

REVENANTS OF SALTMARSH #3: SALVAGE OPERATION

n.b. Revenants of Saltmarsh is a series in which I share the revisions I made to the adventures from Ghosts of Saltmarsh for my two ongoing campaigns (one of which being where this series gets its name). Needless to say, these posts will include spoilers for the classic U-series, their 5E versions printed in Ghosts of Saltmarsh, and some of the other adventures bound to that series by appearing in that anthology. If you are currently playing through (or plan to someday play through) the adventures in Ghosts of Saltmarsh, you should go find some other content on this site to read instead of this post and series. Furthermore, this series assumes you have access to the adventures being written about, so if you are a DM preparing to run these adventures, make sure to have read them first before turning to this series for suggestions on what to change.



“Salvage Operation” was originally printed in *Dungeon Magazine* #123 (June 2005), but despite my general love of *Dungeon*, I don’t have this issue because it came out during a period when 3E adventures were not jibing with my old school sensibilities. I may have ended up playing and running 3E for 16 years, but from early on 3E style stat blocks made my eyes bleed. I just could not focus enough on the tightly set small print on glossy color pages to effectively read them, let alone use them at the table. This is not to say I did not use any 3E *Dungeon* adventures, but mostly, I did what I still do for 5E adventures, I adapted stuff printed in older issues for 1E/2E and BECMI.

That is exactly what the version found in *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* is doing, adapting an older edition adventure to the current edition. Unlike the adaptation of *U1 – The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh* or *U2 -Danger at Dunwater*, I have not read the original version of “Salvage,” so I cannot compare it to the one I have now run twice, but it is a great adventure, made tight by a relatively small but fascinating location, the ghostly hulk of the Emperor of the Waves (which I renamed the Empress of the Waves for my own games). Despite this, the adventure suffers for not being sufficiently tied to the goings on in Saltmarsh and not providing a sufficiently compelling independent motive for the PCs to accept this mission.

The changes I made to the adventure are meant to tie the adventure into Saltmarsh politics and individual player character motivation/goals and make them feel

more invested in accepting the mission. However, many of the changes are specifically tied to my campaign and its characters, so rather than present them all in detail (or even present them in their entirety at all), I am providing suggestions on how to introduce the hooks that you will have to develop in ways that make sense for your own game. I will also try to provide some examples of my own choices without going into the weeds of backstory and lore details that I fear would be a waste of time for anyone not specifically running for my players and in my homebrew setting. My goal is to provide a basis for a DM to make similar changes aligned with the specifics of their own game without having to know those specifics (since I can’t).

That being said, you can jump past all of my suggestions about the adventure hook and backstory and get to the main thrust of my mechanical changes to the adventure, which involve the climactic giant octopus attack, by skipping to the section entitled “Octopus Attack!”

INCREASING THE MOTIVATION

As written, in “Salvage Mission” the PCs are hired by a down-on-his-luck merchant-prince seeking to retrieve his fortune from the derelict hulk of a ship long thought lost, but recently sighted. He is desperate to get back his promissory notes from the magic safe inside before someone else gets the idea to do some treasure-hunting. He promises a hefty reward if the PCs succeed. He also arranges for passage out to where the ship was last seen and provides some basic gear to help on the excursion.

The problem with this hook is that unless the PCs are specifically the type to be motivated by money, they have little reason to undertake this danger. The adventure does suggest planting the legend of a magical item also thought to be on board to push the PCs towards seeking it out, but that alone may not be sufficient. Furthermore, unless the DM has had the forethought to introduce the poor noble Aubreck ahead of time, the request has less of a personal touch than I find helps to motivate players. For whatever reason, in my experience players tend to prefer helping the NPCs they perceive as friends or who have proven themselves to be helpful and generous to them in past interactions.

So of course, you can make sure to set up Aubreck earlier somehow. But it may make more sense to have someone else hire the party to retrieve the box from the Empress of the Waves.

In both of my campaigns, I had the request come from Anders Solmor. As written in *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*, Solmor is a young noble and member of the town council, and while I changed that for my own setting,

there is no need to change it for your own game if he was involved in hiring the PCs both for the assault on the Sea Ghost at the end of *The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh* and visiting the lizardfolk in *Danger at Dunwater*. In this way, it makes sense both for Solmor

to trust the party with a personal request, given their success in missions for the town, and for the PCs to trust him, given his position of authority and clear concern for the people he represents and helps to rule. But at the same time, having it be for a personal mission, changes the relationship between this NPC and the PCs just enough to potentially have rippling effects on the game. For some players, the switch from doing work for the town to doing work for a noble more specifically is going to raise some suspicions.

Additionally, while I maintained the lure of a reward—the PCs were offered 600 gps and right of salvage on anything recovered from the ship except for the box and its contents—Solmor’s primary expressed motivation is retrieving the box for its “family heirlooms” and potential information on what happened to his mother. Rather than be the property of a down on his luck noble, I had the *Empress of the Waves* belong to Solmor’s late parents. According to *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*, his mother, Petra suffered an “untimely death.” So, I suggest making that a presumed death with the disappearance of the ship. I’ll explain more about this when I get to the “Antagonist Backstory” section of this post.

Important! Don’t have Solmor mention the promissory notes. Even if he trusts the PCs, I can imagine it not extending to 100,000 gps worth of trust. But, if you want to make *him* seem more trustworthy have him offer a 10% finder’s fee for the value of anything found in the box, and if you want to make him actually be trustworthy (and according to *GoS*, he is lawful good) have him actually reward the party with 10,000 gps (10% of the promissory notes) once he has cashed them. I run Solmor as a well-meaning noble who has blind spots around people of a different social class or culture which can make him seem potentially malicious.

THE INTERESTED PARTY

The promise of reward and the mystery of the murdered mother may not feel like the kind of hook the PCs will be excited about—even though the introduction of Petra Solmor’s fate to the adventure does make it a little more personal—so in order to really build the tension around retrieving this box, I introduce a second interested party. In fact, I have them approach the party before Anders Solmor does, informing them that the nobleman plans to ask them to go on this mission and throwing suspicion on the noble by explaining about the promissory notes and their value. In fact, this person may even suggest that Solmor is responsible for his mother’s death, given all he inherited and that the box also holds evidence of this that the young noble hopes to

destroy. At the very least, the implication is that Solmor is underselling the value of what is in the box, while the PCs take on all the work and risk.

This interested party will suggest the party accept Solmor’s mission, but then claim the box was lost or the mission a failure and bring it to them instead. They will explain that they have the expertise to open the sealed magic box and subsequently have the notes converted into coin without suspicion, while the PCs might have some trouble. They offer to split the value of the promissory notes with the party after a 20% finder’s fee to go to the person who gave them the information (a source they will not reveal, though Solmor’s butler—Skerrin Wavechaser—is a good candidate). In other words, the PCs can hope to recover 40,000 gps from the mission if they go along with this swindle.

If the party insists the finder’s fee come from his share, the interested party may make a counteroffer of splitting the difference, so the PCs ends up with 45k. But may eventually reluctantly acquiesce, which means he will get 30k and the PCs will get 50k.

But who is this “interested party?”



This is a question each DM has to answer for themselves. In both my campaigns, I had the interested party be someone from a PC’s past. In one case, it was the estranged husband of the party druid who was still involved in the criminal enterprises the PC had abandoned when he became a nature worshiper. In the other, it was an apostate of two PCs’ religion that they had heard of before, who is willing to work with anyone to achieve his zealot’s goals. In both cases, they were NPCs that at least one member of the party had a

reason to distrust, while also seeking to mend a relationship if possible.

In the latter case, I combined the introduction of the interested party with the allure of a magic item, by having the apostate NPC also mention a magical scimitar—mentioned in one of their religious stories and said to harbor the intelligence of an angel—potentially being on board.

In both cases, I had already laid the groundwork for introducing this character by—in addition to the back story connections—having him be the contact between the Sea Ghost smugglers and the Dunwater Lizardfolk, something the PCs discovered during Danger at Dunwater. I chose to lean in on the interested party being sketchy and manipulative and someone different members of the party might feel differently about. A recurring villain the PCs just want to kill can be fun. But a recurring villain they hope to not have to kill is better.

It does not matter if the PCs flatly reject this offer. The offer's existence makes things more interesting. Both of my groups actually decided to handle it the same way, claiming they'd be open to finding evidence of Solmor's corruption and bringing the box to the interested party if they do, while not really having any intention to do so. Increasing the motivation by introducing conflicting choices about what to do and who to believe should make the PCs more likely to want to seek out the ship and retrieve the magic box and care about the results.

TRAVEL TO THE EMPRESS OF THE WAVES

As written, "Salvage Operation" has the party's employer supply transport out to where the Empress of the Waves was last seen. While I had this still be the case, in my *Revenants of Saltmarsh* game, I also had Solmor offer them use of the Sea Ghost if they were willing to rechristen it and scare up their own crew, giving them a bit of independence, providing a new resource and adding a potentially fun and liberating aspect of play. My players turned this down, not seeing their characters as "seafaring types." I did not develop how this adventure might run differently if they did accept that offer, but keep it in mind. It might serve as a new avenue for other adventures to insert into the campaign.

I didn't offer this option to the *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*+ group because, as newer players, I wasn't sure that the logistics of a ship and the necessity of developing a crew of NPCs to travel with was the best direction to take play. If I were re-running it now for those same players, I would definitely make the offer but would be sure to have an out-of-game discussion about what that choice might mean for the direction and tone of the game from then on.

If you do choose to make the offer, the players should weigh the option of using the Sea Ghost against the logistical inconvenience of taking the offered passage on a different vessel. I did not have the dwarven ship called Soul of Winter come to Saltmarsh. Instead, I had the PCs travel to where they'd board. I chose to have this place be the Styes (from the adventure of the same name in *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*), which I renamed "Brackwater Styes," so that if I did eventually run the adventure the town is detailed in, it will already have been introduced and the players will know what a wretched hive of scum and villainy it really is before their eventual return.

Whether the PCs decide to walk/ride or hire a fishing boat to make a three-day trek into a one-day sail, I use this opportunity to open up the region to them a little bit. One way was by having them encounter people fleeing their fishing villages along the route after sahuagin raids in neighboring villages got them scared enough to seek out the relative safety of Saltmarsh. If the group decides to sail, they will be close enough to the shore to see the ruins of recently raided villages.

This helps reinforce the reason why they have been undertaking these adventures, to help keep Saltmarsh from becoming like these villages and in the process allowing the sahuagin to make attacks deeper inland using access to the Kingfisher River.

The other way I used the journey to meet up with the dwarven ship to develop the region was by running an adaptation of "The Whale" by Wolfgang Bauer from *Dungeon Magazine* #35 (May/June 1992). While the sidetrek is written to fit into a Viking setting, it can easily be used to represent any two feuding local groups that have a long violent history and a disparity in power and resources.

ABOARD THE SOUL OF WINTER

While the adventure suggests the option of having sahuagin attack the ship during the journey, I refrained from having that happen for two reasons.

Firstly, I think the sahuagin will have a greater impact if you slowly reveal the devastation they can cause through the setting, rather than reducing them too soon to monsters with hit points and armor classes to be faced and figured out. I later offer proactive groups a chance to go hunting for sahuagin in the lead up to the events of "The Final Enemy."

And, secondly, such a shipboard battle will be a mess to run with a whole crew of dwarves who can fight and who can get killed in the process. Even if the PCs and dwarves succeed at repelling the invading sharkmen, there could be sufficient casualties to not only endanger the current mission but make it difficult for the Soul of Winter to even make it back safely to a secure port,

let alone out to whatever dangerous waters the Empress of the Waves still haunts. It'd feel cheap if you handwave it.

If you insist on introducing a sahuagin threat at this point in the campaign, consider having the attack occur on the way back from the Empress of the Waves instead. Furthermore, I suggest changing the assault force to not include a sahuagin baron (leave him for a potential big bad in The Final Enemy). Replace him with a sahuagin champion and a sahuagin coral smasher, instead.

The adventure does not provide a map of the Soul of Winter, but, if we accept that there is a halfway decent chance for the druid and one or more of their spidery followers make it aboard, it should.

Rather than a sahuagin encounter, I had the ship in *Revenants of Saltmarsh* hit by a violent storm which I ran like a skill challenge of the type I used in "Danger at Dunwater." This skill challenge requires the PCs to get three successes before they get three failures, with failure meaning the ship is thrown off course adding 1d3+1 days to the trip. In addition to the usual open-ended skill challenge approach I explained in the previous installment, I detailed four actions requiring ability checks that could be used to gain successes (or risk failure): Perception (to keep an eye out for rogue waves to point out to the helmsman), Athletics (to help work an oar), Survival (to successfully bail and pump out the bilge), and Nature (to "read" the storm and determine its ebb and flows in terms of ferocity). When I ran the skill challenge, the party bard used Performance to try to help keep the rowers in time.

The point here is not that the player characters are especially heroic but that the storm is an "all hands on deck" kind of situation and everyone doing their part—however small—is crucial for success.

If the Soul of Winter is blown off course, you can have this be evident in the state of the ship (see below). For example, the hold (area 12) can be filled with even more sea water, making fighting the undead there and retrieving the box even more difficult. Perhaps the maw demons (area 6) have escaped their cocoons and stalk the halls, leaping into random combats as loose cannons that seek to devour both sides equally.

STATE OF THE SHIP

As written, the Empress of the Waves is described as having no port holes. This doesn't make a lot of sense to me, given that it housed people. Instead, I describe all the portholes as clogged with debris and boarded over on both sides. The original crew boarded up the windows when they were trying to hold the ship against the evil druid's spidery hordes. Later, once they set sail, those same followers preferred the dimness within the

ship to the relentless sun, so they left them that way. Prying a porthole open takes a DC 20 Strength check and several minutes of work that echoes throughout the ship.

Draw in your own windows/portholes in areas 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11.

ANTAGONIST BACKSTORY

It is here that I begin to worry that the advice I have for running "Salvage Operation" is going to get in the weeds with a complicated backstory. Of course, the only reason why I am re-imagining the events and motivations that lead to the spider-loving druid to be on the Empress of the Waves and oppose the party, is because, as written, the module's backstory is potentially as equally complex and not likely to come up during the running of the adventure since it is not linked in any substantial way to the PCs' or their employer's motives.

Ultimately, however, what the adventure provides may be fine for your needs and no change is necessary. In my own version, Krell the half-orc druid cultist of Lolth, is replaced by Shadoris of Arachne, a tiefling druid who worships a different spider goddess (no Lolth or dark elves in my setting). I made her a tiefling in my *Ghosts of Saltmarsh+* campaign because I wanted to make a connection with a tiefling PC and I just left her as a tiefling for the other game. But a more important change, I think, is that I made the spider-druid a former member of the crew of the Empress of the Waves rather than a random cultist who took over the ship when it ran aground on a mysterious island. *[From here on out I will use they/them pronouns to refer to the druid, since their gender is up in the air depending on DM choice in fleshing them out unless I happen to be specifically referring to Krell or Shadoris].*

By making the druid a recently hired navigator on the ship (to replace the former navigator who unexpectedly got too sick to sail), there is a motivation that brought the ship to the area where it was damaged and taken over rather than having it have been random chance. Instead of plotting a course for where the ship was supposed to go, they navigated them to an uncharted island in the mysterious "Sandspine Shoals"—an area of small islands, obscured reefs, and sandbars that tends to be shrouded in fog and mist and whose islands purportedly appear and disappear over time, as storms barrel through the region. The ship is damaged and eventually runs aground on a sandbar as it dropped anchor near the island to make repairs.

The uncharted island is the location of a shrine or other power that the druid was able to exploit to gain their spidery followers. The surviving portion of the captain's log tells the fragmented tale of the strange new navigator who led them to run aground and then sprung

off the ship on her own to disappear for a few days into the island interior. They then attacked the ship to take control of it and sail back to (so-called) civilization. The crew fought off several waves, boarding up the windows to help defend the ship, but eventually succumbed. Waiting for the tide to change enough to free the ship, the druid did their best to steer the ship with a crew made of prisoners. Eventually, they had to start feeding these prisoners to her pets and followers when arriving in a safe harbor took longer than expected. However, already damaged, the ship is made even worse by the encounter with the giant octopus that returns for the adventure's climax.

This story requires revising the portion of the captain's log that can be found in area 2. The log should mention the hiring of the new navigator and explain how the Empress ran into the shoals after an unbelievable error by the navigator. Furthermore, it should include entries near the end indicating that though the crew thought they'd found a deserted island, it turned out to be inhabited by a cult of monsters that appeared three days after the navigator disappeared into the island's interior. The final entry was written as the surviving crew hoped to cast off again before another wave of monsters attacked.

It would be either during one of the initial battles or in feeding prisoners to the spiders that Petra Solmor met her end. I recommend including a passenger manifest with the captain's log that has her name and/or have the imperious noblewoman who was no help in actually crewing the ship come up in negotiations with the druid (the PCs will likely ask about her). This may reveal how, as such, she was one of the first to serve as a meal for the spiders.

In my *Revenants of Saltmarsh* game, Shadoris was actually sent to the island by the interested party to retrieve the magical scimitar I mentioned earlier, as that was their true goal. Having failed to have someone retrieve it once, he sends the PCs for it with the promise of promissory notes in the magic box. While you will likely have to come up with your own reasoning for the second party to have sent the druid, this not only serves to connect the adventure's antagonist to the conflict the PCs are embroiled in, but it provides the druid with a motive for wanting to leave the island and return to more populated lands. The druid is not from the island and has whatever long-term agenda (aligned with the interested party) you want to give them. However long the Empress of the Waves was missing could be accounted for by getting the ship in good enough shape and freed from the sandbar in order to move on. This could be weeks, months, or even years.

PLAYING THE ANTAGONIST

While the druid—whether you call them Krell or Shadoris—has followers that will attack the PCs as soon as they encounter them (they are aggressive and hungry), it makes sense for the druid to want to negotiate with the PCs for passage back to “civilization,” and as such call off the spiders and ettercaps (even if temporarily) in order to do so.

The adventure suggests that Krell might be convinced to accept passage on the Soul of Winter as a means of escaping eventual death when the Empress of the Waves sinks. However, it makes no mention of his arachnid followers or beloved phase spider pet Roil. While I can imagine him sacrificing some of his followers, would he abandon them all? Would they accept this unquestioningly?

Instead, I imagine the druid working to commandeer the Soul of Winter by sneaking their phase spider aboard (how does the border ethereal work? I am going to assume the spider can literally walk over to the dwarven ship) or using wildshape as way to stow aboard the rowboat that comes to pick up the PCs once the magic box is acquired, commandeer it, and then use it as a way to get as many of her followers and pets on the dwarven ship.

One strategy is to not have the druid display their wildshape ability until after a deal is negotiated and/or they are defeated/surrender, leaving it as a means of escape. The first time I ran “Salvage Operation,” Shadoris escaped after being left bound and unconscious in a hallway while the party dealt with the maw demons. She then attacked while the party was boarding the rowboat. The second time, a member of the party executed her (while unconscious, but stable), after he realized she could not be reasonably restrained for the journey back because of her ability to change shape.

A NOTE ABOUT GHOSTS

I changed the ghosts in the hold (area 12) to ghouls. In my *Ghosts of Saltmarsh+* campaign, I already planned to run *Against the Cult of the Reptile God* in which troglodytes are a common foe, and as written in 5E D&D, the stench ability of both the undead and the subterranean reptilians works the same way and that did not stand right with me. I would ultimately change how ghost stench works, but since I had not figured out how to differentiate them yet at that time, I decided to make them ghouls and increase them from four to six. Well, six was way too many! And it ended up being a harder fight than I thought it'd be. This experience also convinced me that four ghosts would also have been too many. As such, when I ran the adventure again for *Revenants of Saltmarsh*, I went with four ghouls.

I have included the stats for my revised ghost if you want to use it but suggest lowering the number to three

GHAST

Medium Humanoid Undead, chaotic evil

Armor Class 13 (dexterity)

Hit Points 36 (8d8)

Speed 30ft.

Initiative +3

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	17 (+3)	10 (+0)	11 (+0)	10 (+0)	8 (-1)

Proficiency Bonus +2

Saving Throws Str +5, Con +2

Damage Resistances necrotic

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities charm, unconscious, exhaustion

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Languages spoken in life

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Stench. Any creature that starts its turn within 5 ft. of the ghost must succeed on a DC 10 Constitution saving throw or be nauseated until the start of its next turn. Nauseated creatures are Incapacitated and thus unable to take actions or reactions. On a successful saving throw, the creature is immune to the ghost's stench for 24 hours.

Turn Defiance. The ghost and any ghouls within 30 ft. of it have advantage on saving throws against effects that turn undead.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The ghost makes three attacks, two with its claws and one with its bite.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit. *Damage:* 1d8+3 (piercing).

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit. *Damage:* 1d4+3 (slashing). If the target is a creature other than an undead, it must succeed on a DC 10 Constitution saving throw or be paralyzed for 1 minute. The target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success.

OCTOPUS ATTACK!

Even if you ignore everything else I suggest, this is the part you will probably want to use when running "Salvage Operation." The giant octopus attack, which according to the text should begin as soon as the PCs spot the magic box, is a frantic and cinematic encounter that presents a real danger. I think, as written, escaping the hold with the box, and signaling the rowboat waiting between the Soul of Winter and the Empress of the Waves while the octopus attacks, further destroying the ship in the process, is very likely to kill one or more PCs. This is especially true if the PCs spot the box before all the undead are defeated. The box is very difficult to move and if there are any enemies left of the ship, their attacks are a further hindrance. In addition, if the druid is still alive (perhaps wildshaped and hidden for their chance to escape) the rowboat's arrival could be complicated by her attack. The first time I ran the adventure, I had to put my thumb on the scale to keep a PC from drowning (something I would not have done, if I thought they'd had a fair chance of succeeding). As such, I add a little more time when I run this encounter, change the "Sequence of Events" that are listed on page 94 (which I don't have begin until the PCs actually try to move the box), and don't start the required Dexterity saves until the second round.

As written, the potential damage the PCs can suffer while escaping is caused by the octopus's thrashing tentacles, but I have a hard time imagining that an octopus gargantuan enough to grab a ship of this size would have tentacles that can breach the hull to attack those within that often without immediately tearing the ship apart. As such, I have the damage and effects on the table below mostly be the collateral results of the

octopus crushing the ship from outside, and only a less common roll on the table has the octopus tentacles actually be the direct issue. Furthermore, the adventure has each character rolling their save at the beginning of their turn. Instead, I give the octopus an initiative roll at the top of the round and everyone rolls at once. This gives the DM the opportunity to use the "Thrashing Tentacles Result Table" (below) to craft an event that affects more than one person at a time and gives a stronger sense of the ship sinking and its collateral effects. Think of it this way: each round something happens and then the characters have a chance to recover or progress *as a team*. This is preferable than each round just being about individuals potentially taking damage.

At the top of every round after the first, the giant octopus does something that affects the ship—crushing it tighter, rocking it, etc.)—all player characters onboard the ship must make a Dexterity saving throw (DC 10). If anyone fails, roll on the "Thrashing Tentacles Result Table" below. Depending on the result you can decide if it affects everyone who failed (those who succeed are assumed to have avoided the effect) or if you need to, reroll for one or more others for whom the result might not make sense. For example, if the "slamming tentacles" result is rolled, but each of the failed characters are in different parts of the ship, reroll for each of them past the first or until a result might have reasonably affected all the remaining characters. If an initial result doesn't make sense (for example, the "Sucked out of a Hull Breach" result is rolled while the PCs are in a cabin that is not flooding yet, simply use the next most common result, moving one step up or down towards the '7' result.

THRASHING TENTACLES RESULT TABLE

2d6 Result

- 2 Sucked out a Hull Breach:** As the ship lurches upward momentarily with the octopus's movement, anyone in two feet or more of water and within ten feet of the hull is in danger of being sucked out. Take 1d8 (bludgeoning) damage from swirling debris and make an additional Strength saving throw (DC 12) or be sucked out into the ocean (your depth depends on what deck you are on). Making the save means you grabbed on to the edge, and on your turn, you must make a Strength (athletics) check (DC 10) to pull yourself free (using half your movement in the process), otherwise you make no progress. If you are still clinging to the breach at the top of the next round and fail your Dexterity save again, take 2d8 (bludgeoning) damage and make another Strength saving throw as above. This continues until you pull free or are sucked out.
- 3 Falling beam:** Take 3d6 (bludgeoning) damage, fall prone, and be pinned in place. You or an ally must use an action to make a Strength check (DC 15) to pull free.
- 4 Impaling Spar:** a sharpened piece of wood debris stabs into you doing 2d8 (piercing damage).
- 5 Splintering Spray:** The octopus's tentacles crush the hull, and an explosion of splintering wood and other debris strikes you, take 2d6 (bludgeoning and piercing) damage. If the save was a natural '1' you are also blinded until the end of your next turn.
- 6 Weakened Rotting Boards:** Your foot breaks through the bulging floorboards. Take 1d6 (slashing) damage. It takes half your movement to pull free.
- 7 Ship Shaken:** You fall prone and take 1d6 (bludgeoning) damage. The ship now lists 30 degrees to the opposite side than it had been, and you slide 10 feet in that direction. You may take additional damage at DM discretion for falling or striking objects.
- 8 Surge:** A swell in knee deep or deeper water or a rush of splashing water from the upper decks wreaks havoc. Your movement is halved until the end of your next turn and any flame-based light (torches or lanterns) are extinguished and cannot be relit until dry.
- 9 Slamming Tentacle:** Part of the octopus's tentacle breaks through the hull and smacks you. Take 2d6 (bludgeoning) and make a Strength Saving throw (DC 15) or fall prone. You and anyone else in your vicinity may attack the octopus this round.
- 10 Rain of Wreckage:** Splintering boards and other debris slam against your head and shoulders. Take 2d6 (bludgeoning) damage and be stunned until the end of your next turn.
- 11 Partial Collapse:** Your leg breaks through the floorboards past your knee. Take 2d6 (slashing and bludgeoning) damage, fall prone. It takes a bonus action or action (character's choice) to pull free and half your movement to stand. The resulting injury halves your speed until your next short or long rest or until you benefit from any healing magic.
- 12 Undertow:** If you are in waist deep or deeper water, you are sucked under and pushed back ten feet towards the closest opening towards the sea or a hatch or stairway to a lower deck. Your speed is reduced to zero until the end of your next turn. If you are closer than 10 feet to the opening, you are sucked through it, unless you use a reaction to attempt to hold using a Strength saving throw (see "Sucked Out a Hull Breach" above).

TABLE NOTES:

2 and 12. Someone who is unlucky enough to actually get sucked out of the side of the ship will be 10 to 30 feet underwater depending on what deck they are on and what round of the sinking it is—use your best judgment.

7. Keep in mind when the "Ship Shaken" result is rolled, that the *Empress of the Waves* naturally lists to the port side, but once it is wrapped in the octopus tentacles, its pitch shifts back and forth violently. As written, the adventure has the ship only ever list to port. Keep track of which direction the ship is listing from round to round as anyone who falls prone due to reasons not caused by this table's results automatically slides 10 feet in that direction from then on.

8. The "Slamming Tentacles" result allows for attacking the octopus. Use the same rules for attacking and damaging the octopus found on page 94 of *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*, but keep in mind that characters below deck can only attack the octopus when this result is rolled. Characters on the upper decks can always target the octopus. However, those on the top deck make their Dexterity save with disadvantage and always suffer this

effect on a failure. Since the tentacles are long and tapered, they can damage everyone in the same basic area.

Remember, if the giant octopus takes 20 points of damage or more in a single round, it temporarily withdraws. Skip the Dexterity saves and rolling on the "Thrashing Tentacles Result Table" in the following round, though the ship continues to take on more water.

If any of the results show up too often and threaten to make the encounter repetitive (which is how it was unfortunately originally written), consider replacing the result with one of these:

o **Sudden Spray:** A gush of water punches through the hull closest to you or a hatch above you, you are pushed 10 feet away from the hull or hatch, take 1d8 (bludgeoning) damage, and fall prone.

o **Swirling Debris:** As the water rises, various objects swirl around and slam into you. Take 2d4 (bludgeoning) damage and your speed is reduced by 10 feet until the end of your next turn.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

In order for events to work better with the table above and provide a slightly better chance for the party to succeed in getting the heavy and awkward box to the top deck, I have modified the “Sequence of Events” (from page 94) that begins once the box is first touched. Basically, I moved the flooding events to the end of the rounds and in some cases stretched it out over more than one round, allowing the PCs opportunities to see it starting to happen and to react. So, for example, at the beginning of Round 3 the hold begins to fill with water, but it is not completely filled until the end of that round (rather than the beginning, as written).

Round 0: As soon as the PCs go to move the box, describe a heavy shudder running along the starboard side of the ship, and then under it and up the other side. Then there is an unnerving yawning sound as the whole ship lurches a bit. Have the players roll initiative and place the octopus at the top of the order.

Round 1: The octopus’ tentacles wrap around the ship. There is an audible crunch drowned out by the increased sound of water rushing into the ship where seams and cracks have widened from the pressure.

Round 2: The octopus tentacles begin slapping around the ship. At the start of this round begin calling for the Dexterity saving throws and roll on the “Thrashing Tentacles Result Table.”

Round 3: Water begins to fill the hold (area 12) and will fill it completely by the end of the round. The undead in the hold flee up to the galley (area 11) but stop to attack anyone they encounter along the way, having no fear of drowning.

Round 4: Even if the PCs have not signaled for the rowboat to come pick them up, the dwarves start rowing towards the Empress of the Waves to stage a rescue. It takes 10 rounds for them to arrive and they will remain one round’s distance from the ship (50 feet) until they actually see a PC on the deck to avoid the thrashing octopus and any monsters gathered on the main deck (area 1), the forecabin, or quarterdeck.

Round 5: Areas 4 through 11 begin to fill with water. Areas 4, 5, 7 and 9 (port side) are essentially completely submerged by the end of the round, while areas 6, 10, and 11 are half filled in that time. If the ship is listing to the starboard side, areas 5, 8, and 9 (starboard) will be filled instead. Any monsters in these areas (save for the maw demons in Area 6 if they have not been encountered yet) will begin to flee for the main deck and if engaged in combat will disengage in order to do this at first opportunity.

Round 6: Every part of the lower deck (areas 4 through 11) will finish filling with water and the listing side of

the main deck (area 1) is essentially level with the surface of the water, with waves lapping over its side by the end of the round, while the raised side will be 5 feet above the surface.

Round 7 through 13: Waves begin to break over the ship, the listing side of the main deck (area 1) is 3 feet underwater, as is that side of Areas 2 and 3. Throughout this time, the “Ship Shaken” result does not change the direction the ship is listing and by the end of the round the non-listing side is 10 feet above the surface.

Round 14: The rowboat from the Soul of Winter arrives but hesitates about 50 feet away if no PCs are visible or if monsters on the main deck are visibly waiting for it to arrive. If the druid is around, they may wildshape into a form with a swim speed in order to attack the rowboat and use it to help their surviving followers and pets reach the Soul of Winter.

Round 15: At the end of this round, the ship rolls over onto its listing side. Everyone on the top deck is thrown into the sea (2d20 feet in a random direction). Allow characters who were readied for this to make a Strength (athletics) or Dexterity (acrobatics) check (DC 17) to leap clear in the direction they prefer.

Round 16: The Empress of the Waves begins to sink. Any monsters thrown into the water that are within 20 feet of the rowboat begin to try their best to make their way there and attack any non-allies on board. Otherwise, they make their way to the side of the sinking ship that is still just below the surface. By the way, I looked it up, spiders are actually good swimmers!

Round 17 to 20: As the ship sinks (3d20 feet per round), each round one random creature in the water—starting with those closest to the ship and moving outward—is pulled under to its death by the octopus. If there are PCs in the water and they are targeted, they get a Strength saving throw (DC 15) to escape this fate. If they fail by five or less, they take 2d6 bludgeoning damage, are pulled under by 10 feet, and their speed is reduced to 0 for that round. In the following round, the victim gets to save again, a successful save meaning they can swim as normal and take no damage. Another failure by less than five leads to being pulled down another 20 feet, taking 2d6 damage again, and their speed is reduced to 0. Any failure by more than five or a third failure of any kind means the character is devoured by the octopus and lost forever. *Use these guideline even if PCs or creatures fall into the water before round 17.*

Round 21: The Empress of the Waves continues to sink 3d20 feet and anyone inside must find a way out to swim to safety. Escaping air, freed ballast, and other wreckage bubbles and shoots out of the water as the

giant octopus is content to play with the hulk and ignores anyone left in the water.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX!?

The PCs should not be able to easily open the box should they decide to keep it for themselves. While the adventure mentions that a *Dispel Magic* spell against DC 30 will open the box (a feat that should be impossible for PCs at the proscribed level), it fails to discuss how the box interacts with other spells, since it itself is a magical item designed to safeguard precious cargo. At the end of this post, I have included a description of the item and how it functions given this purpose, especially since theoretically much more common spells like *Identify* and *Knock* might be used to circumvent the box based on their own descriptions.

In addition to the promissory notes, include a few pieces of expensive jewelry worth a few thousand gold pieces and some very minor magical items to serve as the family heirlooms Solmor mentioned. However, if you really want to build on the death of Petra Solmor mystery, you should consider including evidence about the smuggling or other illegal operation that might have made her a target for assassination.

In my own games, the magical box included a signed and notarized affidavit by a shipwright named Tomas Nedio, confessing that he helped rechristen a ship—The Dainty Prig—that had been reported lost at sea with all aboard presumed killed, as The Sea Ghost. The Dainty Prig should belong to one of the other noble families on the Saltmarsh town council (I chose the Owelands, the Primewaters also work), implicating them in the smuggling operation. I also included information connecting this family to the sale of slaves (which is illegal in Makrinos) to another country.

In this way, you can link the interested party's goals with noble intrigue. Perhaps there is reason to think that pointing the druid toward that island and the predictable consequences for those aboard the Empress of the Waves, was as much about doing away with Petra Solmor, as it was about retrieving a magical item or gaining arachnid allies.

CONCLUSIONS

And there you have it. I recommend leaving the rowboat unmolested by the octopus. If there are any living monsters (and especially if the druid still lives), the dwarven sailors and the PCs will have a hard enough time getting back to the Soul of Winter without involving the gargantuan beast.

There is enough here I think to take an adventure with an engaging location and heart-pounding action and tie it into more complex interactions with various factions of your game setting and campaign events.

I have included a stat block for my version of the druid and details on the magic safebox, the magic scimitar, and Shadoris's magic scarab.

AUBRECK'S SAFE

Wondrous item, Very Rare (requires attunement)

This box is made of blue metal with reinforced portions along every edge but having no obvious lid, latch, or hinges. It is 22 inches to a side and very heavy even when empty. It is rust proof, watertight, and impervious to all forms of damage. Anything kept inside is also impervious to all forms of damage including from the box tumbling or falling while it is inside and the box is sealed.

The inside of the box is lined with soft purple velvet cushioning.

An unusual magical item, up to six different people can be attuned to it, but attuning to it requires the presence and attention of someone else already attuned to it (unless there are no other attuned users). An attuned user can seal it and determine a password, without which it cannot be opened. This means that up to six different passwords can exist for it at once. An attuned user who knows all current passwords to open it can touch the box and speak them in the order they were determined to "reset" the box, automatically unattuning all other attuned users and needing to set a new password upon reclosing it.

Otherwise, the box can only be opened using a *Dispel Magic* spell against DC 30 or using a *Mordenkainen's Disjunction* or *Wish* spell. The *Knock* spell does not function on this box and *Identify* cannot reveal the passwords (only that a password is needed).

Moving the Box: *Aubreck's Safe* is bulky and hard to handle. One or two medium sized characters or up to four small sized characters can attempt to carry the box. Lifting it or passing it to someone else requires a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check. On a failed check, the box is dropped. How fast someone moves with the box is based on their Strength score (as shown on the table below). If two or more characters carry the box their total Strength score determines how fast they move.

Speed Penalties while carrying box

Strength Score (total)	Speed Penalty
18 or higher	-10 ft.
12 to 17	-20 ft.
8 to 11	-25 ft.
7 or lower	immoveable

SHADORIS OF ARACHNE

medium humanoid (tiefling), neutral evil

Armor Class 14 (leather armor + dex) or 17 (hairsute)

Hit Points 44 (6d8+6)

Speed 30 ft.

Initiative +3

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	16 (+3)	13 (+1)	13 (+1)	15 (+2)	13 (+1)

Proficiency Bonus +2

Saving Throws Dex +5, Wis +4

Skills Arcana +3, Nature +3, Perception +4, Survival +4

Damage Resistances fire, poison

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages Common, Druidic, Infernal

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Scarab of Proof Against Poison. This magical item (requires attunement) allows Shadoris to save against any form of poison with advantage, and any damage she takes is absorbed by the scarab instead. When the scarab has absorbed 66 points of poison damage it crumbles to dust, forever useless.

Spellcasting. Shadoris is a 4th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 12, +4 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following 7 spells and 3 cantrips prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *druidcraft*, *poison spray*, *thornwhip*

1st level (4 slots): *cure wounds*, *faerie fire*, *jump*, *longstrider*

2nd level (3 slots): *heat metal*, *hold person*, *web*

Spider Talk. Shadoris has the ability to comprehend and verbally communicate with spiders and other arachnid beasts and monstrosities as the spell *speak with animals*.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Shadoris can make two attacks with Bloodstar per turn when using the attack action.

Bloodstar (magical scimitar +1). *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit. *Damage:* 1d6+4 (slashing) + once per turn (1/day between short or long rests) deal 2d8+4 (poison), unless a Constitution save (DC 11), in which case target takes half. Shadoris also suffers 1d3 (poison) damage whenever she uses this ability. This ability also goes off whenever Shadoris scores a critical hit with the scimitar, regardless of how often it has already been used. The blade shines as bright as a torch until the beginning of her next turn whenever the poison ability is used. When used in the first round of combat against foes that have not yet acted, it attacks with advantage.

Wildshape (1/short or long rest). Shadoris magically transforms into a beast (without a flying speed) of CR 1/2 or less (common choices: spider, giant wolf spider, or giant crab), remaining in that form for up to one hour. She can revert to her true form as a bonus action. Any equipment she is holding or carrying can transform with her or she can choose to drop it at the moment of transformation. While in this form all her statistics conform to that of the chosen beast except her saving throws. If she is reduced to 0 hps or less while in this form, she changes back and suffers the difference in damage to her actual total.

BONUS ACTIONS

Hairsute (2/long rest). As a bonus action, Shadoris can grow thick spider-like hairs all over her body, which function similarly to a *barkskin* spell, providing a base armor class of 16. This ability, however, does not require concentration and only lasts 10 minutes. While in this form, Shadoris has advantage on Charisma (intimidation) skill checks.

REACTIONS

Hellish Rebuke (1/long rest). As a reaction against a target within 60 feet that did damage to her, Shadoris can cause a burst of hellfire that does 3d10 (fire) to the target, unless they make a Dexterity saving throw (DC 11), in which case the target only takes half damage.

BLOODSTAR

Chaotic Good Sentient Scimitar, Legendary (requires attunement)

INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	16 (+3)	18 (+4)

Senses blindsight 120 ft., passive Perception 13

Skills History +5, Insight +5, Religion +9

Languages Common, Undercommon, Draconic, H'shemlah

DESCRIPTION

This scimitar's blade and hilt are forged from a strange meteorite. It is a dull gray color that has no shine and reflects almost no light. However, when its radiant energy power is used, its blade hums and waves of black and red radiate up and down it. It glows as brightly as a torch until the end of its wielder's next turn when its venomous power. The scimitar's handle is embossed with pearl and threaded with red velvet ribbons.

HISTORY

Bloodstar was forged by Dihrae Wahid, a legendary smith who lost an arm to one of the Sacrificial Cullings that marked the time of the Empire of Moloch. He forged the sword to aid the legendary warrior-prophet Alnaj Alsaamu using a strange meteorite from the Blasted Lands in which was bound the spirit of the angel, Akhokhav the Bloodstar. In the intervening 5000 years, the scimitar has been lost repeatedly and used in various religious uprisings and movements against evil gods and their followers, especially Moloch. Most recently, it was found by Shadoris of Arachne hidden in a cave in the Sandspine Shoals where it had been put by the Children of Maphastal, tieflings from the misty western shores of Antrekironos for unknown reasons.

PERSONALITY

While Bloodstar speaks infrequently, when it does, it speaks with a voice that ranges in timbre from rustle of sand, the cries of carrion birds, the splattering of rare rain in the desert, the gurgle of an infant, the breath of a lover, and the crackle of fire. It can also speak to its attuned user telepathically.

Bloodstar is taciturn. It rarely speaks aloud, doing so only when it deems the subject or situation worthy of using its voice. It has a strong belief in freewill and sees its role as ensuring the freewill bestowed on mortals by the god it serves, while righteously defending against those who would use that will to cause evil and harm the pious. That said, Bloodstar has a dim view of humanity, and is not generous in judging the motives of others. It has a generally imperious attitude and always encourages its wielder to seek out and destroy fiends and powerful undead of any kind. It has no interest in what it calls "petty human slights" and has a hard time understanding the value of familial and romantic relationships to most mortals. It will make it known to its user when it feels like it is being used towards unworthy ends.

ABILITIES

Bloodstar is an intelligent *scimitar* +7. In order to use its other abilities, the wielder must be attuned to the weapon.

When used to make the Attack action in the first round of combat against foes that have not yet acted, your attack rolls are made with advantage.

Upon successfully striking a living target, you can spend a bonus action to have the blade glow with its strange power dealing an additional 2d6 hit points plus an amount equal to your total cleric or paladin levels of radiant damage, and the target is *poisoned* until the end of their next turn. A target that makes a successful Constitution save (DC 12) only takes half damage and does not suffer the *poisoned* condition. This ability may be used once and cannot be used again until after a short or long rest.

This radiance is so intense, that when you use it, you take 1d3 hit points of poison damage whether the target saves or not.

When you strike a critical hit with *Bloodstar* this bonus radiant damage (and the poison damage you take) automatically occurs (without spending a bonus action) regardless of when the ability was last used. The target is still allowed a saving throw. If you want to keep *Bloodstar* from dealing the extra damage, you must win an opposed Charisma check against the sword.

If you have 3 or more combined cleric or paladin levels, you may touch the blade to a willing target to remove the poisoned condition (regardless of the source) as the *lesser restoration* spell, but you take 1d3 hit points of poison damage. This ability may not be used again until after a long rest.

If you have 6 or more combined cleric or paladin levels, it becomes a +2 weapon, and as a reaction to being blinded or in total darkness, you may avail yourself of the sword's blindsight (120' range) by spending a hit die. Roll the die. It lasts that many rounds.

At higher combined levels of cleric and/or paladin (9th, 12th, and 15th), Bloodstar reveals more powers.



SCARAB OF PROOF AGAINST POISON

Wondrous item, Rare (requires attunement)

This ornate and stylized pin is designed to look like a winged beetle with gold inlay and a sapphire body. Scarabs of this style, but using different gemstones and enchanted to protect against a variety of dangers, have their origins among the Pharaohs of Nubt, God-Kings of an ancient kingdom in the Inchoate Empires. This example was found worn by Shadoris of Arachne.

When attuned and worn, you roll all saving throws versus poison damage or the poisoned condition with advantage. In addition, the scarab absorbs the total poison damage the wearer would have taken.

Though they begin with the ability to absorb 100 total hps of total damage, this one has been reduced to 66 points. The scarab crumbles to dust when it reaches 0 hps and cannot be recharged.