




Fiction: Ice Out

Greg Tito treats us to a suitably chilling tale from Icewind Dale.

On these colder, darker nights, we offer the following piece of original fiction from Greg Tito (host of *Dragon Talk*). If the title is any clue, a certain movie involving knives being drawn may have served as initial inspiration. Only, this is a mystery set in the Forgotten Realms—and

inspiration. Only, this is a mystery set in the Forgotten Realms—and specifically Icewind Dale—where things really, *really* are not what they seem!



The sky darkened, and I was nowhere near my destination. I had discovered through a series of careful deductions that I'd find who I was looking for in the wilderness east of Ten-Towns. I normally wouldn't follow a quarry so far from Waterdeep, but I had always wanted to travel to Icewind Dale and my target was one I was quite interested in apprehending. Of course, if I had known the region was experiencing some kind of magical weather anomaly—and that the brigands I'd paid good dragons to accompany me would refuse to leave the relative safety of the Bryn Shander inn they're currently inebriated beyond function within—I would have reconsidered.

Still. Darma Fizzbottom is not a gnome that blanches before a challenge.

Blanching before spending a frozen night on her own in the wilderness of Icewind Dale, that's another matter.

I had to find shelter fast. The wind swirled as I looked to the horizon. The fur around my hood was laden with snow that had solidified into ice, weighing it down so visibility was even more difficult. But I dared not take off the hood. With the already meager daylight fading, the sky now shone with a colored light display that mocked my danger with its beauty. I couldn't see much on the horizon other than snow in every direction. I had long left the path behind and my snowshoes had helped me traverse the open tundra, but it had been slow going. Without shelter, I calculated my survival was less than a snowball's chance in Avernus.

Movement caught my eye. A small white hare poked its head out from a drift to my left, perhaps in search of vegetation. *pfffffftttTTTT* A projectile sped across my field of vision, piercing the hare and spraying red onto the snow behind it.

"Step aside," a voice said behind me. "That's my kill."

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A humanoid figure covered in white furs and bleached leathers strode up seemingly out of nowhere. They were around five feet tall, with a bone bow slung across their back. Two other hare carcasses hung from their belt beside a short sword in a sheath. The figure crouched near its quarry and deftly removed the arrow. A feminine face covered with a white paste looked back at me, then quickly returned to cleaning the hare.

"You are far out from town," she observed.

"I am."

"Unless you are a wizard, it is going to be hard for you to survive this night," she said.

"I was just considering the same thing," I replied. I decided to venture. "I assumed I'd be able to find shelter, but I'm willing to admit I was wrong."


"You were. It takes younglings ten years to master surviving out here. You don't look like you've been here a tenday," she said as she tied her kill to her belt and stood to face me.

"Correct again," I said quietly. I wasn't sure how to proceed here. I was in need, but some cultures don't respond well to requests for lodging from outsiders.

"I am Harrow Left-blade," she said proudly. Her eyes narrowed as she considered me closely. "You do not seem to have evil intent. Just ignorance."

"Well, that may be the first time someone described Darma Fizzbottom thusly, but, in this specific instance... you are once again correct."

She reached a decision. "Come. I will bring you to my companions. You will not die from exposure this night." Harrow turned and began trudging northeast. I followed in her footsteps.



Harrow walked ahead of me, silently. Her tread was extremely light which led me to deduce she was an elf or at least had elven blood. The swirl of the wind increased further as the grey twilight of what passed for day in this cursed land turned to blackness. Harrow didn't pause, and led me directly into a depression nestled between large weathered stones. The opening had a small amount of smoke rising from it into the aurora above. Harrow whistled a pattern of three notes and led me forward.

At the cave mouth, a swarthy human nodded to Harrow as she led me inside. "Brought more than supper, I see," he muttered from his mustachioed mouth. I knew he referred to me, but I was suddenly wary that I was just as trapped. "Hope there's enough. I'm starving." Harrow ignored him.

Inside was a small cave, generally circular in shape. A single log burned in the center and seated around it was an assortment of characters it surprised me to see gathered here, in the wilds of the Icewind Dale. They looked more suited to the seedier taverns of the Dock Ward.

To my left was another elf, this one sitting beside a staff topped with a transparent gem wrapped in bleached leathers. The pale elven face was oddly contorted, perhaps because she was grimacing as she saw me enter. Next to her was a very large and muscular figure seated on a flat stone, perhaps more than eight feet tall when standing. The goliath, for that is what I guessed he was, regarded me flatly. Three young dwarves were across the small fire from where Harrow and I stood, and they were laughing loudly at their own jests. To my right was seated an armored knight of Tymora, based on the sigil on the shield leaning against his thigh. He laughed with the dwarves, shaking his head, then watched me enter with piercing brown eyes.

Harrow stepped forward with the three hares and fashioned a crude spit for them to roast upon. "Before you ask, this is Darma Fizzbottom. I found her outside and thought maybe she'd rather sleep here with you stinking lot than die the cold death," she said casually. Harrow pulled back her hood to reveal brown hair and large ears with a rounded point. Half-elf.

hood to reveal brown hair and large ears with a rounded point. Half-elf, then.

"Welcome, friend gnome," said the knight, the firelight brightening his brown complexion. "I am Axios of Arabel, priest of Lady Tymora, and lover of risky moves. But even I wouldn't venture out in this weather alone!"

The dwarf on the left laughed and slapped his knee. "Did you bring anything to drink at least?" asked the dwarf on the right.

"Sadly, I did not," I said, looking down at my hands aching from the cold. "I appreciate the kindness of Harrow offering me respite. I overestimated my ability to find shelter while traveling here. Is it always this bonechillingly cold?" I laughed nervously as I shook out my cloak.

"Watch it!" exclaimed the mustachioed man. "You're getting snow all over Fluffy!" He rushed from his position at the mouth of the cave to kneel beside a sleeping fox curled up beside a backpack and bedroll.

"Oh be quiet, Sebastien," said the elf spellcaster. "That fool thing is smarter than all of us and is already snoring."

"Aren't you supposed to be watching the door?" said the center dwarf. "You keep letting in more people and we're going to have to start asking for gold!" The dwarves laughed again.

"What brings you to Icewind Dale?" asked Axios, setting down his shield and beckoning me to sit beside him at the fire.

"I'm looking for someone. I have found several pieces of evidence from which I've determined they are attempting to elude capture by coming to Icewind Dale. I think they are living alone out here, only returning to Easthaven for supplies once a month or so," I said. I was fairly certain they wouldn't hurt my search, and I was starting to suspect they might even help if I played my cards efficiently.

"So what'd they do? Something right awful, I reckon," said the dwarf on the left.

"They did," I said. "What about you? Are you dwarves employed as miners?"

"They did," I said. "What about you? Are you dwarves employed as miners?" I gestured to their picks.

"We're Barrowdiggers. I'm Gus." The center dwarf put his right hand on his chest then pointed to his left and then right. "This is Berren, and this is Darren. We make a living carving up the frozen ground to lay the dead to rest in this gods-forsaken land. And when that's not paying the bills, we make our dungeoneering services available. Got a problem that's getting bigger? Call the Brothers Barrowdigger."

"That's bloody brilliant, Gus," said Derren. "You've never been able to come up with a slogan so poetic before. I thought you were allergic to rhymes!" The dwarves laughed, but Derren did look with concern at his brother.

Axios turned to me. "We asked them to come with us to clear up reports we'd heard of something vicious out near the deposits out east. Yeti probably, or maybe something worse. Duergar, maybe. One of the witnesses mentioned snow golems, but we're pretty sure she was as drunk as Gus here. Sheriff Markham himself hired us to go out and investigate for a pretty pile of gold."

"You're not going to cut her in too, are you?" asked the elf.

"I mean, who knows?" Axios replied. "Are you good in a fight?"

"Not really. I can cut my way out of a tangle and hide in the corner till trouble passes," I stated. "My talents lie more in making sense of what's occurred and reporting that to the authorities or people like yourselves. Folks find it easy to underestimate gnomes and that makes my job a lot easier sometimes."

"She works for those Lord's Alliance fops," the elf said, looking down at me with a look icier than the terrain outside.

"I am most certainly not affiliated with any specific agency. I accept the assignments that intrigue me and then I serve my client's needs to their fullest in uncovering the truth of what happened to their associates or loved ones. For that service, I demand payment," I replied. "Is that so different from you accepting a task for the Sheriff of Bryn Shander in

loved ones. For that service, I demand payment," I replied. "Is that so different from you accepting a task for the Sheriff of Bryn Shander in exchange for some gold?"

At that, she stayed silent. I felt the stalemate, so I decided to press my advantage.

"I've told you my name. Who are you and may I ask if I'm correct in guessing you have white dragon blood in your veins?" I asked her.

Her eyes widened almost to bursting. She bolted to her feet, grabbed her staff, and slammed it down perpendicular to the ground. A lace of ice immediately spread from it to where I stood. "Stay your tongue, gnome, before I freeze it in place!"

I took a deep breath. "It wasn't that difficult to deduce," I said calmly. "With all due respect, your eyes are colder than a mephitis's soul. Your staff is well-worn and adorned with quartz, but I see no spellbook so I guessed you are able to cast spells innately. There is also the draconic rune for ice etched in large friendly letters your staff."

I gestured to the staff she was brandishing towards me. She looked at it, then back at me. "I ... didn't realize it was so obvious."

"We all knew," said Axios. "It's all right, Tyra. You can sit down."

"Yes, well, I am sorry," she said, sitting. "I am Tyra Shaeldin. I don't know much about my ancestry but, yes, you guessed correctly. I was just gobsmacked you figured it out after only just meeting me."

"I often have that effect on people," I replied amiably.

Harrow got up from the fire. "The conies are cooked. Dig in," she said as she grabbed a leg, sat down cross-legged and tilted her head so she could bite into the meat like a feral carnivore.

The rest of us followed her lead, and the meal passed in silence. I supposed we were all hungry.

"Good meat," said the goliath in a deep baritone. I looked up inquiringly. His gaze met mine and, I swear to Garl, he nodded.

"So how did a goliath get involved in this endeavor?" I asked.

When the goliath didn't answer, Axios said, "He was here when we arrived. We asked him if it was all right for us to enter the cave, and he nodded. That's the first thing I've heard him say all night!"

"Complimenting an elf's cooking," said Gus Barrowdigger. "Not sure he's right in the head."

The two dwarves snickered but the others ignored the comment. The mood had quieted, and with the night getting colder everyone began setting up their bedrolls near the fire. The goliath curled up in the back of the cave.

"I thank you all for your hospitality," I declared. "You certainly saved this gnome from perishing in a most terrible way. Garl bless you all."

There were a few grunts of assent and Axios said, "It is our duty to help those in need."

Harrow laid her roll beside mine. "You're welcome, little one," she said. "May Selûne light your night's passage."

There were a few more exhalations of air as we all settled into rest. The wind blew steadily outside the cave mouth. I slept.



Fitful sleep in an unfamiliar place can sometimes feel like a series of thoughts and sensations displayed in your memory like so many illusions. I remembered several of these clearly from that night:

- A loud passing of wind from a dwarf and brief laughter.
- Footsteps as someone lightly walked past me in the cave, and then back again.
- A fox's small bark.

again.

- A fox's small bark.
- A rumble of thunder.
- Clattering as something fell to the hard floor.
- The strong odor of smoke as the fire went out.
- A deep sigh from the back of the cave.
- A critter digging.

Then it was morning, and I was awakened by a loud voice indicating tragedy.



The first thing I knew was that Harrow was dead. All the characters I had met the night before were huddled around the body. The exclamation I heard had come from one of the dwarves, no doubt as they woke up and found the gore. They looked at me as I rose from my bedroll. I tried to gather my wits as quickly as I could from the deep slumber into which I had finally fallen. Something felt off. Perhaps I hadn't adjusted to sleeping in the cold, perhaps something else was afoot. I shook my head and focused on the horror before me.

Harrow's limp form lay on the ground, about ten feet from the fire and fifteen feet from where her bedroll laid beside mine. She had a stab wound above her heart, likely made with a small, sharp blade. A pool of blood was beneath her, now congealed and almost solid from the cold. Her own blade was on the ground beside her body. It was covered in blood.

In my mind, a few details clicked together to form a neat box. I looked up at each of their faces, including the goliath who leaned over them all.

"Harrow Left-Blade has taken her last breath," said Axios solemnly. "She was a good friend and a calming force in the storm here in the Dale. Harrow, if we can't raise you, you will be remembered for your valor, your

Harrow, if we can't raise you, you will be remembered for your valor, your candor, and your unwavering aim. May Tymora bless your fate in this world and the next."

"What happened to her?" Sebastien said with a crack in his voice. "Did you do this, gnome?"

"Obviously she did," said Tyra. "It's the only explanation that makes sense." She moved her staff in front of her as an obvious threat.

"It is pretty damn suspicious you just showed up out of the blue last night," Berren said. "What have you got to say for yourself? You one of those Zhent assassins or something?"

I took a breath. "I didn't—"

"Of course, you'd deny it!" screamed Sebastien. "I'll gut you!" He rushed forward drawing his rapier as I held my hand up.

Axios stepped in front of Sebastien. "Let's at least hear her out before passing sentence, Sebastien. Go on, Darma. You didn't kill Harrow? How do we know that?"

I put down my hand. "I can figure out who was behind this heinous crime. As I told you last night, I am an investigator by trade," I said. "I find things out. I've done it in Waterdeep for decades and various other municipalities along the Sword Coast. If you are truly interested in uncovering who killed Harrow, give me an hour and I will tell you all what I've deduced. I already have a working theory."

"What are you talking about? You think we should just let you live after what you did?" Sebastien said. The point of his rapier was at my throat even as Axios pushed him back.

"I understand your dismay. I understand the need for someone to answer for their crimes, more than you know. That's why I'm here in the frozen wastes looking for someone who wronged me," I said looking to the others. "But please, all I'm asking for is a bit of time and I believe we can then possess a positive determination of what happened to Harrow. And

then possess a positive determination of what happened to Harrow. And maybe even prevent it from happening again. That's worth a bit more than my head, isn't it?"

The import of that point kept them silent for a moment.

"We have a traitor here," Tyra said. "Or at least someone capable of murder. I don't really want to go on with any of you lot if we don't figure out which one of us it was, and fast. Should we give her time, Axios?"



"How do we know she won't just bugger off?" Gus said.

"You can stay in my presence if you don't trust me," I said. "In fact, I'd recommend it, in order to uphold the sanctity of this investigation. All I need to do is ask a few questions and dig around a little to confirm my theory."

They looked at Axios. "You really think you can figure all this out in just an hour?" he asked me.

"Yes." My gaze met his.

"Then that's worth the gamble for me. Fine then. I'll stay with you. I'm not letting you magic any illusions to weasel your way out of this, but if you can tell us all what happened here, I think we'll all be grateful."

"Thank you."

"Well don't thank me yet. I may let Sebastien have your head after all," he said. "Go on then, take your look and let's get on with this. The rest of you, see if you can catch something for breakfast. We lost our best hunter, and a good friend. We'll need luck if we're going to survive out here." The group

a good friend. We'll need luck if we're going to survive out here." The group began to move. He looked back at me. "You have a bit of time. Don't make me regret giving it you, Darma Fizzbottom."

"You won't," I said.

Axios nodded without a smile. The rest of the group shuffled out of the cave.



I examined the body a little more closely. The wound wasn't new. Most of the blood wasn't even sticky to the touch. A single blade did this. There weren't any other wounds.

"Killed by her own blade," Axios said. "What's a worse fate than that?"

I moved her body slightly to expose her left arm. There was an arrow in Harrow's fist, held by the fletching as if she was going to shoot it or stab with it. Her bow was strung as well a few feet away. Interesting. It appeared as if Harrow was crouching beside her bedroll right before she was killed.

After a few moments sifting through the fire, I was satisfied my initial assessment was correct, but I still had to eliminate all other possibilities. "I'd like to speak with Sebastien first," I said to Axios.

He relayed my request outside. Luckily, he was still nearby. Sebastien entered the cave with Derren Barrowdigger behind him.

"I'd like to speak to Sebastien without interruption, Derren," I said to the dwarf.

"Get your britches back on, I'm just grabbing some hard tack. Slim pickings for hunting snow bunnies on the slopes this morning, and I'm hungry as a yeti," he grumbled as he moved to his backpack, grabbed it, and walked back out of the cave.

Sebastien hadn't moved from the front of the cave. He was dressed in his brown leathers, and I saw he had recently sharpened his rapier from how

brown leathers, and I saw he had recently sharpened his rapier from how he fingered the hilt. I could tell Sebastien didn't appear comfortable, and it went beyond just being cold. I didn't see the fox anywhere in the cave, and his glances to the empty bedroll were telling.

"Did you lose your fox?" I asked.

"No. Not lost. I think she ran away," Sebastien said softly. "She didn't like me as much as—"

"As Harrow?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Harrow was the one who found her. She brought it back to our camp a few days ago, intending to kill it, I think. It was me who said the fox seemed to like her. Harrow wasn't convinced it wouldn't end up taking food away from us or causing trouble. I guess she was right."

"You can't think the fox did this," I said.

He shook his head. "I just meant I had a bit of dried meat in my pack I was saving for a special occasion. That meat's gone. Same with the fox." He sighed. "Same with Harrow."

"You loved her," I stated.

His eyes met mine for the first time. Sebastien didn't say anything, but his look told me all I needed to know about that.

"What do you think happened to her?" I asked.

"Other than being betrayed by a gnome she brought in from the snow, I'm all out of ideas," he said bitterly. "She was always so careful. So ... confident. I can't believe she's gone. Whatever did this to her had to have tricked her somehow. Like an illusion or some kinda shape-changing monster. It had to be magic. Tyra's or some other foul mage or—"

"Do you think Tyra's involved?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"I didn't say that," he snapped. "Tyra's been with us for a long time. If she had it out for Harrow, she could have done her when we were fighting that

had it out for Harrow, she could have done her when we were fighting that blight troll in Luskan. Or pushed her off the deck of the Hawk's Down. Tyra wouldn't have nursed her back to health like she did all last month if she just meant to kill her out here."

"I see. What's your opinion of the Barrowdiggers?" I asked. "Are they always so blustering?"

He snorted. "Yeah, I suppose they are. I guess the gallows humor is all they've got going for them."

"That's quite funny," I said without laughing. "All right. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

"I can't think of anything," Sebastien said. His anger melted the longer he stood in the cave. "Do you truly think you know what's happening here? None of it seems right. None of it."

"On that we can agree," I said. "Thank you, Sebastien. Please send Gus Barrowdigger in here next."



"What you need answered, then?" Gus asked as he practically stumbled into the cave.

"Liquor keeps the blood flowing," he explained, pulling out a silver flask and handing it out to me. "Everybody knows that."

I hesitated. And then grabbed it from him to take a swallow. "You're right, Gus," I said, coughing a bit from the taste. "It does help. Somewhat."

"Aye. It does at that," he said.

Axios ambled over. "Mind if I take a swig? This morning is tough."

"I'm plum out, Axios my friend," Gus lied. "This damn gnome must have drank all mine!"

"Tymora has left me, what terrible luck!"

"Tymora has left me, what terrible luck!"

"Go out and grab Berren's flask. Tell him I said to give you a pull," Gus said.

"Gentlemen, may I return to my questions?" I prompted.

Axios turned to me, then back to Gus. "Keep an eye on her for me, Gus. I'll be right back." He left the cave.

"So how long have you known Harrow?" I asked.

"Oh, a few years, I suppose," Gus said. "Axios and this crew have been pottering about Ten-Towns, doing odd jobs for anyone who could pay. You know, the kind of dirty work my brothers and I can't usually handle on our own."

"Such as?" I think I had an idea, but I wanted to hear him describe it.

"Well there was that time the fishermen from Lonelywood were convinced there was a wereshark—or was it a sharkwere?—in the lake there. That was a hell of a story they used to tell, with Harrow casting that spell to speak with animals, and talking the big knucklehead down from eating any more men," he said.

"What can you tell me about Axios of Arabel? They all seem to look to him if anything needs to be decided," I said.

He took another pull from the flask. "He calls the shots, yeah. It's usually up to him if they call in outside help like us, so I've always tried to stay on his good side if you know what I mean. Doesn't hurt to get extra work if Axios is in a good mood. It also doesn't hurt that he's sweet on our sister!" Gus smiled.

I ignored that. "What do you remember about last night?"

"Well you showed up at our fire, and a newcomer always makes for stimulating conversation," he drawled.

"The goliath was new to your group too, was he not?"

"The goliath was new to your group too, was he not?"

"Oh yeah, sure, but so was the log in the fire and both had about as much to say of interest."

"A lone individual waiting in a cave like this on the exact night you happened to be walking by on an errand," I proposed to him. "Doesn't that strike you as something worth considering?"

He paused. "Come to think of it, that is a mighty odd coincidence. You reckon he killed Harrow then?"

"Perhaps," I demurred. "Perhaps he was just in the absolute wrong place at exactly the right time."

"Eh?"

"Thank you. That will be all. I'll speak to the goliath next please, if you would be so kind as to mention it to him."

"That's it then? You don't even want to ask what I heard in my sleep last night? It's probably the only clue you'll need to figure out this whole caper. It might even be the key to solving this whole thing." His laughter was disarming, I gave him that.

"Very well. What did you hear in your sleep last night?"

"Nothing." Then he farted and walked out of the cave.



Goliaths are giant-kin. They are perhaps as opposite to my people as can be, so it's no wonder I haven't had much contact with them in the cities to the south. I gathered from folks in Ten-Towns that they see them a bit more often. Representatives from the goliath communities do travel to what counts as civilization here for supplies they can't gather or manufacture on their own. The large folk are always so taciturn, I was told, so the reticence of the extremely tall person who entered the cave for my last interview wasn't that surprising.

last interview wasn't that surprising.

But, Carl damn it, he was still unnerving.

The goliath re-entered the cave with Axios behind him. The goliath stooped low and sat down slowly while Axios sat a few feet away. The goliath looked at me with sad, dark brown eyes. His bald head had scars that almost looked like claw marks, but it was hard to tell from this distance. The two of us staring at each other—one small, one very large—must have been a striking image for Axios to observe.



I had to break the silence. "What is your name?" I asked without any expectation he would answer. He was quiet for an uncomfortable amount of time until he suddenly spoke seemingly without drawing much breath.

"I was called Orilothal," he said. The goliath's voice was a deep bass rumble, more felt than heard.

Axios grunted. "I'll be damned. He can talk."

I kept my attention on the goliath. "You were called that? Not anymore?"

"It has been a long time since anyone called me any name," he said.

"I see. You have been separated from your people. Were you exiled?"

There was a long pause. "I cannot return."

"Why is that?"

"Destiny demands I wander," Orilothal said. He didn't elaborate.

"Destiny demands I wander," Orilothal said. He didn't elaborate.

"What was your purpose in this cave last night?" I asked.

He hesitated. "I had no purpose other than shelter. But when you smallfolk began to arrive, I wondered if there was a task for me to perform."

"And what might that be? The murder of a half-elf hunter?" I asked.

"No," Orilothal said.

I narrowed my eyes but his face gave no indication of emotion or tension. I decided to change the subject.

"Are you of the Skytower or Wyrmdoom clan?"

"My people called themselves Akannathi," he said. "From Skytower Shelter."

"And do Akannathi ever conspire with dragons?" I asked.

"No."

"Not even to get back at those pesky Wyrmdooms?"

"No."

"Must be frustrating for dragon-slayers to have their rival clan work with their enemies?"

"The naming of the Wyrmdoom Clan is more of an honorific than a description of their activities," he rumbled.

"I see," I murmured. "Who do you think killed Harrow?"

"I think you know," said Orilothal with a slight nod of his head. "Something else was in this cave last night. Do you have any guesses as to what that might be?"

Axios stared over at me as well, curious.

"I do."

"I do."

"The footsteps were very quiet. Almost as if made by something extremely small," he said. "There's only one type of creature of which I'm aware that would be able to change its size so dramatically and perhaps induce criminal behaviors in others."

Orilothal looked at me. Axios said, "Wait, what creature? Do you mean the fox?"

I looked up at Orilothal. "You'll assist me with the others then?" I trusted him more now than when the interview began.

"Yes."

"Very well. Let's get this over with!" I clapped my knee and stood up. "Axios, you can bring everyone in now."



"Thank you for giving me the time necessary to understand clearly what occurred last night. It has been a difficult morning. It is never easy to say goodbye to a friend. I hope I can give you some closure. Meaning, I can now tell you exactly what happened last night."

They were all seated in roughly the same position around the fire as they were last night. Harrow's body had been moved and wrapped in extra hides Orilothal had with him. The arctic fox was gone. The three Barrowdiggers, Axios of Arabel, Sebastien, Tyra, and the goliath all looked at me in anticipation. I cleared my throat.

"Usually when a murder occurs among an isolated group like this, my first thought is to suspect betrayal from within. I apologize if this is uncomfortable to hear, but I assumed that was the case here. There were so many possibilities that I needed to look through each one in turn.

"Sebastien," I said clearly. His handsome face looked at mine with pain in his eyes. "You could have killed Harrow since you obviously had a connection to her. You were taking care of the fox to try to impress her simply because she remarked at how much she admired the creature.

simply because she remarked at how much she admired the creature. Harrow was a very special person to you, wasn't she?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"But she didn't return your affections, did she?" He shook his head sadly. "She didn't like you keeping the fox. She didn't seem to want to have anything to do with you romantically at all. Unrequited love happens all the time, however, but I don't see that as a motive here for murder. You seem more sorrowful for your loss than regretful for what you've done. And if you did awaken in the night to confront her, one of us likely would have heard discussions or arguments between you. No, the crime simply occurred too stealthily for me to consider Sebastien the murderer."

He looked down at the ground before him. I went on.

"Tyra Shaeldin," I said. Her fierce, wide eyes turned from observing Sebastien and snapped on me. "You were extremely unpleasant to me last night. There is certainly a cold fire of hatred and anger burning in your soul. Of all the members of this group, you appeared to me as the most likely to commit murder in cold blood."

"Why you little—" she sputtered.

I raised my hand. "Hold your thought," I interrupted. "I was about to say that my quick assessment was not entirely accurate. Your anger is too generalized, honestly, to be directed at any one individual. You hate everyone equally. And while you are clearly a fierce fighter, you guard your companions' well-being just as fiercely. You healed Harrow recently. I might even posit to say that Harrow was important to you, too. Perhaps even a confidante. You might have killed her to make sure she kept your secrets safe."

Tyra drew a quick breath to speak but I cut her off again. "But no, you were in a deep trance last night and didn't even react when your staff was knocked over clattering to the ground." She exhaled, still glaring at me. "I don't believe you murdered Harrow."

"Axios of Arabel," I said. The knight looked at me, the mirth I saw behind

"Axios of Arabel," I said. The knight looked at me, the mirth I saw behind his eyes last night was gone. "You are an amiable fellow, and you are respected by your friends and peers. Even the dwarves like you, but I suspect that has more to do with the gold they make off your exploits than anything else. There is, however, the matter with you and Edna Barrowdigger."

"What?" he said quickly. "How did you know about that? Gus! What the Nine Hells is wrong with you?"

"I might ask you the same question, laddie," Gus roared. "Edna hasn't taken a bath since Marpenoth! What is wrong with your nose?"

I ignored them. "No matter. Your choice in personal relationships, Axios, doesn't appear to have any bearing on what happened to Harrow."

"Well thanks for making sure everyone knew," he spat at me. I couldn't help but smirk at him coyly.

"That brings us to our lovely friends, the Barrowdiggers," I continued. I tried to bring my high-pitched voice a little lower in octave. "Derren, Berren, and Gus. The three of you are rude mechanical gits. Bluster and biting comments are a tough exterior that hides the fact you are cold, starving, and downright scared about whether you are going to make it through this eternal winter. That desperation and vulnerability can sometimes manifest as rough humor, and an unquenchable thirst."

"You're damn right!" the dwarves exclaimed.

"If put in a life-or-death situation, I'm sure you may have been able to murder someone or something. That's why you are brought along by Axios in the first place! I've seen no evidence, however, to suggest you moved off your bedrolls last night."

Sebastien stuck out a thumb pointing to Orilothal said, "What about the goliath?"

"Part goliath," I corrected. "He's a lycanthrope. Part-goliath, part werebear. Borne by Oyminartok, according to the legend I heard in Bryn Shander. His

Borne by Oyminartok, according to the legend I heard in Bryn Shander. His name is Orilothal. And no more evil than the Morninglord himself."

The goliath nodded. "It is true," he said. "I have no ill will towards any of you. In fact, I am going to help you."

Orilothal stood and took a deep breath. He took off his furs to reveal a bare, grey chest with a carpet of curly white hair. His muscles pulled and stretched as he spread his arms and threw back his head. The fur grew thick and spread across his torso. Orilothal the goliath was no more as he grew to twelve feet high, now a huge polar bear with fearsome claws where his stretched hands had been.

There was a cry of alarm from the group. They were already on edge, but seeing a goliath turn into a very large bear pushed them over into full readiness.

With two thuds as oversized paws hit the ground, the bear leaned on its front haunches and waved its snout in front of them all. Eyes piercing, nostrils flaring, Orilothal the polar bear was searching intently for prey.

Sebastien grabbed his rapier, Tyra her staff. The dwarves looked in all directions as Axios created a veritable mist cloud around himself huffing and puffing the cold air.

"Have they come already?" I said in a calm voice. Orilothal did not respond and continued to growl. The bear's snout was unnervingly similar to the goliath's features.

"Has who come?" Derren barked.

"When I had ruled out all of you as Harrow's murderer," I said as they scanned around, "I had to consider more fanciful scenarios. We do live in strange times, as you know. I thought about the fox. I'm sure you are all aware and have even fought beside druids who can change their shape at will, not unlike how our bear friend just did. I've heard rumors in Ten-Towns already of shape-changing spellcasters causing trouble in the name of whatever being is bringing us the cold. Casting spells on animals

name of whatever being is bringing us the cold. Casting spells on animals. Changing into wolves to chase away the livestock. It wouldn't be too far-fetched to believe one of them was masquerading as an arctic fox in order to sneak up on your group before you could do whatever it is the Sheriff wanted."

"Wait, you think Fluffy was an evil druid?" asked Sebastien, incredulously.

"I do not. I'm just merely stating all possibilities, however ridiculous," I returned. "That poor fox just wanted your fire for the night and the jerky from your pack. It's long gone and happy to be rid of you."

At that moment, a gust of wind briskly blew into the cave mouth. It was wickedly strong, unnaturally so, and everyone braced themselves against it. If there was a weapon still in its sheath, it popped out now. The Gravediggers held their picks at the ready, their wide, bloodshot eyes searching about. Tyra and Sebastien were both ready to strike. I wasn't sure where they would attack—at myself, at the were-bear, even at one another....

I kept going:

"Then I wondered about the fire itself. We've all read Volo's stories about creatures that can change their shape into any mundane object you might find in a dungeon. Crafty little buggers. Their whole life is a trick. There wasn't anything big enough to be a mimic in this cave, I thought at first, until I considered the log burning in front of us the whole time!" During that last bit, I'll admit, my high-pitched voice was a veritable squeak.

The wind kept blowing strongly. I couldn't stop talking.

"It could have used magic to avoid burning too badly, whether from a potion or a powerful ring," I continued. "And then just when the fire went out, it'd be ready to strike! Poor Harrow might have just woken up to pee at the wrong time."

"Something just ran past me!" Gus yelled.

Axios took charge, issuing commands: "Eyes open! We don't know what's

Axios took charge, issuing commands: "Eyes open! We don't know what's coming at us here."

"Well, I do," I said.

"Blessed Bahamut, tell us then!" Tyra's staff was moving in a sweep in front of her.

"Of course, it wasn't a mimic who drank a fire protection potion who killed Harrow last night. That too, would be ridiculous. Plus, I checked the log this morning and it really was just a piece of wood. No," I said. "I questioned Gus Barrowdigger because I wanted to eliminate the possibility that he was actually a doppelganger. His brother Derren remarked that something was off about him last night and, as I've learned in my vast experience with doppelgangers, any doubt in a family member or close friend, no matter how small, can be an indication they've been replaced. Thankfully, you were just drunk, Gus."

"Shut up! I can't focus," he muttered trying to quietly take out his flask and take another swig while holding his warpick against his chest. Orilothal roared and stalked around.

Sebastien was stabbing his rapier in different directions. "There!" he yelled. "Did you see that kick of snow just there!" He stabbed again. "Kyra, can you see *anything* invisible?"

"For the last time, I don't know that magic. I'm into frosty things, remember!" Her left hand grew icy and she waved it in front of her.

"Easy," Axios said. "Keep alert, everyone! And Darma, you better stay behind us if you want to stay alive. I wouldn't want you to gamble your life away." He put his hand on my shoulder protectively. I hate that.

"So then I really only had one possibility left," I said, ignoring him. "And Elminster's Razor tells us the only remaining possibility, no matter how incredible, how completely unthinkable, must be true."

I looked over at Orilothal. I was nervous. He nodded. I bit my lip.

"I killed Harrow Left-Blade," I announced.

"I killed Harrow Left-Blade," I announced.

They all stopped and stared at me.

Quietly, I raised Harrow's blade with my left hand. It was still covered in her blood.

The polar bear roared and charged towards me. I spun backwards to my right and, while falling and twisting, I threw the blade forward. Orilothal's bear claw swiped down viciously and struck ... nothing.

At the same moment, the blade I'd thrown stopped in mid-air. Suspended in front of the snarling bear.

A scream echoed both within the cave and in our minds. A desperate cry of pain and anger seared into us... and stopped.

Held in the bear's claws, with Harrow's blade embedded in its eye, was a dwarf with pale grey skin and a long white beard, under which I could see a necklace that looked as if it was made of ice. The polar bear dropped the body to the cold floor.

Its invisibility had ceased along with its life.

"Duergar," Berren said. He spat.

"What just happened?" Axios yelled. "Is Darma working with the duergar?"

"I knew it! You did kill Harrow!" Sebastien rushed forward as if to attack me, but the bear casually stepped in his way.

Tyra was looking at the duergar's body. She kicked at the necklace with her toe. "Incredible," she said.

"You see it now?" I asked her.

"Yes."

"See what?" asked Gus Barrowdigger.

"A duergar? What? Why'd you just tell us you killed her?" The questions

"See what?" asked Gus Barrowdigger.

"A duergar? What? Why'd you just tell us *you* killed her?" The questions poured out of Sebastien. They all looked at me again.

"Explain what's happening!" Axios said. "And whether we still need to kill you or not?"

I sighed. "I am not working with duergar... at least, not intentionally. But they were the first thing I thought of when you mentioned there'd been duergar sightings near the deposits. They are formidable foes, full of strange mental and magical abilities. If they felt threatened, they would have most certainly sent out a mind master to cover their tracks. This was their assassin, and Harrow was their first quarry. They meant to kill you all, picking you off one at a time before you even made it to the deposits.

"Last night, I think the fox woke Harrow by battling with something tiny in one of the small cave openings leading back to the surface."

I kicked the duergar. "It was this one, shrunk down to the size of a quickling. Harrow spotted it, and took an arrow out to shoot. But the duergar panicked and psionically reached out to me, seizing command of my body and forcing me to lunge out of my bedroll, grab Harrow's blade and stab her with it.

"It's a mighty powerful charm, even for a duergar mind master, but I think it used that enchanted necklace to empower its psionics. It all happened too fast for anyone else to wake up. The duergar must have hid in the tiny tunnel, planning to lie in wait to take out more of you.

"I dropped the blade and fell back to sleep right where I was on my own bedroll. I didn't know it. But I did it. I killed her."

I looked up at the bear, who was suddenly a goliath again and putting back on his hides. "I am sorry, little one," he said. "It is not fair you must carry that burden. I thank you for your honesty."

Axios came up beside us. "It would have been best if you had told us right away. We would have been more prepared for this attack," he said kindly.

away. We would have been more prepared for this attack," he said kindly. "But I don't hold you to blame for this. I think we can all agree on that." Axios looked around at Tyra, Sebastien, Gus, Berren and then Derren. They all nodded.

"I appreciate that," I said.

"Just buy us a drink next time you see us in town," Gus added.

"I will," I said. "I am pleased to have met you even under these circumstances. I should, however, continue on with my task and you must continue with yours." I stood, starting to collect my pack. "When you check out those deposits, you'll know to stay wary of duergar."

"And where will you go, Darma Fizzbottom?" Orilothal asked.

I put my cloak on. The fur lined hood surrounded my face and I swung the cloak back so that my small figure was dramatically framed in the bit of light coming through the cave's mouth.

"I'm going to go find my husband."



Then I was back trudging through the unbroken snow by myself. The wind blew across the drifts, frozen tendrils cutting through my coat as if it were full of holes. I longed for the warmth of southern climes and to be rid of this ice and wind. This dale was aptly named, and I hated it. The harrowing experience of this morning had put me in a bitter mood. *Garl* damn my husband for forcing this upon me. Why couldn't he have gone to Chult on his little escapade like any sensible person would?

I saw a white shape suddenly dart across my path. Arctic foxes are adept at camouflage. Why would it have run from me and spoil its hiding spot? I walked a few more steps and spotted a drop of red on the clean white snow.

The fox was there, looking at me. Was it Fluffy? I struggled to pull a small piece of jerky from my belt pouch with my cold fingers, and then I lifted it up to the arctic fox.

up to the arctic fox.

Slowly, tentatively, as if it were favoring one paw, Fluffy moved toward the meat. It stretched its snout and snatched the jerky from my hand and immediately began gnawing with sharp teeth. With Fluffy distracted, I looked at his hide and spotted the small wound. That shrunken duergar must have sliced Fluffy with a tiny axe last night. I took out some unguent from my pack and rubbed it into the cut. Fluffy seemed to appreciate my ministrations.

"I had you wrong at least," I admitted to the fox. "You only ran off when you were wounded, defending us."

"You are kind, little one," said a voice behind me.

"Orilothal!" I turned "You are stealthier than I thought."

"I am a hunter in his favored terrain," he replied.

"Indeed."

"Perhaps that's a skill you will require on your search?" he asked.

I put away my supplies and re-slung my pack over my shoulder. I looked back to see his goliath face looking down at me. "I just might. Your company would be appreciated, old man. I was recently shown how my odds of survival aren't too high out here. At least, not without a guide."

Orilothal chuckled. He strode forward, and I tried to keep up.

Fluffy yipped and followed on my left.

Greg Tito is a playwright, stand-up comedian, and podcast host who just happens to have a day job as a communications and PR professional for Wizards of the Coast. His short play "*Goodbye New York*" was published in the anthology *Stage This! Vol. 2*, and he produced a short film "*The Barista*" which was presented at the illustrious Wood's Hole Film Festival, before joining the ranks of video game journalists covering console and PC games for *The Escapist* and *Destructoid* websites. Through it all, his

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BACK TO TOP