations about Aeorian artifacts and presents it to the bandits. "Have you seen these items?"

"They're with Hulil," the bandit admits reluctantly, his eyes on the documentation with evident recognition. "She's at Croaker's Cave," confirming what the party had already learned from Hulil's sister, Tulgi.

Satisfied with the information, Kragor dismisses the subdued bandits in no uncertain terms: "Leave everything and get out." Seizing their chance, the bandits quickly discard their weapons and coins before hurrying for the door, the rogue outside remaining concealed until the coast is truly clear.

LOOT

After searching the bandits' leavings and their late compatriots' bodies, the party tallies the loot: 14 gold pieces, eight silver pieces, five crossbows, 30 bolts, five scimitars, and a dwarf-sized shirt blazoned with "Scanlan Shorthalt — The Meat Man Cometh". (Elara judges this last item to be a rare find and might fetch as much as two gold pieces.)

The party then turns to the antique shop, assessing the chaos that engulfed it. The room is in disarray, bookshelves overturned and trinkets strewn about. Amidst the disorder, they stumble upon a chilling sight— a frozen elf lying lifeless in bed. It is Verla Pelc, and the grim discovery confirms that the place has not seen tidiness for weeks.

In a thorough inspection of both the shop and the dead bandits' belongings, they discover two bows and various odds and ends. Deciding a

respite was in order, they plan to rest before heading to Croaker Cave.

WHO IS THIS GUY?

Unbeknownst to the adventurers, the rogue remains vigilant, listening to their intentions and preparing to bide his time until they left.

SECRETS OF CROAKER CAVE

CHE 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, with the soothing sound of her voice and the vibrations of her harp. 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, its jaws wide, but miraculously it 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 pinholes 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.

FRIGID WOE

S THE SUN SETS OVER PALEBANK Village, casting a warm glow, the adventurers return to Gramini's shop. Seeking answers about the mysterious blue powder, they notice a familiar sight—their own traded t-shirt featuring Scanlan Shorthalt, now framed above a lipstick-stained autographed card, and priced at 500 gold pieces. Unfortunately, Gramini has no insight to offer, but does recommend speaking to Elro and to a retired wizard named Westeroff.

On the way back to the Jolly Dwarf, the party encounters Elro. "Hail, my friends. What news do you bring?" he asks.

Elara explains all that has happened in the cavern: the bandits, the frogs—especially Old Croaker, and Hulil's role as the leader. Elro responds, "That explains the deranged dwarf our Glassblades caught running by town with his hands bound. He's now in jail. I thank you for ridding our village of the scum. There was a bounty on that gang: 75 gold pieces. You've earned it."

Kragor blurts out, "Have you heard the name Irven Liel?"

"No," responds Elro. "Should I have?"

"I don't know. But we found a journal of Hulil's, and it recorded that she sold an Aeorian artifact—a blue vial—to one Irven Liel. We believe this vial is connected to the sickness." Kragor goes on to explain Hulil's condition, the blue powder seen in the chest, and the vials.

"That does seem consequential. I will post a message to Syrinlya about this. It's an outpost of Uthodurn on Foren, one of the Isles of Eiselcross—perhaps they can make something of your tale." says Elro. "Meanwhile, I suggest you ask about town for this Liel fellow."

THE LIEL-TETHWICKS

Once the party arrives at the Jolly Dwarf, Elara approaches the bar with a knowing smile. "We'd love to get some dinner, Arl," she requests smoothly, sliding six silver pieces across the counter. "Coming right up," Arl replies, flashing a grin as he pockets the coins.

Once seated, Elara's gaze lingers on a nearby family she recognizes from earlier. They seem a motley bunch: two adult men and twin tiefling girls. Curiosity piqued, she leans closer and asks Arl, "Who's the family over there?"

Arl scratches his beard. "Oh, them? That's the Liel-Tethwicks. Irven there is a bookseller, traveling far and wide. On their way to Uthodurn, they are."

Halite perks up at the mention of books. "A bookseller? Fancy myself a reader," he comments, a hint of enthusiasm in his voice.

Irven Liel, overhearing, turns to them with a friendly wave. "Indeed, we are booksellers," he confirms. "Irven Liel, at your service. This is my dearest husband, Fenton Tethwick; and our two lovely daughters, Honor & Magic. We take orders and ship to stores from here to Uthodurn—wholesalers. Even Gramini is planning to stock some of our best sellers."

Recognizing the name "Irven Liel" from Hulil's journal, Whisper, ever the blunt one, asks outright, "How about vials?"

Irven's expression briefly turns guarded. "Uh, who have you been talking to? I don't know about any vials."

"What kind of books do you sell?" Elara asks, trying to avoid spooking the merchant before having the chance to get his whole story.

Irven, his caution momentarily set aside, says "Oh, 'Feather Leather' is flying off the shelf these days." He laughs at his own joke.

Halite gives a good-natured sigh, a touch disappointed that Irven isn't in retail business directly. "Shame you're not a typical bookseller; could have browsed all afternoon."

Elara leans in, her voice lowered and serious. "We're on a quest to solve the popsicle sickness affecting the village. We came across some blue vials, and your name is connected to them."

Irven swallows visibly, his glance darting to one of his daughters before he replies, "The vial... I hope it has nothing to do with the sickness." His voice gains a note of concern.

Halite, sensing a deeper conversation is needed, suggests, "Perhaps we should speak privately." Irven nods, then turns to his husband. "Fenton, could you keep an eye on the girls?" To the tieflings, he says, "Daddy's just going to discuss book business with these fine folk."

Fenton Tethwick nods in understanding and begins talking animatedly with the twins, keeping them distracted.

In a quieter corner of the tavern, Irven reveals a small blue vial from his coat, a hairline crack marring its otherwise perfect surface. "I bought this from a woman named Hulil who needed quick money. Met her on the road," he explains, a touch of defensiveness creeping into his tone. "Is this related to the disease? She claimed it was a magical artifact from Aeor, something that would fetch a high price. I paid 40 gold with the intent of selling it for much more."

Whisper, sensing the urgency of the situation, interjects gently, "Perhaps you'd allow Scarlet to check for the disease?"

Irven nods hesitantly, his anxiety clear. "My whole family has touched this..." he confesses, fear evident in his eyes.

Scarlet focuses, fetching something from her pouch and murmuring an incantation under her breath. A soft glow emanates from her hands as she confirms, "It's the same magical contagion, just like in the chest we found." She gives Irven a serious look. "I think you should

spend some quality time with your children," she advises. Irven blanches. His shoulders slump, his fear for his family's safety evident in his eyes. Doctor Pepe takes the fragile vial into his pouch with extreme care, remarking, "Best not to touch this further."

Halite adds, "Anyone in the family showing any symptoms? Blue streaks on the skin? Inner chill? Slowed movements?" Irven shakes his head, his relief tempered by worry.

Elara gives him a hopeful smile. "Don't lose hope. You've met the right people. We'll find a cure and return."

Irven does his best to smile, gratitude momentarily overshadowing his anxiety. "Thank you. If nothing else, perhaps I can get you a signed copy of 'Feather Leather' when this is over."

Their conversation concluded, the party returns to their table, now laden with an evening meal of salt fish, squid, and bread. As they eat, Whisper suggests, "Maybe we should talk Arl into a deep clean of the area, just in case."

Halite calls Arl over, his voice bearing the gravity of their findings. "Arl, we suspect that some of the items linked to this accursed disease might have been handled here. A thorough cleaning is advisable to ensure safety."

The dwarf's eyes widen, the jovial air around him dissipating like mist in the morning sun. His hands flutter nervously. "You're saying... here? In my inn? By the gods, what if it's already spread?"

Sensing his rising panic, Elara steps in smoothly, her voice a balm of reassurance. "Arl, take a deep breath. We've caught this early enough, and with some care, we can prevent any further trouble. Trust us, we're on top of this."

Arl nods, though his brow remains furrowed with concern. "Right, right. I'm on it. I'll have the place spick and span before the next round of guests even consider laying a foot in

here!" His voice quivers with determination as he hurries off toward the back. But before he retreats entirely, he turns back toward the adventurers, his eyes pleading yet grateful. "Make sure Elro knows what you've uncovered. If anyone can coordinate the village through this, it's him. And thank you... truly." He disappears into the back of the inn, leaving the party in the flickering warmth of the common room.

THE CAUSE AND THE CURE

The lingering warmth of the Jolly Dwarf fades as the adventurers step into the chill evening air, the glow of lamps casting long shadows across the path. They gird themselves for another trek in the icy wilderness, but the promise of knowledge draws them toward the dwelling of the wizard Westeroff.

Just as they're about to depart, Elro approaches with hurried steps, his breath visible in the cold as he greets them. "Ah, just in time," he says, voice laced with urgency. "I've received word from my contacts. They've confirmed some crucial details about this disease— called the Frigid Woe."

The party gathers closer, attentive. "Frigid Woe?" Elara echoes, eyes wide.

"Yes," Elro affirms, nodding gravely. "It is a weapon that originates from Aeor, and it is familiar to the folks of Eiselcross. But there is hope— a cure exists, stored in golden vials by the Aeorians— a milky white liquid. Wherever Urgon found the blue vials, that might be our best hope of finding a cure."

Kragor scratches his chin thoughtfully. "And you believe the Aeorians created this... to fight the gods?"

Elro nods. "Precisely. They despised the gods, and Frigid Woe might have been some experimental weapon against them." He reaches into his satchel, producing a small pouch and extending it to them. "This is

100 gold pieces. Your reward for solving the mystery of this sickness."

Before anyone can respond, he inquires, "Have you accounted for all of the powder?"

Doctor Pepe steps forward, "We've managed to gather all we could, from both of the vials that Urgon found."

Elro continues, "I want to hire you to travel to Foren and retrieve this cure. There's a ship, the Remorhaz, that will take you there. Find the cure, use of it what you need, but the rest... At Syrinlya, you'll find an elf, an Uthodurnian, that goes by the moniker 'The Buyer'. Give the cure to him, and he can teleport it back here to Palebank. Do this, and you will be rewarded 200 gold."

Elara, ever the bargain hunter, stirs the conversation. "Considering the journey's danger, perhaps we require a bit more compensation for our troubles..."

Elro gives her an appraising look, recognizing the negotiation for what it is. "I'll tell you what— securing these blue vials is vital. We can't risk any more exposure. I'll give you 200 gold now for the both of them."

Satisfied with the transaction, Elara turns to less mercantile matters. "What about Irven's family, Elro? They've handled the powder."

Understanding the weight of her concern, Elro promises, "I'll see to it that they're looked after." The sincerity in his eyes reflects his commitment to his people. "But their best chance is for you to find the cure. Join the Remorhaz at the docks tomorrow morning, and godspeed in your search."

NOVICES BECOME ADEPTS

As night casts its velvet cloak over Palebank Village, the adventurers decide to postpone their errands until the next day. They return to the warmth of the Jolly Dwarf, each contemplating the challenges to come, and each

preparing to rise to meet them in their own way.

ELARA'S MELODIES

Elara sits cross-legged, her harp resting in her lap. Her fingers begin a gentle dance across the strings, pulling forth harmonies that weave enchantments into the air. Each note is a thread of light, etching new incantations into her soul. She breathes deeply, and with each exhale, she unlocks a melody for healing, soothing as a lullaby carried on a gentle breeze.

Her focus deepens as the harp sings secrets and tales untold. A profound understanding blossoms within her—an unfolding of expertise perfectly attuned to performance and persuasion. The music whispers of connections, of influence, and suddenly, untapped potentials reveal themselves. She feels an unexpected strength, as though no skill is beyond her grasp.

As the final chord fades like a promise into the air, Elara stands, her heart ready to enchant the world beyond the tavern's doors. Her melody is an invitation to the stories waiting for her.

WHISPER'S SILENT GROWTH

In a shadowed corner of the bustling tavern, Whisper meditates, her eyes closed to the revelry around her. The scent of ale and roasting meat drifts past, unnoticed. Deep within her, a soft glow emanates, invisible among the clamor. She envisions her paws moving with blinding speed, imagining a flurry of precise blows. Her mind crafts a dance of agility, untouched and swift.

Her meditation grows deeper, unlocking secrets of uncanny resilience. An internal wellspring reveals itself, capable of conjuring healing warmth in times of need. The tavern's noise recedes as strength flows through her veins. Whisper opens her eyes, calm and recharged, ready to step into the world beyond with renewed vigor.

SCARLET'S COMMUNION WITH NATURE

Scarlet stands by an open window, the night air alive with the scent of pines. She surrenders to the rhythm of the earth, her pulse syncing with the heartbeat of the soil. Against the swirling snow, an owl materializes from the darkness, its eyes twin moons reflecting wild mysteries. It lands on her shoulder, bringing with it an aura of calm authority.

In that silent exchange, Scarlet absorbs knowledge and guidance from the owl, feeling its ancient wisdom permeate her. She learns to embrace the forms of earthly creatures, realizing that these shapes are not mere disguises but expressions of the natural world's spirit.

Her mind envisions herself as a lithe wolf leaping through snow, a spider weaving webs, a silent rat, a charging boar. With her companion perched beside her, Scarlet feels ready to delve into nature's mysteries, newly emboldened by the owl's presence.

HALITE'S MARTIAL RESOLVE

By the hearth, Halite sits enveloped in the glow of crackling fire. Snowflakes strike the frosted windows, whispering secrets of distant mountains. His mind drifts back to battles past, his tactical acumen sharpened over countless conflicts.

With the heat of the meal and hearth, a shift occurs within him. His warrior spirit thrums louder than the winter winds, power tingling through his veins. He imagines the battlefield where, when stakes are highest, he might unleash two brutal strikes in a heartbeat.

His strategic mind sharpens, foreseeing paths to success even in uncertainty, channeling physical and mental stamina into piercing clarity. Halite rises, his eyes gleaming with the promise of battles yet to come, thankful for the land's icy gifts shaping his destiny.

KRAGOR'S ARCANE RESONANCE

The wind howls as Kragor sits alone, tracing patterns in the frosty air. He dwells on the night before—a restless night as if he had nightmares he could not remember. Upon waking he'd found his fingernails cracked and caked with mud, despite recalling his fastidious evening routine. Lost in these thoughts, an arcane potential vibrates in the air unnoticed.

As he absent-mindedly mutters an incantation, the cosmic swirl of his thoughts unlocks a hidden door. An esoteric rite unfolds, and to his astonishment, a warm surge of magic fills him, restoring some of the energy he expended earlier—a tether to a newfound reservoir of power.

Kragor feels further pulses of unfamiliar eldritch energy. Tentatively, he pulls at invisible strands of weave, knitting a protective cocoon around his form. As the surge reaches its zenith, he senses new ferocity in his ability to blast foes with beams of crackling energy. This agonizing blast will now carry his own formidable willpower in every cast, more impactful than ever before.

Empowered, Kragor contemplates this new reality, still alone yet invigorated, clutching these gifts like lifelines against the cold.

DOCTOR PEPE'S SUBTLE MASTERY

In the dancing shadows, Doctor Pepe reclines near the hearth, his mind whirring through possibilities. As a rogue, his path is a tapestry of subtlety and effectiveness, and tonight, he seeks to enhance these skills further.

Sipping spiced cider, an internal shift sharpens his senses. Every sound—the clink of tankards, the creak of floorboards—crystallizes into focus. He realizes time yields to his will, revealing an ability to exploit the lulls between heartbeats.

Grinning, he tests this newfound quickness, running a stealthy route between tables up to the rooms, completely undetected.

Each moment forms with unclouded insight, readying him to weave through shadows, more agile than swirling snow.

As night deepens, each adventurer, transformed by their experiences within the Jolly Dwarf, readies for the unknowns awaiting on Foren. Outside, whispers of snow and secrecy abound, but with increasing potential, each one braces for the stories and trials of tomorrow.

PREPARE FOR DEPARTURE

The next morning, the adventurers awaken well-rested and invigorated. The warmth of the inn lingers like an inviting blanket, fortifying them against the chill that awaits outside. After a hearty breakfast and a few shared laughs, their eyes are set on the tasks ahead.

Their path leads first to Mathias's Stuffs, an establishment with all the disarrayed charm of a barn filled with a collector's treasures. There, the party quickly trades with the harried elf proprietor Mathias to procure equipment and provisions for their expedition: a quarterstaff for Whisper, a few javelins for Halite, bolts and arrows for Doctor Pepe and Elara, a unique two-billed olive drab hat for Doctor Pepe, and a month's provisions. They more than offset their purchases by selling the scimitars and crossbows they acquired from the defeated bandits.

Thanks to Kragor's curiosity, they also learn a useful tidbit about Eiselcross from Mathias. The lands are inhabited by "wild folk" who largely keep to themselves, except for one group among them: a violent group whose members have black streaks across their faces.

Anxious to discover as much as they might about the Aeorian artifacts Urgon found, they make their next stop the home of Westeroff, the retired wizard mentioned by Gramini. But, they learn little to help them: Westeroff is not a fan of music; a spellcasting costing them five gold reveals the dagger is magical; the remaining items are mundane although

valuable.

During the discussions, Halite eyes a crystal appropriate for arcane focus. He is taken by it, although he is no spellcaster himself, and agrees to pay ten gold for it from his own stash.

Surreptitiously, Doctor Pepe slips aside with Westeroff to identify the properties of a garnet he has been concealing, the exchange of five gold pieces masked beneath the party's ongoing conversation. Whatever he learns, he keeps to himself.

Errands concluded, the six depart to meet their ship and begin their journey to Eiselcross.

THE REMORHAZ

The docks of Palebank Village are beginning to bustle as the adventurers approach the sleek silhouette of the Remorhaz, its sails furled and ready. The icy wind nips at their cheeks, adding a rosy hue to faces already aglow with anticipation. Elro greets the party, his presence a reassuring anchor amidst the chaos of departure preparations.

"When you arrive," Elro instructs, "find Orvo Mustave in Syrinlya. He knows the lay of the land. Remember, send back the cure once you've secured it—the Buyer can teleport it directly to us."

Kragor nods, his grave expression matching the gravity of their mission. "Snowshoes—are they useful for the ice?" he inquires. Elro chuckles dryly. "On Foren, where lava sometimes flows under a thin veneer of ice, yes, they'll come in handy."

"How big is this Syrinlya? And how long will our trip be?" Scarlet asks.

"Oh, I'd say there's about 250 souls there. And the trip is not too long. I expect you'll arrive about four days hence," replies Elro.

Whisper surveys the Remorhaz as the party is brought on board. It is a small ship with three sails, armed with two ballistas, one fore

and one aft. "A fast ship meant as a scout and message courier," she thinks to herself.

Aboard, Captain Stonebeard presents a polished performance. His eyes twinkle with exaggerated warmth as Elro steps aboard, each syllable dripping with supplication. "Ah, welcome to the Remorhaz, Master Elro," he croons, offering a low bow as if addressing nobility. The captain's voice is rich as cream, his deferential tone almost theatrical.

Elro acknowledges him with a nod, the hint of a smile touching his lips. "I trust you'll see them safely to Syrinlya, Captain. Their mission is of utmost importance." Stonebeard gestures expansively around the ship, his posture rigidly respectful. "But of course, Master Elro. We are honored to have them."

Even as they talk of weather patterns and navigation routes, Stonebeard's demeanour remains flawless. His subordinates echo his pleasantries with subtle nods and murmurs of agreement. The atmosphere is one of airbrushed civility—concealing the practical grittiness essential to life at sea.

However, the moment the Remorhaz pushes past the harbor's mouth and Palebank diminishes into a mere silhouette against the frosty horizon, a discernible shift occurs, like the release of a drawn bowstring.

Captain Stonebeard's genial façade melts away, replaced by the steely visage of a seasoned mariner. "Alright, enough pandering," he declares brusquely, rolling his shoulders as if shedding a constrictive garment. "This ship won't sail itself, and there's work to be done."

The party exchanges looks of mild surprise, prompting Stonebeard to offer a half-smile. "Don't look so shocked," he rumbles. "Out here, we run a tight ship, which means everybody pitches in."

Whisper, ever the quick study, steps forward. "What can I do? I have... some experience at sea," she says humbly.

Stonebeard appraises her lithe, efficient frame.

"Help Haldor with the rigging. Keep those sails tight."

Whisper nods and springs into action, her tabaxi agility well-suited to the task. The ropes hum under her deft hands as she climbs, earning an appreciative nod from Haldor.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew—First Mate Ironfist, navigator Mera, chef Ingrid, and various deckhands—move about the deck with practiced ease.

Ingrid leans over the galley's entrance, her voice booming, "Who among you knows their way around a kitchen?"

Scarlet raises a hand with a grin. "Cooking up something warm sounds perfect right now."

Halite joins Scarlet in the kitchen, exchanging pleasantries with Ingrid as they prepare a hearty stew, the aroma rich with spices mingling in the cold air.

THE SNOWY PLOVER

Doctor Pepe, Elara, and Kragor set out to fish off the stern, each facing the sea's challenge in their own way. Doctor Pepe excels, deftly handling his rod, while Kragor grumbles over his struggles, recalling the scarcity of such opportunities in Bladegarden.

Elara's net returns empty, sparkling with only water. She muses, "The ocean guards its treasures today." Kragor, undeterred, hauls in his net with effort, a mystery weighing it down. "I've got something... big!" he exclaims, sweat betraying the cold air.

Haldor helps him retrieve the load, revealing an ancient, barnacle-encrusted anchor inscribed with faded letters, ".he ..owy plover." Whisper's eyes light up with recognition. "The Snowy Plover!" she gasps, recalling tales of a privateer's elusive ship. Captain Stonebeard, intrigued, examines it, seeing a storied addition to the Remorhaz.

Meanwhile, Doctor Pepe succeeds in bringing in an abundant catch, his net teeming with fish. The captain, pleased, acknowledges

their efforts. "A week's provisions," he claps, satisfied with both Pepe's skill and their stroke of oceanic luck.

THE UNEXPECTED GOURMET CHEF

Below deck, Chef Ingrid commands the kitchen with precision, a moon-and-rune amulet around her neck softly clinking. She casts an appraising gaze at Halite. "We will teach you to cook," she declares, and he nods with curiosity.

The galley buzzes with warmth and laughter as Ingrid demonstrates her ritualistic cooking methods. "Here, like this," she instructs, guiding Halite through chopping vegetables with tactical precision.

"Start a restaurant when this is over!" Scarlet jokes, sparking a twinkle in Ingrid's eyes. As Halite presents their culinary creation, the table transforms into a feast: roasted fish glistening with oils, spiced vegetables, and golden bread.

A reverent silence follows the first taste. Elara's eyes widen in delight. "By the stars, what sorcery is this?" she exclaims. Kragor, usually stoic, is awed. "This could rival any feast in Bladegarden," he admits. Agreement ripples through the adventurers.

Whisper purrs contentedly while Doctor Pepe grins roguishly. "Ingrid," he proclaims with a fork's flourish, "your cooking is divine ambrosia."

Ingrid, though gruff, smiles slightly, her amulet flickering like a secret torchbearer. "Serviceable, then?" she asks, already knowing the answer.

Scarlet ceremoniously reaches for seconds. "I could believe this meal holds a druid's magic," she chuckles.

THE BARD PERFORMS

After the meal, the night sky sprawls over the ship like a grand tapestry spun from a dark

magician's loom, stars embedded in the fabric in shimmering constellations that dance in tune with the gentle swells of the sea below. The vessel cuts a silent path through the water, its sails billowing like the unfurled wings of a great celestial bird.

Halite stands towering and firm, with broad shoulders reminiscent of his mountain home. In his gentle hand, he lifts Elara, who now wears an ensemble similar to the garb of dryads and nymphs. She spins, her skirts capturing echoes of ancient songs, her voice a melody above the waves captivating all aboard. Her feet barely graze the timbers, yet it seems the deck itself moves to the rhythm of her bewitching performance.

The seasoned crew, hardened by the sea, find themselves enchanted, moving as if under a benevolent spell, their feet tapping and bodies swaying in time with the bard's ethereal dance. Even the ship's wheel turns with newfound joy.

At the helm is Mera, the usually stern navigator, now smiling widely, her eyes twinkling. She joins in, clapping to Elara's tune, her warm voice breaking the night's rhythm with laughter.

"You," Mera announces, "are the liveliest group we've ever shared this deck with!"

Amidst this spellbound camaraderie, sea and sky blur, the ship an island of revelry on endless waters. The adventurers and crew retire well-fed, sleep coming easily... for most.

A FLUMPH FEVER DREAM

Scarlet drifts into a fevered dream, where she transforms into a flumph in a surreal Underdark kitchen. Her halfling form dissolves, and her senses morph— colors become emotions, and telepathic whispers surround her.

As a flumph, Scarlet floats through this otherworldly kitchen, propelled by gentle bursts of gas that emit soft notes harmonizing

with her thoughts. Her new perspective reveals the flavors of the Underdark: savory spores from glowing mushrooms, earthy cave lichens, and the briny essence of an underground spring.

Scarlet uses her tendrils to sense psychic vibrations from ingredients, uncovering their essence in waves of color and emotion. She crafts dishes with instinctive precision, her mind orchestrating each task like a conductor.

Communicating with ingredients via telepathy, Scarlet coaxes out hidden qualities and balances flavors into a dance on the palate. She infuses each dish with psychic energy, transforming the meal into a nourishing, enlightening experience.

As the fever dream weaves its finale, Scarlet's consciousness begins to ebb back to reality, her experience as a flumph leaving an indelible mark on her aspirations and inspirations. Awakening with a start, she finds herself back in the familiar surroundings, her halfling body reclaimed but her gastronomic spirit forever expanded by the echoes of her uncanny adventure in the Underdark.

IRON CHEF

The day dawns dull and gray, with flurries meeting the sea's gentle waves. High above the decks on the Remorhaz, Whisper and Haldor bond against the ship's soft creaks. "I've never known a day without snow," Haldor admits, his fingers tracing the ropes.

"Truly? Not once?" Whisper asks, intrigued.

"Born in it," he replies. "Though fishing runs in my veins. Glassblades pay well, but the peace of fishing is unmatched. Everyone should learn to fish."

Whisper nods, recalling her warm southern seas where the sun dances lazily on the waves. "The water there welcomes you like an old friend," she says.

Haldor listens, enchanted by the idea of warm seas and ... swimming! "Sounds wonderful," he

says longingly. “I must learn of these waters.” He shows Whisper how to tackle stubborn ice frozen into the ropes, his fingers deft from life in icy lands.

Kragor steps onto the deck, shivering but focused, and casts his net into the sea. As he hauls it back, he’s caught by surprise—not just fish but a barnacle-crusted brass oil lamp lands in his hand. “There’s something to polish,” he murmurs, weighing it in his palm, assessing the worth—a silver’s gain, perhaps.

Elara joins the hunt as well, casting her net into the swirling depths. But it is met with cruel resistance, and the fibers rend and tear. Undeterred, Elara rallies a few seasoned crew hands to help her mend and weave the net whole once more.

Halite’s and Scarlet’s efforts pay off as their nets bring up a writhing mass of fish, including an iridescent marlin, tuna, and musk flounder, making quite an impression with the crew.

With the day’s catch secured, the adventurers gather in the ship’s warm galley. Chef Ingrid, eyes bright with pride, welcomes them with a smile.

“Gather ’round, friends! The sea has blessed us, and I invite you to craft a feast worthy of our journey,” she announces, gesturing to the array of fresh fish. “I’ll share the secrets of a meal so fine, even the gods would envy us.”

The galley buzzes as the adventurers gather around Ingrid, each busy with chopping and seasoning under her watchful eye. Three particularly adept students catch her attention: Kragor, Halite, and Doctor Pepe.

Kragor, with surprising delicacy, carefully fillets a fish. “Didn’t know I’d be good at anything more than swinging a war hammer,” he muses.

Ingrid nods, adjusting his grip. “Precision is key, Kragor, whether in the kitchen or on the battlefield.”

Halite, assessing spices for his rub, observes, “It’s like a strategic battle plan. Each

seasoning has its purpose.”

“Well said, Halite,” Ingrid replies, admiring his work. “Strategy is both simple and bold, in combat and flavor.”

Nearby, Doctor Pepe peels vegetables with the finesse of a master thief. “Cooking is like planning a perfect heist,” he jokes. “But the treasure’s tastier.”

Ingrid chuckles. “You’ve certainly stolen the show, Doctor Pepe.”

As the meal’s aroma fills the galley, Ingrid gathers them around the table. “Feast your eyes and senses,” she declares. “This is more than food—it’s the fruit of your labor.”

Each adventurer basks in a warm glow of satisfaction. Their hearts are as full as their bellies; the bonds between them strengthen with shared laughter and the subtle symphony of clinking plates. Chef Ingrid, her eyes twinkling with a mixture of pride and mischief, approaches Kragor, Halite, and Doctor Pepe. With a flourish as grand as any mage’s spell, she unfurls a satchel of gleaming cooking utensils before them.

“Behold,” she declares, her voice a melodic lilt that dances on the evening breeze, “for you have not merely consumed a feast of meals, but of knowledge. You have stirred the cauldron of curiosity, seasoned your souls, and now, you too are alchemists of flavor. May these tools guide your hands as you concoct dishes that rival the nectar of the gods themselves.”

As he admires their handiwork and their instructor, Kragor’s curiosity is piqued by the amulet dangling from Chef Ingrid’s neck. It is a grand silver talisman of a crescent moon alongside an array of arcane runes. His deep voice gruff yet oddly gentle, he asks “Chef Ingrid, what is that shiny thing around your neck? Looks... important.”

Ingrid replies, her gaze distant, anchored yet free. “Ah, a trifle,” she murmurs, the moon’s silver glow reflected softly within her eyes. “It is a simple reminder of my connection to the

moon, nothing more.”

Kragor nodded slowly, satisfied with the simple explanation. “Ah, nice. Moon is... nice.”

Ingrid chuckles softly, her eyes momentarily distant as if recalling secrets long kept. But with Kragor content and unlikely to probe further, the moment passes.

THE CRICK QUEEN’S CALL

After the splendid meal, the crew gathers on the main deck, their camaraderie warming the cool sea air. The formal atmosphere dissolves into laughter, drifting alongside seabirds’ cries. Captain Stonebeard, usually stoic, joins them, a rare smile on his lips.

Mera, the navigator, clears a space among the tarps and rigging, revealing a makeshift table from wooden crates. “Shall we play ‘The Crick Queen’s Call?’” she proposes, her tone promising intrigue.

Whisper, perched aloft in the rigging, casts a disinterested glance, her paws busy with knots.

Players gather, each contributing a silver piece to the pot. Mera’s eyes gleam with competitive fire as she begins the opening move. Kragor grins, tusks gleaming as he raises the stakes, challenging with a clink of silver.

Elara, Doctor Pepe, and Halite accept the challenge, sliding their tokens forward. The game is a tapestry of glances, strategies, and the jangle of coins.

Scarlet leans back, watching the tides of fortune. “Some hands aren’t worth playing,” she says, folding.

Elara, graceful as in her musical performances, reveals “The Even Hand,” drawing groans and applause. “I hope you’re not always this lucky,” Kragor grumbles, amused.

Coins shift toward Elara, but Doctor Pepe grins, eyes gleaming. “Time for a rematch,” he challenges. Another round, with spirits

undeterred.

This time, Doctor Pepe’s luck turns, his hand a bounty of surprise. Applause follows his victory.

“Kept a few tricks hidden, rogue?” Elara teases, recognizing shared cunning.

As night deepens, the game winds down, and players and crew retreat to their bunks, content with the day’s camaraderie.

SHAPES SHIFT IN THE NIGHT

In the heart of night, Halite and Kragor awaken to a cacophony of crashing and banging, immediately vigilant as they identify the disturbance as emanating from the kitchen. Within moments, they nudge Elara and Scarlet into wakefulness.

Alert and battle-ready, Halite takes point, leading the quartet down the narrow, creaking passageway to the kitchen. There, as the lamplight spills through the doorway, they behold First Mate Ironfist and Haldor, both wide-eyed and tense with faces set like stone, confronting an icy-furred adversary—a fearsome winter wolf with eyes burning frost-blue.

Kragor’s gaze darts about, landing on Ingrid’s amulet, discarded and glinting forlornly on the floor beside one of the bunks. His brows furrow in recognition and curiosity. Without hesitation, he whispers a few arcane words, summoning a protective embrace of magical frost that envelops him, shimmering with power.

Next, Kragor conjures a spectral, floating hand and sends it rushing past the wolf in an attempt to use the ethereal appendage as a distraction. The wolf, however, remains undeterred, its focus shifting toward Ironfist with almost predatory tunnel vision, yet restraint holds its posture for the moment.

Sensing a chance for diplomacy, Elara plucks a

few strings of her harp and chants “Vobiscum natura loquor”. Her voice then rings soft yet authoritative, seeking connection. “Calm, my friend, we mean you no harm. How can we help you?” But the wolf regards her with unwavering silence—this creature is not born of mere wild instinct. Tension thrums through the air as it seems moments away from lunging.

Scarlet withdraws a yew leaf from her pouch. She presses it to her forehead, eyes closing as if to draw insight from ages past. Her arm extends gracefully, and in a swift flick of her wrist, she casts the energy outward. Her voice resonates through the cabin: “Oculi Naturae, aperite ad veritatem; quod latent, patefaciat.” A subtle gleam envelops her, the spell woven, as she opens her senses to all signs of poison and disease. She finds a darker truth beneath fur and fang: lycanthropy dances along the wolf’s essence, a curse as old as time.

The commotion draws more of the crew, Captain Stonebeard included. “What the hey??” he exclaims.

Understanding dawns as suspicion edges Scarlet’s voice: “I think... that... That’s Chef Ingrid!”

Whisper, earlier roused by the clamor, stealthily emerges, taking stock of the escalating scene. She moves with feline grace, fluidly dodging her companions to retrieve the amulet. She pivots, holding out the amulet and asking Haldor with uncertainty, “This should be with Ingrid, shouldn’t it?”

Haldor glances at the amulet, confusion clouding his features. “Ingrid holds that dearer than anything,” he says, clearly puzzled. “She’d never be without it willingly.”

Whisper attempts to withdraw and take the amulet to safety, but the startled wolf lunges, its jaws closing around her arm with a merciless bite. Agony explodes through her senses, and she collapses to the floorboards, desperately clawing for traction to right herself.

In the chaos, Halite takes swift action. With practiced precision, he hurls his net, ensnaring the wild beast in a tangle of coarse fibers.

Kragor sprints forward, snatching the gleaming amulet from Whisper’s trembling grasp. Intent on his objective, he attempts to fasten it around the wolf’s neck, yet the snaring net hinders his movements. Even as he wrestles with the tangled mess, the wolf thrashes free, its eyes ablaze with the primal instinct to flee. It stands cornered, frantic and dangerous.

Amidst the tumult, Elara approaches with an uncanny tranquility. With a deft and unwavering hand, she settles the amulet upon the wolf’s neck. As its fangs snap perilously close to her, an ancient magic unfurls; the transformation is violent and beautiful. Muscles ripple and contort beneath the sleek fur, bones audibly crack and reform with a sickening yet mesmerizing fluidity. The lupine snout retracts painfully back into a familiar dwarven face, eyes flicker from feral to intelligent with startling clarity. The wolf’s savage growls fade into anguished cries as claws withdraw into slender fingers. In mere moments, the fearsome beast dissolves to reveal Ingrid, collapsed and vulnerable, her form shivering under the strain of the metamorphosis.

Silence reigns as Ingrid stands, sheepish and shivering, caught between fear and relief. Elara, compassion in her heart, drapes a blanket over the chef’s shoulders. Captain Stonebeard, with weary authority and a tone brooking no argument, commands, “Everyone back to bed! Nothing to see here!”

As the adventurers retreat upstairs, faintly echoing behind them is the Captain’s low voice, tinged with inevitable frustration, “Well, why the hells didn’t you tell me before??”

JOURNEY TO EISELCROSS

KRAGOR JOLTS AWAKE. FOR THE moment, he is entombed in silent, crushing blue ice. His heart beats sluggishly, almost still. His limbs are heavy, unresponsive, locked in glacial stasis he cannot break. He senses immense weight, groaning sighs of unimaginable pressure, almost imperceptible cracking echoing through the endless blue tomb.

Then, he gasps, back in the Remorhaz's cabin, the phantom cold clinging to him. His hands feel... gritty. Confused, his mind thick with the memory of ice, he raises them into the faint moonlight. Dirt. Dark, loamy earth is packed beneath his fingernails.

Where did this come from? He swings his legs out of the bunk, scanning the cramped space. His bunk is as he left it; nothing is disturbed. Still bewildered, he settles back and begins a slow ritual to attune himself to the presence of magic, desperate for an explanation. Extending his arcane senses, he scans the cabin. Enchanted auras bloom nearby: the dagger Doctor Pepe carries... but also something else he does not recognize. Further away, Ingrid's lycanthropy-suppressing amulet. He checks his bunk, his gear, himself. Nothing. No trace of sorcery explains the vivid nightmare or the impossible dirt. He stares at his hands, the earthy grit a stubborn, unsettling riddle.

Dawn breaks on the third day of the adventurers' journey across the Frigid Depths. A thick fog stretches endlessly before the Remorhaz, reducing the world to a spectral canvas of grays and whites. Visibility collapses to a mere fifty feet, transforming the sea into a claustrophobic realm where sound becomes more reliable than sight.

Chef Ingrid prepares a feast of gratitude. Massive platters of smoked fish, hearty breads, and steaming porridge cover the galley table, a culinary apology wrapped in steam and seasoning.

Pulling Whisper aside, Ingrid's voice is soft, almost apologetic. "Sorry about the little nip," she murmurs. "In that form, control is... challenging. I just like to chase cats." A plate of poke appears, raw fish marinated in vibrant seasonings, offered as both peace offering and cultural delicacy.

Captain Stonebeard's voice cuts through the morning calm. "We need all eyes on deck!" The ship's bell rings, a sonic marker declaring their position to potential listeners in this spectral seascape. "Passengers," he commands, "keep your eyes over the rail. Raise the alarm if you spot anything that could lead to collision!"

Whisper and Haldor ascend to the crow's nest, their keen eyes scanning the milk-white horizon. Distant sounds tantalize but remain uncertain, ghosts of noise within the fog.

The Remorhaz tracks southwest, meticulously avoiding island channels. Mera's navigation is a dance of caution, each movement calculated to preserve their safety.

By noon, the crew strains to discern waves against distant shorelines, sound becoming their primary navigation tool. Stonebeard's call for ballista expertise finds Halite ready, positioning himself with two other crew members, prepared for any potential threats.

They reduce speed, approaching with heightened vigilance. Then—a bell, clear and sharp at first, then suddenly silenced.

Screams follow. Yelling. Shouted commands.

Sounds of crunching. Of cracking.

"Everyone! Eyes open!" Stonebeard roars.

Wreckage begins floating past—splintered wood, broken timbers. A massive mast segment drifts into view, three desperate souls clinging to its bulk.

And rising from the depths, a nightmare incarnate: a giant squid, tentacles reaching

hungrily toward the survivors.

The Frigid Depths have claimed another ship as victim—and the Remorhaz stands between potential salvation and certain doom.

The battlefield erupts in a symphony of magical and martial action, each crew member responding to the giant squid's threat with their unique talents.

Kragor chants arcane words, “Mactē virtutē”. As the last word is uttered, a sudden chill surges through the air. A shimmering, icy aura begins to emanate from his form, enveloping him in a protective shell of frost. He then moves quickly to the ballista, grabs a large bolt, and loads it. Scarlet then springs to the weapon, her aim sharp and focused on the writhing tentacled horror.

While Scarlet tries to get a bead on the beast, a miraculous scene unfolds near the wreckage: one of the shipwrecked survivors lifts his companion, a ring sparkling eerily on his finger before he inexplicably sprints across the water's surface, defying natural law.

Elara, quick-witted and creative, strums her harp to conjure a minor illusion—a tantalizing, hopefully seductive squid-form designed to confuse their monstrous attacker. As the form fully materializes, her harp strings continue to vibrate with an inspiring melody, empowering Halite with courage and skill.

“Shoot the bastard!” bellows Captain Stonebeard, commanding the crew. He raises his crossbow, but his shot goes wildly wide, sailing harmlessly into the fog.

Doctor Pepe, steadier of hand, takes aim and strikes true. His bolt finds purchase, drawing first blood and scoring a solid hit against the creature.

“I'll bring us broadside!” Mera shouts, maneuvering the ship to attempt a rescue.

From below, Ingrid's voice drifts up incongruously: “Anyone want a sandwich?”

The squid, momentarily confused by Elara's

illusion, probes it with a tentative appendage. Confused, it swings a large tentacle, but the attack passes right through the squid-that-is-not-there. Finally realizing the deception, it shifts focus and savagely attacks the boat, its powerful beak tearing into the hull with devastating force.

Benefiting from the inspiration Elara granted earlier, Halite fires the ballista, a devastating shot that tears into the squid's massive form. The bolt rips through its flesh, but the creature remains terrifyingly active.

Whisper descends from the rigging to join the others on deck, and throws her javelin with deadly precision. The creature writhes under the assault but doesn't slow.

“Two in the water!” Ironfist shouts, attempting to throw a rescue rope to the figure strangely running across the water's surface with another slung over his shoulder. The rope falls pathetically short, landing uselessly in the churning waves. Nonetheless, the water-walking sailor closes the distance, and he and the companion he was carrying clamber up the rope onto the deck. As soon as he steadies himself, his eyes narrow, fixing on the squid with predatory intensity. A crimson thread of arcane energy faintly traces a trail to his chosen prey, marking it with an ethereal brand that he knows will make his every subsequent strike deadly.

Another human suddenly materializes on deck, adding to the chaotic battle... the third survivor of the shipwreck. By his garb, he is clearly a wizard. “By the gods, I'm glad you showed up!” he shouts to the crew. He reaches into his robes and pulls out a small dart along with something slimy looking. He rubs them together and suddenly a sickly shimmering green arrow streaks towards the squid. It lands just short of the mark, yet it splashes and the squid flinches as its skin sizzles where it is touched by the corrosive magic.

Kragor stands firm upon the wooden deck, veins throbbing with dark energy. Sinister tendrils of unearthly mist coil and writhe

from his fingers, weaving through the air like serpents drawn to their prey. An invisible curse ensnares the colossal squid, making its gaze falter, its monstrous tentacles flinch with an unseen dread. “Dolor!” screams Kragor, as a pulsating orb of crackling energy leaps from his war hammer, tearing through the air with a piercing whistle. It collides with the massive squid’s hide, the impact causing the creature to recoil, its tentacles thrashing violently as the energy sizzles and singes them.

Mera maneuvers the ship into a better firing position. Scarlet’s slender fingers trace intricate patterns in the air, drawing forth a mote of pure elemental fire that dances and trembles above her open palm—a spark of primal energy, bright and hungry. With a fluid motion born of wilderness training, she hurls the flame toward the squid’s writhing mass, the blazing projectile arcing through salt-laden wind before striking the creature’s membranous hide, erupting into a consuming conflagration that sears and blisters its pallid flesh.

“Get ready to aim and fire!” Captain Stonebeard bellows as he rapidly reloads the ballista. In that fleeting moment, Doctor Pepe emerges like a phantom, his crossbow bolt striking true into the squid’s vulnerable flank. The beast roars in pain, its thick, dark flesh quivering from the impact.

Enraged and wounded, the colossal squid reacts with malignant fury. Its writhing tentacles thrash through the salt-laden air, and one particularly vicious limb finds its mark on Elara, ensnaring her. Her hands clutch at the slick, unyielding surface of the creature. The harp at her side falls silent as she struggles, caught in the squid’s vice-like grip.

Another abrupt strike from the squid’s beak leaves a gaping wound in the ship’s hull. Thick splinters and dislodged timbers bear silent witness to the beast’s brutal might. Amid the clamor of battle, Ingrid’s voice wafts upward from below, barely registering over the cacophony of combat: “Are you sure you wouldn’t like a sandwich?”

Halite’s broad arm hurls a javelin that whistles through the frigid air, colliding with one of the squid’s thick tentacles. The impact reverberates—a flash of victory as the creature recoils, wounded by the force of his strike. At the same moment, Whisper dashes to Elara’s aid. With feline agility, she slashes at the slimy appendage constricting her, her claws raking into its flesh. A burst of raw determination follows as she unleashes a flurry of attacks that loosens the tentacle’s grip enough for Elara to breathe, but not enough for her to escape.

Across the chaotic deck, Ironfist steadies himself and lines up the ballista, the massive weapon creaking as he aims it squarely at the disordered beast. Not far away, the wiry wizard, face alight with fervor and exhaustion, summons a bolt of shimmering blue energy. The air crackles with ozone as a sustained electric arc connects with the squid, sapping its monstrous vitality.

Kragor charges, hammer raised high in a wild swing, but his blow misses, clanging uselessly against the ship’s railing. Scarlet seizes the moment: she maneuvers nimble fingers over the ballista’s trigger, and its bolt flies ahead, striking home into the beast’s pulsating flesh with a resounding crash. Gerhard then finds his focus. His longbow sings as an arrow arcs through the gloom, finding its target in one of the squid’s unblinking eyes.

Under the relentless assault, the colossal creature falters, its thrashing slowing until it releases Elara and finally sinks into the inky depths. After a gasp of relief, Elara calls out over the din to Ingrid below deck, her voice lilting and defiant, “Sandwiches for everyone!” A surreal endnote to the turmoil—a promise of warmth and camaraderie amid the unforgiving cold.

GERHARD

The crew methodically surveys the damage. The squid’s beak has carved a gaping maw in the ship’s hull, and the task of repair falls heavily on the remaining hands.

Whisper, nimble even in the lingering fear, takes to the rigging, aiding in the salvage operation. She peers into the depths, her vision unnervingly clear, but the fog obscures the scene.

"Keep wits sharp and hearts steadfast," the captain's voice cuts through the hush aboard the Remorhaz, a floating island of survival. On decks slick with salt and battle-scrapes, weary heroes meet the newcomers: Gerhard, former captain of the lost ship; Rorik, his young crewman; and Bret, a passenger.

"Well met," Halite says, his voice crisp. "What brings you so far out?"

Gerhard, weathered and mid-thirties, steps forward, brown eyes reflecting relief and deep caution. "Thank you," he breathes, voice tight with gratitude and disbelief. "The Frostfang... my ship... gone. That squid! I thought I was dead. Ran across the water, carrying Rorik. This family heirloom saved me." He gestures wildly. "And that aasimar... almost killed! What the hell!"

Rorik, barely seventeen, watches his captain, wide-eyed. Halite, however, stands rigid, scrutinizing Gerhard. Suspicion cuts sharper than the chill air; Halite knows survivors don't

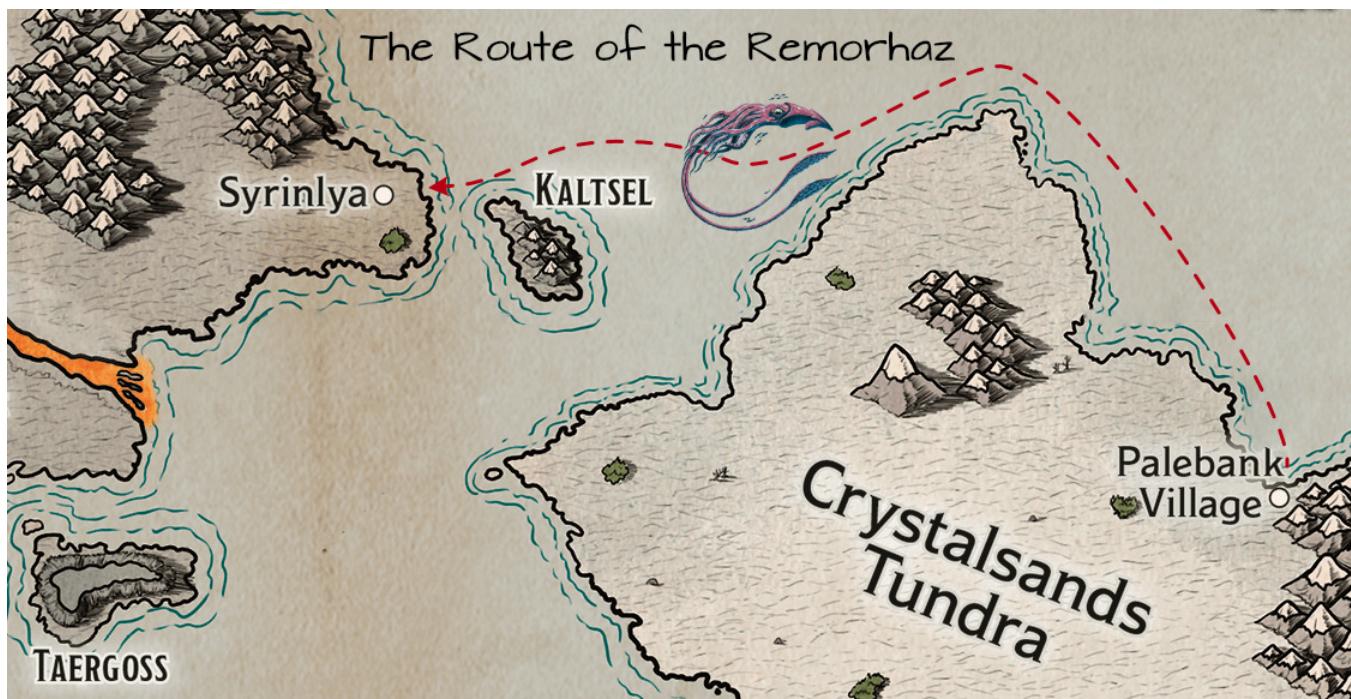
always bear honest scars.

At the rail, Bret's robed figure steps forward. Kragor recognizes the sigils: a symbolic design of three inward-pointing diamond shapes with eight curling spires underneath. This wizard is a member of the Cerberus Assembly, a powerful conclave of mages in the Dwendalian Empire. The wizard nods solemnly to Gerhard. "The sea tests us all," Bret intones. "Perhaps misfortune portends a greater journey."

Halite's gaze narrows on Gerhard, pressing. "Specifically, what were you doing out here?"

Gerhard's breath clouds the frigid air. "My kin have always plied these waters. Fishing... crabbing, mostly." He falters, eyes darting across the ravaged deck. "But we found a new source of income. Ferrying passengers, mostly one way to Eiselcross." He gestures toward Bret. "That mage offered a fortune in gold for his transport there and back again."

Bret stands nearby, clearly agitated, his words laced with a demanding edge. "I require passage to Icehaven, Captain," he declares, his voice tight with urgency. "I bear tidings of utmost import. Our vessel is lost; I must deliver my news without delay. I will provide recompense for diverting your ship."



Stonebeard remains unmoved. “Such a course is impossible,” he rumbles, his voice a deep echo of the sea. “My obligations lie with the Glassblades; my route must be followed. You may remain aboard. After completing our appointed rounds, we shall deposit you at Palebank Village. Another vessel can convey you to Icehaven from there. I am heartened we rescued you, fortunate you remain living. But expect no more than offered.” His gaze fixes upon the traveler with steely resolve. “Assist cleaning the foredeck. There is work to be done.”

LAND HO

The afternoon fog clings suffocatingly to the Remorhaz, smothering the sea and reducing the ship to a cautious crawl. In this soup, dead reckoning is Mera’s only guide. Scarlet summons Sparky, her owl companion, a flash of gold against the gray. “Fly up, Sparky,” she commands, voice tight. “Find the sun. Tell me how long it takes. And look for land.”

Sparky beats upward, swallowed instantly by the milky expanse. The crew watches, hope and anxiety warring on their faces. Three minutes pass. Four. The wingbeats fade into silence. Five minutes stretch into six, then seven, then eight.

Suddenly, a spectral shape wheels out of the gray. Sparky circles, settling onto Scarlet’s shoulder. The connection flares, and she sees through the owl’s eyes. “Took a while to break through,” Scarlet reports, her voice hushed, barely carrying over the creak of timbers. “Up there... just clouds. A sea of gray, stretching forever. No land.”

A small, wry chuckle escapes her. “Sparky did mention seeing tentacles in the water, though. Said they smelled bad... like farts.”

A collective sigh escapes the crew, a shared breath of weary disappointment. Hope is a fragile commodity here. The Remorhaz creeps onward, the search continuing within the fog’s suffocating embrace.

The galley bustles with activity. Chef Ingrid is impressed with our tale of the giant squid, her moon-and-rune amulet glinting in the lamplight. Despite the chaos, a sense of camaraderie pulses through the ship as the crew gathers—survivors and newcomers alike.

Kragor, brow furrowed, leans towards the wizard Bret, peppering him with questions. Bret, clearly burdened by secrets, folds his hands cautiously. “I am bound by oaths,” he states, his tone careful, “to maintain discretion regarding my objectives within Eiselcross.” His eyes dart around the galley.

Kragor persists. “But passage to Icehaven? You mentioned tidings of utmost import. Surely, some details for fellow adventurers?”

Bret sighs, shoulders slumping. “We uncovered valuable information and encountered... Aeorian constructs in the wastes. It is vital that I reach Icehaven. And soon.”

“Seen any gold vials?” Kragor pushes, relentless.

Bret’s face remains impassive. “The antidote for the Frigid Woe? No. Fortunately, we did not encounter that dreadful affliction.”

Sensing the rising tension, Elara raises her glass with a bright smile. “To new beginnings,” she declares, her voice ringing with cheer, “and to surviving giant squids!”

Laughter erupts, instantly easing the weight of suspicion. The crew celebrates, reveling in their shared survival. Though fog still clings thick to the Remorhaz outside, a warmth begins to bloom within the ship, where adventurers share a meal among friends.

Below decks, Ingrid’s promised feast wafts upwards—smoked fish and steaming bread, a comforting aroma cutting through the lingering brine and stench left by their monstrous assailant. The three shipwreck survivors—Gerhard, Rorik, and Bret—are formally integrated into the temporary community forged by shared peril. Gerhard still looks stunned, his eyes periodically flicking towards

the deck as if expecting the shattered Frostfang to reappear from the mist. Rorik, barely a man in years, sticks close, while Bret, the wizard, observes the adventurers with guarded curiosity.

Scarlet approaches Gerhard, her expression sympathetic but gaze direct. “Gerhard, you said your family sailed these waters long? Your family name?”

He pulls his attention from the gray void beyond the porthole. “Eisner,” he replies, rubbing a hand over his burgeoning beard. “Of Icehaven. Fishermen for generations. Crabs, mostly. That boat... she was everything.” He gestures vaguely towards Rorik. “My life, his livelihood... gone.” He sighs, a plume of condensation in the cool air. “We’d only recently started ferrying passengers. Trying a new way. Bret here offered good coin.”

“Is there somewhere... we might rest?” Gerhard asks, looking towards Captain Stonebeard, who surveys the gathered company, his face grim but resolute.

“Aye,” Stonebeard nods curtly. “Bunks enough. You earned your place.”

As the survivors find spots at the galley table, laden with Ingrid’s platters, conversation turns to the adventurers’ quest. Halite, Kragor, and Elara briefly explain their mission: the Frigid Woe spreading from Palebank Village, stolen Aeorian artifacts, Hulil’s desperation, and their current journey to Eiselcross seeking the cure Elro described—the milky liquid in golden vials. Gerhard and Rorik listen intently, their own recent brush with death making the tale resonate deeply. Bret listens too, his face impassive, betraying nothing.

Mera, the navigator, consults her charts, brow furrowed. “With this fog and the delay... we lost time,” she announces. “But if the weather clears, we could reach Syrinlya by tomorrow afternoon.”

A collective sigh ripples through the crew. Landfall is close.

Dinner is subdued, a recounting of the battle punctuated by shared relief. Later, mugs refilled, Elara retrieves her harp. Small against the vast, fog-bound sea, the instrument sings under her fingers, a melody of quiet longing and resilient hope filling the galley. The notes hang, fragile beauty against their harsh reality. Even Bret seems softened, gaze distant. When the song ends, respectful silence yields to appreciative murmurs.

As evening deepens, the ship’s routine returns. Watches are assigned: Scarlet first, senses alert to wind and timber, Sparky a silent, feathered presence beside her. Whisper follows, melting into deck shadows, eyes piercing the gloom. Gerhard takes the third watch, grateful for the normalcy. Captain Stonebeard joins him near the helm, leaning on the rail, fog swirling like ghosts.

“Sorry about your vessel, Gerhard,” Stonebeard says, voice low. “Hard thing, losing your ship.”

Gerhard nods, staring into the white abyss. “Aye. Good boat. Fast. Grew up on her. Dad taught me fishing there.” He pauses. “Good thing I have insurance.”

Stonebeard raises an eyebrow. “Insurance?”

“Aye. Have you never found a wizard willing to take a few gold a month against the value of your hull? Got a good rate from an Empire fellow. If she sinks, he buys me a new one. Family’s done it a long time.” He shrugs. “Still... devastating. But we’re not bankrupt.”

Stonebeard grunts, filing the information away. “Boats are expensive. Taken many voyages myself.” He shifts his weight. “Given the circumstances, saving your lives, there’s no charge for passage to Palebank Village.”

Gerhard turns, surprise, perhaps offense, flickering in his eyes. “No charge? Captain, with respect, that’s naval etiquette. Rescued souls aren’t passengers for fare.”

Stonebeard meets his gaze steadily. “My apologies. Correct, of course. Force of habit.” He sighs wearily. “Long few days.” He gestures

vaguely below deck towards where Bret presumably sleeps. “That squid... seemed focused. Like it was after your passenger.”

Gerhard shivers, though perhaps not entirely from the cold. “Never seen the like. Thirty years sailing these waters. Seen krakens, sure. But never one going after a ship, after someone, like that. Not even for a hold full of my crabs.”

The two captains stand silent awhile, solitary figures keeping vigil against the vast, uncaring sea and spectral fog.

Elara takes the fourth watch, relieving Gerhard. Settling near the bow, harp resting beside her, she resolves to stay alert, but the battle, the song, the journey’s weight... it all presses down. The rhythmic slap of waves against the hull becomes a lullaby. Her eyelids grow heavy. One moment she scans the impenetrable white wall ahead; the next...

She jerks awake with a start. Gray dawn light filters through thinning fog. Guilt floods her—she slept. Heart pounding, she scrambles up, frantically scanning the deck, the sea. Nothing. No alarms, no disturbances. The Remorhaz sails on, undisturbed. Relief wars with embarrassment; apparently, the Frigid Depths granted her unguarded peace.

As the morning progresses, the pale sun burns away the fog. By noon, visibility stretches for ten miles across choppy, gray-green waves under a brightening sky. And there, rising from the sea to the south, is the unmistakable shape of land— jagged, snow-dusted peaks against the horizon.

A shout goes up from the crow’s nest, echoed by murmurs on deck. Captain Stonebeard strides to the railing, squinting. A rare grin splits his beard. “Ah, Kalsel to the south!” After a brief conference with the navigator, he adds, “Mera puts us two hours out from Syrinlya!” He turns, voice booming across the deck, energized. “Alright, you lot! Look alive! Pack your gear and prepare for landfall! The Frigid Depths haven’t beaten us yet!”

The salt spray now freezes almost instantly upon hitting the deck. Since leaving Palebank Village, the world has steadily bled color and warmth, surrendering to an encroaching reign of ice. The air bites with a ferocity that makes the fog-chilled waters seem almost temperate by comparison. Under the finally clear, brittle sky, the Remorhaz glides towards a coastline that looks like the jagged teeth of some immense, frost-covered beast, its peaks clawing at the sky.

Mera’s calculations prove precise. As the sun begins its slow descent, casting long, pale shadows across the waves, the ramshackle outpost of Syrinlya comes into view. It’s less a town and more a temporary scar upon the landscape—a sprawling camp of fur-lined yurts huddled against the relentless wind, smoke whipping horizontally from their capped peaks. Figures bundled against the cold—mostly dwarves and elves, judging by their builds—move between the structures.

Stonebeard brings the Remorhaz expertly alongside a crude dock fashioned from timber and ice. “Alright, Syrinlya!” he bellows, his voice carrying over the wind’s howl. “We’ll unload cargo, then take on whatever’s heading back south. We depart for Palebank Village in three days. Plenty of time for you lot to find your contact.” He gives a curt nod to the adventurers. “Mind the ice.”

SYRINLYA

The wind assaults the party as they step onto frozen ground, driving needles of snow into exposed skin. Kragor pulls his cloak tighter, muttering about unnatural cold. A stout, weathered dwarf woman with a wild mane of shaggy gray hair approaches, stamping heavily booted feet.

“Morgo Delwur, at yer service!” she declares, her voice rasping through the gale. “Heard you were comin’. Lookin’ for Orvo Mustave?” She gestures vaguely inland. “His yurt’s over there. And the Buyer?” She points to a larger, well-maintained yurt. “That’s his place. Fancy.”

She sweeps an arm around the disparate groups of adventurers milling about near sputtering fires. “Everyone’s here for the same thing, eh? Aeorian treasure. Big risks, big rewards... or just frozen toes.”

Halite asks, “Can you point us towards provisions? Snowshoes, perhaps?”

Morgo nods. “Aye, plenty o’ folk lookin’ to sell you gear. Some make more coin tradin’ than diggin’. Follow me.” She leads them through the camp to another large, fur-lined yurt. “You can bunk here. Belonged to some rich elf lordling. Came lookin’ for adventure, poor sod. Got himself eaten by a sabre-tooth tiger his first day out.”

Scarlet’s eyes widen. “In the yurt?!”

“Gods, no, lass!” Morgo barks a laugh. “We don’t let the big cats wander camp! Nah, he went out, didn’t listen to his guides. They found his boots and... well, not much else. His loss, your gain.”

Inside, the yurt is surprisingly spacious and less frigid. A stone fire pit sits centrally; thick, fur-lined hammocks hang from sturdy poles. “Right then,” Scarlet steps to the pit, whispers an incantation. A small flame springs to life, instantly pushing back the chill.

Gerhard, utterly lost and overwhelmed, drifts away from the nascent fire, staring blankly at a fur-lined wall. Elara approaches the bereaved captain. “Gerhard,” she says softly, her voice warm despite the chill. “It’s... a lot to take in. But you’re safe now.”

Scarlet steps closer to the crackling flames. “She’s right. You survived something terrible. You’re stronger than you think. And you’re welcome here.”

He manages a weak, haunted smile. “Thank you... my boat... everything...” Rubbing his face, he trails off. “I... I think I need rest.” He finds an unoccupied hammock and climbs in, pulling a fur blanket over himself.

While Gerhard settles, Kragor spots an open wooden crate. Curiosity piqued, he investigates.

Inside lies a trove: weeks of trail rations, fifty feet of fine silk rope, a thick woolen blanket, another grappling hook, a sturdy miner’s pick, and, tucked beneath it all, a small, leather-bound book.

Kragor picks it up. The gold-leaf title reads: “Adventure Sexy: Impress Potential Lovers with Great Deeds”, by Scanlan Shorthalt.

He grunts, holding it aloft. “Looks like our elf wasn’t just after treasure.”

Elara peers at it. “Oh, Scanlan again. So popular... I’ll have a following like that someday.” She winks.

Whisper sniffs disdainfully. “More useful than poetry, perhaps.” She eyes the silk rope with interest.

“Miner’s pick?” Halite rumbles, taking the tool from the crate and testing its weight. “Could be useful.”

Morgo nods at the fire. “Right then. Shelter’s sorted. Provisions are sold near The Buyer’s place. Meself, I’ll be heading on an expedition west tomorrow.” She cracks her knuckles. “Any final questions?”

“Thank you for your hospitality, Morgo,” Halite says with a respectful nod.

“Aye, thanks for the yurt,” Kragor adds, tossing the Scanlan Shorthalt book dismissively into its crate. Elara quickly retrieves it with a thoughtful hum.

Morgo gives them a final nod. “Stay warm. Stay sharp. Don’t get eaten.” She turns and vanishes into the swirling snow.

Inside the yurt, the fire crackles against the wind’s mournful Eiselpoint howl. It’s late afternoon, their fourth day since leaving Palebank Village. Syrinlya is harsh, potentially deadly, but they have shelter, supplies, and a lead.

ORVO

“Alright,” Halite says, hefting the miner’s pick. “Let’s find this Orvo Mustave. Then we’ll see

about snowshoes and other provisions.”

Whisper interjects, “It’s getting late. Best split up: some get supplies, others find Orvo.”

They agree. Whisper, Scarlet, and Doctor Pepe head for the provision yurts near The Buyer’s large dwelling, the spot Morgo indicated. Wind tugs their cloaks as they navigate snow-dusted paths between structures.

Meanwhile, Kragor, Halite, Elara, and a subdued Gerhard seek Orvo Mustave’s yurt. They find it slightly apart, smaller than theirs, smoke rising bravely against the gray sky. Before it, a modest campfire struggles against the cold. A young dwarf sits beside the flames, shortsword across his lap. His dark, relatively short beard frames a face marked by a prominent scar— three ragged lines, like a claw mark dragged across his cheek. He looks up as they approach, warming his hands.

“Oh, hey,” he calls out, his voice rough but friendly enough. “How y’all doing?”

Halite steps forward, his bulk casting a long shadow in the afternoon light. “Well met. We seek Orvo Mustave. Elro of the Glassblades sent us from Palebank Village.”

The dwarf nods, pushing himself up slightly from his resting spot. “I’m Orvo. Elro sent word you’d be coming. Heard you came with the Remorhaz.” He squints at the disparate group before him. “Quite the collection. Where are you folks from?”

Kragor pulls his cloak tighter against the wind whipping off the ice. “Bladegarden.”

Orvo whistles softly. “Bladegarden? Long way. Caught between the Empire and the Dynasty there, eh?”

Halite gestures vaguely south. “The Menagerie Coast is my home.”

“Ah, the Menagerie,” Orvo nods. “Heard it’s warmer.” He turns his gaze to Elara, who beams, her celestial heritage almost palpable even bundled in furs. “And you, lass?”

Elara steps forward, eyes sparkling like distant

stars. “Me? Oh, I’m from the stars! Just landed here recently.”

Orvo blinks, then chuckles, a low rumble in his chest. “From the stars, eh? Okay then. That’s... different. Welcome to Syrinlya, Star-Lass.” His gaze shifts to Gerhard, who seems braced for the attention.

Gerhard clears his throat, his voice quiet, almost rough from disuse or emotion.

“Gerhard Eisner. My family... we’re from the Greying Wildlands, north of the Empire. We... fished these waters. Generations of us.” He gestures vaguely out towards the frozen sea, his expression momentarily shadowed by unspoken loss.

Orvo nods slowly, his expression softening with understanding. “Greying Wildlands? Know the coast. Tough folk live up there. And fishing these waters... takes grit.” Sensing Gerhard’s recent hardship, he doesn’t press, turning back to the group. “Well, welcome to Syrinlya. You all came a long way. What can I do for you? Elro’s message just said you were looking for something.”

Elara clasps her hands together. “We are on a quest! A most urgent one. We seek... a cure! A milky liquid, held within vials of gold. Have you seen such wonders?”

Orvo scratches his scarred cheek, looking genuinely puzzled. “Gold vials? Milky liquid? Can’t say I have. Sounds fancy.”

“Familiar with the Frigid Woe?” Halite asks directly, his tone sharp. “The freezing sickness?”

Orvo’s expression darkens. “Aye. Nasty business. Came across the... source material... out with Urgon.” He pauses, brow furrowed. “Wait, you know Urgon? My buddy?”

Kragor steps forward, switching smoothly to Dwarvish, his voice low and somber. “Orvo... we have bad news about Urgon.”

Orvo’s eyes widen slightly. “Bad news? What... what happened?”

"He contracted the Frigid Woe," Kragor states plainly. "From one of the blue vials you recovered. He... did not survive. Died back in Palebank Village."

The dwarf stares, comprehension dawning slowly. His gaze drops to the struggling fire; he kicks absently at a chunk of ice near his boot. "Ah, hells. Urgon..." He shakes his head, the movement sluggish with disbelief. "Damn it. Knew that stuff was dangerous. He... could be a real jerk, but... he was my mate." Looking up, grief and anger cloud his eyes. He switches back to Common, his voice thick. "That bloody sickness. Did... did you handle those blue vials?"

"We secured the ones Hulil Lutan had," Halite confirms. "She got them from Urgon, it seems. Did you keep any?"

Orvo shakes his head again. "Nah. Sold my share to The Buyer right after the dig. Needed coin. Told Urgon to be careful." He sighs, a ragged sound. "So the cure... the gold vials you're after... you think they're out where we found the blue ones?"

"Elro believes so," Elara confirms urgently. "Where did you find them, Orvo? People are still sick back in Palebank Village."

"Right, right." Orvo gathers his thoughts. "The place is called Salsvault." He gestures northwest. "About two hundred miles that way, in the Thin Sheets. The ice there gets treacherous, shifting. The ruin itself is... odd. Better shape than most. Feels like something's holding it together, maybe magic from the city's fall."

"Two hundred miles?" Kragor's brow creases as he calculates. "How long does that take?"

"Depends on your pace," Orvo replies. "Normal speed, maybe eight or nine days— twenty-four miles a day, give or take. Push it to thirty, but you risk exhaustion. Or slow it down, safer at eighteen miles a day, easier to spot trouble." He rubs his hands near the fire. "Trouble like the Ice Mephits. Elemental pests drawn to the magic keeping the place intact."

"Mephits?" Elara asks, intrigued. "Are they aggressive?"

"Oh aye," Orvo nods grimly. "Saw a few lurking outside. We thought we were clever sneaking past them. The real trouble was inside. Looked like a lab. We barely made it into the third chamber before these animated suits of armor came alive and chased us out. Not as big as you," he glances at Halite, "but still big enough. We snatched what we could—the vials and a few other bits—and didn't look back."

"So you didn't find any gold vials?" Halite presses.

"Nah. Didn't know what the blue ones held then, just that they seemed valuable." Orvo sighs, regret heavy in his voice. "Poor Urgon. If I'd known..."

"Is there no faster way to Salsvault?" Kragor asks. "Horses? Sled dogs?"

Orvo snorts. "Horses? They'd freeze or break a leg in an hour. Dogs, maybe, if you find a trained team willing to risk it. Most folks stick to snowshoes. Best bet, really."

"Where can we acquire those?" Halite asks.

"No proper shops here," Orvo confirms. "It's all trade and salvage. Folks pick gear off expeditions that... don't come back complete. Try asking around near The Buyer's yurt. Fellow named Javel, might have some. Three yurts over from the big one, towards the ice cliffs. But expect to pay. Supply and demand, eh? Probably run you two gold a pair, maybe more if he thinks you're desperate."

As Orvo finishes speaking, the rest of the party approaches, emerging from the maze of yurts. Scarlet brushes snow from her cloak, Whisper moves with silent steps, and Doctor Pepe offers a curt nod.

"We struck out on supplies," Scarlet admits reluctantly. "However!" she holds up a small, grease-stained paper bag. "Scones. Apparently, someone here bakes."

Doctor Pepe eyes the bag. “Are they gluten-free?”

“They’re squid-based,” Whisper announces, her voice flat but her eyes betraying an eagerness to try them.

Orvo looks between the two groups, then back towards the bleak, frozen wilderness stretching away to the northwest. “Right then. Looks like you’re all set to talk gear. Salsvault ain’t goin’ anywhere. But those suits of armor... watch yourselves. They freaked me right out.” He gives them a final, weary nod. “Good luck. Hope you find what you’re lookin’ for. For Urgon’s sake, too.”

The wind howls a dirge through Syrinlya’s haphazard sprawl of yurts as the reunited party stands outside Orvo Mustave’s modest dwelling. The dwarf offers a weary nod before retreating to the warmth of his fire, leaving the adventurers to the biting cold. Snow swirls around their boots, stinging exposed cheeks.

JAVEL

“Right,” Halite rumbles. “Snowshoes. Orvo mentioned a trader named Javel, three yurts over from The Buyer’s place.”

Whisper nods, her tail twitching beneath her cloak. “Near the ice cliffs. Let’s not waste time.”

They trudge through the deepening snow, the crunch of their boots muffled by the wind. Bundled figures pass by, faces obscured by scarves, gazes cast downward against the elements. The air smells sharp and cold. Gerhard follows silently, haunted by memories of his lost ship.

Following Orvo’s directions, they locate the specified yurt—a larger structure with smoke curling from its central vent. A rough-hewn sign hangs beside the entrance, depicting a crossed pickaxe and snowshoe.

Elara, ever the diplomat, pushes the flap aside and steps inside, the others close behind. The immediate change is palpable; the wind’s roar

diminishes, and though the air is cold, it lacks the vicious bite of outside. The interior is cluttered yet organized, filled with furs, ropes, and adventuring gear. Near a sputtering fire pit sits a dwarf so ancient his braided beard pools around his feet. He looks up, watery eyes blinking in the gloom, and lets out a series of rattling coughs.

“Good day, Master Dwarf! I’ve heard good things about your shop.” Elara chirps, her voice bright in the dim, smoky yurt. She steps forward, radiating warmth despite the chill. The old dwarf squints at her.

“Eh? What’s this now?” he rasps. “Well now... yer a sight. What in the Nine Hells are ya? Is that... a horn on yer head?”

Elara smiles, a dimple appearing in her cheek. “Some say it’s horny.”

The dwarf lets out a wheezing cough that could be a chuckle. “Heh. What can I do for ya?”

“We’re new here,” Elara says, pulling a small, worn leather-bound book from her pack.

“Hoping you might help us. By the way, your cough sounds dreadful. I don’t have any herbs, but I find this book helps during... downtime.” She offers it to him.

The dwarf’s eyes widen slightly as he takes the book with a trembling hand. “Tusk Love? Gods... have ya read Chapter Three?”

“Oh, it was so good,” Elara gushes, clasping her hands. “The size of those hands! And the tentacles! My horn was horny when I read that chapter!”

“Aye!” The dwarf nods vigorously, another cough rattling him. “Best thing to read when yer laid up. Just lie back and read Tusk Love.” He sets the book aside and pulls out a long pipe, tamping something into the bowl. “A woman after me own heart. So, what brings this fine company to ol’ Javel’s Emporium? I’d guess me boyish good looks, or yer lookin’ for gear.”

“Well,” Elara leans in conspiratorially, “we

definitely noticed the boyish good looks.”

“Ho ho!” Javel chuckles, a sound like rocks tumbling. “Yer not wrong there! But I suspect gear’s the main order o’ business. What do ye need? Snowshoes?”

“Indeed,” Halite confirms. “Seven pairs. We’re on an urgent mission—to stop a... popsicle sickness.”

Javel raises an eyebrow. “Popsicle sickness? Ah, the Frigid Woe. Nasty business. Commendable you want to stop it.” He studies the party. “Goliath, Tabaxi, Orc, Halfling... you lot come in all shapes, eh? Let me see what I got.” With a groan, he rises, his beard trailing the packed-earth floor, and disappears into the shadows of the yurt.

They hear him muttering, coughing, and the unmistakable shuffle of gear, occasionally interrupted by a clatter and a dwarven curse. Halite shifts his weight, scanning the yurt’s contents. His thoughts drift beyond the immediate dangers of Salsvault—Eiselcross, Aeor... ancient magic, lost knowledge. Perhaps there are secrets here beyond just a cure. A seed of ambition takes root: survive this, find the cure, yes, but also learn. Bring back more than just stories to his people.

Javel reappears, dragging several pairs of snowshoes. “Right then. Got yer sizes, I reckon.” He sorts through them. “Goliath... these’ll do.” He tosses a large pair towards Halite. “Orc, Tabaxi, the rest of ya. Oh and erm, Halfling...” He pauses, holding up a pair stained dark red. He glances at Scarlet. “Yours... uh... well, they’re red. Ignore that.”

He piles the seven pairs together. “Normally, fifteen gold for the lot. But... I like yer horn, lass. And yer taste in literature.” He winks at Elara. “Twelve gold pieces for the lot. That’s like getting three pairs free, considerin’ the goliath tax.”

“How about ten gold?” Elara counters smoothly. “Chapter Eight was quite illuminating. Those pixies! Glitter me, that’s all I have to say.”

Javel strokes his beard, considering. Elara beams hopefully. He shakes his head. “Twelve’s fair. But... seein’ as yer on a noble quest...” He rummages behind a pile of furs. “I’ll throw in these four ice hammers ... and,” he holds up a finger indicating a pause, and rummages around. He then produces a few sturdy climbing hammers along with a quartet of waxed leather pouches, each roughly the size of a grown man’s fist. “... Oil. That’s a whole lot—seven pairs o’ shoes, four hammers, four pounds of oil—thirteen gold pieces. Final offer. Won’t find better in Syrinlya, guaranteed.”

Scarlet steps closer, eyeing the red snowshoes Javel set aside. In Dwarvish, she asks, “Why are the snowshoes red?”

Javel leans in, lowering his voice. “Ah. Pre-owned, ye see. Prime condition, but... belonged to a halfling.”

“And the color?” Kragor interjects.

Javel glances at the yurt flap, conspiratorial. “Keep yer eyes open for Yetis out there.”

“Are they partial to halflings?” Scarlet asks dryly.

“Depends how hungry they are,” Javel grunts. “But the red... aye. That’s bloodstain. Couldn’t quite scrub it all out.”

Nearby, Gerhard listens in on the Dwarvish conversation, and summarizes for Halite in a murmur, “Sounds like a Yeti ate the last owner.”

Scarlet inspects the snowshoes more closely. Years of reading nature’s signs allow her to identify the stains with chilling certainty. It’s old blood, soaked deep into the hide. She wrinkles her nose but nods. “They’ll do. Thirteen gold.”

As the party pools their coins, Javel grunts with satisfaction, tucking the gold into a pouch. “Pleasure doin’ business with ya.” He reaches under some furs and pulls out a dusty bottle of amber liquid. “And before ye go... welcome to Syrinlya.” He hands it to Elara. “On the house.

Sandkeg's High. Not the fancy stuff, but it'll warm yer bones."

"Why thank you, generous soul!" Elara replies, taking the whiskey.

"Right then," Kragor says, eyeing the bottle. "After fighting a giant squid and learning we're facing an eight-day trek through Yeti territory, I think a drink's in order."

"Agreed," Halite nods. "Let's head back to the yurt. We need to plan."

They thank Javel and step out into the relentless wind, clutching their new gear. The evening sky darkens, the cold deepening as the prospect of their journey looms large. Back at the elf-lord's abandoned yurt, with Gerhard huddled miserably in a hammock and the whiskey making the rounds, they face the stark reality of Eiselcross. They have gear and a destination, but the path ahead is long, cold, and fraught with unknown perils.

INTERMISSION

THE YURT'S INTERIOR GLOWS WITH a warm, flickering light from the central fire pit, a defiant warmth against the relentless Syrinlya wind that howls outside like a wounded beast. Doctor Pepe is the first to notice a message from Captain Stonebeard left on the yurt's only table: the Remorhaz requires weeks of repair before it might be able to make another crossing of the Frigid Depths. The clock ticks mercilessly for the Liel-Tethwick family, with Salsvault 200 miles away and the Frigid Woe's icy grip threatening to claim their lives. It had already been five days since they had left Palebank Village, and the adventurers knew that they must set out immediately.

Elara, her celestial nature radiating with optimism, sets about lifting their spirits. Her hand drum sets a vibrant rhythm, a defiant heartbeat against the wind's relentless howl. Her eyes gleam with an almost manic energy as she launches into a quick, lively beat.

Gerhard sits hunched, a man broken by loss. The *Frostfang*, his life's work, now exists only in memory. Rorik's placement aboard the Remorhaz feels like salt in an open wound. "What's-his-name is dead to me," he mutters, his voice cracking with unshed grief, whisky sloshing in a trembling hand.

Scarlet moves closer, her presence as grounding as the earth itself. "Even after the fiercest blizzard, the smallest shoot can still find the sun. Even when the great beasts tear through the forest, life finds a way to grow back, sometimes stronger, sometimes in a new and unexpected form," she says to Gerhard. "You've lost much, yes, but you're still here. And your skills, your knowledge of this unforgiving land... they're not lost. They're waiting. Our quest isn't just for some glittering bauble, though treasure does have its uses. We're seeking a cure, a way to mend what's broken in the world, much like you might one day find a way to mend the loss

within you."

Her words are a balm, cutting through Gerhard's fog of despair. He looks up, really sees the faces around him for the first time. Something shifts in his eyes—a spark of possibility rekindling. Finally, he lets out a shaky sigh. "Well, what the hell. There's really nothing I can do, stranded here with no boat and no crew. I might as well go with you lot. May I find a fortune while keeping you out of trouble."

Halite claps him on the back, the impact nearly knocking Gerhard off balance. "Welcome aboard," he rumbles with a genuine smile. Whisper offers a small, encouraging nod. The others add words of encouragement as well, all of them welcoming the skills Gerhard brings to the team.

Elara, sensing the shift in mood, launches into a rambunctious rendition of "A Troll's Grin and a Fairy's Hand," her hand drum accompanying her voice as she celebrates their new collaboration. Her lilting song fills the yurt, promising adventure and companionship, drowning out the wind's mournful song.

KRAGOR SPEAKS UP

Kragor has remained uncharacteristically silent, lost in thought. Subdued. But as Elara's last note fades, he abruptly stands. He draws a deep breath, his chest visibly expanding.

"Alright. Listen up. I got something to say," he begins, his voice raw, almost hesitant. He begins the story of his initiation into the arcane, and as the party leans in, the walls of the yurt seem to melt away, replaced by the cold, dark streets of Bladegarden.

"I've made it no secret that I get my magic from ... somewhere from without our realm. But I never told you how, or why I came here. To the north. My business is my own. Yet now... things are getting weird. Bad weird.

And I fear keeping secrets too close might bring you to your doom. And then I die too, 'cause we're stuck together now."

He stares beyond the yurt's walls, his eyes unfocused, lost in a memory that transcends time and space. He shares the story of the past, and, as he does, his listeners are able to see the world in the same bleak way that he does.

"My journey began after many, many moons of strange sleep as I lived on the streets of Bladegarden. Hearing whispers. Bad dreams full of dark shapes that called my name. Visions of stars falling, and huge dark shapes just beyond reach. And something there, watching. Always watching." He pauses, as if trying to grasp the memories. "Then, on a very dark night, some man-whelps tried to kill me. But I refused to die like a nobody. Just another forgotten orc, fatherless trash. I was scared and nearly dead. So I yelled into darkness... I gave up to... whatever the watcher was."

His eyes blaze with an inner fire as he describes the moment of transformation. "Then I felt it!" he says. "Cold like night but... nice. It wrapped around me like black smoke. It whispered secrets in a strange tongue I do not know. Then, power filled me! A war hammer appeared in my fist from nowhere. I felt no remorse when I smashed in my attacker's stupid face right then and there, then blasted the other scum with dark crackling magic that sent them running like scared rabbits."

Whisper glances at Halite, a silent question in her eyes: "Where is this going?"

Kragor's eyes harden as he adds, "But I know such magic comes at a cost. The dreams kept coming, mostly nonsensical. Gradually, they formed some thought—a command and a promise for greater power. 'Go north. Cross the frozen north. To Eiselcross.' Don't know why exactly. Maybe to find something. Maybe to smash something.

"But comrades... I've new dreams now. Worse

dreams. More than dreams." The orc shifts uneasily from one foot to another, a gesture of worry that his companions are not used to seeing. "Back at that tavern, the Jolly Dwarf, some night I slept bad. Couldn't remember what I dreamed, but when I woke up... my fingers had dirt under the nails. Broken nails. It made no sense! I am clean ... fastidious! And then on the Remorhaz, while crossing the ice sea, I woke up in the night. But I was not in my bed! I was... somewhere else. Couldn't move. Felt like mountains of ice pressing down on me. Hearing ice cracking. For a long time, I couldn't even feel myself breathing. Couldn't scream. This was no dream. It felt like I was locked away, buried under ice. Then, snap! Back in my bunk. And again, dirt under my nails! Dirt that should not be there... could not be there!"

Kragor shudders, a chill running down his spine that has nothing to do with the icy wind. "Whatever got its claws in me... it's doing something with my body when I'm sleeping. And that ain't good for any of us."

As Kragor's story ends, a stillness falls over the yurt as the companions ponder the implications.

Elara is the first to break the silence, her voice soft but resolute. "We should stay close," she says, looking directly at Kragor. "I'll bunk near you, keep watch. Maybe we can understand what's happening."

Whisper's tail twitches nervously. "Tie him up?" she suggests, her feline eyes narrowing.

"No," Halite rumbles, shaking his head. "We may need Kragor's powers if we encounter trouble. Restraints could slow us down."

Doctor Pepe leans forward, stroking his chin. "Interesting predicament. Sounds like a magical possession, or perhaps something more sinister."

Scarlet closes her eyes, communing silently with the natural energies around them. "There's something... off. A presence. But I can't quite identify it."

As the discussion continues, Elara retrieves her harp. Her fingers dance across the strings, weaving a gentle lullaby that seems to soften the harsh edges of their conversation. The melody speaks of protection, of peaceful rest, of guardianship against unknown threats.

Gerhard, still haunted but feeling more connected to the group, volunteers for first watch. The night passes quietly, save for the discovery that someone in the group snores with the thunderous intensity of a winter storm.

Halite takes the second watch. The camp remains still, with occasional sounds of people moving to relieve themselves against the bitter cold. The wind whispers secrets outside, but nothing disturbs their rest.

Elara's watch is marked by intense focus. Her eyes never leave Kragor, watching for any sign of movement, any hint of the strange nocturnal activity he described. But the orc remains motionless, his breathing steady and deep.

As Scarlet takes the final watch, the first hints of dawn begin to paint the sky. The sounds of the camp slowly come to life—the rustling of sleeping bags, the soft clanking of cooking utensils, the preparatory movements of travelers readying for a day's journey.

Morning arrives, and Kragor's nails are clean. No mud, no dirt—nothing to suggest mysterious events.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The party decides on a measured pace, hoping to cover approximately 24 miles each day without undue risk. Gerhard, drawing on years of wilderness experience, prepares their rations. His hands move with practiced efficiency.

Scarlet sends Sparky, her faithful owl companion, to scout ahead. But the bird, more accustomed to wooded landscapes, seems perplexed by the endless expanse of snow. There are no trees, no rocks—just an infinite

white canvas stretching to the horizon.

As night falls, they make camp beneath a half-moon of Catha, the Moon Weaver. Ruidus, the small moon, hangs full—a celestial harbinger of ill tidings that sends a collective shiver through the group.

During Whisper's watch, a bright light streaks across the sky from east to west. She makes note of it but waits until morning to mention the anomaly.

The second day out from Syrinlya brings challenges. A steep cliff face looms before them, its icy surface treacherous and unforgiving. Halite steps forward, his massive frame a testament to strength and determination as he swings the grappling hook up and over the edge of the cliff. With the grappling hook secured, he scales the cliff with surprising grace, creating a lifeline for his companions. One by one, they traverse the obstacle, each movement calculated and precise.

As evening approaches, clouds gather, muting the landscape into shades of gray and white. The cold is relentless, but they sleep soundly—except for one.

During her watch, Elara notices Kragor's restlessness. He curls into a tight ball, his massive frame seeming to shrink. Unable to wake him, she watches him intently as he oscillates between struggle and paralysis. When morning finally comes, his fingernails are once again caked with mud—impossible in this frozen wasteland of ice and snow.

On the third day, as they trudge forward, the monotonous white landscape is interrupted by two rock formations, standing like silent sentinels approximately ten feet tall. Their sudden appearance is both a relief and a source of renewed tension, breaking the endless white with their dark, weathered surfaces.

Something is watching. Something is waiting.

THE FROZEN PATH

 ISING IN THE DISTANCE ARE jagged mountains that begin at the rock formations. The biting wind seems to hold its breath for a fleeting moment, leaving the frigid air unnaturally clear. Sunlight, thin and pale, glints off the endless snowfields.

Suddenly, a sound rips through the stillness—a distant cry, chilling and sharp—the yip of a wolf, twisting into a shriek of raw agony. Then, as abruptly as it began, it ceases. Gerhard and Scarlet, their senses honed by the wilderness, exchange a wary glance.

Far across the pristine expanse, a flicker of white catches the eye. A large wolf, its fur blending seamlessly with the snow, streaks across the landscape, glancing desperately behind it. A sudden cloud of steam erupts from the snow—a phantom geyser—and the wolf, engulfed, vanishes. Its pained yelp echoes once more, then is swallowed by the silence.

Elara, ever quick to react, instinctively draws upon the subtle, earthy magic she learned during her time among the druids. A faint, almost imperceptible shimmer, like a fleeting forest whisper, settles upon Doctor Pepe, imbuing him with a quiet moment of clarity. She then melts into the shadows of a nearby outcropping, her lithe form disappearing against the gray stone.

Scarlet, her own connection to the natural world immediate, releases Sparky to scout. The owl, a golden dart against the pale sky, spirals upward. Through Sparky's keen eyes, Scarlet sees the steaming rupture in the snow—a localized column, a small cylinder of superheated vapor, rising perhaps ten feet high, with something disturbingly blue shimmering within its heart. The earth where the wolf had been is scalded and bare.

Kragor, his massive conjured war hammer already clutched in his frost-rimed gloves, takes a position alongside Elara, his glowing eyes

fixed on the boiling cloud. He readies some of his eldritch power, raw and untamed, preparing to blast whatever horror emerges. Similarly, Doctor Pepe, moving with the preternatural swiftness of a seasoned rogue, finds a hollow in the terrain and vanishes, becoming one with the contours of the frozen earth. He loads his crossbow and is ready to fire at the first sign of danger.

Just as he begins to feel settled, Doctor Pepe registers a flicker. Whisper is but a fleeting impression of tawny fur and controlled power. Her inherent tabaxi agility, honed by years of monastic discipline and fueled by ki, allows her to cover the ground with impossible speed as she darts to the sheltering embrace of another craggy outcropping. She presses herself against its cold stone, her lithe body blending into the jagged lines, becoming almost invisible to the untrained eye.

Halite, a towering force of muscle and granite, rushes forward, his massive bronze shield held ready. He plants himself on the other side of Whisper's outcropping, his trident gleaming.

Meanwhile, the cloud of steam they've been watching begins to dissipate, thinning into mere wisps that dance on the wind. Just as the last tendrils of steam vanish, a sudden shout rips from Gerhard's lips. His eyes, fixed on the unfolding horror, widen with dawning recognition. "Remorhaz!" he bellows, his voice raw with ancient dread. The name, heavy with arctic menace, carries across the plains to Whisper, Elara, and Kragor, a stark warning of the monstrous threat. Scarlet, too, recognizes the terrifying implication of Gerhard's cry: an aggressive predator that devours any animal matter, including humanoids (they have even been known to attack frost giants), with a furnace burning inside—a creature of ice and fire, a living engine of destructive heat.

Elara, with a flash of inspired cunning, brings her hand drum to bear, focusing her bardic

magic into its taut skin. A low, rhythmic thumping sound, deep and resonant like the ponderous, ground-shaking steps of some immense, warm-blooded beast struggling through deep snow, manifests ten feet beyond Halite's position. It is an illusory lure, a sonic beacon designed to draw the creature's fury.

Whisper, with an almost imperceptible shift, stows her snowshoes. Then, with the fluid grace of a creature born to defy gravity, she begins to climb the rough face of the outcropping, finding purchase ten feet above the snow.

Suddenly, a tremor shakes the ground. The snow around Elara's illusory thumper erupts, showering the air with crystalline fragments. From the earth, immense and terrible, rises the remorhaz. Its segmented body, a nightmare of chitinous plates, glistens with superheated ice, steam roiling from its carapace. A wave of oppressive heat washes over Halite, the air burning. The tip of his nose, caught in the sudden thermal blast, turns an alarming red.

From his hidden vantage, Doctor Pepe's crossbow twangs. The bolt streaks across the snow, finds its mark, and pierces the remorhaz's armored hide. The bolt sinks more than halfway into the creature's flesh before it ignites and burns away to nothing—consumed by the beast's internal furnace.

Then Kragor's moment arrives. With a snarl of raw power, he unleashes a crackling beam of dark, purple-red energy ripping through the air. It tears a smoking wound into the remorhaz's armored side. The colossal worm, its primal fury ignited by these affronts, lets out a deafening shriek of rage, its many legs churning the snow.

Halite, recognizing the creature's unbridled wrath, makes a tactical retreat, moving twenty-five feet back, placing himself closer to Elara. With a powerful grunt, he hurls his javelin. The weapon spins through the air, impales the remorhaz, and bites deep. But like Doctor Pepe's bolt, the javelin is swiftly consumed by the creature's inner fire, incinerating on

contact. Still, the blow tells; the remorhaz's furious charge falters.

Gerhard, his eyes keen despite the danger, yells, "*Mors certa!*" and a faint, glowing sigil appears upon its segmented hide. His longbow twangs, and an arrow, guided by his mark, flies true, striking the base of one of the remorhaz's many antennae. Elara, her shortbow singing its own song of defiance, fires an arrow that finds purchase between chitinous plates. The bloodied remorhaz's fury becomes desperation as it starts to regret its choice of prey.

With a quick glance towards Scarlet, Elara beats her drum, a pulse of inspiration flowing into the druid, urging her to action. Scarlet, empowered, thrusts her hands forward. Vines, thick and green, burst from the ground, lashing out at the remorhaz, briefly coiling around its immense form. But the creature's infernal heat is too great; the nascent flora sizzles, blackens, and burns away in an instant.

The party continues the onslaught. Kragor, seeing the beast's injuries, doubles down on his assault. He extends a hand towards the colossal worm, and a dark pallor settles over its carapace. Then, with a grunt of exertion, he unleashes another blast of fuchsia energy, delivering a crash of searing pain into the remorhaz. Doctor Pepe, from his hidden vantage, fires again. His crossbow bolt finds its mark, sinking deep into the creature's flesh, causing it to emit a strange, blood-curdling screech of agony. He slips back into concealment, a shadow among shadows. Whisper, a blur of motion, pops out from her perch. Her sling whirls, a stone singing through the air, hitting the remorhaz with a sharp crack before she melts back into hiding.

The remorhaz, heavily wounded and frenzied, shifts its terrible focus. It rushes toward Halite, its massive, heat-shimmering maw opening in a bid to snap off the goliath's head. But through its haste and pain, it misjudges Halite's height. The fiery bite snaps shut on empty air. Halite, momentarily distracted by the oppressive heat radiating from the creature, swings his

trident, but his aim is off; the attack misses. With a guttural roar, he calls upon his inner reserves of strength, power surging through his muscles. His trident becomes a blur as it strikes again. This time the blow lands with devastating force and accuracy. Halite's hands, arms, and body scream with the fiery agony of the beast's heat. The triple-barbed head of the weapon thrusts deep into the remorhaz's final body segment, all three prongs puncture its head, piercing its brain and eyes. The creature gurgles, a last, dying spasm shaking its colossal frame.

The remorhaz, mighty and terrible, lies dead, its monstrous form cooling into a massive, steaming corpse on the frigid plains. The adventurers cheer Halite's killing blow, while relief that the surprise encounter is finished flows over them like balm.

Examining the carcass, Gerhard and Scarlet now recognize the beast as a juvenile. "Thank the gods this was but a young one, and let us hope the mother is nowhere near!" Gerhard says.

Scarlet approaches the fallen beast, her naturalist's eye already assessing its unique properties. The halfling notes the thick, iridescent scales, realizing they hold the secret

to fire resistance—thrym, a potent protection against the very element that once animated the creature. But extracting the scales is a perilous task. The remorhaz still radiates latent heat, and its glands, even in death, remain volatile. Undeterred, Scarlet sets to work. With precise, careful movements, she manages to remove three of the prime scales. Yet, in her meticulous effort, her hand slips. She nicks a heat gland, and a searing burst of residual fire erupts, searing her upper arm. She hisses at the pain, but holds fast to her prize.

With the immediate threat neutralized, Whisper's keen eyes scan the surrounding mountains. Her gaze falls upon a promising formation—a deep, winding niche, carved into the sheer stone face. It is high above the snowline, offering a perfect, windless shelter. A natural sanctuary.

The day's grim victory leaves them with a new sense of the land's dangers, but also a formidable prize. They have covered a total of seventy-two miles, their path steadily leading them deeper into the icy heart of Foren, a journey fraught with both peril and potential. Exhausted, the party rests well—with one exception. Kragor is again tormented as he is split apart, one body fitfully turning in his



bedroll, one body captured deep under ice.

THE ORPHAN EGG

The fourth dawn on Foren broke with a deceptive clarity, yet Kragor's scouting mage hand proved insufficient to keep the party from hazards. Halite plunged through treacherous snow, vanishing up to his neck. Half the precious day was spent in a desperate excavation, clawing him free from the frozen earth.

Day five dawned under bruised clouds, the wind blustery and disorienting. Whisper, usually a master of navigation, found her keen senses baffled by the featureless expanse. Despite her efforts, their tracks merely circled back upon themselves. True progress felt elusive as the spirit of their journey momentarily lost its way.

The sixth day echoed the fifth, grim and gray. But Elara, a spark of celestial defiance against the encroaching despair, refused to yield. Her hand drum thrummed with a vibrant, defiant rhythm, weaving a spirited marching song into the biting air. An uncanny alchemy occurred; their steps, once leaden, found new purpose, each synchronized movement a part of an impossible, fluid dance across the snow.

Day seven brought an urgent clarity. Doctor Pepe, moving like a phantom, scouted ahead, discerning the most efficient path. Soon, a bright orange ribbon snaked across the landscape—a river of molten lava, the River Inferno, a fiery serpent across the snowy landscape.

As twilight fell, a griffin descended, its sharp beak pecking desperately at a wounded wing. Scarlet, attuned to nature, felt its pain. She used her druidic magic to communicate with the griffin, and learned of the arrow behind the wounded wing. With practiced hands, she removed the projectile and healed the magnificent beast. The griffin offered her a ride in gratitude, and warned her of towering giants to the far north. For the next few days, Scarlet ascended with the friendly mount, scouting

from above.

The eighth day was a blur of wind and snow, visibility drastically reduced. Yet, with the griffin as their tireless guide, the party maintained their impressive pace. Before long, the party had covered one hundred and fifty-six miles across Foren.

The ninth day since departing Syrinlya dawns under a bruised, leaden sky. The wind, a constant, sneering companion, claws at their faces, driving needle-fine ice into any exposed skin. Visibility shrinks to a mere dozen feet, the world a suffocating shroud of white where earth and sky blend into an indistinct, endless canvas.

As the gray light begins to wane, the griffin circles once more overhead. It descends with a graceful, unhurried landing beside Scarlet, its keen eyes meeting hers with an ancient understanding. The bond formed between them, forged in gratitude, finds its natural end. The magnificent creature has fulfilled its obligation, the debt of its healing paid in full. With a final, majestic spread of its wings, the griffin launches itself skyward, a silent, feathered arrow against the bleak, fading light. The party watches it go, a collective sigh of farewell breathed into the biting wind. The vast, empty sky reclaims its magnificent child, leaving the adventurers alone once more with the silence and the cold.

The grim ritual of making camp begins. Movements, practiced and efficient, cut through the fading light. Each adventurer scans the unforgiving landscape, their vigilant gaze sweeping for subtle shifts. Halite's gaze, however, snags on... something. Beyond the relentless swirling snow, a faint, almost otherworldly glimmer catches his eye.

He strides forward, his heavy boots biting into the packed snow. And then he sees it: a massive egg. It stands almost three feet tall, a perfect, gleaming sentinel. A stark monument against the endless white. Its surface, purest white alabaster, impossibly smooth, radiates a subtle cold. A cold that mocks the very air

around it.

"What in the frozen hells do you have there, Halite?" Kragor's voice rumbles.

"An egg," Halite replies. "And I have a truly abysmal feeling about it. I think we should leave it to whatever unholy parent spawned it." Halite's appetite for unpleasant surprises remains thoroughly sated after the remorhaz incident and his subsequent near-burial in the snow pit.

Kragor, whose curiosity is less a trait than a chronic, terminal affliction, lumbers forward. His heavy war hammer lies carelessly abandoned in the snow. He circles the egg, extends a massive hand, poised to prod its impossibly smooth surface. He inhales deeply, apparently attempting to glean its cosmic secrets by means most olfactory. A low grunt escapes his lips.

Then, driven by an impulse born less of instinct and more of outright, unmitigated madness, Kragor licks the unyielding surface of the colossal shell.

A sharp, wet gasp rips from his throat. His tongue, a splash of pink-red against the pristine white, instantly adheres to the frozen shell. A searing pain, like a thousand needles of ice, blossoms across his mouth. He yelps, struggles, a pathetic dance of desperation, to pull free. But the cold binds him, unrelenting. A quick, brutal yank, and his tongue detaches with a sickening, wet tear. Frigid pain lances through him, a stark, undeniable reminder of Foren's unforgiving, utterly unsympathetic nature.

"Fool," Whisper hisses, her tail twitching with a barely concealed, exasperated amusement.

Scarlet, her druidic senses a finely-tuned instrument of dread, approaches cautiously. Her eyes, wide as craters, fixate on the pristine shell. An unmistakable aura pulsates from it.

"A white dragon egg," she breathes, the words a hushed blend of awe and horror. "And it's... distressingly far along. Close to hatching." She

estimates its gestation, a mere matter of weeks before the scaled terror rips its way into this desolate world.

Kragor, still massaging the raw, violated ruin of his tongue, stares at the colossal object of his self-mutilation. *Is this what has been calling me here? Causing my entombed dreams?* His glowing eyes soften. A rare vulnerability crosses his harsh features. "It's an orphan," he mutters, the words heavy with a strange, almost personal resonance. "Like me. An unwanted, misunderstood bastard left to face the world alone."

A decision, swift and unyielding as a glacier, hardens in his gaze. He reaches out, not to repeat his oral folly, but to *embrace* the chilling alabaster. "I shall take it," he declares, his voice a decree from some forgotten, frozen god. He begins to scrape away the snow around the massive egg, preparing to shoulder its hefty weight.

A ripple of unease washes over the rest of the party. Halite's brow furrows, a canvas of quiet exasperation. Doctor Pepe eyes the egg with a professional curiosity that warps quickly into naked apprehension; his hand instinctively seeks the comforting, lethal weight of his concealed dagger. Elara's celestial glow, usually a beacon, seems to dim a shade, a hint of genuine concern clouding her normally bright demeanor.

A white dragon, even a mewling hatchling, is a creature of chaotic danger and volatile unpredictability. To willingly invite such a volatile force into their already desperate, life-threatening quest... it's a special kind of madness.

But Kragor, his mind set with the immovable stubbornness of a frozen mountain, is beyond dissuasion. He lifts the egg, its chilling weight a grim, impossible promise of the unknown. The others exchange wary, resigned glances. Their journey, already fraught with ancient horrors and elemental dangers, has just gained a new, undeniably chilling companion.

WHERE IS LUCIEN?

The tenth day on Foren dawns with brutal clarity, sun stripping away the shroud of perpetual fog. Sparky, ever watchful, soars high above, a silent sentinel against the endless white. As the day wanes, Doctor Pepe's keen eyes snag on a lone figure, a dark mote against the horizon, walking with unnerving precision toward the river of molten earth.

Most of the party melts into the snow, seeking to avoid contact, but Doctor Pepe, drawn by a rogue's instinct, creeps closer for a better look. Within a hundred feet, the figure veers, its sightless gaze fixed on them. Kragor, sensing potential danger, fingers his war hammer and mutters "*Mactē virtutē*". A shield of ice crackles around his body.

The creature halts, not twenty feet from Scarlet. "Where is Lucien?" it rasps, voice like grinding stone. Kragor and Elara close in, a bardic melody empowering Scarlet as she lies, pointing eastward. "Balenpost," she offers, a fabricated beacon of hope. The thing turns, a singular purpose driving it, and strides away, leaving only silence and the chilling echo of its question.

"What in the name of the six approved gods was that?" queries a stunned Gerhard.

Scarlet shrugs. "Undead. A one-track mind. I'm hoping the thing incinerates itself attempting to cross the River Inferno." And indeed, the figure of decaying and emaciated flesh marches in a straight line towards Balenpost, and thus towards the river of lava.

With a collective shrug, the party continues until they find a suitable location to set up camp. Having now crossed two hundred four miles into the island, they know they will soon find Salsvault.

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, 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.

ENTER SALSVault

HE AFTERMATH OF THEIR BRIEF, violent clash with the ice mephits leaves a profound and unsettling silence. The wind, for a moment, seems to die, and in the sudden quiet, the adventurers' own ragged breaths sound unnaturally loud against the vast, indifferent canvas of the snowfield.

Before them, half-swallowed by an ancient snowdrift, slumps the Aeorian edifice Orvo had called Salsvault. Its architecture is a disquieting blend of smooth, impossible curves and sharp, crystalline angles. The structure groans, a low, protracted sound of immense pressure, as it continues its inexorable descent into the frozen earth—a tomb sinking into its own grave.

While most of the party is taking in the structure, Halite is scanning the other direction. “What is *that!*?” he exclaims, noticing a steam plume hanging low on a nearby mountain side. “Not another remorhaz I hope!”

Whisper’s curiosity piqued, she suggests, “This seems ... different. What say we scout it out?”

Scarlet puts on a concerned look. “The clock is ticking for those poor tiefling lasses. I feel there’s no time to waste.”

Halite says thoughtfully, “But the possibility of danger at our backs cannot be ignored.”

Whisper’s tail lashes the air once, twice. “Halite and I will find out whether the source of this... fog presents any threat. The rest of you continue our search for the cure, and we will catch up.” She bounces lightly on the balls of her feet.

Scarlet looks to the others. Gerhard shrugs, “He’s big. She’s quick. They’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

Halite and Whisper head for the base of the

mountain side, snowshoes crunching a solemn rhythm. Meanwhile the remainder of the group trudge forward towards Salsvault, their eyes fixed on the one feature that suggests entry: a single, unadorned door, its surface a dark, unidentifiable metal.

ON THE THRESHOLD

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

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

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

Moments stretch into a tense eternity. The vault groans again, a louder, more final sound. With a curse muttered under his breath, Gerhard steps forward and raps his knuckles against the strange metal. The sound is dull, swallowed by the immense cold. There is no answer.

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

“It looks like it is frozen shut,” observes Scarlet, her druid’s eye catching the tell-tale shimmer

of thick, ancient ice that has welded the door to its frame, sealing it as effectively as any lock.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FACE THE GUARDIANS

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

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

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

The party needed no further urging. Gerhard was through the door in two long strides, Elara a pale shadow at his heels. The ranger raised his longbow and spoke, "*Mors certa*." For a heartbeat, a ring of ghostly blue light flared

around the armored figure before vanishing. The bowstring sang. An arrow, fletched in stark white, slammed into the construct's chest with a sound like a hammer striking an anvil. The figure jerked, a minute, mechanical tremor, but its forward momentum was unbroken. As it tore through the grasping vines with implacable strength, Gerhard saw another, identical automaton step through the southern door behind it. "He's got a friend," he chuckled without real mirth.

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

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

"Pick on someone your own size," Kragor spat from the doorway, his own eyes burning with a protective rage. "*Te execro!*" A smoky aura of dark green malice enveloped the armored figure. He stormed forward, his conjured war hammer held high. The obsidian weapon came down, a blur of motion and vengeful fury. It struck the construct's shoulder with a deafening clang. A plate of verdigris-stained metal sheared away, spinning across the floor. Kragor peered

into the gap his blow had created and saw... nothing. Empty air. A hollow shell given a semblance of life. He growled, a low, guttural warning to the others. "Empty! These are magical constructs!"

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

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

"This one's mine," Kragor grunted. Gerhard needed no encouragement. His bow sang again, and his arrow found a another chink in the automaton's armor. Kragor followed with a final, crushing blow from his war hammer. There was a screech of tearing metal, a final shudder, and the first sentinel collapsed into a heap of inert, enchanted scrap.

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

The Scarlet-boar charged. A blur of bristling fur and righteous fury, it drove its tusks deep into the construct's groin—if such a thing could be said to have one. Metal crumpled

and tore away, again revealing nothing but the cold, empty air within. In trade, the armor pounded its fist down onto the boar's back. The beast squealed, a sound of both pain and rage, staggering under the weight of the blow. A deep gash opened on its flank, and its bristly hide was suddenly slick with blood.

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

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

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

It was then that the final barrage began, a desperate duet of arcane might. Kragor unleashed a blast of eldritch energy, a bolt of purple force and necrotic shadow that slammed into the automaton, causing it to stagger. Elara answered, her hand outstretched as a wisp of pure starlight, radiant and searing, struck the construct's head. With a final, guttural cry, Kragor unleashes one final, decisive blast. The beam of raw magic, a searing fuchsia, strikes the hollow guardian

dead center. It shudders violently, then explodes outward. Pieces of enchanted armor—greaves, gauntlets, and a dented helm—are spread in a wide, silent circle across the floor of the south room, immobile at last.

A CAUTIOUS EXPLORATION

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

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

"I, um, I found this in Pelc's Curiosities after the rest of you left," he admits, a touch of sheepishness in his voice. "I paid old man Westeroff to have a look at it. It's a Ring of Comprehension... I think it'll let me read these words." He rubs the ring, and a faint shimmer passes over his eyes. He traces his fingers across the alien writing on the wall. "It's some form of draconic. It says..." He clears his throat, his voice taking on a formal, almost recorded tone. "Welcome to Salsvault. Visitors, please wait for an escort. Do not touch anything without permission."

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

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

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

Searching the room to the south, from which the animated armors came, Doctor Pepe finds two stone chests, both already opened and

empty. He reflects on Orvo's story. "These must be the chests that Urgon and Orvo looted," he muses aloud. "Where they found the vials of Frigid Woe."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

returns to the party.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kragor's eyes gleam. "I have an idea."

With everyone retreating to the relative safety of the entryway, Kragor pulls the north door nearly shut, leaving only a crack. He intones, "*Veni et iuva me.*" A spectral, translucent hand appears before him. It drifts silently through the gap in the door, glides across the lab to the lever, and pulls it down.

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

"Well, that didn't work," he groused disappointedly. "Doctor Pepe, why don't you have a look at those chests?"

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

"What does this say?" she asks.

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

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

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

"The cure is supposed to be in gold vials," Kragor reminds them. "I doubt they'd store a cure in a room labeled 'Disease Storage' and rigged to an incinerator. That's where you put the problem, not the solution."

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

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

With the door now open, Scarlet peeks into

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

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

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

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

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

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

As they debate, Scarlet's attention drifts. Her eyes, accustomed to seeing the subtle patterns of nature, trace the clean, artificial lines of the east wall. It is too perfect. Too uniform. Her fingers brush against the cold stone, seeking a flaw, an imperfection. *A-ha!* A line so faint it is almost invisible, a seam that does not quite match the others.

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

"This one might be trapped, too," says Scarlet. Doctor Pepe already has his tools in hand. He studies the seams, the mechanism, running his fingers along the edges. "I can't discern

any danger.” With a shared, tense breath, he pushes the secret door fully open and peeks into the hallway.

“Whoops,” he croaks, his body freezing in the doorway.

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

THE SUNKEN HALL

THE SECRET DOOR, NOW OPEN, reveals a narrow, stone-lined corridor stretching into darkness. From that darkness, they shamble—two figures in robes the color of dried blood, their movements a slow, palsied parody of a walk. Their skin is ancient leather stretched over bone, their eyes hollow pits of shadow.

“Well,” Doctor Pepe mutters, his voice tight, “At least they’re slow.” A little louder, he alerts the rest of the party: “We’ve got zombies!”

Elara relays this in a sing-song voice to pass on the message: “Zombie! Zombie! Zombie-ie-ie!”

Kragor, a green-gray juggernaut of righteous fury, needs no encouragement. He barrels past Doctor Pepe into the hallway, his boots thudding on the strange, seamless stone. He sees not two, but four of the desiccated things lurching toward him. *“Mactē virtutē,”* he snarls, and a shimmering shell of magical frost crackles into existence around him. His war hammer swings, a blur of obsidian that connects with the first zombie’s shoulder. There is a flash of radiance, a dry snap, and the creature’s arm slumps, hanging limply from decayed sinew. “Gross!” Kragor barks.

Scarlet raises her staff, ready to unleash the fury of the earth should the dead things get any closer. Doctor Pepe snaps a bolt into his crossbow. He fires. The bolt screams past Kragor’s ear and ricochets off the ceiling with a sharp *“ping”*. The rogue melts back into the relative safety of the lab.

The first zombie, one arm useless, swings its good one in a clumsy arc that Kragor easily sidesteps. The second lurches forward, its own wild blow glancing harmlessly off the orc’s armor.

Gerhard steps up to the doorway, his bow already drawn. *“Mors certa!”* he cries, and the arcane mark flares on the second zombie.

The arrow strikes true, punching through the creature’s chest. The thing stumbles but does not fall.

It is Elara’s arrow that finishes it. Her shot is clean, precise, and the second zombie collapses into a heap of robes, bones, and rotted flesh. Kragor, seeing his chance, chants *“Te exsecro”* as his eyes glow with a sickly green light. Suddenly, chartreuse arcs of light dance like smoke around the first zombie. Another swing of his war hammer, and the creature’s head separates from its shoulders, its unlife violently extinguished in an incandescent explosion.

And then, in the eerie silence, the fallen corpse of the zombie brought down by Gerhard’s and Elara’s arrows begins to stir. Bone knits to bone, and it rises again.

THE MOUNTAIN’S BREATH

Miles away, Halite and Whisper approach the source of the steam plume. It billows from a ten-foot gap in the mountainside, a constant, ghostly exhalation.

“The mountain’s breathing,” Halite rumbles, his voice low with awe.

Whisper’s tail gives a single, decisive flick. “Let’s see if it has anything interesting to say.”

The air near the opening is surprisingly warm, a welcome respite from Foren’s bite, but the thick, rolling vapor forms an impenetrable wall.

“Can’t see a damn thing,” Halite states, peering into the white abyss. “But it’s warm. Too warm.”

“Better than freezing,” Whisper counters, already uncoiling a rope from her pack. “Give me your javelin.” It isn’t a question.

Halite grunts his approval. “Right. Sound thinking.”

Whisper ties the rope fast, and returns it to Halite. With a grunt, he hurls the weapon into the mist. It clatters on stone maybe thirty feet in. As he begins reeling it back, he feels a new resistance pull at the line. The javelin emerges coated in warm water that freezes almost instantly into a sheath of cloudy ice.

"Hot spring?" Halite queries, chipping the ice away with a gauntleted thumb.

"Or a bath for something very large and very angry," Whisper muses, her eyes gleaming.
"Tying in. You first, or me?"

Before he can answer, she secures the rope around her waist and his, then creeps forward. After a few paces, her next step finds no purchase. She lurches, her paw plunging into water before she catches herself with a soft hiss. The water is warm, smelling faintly of sulfur.

"Definitely a spring," she calls back, her voice slightly muffled. "And I'm not getting my gear soaked. Going in." She quickly sheds her equipment, her natural inclination for warmth overriding any caution. The water is chest-deep, and as she steps in, the accumulated stress of their long journey begins to melt from her bones. A gentle current pulls from her left. She wades against it until her hands meet the far stone wall of the large pool. The steam is thinner here, and she sees a narrow, furiously hot stream feeding the pool from an opening in the rock.

She climbs out onto a dry ledge just as Halite wades through to join her, the water only reaching his waist. For a moment, they are eye to eye, the goliath in the pool and the tabaxi on the ledge, surrounded by the mountain's warmth.

"Alright, you've had your spa day," Halite says, a hint of a smile in his voice. "What's next?"

Whisper points a single, sharp claw toward a bright orange glow visible from the passage upstream.

"That," she says. "That's next."

They follow the steaming, three-foot-wide

stream into a vast cavern. A couple of walls here are not natural stone, but perfectly flat, polished marble. And in the center of the cavern, floating in absolute silence, is a massive, misty-blue, nearly transparent sphere.

Within the sphere floats a cage of shimmering electrum, its form a perfect, intricate dodecahedron. And inside the cage, suspended in absolute stillness, stands a giant figure made of flame. Its fiery tendrils are frozen, a silent, eternal inferno.

"What in the Ashkeeper's crumbling peak is that?" Halite breathes, the words a cloud in the humid air.

"It's a dodecahedron," Whisper observes, her voice a low purr of intense focus. "And inside... a genie? An elemental? Whatever it is, it's not moving." Her tail twitches with a mixture of curiosity and caution.

They jump the narrow, steaming stream to get a closer look. Against a polished wall surface stands a strange table that seems to grow directly from the wall itself.

"This wall... it's impossibly smooth. Unclimbable!" Whisper complains, running her claws over the seamless marble. They find no purchase.

"But what craftsmanship," Halite murmurs, running a gauntleted hand over the table. "No seams, no tool marks. It's like it was sliced from the mountain with a vorpal sword."

On the table, a small light glows a steady azure at one end, while a simple lever rests at the other. Strange, flowing script is carved into the marble before each. Neither Halite nor Whisper can make sense of it.

Whisper's unquenchable curiosity wins. With a confident movement of her wrist, she pulls the lever.

"Are you sure that's a good idea!?" Halite bellows, startled.

The azure light on the table blinks off. Then it blinks red once, twice, then winks out. The

azure light returns, glowing steadily once more. Nothing else seems to happen. The caged flame remains perfectly still.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," Whisper says with a shrug, and pulls the lever again. Again, the light switches from azure to two red blinks, then back.

Halite grimaces at her. "You and your levers." He crouches down, running his hands over the strange table, looking for any other clues. Underneath, his fingers brush against a small, corked bottle. He pulls it out. A golden metal filigree, adorned with strange writing, wraps around a glass core. Within the bottle, something blue and iridescent swirls like a captured galaxy.

"Ooh, shiny," Whisper coos, leaning over his shoulder.

"And probably cursed," Halite grunts, stashing it securely in his backpack. "It stays there until we find someone who doesn't poke at things for fun."

He turns back to study the motionless figure of flame. The longer he stares at its massive, frozen form, the smaller and more insignificant he feels. He notices then that the sphere seems to be set directly against the marble wall, and the hot stream originates from that exact spot.

He moves to investigate more closely, his boot slipping on the damp floor. He trips, throwing out a hand to steady himself. His palm slaps against the blue sphere. It doesn't yield. It feels more solid than the mountain itself.

Now that he is closer, he sees the detail he couldn't make out from across the room. On this side, near the floor, the electrum cage is warped, a few of its bars bent outward. Through that gap, the fiery figure's back heel protrudes, just barely breaking the surface of the sphere. There, and only there, the flames are active, licking and dancing as they meet the constant flow of snowmelt from a fissure in the rock, creating the intensely hot stream of water that warms the entire cavern.

"Whisper," Halite says, his voice low. "Get over here. You need to see this." He points. "The whole hot spring... it's just runoff from a prisoner's leaky cell."

They explore the rest of the vast cavern, but find nothing further of note. The silent, flaming giant in its blue prison remains the sole, baffling mystery.

"Think we could break it out?" Whisper asks, tapping a claw against the unyielding blue sphere. The sound is a dull, dead thud.

"And unleash *that*?" Halite rumbles, gesturing to the silent inferno. "I'd rather not be the one to thaw out whatever it is. It was put in here for a reason."

"But what reason?" she muses, her tail lashing with thought. "A power source? A guardian? An eternal punishment?" She trots back to the console. "Maybe if I try the lever just one more time..."

"Don't you dare," Halite warns, his voice flat. "We have no idea what this is. For all we know, that thing is counting the red flashes and waiting for the right number to break free and turn us into cinders."

Whisper sighs theatrically. "You're no fun." She makes one last circuit of the room, running her claws fruitlessly against the seamless marble walls, while Halite gives the sphere a wide berth. His gaze fixes on the frozen, fiery giant. The sheer scale of it is humbling.

Having exhausted their curiosity for the moment, their thoughts turn back to the rest of their party and their quest.

"Alright," Halite says, turning his back on the prisoner. "We've seen the mountain's furnace. There's nothing more for us here. Let's go find the others. Knowing Kragor, he's probably charged headfirst into a wall by now."

Whisper casts one last, longing look at the sphere. "Fine. But we're coming back here."

They wade back through the warm pool, the shock of Foren's cold air hitting them like a

physical blow as they emerge from the steam. Shivering, they return the way they came, their snowshoes crunching in the snow as they head back toward Salsvault.

THE UNENDING TIDE

Back inside, Scarlet recites "*Ignis vagus*" and her hand flashes. A mote of fire leaps from her palm and engulfs the re-risen zombie, which collapses once more into a smoldering pile. Doctor Pepe, peeking from his hiding place, targets one of the remaining zombies, but his crossbow misfires. "Raven Queen's beak!" he spits.

A third zombie reaches Kragor. It brings both fists down on the orc, who shrugs it off with fiendish vigor. The magical frost of his armor lashes out, and the creature recoils, its own fists pierced by ice. The fourth closes in, but its attack is clumsy, glancing off Kragor's armor.

"There are more of them!" Gerhard yells, peering down the long hall and spotting a fifth and a sixth walking corpse. He marks the fourth zombie and sends an arrow into its neck, leaving a terrible wound.

At that moment, Halite and Whisper arrive at the entrance to Salsvault. Hearing the sounds of battle, Halite unslings his trident and enters without a word. Whisper is a blur of motion behind him. She streaks past the party, into the hallway, a creature of pure, fluid speed. She leaps onto the fourth zombie, grappling it. In a flash, her claws rend the restrained corpse. It falls, then immediately begins to knit itself back together. A second slash from her claws tears it apart again, and this time, it stays down.

Elara's voice rings out, "*Sidereus lumen!*", and a mote of starlight flies from her hand, striking the third zombie. It shudders. Kragor follows with a final, crunching blow from his hammer. A blazing corona of light erupts from the hammer to consume the third zombie's head. It does not get back up; it simply ceases to be.

Scarlet hurls another flame down the hall, striking a fifth zombie that has just shambled into view. Doctor Pepe, giving up on his crossbow, rushes forward, dagger and shortsword in hand. He fumbles his first strike but connects with his second. Halite, now in the hallway, takes aim and throws his trident. It passes clean through the zombie, pinning it to the floor. It, too, falls apart.

The sixth and final zombie lumbers forward, swinging at Doctor Pepe, who skillfully evades the blow.

Gerhard marks it, but his arrow zips past the ears of both rogue and zombie. As Whisper moves to engage, her foot tangles in Gerhard's discarded, broken bowstring. She trips, falling prone with a curse. She rights herself in an instant, lashing out with her claws. Two quick strikes leave the final zombie reeling.

Elara ends it. Another wisp of starlight, another flash of radiant energy, and the last of the undead guardians is utterly destroyed.

Silence, thick and heavy, falls over the corridor. Doctor Pepe and Halite creep to the end of the hall, peering around the corner. More doors. More of Salsvault's sterile, silent mystery.

As the others catch their breath, Kragor inspects one of the fallen zombie's robes. "Strange," he says, rubbing the material between his fingers. "It's like plant fiber, but... not. And it's not rotted at all. For being nine hundred years old, it's in perfect shape."

"Waste not," Whisper says, already pulling one of the robes over her own clothes. Kragor and Gerhard follow suit, the strange, ancient garments settling over their armor.

AN UNEXPECTED SANCTUARY

The reunited party gathers in the entryway.

"You missed a hell of a thing," Halite says, his voice low with awe. He and Whisper describe the cavern, the marble walls, the massive blue

sphere, and the flame prisoner. Halite then produces the bottle. “And we found this under the strange table.”

Doctor Pepe takes it, turning it over in his hands. “I can’t read this... it’s Draconic, like the script on the walls, but ... it’s not *words*.” He pauses for a moment, recalling a memory. “But I remember an old wizard telling me that Draconic is a common language for spell scrolls.”

“Perhaps the writing itself is part of the enchantment,” Elara suggests.

“Whatever it is,” Scarlet says, looking from one exhausted face to another, “that warm cavern you found sounds like the perfect place to rest. We’re no good to anyone if we collapse in here.”

The party quickly reaches a consensus. They leave Salsvault the way they came, strap their snowshoes back on, and trudge across the snow and up the mountainside to the cavern’s steamy entrance. Kragor carefully unstraps the massive dragon egg from his back, leaving it just outside. “Don’t want the little one to cook,” he mutters.

Inside, the warmth is a welcome shock. The air is humid, filled with the gentle sound of the stream. They settle near the great blue sphere, its silent presence both unnerving and strangely calming.

Scarlet frowns. “The elemental planes are places of pure creation. Sometimes, when a piece of one bleeds into our world, it brings its nature with it. That creature in the sphere... it’s a fire elemental. A powerful one, to heat this much water.”

Doctor Pepe examines the small console table near the sphere. He runs a finger under the script. “Here,” he says. “Next to the lever, it says *Power Interrupt*. And this script, by the light? *Energy Regnum Only*.”

“A trap... or a prison,” Halite rumbles, staring at the still, flaming figure within the cage, within the sphere. “And we’re sleeping in the

warden’s office.”

As Kragor lies down on the smooth marble floor, he feels it—a low, rhythmic humming vibrating up through the stone. “Anyone else feel that?”

Watches are set. Halite takes the first, Scarlet the second. The humming continues, a deep, resonant pulse beneath them, but nothing disturbs their rest. For the first time in what feels like an eternity, they sleep soundly, warmed by the impossible heat of a caged, primordial fire. Morning finds them rested, healed, and ready to face the sunken secrets of Salsvault once more.



THE SUNKEN HALL

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*.”

THE DROWNED ROGUE

HE DEAD MAN'S FINAL words hang in the air like frost: *The gods must pay for Aeor's destruction.* It is a sentiment so vast, so blasphemous, it almost eclipses the immediate squalor of Ferol Sal's vault—a place of grand, genocidal ambitions and petty, homicidal housewares. Exhausted, bloodied, and with nerves frayed to raw threads, the party retreats to the impossible warmth of the elemental's cavern. There, the low hum of the caged giant becomes a welcome lullaby as they finally take their rest, a pocket of life carved out of a world of ice and death.

When they return, the ruin seems to have sunk even further, as if weary of its own long vigil. The silence within is deeper, more expectant. They have scoured much of this place, but the cure remains a ghost. Three doors remain in the long, zombie-stained corridor.

"Right then," Halite says, his voice a low rumble that barely disturbs the quiet.
"Nothing to do but keep looking."

They return to the kitchen, the scene of their recent, chaotic ballet with cutlery. Now that all is calm again, they notice a door opposite the magic oven.

"I'll take this one," Doctor Pepe says, his voice betraying a confidence he might not entirely feel. He gestures for quiet, for space.
"Stealthily, this time."

"Just try not to get eaten by the furniture," Gerhard mutters from the back.

Doctor Pepe ignores him, pressing his ear to the cold stone door. He runs his gloved fingers along the seams, feeling for the slightest incongruity that might betray a wire or a pressure plate. He examines the floor beneath, the hinges, the handle itself, his touch feather-light. He is all focus, a surgeon of secrets.

And then Whisper, shifting her weight, knocks her water-skin against her quarterstaff with

a dull *bop* that echoes like a drumbeat in the tomb's silence.

"Gods take you, cat!" Kragor hisses. "Why is it always the stealthy one who stubs her toe?"

"I am a natural soloist," Whisper retorts, unruffled. "Bringing all of you along is the problem."

Doctor Pepe flinches at the noise but continues his work. He gives a soft grunt of satisfaction. "Not trapped. And it's not locked." He steps back, glances at the others, and pulls.

The door swings open on a dining hall, choked with the dust of ages. Piles of rubble litter the floor. And sitting at the remains of shattered tables are six figures in familiar red robes, their heads bowed as if in prayer. For a silent, hopeful second, they are just bodies. Then, as one, they lift their heads, and the dead, milky eyes of zombies fix upon the living.

"Oh, for the love of..." Kragor groans.

The room erupts in a storm of decaying fists and groans. Elara doesn't hesitate, rushing past Halite into the doorway. *"Fae ignis!"* she sings, strumming a sharp, dissonant chord on her harp. A wave of violet light washes over the room, bathing three of the shambling figures in an eerie glow, their rot suddenly, sickeningly vivid.

"Light 'em up, I'll knock 'em down!" Gerhard yells. His arrow and a bolt of crackling shadow from Kragor converge on the nearest glowing corpse, blowing it apart in a spray of dust and dried viscera.

Doctor Pepe sees his opening. A flash of dagger, a thrust of shortsword into the zombie, and he's gone, melting back into the relative safety of the kitchen. "That's how you fight like a rogue!" he pants.

His tactics, however, only serve to draw the enemy out. One lurches after him, a clumsy fist grazing his ribs. Another swings at Elara,

who twirls away from the blow. The doorway becomes a choke point of grasping hands and snapping teeth. A heavy fist hits Whisper with sickening force, and the tabaxi grunts, staggering. Halite's shield rings like a funeral bell as he holds the line, his trident punching deep into a fourth attacker.

"Zombie hurt me," Whisper growls, her voice low and dangerous.

Scarlet hurls a gout of flame at Doctor Pepe's pursuer as Whisper, though wounded, slashes at her own attacker before flowing back into the hall. The tide turns. Elara's twin daggers find the heart of the zombie Doctor Pepe had wounded, and it collapses. Gerhard's next arrow fells the one Scarlet scorched. "And stay down!" he shouts.

It becomes a brutal disassembly line. Kragor blasts the creature menacing Halite into greasy chunks. Doctor Pepe leans out and puts a bolt through the eye of Whisper's attacker.

Only one remains. It ignores the others, charging Kragor. Halite's trident rips through its torso, tearing away half its body. Incredibly, it keeps coming, a lurching, one-armed nightmare. While Scarlet's magic knits Whisper's wounds, the monk leaps back in, a flurry of fists and feet. The zombie falls. It gets back up. She pummels it again. It rises once more.

"Stubborn bastard," Elara mutters, nocking an arrow. Her shot finds its mark. The thing falls a final time and is still.

THE SUNKEN LIBRARY

The silence that follows is heavy with the smell of dust and old death. Searching the dining hall, they find nothing of use. They exit through a door into the hallway. Gerhard glances up and down the length of it. "Just two doors left," he observes. Doctor Pepe, with a weary sigh, steps forward once more, towards the nearest door. He waves off any checks for

traps or locks and just opens it.

Beyond is a ruined library. Water ebbs and flows through a large opening in the far wall, turning the floor into a shallow, debris-strewn pool. Rotting parchments and waterlogged tomes float like lily pads. Dim, arcane light glows from sconces on the one remaining wall, casting long, dancing shadows on the water.

"Hear that?" Doctor Pepe whispers. "Running water." He takes a cautious step into the room.

The water does not so much splash as it heaves, exploding upwards. A slick, purpled tentacle, thick as a man's thigh and knobbed with pulsing suckers, whips through the air with a sound like a wet bullwhip. It cracks against the stone just beside Doctor Pepe's head.

"By the Abyss! Big octopus!" Kragor bellows, a sickly chartreuse light already gathering around his hands. "*Te exsecro!*" he snarls, and the shimmering curse sinks into the dark shape moving beneath the water. He points a crooked finger. "*Dolor!*" A bolt of greasy, void-black energy lances into the pool, striking something vast and yielding with a sudden *whump*.

"Maybe it wants to parley?" Scarlet asks, her voice thin with desperate hope.

"It's a little past words, I think!" Gerhard yells back. He nocks an arrow, but it skips harmlessly off the churning water.

The second lash is too fast to follow. It hits the rogue like a battering ram, a wet, meaty slap that cracks against his ribs. The air leaves him in a single, desperate gasp before the coil tightens, lifts him from his feet, and vanishes with him beneath the black water.

"Doctor Pepe!" Halite's voice is a raw-throated bellow of fury. The beast surfaces, a nightmare of bulging mantle and intelligent, malevolent eyes, its great, horny beak snapping at Kragor. The orc clumsily dodges just in time, almost losing his balance.

Whisper is a blur of motion. She darts into the

room, landing a single blow to the creature's mantle before using its own momentum to shove it back into the deeper water. Halite charges past her, hurling a trident that sinks deep into the monster's flank. He draws another and, with a roar of pure rage, throws it as well. It strikes true.

Elara is there beside him, adding her own arrow to the pincushion of shafts now sprouting from the beast.

Suddenly, Gerhard twists the opal on his finger. "Try the floor!" he yells, and then he sprints across the water, his boots pounding the surface with impossible, solid *thuds*.

Scarlet doesn't hesitate. She runs across the top of the water to where she last saw Doctor Pepe. She speaks a word, and the shimmering magic around her feet dies. She plunges into the glacial water, the shock a physical blow. Below, in the green-black gloom, she sees the octopus, its coils wrapped tight around Doctor Pepe's still form. She swims to him, lays her hands upon his chest, and a desperate pulse of healing light flows from her palms.

Doctor Pepe's eyes fly open. He is underwater. He is drowning. He is alive.

His revival enrages the beast. A tentacle whips out, ensnaring Scarlet, holding her fast. Its beak finds Doctor Pepe, biting deep into his shoulder. It begins to pull away, dragging its two captives toward the breach in the wall.

"Oh no you don't!" Whisper is already moving, her feet slapping against the solid-seeming water. She dives, her claws flashing.

Halite is right behind her, a titan running on water. He reaches the beast, raises his last trident, a three-pointed specter against the arcane light. He doesn't throw it. He leaps, driving it down with all his weight and rage behind it. The weapon punches through the creature's mantle with a sickening crunch. The octopus convulses, vomiting a great cloud of black, sulfurous ink, and then it is still. Its tentacles go limp.

They drag themselves and their dead foe to the relative dryness of the library floor, gasping, shivering, and stinking of the abyss.

"Sulfurous," Scarlet chokes out, prodding the corpse. "Definitely can't eat it."

Doctor Pepe drags himself to a wall and slides down it, the fight leeched out of him. A profound weariness, deeper than any simple fatigue, settles into his marrow. His vision tunnels, the world's edges blurring into gray.

ONE LAST GRASP

It is just then that Elara hears a voice in her head, faint and familiar. *Tulgi has passed away.* It is The Buyer.

Her face hardens. She thinks her response, focusing her will. *Our condolences. We are in Salsvault. Seeking the solution.*

She waits, but there is no reply. "A Sending spell just informed me: Tulgi Lutan has succumbed to the Frigid Woe. We're running out of time," she tells the others. No one speaks. The declaration hangs heavily in the air.

After several heartbeats, Gerhard shrugs. "We should continue our search."

As the others search the ruined library, Whisper spots a scroll case bobbing near the far wall. She retrieves it. Inside are two scrolls. "Kragor... what do you make of these?"

"Detect Magic," Kragor announces, looking them over. "I have no need of these... but Elara, Scarlet... you may find them handy. Take one each."

There is one door left in the hall. One last loose end before they can rest. Whisper approaches it, her movements now filled with a weary deliberation. She finds no traps, no lock.

"Right," Halite grunts. "Let's get this over with." He shoves the door open.

Four more zombies in a trashed dormitory.

Whisper sighs. The party moves with the grim

efficiency of butchers on a killing floor. There is no surprise, no fear, only a job to be done. Whisper is a flurry of blows, pushing one back, staggering another. The zombies shamble forward. Most of their punches miss wildly, but one exceptionally agile one weaves through the crowd and strikes Whisper. Seeing this, Elara draws and shoots, but only manages to put an arrow in its calf. Gerhard downs it with a perfectly placed shot through the eye. Halite's trident skewers another. Kragor, moving in with his hammer, smashes a third with a blast of radiant light, ensuring it won't get back up.

The last two fall in a hail of arrows, fists, and steel. The fight is over in seconds. The hallway is finally, truly clear.

They search the dormitory, but it is as fruitless as the dining hall. Overturned cots, ransacked footlockers, the meager possessions of long-dead acolytes scattered like chaff. Gerhard kicks at a splintered chest, spilling moth-eaten woolens and a single, sad-looking sock across the grimy floor.

"More nothing," he announces to the silent room. "Not a copper piece, not a clue, not even a decent water-skin. Just more dead men in robes."

Doctor Pepe leans heavily against the door frame, the unnatural weariness a leaden cloak upon his shoulders. "My bones ache. I'm spent."

"He's right," Halite says, his voice a low rumble. "Scarlet and Whisper are beyond bloodied as well. Ferol Sal's grand design can wait until morning. They need rest."

"The hot spring sounds better than any feather bed right now," Whisper agrees, her tail giving a single, tired flick.

"Agreed," Kragor says, resting his war hammer on his shoulder. "Let's not find out what other surprises this place has for us in this condition."

The decision is unanimous. With one last look down the cleared, silent hall, they turn

their backs on the tomb. Back through the sinking ruin, out into the biting wind, and to the sanctuary of the elemental's cavern. The warmth is a blessing, a stolen moment of peace.

BLIZZARD

That night, Kragor dreams. He is not an orc. He is human, his hands slender, with snaking black veins pulsing just beneath the skin. He is with a tribe of humans and halflings, struggling through a blizzard of impossible force. A god's voice booms in his mind, urging them onward. A block of ice the size of a horse hurtles out of the white chaos, wiping out two of his companions. He sees towering figures in the distance, then another boulder of ice is hurtling toward him—and he wakes with a gasp, the phantom impact still echoing in his bones.

Outside, a real blizzard now howls, reducing visibility to zero.

"We can't just sit here," Elara says, her voice taut with urgency. She is the first one fully awake, staring out at the screaming white void that has replaced the world. "Tulgi is dead. How many more will follow while we wait for the weather to turn?"

Gerhard squints into the maelstrom. "And how many of us will follow Tulgi if we step out into that? You can't see your own hand. We'd be lost and frozen statues in ten minutes."

"The ranger is right," Halite says, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Salsvault has waited for centuries. It can wait one more day. We're no good to anyone as ice cubes."

So they wait. The day bleeds away into a long, howling night, the hours marked only by the shifting of restless sleepers and the elemental's ceaseless, gentle hum.

Morning comes, not with light, but with a profound and muffled silence. The blizzard is gone. In its place, a solid wall of white seals the mouth of their cave.

"Right, then," Halite grunts, grabbing a shield to use as a makeshift shovel. "Kragor, with me."

Halite and Kragor spend the better part of an hour digging a tunnel out into a world blanketed in fresh, deep powder. They carve a path through the drift, a two-man engine of grunting, scraping determination. They break through into a world born anew in white. The sun is a merciless glare, the air colder than ever, a physical presence that bites at any exposed skin.

The trek back to Salsvault is exhausting. Every step is a plunge into thigh-deep snow, a battle against a landscape that wants to swallow them whole. The quick dash of yesterday becomes a two-hour ordeal of high-stepping, panting, and cursing the gods of winter. Finally, they stand again in its silent halls.

"Ready for more surprises?" Gerhard asks, his voice flat. "Let's head south of the entrance."

Doctor Pepe leads the way, looking back over his shoulder at the rest of the party. "That's back through this room where we know Urgon and Orvo found the Frigid Woe, right?" Somewhat distracted, he walks straight into a door with a dull thud. It swings open.

Beyond is a forge. A great, cold anvil and furnace dominate the room, which is otherwise filled with armor stands and rubble.

Whisper notices something strange across from the furnace. "What's this?" she purrs. She crosses the room to examine a pile of debris—out of which protrude two booted feet. As she takes a closer look, they twitch!

She picks up a scrap-iron rod from the litter. She cautiously pokes the boots with it. They twitch again, but no other response.

"Leave that alone!" Gerhard barks. Whisper gives him a sly smile and tosses aside the rod. "Perhaps it is bait... a trap..."

"More like just an unlucky zombie," Kragor answers. "Who knows how many years it has

been stuck under this rubble. In any case, it poses no threat." Gerhard grumbles assent.

Kragor then kneels, his eyes closed, whispering the incantation to see the world of magic. "Nothing in here," he reports. He looks toward the door on the far side of the forge. "But through there... I sense several points of power. Transmutation, Evocation... and that other kind. The kind I can't place."

"Let's not just throw it open this time," Elara suggests. She raises a hand, and a perfect, shimmering illusion of the door appears just before the real one. "Kragor, if you would?"

Kragor looks confused for a moment, then it clicks. "Ah, clever plan." The warlock summons his spectral hand. It drifts through the illusion, then grasps the handle of the real door, and pulls it open.

Whisper peers carefully through Elara's illusory door. She sees a long hallway with four more doors. And from somewhere down that hall, she hears a sound: a heavy and sporadic thumping.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.



FEROL SAL

HE SOUND IS A DEAD, FLESHY thing. Not the sharp crack of a hammer, but a wet, heavy punctuation to the tomb's deep silence. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* It comes from a door down the hall, painted a flaking blood-red, a crude white "X" scrawled across its center.

"Well," Doctor Pepe whispers, "that's not ominous at all." He starts toward it, a moth to a very ugly flame. The rest of the party stays behind in the forge, awaiting Doctor Pepe's signals.

Kragor grunts. "Looks like he has chosen the door with the warning, Gerhard."

The ranger shifts his weight, positioning himself in the forge's doorway. "Aye. You want to maybe get behind him in case something really bad happens? I can hide behind you."

"Let him learn his lesson," Kragor rumbles, not unkindly.

Amused, Gerhard quietly moves into the hallway and takes position, ready to shoot any horror that should come into view.

Doctor Pepe, oblivious, is already at work. He kneels, his tools a silver glint in the arcane light. He listens, probes, and after a moment, gives a confident nod. A *click* echoes down the hall.

The thumping inside pauses. Then resumes, heavier, more frantic.

Doctor Pepe places his hand on the door, intending to crack it just an inch. He rolls his wrist. He fumbles. The door swings wide open with a groan.

The room beyond is a debris-filled mess. A creature, nearly nine feet tall—a grotesque parody of a man sewn from the mismatched parts of others—turns from its work of hammering a table into shards. It looks at the rogue, its dead eyes fixing on him, and charges.

Startled, Pepe scrambles back, trips, and falls over the threshold into the room.

Seeing the blunder from his vantage point in the forge doorway, Kragor roars, "By Kord's broken shield!"

As the flesh golem reaches him, Doctor Pepe expertly regains his footing. He darts and slashes, but the monster hardly notices. He bolts back into the hallway as his companions' arrows and javelins sink into the creature's hide, mere annoyances.

A fist the size of a small boulder comes down. The rogue's ribs give way with a sound like snapping branches. A second blow hammers the air from his lungs, and he collapses, a broken marionette.

"Doctor Pepe!" Elara's cry is a razor's edge. Her arrow slams into the golem's chest, followed by a single, piercing note—"Encore!"—a command to the flesh. The healing light is a violent shock, forcing his heart to thunder, his lungs to gasp.

Scarlet's hand shoots forward, cupping a perfect flame. She throws it. The fire splashes across the golem's face, a liquid, noiseless incandescence. The creature recoils as though doused in acid, its stitched features a mask of primal horror.

Halite, stunned for a half-second, throws a trident. It flies wide. "Blast!" A second follows, striking the golem's leg with enough force to topple it. The behemoth crashes to the floor, prone and flailing.

"Stay down, you stitched-up bastard!" Kragor snarls, marking the beast with a sickly violet hex. He grips his war hammer, and a beam of crackling, star-dusted darkness erupts from its head. Where it hits, flesh bursts and rots.

The party descends on the downed monster. Whisper's claws find a seam and rip it open. Doctor Pepe, groaning to his feet, adds two

more small wounds. Burning radiance and fire rain down, arrows pierce, followed by a final blast of eldritch force. The creature gives one last, shuddering groan and collapses, its stitches bursting, its composite parts slumping into a grotesque, inanimate heap.

Silence falls once more. The party breathes heavily, staring at the carnage. "Well," Kragor says, studying the remains. "That was... educational. He's made of bits of everything."

Doctor Pepe, his face pale, searches the golem's room. "Nothing," he reports, his voice shaky. "Just rubble."

A STORM OF BLADES

"Right," Kragor says, nodding to the door opposite. "You're up again. Try not to fall down this time?"

They take their positions. "Let's try that gambit," Kragor says to Elara.

In a sing-song voice, Elara chants, "*Imago fallax*." A shimmering image of the door appears inches in front of the real one. Kragor's spectral hand drifts through it, grasps the true handle, and pulls.

A longsword, humming with malevolent energy, slices silently through the illusion and bites deep into Whisper's side. A second, third, and fourth follow, a whirlwind of steel erupting from the unseen doorway.

"They can see through it!" Gerhard yells.

A fifth and sixth sword emerge. One finds Whisper's flesh again, and she collapses, unconscious. Another flies down the hall in pursuit of Doctor Pepe and stabs him in the back. He falls, out cold.

"I'm beginning to sense a pattern here," Kragor groans, clutching a new wound in his arm.

The sight of her companions falling drives a cold spike through Scarlet's heart. She gathers dust and arcane light, spinning them into a familiar shape. An owl of bone-white and dusk-grey feathers settles on her shoulder, its eyes

twin pools of fey intelligence. Her command is a thought loosed like an arrow: *Go*.

The owl streaks down the hall and lands on Doctor Pepe's chest. A wave of healing energy flows from its talons. The rogue's eyes snap open.

Kragor whispers "*Mactē virtutē*", and a shimmering carapace of supernatural ice blooms over his skin. One of the fae-lit blades swings for his head. It strikes the phantom armor with a sound like a hammer hitting a frozen coffin. A silent explosion of absolute cold erupts, and the sword's animating magic is snuffed out. The enchanted steel screams as it crystallizes, then shatters into a thousand glittering splinters.

Halite's trident catches another sword's flat. With a jarring *thrum*, a violent shiver runs the length of the blade, and its magic breaks. It clatters to the stone, inert. Elara rushes to Whisper's side, a surge of celestial power knitting her wounds.

The tide turns. Gerhard's scimitar flashes, shearing through a faint glyph at a blade's hilt. Doctor Pepe, with a furious, two-handed wrench, breaks the magic of the sword that felled him. Whisper, a storm of grey fur, leaps from the wall, her kicks and slaps sending another blade spinning to the floor.

Only one remains. Before it can choose a victim, Elara's silver-tipped arrow leaves the string. It strikes the pommel, and with a sigh of escaping energy, the sword falls. Its clang echoes in the sudden, profound silence.

THE ECHO OF STEEL

Doctor Pepe approaches the doorway, knowing the shimmering image before him is Elara's phantom. His mind knows this. His body, however, remembers the steel.

He peeks his head through, and the world lurches. A memory of pain, sharp and absolute, seizes him. He doesn't trip so much as crumple, pitching forward through the dissolving illusion. His hands, thrown out to break his fall, land

squarely on the pile of razor-edged, broken swords. The impact tears open ugly wounds. He bites back a scream, his knuckles white as he grips the hilt of a shattered blade.

Elara winces, letting the last of the illusion fade. It reveals their companion kneeling in a pile of broken steel, his head bowed in utter, silent humiliation.

The room beyond is a graveyard of steel. Amidst the ruin, one sliver of integrity endures. Doctor Pepe's eye catches a glint. Buried under rusted spearheads is a longsword, pristine. The blade is the color of a gathering thunderhead, its flat, non-reflective grey seeming to drink the light. Within its substance, faint, silvery veins race like a storm trapped in steel. The hilt is wrapped in pale, petrified lizard-skin.

Kragor, focusing his arcane senses anew, approaches. "You've found a magic sword," he announces. Doctor Pepe grins excitedly.

Exhausted and wounded, they retreat to the golem's room and barricade the door. Sleep is not a luxury; it is a necessity. They set the watch.

Kragor takes the first, war hammer across his knees, senses stretched into the oppressive silence. Halite's watch is a study in brutal stillness, the cramped, foul-smelling hole gnawing at him, every scrape and slither a phantom threat. Doctor Pepe's watch is a torment. He huddles near the door, a porcelain doll cracked and crudely glued, the memory of fists and steel a fresh phantom limb of pain. His confidence is a ruin. Whisper takes the last, a grey shadow among shadows, coiled, a spring of deadly potential.

The arcane light flickers, a new day of sorts arrives. They are not restored, not truly. They are merely... less broken. The gnawing dread recedes, leaving a hollow ache of exhaustion.

Doctor Pepe rises, his gaze falling upon the longsword. "That is a thing for a butcher, not a surgeon," he muses. He looks at his bandaged hands, remembers the fumbling

chaos. That is the longsword's world, a brutal ballet for which he has no training. His own dance is quieter, played with the slim dagger Kragor gave him weeks ago. Acknowledging the truth of his own nature, he hefts the longsword and offers it, hilt-first, to the orc.

"This sings a song I do not know how to dance to," he says.

Kragor's calloused hand closed around the hilt. The weapon felt wrong—too light, too clever. He craved the familiar, honest heft of a war hammer, the straightforward crush of steel on bone. But a cold power hummed within the blade, a bitter advantage he was forced to claim.

He puts down his war hammer, grips the sword's lizard-skin hilt, and shuts his eyes. At his feet, the hammer shimmers and vanishes into greasy black smoke. Darkness snakes from his palm, sinking into the blade like ink into water. The sword pulses once with a faint, violet light, a malevolent heartbeat now in time with his own. The bond is forged.

He opens his eyes, looks at Doctor Pepe. "I know this tune," he rumbles. "It is a dirge."

BRINEY BEHEMOTHS

Two doors remain. Doctor Pepe, moving like a man made of glass, approaches the first. The handle turns with unnerving silence. He eases the door inward. A blast of cold air sighs out, heavy with brine and the rot of the sea bed.

The chamber beyond is breached. Black water pools across the floor. Two iron-bound chests loll in the deeps. Then, motion. A carapace the size of a shield scuttles from the shadows, its claws snapping with a sharp, wet *clack*. Another appears, and a third. From a bed of kelp, a fourth rises, a true behemoth, its stalked eyes fixing on the doorway.

Doctor Pepe has had his fill of being a toy for monsters. Silently, he eases the door shut. He turns to the others to share what he's seen.

"Leave the crabs be," Gerhard advises, his gaze

already on the final door. “We don’t have time for seafood.”

THE WIGHT’S END

Having charted every other passage, their quest now rested on this final, unopened door. Doctor Pepe approaches it as a penitent approaches the block. He is a creature of nerve endings and scar tissue now, his every movement a careful negotiation with pain. His hands, swathed in Elara’s bandages, are clumsy ghosts of their former selves as he kneels. The lock-picking tools are a familiar weight, but the confidence is gone. He probes the keyhole out of sheer, desperate habit, a prayer offered to a god he no longer trusts.

Nothing. No click of a pressure plate. No whisper of a scything blade being set. Nothing.

He presses his ear to the wood. He hears only the frantic drumming of his own heart and the faint, dry rustle of... something. Paper? Bone? He cannot tell. He sets his palm against the cold, pitted iron of the ring-pull, takes a breath, and pulls.

The door swings inward on silent, well-oiled hinges.

A smell washes over him—of dust as old as mountains, of strange, acrid chemicals that sting the back of the throat, and something else... the dry, sweet scent of decay. He peers into the gloom.

Beyond is a laboratory. Tables are crowded with alchemical equipment, bookshelves line the walls, and barrels of strangely bubbling liquids stand in the corners. In the center of the room, a figure in elaborate red robes hunches over a desk, working frantically. It is undead, its skin gray and tight over its skull, its eyes sunken pits, its teeth long, its fingers tipped with claws. Beyond it, two suits of animated armor move about the room, fetching and carrying.

The creature looks up, its skull-face a mask of desiccated irritation. A sound issues from its throat, a dry, whispering rustle like dead leaves

skittering across a tombstone. The sounds mean nothing to Doctor Pepe, a dead noise in a dead place. His mind stalls, then lurches. The ring! His bandaged fingers, clumsy with pain, fumble the silver circlet from his pouch and press it onto his thumb.

The wight makes the sound again, louder this time, impatient. Now, the alien syllables arrive in Pepe’s mind as a cold, clear thought, a voice of ancient arrogance superimposed over the rattling hiss. *Who are you to interrupt me? Why do you trespass in my workshop?*

“We seek a cure for our friends,” Doctor Pepe says, his own voice sounding thin and shockingly alive in this dead air. He speaks the Common tongue, a hopeful, desperate gambit.

The creature’s sunken eyes are pits of black incomprehension. It perceives only vermin within its sterile sanctum. With a deliberate motion, it raises a long, dusky finger, tipped with a nail resembling a shard of obsidian, and stabs it in the air. First it points toward the nearest suit of animated armor, then toward the rogue. The command needs no translation. With a groan of tortured metal, the armor takes a step forward.

The animated armor is a ponderous, grinding thing of iron and malice. But Whisper is a blur of grey fur and coiled fury. Before the construct can complete its second step, she is past it, a living arrow aimed at the hunched figure at the desk. Her movement is a fluid, predatory pounce, a controlled explosion that locks her onto the undead thing. With the leverage of a striking cat, she ensnares the creature, her grip like iron bands around its brittle torso. The thing is shockingly light, a bundle of dry bones and ancient cloth. With a grunt of effort, she heaves, dragging the hissing wight out of its sanctum and into the chaos of the hallway.

She does not release her hold. She begins a rattling cascade of open-hand blows against its ribcage, a staccato of punches that echo like a mallet against dry wood. Her claws are sheathed; this is a pummelling, a desperate

attempt to break the thing before it can properly fight back.

“He’s fast!” Gerhard yells, his spectral brand flaring to life on the wight’s chest. His arrow follows an instant later, a bodkin-tipped prayer that sinks deep into the creature’s shoulder.

Halite roars, a battle-cry swallowed by the narrow hall, and swings his trident in a wide, gleaming arc. The wight, impossibly quick, twists in Whisper’s grasp, and the tines bite only air. Cursing, the goliath surges, a second swing just as fast as the first, and just as fruitless. Frustrated, Halite backpedals, trying to find space to fight. As he moves, the creature’s skeletal hand darts to its belt, drawing a longsword whose blade glows with a sickly green light. It lashes out, a parting gift for the retreating goliath, but Halite’s shield catches the blow with a jarring clang.

The animated armors, their master now embattled, lumber into the hall. They are single-minded, ignoring the melee to follow their last order. The first reaches Doctor Pepe, its iron fist slamming into his side with the force of a battering ram, driving the air from his lungs. Its second swing goes wide. The second suit of armor is more accurate. Two crushing, piston-like blows land square on the rogue’s chest, one after the other. He staggers, his vision swimming in a sea of black stars.

Through the pain, Doctor Pepe sees his opening. He stumbles forward, dagger first, but the thrust is clumsy, deflected by the wight’s flailing robes. His shortsword, however, finds its home, slicing a deep gash across the undead thing’s desiccated thigh.

From the back of the formation, Elara draws. The arrowhead of her nocked shaft glows with a soft, silver light. The string sings. The arrow is a comet of purification, striking the wight just below the clavicle. There is a sound of cracking ancient bone and a hiss as holy energy sears unholly flesh. The creature reels.

Kragor extends a hand, and murmers a single, guttural curse. Strands of a sallow, chartreuse

glow cling to the wight like a shroud. Then he levels the new longsword, channeling his will through the thunder-grey steel. A beam of star-dusted darkness erupts from its tip, striking the creature with otherworldly force.

The wight ignores the arrows, the spells, the blade in its leg. It focuses its ancient hatred on the creature holding it. Its clawed fingers, hard as obsidian, dig into Whisper’s flesh. It is not a cut, but a violation. A sucking cold floods the tabaxi’s body, a chilling void where her life-force used to be. She feels a part of her soul being siphoned away, devoured by the abyss in the creature’s touch. Before she can even scream, its glowing green longsword scythes across her middle. The world dissolves into a final, agonizing slash of pain, and she collapses, a heap of grey fur on the cold stone.

“Whisper!” Scarlet cries, her face a mask of horror. Her hands move, weaving light and dust. The spectral owl, Sparky, coalesces on her shoulder, its feathers the color of dusk and ash, stark against the gloom.

Whisper’s soul clings to a single, fraying thread. On the black precipice of death, she holds.

Gerhard’s face is grim. He draws, looses, and his second arrow lands with even greater force than his first, staggering the wight. Halite, seeing his opening, hurls his trident like a javelin. It soars past the wight’s ear and clatters harmlessly down the hall. “Damn my eyes!” he bellows.

The armors continue their grim work. One slams its fist into Halite’s shield, a blow so powerful it nearly tears the arm from his socket. The second suit swings twice at the goliath, its iron fists glancing off his pauldron and shield with percussive, harmless clangs.

Doctor Pepe, seeing Whisper fall, knows he is next. He fires his crossbow, the bolt striking the wight’s chest, then dives for the cover of a nearby doorway, his heart hammering against his bruised ribs.

Seeing the life drain from the tabaxi, a defiance born of desperation seizes Elara. “Not yet!”

she shouts, her voice a clarion call. Another arrow flies, a shot that finds an impossible, perfect opening, burying itself deep in the wight's throat. It stumbles back, clutching the shaft, its hissing voice growing ragged. Without pausing, Elara sings a single, sharp word of healing. A golden warmth washes over Whisper, knitting sinew and sealing wounds. The tabaxi's eyes snap open. She is whole again, her wounds sealed, yet a deep, abiding chill remains—a hollow space where the wight's touch stole something vital, something the bard's healing cannot replace.

The wight itself is grievously wounded, its unholy vitality guttering like a candle in a gust. It turns its hollow eyes toward Kragor, sensing the source of the dark power that eats at its being. It takes a single, shaky step.

This is the moment. Kragor surges forward, crossing the distance in three pounding strides, a green-skinned avalanche of vengeance. He brings the new longsword up in a two-handed grip. The thunder-grey blade drinks the arcane light, its strange, internal veins of silver seeming to pulse with a cold, hungry light. He remembers his own words. *It is a dirge.* He swings.

The blade does not clang or ring. It sings a low, mournful note as it cuts the air, a chord of finality and ruin. The wight moves to parry, its own blade a blur of sickly green, but the thunder-grey steel is not entirely there, its edge slipping through the space between moments. It meets the wight's neck. The star-dusted darkness that now infests the steel devours the creature's animating magic in a silent, violet flash. The wight's head comes free, tumbling to the stone with a dry clatter. Its body, suddenly just a collection of ancient bones in rotting finery, collapses in on itself, a puppet with its strings cut. Ferol Sal is gone, his ancient evil unmade.

Kragor watches the robed skeleton fall, then shifts his gaze, and the sickly violet aura of his hex leaps from the empty space to cling to the nearest suit of armor.

The fight is not over. Scarlet's owl streaks past the remaining armor, a ghostly distraction that lets the druid land a small glob of flame spattering against its iron helm. Whisper, woozy and disoriented, spins to her feet and lashes out at the armor, but her claws find only air. She snarls, then wisely disengages, melting back down the hall to safety.

"On the metal ones!" Gerhard shouts, his mark shifting to the second suit of armor as his bow sings again, his arrow sparking off its chest plate. Halite, abandoning his thrown weapon to the gloom, rips another trident from the harness on his back and hews at the same target, a solid blow that leaves a deep score in the metal.

The first suit of armor swings at Halite. It is a crushing blow that should have shattered his ribs. But the goliath grits his teeth, his skin momentarily taking on the hardness of granite. The blow lands with a dull thud, its force entirely negated. The second armor misses him twice, its fists hammering the stone wall beside his head.

Doctor Pepe, peeking from his doorway, looses a crossbow bolt that ricochets harmlessly away. Elara is more fortunate; her arrow bites deep into a joint in the second armor's arm.

Kragor steps into the fray, the longsword a blur of grey death. He brings it down on the first armor. The dirge-song of the blade rings out as it smashes into the construct's shoulder. Plates of enchanted iron buckle and split, and the thing staggers, its animating light flickering like a faulty lamp, wounded but not yet dead.

Scarlet's flame goes wide, painting the stone wall with a brief, angry light. Whisper throws a javelin that glances off its shoulder. Gerhard's arrow skips off the armor's helm with a shriek of metal. But Halite, finding his rhythm, drives his trident deep into its chest. There is a grinding crunch, a final shudder, and the construct collapses into a heap of scrap.

The last armor stands alone, turning its helmeted head from Halite to Kragor. It

lumbers toward the orc, its iron fists raised. Its first blow is a ponderous, telegraphed swing that Kragor parries with a jarring clash of steel. As it raises its arms for a second, crushing blow, Elara's arrow sinks into the joint of its knee, making it stumble. Doctor Pepe fires his crossbow. The bolt, a splinter of wood and iron guided by a hand that has forgotten its own sureness, flies not true but wide. It sparks against the corridor wall then is swallowed by the gloom.

It is Kragor who ends it. Another swing of the thunder-grey blade, a final, sorrowful note hanging in the air. The longsword cleaves the armor from shoulder to hip. The construct falls apart, two halves of dead, useless iron that crash to the floor with a deafening, final clang.

Silence rushes in to fill the void, thick and heavy as grave dust. It is broken only by the harsh, ragged gulps of air from lungs that have earned every breath.

Kragor steps over the ruin of the last armor, the dirge-blade in his hand humming with a low, satisfied thrum. He prods the heap of bone and rotting silk that was Ferol Sal with the toe of his boot. He kneels. His scarred green fingers, with a delicacy born of a hundred dissections on the battlefield, probe the brittle, web-like fabric of the wight's robes. He finds them nestled in a secret fold over the skeleton's ribs: two small keys of blackened brass, their shapes ornate and unfamiliar. They are cold as a corpse's kiss in his palm.

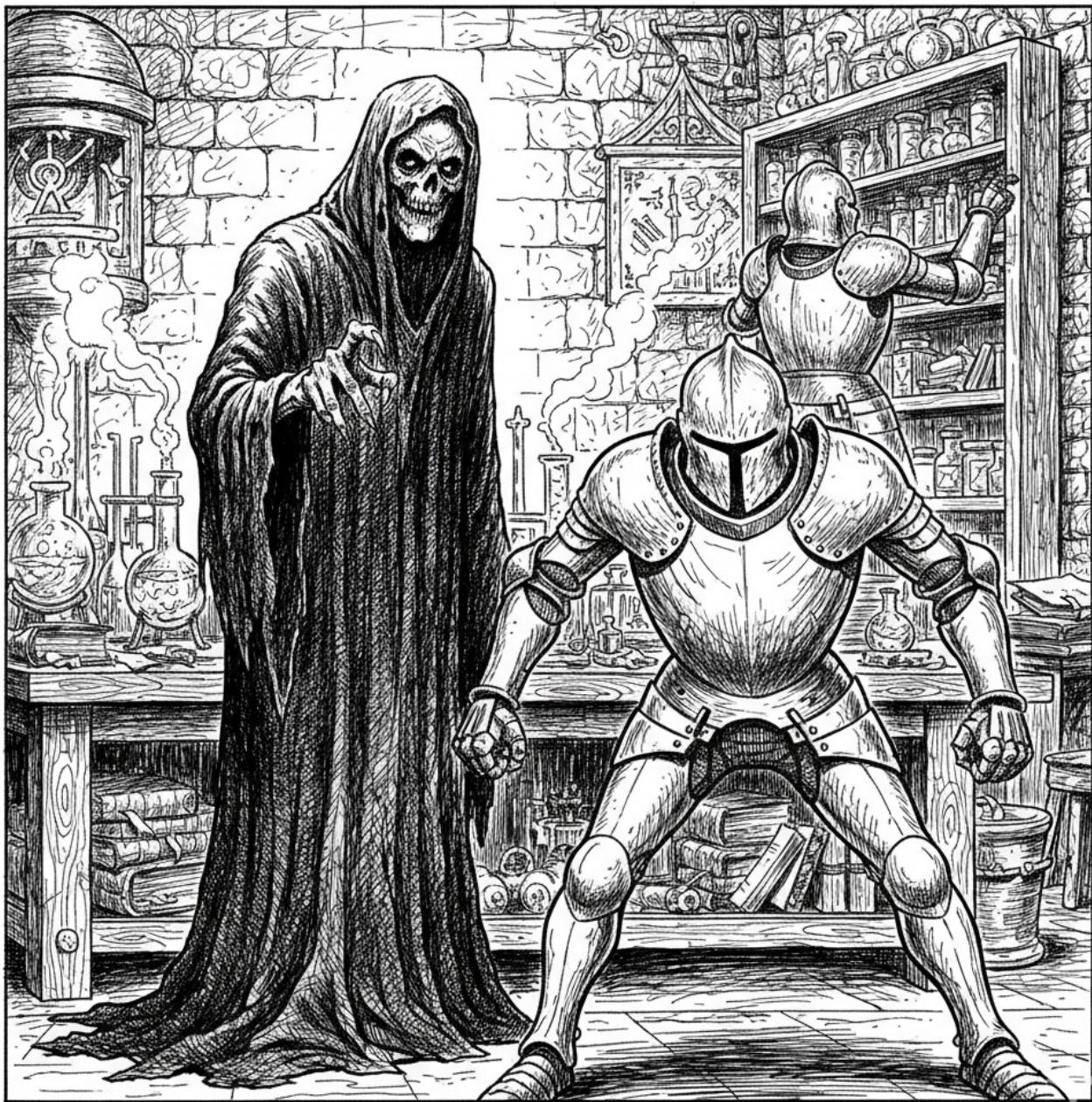
He and Gerhard move deeper into the laboratory, a place of foul stinks and fouler science. Against the walls, barrels bound in verdigris-eaten iron stand sentinel. Their contents bubble with a slow, greasy *plop...* *plop...*, releasing a sharp, vinegary reek that stings the throat and waters the eyes. What dormant plagues or transformative poisons simmer in that viscous broth, they do not care to learn.

The workbenches are a tangled nest of glass piping, copper coils, and simmering retorts. Within the glass, liquids of bilious yellow and

bruised purple drip and steam. This is the wight's kitchen, the very crucible where the Frigid Woe was cooked. To jostle a table, to crack a single vial, would be to invite a death more horrifying than any blade. They move with the predatory stillness of cats stalking through a room of sleeping cobras. They manage to liberate a fine set of alchemist's tools from one tray, their fingers trembling. A second, simpler set they find on a high shelf, gathering dust, and claim that as well.

But the search is otherwise a hollow one. There is no great ledger detailing the wight's work. No flask labeled with the simple, miraculous word: *Cure*. They have decapitated the serpent, but its venom still courses through the veins of their friends.

Exhausted, they retreat to the golem's butcher-shop, a council of the walking wounded. The two brass keys are a heavy weight in Kragor's pouch, a question cast in metal. Before them lies a locked room of scuttling sea-horrors and the cold, sinking heart of the vault. The cure is still down here, somewhere, waiting in the dark.



CLAWS AND CURES

CHE 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 repells 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 Krynn 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.

APPENDIX A — DRAMATIS PERSONAE

1. **Adventurers:** The primary group consisting of **Elara**, **Halite**, **Kragor**, **Scarlet**, **Whisper**, **Doctor Pepe**, and **Gerhard**. Having survived the perils of the sea and the Foren wastes, they have breached the sunken Aeorian ruin of Salsvault. They have now successfully plundered the entirety of Salsvault, defeating its guardians to secure not only the vials of anti-plague they sought, but also a dangerous cache of the Frigid Woe plague itself. After a harrowing, multi-day flight across the wastes, pursued by the relentless, black-marked **Wormkin**, they have reached the sanctuary of Syrinlya. There, they sold their grim treasures to **The Buyer** for a king's ransom, learning much about their pursuers and the nature of the Eiselcross wastes. Their trials have forged them into a more powerful and resilient force.
2. **Animated Armors:** Tall, hollow guardians of Salsvault's foyer, clad in verdigris-stained metal. Moving with the relentless cadence of machines, these magical constructs proved immune to enchantments that sway the minds of living beings. They were destroyed by the party upon entry.
3. **Animated Cutlery:** A silent, murderous swarm of kitchen implements—cleavers, knives, and other utensils—that flew from their racks in the Salsvault kitchen to attack the party. Their small size and vicious speed made for a chaotic and bloody encounter that left Whisper unconscious before they were all destroyed.
4. **Arl Bortock:** A jovial dwarf who tends bar at the *Jolly Dwarf* in Palebank Village. He provides the adventurers with lodging, refreshments, local insights, and identifies the Liel-Tethwick family. He later promises a thorough cleaning of his inn upon learning of potential contamination.
5. **Bandits (Croaker Cave):** Followers of Hulil Lutan, tasked with defending her operations within Croaker Cave. They battled the adventurers, resulting in casualties and one captured dwarf (associated with the Uttolot family) who provided intelligence before being knocked out.
6. **Bandits (Pelc's Curiosities):** Followers of Hulil Lutan, encountered ransacking the shop searching for clues to cure Hulil's Frigid Woe. They engaged the adventurers in combat but surrendered after several were defeated, revealing Hulil's location and affliction.
7. **Bill:** A Glassblade in Palebank Village, encountered at the *Jolly Dwarf*, providing warnings about the dangers of the Frigid Woe and the port closure.
8. **Bret:** A human wizard and member of the Cerberus Assembly, rescued by the *Remorhaz* after the *Frostfang*, on which he had purchased passage, was destroyed by a giant squid. He was traveling as a passenger under Captain Gerhard Eisner and seeks urgent passage to Icehaven in Eiselcross, carrying vital news about Aeorian constructs encountered in the wastes. Captain Stonebeard has denied his request for diversion, directing him to Palebank Village.
9. **The Buyer:** An enigmatic and beautiful elf of androgynous appearance, found residing in a luxurious, incense-filled tent in Syrinlya. With silver hair braided with lapis lazuli and a tiny pseudodragon curled in their lap, The Buyer serves as a high-level contact for the Diarchy of Uthodurn. They purchased the party's salvaged cure, the dangerous vials of Frigid Woe, and the broken mithral tools for a staggering sum. Possessed of deep knowledge, they identified the party's pursuers as **Wormkin** (servants of the slumbering entity **Quajath**), explained

- the caged elemental's prison as an Aeorian "stasis bubble," and offered a stark warning about the dangers and immense willpower required to raise the **white dragon** egg.
10. **Doctor Pepe:** Initially a mysterious rogue observing the adventurers, he formally joined their quest at Croaker Cave. He contributes sharp investigative skills, stealth, and crossbow proficiency. He is proving adept at fishing and cooking. His aim with a crossbow has proven comically inept, though a shot of pure luck brought down the behemoth crab in Salsvault. He was also the one to scout the **Wormkin** camp, his report precipitating the party's desperate flight across the wastes.
 11. **Elara:** An aasimar bard whose musical talents and spellcasting bolster the party. She excels at negotiation, inspiration, healing, and illusions, and has bonded with others over the novel *Tusk Love*. Her spells and bardic inspiration have proved pivotal in battle. She acted as the party's spokesperson with the **Wormkin** and later with **The Buyer**, negotiating the sale of their loot and conducting the debrief.
 12. **Elf Acolyte (Croaker Cave):** A male elf and devout follower of Hulil Lutan, discovered kneeling beside her before a tapestry of Tiamat. He engaged the party in combat in defense of his priestess but was swiftly killed by a crossbow bolt to the neck from Doctor Pepe.
 13. **Elro Aldataur:** A Glassblade leader in Palebank Village. He introduces the adventurers to the Frigid Woe mystery, confirms the disease's name and Aeorian origins, explains the cure (milky liquid in golden vials), hires the party to retrieve the cure from Eiselcross, provides payment and bounty for Hulil's gang, arranges passage on the *Remorhaz*, and identifies Orvo Mustave and "The Buyer" as contacts in Syrinlya. He has also promised to ensure Irven Liel's family is cared for.
 14. **Fenton Tethwick:** Irven Liel's husband, traveling with Irven and their twin tiefling daughters (Honor & Magic). He helps care for the children while Irven discusses sensitive matters with the adventurers.
 15. **Ferol Sal:** The undead lord of Salsvault. A letter found in his immaculate bedchamber reveals his identity and chilling purpose: having survived Aeor's fall, he has continued his work in undeath, seeking to engineer a plague capable of infecting and destroying the very gods he blames for his city's destruction.
 16. **Fire Elemental (Caged):** A colossal figure of silent, eternal flame, suspended within a shimmering electrum dodecahedron cage, which is itself contained within a massive, misty-blue sphere. According to **The Buyer**, the shimmering sphere containing the creature is an "Aeorian stasis bubble," a piece of ancient technology used to stop time for its subject, which is likely a prisoner or a power source.
 17. **Gerhard Eisner:** The former captain of the *Frostfang*, rescued alongside his crewman Rorik and passenger Bret. Deeply affected by the loss of his ship, he has joined the adventurers' quest, contributing his wilderness experience, map-reading skills, and combat support. His pragmatism and experience were on full display as he helped dispatch the **undead smith**, recognized the value of its ruined mithral tools, and helped construct a stretcher to carry the incapacitated Kragor during their flight from the **Wormkin**.
 18. **Giant Crabs (Salsvault):** Guardians of the cure, these armored monstrosities lurked in a briny pool within Ferol Sal's laboratory. Scarlet's bold attempt at crustacean diplomacy was cut short by Kragor's impatience, leading to a chaotic battle. A behemoth among them briefly grappled Kragor before being put to sleep by Elara's magic, only to be rudely awakened by Halite's trident. The entire brood was eventually slain, with the largest felled by

- a lucky crossbow bolt from Doctor Pepe. Their remains later provided a much-needed feast for the weary adventurers.
19. **Giant Ice Frogs (Croaker Cave):** Two aggressive, mastiff-sized, blue-skinned frogs that served as guards in the first chamber of Croaker Cave. They ambushed Doctor Pepe and Whisper upon their entry, wounding Whisper before the rest of the party arrived. One was killed by Elara's magic, and the other retreated after being wounded by Doctor Pepe. They are distinct from the much larger, semi-domesticated Old Croaker.
20. **Giant Octopus:** A slick, purpled monstrosity with malevolent intelligence, found lurking in the flooded library of Salsvault. It dragged Doctor Pepe into the depths and ensnared Scarlet before Halite's furious trident assault ended its life. Its corpse exudes a foul, sulfurous odor.
21. **Giant Squid:** A colossal cephalopod encountered in the fog-laden Frigid Depths. It destroyed the *Frostfang* and attacked the *Remorhaz* before being slain by the combined efforts of the adventurers and crew. Sparky reported its remains smelled like farts.
22. **Gramini:** An elderly elf potion vendor at the Palebank Village docks. She sells the party healing potions, trades for a Scanlan Shorthalt shirt (which she frames and prices highly), and offers initial advice about Westeroff.
23. **Griffin:** A magnificent but unnamed griffin encountered with an arrow lodged in its wing. After Scarlet communicated with, treated, and healed the beast, it showed its gratitude by allowing her to ride it for several days. It served as an aerial scout for the party during their trek across Foren and warned them of giants to the north before departing.
24. **Haldor:** A deck hand on the *Remorhaz*, born and raised in snowy lands but with a love for fishing. He confronts the winter wolf in the kitchen with Ironfist and later bonds with Whisper while working the rigging, sharing stories of their respective homes and showing her techniques for tackling ice frozen into ropes.
25. **Halite:** A goliath fighter known for his strength, tactical mind, and mastery of the trident and javelin. He has discovered a surprising aptitude for cooking. His impatience during the crab battle led him to attack a magically sleeping behemoth, awakening it to the party's peril, but he later helped dispatch it with a mighty, bard-inspired blow. He heaved open the heavy, water-logged chests containing the cure and, along with Gerhard, bore the weight of the unconscious Kragor for days during the flight to Syrinlya.
26. **Hulil Lutan:** A dwarf priestess of Tiamat and sister of Tulgi. Afflicted with Frigid Woe, she led criminal operations from Croaker Cave, seeking Aeorian artifacts and a cure. Defeated by the party, her journal revealed the sale of a blue vial to Irven Liel.
27. **Ice Mephits:** Three small, malevolent elemental creatures of ice, described as "flickering motes of azure" and "shards of living ice." They are drawn to the magic sustaining the Salsvault ruins. Agile fliers, they attack with blasts of frigid air and can exhale shrouds of dense, swirling fog. They are fragile, exploding into ice shards when defeated by the party.
28. **Ingrid:** The skilled, if gruff, dwarven chef aboard the *Remorhaz*. She is revealed to be a lycanthrope (winter wolf), her transformation tied to a moon-and-rune amulet. She mentors several party members in cooking, gifting utensils to Kragor, Halite, and Doctor Pepe in recognition of their talent. She apologized to Whisper for biting her while transformed, and incongruously offered sandwiches during the height of the giant squid battle.
29. **Ironfist:** The First Mate of the *Remorhaz*. He confronts the winter wolf in the kitchen

- with Haldor and participates actively in the battle against the giant squid, manning a ballista and attempting to throw a rescue rope to the water-walking survivor.
30. **Irven Liel:** A traveling bookseller (specializing in wholesale) heading to Uthodurn with his husband Fenton and their twin tiefling daughters. He purchased a cracked blue vial containing Frigid Woe contagion from Hulil Lutan as an investment. He cooperates with the party, allowing Scarlet to confirm the danger, and now relies on them finding the cure for him and his entire family. He is a proponent of “Feather Leather” as a best-selling book.
31. **Javel:** An ancient, coughing dwarf trader operating out of a yurt in Syrinlya. He sells the party snowshoes (including blood-stained ones from a halfling eaten by a yeti) and ice hammers, bonding with Elara over a shared appreciation for the novel *Tusk Love* and gifting her a bottle of Sandkeg’s High whiskey. He warns them about yetis.
32. **Kragor:** An orc warlock wielding eldritch power and a conjured war hammer. He has discovered a talent for cooking. Within Salsvault, he used his spectral hand to unlock the chests containing the cure, faced down an **undead smith**, and salvaged its ruined mithral tools. He has become the target of the ancient entity **Quajath**, suffering debilitating psychic attacks that left him incapacitated for days, forcing his companions to carry him during their desperate flight to Syrinlya. He has successfully transported the **white dragon egg** to the safety of the camp.
33. **The Liel-Tethwicks:** The traveling family consisting of Irven Liel, his husband Fenton Tethwick, and their twin tiefling daughters, Honor and Magic. They become entangled in the Frigid Woe mystery due to Irven’s purchase of a contaminated vial.
34. **Mathias:** The harried elf proprietor of “Mathias’s Stuffs” in Palebank Village, where the party buys supplies and sells bandit gear. He provides a warning about violent “wild folk” with black streaks on their faces in Eiselcross.
35. **Mera:** The skilled navigator of the *Remorhaz*. She participates in the card game, expertly pilots the ship through fog and during the squid attack, and calculates their position and arrival time in Syrinlya. She expressed delight at Elara’s musical performance and the liveliness of the group.
36. **Morgo Delwur:** A stout, weathered dwarf woman acting as an informal guide or contact in Syrinlya. She directs the party to Orvo and The Buyer, offers them the yurt of a deceased elf lordling (eaten by a saber-toothed tiger), and mentions local dangers before heading off on her own expedition.
37. **Old Croaker:** A giant ice frog of unusual size dwelling in Croaker Cave. Used by Hulil’s bandits (and later the party) for transport across an underground pool, motivated by treats (bats, elf hands). It attacked Whisper when startled. Scarlet confirmed it is venomous.
38. **Orvo Mustave:** A dwarf adventurer in Syrinlya and friend of the deceased Urgon, identified by a distinctive three-line scar on his cheek. He accompanied Urgon on the expedition where the blue vials were found in the Salsvault ruins (located in the Thin Sheets region). He provides the party with directions, details about the ruins’ dangers (Ice Mephits, animated armor), confirms he sold his share of artifacts to The Buyer, and directs them to Javel for snowshoes. He is saddened and angered by Urgon’s death.
39. **Quajath:** An ancient and powerful entity, referred to as “the Worm,” that slumbers deep beneath the ice of Eiselcross. Its dreams are a psychic contagion, infecting the minds of the lost and promising warmth and communion, but delivering only madness and servitude. It targeted Kragor with its telepathic voice, causing him immense pain and relentlessly hunting him through its followers, the Wormkin.

40. **Rorik:** A young human crewman from the *Frostfang*, rescued alongside Captain Gerhard Eisner and Bret. He seems loyal to Gerhard.
41. **Rug of Smothering:** An animate carpet found in a ruined Salsvault storeroom. It attempted to suffocate Halite and then Scarlet before the druid's transformation into a draft horse tore it from its grapple, after which it was quickly destroyed.
42. **Scanlan Shorthalt:** A legendary and widely popular bard, known through his merchandise and literary works rather than a personal appearance. His name appears on a rare shirt the party barters to Gramini for a discount, and his book, *Adventure Sexy: Impress Potential Lovers with Great Deeds*, is found in an abandoned yurt in Syrinlya.
43. **Scarlet:** A halfling druid deeply connected to nature. She has an owl companion ("Sparky") used for scouting. Her bold plan to infiltrate the giant crabs' lair by polymorphing into one of them was a masterpiece of cunning, though it was cut short by the party's premature attack. During the ensuing melee, she was mistakenly shot by a crossbow bolt from Doctor Pepe, which forcibly returned her to her halfling form while still grappled by an enemy crab.
44. **Sparky:** Scarlet's owl familiar. A loyal and effective scout, Sparky provides aerial reconnaissance for the party. He scouted the fog-laden sea for land, reporting back to Scarlet that the remains of the giant squid "smelled bad... like farts." He also proves helpful with navigating the featureless terrain of Foren.
45. **Stonebeard:** The seasoned captain of the *Remorhaz*. Initially deferential to Elro, he reveals a pragmatic, no-nonsense command style once at sea. He oversees ship operations, directs the crew during crises (the lycanthropy incident and the squid attack), interacts with the rescued survivors, and safely navigates to Syrinlya.
- His ship requires weeks of repair before another crossing.
46. **Swarm of Undead Snakes:** A roiling ball of tiny, desiccated, and venomous undead serpents that erupted from a chest in Ferol Sal's private quarters. The swarm was obliterated by a radiant blow from Kragor's war hammer.
47. **Tulgi Lutan:** A solitary trapper in Palebank Village and sister of Hulil. Afflicted with Frigid Woe, she confessed her and Hulil's criminal activities and theft from Urgon, revealing Hulil's location in Croaker Cave. As confirmed by a message from The Buyer, she has since succumbed to the disease.
48. **Undead Figure:** A solitary, decaying humanoid figure encountered walking with unnerving precision across the frozen landscape of Foren. The sound of its voice is like "grinding stone," and it appears to be sightless. It is driven by a singular, obsessive purpose, asking, "Where is Lucien?" The party redirected it towards the River Inferno, hoping it would incinerate itself. Scarlet identified it as undead.
49. **Undead Smith:** One of Ferol Sal's red-robed servants, found buried under rubble in the vault's cold forge. Clad in a scorched leather apron and clutching a smith's hammer, it rose to attack the party with mechanical fury, its blow ringing off Kragor's armor. It was swiftly dispatched by the combined might of Gerhard and Kragor, collapsing into a drift of greasy ash. Its masterwork mithral tools, though ruined, were salvaged by the party.
50. **Urgon Wenth:** A dwarven adventurer whose return from Eiselcross afflicted with Frigid Woe and subsequent death sparked the story's central mystery. He recovered Aeorian artifacts, including the blue vials containing the contagion, from the Salsvault ruins alongside Orvo Mustave.
51. **Verla Pelc:** The owner of Pelc's Curiosities

- in Palebank Village. Found frozen dead in her shop by the adventurers, a victim of the Frigid Woe after purchasing the blue vials from Urgon and handling them.
52. **Westeroff:** A retired wizard in Palebank Village. He provides limited magical identification services, confirms Urgon's dagger is magical, sells Halite a crystal focus, and identifies a garnet for Doctor Pepe. He is notably not a fan of music.
53. **Whisper:** A tabaxi monk known for exceptional agility, stealth, and scouting. She survived being partially swallowed by an ice frog and bitten by Ingrid in wolf form. She participated in the chaotic battle against the giant crabs, and after the fight, expressed a feral delight at the prospect of feasting on their remains. She ended the combat by dispatching the final crab that held Scarlet in its pincer.
54. **White Dragon Egg:** A massive, three-foot-tall, alabaster-white egg discovered by Halite on the Foren plains. Kragor, having declared it an "orphan" like himself, has adopted it as his own, carefully protecting it on the journey from Salsvault to Syrinlya. Upon learning of its existence, **The Buyer** warned that a white dragon is a creature of pure malice and that raising it will require a will of iron to match its own.
55. **Wormkin:** The "wild folk" of Eiselcross, marked by black streaks on their faces and hands. They are the chosen servants of the slumbering entity Quajath, their minds touched by its psychic dreams. The party encountered a tribe of them in a remote valley, witnessing them inducting new members from a group of captives. They pursued the party for days across the wastes with relentless, tireless speed, their pursuit guided by the psychic connection Quajath had forged with Kragor.
56. **Young Remorhaz:** A monstrous, heat-radiating, segmented worm native to Eiselcross, capable of burrowing through snow and ice. The party encountered and defeated a juvenile remorhaz, confirming its aggressive, predatory nature and its unique internal furnace that consumes objects on contact. Its iridescent scales (thrym) offer fire resistance.
57. **Zombies (Salsvault):** The reanimated novices and workers of Ferol Sal, found throughout the ruin. Clad in unnaturally well-preserved red robes of a strange plant-like fiber, these desiccated corpses are slow but relentless. The party has now cleared the ruin of these creatures, including a final, hammer-wielding **undead smith** found in the forge. Their threat has been extinguished.

APPENDIX B — THE VANQUISHED

1. **First Bandit (Pelc's Curiosities)** — *Kragor* crushed the elf's head with a single blow of his war hammer in the fog-clouded Pelc's Curiosities.
2. **Second Bandit (Pelc's Curiosities)** — *Halite* skewered the elf's jaw with an uppercut from his trident, after *Scarlet* had initially injured him with her acid-laden, elongated claws.
3. **Third Bandit (Pelc's Curiosities)** — *Kragor's* hex and Eldritch Blast left the elf on the brink of death. The bandit surrendered.
4. **Fourth Bandit (Pelc's Curiosities)** — In the shadow of *Halite's* imposing stature, the final elf surrendered.
5. **First Giant Ice Frog (Croaker Cave)** — *Kragor's* hex and blast combo disintegrated this ice frog, which had previously retreated into the pool with severe wounds from *Doctor Pepe* and *Whisper*.
6. **Second Giant Ice Frog (Croaker Cave)** — *Elara* destroyed the frog with a radiant mote of energy, after it was initially injured by *Halite's* trident.
7. **Fifth Bandit (Croaker Cave)** — The elf was felled by *Halite's* javelin after it was wounded by *Whisper's* sling.
8. **Sixth Bandit (Croaker Cave)** — Pulverized by *Kragor's* Eldritch Blast after *Elara's* starry wisp scorched the elf.
9. **Seventh Bandit (Croaker Cave)** — *Halite* pierced the dwarf bandit with deadly precision, after which the dwarf surrendered and was bound.
10. **Acolyte (Croaker Cave)** — Slaughtered by a bolt to the neck from *Doctor Pepe's* crossbow.
11. **Hulil Lutan (Croaker Cave)** — *Halite's* javelin punctured the dwarf's heart, ending her after having been worn down by a first javelin, two bolts from *Doctor Pepe*, an arrow and Dissonant Whispers from *Elara*, *Kragor's* hex and Eldritch Blast, and *Scarlet's* shillelagh.
12. **Giant Squid (Frigid Depths)** — Overwhelmed by a combined assault from the party and the crew of the *Remorhaz*. Key strikes included multiple crossbow bolts from *Doctor Pepe*, ballista shots from *Halite* and *Scarlet*, javelins from *Halite* and *Whisper*, *Kragor's* hex and Eldritch Blast, *Scarlet's* flame projectile, and supporting attacks from the *Remorhaz* crew and the rescued wizard Bret. The killing blow was an arrow to the eye from the rescued captain, Gerhard.
13. **Young Remorhaz (Foren)** — *Halite's* trident pierced the creature's brain with a critical hit after it was wounded by *Kragor's* Eldritch Blasts, *Doctor Pepe's* bolts, *Gerhard's* and *Elara's* arrows, and *Whisper's* sling bullet.
14. **First Ice Mephit (Salsvault, Threshold)** — Pierced and popped by *Elara's* arrow after it was wounded by *Halite's* javelin and *Doctor Pepe's* bolt.
15. **Second Ice Mephit (Salsvault, Threshold)** — *Halite's* javelin destroyed this mephit after it was restrained by *Scarlet's* magic vines and seriously wounded by *Gerhard's* arrow.
16. **Third Ice Mephit (Salsvault, Threshold)** — Decapitated by *Whisper's* claws while it was restrained by *Scarlet's* magic vines, bound by *Whisper's* rope bindings, pierced with *Doctor Pepe's* bolt and *Elara's* arrow.
17. **First Animated Armor (Salsvault, Entryway)** — Destroyed by a final, crushing blow from *Kragor's* war hammer, after being damaged by two arrows from

Gerhard.

18. **Second Animated Armor (Salsvault, Entryway)** — Disintegrated by a final Eldritch Blast from *Kragor* after a prolonged assault involving *Scarlet* (in boar form and then with her staff), an arrow from *Elara*, and an earlier blast from *Kragor*.
19. **First Zombie (Salsvault, North Hallway)** — Destroyed by *Kragor's* radiant war hammer.
20. **Second Zombie (Salsvault, North Hallway)** — Incinerated by *Scarlet's* fire mote after it reanimated from being felled by arrows from *Gerhard* and *Elara*.
21. **Third Zombie (Salsvault, North Hallway)** — Annihilated by a radiant blow from *Kragor's* war hammer, after it was blasted with cold from *Kragor's* Armor of Agathys and was struck by *Elara's* radiant mote.
22. **Fourth Zombie (Salsvault, North Hallway)** — Torn apart by *Whisper's* claws, after it reanimated from being downed by an earlier claw strike and *Gerhard's* arrow.
23. **Fifth Zombie (Salsvault, North Hallway)** — Pinned to the floor and destroyed by *Halite's* trident after being hit by *Scarlet's* flame and *Doctor Pepe's* shortsword.
24. **Sixth Zombie (Salsvault, North Hallway)** — Disintegrated by a radiant mote from *Elara* after being slashed twice by *Whisper's* claws.
25. **Animated Rug (Salsvault, Destroyed Dormitory)** — Undone by *Gerhard's* arrows after being punctured with *Halite's* trident, raked by *Scarlet's* Primal Savagery, and hoofed (!) by *horse-Scarlet*.
26. **Animated Hog Splitter (Salsvault, Kitchen)** — De-animated by *Kragor's* Eldritch Blast.
27. **Animated Cleaver (Salsvault, Kitchen)** — Undone by a flurry of blows from *Whisper*,
- after it was weakend by *Halite's* trident and *Kragor's* war hammer.
28. **Animated Fillet Knife (Salsvault, Kitchen)** — Obliterated by *Kragor's* war hammer after it was weakend by a hoof-kick from *horse-Scarlet*.
29. **Animated Bird's-beak Knife (Salsvault, Kitchen)** — Undone by *Halite's* javelin after freezing from *Kragor's* Armor of Agathys.
30. **Animated Flensing Knife (Salsvault, Kitchen)** — Crushed by *Kragor's* war hammer after it was damaged by *Doctor Pepe's* shortsword.
31. **Animated Skinning Knife (Salsvault, Kitchen)** — Disabled by *Elara's* dagger after freezing from *Kragor's* Armor of Agathys.
32. **Animated Boning Knife (Salsvault, Kitchen)** — Destroyed by *Halite's* trident.
33. **Mass of Undead Snakes (Salsvault, Ferol Sal's Bedroom)** — Annihilated by a single blow of *Kragor's* war hammer.
34. **Seventh Zombie (Salsvault, Dining Hall)** — Blown apart by the force of *Kragor's* Eldritch Blast after being illuminatated by *Elara's* faerie fire and severely wounded by *Gerhard's* arrow.
35. **Eighth Zombie (Salsvault, Dining Hall)** — A dagger thrust to the heart from *Elara* finished this creature, which had been grievously wounded by *Doctor Pepe's* blades.
36. **Ninth Zombie (Salsvault, Dining Hall)** — Felled by *Gerhard's* arrow after being scorched by *Scarlet's* flame and stabbed by *Elara*.
37. **Tenth Zombie (Salsvault, Dining Hall)** — Blasted into greasy chunks by *Kragor's* Eldritch Blast while it was menacing *Halite*, who had already pierced it with his trident.
38. **Eleventh Zombie (Salsvault, Dining Hall)** — Downed by a crossbow bolt

- through the eye from *Doctor Pepe* after it had been slashed by *Whisper*.
39. **Twelfth Zombie (Salsvault, Dining Hall)** — Put to rest by an arrow from *Elara*, after it had reanimated twice from being felled by *Halite*'s trident and *Whisper*'s blows.
40. **Giant Octopus (Salsvault, Library)** — Fatally pierced by a furious, downward trident thrust from *Halite* after taking heavy damage from earlier strikes by *Halite*, *Kragor*'s Eldritch Blasts, *Whisper*'s punches, and *Elara*'s arrow.
41. **Thirteenth Zombie (Salsvault, Occupied Dormitory)** — Destroyed by a perfectly placed shot from *Gerhard*'s bow after it was struck by an arrow from *Elara*.
42. **Fourteenth Zombie (Salsvault, Occupied Dormitory)** — Smashed with a blast of radiant light from *Kragor*'s war hammer after being skewered by *Halite*'s trident.
43. **Fifteenth Zombie (Salsvault, Occupied Dormitory)** — Felled a second time by an arrow from *Gerhard*, after taking blows from *Whisper*'s claws and being downed a first time with a shot from *Elara*'s bow.
44. **Sixteenth Zombie (Slasvault, Occupied Dormitory)** — Run through and destroyed by *Halite*'s trident after being pummeled by *Whisper*.
45. **Flesh Golem (Salsvault, The Butcher's Workshop)** — Finished by a final blast of eldritch force from *Kragor* after the party had already downed the stitched behemoth. It had been toppled by *Halite*'s trident and wounded by arrows from *Elara* and *Gerhard*, fire from *Scarlet*, claws from *Whisper*, and blades from *Doctor Pepe*.
46. **First Flying Longsword (Salsvault, Hallway)** — Shattered into a thousand glittering splinters when it struck *Kragor*'s supernatural ice armor.
47. **Second Flying Longsword (Salsvault, Hallway)** — Disabled by a precise flash of *Gerhard*'s scimitar, which sheared through the animating glyph on its hilt after it had been damaged by *Whisper*'s claws.
48. **Third Flying Longsword (Salsvault, Hallway)** — Destroyed with multiple blows from *Gerhard*'s scimitar.
49. **Fourth Flying Longsword (Salsvault, Hallway)** — Broken by a furious and vengeful two-handed wrench from *Doctor Pepe*.
50. **Fifth Flying Longsword (Salsvault, Hallway)** — Pinned to the floor and de-animated by *Halite*'s trident.
51. **Sixth Flying Longsword (Salsvault, Hallway)** — Felled by *Elara*'s silver-tipped arrow after being slashed by *Gerhard*'s scimitar.
52. **Ferol Sal (Salsvault, Laboratory)** — Decapitated by *Kragor*'s new thunder-grey longsword, which sang a dirge as it unmade the creature's evil. The killing blow came after the party had grievously wounded it with arrows from *Gerhard* and *Elara*, a slash from *Doctor Pepe*, and an initial grapple and pummelling from *Whisper*.
53. **Third Animated Armor (Salsvault, Laboratory)** — Destroyed when *Halite* drove his trident deep into its chest, collapsing the construct into a heap of scrap. The armor had previously been damaged by a heavy blow from *Kragor*'s longsword and primal flames from *Scarlet*.
54. **Fourth Animated Armor (Salsvault, Laboratory)** — Cloven from shoulder to hip by a final, sorrowful swing of *Kragor*'s dirge-blade, after it was damaged by arrows from *Elara* and a solid blow from *Halite*.
55. **Giant Crab Behemoth (Salsvault, Crab Pool)** — Felled by a crossbow bolt between the eyes from *Doctor Pepe*, after grappling *Kragor* and taking blows from his longsword, encouraged to slumber by *Elara*'s magic, awakened by trident thrusts from *Halite*, struck by *Gerhard*'s arrows, and taking a

critical blow from *Whisper*'s javelin.

56. **First Giant Crab (Salsvault, Crab Pool)** — Dispatched by a javelin from *Whisper* after being incapacitated by *Elara*'s *Sleep* spell, and blasted with eldritch energy by *Kragor*.
57. **Second Giant Crab (Salsvault, Crab Pool)** — Pierced by an arrow from *Elara* before being run through and killed by *Halite*'s trident.
58. **Third Giant Crab (Salsvault, Crab Pool)** — Killed by a final slash of *Whisper*'s claws after being wounded by *Scarlet* (in crab form).
59. **Zombie Smith (Salsvault, Forge)** — Destroyed by a radiant blow from *Kragor*'s longsword after taking damage from his icy *Armor of Agathys* and *Gerhard*'s scimitar.

APPENDIX C — HOUSE RULES

This appendix collects:

- House rules and rulings.
- Rules that are not included in the *Player's Handbook* or are only partially included.

LUCKY

The *Player's Handbook* description reads:

Luck Points. You have a number of Luck Points equal to your Proficiency Bonus and can spend the points on the benefits below. You regain your expended Luck Points when you finish a Long Rest.

Advantage. When you roll a d20 for a D20 Test, you can spend 1 Luck Point to give yourself Advantage on the roll.

Disadvantage. When a creature rolls a d20 for an attack roll against you, you can spend 1 Luck Point to impose Disadvantage on that roll.

House rule: Alternatively, you can choose to spend one of your luck points after you roll the die, but before the outcome is determined; or when an attack roll is made against you. Roll a d20, and then choose whether to use the original roll or the re-roll. (Adopted from *2014 PHB*.)

WILD SHAPE

The *Player's Handbook* description reads:

Temporary Hit Points. When you assume a Wild Shape form, you gain a number of Temporary Hit Points equal to your Druid level.

Game Statistics. Your game statistics are replaced by the Beast's stat block, but you retain your creature type; Hit Points; Hit Point Dice; Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma scores; class features; languages; and feats. You also retain your skill and saving throw proficiencies and use your Proficiency Bonus for them, in addition to gaining the proficiencies of the creature. If a skill or saving throw modifier in the Beast's stat block is higher than yours, use the one in the stat block.

House rule: When you transform, you can choose to gain Temporary Hit Points as above,

or instead assume the beast's hit points and Hit Dice. If you choose the latter, then when you revert to your normal form, you return to the number of hit points you had before you transformed; and, if you revert as a result of dropping to 0 hit points, any excess damage carries over to your normal form. (Adopted from *2014 PHB*.)

TOOL PROFICIENCIES

Sources: Player's Handbook and Xanathar's Guide to Everything

CARTOGRAPHER'S TOOLS

Using cartographer's tools, you can create accurate maps to make travel easier for yourself and those who come after you. These maps can range from large-scale depictions of mountain ranges to diagrams that show the layout of a dungeon level.

Ability: Wisdom.

Crafting: Map.

Components. Cartographer's tools consist of a quill, ink, parchment, a pair of compasses, calipers, and a ruler.

Arcana, History, Religion. You can use your knowledge of maps and locations to unearth more detailed information when you use these skills. For instance, you might spot hidden messages in a map, identify when the map was made to determine if geographical features have changed since then, and so forth.

Nature. Your familiarity with physical geography makes it easier for you to answer questions or solve issues relating to the terrain around you.

Survival. Your understanding of geography makes it easier to find paths to civilization, to predict areas where villages or towns might be found, and to avoid becoming lost. You have studied so many maps that common patterns, such as how trade routes evolve and where

settlements arise in relation to geographic locations, are familiar to you.

Craft a Map. While traveling, you can draw a map as you go in addition to engaging in other activity.

Activity	DC
Determine a map's age and origin	10
Draft a map of a small area	15
Estimate direction and distance to a landmark	15
Discern that a map is fake	15
Fill in a missing part of a map	20

CARPENTER'S TOOLS

Skill at carpentry enables a character to construct wooden structures. A carpenter can build a house, a shack, a wooden cabinet, or similar items.

Ability: Wisdom.

Crafting: Club, Greatclub, Quarterstaff, Barrel, Chest, Ladder, Pole, Portable Ram, Torch.

Components. Carpenter's tools include a saw, a hammer, nails, a hatchet, a square, a ruler, an adze, a plane, and a chisel.

History. This tool proficiency aids you in identifying the use and the origin of wooden buildings and other large wooden objects.

Investigation. You gain additional insight when inspecting areas within wooden structures, because you know tricks of construction that can conceal areas from discovery.

Perception. You can spot irregularities in wooden walls or floors, making it easier to find trapdoors and secret passages.

Stealth. You can quickly assess the weak spots in a wooden floor, making it easier to avoid the places that creak and groan when they're stepped on.

Fortify. With 1 minute of work and raw materials, you can make a door or window harder to force open. Increase the DC needed to open it by 5.

Temporary Shelter. As part of a long rest, you can construct a lean-to or a similar shelter to keep your group dry and in the shade for the duration of the rest. Because it was fashioned quickly from whatever wood was available, the shelter collapses 1d3 days after being assembled.

Activity	DC
Build a simple wooden structure	10
Design a complex wooden structure	15
Find a weak point in a wooden wall	15
Seal or pry open a door or container	20

COOK'S UTENSILS

Adventuring is a hard life. With a cook along on the journey, your meals will be much better than the typical mix ofhardtack and dried fruit.

Ability: Wisdom.

Crafting: Rations.

Components. Cook's utensils include a metal pot, knives, forks, a stirring spoon, and a ladle.

History. Your knowledge of cooking techniques allows you to assess the social patterns involved in a culture's eating habits.

Medicine. When administering treatment, you can transform medicine that is bitter or sour into a pleasing concoction.

Survival. When foraging for food, you can make do with ingredients you scavenge that others would be unable to transform into nourishing meals.

Prepare Meals. As part of a short rest, you can prepare a tasty meal that helps your companions regain their strength. You and up to five creatures of your choice regain 1 extra hit point per Hit Die spent during a short rest, provided you have access to your cook's utensils and sufficient food.

Activity	DC
Create a typical meal	10
Duplicate a meal	10
Improve food's flavor	10
Spot poison or impurities in food	15
Create a gourmet meal	15

GAMING SET

Proficiency with a gaming set applies to one type of game, such as Three-Dragon Ante or games of chance that use dice.

Ability: Wisdom.

Components. A gaming set has all the pieces needed to play a specific game or type of game, such as a complete deck of cards or a board and tokens.

History. Your mastery of a game includes knowledge of its history, as well as of important events it was connected to or prominent historical figures involved with it.

Insight. Playing games with someone is a good way to gain understanding of their personality, granting you a better ability to discern their lies from their truths and read their mood.

Sleight of Hand. Sleight of Hand is a useful skill for cheating at a game, as it allows you to swap pieces, palm cards, or alter a die roll. Alternatively, engrossing a target in a game by manipulating the components with dexterous movements is a great distraction for a pickpocketing attempt.

Activity	DC
Discern whether someone is cheating	10
Gain insight into an opponent's personality	15
Win the game	20

HERBALISM KIT

Proficiency with an herbalism kit allows you to identify plants and safely collect their useful elements.

Ability: Intelligence.

Crafting: Antitoxin, Candle, Healer's Kit, Potion of Healing.

Components. An herbalism kit includes pouches to store herbs, clippers and leather gloves for collecting plants, a mortar and pestle, and several glass jars.

Arcana. Your knowledge of the nature and uses of herbs can add insight to your magical studies that deal with plants and your attempts to identify potions.

Investigation. When you inspect an area overgrown with plants, your proficiency can help you pick out details and clues that others might miss.

Medicine. Your mastery of herbalism improves your ability to treat illnesses and wounds by augmenting your methods of care with medicinal plants.

Nature and Survival. When you travel in the wild, your skill in herbalism makes it easier to identify plants and spot sources of food that others might overlook.

Identify Plants. You can identify most plants with a quick inspection of their appearance and smell.

Activity	DC
Identify a plant	10
Find plants	15
Identify poison	20

LEATHERWORKER'S TOOLS

Knowledge of leatherworking extends to lore concerning animal hides and their properties. It also confers knowledge of leather armor and similar goods.

Ability: Dexterity.

Crafting: Sling, Whip, Hide Armor, Leather Armor, Studded Leather Armor, Backpack, Crossbow Bolt Case, Map or Scroll Case, Parchment, Pouch, Quiver, Waterskin

Components. Leatherworker's tools include a knife, a small mallet, an edger, a hole punch, thread, and leather scraps.

Arcana. Your expertise in working with leather grants you added insight when you

inspect magic items crafted from leather, such as boots and some cloaks.

Investigation. You gain added insight when studying leather items or clues related to them, as you draw on your knowledge of leather to pick out details that others would overlook.

Identify Hides. When looking at a hide or a leather item, you can determine the source of the leather and any special techniques used to treat it. For example, you can spot the difference between leather crafted using dwarven methods and leather crafted using halfling methods.

Activity	DC
Add a design to a leather item	10
Modify a leather item's appearance	10
Determine a leather item's history	20

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Proficiency with a musical instrument indicates you are familiar with the techniques used to play it. You also have knowledge of some songs commonly performed with that instrument.

Ability: Charisma.

History. Your expertise aids you in recalling lore related to your instrument.

Performance. Your ability to put on a good show is improved when you incorporate an instrument into your act.

Compose a Tune. As part of a long rest, you can compose a new tune and lyrics for your instrument. You might use this ability to impress a noble or spread scandalous rumors with a catchy tune.

Activity	DC
Play a known tune	10
Identify a tune	10
Improvise a song	15

NAVIGATOR'S TOOLS

Proficiency with navigator's tools helps you determine a true course based on observing the

stars. It also grants you insight into charts and maps while developing your sense of direction.

Ability: Wisdom.

Components. Navigator's tools include a sextant, a compass, calipers, a ruler, parchment, ink, and a quill.

Survival. Knowledge of navigator's tools helps you avoid becoming lost and also grants you insight into the most likely location for roads and settlements.

Sighting. By taking careful measurements, you can determine your position on a nautical chart and the time of day.

Activity	DC
Plot a course	10
Discover your position on a nautical chart	15
Determine position by stargazing	15

TATTOOIST'S TOOLS

House Rule

Proficiency with tattooist's tools allows you to create intricate designs on the skin of a living creature. Tattoos can be a mark of allegiance, a symbol of faith, a superstitious ward, or a personal statement.

Ability: Dexterity.

Components. Tattooist's tools include a selection of needles, a mortar and pestle for grinding pigments, ink pots, a sterilizing agent, and clean leather rags. These are typically kept in a sturdy leather case.

Arcana. Your knowledge of intricate symbols and magical script, combined with your artistic skill, can help you discern magical properties within a tattoo or identify ancient runic etchings.

History. Your knowledge of tattoos allows you to recognize traditional designs, from the markings of a remote tribe to the intricate scrollwork favored by an ancient magical order. You can identify the approximate origin or cultural significance of a tattoo.

Insight. Examining someone's tattoos can reveal much about their background, affiliations, and personal history. You can often determine gang memberships, military service, religious devotions, or important life events from their ink.

Deception. You can create temporary tattoos or modify existing ones to help establish a false identity or allegiance, though such work fades after several days.

Medicine. Your understanding of skin, healing, and infection prevention grants you additional insight when treating wounds or skin conditions. You can use this knowledge to effectively clean and bind a wound, granting advantage on any Wisdom (Medicine) check made to stabilize a dying creature.

Apply Tattoo. You can apply a tattoo to a willing creature. The complexity and size of the tattoo determine the time and DC of the check. A successful check means the tattoo is applied cleanly and safely; a failed check might result in a poorly drawn tattoo, scarring, or a minor infection. A simple tattoo (DC 10) might take 1 to 2 hours, while an intricate or large design (DC 15+) could take 4 to 8 hours or more.

Activity	DC
Identify a common tattoo's meaning or origin	10
Create a simple, artistic tattoo	10
Cover or modify an existing tattoo	15
Create a temporary tattoo for disguise	15
Discern that a tattoo is fake or altered	15
Inscribe a hidden message within a tattoo	20
Perfectly replicate a complex tattoo	20

THIEVES' TOOLS

Perhaps the most common tools used by adventurers, thieves' tools are designed for picking locks and foiling traps. Proficiency with the tools also grants you a general knowledge of traps and locks.

Components. Thieves' tools include a small file, a set of lock picks, a small mirror mounted on a metal handle, a set of narrow-bladed scissors, and a pair of pliers.

History. Your knowledge of traps grants you insight when answering questions about locations that are renowned for their traps.

Investigation and Perception. You gain additional insight when looking for traps, because you have learned a variety of common signs that betray their presence.

Set a Trap. Just as you can disable traps, you can also set them. As part of a short rest, you can create a trap using items you have on hand. The total of your check becomes the DC for someone else's attempt to discover or disable the trap. The trap deals damage appropriate to the materials used in crafting it (such as poison or a weapon) or damage equal to half the total of your check, whichever the DM deems appropriate.

Activity	DC
Pick a lock	Varies
Disable a trap	Varies

SPELLS

PRIMAL SAVAGERY

Source: Xanathar's Guide to Everything
Transmutation Cantrip

Casting Time: 1 Action

Range/Area: Self

Components: S

Duration: Instantaneous

Attack/Save: Melee

Damage/Effect: Acid

You channel primal magic to cause your teeth or fingernails to sharpen, ready to deliver a corrosive attack. Make a melee spell attack against one creature within 5 feet of you. On a hit, the target takes 1d10 acid damage. After you make the attack, your teeth or fingernails return to normal.

The spell's damage increases by 1d10 when you reach 5th level (2d10), 11th level (3d10), and 17th level (4d10).

ZEPHYR STRIKE

Source: Xanathar's Guide to Everything

Transmutation 1

Casting Time: 1 Bonus Action

Range/Area: Self

Components: V

Duration: Concentration, up to 1 minute

Attack/Save: Melee

Damage/Effect: Buff

You move like the wind. Until the spell ends, your movement doesn't provoke opportunity attacks.

Once before the spell ends, you can give yourself advantage on one weapon attack roll on your turn. That attack deals an extra 1d8 force damage on a hit. Whether you hit or miss, your walking speed increases by 30 feet until the end of that turn.

MAGIC TATTOOS

Wondrous item (tattoo), rarity varies

Source: Tasha's Cauldron of Everything, House Rule

Blending magic and artistry with ink and needles, magic tattoos imbue their bearers with wondrous abilities. The creation of a magic tattoo is a rare art, typically accomplished in one of two ways.

The first method involves binding the magic to the tool itself, creating a magic needle. This enchanted item holds the tattoo's power latent within it, ready to be transferred. Anyone can then use this needle to inscribe the design and release its magic into a creature's skin.

The second method requires a direct conduit of power. A warlock, using a mundane needle and ink prepared from powdered gems, can channel their patron's energy through the tool as they work, infusing the ink with their pact magic as it is set into the flesh.

Once inscribed on a creature's body, damage or injury doesn't impair the tattoo's function, even if the tattoo is defaced. When applying a magic tattoo, a creature can customize the tattoo's appearance. A magic tattoo can look like a brand, scarification, a birthmark,

patterns of scales, or any other cosmetic alteration.

ELDRITCH TATTOO

Wondrous item (tattoo), rarity varies

Source: Tasha's Cauldron of Everything, House Rule

Inscribed by a warlock who channels their patron's power through a needle and specially prepared ink, this tattoo contains a single spell of up to 5th level. The warlock infuses the ink with otherworldly energy as they create the design directly on a creature's skin. The tattoo's appearance often reflects the nature of the patron who empowered it—fiery lines for a Fiend, twisting patterns for a Great Old One, or thorny vines for an Archfey.

Once the tattoo is on a creature's skin, the creature can cast its spell, requiring no material components. The tattoo glows with an otherworldly light while the creature casts the spell and for the spell's duration. Once the spell ends, the tattoo vanishes from the creature's skin.

The level of the spell in the tattoo determines the spell's saving throw DC, attack bonus, spellcasting ability modifier, and the tattoo's rarity, as shown in the Eldritch Tattoo table.

Eldritch Tattoo

Spell Level	Rarity	Spellcasting Ability	Saving Throw DC	Attack Bonus
		Mod.		
Cantrip	Common	+3	13	+5
1st	Common	+3	13	+5
2nd	Uncommon	+3	13	+5
3rd	Uncommon	+4	15	+7
4th	Rare	+4	15	+7
5th	Rare	+5	17	+9

The rarer a magic tattoo is, the more space it typically occupies on a creature's skin. The Magic Tattoo Coverage table offers guidelines for how large a given tattoo is.

Magic Tattoo Coverage

Tattoo Rarity	Area Covered
Common	One hand or foot or a quarter of a limb
Uncommon	Half a limb or the scalp
Rare	One limb
Very Rare	Two limbs or the chest or upper back
Legendary	Two limbs and the torso

Eldritch Tattoo Costs

Spell Level	Time	Cost
Cantrip	1 day	15 GP
1	1 day	25 GP
2	3 days	100 GP
3	5 days	150 GP
4	10 days	1,000 GP
5	25 days	1,500 GP

CRAFTING AN ELDRITCH TATTOO

Source: Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide, House Rule

We use the rules for crafting spell scrolls with modifications:

To craft an *Eldritch Tattoo*, you and any assistants must have proficiency in the *Arcana* skill. You must be proficient with *Tattooist's Tools* and use them to create the tattoo. Any assistants must also have proficiency.

A spellcaster can transfer a spell onto a willing creature's skin and create an *Eldritch Tattoo*, using the rules below.

Time and Cost. Creating a tattoo takes an amount of time and money based on the level of the spell, as shown in the Eldritch Tattoo Costs table. For each day of inscription, you must work for 8 hours. If a tattoo requires multiple days, those days needn't be consecutive.

Prerequisites for the Tattooist. To create a tattoo, you must have proficiency in the *Arcana* skill and with *Tattooist's Tools* and have the spell prepared on each day of the inscription. You must also have at hand any Material components required by the spell; if the spell consumes its Material components, they are consumed only when you complete the tattoo. The tattoo's spell uses your spell save DC and spell attack bonus.

Cantrips. If the tattooed spell is a cantrip, the version on the tattoo works as if the caster were your level.

APPENDIX D — CAMPAIGN TIMELINE

The adventure began in 835 Post-Divergence (PD). This timeline refers to the day the party arrived in Palebank Village as “Day 1”.

UNNDILAR 835 PD

- **5 Unndilar, Day 34.** The cure is delivered to The Buyer, and the family of Irven Liel is saved.
- **4 Unndilar, Day 33.** The party reaches Syrinlya.

THUNSHEER 835 PD

- **31 Thunsheer, Day 29.** The party encounters wormkin and are pursued.
- **24 Thunsheer, Day 22.** Ferol Sal is destroyed. The antidote for the Frigid Woe is discovered.
- **23 Thunsheer, Day 21.** The party enters the south wing of Salsvault and defeats several constructs: flying swords and a flesh golem.
- **22 Thunsheer, Day 20.** A blizzard strands the party in the elemental’s cavern.
- **21 Thunsheer, Day 19.** Continued exploration of Salsvault. Defeated many zombies and a giant octopus. Received message from the Buyer: “Tulgi has passed away.”
- **20 Thunsheer, Day 18.** Continued exploration of Salsvault. Defeated a Rug of Smothering, several magically animated kitchen knives, and a mass of undead snakes. Discovered Ferol Sal’s note.
- **19 Thunsheer, Day 17.** The party arrived at the entrance to Salsvault and dispatched several ice mephits encountered outside. Halite and Whisper discovered a cavern containing an imprisoned fire elemental. The rest of the party entered Salsvault and began exploring it, encountering and defeating animated armors and zombies.
- **18 Thunsheer, Day 16.** The party encountered a revenant seeking someone named “Lucien”.
- **17 Thunsheer, Day 15.** The griffin left the

party. Halite found a white dragon egg and Kragor insisted on bringing it with them.

- **15 Thunsheer, Day 13.** A griffin joined the party after Scarlet removed an arrow from its wing.
- **11 Thunsheer, Day 9.** A young remorhaz attacked the party. Kragor’s fourth Entombed Dream.
- **10 Thunsheer, Day 8.** Kragor’s third Entombed Dream.
- **9 Thunsheer, Day 7.** The party left Syrinlya to find Salsvault. Whisper noticed a bright light streak across the sky.
- **8 Thunsheer, Day 6.** The Remorhaz arrived in Syrinlya. Orvo Mustave told his tale of Salsvault, and Kragor shared his Entombed Dreams with the party.
- **7 Thunsheer, Day 5.** A giant squid destroyed the *Frostfang*, and attacked the Remorhaz. Gerhard joined the party.
- **6 Thunsheer, Day 4.** Chef Ingrid taught some of the adventurers how to cook, and was revealed to be a werewolf. Kragor’s second Entombed Dream.
- **5 Thunsheer, Day 3.** The Remorhaz set sail from Palebank Village. Elara put on the show of a lifetime. Scarlet has a flumpf fever dream.
- **4 Thunsheer, Day 2.** Doctor Pepe joined the party. Hulil’s gang was defeated at Croaker Cave. The adventurers variously prepared, trained, and experienced epiphanies.
- **3 Thunsheer, Day 1.** The *Frostwind* arrived at Palebank Village. Urgon Wenth’s funeral procession. Kragor’s first Entombed Dream.
- **1 Thunsheer, Day -2.** Irven Liel purchased a blue vial from Hulil Tulgi. He and his family became infected with Frigid Woe.

DUALAHEI 835 PD

- **21 Dualahei, Day -12.** The *Frostwind* set sail from Icehaven.
- **18 Dualahei, Day -15.** Kragor arrived in

Icehaven.

- **12 Misuthar**, *Day -51*. Kragor left Bladegarden.

HORISAL 835 PD

- ? **Horisal**, *Day -60—90*. Urgon Wenth became infected with Frigid Woe.

HISTORY

- **~828 PD**. Artifacts from Aeor began making their way south into the Empire.
- **~775 PD**. Palebank Village was founded with the help of Elro Aladataur, who led the village for at least the next 60 years.
- **~735 PD**. Bladegarden joins the Dwendalian Empire.
- **539 PD**. The Dwendalian Empire was founded.
- **514 PD**. Rexxentrum was founded.
- **35 PD**. Uthodurn was founded.
- **~50 years Before the Divergence**. The Prime Deities bring Aeor crashing down.

DOCTOR PEPE

A former farmer turned rogue, Doctor Pepe's motives remain unknown.

ELARA STARGLIMMER

 LARA STARGLIMMER'S STORY begins with a cosmic ballet that predates her corporeal form—a celestial union between a radiant unicorn herald and a shimmering nebula, conspired by the whims of the cosmos. Her inception as a meteorite crashing into Exandria was not a harbinger of destruction but rather a seed of wonder sown in stardust, imbued with the divine potential of her celestial ancestors.

Upon impact, she emerged from the crater's heart as Awendë—the unicorn—the pure embodiment of beauty and grace. In this ethereal form, she traversed the verdant wilds, a creature of mystery and majesty who danced under the silver moonlight and conjured songs from the whispers of the wind and the rustling leaves. The primeval forests became her sanctuary, where she absorbed the narratives embedded in the earth, the flowing streams, and the ancient, moss-covered ruins that bore witness to the rise and fall of titans.

While the mortal world marveled at her rare appearances, Elara embraced the teachings of the few daring nature priests who sought her out, recognizing in them kindred spirits who honored the natural balance. These druids, whom she guided through secret trails and hidden groves, taught her the sacred rites of channeling nature's magic, augmenting her inherent celestial gifts with the primal energy of the world.

Driven by a compassionate longing to protect the fragile harmony she saw threatened by mortal folly, Elara felt an insatiable yearning to give voice to the silent serenade of the wild. Her enchanting stories and awakening melodies took human form, transforming her into a resplendent woman—a bard unparalleled in beauty and charisma.

PERSONALITY

Elara is a creature of contrasts—effortlessly poised and yet untamed. Her laughter

resonates like a rippling brook, infectious and soothing in equal measure, while her presence commands the attention of all who meet her. Although capable of deft persuasion and dazzling charm on the stage, she carries an air of mystery, her eyes often alight with mirth and quiet contemplation.

Her heart beats in time with the world's natural rhythm, perpetual melodies seeking harmony rather than discord. This drives her to seek her true calling—a purpose that aligns with her celestial legacy and the music that is her soul's perennial essence.

GOALS

Elara's journey is one of self-discovery and stewardship. She travels the lands in search of forgotten legends and hidden dangers, all while composing an opus of nature's splendor to mesmerize and educate. Her ballads, while delightful to audiences, bear an underlying message: a reminder of the delicate equilibrium that exists in nature and the constant need to nurture and protect it.

Each performance is a chance to inspire change; each ally, a potential partner in her quest to preserve her beloved wilderness. And while she values the joy of song and celebration, the threads of destiny that tie her to the cosmos beckon her to uncover the full extent of her capabilities—her truest calling as both bard and guardian of the natural realm.

GERHARD EISNER

Gerhard is the former captain of the *Frostfang*, rescued alongside his crewman Rorik and passenger Bret. He hails from Icehaven, from a family of fishermen who recently began ferrying passengers. He possesses a magical ring allowing him to walk on water. Deeply affected by the loss of his ship, he is travelling with the party for now, seeking rest and direction. He carries ship insurance procured from an Empire contact.

HALITE THE GOLIATH

A goliath fighter known for his strength, tactical mind, and mastery of the trident and javelin. He seeks adventure to discover knowledge to bring back to his people.

KRAGOR GRIMSTRIDE

I AM KRAGOR GRIMSTRIDE, ORPHAN of Bladegarden. My parents were proud orcs of the Righteous Brand, fallen heroes who died defending our city's walls. But hushed whispers in the alleys hinted at a darker truth—betrayal, or sacrifices made in shadows. At five years old, none of that mattered. Only the gnawing emptiness of my belly and the cold stone streets that became my home.

I was never as strong or clever as the tyrannical bullies who ruled the streets. By deception, speed, stealth, and a silver tongue I survived until adulthood. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to be taken under the wing by a grizzled, retired veteran who had learned the art of tattooing while on tour near Xhorhas. He taught me the skill, and I scrapped together a few coppers as an apprentice. But my designs... they were never truly my own. Sometimes I would take up the needle, and my hands would move with a will I did not recognize, etching abstract, strange, and unsettling glyphs. Other than myself, they interested only a few mages, those who saw something beyond the ink on skin, something that mirrored the unsettling stirrings already taking root in my own mind. My mentor, Dagmuk, who taught me how to manifest these designs on my skin and others', often said I had a "touch for the unseen." He couldn't have known how literal that would become.

Even as I navigated the tangible threats of Bladegarden and the daily grind of survival, a far more insidious struggle began to unfold in the dark expanse of my unconscious mind. I don't know why, or how, but some presence... some thing... from outside our realm began whispering in my dreams—discordant, incomprehensible words, and images of impossible geometries. For months these dreams plagued me, a subtle, creeping insinuation into the corners of my mind. The murmurs were vague at first, then became

persistent, a distant echo of a vast, alien hunger stirring far beyond my comprehension.

My darkest hour arrived one night. After earning a decent sum from tattooing a wizard, I boasted about my newfound wealth, unaware that Brother Theron and his Tuskbreakers were watching. These thugs had terrorized downtrodden orcs like me for years. I was caught off guard and struggled to fend them off, but the blows rained down, each one a hammer against my fading strength. Blood filled my mouth. The world tilted into darkness. Feeble and desperate, despising the weakness that had always plagued me, my will to live burned hotter than ever. Then the whispers exploded into a roar inside my skull—an ancient will offering power beyond imagining. I screamed and I surrendered. Eldritch energy surged through my veins; my eyes bled black. The tattooed glyphs on my arms burned with a cold light. Muscles tensed unnaturally; power crackled at my fingertips. I didn't just fight back—I unleashed a storm. I obliterated one of the thugs and sent the others scattering into the night, their screams echoing my own.

Since then dream visions continued to haunt my slumber and reveal the depth of my awakened abilities. With my war hammer raised and eldritch energy crackling at my fingertips, I fought against the street tyrants at every opportunity, protecting those they sought to exploit.

Gradually, the chaos of my dreams began to coalesce into a chilling clarity—a command, stark and undeniable, and a promise of greater power. "Go north. Cross the frozen north. To Eiselcross." The purpose remained a shrouded mystery, yet a strange, cold resolve settled deep within me. I would follow.

When I went to give Dagmuk my farewell, he was gone and his shop was empty, abandoned. His tools were scattered like forgotten

memories. A scorched parchment bore one of my glyphs. An unspoken message? A warning? I felt a pang of loss for the only person who believed in me.

I hit the road with a cover story. A Righteous Brand veteran now seeking his own fortune was a tale that opened purses and secured passage. Merchants, traders, wandering groups paid for my protection, though my true purpose was survival. Traveling alone meant certain death. Joining caravans and groups was a matter of strategic necessity.

Nights were the hardest—when the cold bit through my cloak and the whispers in my mind grew louder, reminding me I was no mere soldier. Dangerous encounters were rare, but not nonexistent. Most challenges I met with a growl and a bluff, my war hammer a sufficient deterrent. But there were moments when mere brute force wouldn't suffice—moments when I felt the cold breath of death on my neck. It was then, when my instincts screamed that head-smashing is not enough, I would unleash the alien power within me, breaking the careful illusion of a simple veteran soldier. The reactions were always the same: a mix of shock, fear, and a quick retreat as

they recognized I was something else entirely. They would scatter, leaving me to continue my calculated journey, the whispers in my mind a constant companion.

Four weeks of winding roads and vicious winds carried me from Bladegarden, through Nogvugrot, Rexxentrum, and Yrrosa. Icehaven finally emerged from the Zemni Fields like a promise. Once I arrived, I made bargain with the first captain who would take me. The rest you know, as we all met on board the *Frostwind* on our way to Palebank Village.

APPEARANCE

From the journal of a traveler, name unknown, recovered from a windswept road north of Saltwallow Bog:

Of all the strange and disquieting souls one is fated to meet upon the winding roads of this world, few have etched themselves into my memory with such unnerving clarity as this singular orc. To look upon him is to read a page torn from two different books, one a gutter-dweller's grimy chapbook, the other a tome bound in the skin of something that fell from the stars.

He calls himself Kragor Grimstride, a name



that tastes of iron and long marches, and he wears the part with a practiced ease. The bearing of a soldier is there, in the straightness of his spine and the way his hand rests near the haft of a war hammer that seems, upon closer inspection, a trifle too heavy for him. He is an orc, yes—the mottled, greenish-gray skin, the dark architecture of his bones, the twin tusks jutting like broken daggers from his lower lip all attest to that. He wore no mustache, but thick sideburns descended to a dark beard that framed a jaw of resolute strength. He is a tower of a man, tall enough to cast a long shadow even in this wan light.

Yet, the illusion of the common sell-sword frays at the edges. Where one expects a bulwark of muscle, a physique hewn from granite, there is instead a certain wiry tension. He lacks the brutish mass of his kin; he is built not like a battering ram, but like a coiled whip, all lean sinew and a predator's deceptive grace. His strength is not in the breadth of his shoulders, but in the quick, assessing flick of his gaze and the low, persuasive timbre of his voice. He has survived not by breaking skulls, but by turning heads and twisting words—a truth that clings to him more closely than the worn leather of his armor.

His face is a study in contradictions. The long, jet-black hair, drawn back in a severe topknot, speaks of discipline. But his eyes... his eyes are where the true madness begins to leak through. They are not the simple, brutish black or bloodshot red of his race. They are the color of a winter sea beneath a sky of impossible clarity, a startling aquamarine. And within that startling blue, flecks of gold drift like motes of dust in a sunbeam—or, if one stares too long, like the shattered script of some forgotten, cosmic alphabet. There is an unnerving depth there, a sense that one is not looking *at* his eyes, but *through* them, into a gulf of chilling, silent space.

And then, there are the tattoos.

They are not the proud clan-marks or crude battle-scrawls of a typical orc warrior. These

are things of a different order entirely. They coil around his arms and spill across his collarbones, a filigree of stark black ink upon gray-green skin. At a glance, they might seem abstract, but to the discerning eye—or to the mind already teetering on the edge of certain esoteric truths—they are a disease made manifest in ink. They are a brand of unhallowed calligraphy.

There are no dragons, no skulls, no symbols of martial pride. There are only glyphs of a maddening, alien geometry. Spirals that seem to pull the eye into a lightless void. Angles that meet in ways that make the head ache. Lines that weave into patterns that suggest the skeletal framework of things that should not exist. They are not merely on his skin; they seem a part of it, and in the shifting light of the campfire, they sometimes appear to writhe, to shift their configuration ever so slightly when you are not looking directly at them. They whisper of a pact made not in blood, but in the currency of sanity itself.

He stands there, a charlatan of the mundane, his simple story a threadbare cloak thrown over a form scribbled with the signature of a lunatic god. He is an orphan, a veteran, a survivor. But he is also a vessel, a canvas for an artist whose studio is the void between worlds. One looks at Kragor Grimstride and sees a down-on-his-luck orc seeking his fortune, but one also feels an inexplicable chill, the same disquiet one feels when hearing a melody that is almost beautiful, but for a single, recurring, discordant note that promises only chaos and the dark.

BONDS

- **Vargun the Steadfast:** Father. Righteous Brand veteran. Circumstances of death unknown.
- **Ursa Rune-sight:** Mother. Righteous Brand veteran. Circumstances of death unknown.
- **Dagmuk Rift-hand:** Mentor and tattooist. Righteous Brand veteran who served on the border near Xhorhas. Mysteriously

disappeared after Kragor was summoned north by his patron.

Ever since his mentor Dagmuk disappeared, Kragor has no one. He bitterly holds on to what little memory of his parents he has. He treasures the only keepsake left to him: a chipped amulet featuring the symbol of Kord.

IDEALS

For Kragor Grimstride, faith is not a whispered prayer in a sanctioned temple; it is a pragmatic code forged in the shadow of his parents' dual legacies and hammered into shape on the unforgiving anvil of the streets. Having been orphaned and left to fend for himself after their mysterious end, Kragor is a survivor first and foremost. He views the divine not as beings demanding worship, but as philosophies to be utilized—a collection of tools for navigating a broken world. His True Neutral alignment is born from this harsh education, for his life has taught him the equal utility of both law and chaos. He doesn't believe in gods; he believes in results.

Both his parents were decorated veterans of the Righteous Brand. His father honored Bahamut with the straightforward piety of a loyal soldier, instilling in Kragor a respect for the Platinum Dragon as the symbol of his family's noble purpose: be the bulwark for the vulnerable, bring justice where there is none, and act with honor. Kragor witnessed the opposite in the alleys of Bladegarden—the strong preying on the weak—and clings to the ideal of protection his parents fought for. A silent nod to a carving of the Platinum Dragon on a barracks wall is not an act of worship, but a solemn vow to memory of his parents.

Yet, Kragor has no patience for the rigid laws and hierarchies of the Empire that ultimately failed to protect him. This defiant streak was nurtured by his mother. A decorated soldier herself, she walked a more dangerous path, secretly revering Kord within an underground community. From her, Kragor learned the core tenets of the Stormlord: the necessity of

personal might and the virtue of self-reliance. His mother's faith, forbidden by the Empire, represented the untamed orcish spirit—a chaotic but vital force required to break the chains of oppression. It taught him from his earliest days that true strength often operates outside the sanction of the law. After being orphaned and thrust onto the merciless streets, he grasped this truth in his bones.

This upbringing placed Kragor at the center of a fundamental conflict. The same Empire that had blessed his parents with status and meaning also forced his mother to practice her faith in secret and failed to protect him from falling into destitution. His hatred of rigid, authoritarian structures stems not from ideology, but from witnessing firsthand how his family was forced to live within such contradictions daily. When coupled with the brutality he later suffered from street predators, this forged a fierce opposition to tyranny.

His warlock pact is the ultimate and most logical expression of this philosophy. When he needed power to survive and to fight back, he didn't turn to prayer—not to his father's sanctioned god nor his mother's forbidden one. He made a deal. He welcomed a patron who could provide him with tangible tools—pact magic and eldritch invocations—to achieve his goals. Bahamut and Kord are not gods to be worshipped, but names for the two essential instruments he inherited and now wields to enforce his code: the righteous conviction that bullies need crushing, backed by the power and will to be the hammer.

Philosophical Textual Component Evidence		Ethical Axis	Moral Axis
		Indication (Law/Chaos)	Indication (Good/Evil)
Core Motivation	"fierce opposition to tyranny," "be the bulwark for the vulnerable, bring justice where there is none"	The goal of establishing justice can be Lawful, but opposing tyranny is often a Chaotic act. The motivation itself is ethically ambiguous.	Unambiguously Good. This mirrors ideals of protecting the innocent and fighting for the greater good.
View of Societal Law	"no patience for the rigid laws and hierarchies of the Empire," which "ultimately failed to protect him"	Strongly Chaotic. This is a clear rejection of established, legitimate authority based on personal experience of its failure and hypocrisy.	Neutral. The rejection is based on efficacy and personal grievance, not an abstract moral judgment on the nature of law itself.
View of Personal Code	"a pragmatic code forged... on the unforgiving anvil of the streets," a "solemn vow to memory of his parents"	Strongly Lawful. He adheres to an unwavering, internally consistent code inherited from his family. This is the definition of a personal code superseding societal law.	Neutral. The code is about "results" and "crushing bullies." This lacks the compassionate, merciful element of a truly Good philosophy, focusing instead on a rigid, retributive form of justice.
Methodology	"He made	Neutral.	Neutral.

THE WYRMLING

The wind howling down from the jagged teeth of Foren's frozen peaks did not merely bite; it chewed. It was a gnawing, insistent beast that sought to strip the warmth from bone and marrow, a fitting companion for the pair huddled in the lee of a wind-scoured rock formation, a few miles shy of the shivering outpost of Syrinlya.

Kragor sat cross-legged on a patch of permafrost he had diligently cleared of snow. He was a long, ropey figure of an orc, possessing little of the chaotic bulk common to his kin. His frame was all wire and leverage, draped in furs that smelled of ozone and old smoke. His face, lean and sharp-tusked, held the weary patience of a man who had spent his youth dodging the heavy boots of city guards in back alleys far warmer than this frozen hell.

Before him, curled like a glistening, thorny shrimp, lay Rime-flake. The white dragon wyrmling was five feet of absolute, crystalline malice, currently dormant. Their scales were the color of a clouded mirror, and their breath puffed out in little rhythmic clouds that turned instantly to ice crystals on the air.

"Wake up, you frost-bitten lizard," Kragor murmured, though the tone was affectionate. "School is in session."

The orc reached into a pouch at his belt, withdrawing a pinch of soot and a grain of rock salt. He began the ritual, a slow, ten-minute rhythmic chanting that felt less like casting a spell and more like greasing a lock. The starry, incomprehensible void that whispered in his ear enjoyed the breaking of barriers. *Comprehend Languages.* The magic settled over Kragor's mind like a wet, heavy blanket, filtering the world's noise into discernible meaning.

Flake's eye, a pool of pale, milky blue, snapped open. A low rumble started in his chest. «*Hunger. Meat. Warmth. Where?*»

The ritual caught the Draconic growls and translated them into concepts Kragor's street-

smart brain could parse.

“Meat later. Words first,” Kragor said. He stood, his movements fluid, lacking the lumbering gait of a warrior. He had the grace of a pickpocket. “Pay attention, Flake.”

Kragor stood with arms crossed. For this he needed no book, no magic words, no mystical gestures. His magic was the magic of the lie, the cheat, the beautiful fabrication. He tapped into the *Misty Visions* eldritch invocation, that endless well of deception his patron granted him.

The air between them shimmered, and then the mist coalesced into an image. It was crude at first, then sharpened into the form of an orc, a specimen typical of the species. The illusionary orc stood tall, leaning on a greataxe, looking imperious.

Kragor pointed a long, grey finger at his own chest, then at the illusion.

“*Nothok*,” Kragor enunciated, the Orcish word heavy and guttural.

The wyrmling uncoiled, neck snapping forward with the speed of a striking cobra. He sniffed the illusion. It smelled of nothing. Disappointed, Flake looked at the much more corporal Kragor.

«*Soft-skin. Meat-giver.*»

“No,” Kragor corrected, shaking his head. He tapped his chest again, harder. “*Nothok*.”

Flake tilted his head, the icy frills rattling. He let out a chuffing sound, a sharp bark of noise. “*Ghik*.”

«*Orc.*»

Kragor smiled, a flash of tusks. “Good. *Ghik*. I am the *ghik*. I am the *nothok*.”

Kragor waved his hand, and the illusion dissolved into swirling vapor. In its place, he willed a new vision. This one was grander. He sculpted the mist into a dragon—not a wyrmling, but a majestic, adult white dragon, wings spread wide, jaws open in a silent roar.

It was pure theater, a grander evolution of the crude distractions and sleight-of-hand Kragor had used to baffle marks in the bazaars, long before the stars whispered their secrets to him.

He pointed to the magnificent beast, then pointed to the small, frosty pug on the ground.

“*Kulkodar*,” Kragor said, infusing the word with reverence.

Flake puffed up his chest. He extended his own wings, mimicking the illusion. The vanity of the species was present even in the egg; the wyrmling looked at the image and saw no difference between its grandeur and his own small, deadly form.

“*Darastrix*,” Flake hissed, the sibilance carrying the pride of emperors.

«*Dragon.*»

“Aye, you vain little monster,” Kragor chuckled. “*Kulkodar. Darastrix*.”

Now for the hook. Kragor knew that to control a bully, one must control the desire. He dissolved the dragon and conjured yet another image: a heavy, iron-bound chest. The lid was thrown back, revealing a heap of gold coins and glittering gems.

To sell the con, Kragor leveraged the cantrip *Minor Illusion*. From the silent image came the distinct, heavy clink-clatter of gold coins spilling over one another.

Flake’s pupil dilated until his eye was entirely black. The instinct was ancient, coded into his being before he had even cracked his shell. He lunged, jaws snapping shut on the air.

His teeth passed through the mist. The clink continued, mocking him.

Flake let out a screech of frustration, swiping a claw at the empty air. «*Mine! Sparkles! Where?*»

Kragor stepped in, holding up a finger. “Not real, Flake. Magic. Look.” He pointed at the illusion. “*Grumbull*.”

The dragon snarled, agitated. He wanted the hoard. He wanted to sleep on it.

“Say it, and you get a snack,” Kragor bargained, producing a strip of dried jerky from his pocket.

Flake eyed the meat, then the fake chest. The calculus of survival outweighed the greed for a moment.

“*Rasvim*,” the wyrmling grumbled, the word dripping with acquisitive lust.

«Treasure.»

Kragor tossed the jerky. Flake snatched it out of the air with a snap that could have severed a hand.

“Last one,” Kragor said, wiping meat dust on his trousers. “Then we hunt.”

He altered the illusion of the chest, reshaping it back into the dragon. But this time, he animated it. The dragon beat its wings, lifting off the ground, circling higher and higher into the grey sky above the camp.

Kragor pointed at the soaring phantom, then looked at Flake. He made a sweeping gesture upward with his arms.

“Zes,” Kragor commanded.

Flake chewed the jerky contentedly, refusing to move. The ground was stable. The sky was work.

Kragor sighed. He concentrated, moving the illusionary dragon so it swooped down, acting as if it were about to steal the remaining jerky from Kragor’s pouch.

“It’s going to take the rest,” Kragor lied effortlessly, his skills of deception selling the casual warning.

Flake’s head snapped up. Rivalry. He wouldn’t let a cloud-ghost take his due! The wyrmling launched himself upward, claws scrambling on the ice for traction, wings beating frantically until he caught the updraft. He rose, five feet, ten feet, intercepting the illusion.

“Zes!” Kragor shouted up at him.

Flake batted through the smoke, realized he had been duped again, but held the hover, looking down at the orc with imperious disdain.

“*Austral!*” he shrieked down, the wind of his wings kicking up snow around the warlock.

«*Fly!*»

Kragor grinned, pulling his collar up against the wash of displaced air. The wyrmling drifted back down, landing with a heavy thump that cracked the ice. The lesson was over. The trust was tenuous, bought with lies and jerky, but it was there.

“Good one, Flake,” Kragor whispered, canceling the spell. The mist vanished, leaving only the biting wind. He watched the wyrmling settle back onto the ice, a small, perfect engine of destruction already preening with an emperor’s pride. Kragor saw the future coiled within that frosty form—the power to shatter armies, to become a god of ice and fear, another tyrant ruling from a throne of frozen bones. He’d seen that same arrogance in the eyes of petty street lords, and he felt a cold knot of resolve in his gut. This one would be different. This one would learn that true strength wasn’t the power to command, but the will to be commanded by none. “Be your own master,” Kragor murmured, the words almost lost in the gale. “Not someone else’s.”

SCARLET TANAGER



CARLET TANAGER GREW UP tangled in brambles and birdcalls, raised more by moss and moonlight than by halfling hearths. Her early days were wild — tracking foxes through the fog, mimicking bird whistles, and napping on sun-warmed roots with her owl companion Sparky perched nearby.

From the forest, she learned healing — which roots soothed pain, which fungus cured rot, which songs calmed frightened deer. But she also studied: sketching leaves in a threadbare notebook, tracking lunar cycles, deciphering glyphs etched in ancient bark.

The spirits of the land spoke to her. Not always in words, but in wind patterns and animal eyes. When she first called one forth — a shimmering elk that lingered only long enough to chase away a pack of wolves — she knew she was not just a druid. She was a Shepherd.

She's not without flaws. Scarlet's curiosity sometimes outweighs her caution. Her fingers tend to "borrow" interesting things, and while she trusts nature implicitly, she has a harder time trusting people. But she protects the wild and its creatures fiercely — and now, in Eiselcross, where magic runs old and thin beneath the ice, she listens for the voices only she can hear.

WHISPER OF MISTY VALLEY

A tabaxi sailor turned monk, known for exceptional agility, stealth, and scouting. She prefers claws and thrown weapons in combat, and will choose to grapple and securely bind given the opportunity.