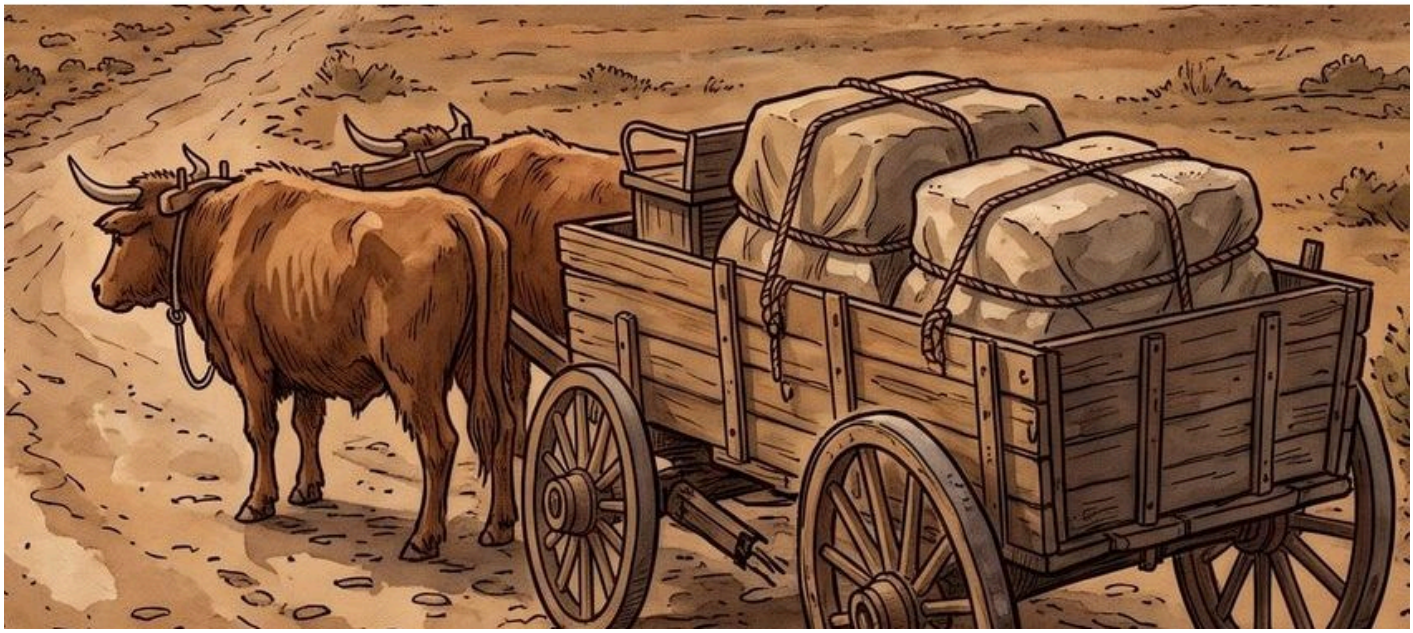
COMPATIBLE WITH FIFTH EDITION

# Nine Miles

*A short adventure for one to four, at 1st level*



| LEVEL | PLAYERS | PLAY TIME | SCENES | COMBAT |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1–4 | 2 hours | 5 | combat light |

A caravan is stopped nine miles short of the auction with a cracked axle, and the weighing opens at first light and closes an hour later.

The salt can wait. The tally-stick cannot. Unweighed salt is not sold, and forty people are paid out of the sale.

So somebody walks. Nine miles, in the dark, carrying a notched stick worth more than everything else on the road tonight.

The trouble is what the notches say.

READ THESE TWO PAGES AND YOU CAN RUN IT

# The Evening at a Glance

Everything below is expanded later. If you have twenty minutes before your players arrive, these two pages and the read-aloud boxes are enough.

## How it opens

Open with the stick already in a player's hand, because Cotter Bray does not ask and does not explain. He puts it there, closes their fingers on it, and says the only three things that matter.

**"Nine miles. First light. Ask for the weighmaster and nobody else."**

Then he goes back to the axle, because there is nothing else he can do and standing still is worse.

**Give the table the physical thing.** A length of hazel the size of a forearm, split down the middle, one half held by the Tollhouse and one half here. Notches cut across both halves at once, so the two only read true together. That is the road's whole system of trust, in a stick, and every drover in this camp learned to read one before they learned to write.

**Then start the clock and make it the ground under the evening.** It is a little after two in the morning. First light is around six, and the weighing closes an hour after it. Nine miles is three hours at a walk on a good road, and this is not a good road, in the dark, and nobody here has slept: call it four and a half.

Say the miles out loud as they fall. Nine. Seven. Five. **Do not roll for it and do not hurry it** - a journey where the DM is counting is a journey the table can feel.

And one thing more, said by a drover as they leave, not by Bray: **"He'll not have told you what's on it."**

## The order of things

| | SCENE | WHAT HAS TO BE TRUE WHEN IT ENDS | FIGHT | PAGE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | The Axle | They are carrying the stick, they know the deadline, and somebody has told them the stick has a problem on it. | — | 14 |
| 2 | Two Ways to the Auction | They have chosen a route knowing what it costs, and they have had time with the stick in their hands. | — | 16 |
| 3 | The Pan Bank | They are committed to the narrow ground, and they know what it costs to leave it. | — | 18 |
| 4 | The Cutters | The people who need this stick not to arrive have tried to stop it, and the party know why. | hard | 21 |
| 5 | First Light at the Scales | They hand over what they are carrying, having decided what to say with it, and they hear what it costs. | — | 26 |

Also in here — Stat blocks 28 · What they carry out 29 · Handouts 30 · Random tables 32 · Battle maps 35.

## The three things they will remember

- **Ilsabet Rooke, who answers every question completely the first time it is asked, and has been waiting three runs for somebody to ask.**
- Six wrapped shapes standing still on a three-pace bank in the dark, and a hand held out, palm up.
- Standing at the bench with both halves of the stick together in front of a woman who has read ten thousand of them, and deciding what to say while she looks.

## The decision that is theirs

What to say at the scales. The stick shows a shortfall and the shortfall is three tolls paid in salt by a head drover so that two of her people were not left at a gate at midnight. Saying so is true and puts her name in a book for the first time in twenty years. Saying nothing is also true and puts a mark against a man who has run this road for forty years. Saying they do not know is true as well. The weighmaster will take any of the three and will not tell them which she wanted, and there is no correct answer.

FOR THE DUNGEON MASTER

# Running This Adventure

**Nine Miles** is a one-shot for one to four 1st-level characters, written to run in 2 hours at one sitting. Everything you need is in this file: the scenes in order, the people in them, every creature's numbers printed in full, the maps, the handouts, and 4 ready-made characters.

Read the boxed passages aloud. Everything outside them is for you. The dashed boxes marked *if it goes sideways* are there for when your players do something the scene did not expect — which they will, and which is the best part.

## Running it with your own party

Any first-level characters fit, one to four of them with the changes on the page One, Two, Three or Four Players, because the adventure asks one thing of them: that they will walk nine miles at night for people they met an hour ago. If nobody has a reason, Ilsabet Rooke gives it at the camp - forty people, one auction, a month to the next. A party with a horse between them shortens the road and changes nothing else; say the miles anyway. A party that is all talk will find the cutters are a conversation, and a party that is all fight will find they are four rounds; both are complete versions. The only thing that does not survive being skipped is the stick going into a player's hand in the first minute, so put it there before anybody asks what the job is.

## When to hand out inspiration

> Look for the player who asks what is wrong with the stick before agreeing to carry it. Being told the problem at the axle instead of discovering it at the scales is the difference between a delivery and a disaster.

## If they try something that is not written here

They will. These are the ones this adventure actually gets, and what to do with each — not a list of the permitted moves, but eight worked examples of the same stance. Anything else: let it work if it is clever and costs something, and say what it costs before they commit.

- **Refuse the job once they hear about the problem.** Allow it. Somebody else carries it and arrives late, and the party spends the evening watching an auction go the wrong way with their hands clean.
- **Fix the stick on the road.** It cannot be fixed and it can be understood. An hour spent on it tells them exactly what to say at the scales, which is worth more than a repair.
- **Go openly rather than quietly.** The cutters know either way. Going openly means they come at a time and place the party can choose, which is a genuine trade for the nine miles.
- **Hand the stick to somebody else to carry.** Whoever takes it is now the target and does not know it. Say that plainly once. If they do it anyway, that is the adventure they have chosen.
- **Take the stick apart to see the problem properly.** It comes apart and it does not go back the same. What they learn is worth having and what they hand over at the scales is now visibly opened.

- **Send a decoy on the other road.** The cutters split, which halves the ambush and doubles the number of places it happens. Whoever carries the decoy is alone for the whole middle of the night.
- **Arrive early and wait at the scales.** The scales open when they open. Waiting outside them with it in the dark is the most exposed hour of the nine miles and it is entirely their idea.
- **Tell the cutters they know.** Allow it. It ends the following and starts the negotiating, and a negotiation on this road at this hour has terms nobody wrote down.

## If a character dies

Death saving throws work as written, and so does any magic at the table that brings somebody back. If there is none, the death stands. What should not happen is a player watching for the rest of the evening. **From the next scene they play the person named below.** The simplest way is to keep the old character sheet under the new name. Take what that person wants and how they sound from *The Cast*, and keep what they are hiding to yourself unless it comes out in play.

> Ilsabet Rooke. Forty people get paid on what that stick says, so she follows on foot the moment she can leave the carts, and she reaches the party at the next place they stop. She will tell anybody anything they ask, straight away, which makes her an easy person to hand to a player.

## When a fight goes too easily, or too badly

Too easily

Leave it won. A party that planned well has earned a short fight, and a creature that suddenly gets tougher halfway through is the one thing every table notices. Push the next fight instead: one more of its weakest creature, or its biggest one starting with a third more hit points. If it was the last fight, let it be short and give the scene after it the time.

Too badly

Every fight in this adventure has a line marked **Instead of killing the last one**. Read it before the first character drops, not after. It is written as something the creature would do anyway, so using it never looks like a rescue.

## Give advantage more often than the boxes say

Every scene in this adventure has a **Give advantage if** box. Each one is an example of a standard rather than the list of times the standard applies. The standard: **when something the party did earlier would plausibly make this easier, give advantage on it, written down or not.**

- **It is cheap.** Advantage is worth about the same as a +3 on the roll, and it is worth most when the odds were already close to even. It turns a coin-toss into a good bet. It does not turn a bad plan into a good one, which is why handing it out costs you nothing you wanted to keep.
- **It pays attention rather than optimisation.** The player who asked a question two scenes ago, or talked to somebody nobody else talked to, gets something back for it. That is the behaviour worth rewarding at a table, and it is the behaviour these boxes are built out of.

- **Say why, out loud, in one sentence.** You spoke to the ferryman first, so you know where the rope is — roll with advantage. The table learns the standard by hearing it, and inside an hour they start playing towards it without being asked.
- **And the limit, which matters as much as the permission.** If it is going out on every roll it has stopped meaning anything. It is for the roll that an earlier decision earned, not for the roll that happens to be hard. Disadvantage is the same dial turned the other way, and the same rule holds: something they did, not something you wanted.

## If this is your first time running a game

Skip this section if it is not. Four things nobody tells you:

- **You are allowed to make it up.** If the players do something this adventure did not predict — and they will — decide what happens, ask for a check if it is uncertain, and carry on. That is not a failure of the adventure. That is the game.
- **You do not have to memorise anything.** Every number you need is on the page in front of you when you need it. Looking something up at the table is normal.
- **Nobody at the table knows what was supposed to happen.** If you skip a scene, forget an NPC, or get a rule wrong, you are the only person who will ever know.
- **When in doubt, say yes.** A player who tries something clever should usually get to try it. Ask for a roll if it might fail, and let the dice make it interesting.

> **And about this one in particular.**
>
> Written for a DM who has never run anything. One fight, one map, five short scenes, and every check says what happens on a failure. If a check fails and the text says nothing, it costs them time and nothing else.

## Words this adventure uses

The d20
The twenty-sided die. Almost everything uncertain is settled by rolling it, adding a number, and comparing the total to a target.

Ability check
A roll to see whether a character manages something difficult — climbing, persuading, spotting, remembering. Roll a d20, add the relevant bonus from the character sheet, compare to the DC.

DC (Difficulty Class)
The number to beat. This adventure gives you one for every check. 10 is ordinary, 15 is genuinely hard, 20 is exceptional. Equal to the DC counts as a success.

Saving throw
A roll to avoid something happening TO a character, rather than to make something happen. Same procedure as an ability check — d20 plus a bonus against a DC — but it is the reaction, not the attempt. "Make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw" means: roll, and if you fail, the bad thing lands.

Armor Class (AC)
How hard a creature is to hit. An attacker rolls a d20, adds their attack bonus, and must equal or beat the target's AC.

Hit points
How much damage a creature can take before it drops. At 0 a monster dies; a player character falls unconscious and starts making death saving throws.

Initiative
The order of turns in a fight. Everyone rolls a d20 and adds their Dexterity bonus once, and you go around in that order until it is over.

Action, bonus action, reaction
On their turn a character does one main thing (an action), possibly one quick extra thing if they have one (a bonus action), and can move. A reaction is something they do on somebody else's turn.

Advantage / disadvantage
Roll two d20s instead of one and keep the higher (advantage) or the lower (disadvantage). It is the game's way of saying "that should be easier / harder" without doing arithmetic. Use it freely.

Short rest / long rest
An hour of sitting down, or a night's sleep. Characters get some abilities back on a short rest and nearly everything on a long rest.

Challenge Rating (CR)
A monster's rough difficulty number. You do not need to do anything with it — this adventure has already worked out how hard each fight is for the party size on the cover.

Stat block
The boxed set of numbers for a creature. Everything you need to run it is inside the box; you never need another book.

Read-aloud text
The italic boxed paragraphs in this adventure. Read them out, or reword them — they exist so you always know how to start a scene.

## For a bigger table

Five or six players
Add one more of the weakest creature in each fight. Do not add a second boss.

A player who has never played
Hand them one of the pre-generated characters and tell them their character does one thing very well. That is enough for an evening.

A table with both veterans and newcomers
Ask the veterans to say what they are doing in plain language rather than rules language. It fixes almost everything.

**And for Nine Miles specifically.**

**Another table size.** For five or six, keep six and let two work round through the brine as written - the bank is what balances this fight, not the numbers.

**How long it runs.** Two hours. The camp is twenty minutes, the fork is fifteen, the bank and the cutters are forty together, and the scales are the rest - because the scales are what the evening was for.

**The clock.** Say the miles falling and the hours passing, out loud, and never roll for either. The whole adventure is a clock with people standing in front of it.

**The tone.** Nobody in this adventure is a villain, including the six people who take the stick. If the table finishes it angry at somebody, something was played too hard.

FOR THE DUNGEON MASTER

# One, Two, Three or Four Players

**Nine Miles** is written for four characters and plays just as well with one, two or three. With four, play it as written. With fewer, everything that changes is on this page, and the numbers for each fight are also printed in the fight itself; anything not mentioned here stays as it is.

With fewer players, take whichever ready characters they like. For one player, Halder Quist or Nesh come through the fight best.

## One player

Ilsabet Rooke walks the nine miles with the one character from the start instead of following later. Forty people get paid on what that stick says, she will tell anybody anything they ask, and she does not fight.

- **Scene 4, The Cutters.** Two Bandits.

## Two players

Ilsabet Rooke walks with them if they ask her, and tells them anything they ask. She does not fight.

- **Scene 4, The Cutters.** Three Bandits.

## Three players

- **Scene 4, The Cutters.** Four Bandits.

# Hooks

> They are at the Drovers' Camp for the night, as anybody moving on this road is, and the caravan that broke its axle is fifty feet from where they laid out their bedrolls.

> Cotter Bray is paying two gold and asking for people with no stake in the load, which on this road means strangers, which tonight means them.

> A courier would normally ride this - but Tam Auker went south this afternoon and will not be back before the auction closes, and there is not a sound horse in the camp.

WHO THEY WILL MEET

# The Cast



## Cotter Bray

*Caravan-master, hauls salt the length of the road*

**Looks like.** Sixty and built like a gatepost. Hands that have been broken and set more than once. He talks to the axle more than to the people standing around it.

**Wants.** The stick at the weighmaster before first light, and no conversation about what is cut into it.

**Is hiding.** He knows exactly what the notches show and has known for three runs. He is not a thief and he is not innocent, and he has been hoping the auction would not look closely, the way it has not looked closely for years.



## Ilsabet Rooke

*Head drover, twenty years under three different masters*

**Looks like.** Small, wrapped against the cold before anybody else feels it, and the only person in the camp who has looked at the sky and worked out the time without being asked.

**Wants.** Forty people paid. That is the whole of it, and she will say so plainly to anybody who asks what she thinks the party should do.

**Is hiding.** She is the one who paid the tolls in salt, off her own initiative, on three separate runs, because two of her drovers had no coin and the alternative was leaving them behind. Bray let it happen by not asking.



## The Weighmaster

*Runs the scales at the Salt Auction; nobody uses her name*

**Looks like.** Awake at first light because she is always awake at first light. Reads a tally-stick the way other people read a face.

**Wants.** The two halves to agree. If they do not, she wants to be told why by somebody standing in front of her, not to find it out afterwards.

**Is hiding.** She has known about tolls-in-salt for a decade and has never once written it down. What she cannot do is un-see a discrepancy that a stranger has just handed her across the bench.

GIVE THESE AWAY WHEREVER THEY DIG

# Secrets and Clues

These are true, and none of them belongs to a particular scene. When your players search somewhere you did not plan for, or ask a question you did not expect, hand them one of these. Cross it off. You will not run out, and the adventure cannot stall.

1. The stick is one half of a pair. The Tollhouse holds the other. Notches were cut across both at once and the two only read true together.
2. Two hundred and eleven bushels were tallied out of the Tollhouse. The load standing at the camp is short of that.
3. The shortfall is not one theft. It is three small ones, on three separate runs, each about the size of a toll.
4. That is exactly what it is: tolls paid in salt off the load, by drovers with no coin, so nobody had to be left behind.
5. Ilsabet Rooke did it, all three times, on her own decision. Bray let it happen by not asking a question he could see the answer to.
6. The Tollhouse takes salt-in-lieu from about a third of the caravans on this road and has done for years. It is normal and it is not written down anywhere.
7. Unweighed salt cannot be sold at auction. The next auction is a month out and forty people are paid from this one.
8. The salt-cutters work the pans between two and dawn, because the crust only carries weight when it is cold.
9. Six of them have been taking a cut off loads that cross the pans, small enough that it reads as spillage.
10. They do not want the stick delivered. A weighmaster reading a shortfall out loud is a weighmaster who starts counting, and their arrangement ends.
11. The weighmaster has known about tolls-in-salt for ten years and has never written it down once.

## What they need to work out

> The load is short, and the shortfall is three tolls, not a theft.
>
> - **The camp, scene 1** — A drover says it on the way out, unprompted: "He'll not have told you what's on it." *(automatic)*
> - **The road, scene 2** — Intelligence (Investigation) DC 11 on the stick itself: three notches sit apart from the run, cut with a different blade and at a different depth, at roughly even spacing along its length. *(check)*
> - **The auction, scene 5** — Asking Ilsabet Rooke directly, at any point, gets the whole of it in four sentences. She has been waiting three runs for somebody to ask. *(earned)*

> Somebody on the pans does not want this stick to arrive.
>
> - **The road, scene 2** — Anybody in the camp will say the cutters are out on the pans tonight, because the cutters are out on the pans every cold night. *(automatic)*
> - **The pans, scene 3** — Wisdom (Perception) DC 12: cut-marks in the crust either side of the bank are fresh, and they cluster where the spur meets the crown rather than running the whole length. *(check)*
> - **The pans, scene 4** — Taking one of them alive, or simply asking mid-fight what they want. The answer is the stick, not the party, and they will say so. *(earned)*

SCENE 1 OF 5 · A MOMENT FOR THE ONE WHO TALKS

# The Axle

**What this scene is for.** They are carrying the stick, they know the deadline, and somebody has told them the stick has a problem on it.

**It begins when.** Cotter Bray puts the stick in a hand. He does this within two minutes of anybody agreeing to anything.

> READ ALOUD
>
> *The camp is forty people and ninety animals in the cold, and most of them are asleep. One thing here has light on it: a caravan on its side with a cracked axle, and four men underneath it who have been there since dusk.*
>
> *An old man straightens up out of that and walks over. He puts a split length of hazel into the nearest hand and closes the fingers around it himself. The wood is warm from his pocket.*
>
> *Out past the fires, in the dark, a dog decides not to bark.*

**NO FIGHT HERE.** This scene is three conversations and a clock, and it should run about twenty minutes.

**WHAT A TALLY-STICK IS**, because a first-time DM needs to be able to say it in one breath: a stick split lengthways, notched across both halves at once, one half kept by each party. The two only read true together, and neither can be altered without the other showing it. The Tollhouse holds the twin of this one.

**BRAY WILL NOT DISCUSS THE NOTCHES.** He is not shifty about it - he is a man who has decided what he is going to say and says only that. **Play him as immovable rather than evasive.** Pushed hard, he gives the one line he has: *"Whatever they tell you out there, it was not stealing."* Then he goes back under the cart.

**ILSABET ROOKE IS THE OPPOSITE AND IS STANDING RIGHT THERE.** She answers anything she is asked, at once and completely, and volunteers the number without being asked twice: two hundred and eleven bushels out of the Tollhouse. **She has been waiting three runs for a stranger to ask her a direct question.** If nobody does, she says the second line as they leave, and that is the free clue.

**TWO GOLD AND THE CAMP'S SPARE LANTERN ARE ON OFFER**, and both are theirs whether or not the job is taken.

**WHAT IS ACTUALLY AT STAKE, SAID PLAINLY.** Unweighed salt is not auctioned. The next auction is a month out. Forty people at this camp are paid from this one, at the end of a run they have already worked. That is the pressure, and it is not Bray's - it is theirs.

**IF THEY ASK WHY NOBODY RIDES**, the answer is short and true: the courier went south this afternoon, and there is not a sound horse in this camp because the sound ones are pulling. Do not let this become a puzzle. It is a reason, given once.

> **Give advantage if.** Somebody asked what is wrong with the stick before agreeing to carry it. They are told the problem at the axle instead of discovering it at the scales.

| CHECK | DC | SUCCESS | FAILURE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Charisma (Persuasion) | 10 | Ilsabet gives them the whole shape of it before they leave, including that the shortfall is three separate small ones and roughly the size of a toll each. | She gives the number and nothing around it, and lets them walk off with a figure they cannot yet use. |
| Wisdom (Insight) | 11 | Bray is not hiding a crime from them. He is holding a decision he made by not making it, and he would rather carry that than explain it to strangers at ten at night. | A man who will not answer a plain question, which on this road usually means one thing. |
| Intelligence (History) | 10 | Tolls paid in salt off the load are older than anybody here. About a third of the caravans on this road do it and nobody writes it down. | The stick system is clear enough. What people do around the edges of it is not, at least not to a stranger. |

**Ways on from here.** Out of the firelight, onto the road, with eight hours left

SCENE 2 OF 5 · A MOMENT FOR THE ONE WHO KNOWS THINGS

# Two Ways to the Auction

**What this scene is for.** They have chosen a route knowing what it costs, and they have had time with the stick in their hands.

**It begins when.** A mile out of camp, where the road forks at a milestone nobody has repainted in years.

> READ ALOUD
>
> *A mile out, the fires are gone and the cold is a different kind of cold - the sort that comes up out of flat ground rather than down out of a sky.*
>
> *The road forks at a leaning milestone. One arm keeps to the made road, which swings wide and north around the pans. The other drops onto the pan bank, straight across, and the salt gives back what little light there is.*
>
> *Both arms are rutted. Both have been used tonight.*

**THE ROUTE CHOICE IS THE SCENE, AND NEITHER ANSWER IS THE RIGHT ONE.** Lay out both, with their costs, and then stop talking.

- **THE MADE ROAD — nine miles, certain footing.** Metalled, drained, walkable in the dark at a steady two miles an hour by people who have not slept. **It arrives about three-quarters of an hour after the weighing opens** and a quarter of an hour before it closes, with nothing whatever in hand. Any delay at all on this route and they are late.
- **THE PAN BANK — six miles, and the ground is a question.** A raised bank of packed salt and clay across the flats, at the same two miles an hour. **It arrives the best part of an hour early** and that hour is worth more than anything else in this adventure. The crust only carries weight while it is cold; after about four in the morning the bank starts to soften at the edges. And the cutters work the pans on cold nights, which is tonight, which is why it is cold enough to walk on.

**SAY BOTH COSTS OUT LOUD AND DO NOT STEER.** If the party asks which is better, the honest answer from anybody at the camp is *"depends what you're carrying"*, and they are carrying the one thing on this road that cannot be replaced.

**THE MILES ARE THE CLOCK.** Count them down aloud. Nine. Seven. Five. Three. Nobody rolls for walking.

**THIS IS WHEN THEY LOOK AT THE STICK**, and most parties do, because they have three hours and their hands are cold and there is nothing else to do. Give them the handout. **Three notches sit apart from the run** - different blade, shallower, evenly spaced along the length like three separate occasions rather than one bad night.

**COLD IS THE COST OF THE WHOLE JOURNEY** and it is never a damage roll. Say it every scene. A party that stops to warm up loses twenty minutes and should be told so without penalty attached.

**IF THEY GO BACK TO ASK ILSABET** about the three notches, that costs forty minutes on the made road or twenty on the bank, and she tells them everything. That trade is a good decision and should feel like one.

> **Give advantage if.** They chose the route knowing what it costs rather than which is shorter. Time with the stick in their hands is worth more than time saved.

| CHECK | DC | SUCCESS | FAILURE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intelligence (Investigation) | 11 | Three notches, cut with a different blade at a different depth, spaced evenly down the length. Three occasions, not one. Each one about a toll deep. | Notches on a stick, all of them notches, and reading a tally in the dark with cold hands is exactly as easy as that sounds. |
| Wisdom (Survival) | 12 | The bank will carry until about four. After that the edges go soft first and the middle holds longest, which means walking the crown and not the verge. | Flat white ground under a flat black sky, and no way to tell firm from soft until a boot is in it. |
| Wisdom (Perception) | 10 | Both arms of the fork have been walked tonight, and the pan bank has more feet on it than the made road does. | Ruts and frost and a milestone nobody can read. |

**Ways on from here.** Down onto the pan bank, or the long way round to the same place

SCENE 3 OF 5 · A MOMENT FOR THE ONE WHO HITS THINGS

# The Pan Bank

**What this scene is for.** They are committed to the narrow ground, and they know what it costs to leave it.

**It begins when.** They step onto the bank - or, on the made road, they reach the one stretch where it runs the pans' edge and the same rules apply for four hundred yards.

> READ ALOUD
>
> *The bank is three good paces wide and stands about a foot above the flats. On both sides the pans run out further than the dark allows anybody to see.*
>
> *They are not dry. An inch of standing brine lies over the crust, cold and quiet, and it holds the sky better than the sky does. Every footfall sounds like walking on thin ice that does not break.*
>
> *A long way off, somebody is cutting salt, and the sound carries the way sound carries over water.*

**THIS IS THE ONE PLACE THEY CANNOT GO AROUND**, and the map is here because everything after this happens on it.

**THE RULES OF THE BANK, GIVEN ONCE AND THEN HELD:**

- Three paces wide at the crown, the whole way across, with no wider place and no narrower one. Two people abreast in comfort, three in a hurry, four never.
- Off the bank is not death. It is brine to the knee over a crust that gives, **Strength (Athletics) DC 12 to get back up**, and every minute in it is a minute of cold that will matter later.
- **The crust carries until about four in the morning.** A party that dawdled at the fork feels the verges soften and the usable width drops to two paces.
- Salt gets into everything. Boots, cuffs, the stick. It is worth one sentence when they arrive.

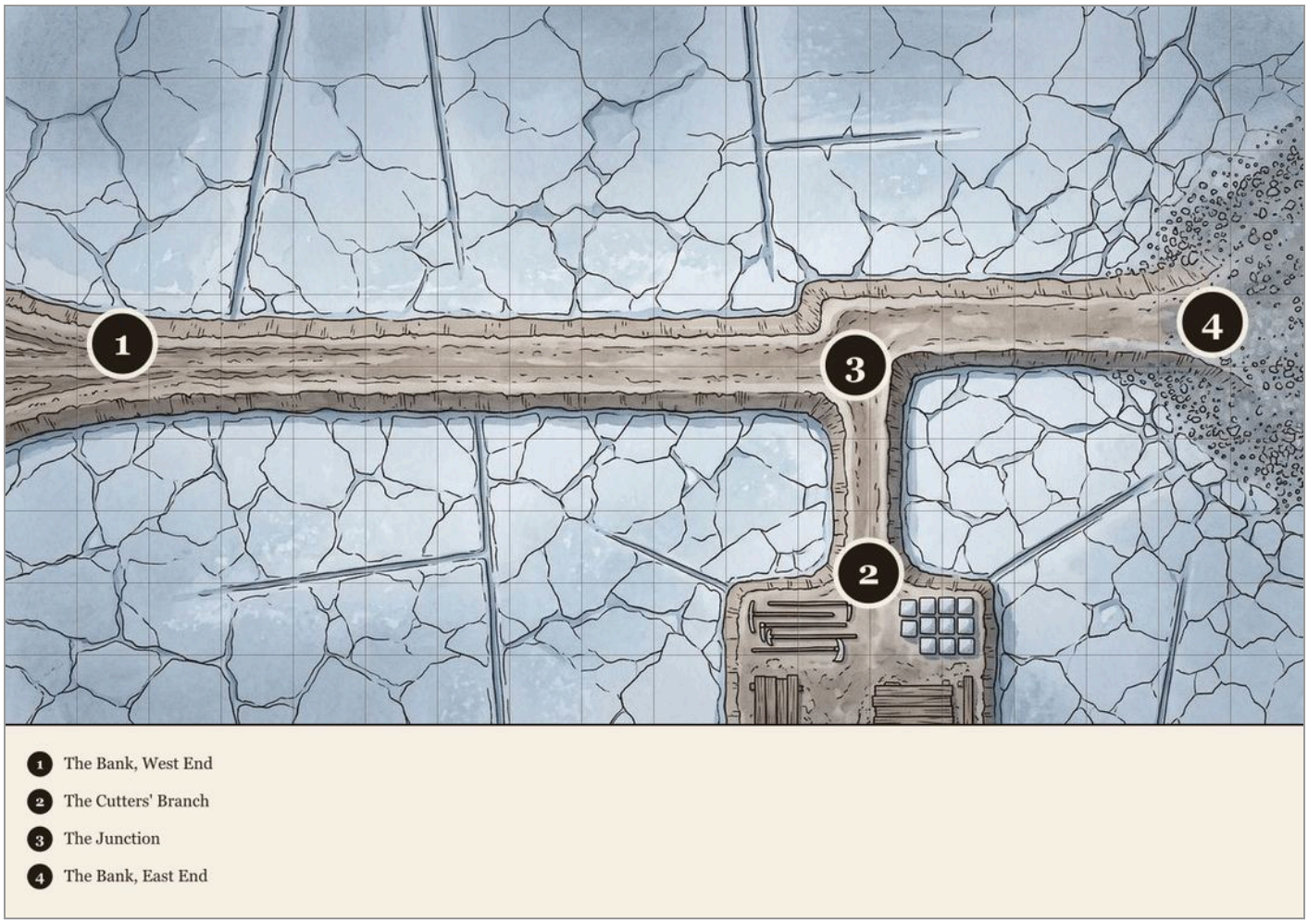
**THE BRANCH AND THE STEP.** About two-thirds along, the crown steps a single pace north and carries on, and at that same point a spur runs off south to the cutters' working - a platform of trodden crust with tools stacked and nobody on it. **It is not a trap and there is nothing hidden on it.** It is where the six of them will come from, and a party that walks out to look at it first has bought itself the enormous advantage of knowing that.

**WHAT THE PARTY CAN DO WITH THIS GROUND**, if they think of it, and they should be allowed to: the bank is a corridor. Two people can hold it against six. Anybody who wants to get past has to come along it or wade, and wading in the dark in front of somebody with a spear is a bad idea for the wader too.

**IF THEY TOOK THE MADE ROAD**, run this at the four-hundred-yard stretch where the road skirts the pans. Same map, same rules, same fight, less of it - and they arrive at the auction with no time in hand, which is the cost they already accepted.

> **Give advantage if.** They know from the road-choosing what leaving the narrow ground costs. Being committed is a position when you chose it and a trap when you did not.

| CHECK | DC | SUCCESS | FAILURE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strength (Athletics) | 12 | Out of the brine and back onto the crown without losing anything, including the stick. | Up, eventually, soaked to the thigh and shaking. Every check for the rest of the night is made cold. |
| Dexterity (Acrobatics) | 11 | The soft verge is read by foot before it is trusted with weight, and nobody goes in at all. | One leg through, one hand down, and whatever was in that hand is now in the brine. |
| Wisdom (Perception) | 12 | Fresh cut-marks in the crust on both sides, clustered where the spur meets the crown and not running the whole length. Somebody chose that spot. | Cut salt looks like uncut salt at night, and there is a great deal of both. |




The Pan Bank, Below the Auction — DM copy

### 1 The Bank, West End

Where the bank leaves the made road and starts across the flats. Three paces of packed salt and clay standing about a foot above the pans, with an inch of standing brine on the crust either side. Every footfall sounds like walking on ice that does not break.

2 The Cutters' Branch

A spur running south off the crown to a trodden working platform: long-handled blades stacked, cut blocks squared up, boards for the soft ground, and nobody on it. Nothing is hidden here. It is where the six of them come from, and a party that walks out to look first knows that before the hand goes out.

3 The Junction

Where the spur meets the crown, and where the bank steps a pace north and carries on. This is where the cutters stand and wait: they come up off their own working, and there is no going round them without going into the brine. Three paces here as everywhere - two abreast in comfort, three at a squeeze, four never.

4 The Bank, East End

The crust gives way to gravel and the ground comes up, and the auction lights are visible from here for the first time - low, orange, about a mile off. Anybody who reaches this square is past the fight whether it was finished or not.

---

**Ways on from here.** On along the bank, toward the junction

SCENE 4 OF 5 · A MOMENT FOR THE ONE WHO SNEAKS

# The Cutters

**What this scene is for.** The people who need this stick not to arrive have tried to stop it, and the party know why.

**It begins when.** The party reach the junction where the spur meets the crown, about two-thirds along, or twenty minutes pass on the bank.

> READ ALOUD
>
> *Where the spur comes up onto the crown there are people standing on it, and they have been standing there long enough to be cold.*
>
> *Six of them, in the salt-cutters' get-up: wrapped to the eyes, boards on their feet for the soft ground. Each one carries a long-handled blade. It is a tool, and it would not have to be modified to be anything else.*
>
> *The one in front holds a hand out, palm up, and says the only thing any of them says before it starts.*
>
> *"The stick."*

**THE PEAK, AND THE PEOPLE IN IT ARE NOT MONSTERS.** Six salt-cutters. Use the **Bandit** stat block. They have been taking a cut off loads crossing the pans for two years, small enough to read as spillage, and a weighmaster who starts counting is the end of that.

**THEY SAY WHAT THEY WANT AND IT IS TRUE.** They want the stick. Not the party, not the two gold, not anybody's boots. **If asked mid-fight what they want, they answer** - they are not silent villains and playing them as silent villains loses the whole scene.

**THE MERCY IS THE WHOLE DESIGN OF THIS FIGHT AND IT IS NOT A CREATURE TRAIT.** These people are not killers and are not prepared to become killers over an arrangement. **A character who drops is not finished off.** The cutters take the stick off whoever is holding it and go, at speed, out across the crust where nobody in armour is following. **Losing this fight costs the delivery, not the character** - and a DM who understands that can let it be genuinely frightening without lying to the table.

**THE GROUND IS THE FIGHT.** Three paces wide, six of them, four of the party. Only two or three can engage at once and the rest are queued behind. A party that forms up and holds the crown is doing exactly the right thing, and it works.

**THREE WAYS PAST THAT ARE NOT KILLING SIX PEOPLE**, and all three should be available:

- **Talk.** They are being asked to commit robbery over spillage. **Charisma (Persuasion) DC 13**, with advantage for anybody who worked out what is on the stick and says so - because the tolls make the party and the cutters the same kind of guilty, and everybody standing on that bank knows it.
- **Refuse and hold.** Two rounds of a shield wall on a three-pace bank and two of them decide this is not worth a broken arm. The rest follow within the round.

- **Go around.** Off the bank, into the brine, in the dark, on purpose. It works. It costs twenty minutes, and everything anybody was carrying loosely.

**IF THEY LOSE THE STICK**, the evening is not over and this is the best version of it: the cutters go south to the working, and they are on foot, in the dark, carrying something they do not want and cannot use. Scene five happens at the auction anyway, with three hours to explain themselves and no stick.

> **Give advantage if.** They worked out on the road who needs this stick not to arrive. The people who tried to stop it are not a surprise, and surprise is the only advantage those people had.

| CHECK | DC | SUCCESS | FAILURE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dexterity (Stealth) | 11 | The stick goes to somebody at the back before the hand comes out, and the cutters spend the first round asking the wrong person for it. | Six people who have been standing in the cold for an hour watch exactly where it goes. |
| Charisma (Persuasion) | 13 | Said out loud, on a salt bank at three in the morning: everyone here is shaving something off a load. The blades go down. Nobody feels good about it. | It lands as a threat to inform, which is the one thing that makes six frightened people commit. |
| Wisdom (Insight) | 10 | These are working people doing something they have talked themselves into, and not one of them has drawn on a person before. | Six armed shapes on a narrow bank in the dark, and no way to read a face that is wrapped to the eyes. |

ENCOUNTER · A HARD FIGHT FOR 4 1ST-LEVEL CHARACTERS

**Starts when.** The hand goes out, and either somebody refuses or ten seconds of silence passes.

**6**× Bandit

**Fewer players. One:** Two Bandits. **Two:** Three Bandits. **Three:** Four Bandits. With fewer cutters, they give up the stick once one of them is down or withdrawn.

**What winning means.** Get the stick to the far end of the bank. Killing six people is one way through and it is neither the fastest nor the one this adventure is built around.

**Tactics.** Two forward on the crown, two behind them, two off the bank in the brine working round to whoever is holding the stick. They go for hands and for the stick, not for the throat. Any cutter reduced below half hit points steps back off the bank and does not come forward again.

**The ground.** The bank is two squares wide - two combatants abreast in comfort, three at a squeeze. Brine on both sides is difficult ground, knee deep, DC 12 Athletics to climb back up. Anybody prone on the crown is at the edge. Light is whatever the party brought; the cutters have worked this ground for two years and do not need any.

**How it ends.** Two or more cutters are down or withdrawn, or the party talk them off, or the cutters get the stick.

**Instead of killing the last one.** Nobody here finishes anybody off. A character at nought hit points is stepped over, the stick is taken from whoever has it, and the six of them go south across the crust at a run. That is what losing looks like in this adventure, and it is a scene rather than a funeral.

# Bandit

*Medium Humanoid (any race), any non-lawful alignment*

**Armor Class** 12 (leather armor)

**Hit Points** 11 (2d8+2)

**Speed** 30 ft.

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11+0 | 12+1 | 12+1 | 10+0 | 10+0 | 10+0 |

**Senses** passive Perception 10

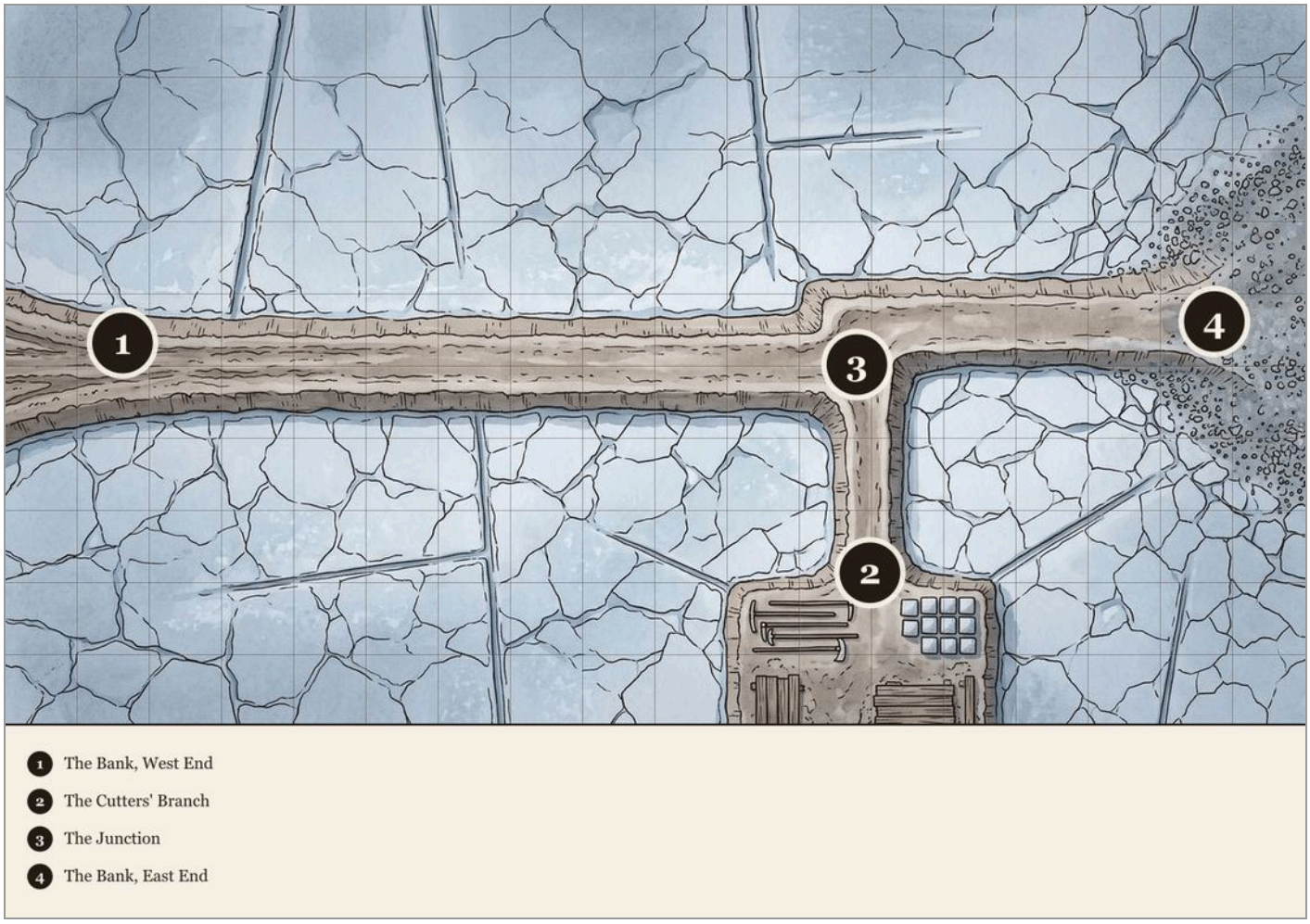
**Languages** any one language (usually Common)

**Challenge** 1/8 (25 XP)

## Actions

***Scimitar.*** Melee Weapon Attack: +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 4 (1d6 + 1) slashing damage.

***Light Crossbow.*** Ranged Weapon Attack: +3 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. Hit: 5 (1d8 + 1) piercing damage.

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Where the spur meets the crown, and where the bank steps a pace north and carries on. This is where the cutters stand and wait: they come up off their own working, and there is no going round them without going into the brine. Three paces here as everywhere - two abreast in comfort, three at a squeeze, four never.

### 4 The Bank, East End

The crust gives way to gravel and the ground comes up, and the auction lights are visible from here for the first time - low, orange, about a mile off. Anybody who reaches this square is past the fight whether it was finished or not.

**Ways on from here.** On off the pans, with the auction lights ahead

SCENE 5 OF 5 · A MOMENT FOR THE ONE WHO TALKS

# First Light at the Scales

**What this scene is for.** They hand over what they are carrying, having decided what to say with it, and they hear what it costs.

**It begins when.** They reach the auction yard, whatever hour it is and whatever state they are in.

> READ ALOUD
>
> *The auction yard smells of wet stone and animals and, under that, salt, the way everything here smells of salt.*
>
> *The scales are the size of a cart and older than the building around them. A woman is standing at the bench in the half-dark with the Tollhouse's half of the stick already laid out on it, squared up, waiting.*
>
> *She does not look at the state of them. She looks at their hands.*
>
> *"Both halves on the bench."*

**THIS IS THE PEAK OF THE EVENING EVEN THOUGH THE FIGHT IS BEHIND THEM.** Do not rush it and do not resolve it for the table.

**THE TWO HALVES GO TOGETHER AND THEY AGREE.** That is the first thing and it should be said out loud: the stick has not been tampered with. What it shows is a load that left heavier than it arrived, in three steps.

**THE WEIGHMASTER SEES IT IMMEDIATELY.** She has read ten thousand of these. What she does next depends entirely on what the party say while she is looking, and she gives them the whole of that silence to say it in.

**THE THINGS THEY CAN DO, AND THE AUCTION ACCEPTS ANY OF THEM:**

- **Say nothing.** She records a discrepancy of three notches against Cotter Bray's mark. The load is weighed and sold, forty people are paid this morning, and there is now a written thing with his name on it that did not exist yesterday.
- **Say it was tolls.** True, checkable at the Tollhouse, and it takes the discrepancy off Bray and puts it on a practice that about a third of the road relies on. She writes down what she is told. **Ilsabet Rooke is named in it.**
- **Say they do not know.** Also true, and she accepts it without a flicker. The load is weighed and sold, and the question stays open and follows the caravan.
- **Hand her the stick and ask what she would do.** She will answer honestly, once, and it is not a hint: *"I'd want it said by the man it belongs to. He isn't here. You are."*

**AND THE HONEST THING NOBODY WILL TELL THEM:** she has known about tolls-in-salt for ten years and has never once written it down. **The only reason it is going in the book today is that a stranger is standing in front of her holding it.** That is not the party's fault and it is entirely the party's doing, and both of those are true.

**IF THEY ARRIVE AFTER THE CLOSE**, she is still there and the answer is the same one it always is: no weighing, no sale, next auction is a month out. She is not cruel about it. Forty people go unpaid and the party watch Ilsabet Rooke be told.

**IF THEY ARRIVE WITHOUT THE STICK**, she takes their word for what happened, sends two people out to the pans at daylight, and the load waits. That is worse for the drovers than the truth would have been, and better for Bray.

> **Give advantage if.** They decided what to say with it before first light. The stick is handed over with an account attached, and an account cannot be argued with the way a stranger can.

| CHECK | DC | SUCCESS | FAILURE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Charisma (Persuasion) | 11 | Whatever they say is heard as they meant it, by somebody who has heard every version of every excuse and can tell one from a reason. | It comes out as a stranger deciding a local matter, and she writes down what was said rather than what was meant. |
| Wisdom (Insight) | 12 | She does not want this. She would have taken any answer that let her hand the stick back and open the yard, and the party did not give her one. | An official at a bench doing an official thing, unreadable and probably indifferent. |
| Intelligence (Investigation) | 10 | The two halves line up along their whole length. Nobody has cut, sanded or added anything. Whatever this stick says, it says honestly. | Two pieces of notched hazel on a bench, and the weighmaster waiting. |

EVERYTHING WITH A NUMBER, AGAIN, IN ONE PLACE

# Stat Blocks

Each of these is also printed beside the scene that uses it, so you never have to turn back here mid-fight.

## Bandit

*Medium Humanoid (any race), any non-lawful alignment*

**Armor Class** 12 (leather armor)

**Hit Points** 11 (2d8+2)

**Speed** 30 ft.

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11+0 | 12+1 | 12+1 | 10+0 | 10+0 | 10+0 |

**Senses** passive Perception 10

**Languages** any one language (usually Common)

**Challenge** 1/8 (25 XP)

### Actions

***Scimitar.*** Melee Weapon Attack: +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 4 (1d6 + 1) slashing damage.

***Light Crossbow.*** Ranged Weapon Attack: +3 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. Hit: 5 (1d8 + 1) piercing damage.

WHAT THEY CARRY OUT

# Treasure and Ending

> **Worth.** 2 gp per character

> **Worth.** 5 sp
>
> Theirs to keep. On the pan bank it makes them the most visible thing for two miles in any direction, which is a real decision and not a punishment.

> **Worth.** 1 sp
>
> A flat wooden shoe for soft crust. Anybody wearing a pair ignores the difficult ground either side of the bank, and looks exactly like a salt-cutter from more than ten feet away.

> **Worth.** 1 gp

## The Yard Opens

The bell goes at six whatever anybody has decided, and eleven caravans start moving at once.

**If the load was weighed and nothing was said,** the drovers are paid before noon. There is a line in the auction book against Cotter Bray's mark that was not there yesterday, and he will find out about it in a month, from somebody who is not the party.

**If they said it was tolls,** it is checked at the Tollhouse within a week and holds up, because it is true. Bray keeps his licence. Ilsabet Rooke is named in a book for the first time in twenty years and does not blame them, which is worse than if she did.

**If they arrived late,** forty people go back down the road unpaid at the end of a run they have already worked. Nobody shouts at the party. Ilsabet says one sentence to them and it is not an unkind one.

**Either way they walked nine miles for strangers in the cold**, and the road notices that sort of thing, and remembers it a good deal longer than it remembers the salt.

PRINT THESE AND PUT THEM IN THEIR HANDS

# Handouts

HANDOUT

## The Tally-Stick

*Hand this to the players. Do not read the last line out; let them find it.*

*A forearm of hazel, split lengthways. Notches cut across the whole width, so both halves carry the same cut.*

```
 ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| |   two hundred and eleven bushels, out of the Tollhouse
 ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||  |
 ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| |
 ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| |
 ||||| · ||||| · |||||
```

*Three of the notches are not like the others. They are shallower, cut with a narrower blade, and they sit apart from the run at roughly even spacing - a third of the way along, halfway, and two-thirds.*

*Three separate occasions. Not one bad night.*

HANDOUT

## What Ilsabet Rooke Says, If Anybody Asks Her

*"Two hundred and eleven bushels left the Tollhouse. Ask me what arrived.*

*Three times this season I've had a drover at a toll gate with no coin in him. You leave them, or you pay it off the load. There's no third thing, and anyone who tells you there is has never stood at a toll gate at midnight.*

*I did it. Cotter didn't ask and I didn't tell him, and he's not a fool, so make of that what you like.*

*The stick doesn't lie. That's the point of the stick. I just never thought it'd be a stranger reading it."*

HANDOUT

## Nine Miles, and What the Hours Cost

*Give this to a player and let them run it. It is the only bookkeeping in the adventure.*

*2 am* *they leave the camp*
*4 am* *the pan crust starts to soften at the edges*
*6 am* *first light, the weighing opens*
*7 am* *the weighing closes*

*THE MADE ROAD* *9 miles, certain footing* *arrives ~6.45 am*
*THE PAN BANK* *6 miles, the crust is a question* *arrives ~5.15 am*

*going back to ask Ilsabet* *+40 min on the road, +20 on the bank*
*stopping to get warm* *+20 min, no penalty, say yes*
*going into the brine* *+10 min and cold for the rest of it*

ROLL WHEN YOU NEED SOMETHING

# Tables

## The nine miles, if the table wants the road to have things in it (d6)

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | A milestone face-down in the ditch, dragged there deliberately, its number toward the ground. |
| 2 | Two drovers coming the other way who will trade news for a mouthful of anything hot. |
| 3 | A cart wheel, one, upright against a wall a hundred yards from any wall's worth of building. |
| 4 | Salt fog off the pans, thigh-high, moving faster than the air that should be pushing it. |
| 5 | A dog that walks with them for a mile and a half and then stops dead and will not go further. |
| 6 | The auction bell, tested once at four in the morning, carrying nine miles across flat ground. |

## The auction yard at first light (d6)

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Eleven caravans queued, and the queue has not moved in an hour. |
| 2 | A boy paid a copper a head to keep the yard dogs off the scales. |
| 3 | Somebody arguing about a weighing from last month, loudly, to nobody official. |
| 4 | The smell of the boiling-house, which everyone here stopped noticing years ago. |
| 5 | A buyer from off the road, in the wrong coat, being charged the wrong prices. |
| 6 | Ilsabet Rooke, who walked the nine miles behind them and has been here twenty minutes. |

# Pre-Generated Characters

Four characters, finished. Ability scores, armour class, hit points, attacks, spells and the two or three things each one is for. Nothing to roll, nothing to look up, nothing to buy.

## Halder Quist



Human · Fighter 1

*Walked this road as a boy behind his father's animals and has not been back since it stopped paying.*

| AC | HP | SPEED | INIT | PROF | PASSIVE PERC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18 | 12 | 30 ft. | +2 | +2 | 13 |

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 16+3 | 14+2 | 15+2 | 9-1 | 13+1 | 11+0 |

**Saving throws** STR +5, CON +4 (others are the plain modifier)
**Skills** Athletics +5, Perception +3
**Attacks** Longsword +5 to hit, 1d8 +3 slashing (two-handed 1d10 +3) · Javelin +5 to hit, 1d6 +3 piercing
**Gear** Rope, 50 ft., Bedroll, Tinderbox
**Fighting Style: Defence.** The +1 is already inside the armour class printed above.
**Second Wind.** Once per rest, a bonus action gives you back 1d10 + 1 hit points.

## Nesh



Halfling · Rogue 1

*Can read a tally-stick faster than anybody in the camp and would rather nobody knew why.*

| AC | HP | SPEED | INIT | PROF | PASSIVE PERC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | 10 | 25 ft. | +3 | +2 | 15 |

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8-1 | 17+3 | 14+2 | 12+1 | 13+1 | 11+0 |

**Saving throws** DEX +5, INT +3 (others are the plain modifier)
**Skills** Stealth +7, Perception +5, Acrobatics +5, Sleight of Hand +5
**Attacks** Shortsword +5 to hit, 1d6 +3 piercing · Shortbow +5 to hit, 1d6 +3 piercing · Dagger +5 to hit, 1d4 +3 piercing
**Gear** Thieves' tools, Crowbar, Ten feet of waxed cord
**Sneak Attack (1d6).** Once a turn, add the dice when you have advantage, or when an ally is beside your target.
**Expertise.** Double proficiency on two skills — already inside the numbers above.
**Halfling Luck.** Reroll a 1 on any d20 and take the second roll.

# Pre-Generated Characters

## Sister Aud



Human · Cleric 1

*Owes the road-priest at the Salt Chapel a favour and has been told, vaguely, to be useful on this stretch.*

| AC | HP | SPEED | INIT | PROF | PASSIVE PERC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 16 | 10 | 30 ft. | +1 | +2 | 13 |

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14+2 | 13+1 | 15+2 | 11+0 | 16+3 | 9-1 |

**Saving throws** WIS +5, CHA +1 (others are the plain modifier)
**Skills** Medicine +5, Religion +2
**Attacks** Mace +4 to hit, 1d6 +2 bludgeoning
**Spells** save DC 13, attack +5, 2 slots of level 1
**Cantrips** Sacred Flame, Guidance, Light
**Prepared** Cure Wounds, Healing Word, Bless, Shield of Faith
**Gear** Holy symbol, Bandages, A flask of something warm
**Ritual casting.** A prepared spell marked as a ritual can be cast without spending a slot.

## Petrin Vole



Gnome · Wizard 1

*Is walking to the auction anyway to buy one specific thing and has been counting the miles all week.*

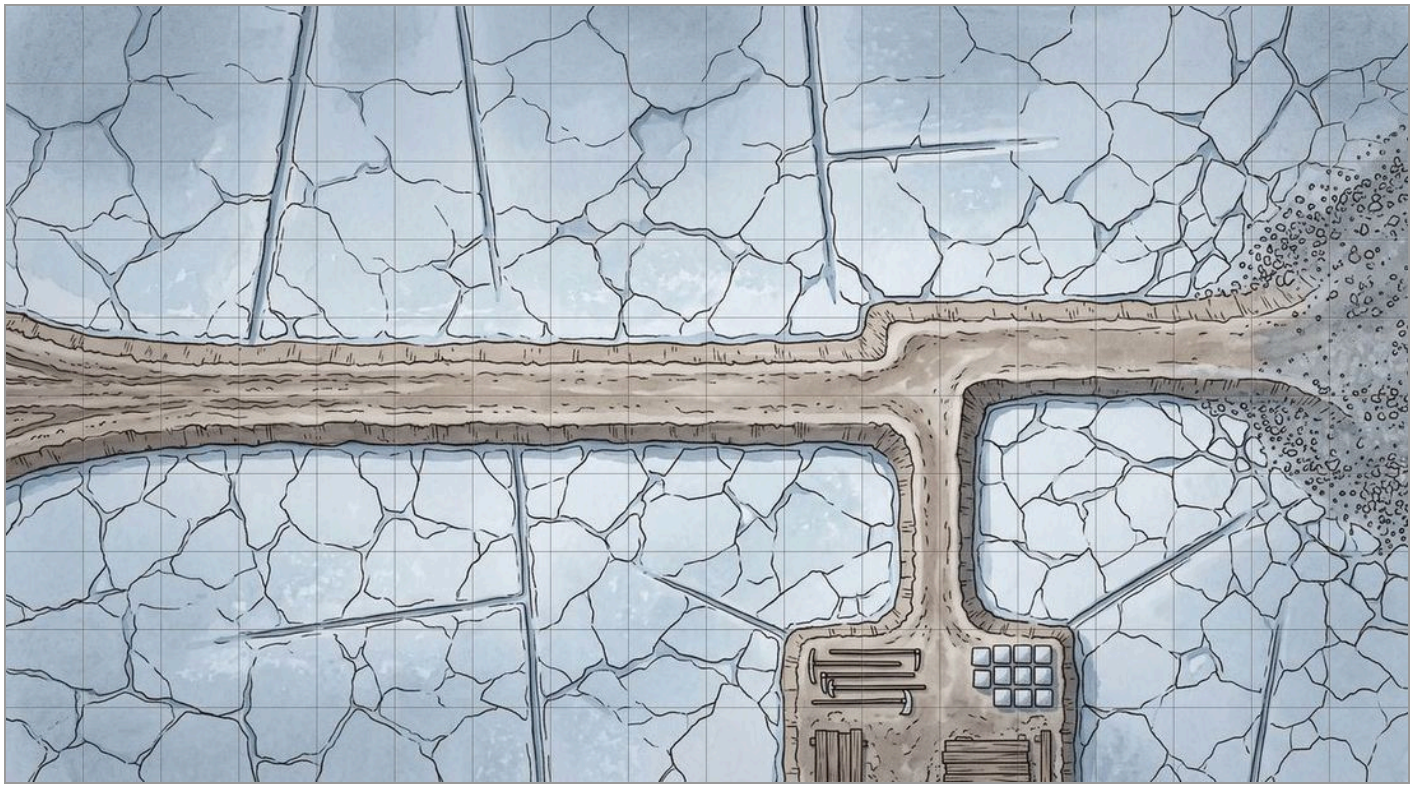
| AC | HP | SPEED | INIT | PROF | PASSIVE PERC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | 8 | 25 ft. | +1 | +2 | 11 |

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8-1 | 13+1 | 14+2 | 17+3 | 12+1 | 10+0 |

**Saving throws** INT +5, WIS +3 (others are the plain modifier)
**Skills** Arcana +5, Investigation +5
**Attacks** Quarterstaff +1 to hit, 1d6 -1 bludgeoning (two-handed 1d8 -1) · Dagger +3 to hit, 1d4 +1 piercing
**Spells** save DC 13, attack +5, 2 slots of level 1
**Cantrips** Fire Bolt, Mage Hand, Light
**Prepared** Magic Missile, Shield, Mage Armor, Sleep
**Gear** Spellbook, Ink and a dry pen, Component pouch
**Arcane Recovery.** Once a day, a short rest gives back spell slots worth half your level, rounded up.
**Gnome Cunning.** Advantage on INT, WIS and CHA saves against magic.

BATTLE MAP · PRINT IT, OR DROP IT INTO A VIRTUAL TABLETOP

# The Pan Bank, Below the Auction



Player copy — no labels, no secrets. 70 pixels per 5-foot square, so it imports at the right scale without rescaling.

A NOTE FROM US

# Thank you for playing

We are a small studio, and we read everything our players tell us. What you say decides what we make next — and how we fix what we have already made.

So, once you have played: what worked? What dragged? Was anything unclear? Did anything surprise you?

> TWO WAYS TO TELL US
>
> *1.* ***Leave an honest rating on itch.io.*** *Sign in, open* ***onegoodeveningdnd.itch.io/nine-miles****, and under More information choose Rate this. The stars help other players find it; any words you add are read only by us.*
>
> *2.* ***Or leave a comment*** *at the bottom of the same page. We answer every one.*

*If anything in the file is wrong or missing, tell us and we will fix it.* Good or bad, it all helps. Thank you.

LICENCE

# Legal

**If this one worked at your table, there are more.** Dozens of evenings like this, and more you can download free, at

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