

Winter's Cold Heart

A generic no/low-magic fantasy horror RPG scenario
Designed for novice to intermediate Player-Characters

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This scenario, Winter's Cold Heart, is divided into two sections: Section 1: Ice in the Blood, and Section 2: Blood in the Ice. The division and name reversals are intended to help differentiate different style, atmosphere and overall "feel". Though some combat is likely, mostly in Section 2, the scenario relies more on reason, critical thinking and using clues to solve a fairly straight-forward puzzle which will help increase the chance of survival for the inn's patrons.



Section 1: Ice in the Blood

*“...Wind, sleet. The branches sway,
Writhing their stunted limbs,
And off the white smoke swims
Across the heavens' gray.
A pallid yellow lingers
Over the chilly dale.
My keyhole blows a gale
Onto my frozen fingers.”*

- Victor Hugo, *Be Off Says Winter's Snows*

OVERVIEW

This Section will strand the PCs during a winter storm at a friendly little place called the Sugarloaf Inn – but the cheery fire inside pales in comparison to the chaos of the blizzard raging outside, and the hunger which waits both outside and within the walls of the inn itself.

ARRIVAL

Read the following aloud to the players as their characters come upon the inn on their way down the King's Highway, just as the sun is beginning to set. Indicate that the PCs have been on the road most of the day and, pressing business or not, a rest is desperately needed. This allows the GM to insert this scenario in the middle of travels during a different scenario, as its just a stop on the road.

*Although the sun was bright this morning, the coming of winter is heralded by a frigid rain which turned into sleet earlier, and has only continued to become wetter and colder, leaving large pools of mud and rainwater in the primitive dirt roads leading to **the Sugarloaf Inn**, a road-side coaching inn and its attached stables. A nice personal carriage and its two-horse team, as well as a handful of varying qualities of other mules and horses mill around within the stables, huddling near each other for warmth.*

1 – Outside the Sugarloaf Inn. The short trail leading to the inn from the main road is worn and muddy, and also winds its way between the inn proper and the stables, also passing the establishment's very own water well, a well-kept standard stone well, complete with rope and wooden bucket (which is unfortunately mostly frozen in winter), which is only a scant few meters from the inn's non-descript oaken door.

2 - The Stables, to the north of the Inn, situated directly above the Wine Cellar, is a fairly complex setup, with double-tiered roof and various northern windblocks and hollow double-walls to protect the animals from the worst of bad winter winds, as well as allowing the entire structure to act as defense for the Inn itself, which almost isn't necessary, since there is also a fairly dense forest even further to the north, providing natural shelter. Full of hay and straw in the stalls, open area and lofts, the stables have been used by people to weather some winter storms in the past, though Jonas usually allows anyone to stay free if the weather is truly nasty. Horse blankets and furs litter the ground and hang over other timbers, and provide a surprisingly effective shelter for the animals; a large usually-open gate in the back of the stables leads out into the larger corral for the animals to run and graze in more pleasant weather.

IN FROM THE COLD

The innkeeper looks up in surprise at the late arrivals and rubs his arms as an arctic blast of air drives into the heart of the inn as the door opens. He nods and welcomes everyone, introducing himself as Jonas Becker, and gives his usual schpiel for potential customers but apologizes for the lack of available food except for some bread and cheese, due to the lateness of the hour – he offers lodging in the somewhat comfortable common room with the other patrons, or the remaining community room or private rooms upstairs, trying to upsell each in turn, with the private rooms obviously being the biggest profit-makers. He also makes water and ale available but indicates he has already put away the majority of his beverages and liquor stock for the night.

Jonas Becker, the innkeeper, is a stocky, overweight middle-aged man whose dark curly hair is nearly all silver; he has a tired but warm smile and eyes that sparkle with goodwill, even at this late hour, and though still focused on finishing his work, he is happy to converse on most topics in a gentle but worldly tone, while keeping a watchful eye on his daughters and their friend – ever the vigilant and protective businessman-father.

Elma, Jonas' portly but friendly wife, also wanders throughout the inn, helping finish up, stepping over sleeping patrons and fulfilling last minute requests, as well as overseeing the chores of her two daughters, **Ilsa and Amaria**, and their friend **Celeste** – the three late-teen barmaids.

3 – Bar/Kitchen. The interior is cheerily lit with candles and frosted oil lamps, as well as a large roaring fireplace in the common room, which can be seen from the bar/kitchen area near the front door. The Inn’s single glass window in the kitchen, visible from any seat at the bar, will allow interested patrons the novelty of watching the ferocity of the storm while remaining relatively warm and comfortable. The rest of the Inn’s various windows are all shutter-and-sash style and are tightly closed, locked and insulated with furs and extra blankets. Anyone at the bar for any amount of time will also notice a simple, unassuming door tucked off into the far west corner of the kitchen by the stove – its not hidden, just naturally obscured by various items.

4 – Common Room. The dominant feature in this largest room in the inn is the massive stone fireplace, which nearly always has a blazing fire to stave off the chill winter. The chimney goes straight up into the ceiling and is actually used as a primitive method of heating some of the upstairs rooms closest to it, with the chimney extending up finally to the roof. There are about half a dozen rough and ugly tables flanked with matching chairs positioned strategically throughout this room to allow patrons to either lounge around or bed down for the night. On the north end of the room, to the left of the fireplace, is a small archway and a small flight of stairs leading up to the upper floor of the inn, where the community room (barracks, basically) and private rooms are.

5 - The Ash Room, as Jonas and his family refer to it, entered from the door behind the bar, is a long, narrow section of the Inn which runs behind the enormous fireplace and a few extra stacks of logs, and has two functions: 1) to allow for relative ease when cleaning the soot and ash from the fireplace, by having handy rear access, and 2) on the opposite end of the room is a smaller wooden door and set of stairs leading down into the Beckers’ wine cellar.

6 - Wine Cellar, where Jonas stores all his ale, wine, beer and other spirits, as well as some foodstuffs, as the cellar is usually very cold and acts as a primitive refrigerator. A few dozen yards to the east is a smaller flight of wooden stairs that lead up to a large, heavy wooden set of double-doors, usually barred from the outside, but which can be lifted from within by a thin tool between the two doors, which open out into the front yard area between the stables and well, not far from the approach of the dirt trail leading to the Inn.

Although it is many hours past sunset and well into the night, Jonas bustles about happily in the kitchen, cleaning, putting away dishes and food, and preparing things for the next day, while the girls finish their rounds of clearing tables, sweeping, stoking the fire, preparing rooms and various other miscellaneous errands.

Amateur yet charming paintings hang in inexpensive frames on the walls throughout the two stories of the inn, showcasing everything from fanciful dancers to beautiful unicorns and glorious scenes of a battle between brave knights and hideous monsters. Jonas will brag that the paintings were done by his two daughters, and points at the barmaids.

In the common room, a handful of slumbering patrons share the floor, chairs, tables and stacks of hay and straw – mostly peasants too poor to afford private rooms and a couple of veteran woodsmen reluctant to sleep outside on a night like tonight, but not “soft” enough to need beds or individual rooms.

Common Room Patrons

Trask and Iago, two woodsmen, sit and shoot the breeze near the large stone fireplace and the warmth within it, fully dressed in their ratty but practical and comfortable clothing, complete with animal skin caps. Stories of how many rick of wood one can split with one ax swing or how many traps were filled in a day are the commonly overheard tales near these two men of over fifty years each, who obviously prefer to keep to themselves but aren’t actively unfriendly and in fact, are some of the more easygoing patrons, overall. Although not directly social with people, occasionally they will tell some of their stories with just enough volume to draw in an interested listener or five.

The Faranson family, consisting of middle aged father and mother, Olin and Dee, and Olin’s younger brother, Spigg, and the Faranson children, Tolas, the tow-headed ten year old adventurous boy, and Sulia, Tolan’s blonde younger sister. The Faransons were out on a simple family ride on their two horses and actually only planned to stop in briefly for a meal before returning home, but were convinced by Jonas to stay the night because of the storm. They are humble, fairly intelligent but simple, honest, hard-working peasants.

UPSTAIRS

The more well-to-do patrons have retired to private rooms, of which there are four available to customers (three more private rooms are used by inn staff), or more suitable “community” rooms, of which there are three, similar to the common room but intended for four to eight people. The private rooms have all the amenities, including a tub of hot water for bathing and an actual feather mattress. The community rooms are barracks-like setups, with more makeshift beds of straw and hay and outspread blankets.

Upper Floor Rooms and Patrons

PR 1 - Private Room One belongs to **Lord Marin Tamar and his servant, Nouel**, a dark-skinned and handsome “foreign” man who bears a palpable quiet dignity, even while performing menial tasks, but is otherwise totally unreadable, feature and emotion-wise. Lord Tamar is a fair-complexioned, curly-blond petty noble decked out in the ugliest fineries and baubles, but seems surprisingly devoid of any sense of arrogance or class-structure, and is as likely to rub elbows with a hunter, peasant or dockworker as with a merchant or fellow noble, simply talking for the sake of talk, and listening for the sake of listening, regardless of subject. The noble knows a surprising amount about a vastly broad array of subjects, from budding science and seafaring to art and strategic warfare and animals. He treats Nouel well, conversing with him as a peer – overall, Lord Tamar seems good-natured and intentioned but a trifle oblivious to a lot of things, as well as absent minded.

PR 2 - Private Room Two houses **Ulf Lodderson**, a middle-aged, mustachioed man in officious vestments of the King’s colors and a simple military-issue longsword and royally emblazoned kite shield (which usually remains in his room). Ulf is an amiable, practical but stern and watchful man, constantly gauging everyone and everything; he considers himself above corruption or intimidation, and will react appropriately to each situation in kind. As a **King’s Roadwarden**, Ulf has the legal and royal jurisdiction and rights due to the office, which, in dire circumstances, includes being judge, jury and executioner. Because of his self-discipline and official function, though not an anti-social person, Ulf will associate with few people – the less they have to do with his role, the less he will interact with them.

PR 3 - Private Room Three is vacant.

PR 4 - Private Room Four houses a roguish man named Lodin, who was caught in the storm and made it to the safety of the inn only about an hour before the PCs arrived.

PR 5 - Private Room Five, also known as the Guest Room (which isn’t usually rented out), houses the Becker daughters’ friend, **Celeste Schneider**, daughter of Henrick and Lydia Schneider, husband-and-wife tailors that live a few miles north, as she weathers the storm with the rest of the inn’s inhabitants, due to her not wanting to brave the winter storm to walk three miles back to her parents’ home. Although not connected with a door, her room shares a wall with the Becker girls’ room and they sometimes communicate with each other by tapping on the wall in a primitive form of morse code.

PR 6 - Private Room Six is occupied by and is the bedroom of Jonas and Erma Becker, the Innkeeper and his wife. Most spare blankets and sackcloth are also kept in here, as well as an extra pillow or two, which usually costs a few coins to “rent”, though Erma will sometimes just hand one out cheerily. The back wall of this room shares a door with Private Room Seven, which houses the Becker daughters. A very expensive and luxurious canopy featherbed provides a very comfortable and warm refuge from cold nights.

PR 7 - Private Room Seven, as noted, is the Becker daughters’ room, and is connected to their parents’ always unlocked room for safety reasons, just in case one of the patrons gets rowdy. Two featherbeds, which can be pulled together if necessary, spoil the Becker sisters.

BEDDING DOWN

Once the PCs have gotten their room(s) and begin to settle in, read the following:

“Some storm coming,” remarks Jonas as he puts the away the broom and gives the counter one last brush with a cloth before nodding to himself. “Ol’ Pete was in today earlier and said his knee told him that its going to be a hard winter, but this first storm will be the hardest of all – snow, ice, blizzards, freezing chill, all of it. Maybe for days it will last. Pete’s knee ain’t been wrong in the years I’ve known him. But we don’t have to worry here in the inn – ain’t nothing fancy but its home and its warm and that fire’ll keep going through the night.”

Ol' Pete is in fact, quite dead already, frozen in the snow, miles up the road, a victim of the Wendigo?

With that, Jonas douses all but a few lamps and candles to see by, and drops one more log onto the fire from the nearby pile, and joins his wife, waiting in the doorway to the stairs. Looking out the clearly expensive single glass window, very rare even for affluent persons; what moments ago was a frigid wet downpour is now a furious mass of whirling white, sometimes the flakes speed past the window at a nearly horizontal angle, indicating a very strong and consistent north gale, which howls and changes pitch and direction chaotically.

Erma shivers involuntarily and wraps her arm around Jonas from behind and leans her head on his shoulder. "Oohh... I don't even want to think about being out there. In fact I'm going to put more blankets on when we get to our room – I might even sleep in tomorrow." she and Jonas smile as the three girls kiss them both and head upstairs, waving quick greetings and farewells to the new arrivals before disappearing. Jonas finally shrugs and abruptly says "Well... goodnight. Keep warm.", then turns with his wife and also disappears upstairs.

FREE REIGN

Within reason, the PCs are more or less free to do whatever they want in the Inn, but will cause a commotion with the other bedded down patrons if they remain in the main common room doing much more than talking amongst themselves, and may disturb some unhappy private rooms if they constantly trudge through the hallways.

Any goings in and outside are certain to raise a cacophonous chorus of "Keep the damn door closed, can ye not see the weather well enough as it is?!", though everyone is too wrapped up in themselves or trying to stay warm to display open hostility without serious cause, mainly cursing and griping. If a fight somehow seems required (unlikely but PCs are known to be unpredictable), one of the patrons will likely summon Jonas and/or the Roadwarden.

Besides a shocking blast of arctic gale-force wind and heavy snow, anyone opening the door to the outside will be treated to absolutely zero visibility, not being able to see anything, even blurry white from the moonlight – it is a total screaming blizzard outside the Sugarloaf Inn.

Although it is safe to venture out into the storm a few dozen yards (for whatever unknowable reason) for a short time, no one should remain in the storm for more than half an hour, at the risk of hypothermia and frostbite, even with full winter garb.

PREPARATION AND FORESHADOWING

PCs should decide where they're going to sleep, set watches if desired (maybe even encourage this, just to raise suspicion) and do whatever planning or rambling around they wish for the night. Allow Perception / Luck rolls occasionally for the following, appropriate to location, character, etc. just to keep everyone on their toes.

#1. During a break in spiraling white of the storm, although it was out of the corner of the eye, the PC could SWEAR they saw a large, low-slung shape, possibly a horse (it isn't), huddled in the yard where the trail leaves the main road. No amount of further peering will find it as the storm resumes its rage, and investigations to the outside find only that the storm quickly fills in any tracks, even the PCs own recent ones from the Inn.

#2. Once most people have finally retired for the night and began nodding off, one or more patrons (NPCs included) will ...imagine... that they hear a second sporadic howling carried on the tremendous winter wind – a chillingly deep and resonant howl almost reminiscent of some living animal. Intent listening will seem to be able to track the unusual howling, which seems to move from one side of the Inn's walls to another, circling the structure in a way that shouldn't be possible, given the storm's intensity.

#3. ** THUMP! ** The sudden sound will startle anyone hearing it to immediate wakefulness and sobriety, as it comes from either the roof, the Wine Cellar, a wall (interior or exterior) or UNDER the floor. It only occurs once in each location and no other accompanying noises are to be heard, but it was unmistakably *something* very large and heavy...

#4. "Ahhh saaaaid," growls one of the hunters dangerously, "Close that DAMN... door..." he trails off, blinking, as a fierce blast of ice-cold wind from nowhere cuts through the Common Room and any clothing and blankets – a handful of snowflakes flutter and drift surreally to the floor as the strange wind disappears, leaving everyone at a loss, staring at the closed and barred door and intact window.

#5. Faintly at first, then pronounced enough to carry over the sharp keening of the wind, the frightened and agitated crying neighs of the horses from the Stables are clear and alarming. Anyone venturing to the Stables will see nothing unusual until the corral, which now features an enormous saturation of dark crimson in the snow, quickly being covered. One horse leg can be seen jutting up grotesquely out of a drift a few yards away, but the rest of one of the Faranson's horses is nowhere to be found. The rest of the animals are huddled oddly together within the Stables' confines, whinnying lowly, ears and tails twitching nervously.

THE BLESSED DAWN

Although the events of the night are unsettling and darkly suggestive, nothing will happen to any patrons (well, except one), even if outside. The next morning, the interior of the Common Room is strangely dark, a fact accounted for by the snow packed completely against the glass window and attempting to creep in under the door – the Inn is almost completely buried.

Although its not easy, its not a Herculean effort to dig a path out of the drift to the open daylight, but there is little hope of much more than that for the almost completely invisible Inn. On the upside, the insulating snow is actually providing some protection against the harsh winter winds that still blow above, albeit at a much reduced force.

A mule and a horse have frozen to death in the also-buried Stables, though the remaining animals, while shivering and seeming tired and skittish, lived through the worst of the storm, but cannot be ridden for any length due to the depth of the snow, which would be over their heads.

The main road, well and even some trees are entirely obscured by the heavy snow, and there is no sign of any activity anywhere nearby, except for a few birds overhead. This is easily the worst winter storm any of the patrons has ever seen.

IT BEGINS

Allow the PCs to gather their thoughts and go about whatever activities they want for a while. Then...

“AAaiiiiiii!!!!” (young girl’s high-pitched shriek)

The piercing shriek from within the Inn brings bodies running from all over, to the Guest Room, and Ilsa Becker, staring dumbly at the corpse of young Celeste Schneider, sprawled across her bed in her bedclothes. There are no wounds.

After a few moments of muttered shock, prayers and weeping, Jonas and Erma clear the hallway of onlookers and do their best to place the girl in a dignified rest in the room, before comforting their daughters and debating how to tell Celeste's parents. A fairly constant cold draft whistles into the room from a small section of chimney stones loosened from age, with sparkling frost coating the small aperture.

Amid hushed, excited whispers of superstition, the Roadwarden strides around the Inn, glowering and checking windows and doors.

Unless there is obvious reason to confide in or trust or allow the PCs to assist him (such as one of them being of proper social or military/government status), the Roadwarden will refuse any attempts at help or investigation, stating matter-of-factly that he's got enough trouble investigating what happened as it is, without enthusiastic novices underfoot and in the way. Although it is possible to convince him to allow one or all PCs to help, it is highly unlikely, and he is, for the most part, correct in his assertion. Unfortunately, he likely won't live to see the end of the scenario.

GO ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS

The majority of the day is taken up by people gossiping, debating the weather and when it will be safe to begin making their way from the inn – the general consensus is that, given the dark clouds and overcast sky, its likely another one or two days of bad storms are in store, making any travel extremely unwise. The Becker girls will wander about listlessly, quietly, but mostly remain by the fire or in the kitchen, with Jonas and Elma taking care of most of the chores and needs of the patrons, as their daughters are useless, being in moderate shock. Jonas and Elma will make a few big batches of moist and delicious cookies and sweet rolls and set them out for everyone, along with a donation jar, not charging for the treats but gladly accepting any contributions any appreciative patrons are willing to part with. The Beckers' generosity lifts the mood somewhat but is unable to dispel the pall of Celeste's death and the other grim findings, including the likelihood of at least one more night of freezing blizzards.

NIGHT AGAIN

As afternoon passes, the glass window is matted with heavy frost, where only a short time earlier, there was none – what dim sunlight there was is nowhere to be seen, as the scene outside is only a contrast of the black night and the white ground. The two hunters open the door and peer out, arguing intensely but quietly among themselves as they stare out into the darkness.

WHAT DO THE HUNTERS KNOW?

The two grizzled hunters, Iago and Trask, are arguing about a creature spoken of only in rare legend – the Wendigo, which is a fierce, hungry beast of cunning, always encountered by individuals or very small groups, in the wilds, in heavy snow and blizzards and cold. They will hint at it and argue with each other indirectly all night from time to time, never daring name the thing and shying away from the topic if anyone seems a little *too* keen on it – at least at first. Neither hunter has actually seen, or in fact, even known anyone who has seen the Wendigo, though they probably have heard some authentic stories, along with plenty of unadulterated lies – great stories, but totally inaccurate – unfortunately for everyone, hunters are experts at living off the land, but not terribly skilled at evaluating the veracity of stories.

IT WILL JUST TAKE A MOMENT

Nouel, Lord Tamar's man-servant, appears from the stairway, bundled in heavy furs and leathers, obviously intent on going outside. After a brief attempt by Jonas to talk the man out of "seeing to the horses" as Lord Tamar wishes, the young man will kindly refuse Jonas' advice and head out the door to make sure the noble's prize steed and Nouel's own sturdy but unremarkable horse is fed and watered. As he opens the door, strong, frigid wind, seemingly growing stronger by the second, ghosts through the common room. Nouel grits his teeth and grins good-naturedly to the nearby patrons. "*It looks like it is getting much worse, yes?*" he says loudly to be heard over the oncoming wind. "*The horses had better have a cup of hot mead for me eh?!*" he gives a short laugh and disappears out the door, making sure to shut it firmly behind him.

Although PCs really can't be stopped from following or accompanying Nouel, this is undesirable, as Nouel is about to die, and the PCs knowing too much could set the wrong tone.

Section 2: Blood In the Ice

*"His face is growing sharp and thin.
Alack! our friend is gone,
Close up his eyes: tie up his chin:
Step from the corpse, and let him in
That standeth there alone,
And waiteth at the door."*

- Alfred Tennyson, the Death of the Old Year

OVERVIEW

This section moves into the first real possible conflict between the Wendigo and patrons of the Inn, and all culminates in a horrific revelation and probable fight for survival.

NOT LONG FOR THIS WORLD

Assuming no one went outside with Nouel (if they did, read HEY – WHO INVITED YOU?!), after a reasonable amount of time to tend to the horses, the man fails to return, and alarm grows among the patrons – even Lord Tamar comes downstairs, perplexed. Suddenly there is a muffled BANG against the front door, from the outside. The PCs or someone will rush to check...

Nouel falls limply into the inn, bloody and partially covered in frost and snow and shivering. A quick check reveals deep, multiple vicious gashes in his chest and ribs and neck, made by an exceptionally long and sharp blade of some kind, which shredded the thick, heavy clothing like cotton. Nouel coughs up dark, almost black blood, which tells everyone present that he has little time left. His mouth opens and closes, his lips forming words but his throat not able to do more than gurgle. Finally, cradled by a tearful Lord Tamar, Nouel will clutch his master's arm and look into his eyes. "My... Lord... -cough- ..." Nouel's eyes simply inch closed and the tension disappears from his body, as he slumps in Tamar's arms; a heavy metal object falling from one hand and rolling under a nearby table.

Nouel met his attacker, who was lying in wait, on his way to the Stables, and bravely/foolishly, fought one-on-one, armed only with his standard sidearm, an exquisite, curved shortsword, which is found easily beneath a table and covered in Nouel's blood, on the grip, as well as a small amount of someone else's, on the blade.

HEY – WHO INVITED YOU?!

For anyone who did venture outside with Nouel, he will insist that they keep their distance from him as he tends to the horses, as the Lord's steed is a highly arrogant and fickle creature and responds poorly to strangers and has bitten the servant on more than one occasion, when startled, and he'd like to avoid that from now on if at all possible. This should help keep the PCs away from Nouel to some extent – at least to the point where he is briefly out of their sight – just long enough to be mysteriously killed.

TOO OLD FOR THIS

Road Warden Ulf Lodderson, when summoned from his room, is faced with the second death, both of highly bizarre causes, sighs tiredly as he looks at Nouel's body, thinking there is something outside in the storm that is straight out of nightmares and tales told to scare children into behaving. He wasn't trained for this, he was trained to police the King's Highway, to keep order and get rid of the bandits. He wasn't supposed to babysit or have to be responsible for an inn full of unpredictable nobodies, to protect them against something on the other side of those walls that may not even be able to be killed. He will spend his time "investigating" and planning for a possible fight with the Wendigo.

LODIN THE KNIFE

A few hours later, Lodin, making his first appearance from his private room upstairs, seats himself at the bar by the wall and speaking to the innkeeper. Jonas fixes him a cup of spiced cider. The man looks off into space and speaks: "We only got a few miles... it was so slow... we had to clear the road for the horses, those DAMN merchants, whining, cursing us, asking questions, reminding us how much they paid us. Like we wanted to play in the blizzard. Asses." spits Lodin to no one in particular, between sips of the hot drink.

Perception checks indicate Lodin's cloak and shirt and boots are stained with a dry, dark substance. If asked, Jonas will confide that he didn't recall seeing any stains on Lodin's clothing when he first arrived... Lodin will also favor his side occasionally, wincing in pain, apparently from a wound of some sort.

If asked about what he's muttering about, Lodin will oblige, explaining he is the only remaining member of his party, who had been hired to protect a caravan of merchants, who were beset by "something"...

"Thorvald saw it first. It just... one moment... it was just THERE. Right alongside us, like it somehow had always been – no sound, nothing - even the horses didn't know. It tore into us as Thorvald gave a yell. It cut him down. It cut him OPEN." Lodin shivers at the memory. "It just swiped its claw across him – he was wearing mail! It ... its like it wasn't there. He pitched over out of his saddle and onto the ground and didn't move again."

Lodin begins weeping into his cider, whining and blubbering piteously. "That big man, I've seen him... that was no way to go." Lodin regains some composure and continues. "Sturla, Yasha, Ospin... they tried. We tried. We couldn't track it. It weaved in and out of our vision, it moved around us, in the swirling snow, it was like a ghost. A vicious, hungry, monstrous ghost. Not one of us ever got one true strike. Yasha, she was the last one. She was fierce. She kept it at bay, she could swing that maul of hers like a man thrice her size. I... I escaped. I ran. Oh gods... I left her to die." Lodin collapses into an unintelligible heaving mass of torment, regret, fear and fragile sanity, leaving everyone to stare at him silently.

The merchants and horses were slain and eaten at leisure. The creature paused at each body, sniffing it, rifling clumsily through clothing and shaking the corpses curiously as though looking for something. This was all lost on Lodin, who was already on his way to the inn, carrying his pack with the oh-so-precious payment that the merchants was to give to the group upon the completion of their task – Lodin, in a time of crisis, reverted to his baser instincts, greed and flight, not really even realizing he was worrying about something as petty as a physical possession, with his friends' blood splattered across the snow behind him. He had stopped to claim the pack from the snow beside the carriage.

THE TALE OF THE WENDIGO

Lodin will ball up in a corner and cry himself to sleep, being given warm blankets by Erma. The hunters, Iago and Trask will murmur conspiratorially amongst themselves again, glancing at Lodinn. With some prompting and an earnest appearance of interest, Iago and Trask will grudgingly agree to tell yet another fantastic tale, though before they begin, an icy blast with a scattering of snowflakes, heralding the approach of tonight's storm, drives through the open door, chilling everyone to the bone. The men will light up pipes, sweet smoke curling lazily.

The Wendigo, according to the hunters, is larger than a horse (“more like a mountain”, according to the stories). Its heart is so cold, it has the chilled water of a winter creek for blood – some say its heart IS ice – no one really knows for sure. Stark white hair or fur, albino, to match perfect with the snow, it’s a hunter worse than any. They say its brought by, or maybe brings with it, the deadly cold winter storms and blizzards. The creature is a fiercely hungry thing; a hunger that never goes away, never fades. Its been hungry its entire life – which is a long, long time - eternal its said the creature is, born with the world, out of the darkness and things none of us can know about. Forever it hunts, stalks, hungers, forever it feeds its hunger, a hunger is for anything – stock, other predators...horses... But people... that’s its treat, the thing’s hunger is strongest for Man – its sweet meats.

The thing hunts with the wind, the snow and the ice. The cold winter is its breath, its scent. The snow is its bile, dripping off its huge, ugly yellow fangs, three times the size of any wolf or big cat. The shrieking, howling wind is its cry of hunger, its warning that its coming, a warning heeded by the wise, to keep themselves latched in by the fire. When it hunts you, you don’t know it – it stalks you silently, like the dead themselves, following you side by side and you’re none the wiser, some say it hunts like a wolf, on all fours, loping on huge, fast, hind legs – some say it can walk upright in a grim likeness of a man; either way, its creeping and following behind.

Its said it doesn’t fully follow the way our world works - somehow not all in our world but in another too – only those lucky... or unlucky... enough to see it bear down on them head-on, they’re the ones that see the monster, fully - in full horror as it opens its giant maw to take them in; some say you won’t see it coming at all...

After a good amount of the information has been related, Jonas will call an end to the drama:

“Enough!” interrupts Jonas, who had crept closer, unnoticed, as he slams a pewter mug down on the table. “Enough...” he says again, more softly, attempting to lessen the tone of his rebuke. “Please. This isn’t helping anything. Its just a storm, friends. A storm we’ll all see each other through. Spring is not far off...” Iago emits a nervous cackle. “It’s a storm alright. Its what’s walkin’ in that storm out there – it took that poor girl...” he says, then bites his lip.

The Becker girls burst into wailing tears and run to an empty far corner at the callous mention of their unfortunate friend. Jonas shoots Iago a deadly look as Erma runs to comfort her girls.

Jonas eventually calms slightly, makes sure everyone is taken care of and all his chores are done, then nods to everyone and huddles up with Erma and their daughters, as Trask and Iago sit staring silently at the floor. Any attempts to get further information or stories are waved off bitterly and regretfully. “Just a couple a crazy old men, we are. Heads full o wild stories and lies, don’t pay to listen to the foolish – that’s all they is: stories.”

BLOOD MONEY

A few hours later, after most have gone to sleep, Lodin begins whimpering in his sleep, his voice rising in pitch until he begins to wake people up. “You don’t need this – you don’t need this anymore, you’re dead, you’re all dead!” he cries out, still asleep, and hugs his pack tightly to his body and begins whimpering again.

*Happening to be making his rounds, the Road Warden’s face is stone and unreadable as he looks down at Lodin. Finally he bows and grabs the pack strap and pulls it gently at first but gives a sudden jerk as he realizes Lodin is resisting him, awake or asleep. As the pack comes free and Ulf stumbles back in surprise, Lodin springs to his feet on pure instinct, his eyes flying open and focusing on the Road Warden as a thin, wicked blade appears in his hand and plunges into the absolutely unsuspecting man’s body – *thckk, thckk,thckk*, in the lung, kidney and heart areas, then twice in the throat. Emitting only a weak gurgle, Ulf Lodderson slowly sinks to the floor and dies, the look of shock still evident on his countenance.*

Lodin, standing nearly frozen in place, blinks a few times then looks down at his blood-covered knife and then at the dead Road Warden and frowns blankly, apparently already pushed past the point of being able to be affected by his own horrific actions. He looks down at the unopened pack on the floor and sighs, then sits back down in the corner, staring at nothing.

Lodin is mentally “gone” now and will not respond or resist, and can be guided if need be, but will never recover. He is unable to feel anything. He no longer cares about anything and is no longer a threat.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Inside Lodin's pack is a blue gem the size of a grapefruit, looking similar to a giant topaz, though with a strange absence of obvious facets and cut – in fact, it is closer to some sort of blue amber, with strange internal crevices and bubbles unlike any seen in any sort of jewel. It is also ice cold and painful to the touch, and any moist objects, including warm skin, will begin to stick to it.

This gem was given as payment by the merchants who hired Lodin's group and ignorantly deemed the thing “pretty, but worthless” - they agreed to give it to Lodin's party as payment for the escort, deciding that although they would have preferred to have sold it to some rich know-nothing for a vast sum, it was much more important to get out of the snowstorm and back to civilization as quickly as possible, and they could always run a scam another time, so they played up the “worth” of this “magnificent” gem, which is in fact, the “heart” of the Wendigo's mate, which Lodin had unwittingly brought to the Sugarloaf Inn.

MOTIVATIONS

The Wendigo stalking the inn followed the scent of the heart-gem and Lodin, and although hungry (an understatement), the Wendigo is not keen on tangling with anyone in the inn if it doesn't have to, and is leery of large groups and especially well-armed persons – its main goal is the heart-gem.

The Wendigo will remain outside the inn and attempt to take down any lone explorers, providing they don't appear overly competent, and will also likely take a horse now and then, perhaps even to cause someone to check on them and give the creature another opportunity to feast.

NOW WHAT?!

The Wendigo itself is an exceptionally stealthy and experienced hunter, with a primitive capacity for abstract thought. It learns and adapts quickly and is able to use rudimentary tools, such as branches or rocks, similar to a primate or crow, to accomplish some tasks, although it lacks the manual dexterity to reliably and consistently operate any mechanism (such as a door) with any finesse. The thing comprehends the basics of speech and gestures, though it cannot speak, similar to a dog, which would recognize certain words and behaviors (it recognizes the word “Wendigo” as referring to itself).

It is possible to awkwardly “communicate” with the creature, if the negotiator does something to get its attention and cause it to hold its attack long enough to demonstrate the desire to “talk” – the Wendigo itself will never think to initiate such contact, unless having been “taught” by one of the PCs.

Wary of Man and traps and deceit, if the PCs' approach is suitable, the Wendigo will cautiously appear within visual and aural range, always pacing and stalking, moving from place to place to present a difficult target, but will attempt to discern any messages or attempts to negotiate, and attempt to “demand” the ice heart of its mate – this should be easy if the PC's have caught on to the object's nature, but will be nearly impossible for the creature to indicate if the heart remains an unsolved mystery.

If the heart is simply left outside or offered to the Wendigo, the creature will make sure its not walking into a trap, then take the item, snarling its hatred for Man, and lope off into the woods, taking the winter storm with it, looking for easier food. elsewhere.

If the ice heart is threatened, the Wendigo will do everything within reason and personal safety to insure that the heart remains intact and will fly into a rage if the heart is actually destroyed – falling upon the inn, crashing through doors and walls and savaging everyone until they or it are dead.

The ice heart “gem” itself can be destroyed with enough severe physical impact (though it takes a lot, like breaking stone) or melted if placed in a fire for long enough – it cannot be cut by a normal chisel or blade of any sharpness.

WHO KILLED CELESTE AND NOUEL?

The Wendigo? Lodin? Jonas? For a real twist, Jonas was in the process of “assaulting” young Celeste, but killed her out of fright of anyone finding out – the Wendigo and Lodin the Knife are perfect scapegoats.

*Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work
So fanciful, so savage, naught cares he
For number or proportion. Mockingly
On coop or kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;
A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn;
Fills up the farmer's lane from wall to wall,
Maugre the farmer's sighs, and at the gate
A tapering turret overtops the work.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Snowstorm*

The Wendigo, Primordial Incorporeal Hunter

Accuracy: moderately superior to the most proficient of the PCs.

Damage: dangerous, due to the multi-dimensional nature of its tremendous attacks.

Movement: Incredible – prodigious leaps, four-legged sprints faster than any cat, wolf or horse.

Will/Life: At least four times the maximum of the hardiest of the PCs – possibly Immortal.

Recovery: Recovers from injuries and even grievous wounds, rate depends on plot and GM needs

Special: Extreme frustration or anticipation of making a killing blow will cause the Wendigo to fully “phase in” to the physical world briefly, in order to unleash a blood-chilling and unearthly beastly howl that will haunt everyone who hears it for the rest of their lives – the sight of the gargantuan primordial creature will cause a suitable Stress/Sanity/Willpower task check for anyone seeing it, with failure causing anything from fainting to catatonia to flight in abject terror, to a permanent mental break.

Combat: Although vulnerable to weapons when fully corporeal, the Wendigo is a very, very resilient and ancient creature, which, although mortal (despite the assumption to the contrary), is nearly impossible to “permanently” kill, as its wounds, even critical ones, will mend themselves fairly rapidly, drawing what little warmth there is from the surrounding area and converting it into bio-energy for the function. In combat, the Wendigo is vicious and ruthless, though wary, and its attacks are fast and supernaturally strong and potent, as its talons partially phase through armor and flesh alike, making even heavy clothing and plate armor nearly equal in effectiveness.

Death: The Wendigo itself, unless entirely dismembered and separated or by having its own heart pulverized or melted, cannot truly be killed by normal weapons, as its liquid ice blood will eventually regenerate its flesh.

NOTES ON COMBAT WITH THE WENDIGO

When the creature attacks, the PC’s will initially be swatted aside or blown backward by a freakish gale force wind emanating from the creature, who seems to suddenly appear directly into their midst out of thin-air (in fact it was simply sitting on the path to the stables, nearly-invisible as it has an instinctual but not finely detailed ability to modulate which sections of its body are corporeal or incorporeal.

With time and good light and some movement, the Wendigo is generally perceived as a shimmering, “wave-like” (similar to a mirage or heat inversion) vaguely undulating, horse-sized upright humanoid shape, greater than ten feet in height. In the strengthening blizzard, however, it will be extremely hard to discern, and any solid objects, including snow, will pass through the incorporeal portions of its skin, not leaving a reliable visible outline to highlight the creature.

Anyone wounding the Wendigo will notice a strange, steaming, nearly luminous milky blue sticky liquid, which entirely coats the blade. The liquid is cold and painful to the touch, like liquid nitrogen, and will in fact, function similarly, though less-intensely. The liquid, Wendigo blood, will not warm if left exposed to moderate warmth, and will actually crystallize into an incredibly hard and dark, almost topaz-like substance.

The creature’s speed and superior physical conditioning make it impossible to catch on foot and the horses cannot be readied in time and ridden through the deep drifts of snow, in pursuit of the Wendigo’s four-legged lope. The creature will not likely face more than two moderately proficient individuals in most circumstances.



Lodin's Comrades or useful NPCs

Thorvald Redblade is a huge and sculpted man, towering easily over anyone else in the Inn, with a shaggy mane of long blonde hair, beard and mustache, and more scars and ugly wounds than would seem possible for a man to have and still be able to walk. His horned iron helmet, which he refuses to take off even in the Inn, generally scrapes the ceiling, and his hand-crafted leather-and-scale armor and hand-and-a-half sword strapped to his side always audibly herald the approach of this near-giant. Although he does have some sense of humor and enjoys recounting his impossibly heroic exploits, he has little time for small talk or listening to anyone else's problems or opinions and generally growls, ignores or carelessly throws coins at whatever the problem is until it ceases to be a problem. Thorvald's huge, double-bladed battle-ax is strapped to his back or leaning against a wall near at hand.

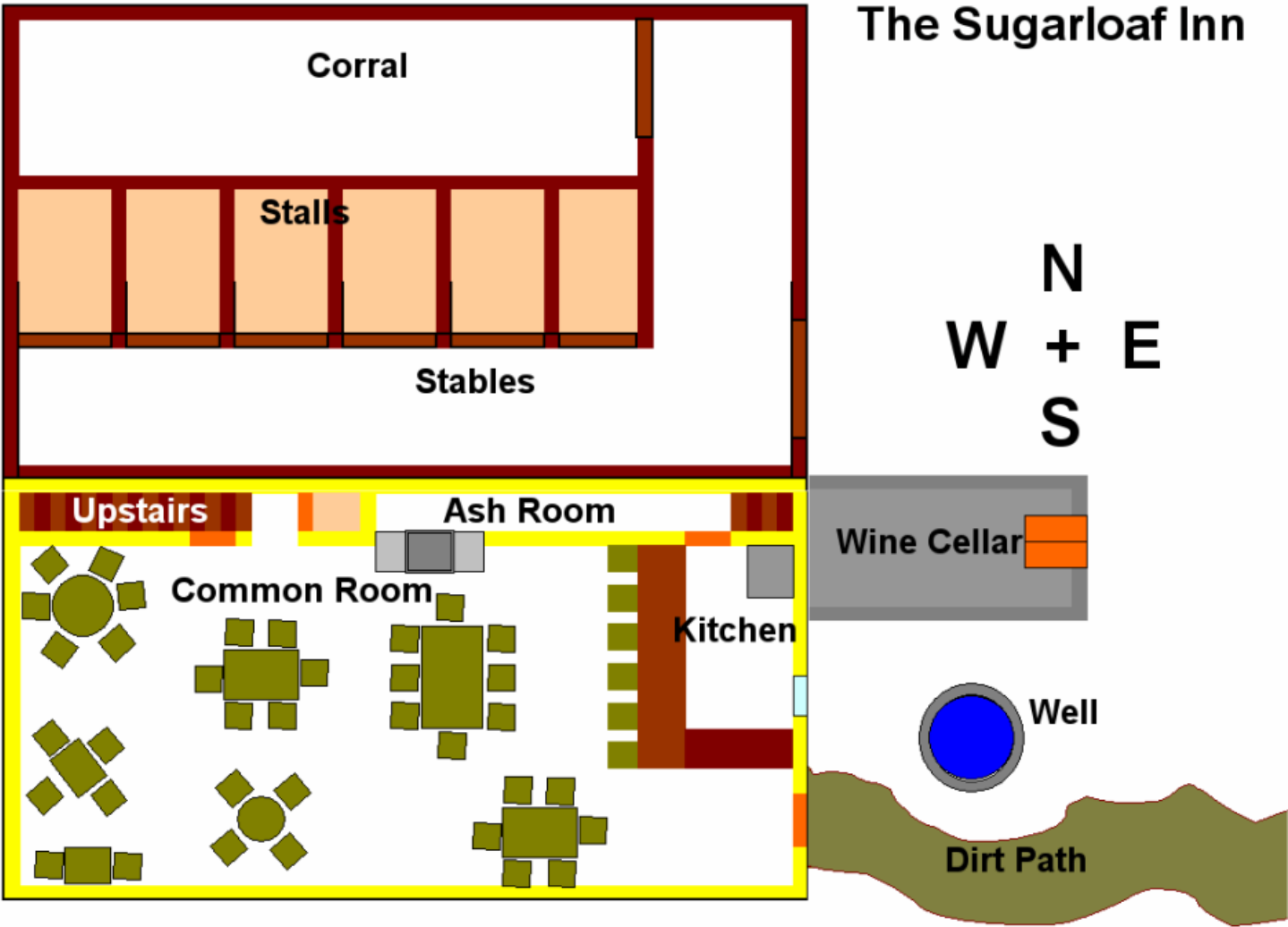
Yasha the Goat, a novelty among the novelties, being an obviously skilled and athletic warrior-woman, has eyes as cold and grey and hard as pure steel and a rigid, unsmiling mouth which tends to open only to lambaste an unlucky peasant with an incredibly cutting insult, about which she makes no mystery she plans to back up with muscle and fiery spirit if the point is not taken the first time. Her dark, curly strands of hair cascade over a thick full mail waistcoat, worn over a padded leather gambeson which goes all the way to her legs to meet with her heavy leather thigh-boots which have undoubtedly kicked many a backside. She tends to carry around, wield, spin and absently fiddle with a nasty looking mid-sized ax-headed maul hammer which is normally worn at her side.

Brother Nafis Ospin is a dark-haired, tall, gaunt and serious figure, dressed in impeccable golden silk robes with an overlaid hauberk featuring the garishly embroidered symbol for his Church of the Dawn. Although he rarely speaks, his eyes constantly wander about him, looking with thinly-disguised disdain at... pretty much everyone. He is otherwise found pouring over the leather-bound volume of his faith's gospel and scripture, occasionally closing his eyes and indicating some unrecognizable pattern in the air with his fingers. Although he does not seem to pay it a second thought, an iron-shod quarterstaff can always be found somewhere near the good Brother.

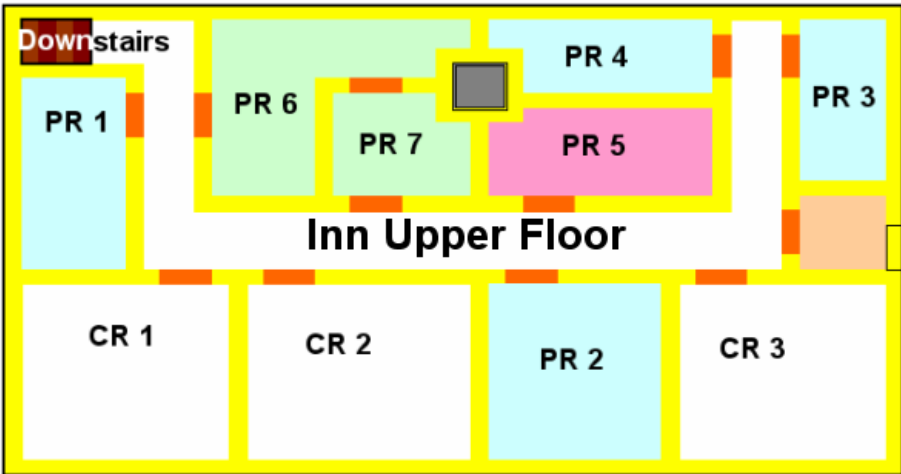
Lodin the Knife is a little *too* friendly, with an almost serpentine grace and tone of voice, and seems to be content to see just how close he can get to people before excusing himself back to rejoin his friends. His dark olive cloak flutters about him and at times you can find him with his hood up, losing almost all of his face in darkness except for his thin lips and scruffy mustache. His hands, on the rare occasion he removes them from the confines of his cloak, are encased in tight, black leather gloves, and he taps his fingers on any nearby surfaces if he remains in any one place more than a few moments.

Sturla Rabbitfarer is surprisingly small, being only a bit more than half the height of Yasha the Goat, and is clad in natural and undyed linens, all the way down to her diminutive elfin-looking woolen boots. Despite being easily the most out-of-place in the group, with an almost-infectious sense of humor and a near-continual laugh or titter, the strawberry-haired Sturla engages in conversation with the rest of her crew as an equal. Sturla spends her time digging through various belt pouches and leather cases, mixing powders and flipping a short, gnarled twig end-over-end when bored.

The Sugarloaf Inn



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Ice in the Blood
(C) 2005 Jason Patterson

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RPGHOST.COM FORUMS
LittleRat_1

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Frank Sronce
Harlequin Jones
Pseudopod
Cusher Bob
Phantom Grunweasel

OTHER
Native American/Canadian Legends
Algernon Blackwood
Geoffrey Ulam