
A NARRATIVE ADVENTURE

THE LONG WAY DOWN

*A dungeon crawl with an eighty-one-year-old guide
and fifty-two years of unfinished business*

FOR 1-4 PLAYERS · CHARACTERS OF 4TH-6TH LEVEL
THREE TO FOUR SESSIONS · COMPATIBLE WITH FIFTH-EDITION RULES

TIDE MOON TALES · tidemoontales.com



A NARRATIVE ADVENTURE FOR 1-4 PLAYERS

*Fifty-two years ago, five friends went down to the fifth level.
One came back. She's eighty-one now,
and she wants to go down one last time.*

The Long Way Down is a classic dungeon crawl: five levels of traps, monsters, and dwarven ruins, with one difference. The party's guide has been here before. Ida Crane is the last of the Merry Ruin, the most famous delving company the Deep ever saw. She is tiny, half deaf, gloriously rude, the best archer alive, and out of breath at the top of every stair. She knows every room in the dungeon, as it was half a century ago. She is often right. When she's wrong, people get hurt.

The mountain is waking, and in five days the town will seal it forever. Ida says she wants to bring her friends' bones home, and to find the man who ran and left them to die. On the way down, the dungeon starts replaying the past: silver ghosts of five young people, laughing and singing on their last descent, out of order, one level at a time. Somewhere below, the story she has believed for fifty-two years is waiting to be checked.

56
pages

13
scenes in three acts

5
levels of dungeon

5
Echoes of the past

5
structured
conversations

6
set pieces

WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT

THEN AND NOW

Most rooms come with two descriptions: what Ida remembers, and what's really there. Trust her and save time, or check and lose it. Her memory saves lives. Until it doesn't.

A GUIDE WHO CAN'T KEEP UP

Ida's Breath turns frailty into choices: rest and lose time against the blasting deadline, or press on and risk her. She will fight you on it. She will lose. She will be furious.

FUNNY FIRST

Ida is the rudest person your players will ever be grateful to. A filthy song about a bishop and a barmaid runs through the whole dungeon, and a mushroom has been singing it for fifty years.

THE ECHOES

Five scenes from fifty-two years ago, replaying in the rooms where they happened, in the order the party finds them, not the order they happened. Assembling them is the mystery.

CONVERSATION AS PLAY

Five structured scenes: a job interview, a bar full of old delvers' worst stories, five candle stubs and one small true thing about each, a game of who you'll be at eighty, and a last toast.

ANY TABLE

Companions scale the story from one player to four: an archer, a halfling with a frying pan and a notebook, and a rival company of young fools. Six backstory Threads let players write themselves in.

MOMENTS YOUR TABLE WILL CARRY HOME

🕯 *A blue moth landing on a rope-shop counter after fifty-two years.*

🕯 *"Mind the seventh step." She's exactly right.*

🕯 *A bridge "solid as a mountain" that fell thirty years ago.*

🕯 *Five candle stubs on a stone, one never named.*

🕯 *An old woman young again, for three rounds, and running.*

🕯 *A five-day countdown, and fuses at dawn.*

IN THIS PREVIEW

The opening chapter, the rules for story-first play (Chalk, Then and Now, the Echoes, and Ida's Breath), the backstory Threads, the town and the five levels of the Deep, and all of Act One, down to the bottom of the Grand Stair. Every page carries its page number from the full edition. At the end are three short glimpses of Act Two, chosen to show how deep it goes without giving away what's at the bottom.

PREVIEW EDITION

THE LONG WAY DOWN

A dungeon crawl with an eighty-one-year-old guide and fifty-two years of unfinished business



FOR 1–4 PLAYERS · CHARACTERS OF 4TH–6TH LEVEL
THREE TO FOUR SESSIONS · COMPATIBLE WITH FIFTH-EDITION RULES

“In my day we had a ten-foot pole and a candle and we were grateful.”

— Ida Crane, the last of the Merry Ruin

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56 PAGES · 13 SCENES · 5 ECHOES · 5 STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS · 6 SET PIECES · 3 HANDOUTS

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Fifty-two years ago, five young adventurers who called themselves **the Merry Ruin** went down into the **Kaldrith Deep**, the great dwarven ruin under the mountain, to reach its fifth and lowest level, where no one had ever been. They were the best of their generation. They were loud, broke, and in love with each other in all the ways young people in a dangerous trade are. One of them came back up.

Her name is **Ida Crane**. She is eighty-one years old now, five feet nothing, half deaf, rude to everyone, and dying. For fifty-two years she has sold rope and maps to young delvers at the mouth of the Deep, and warned every one of them off the fifth level. For fifty-two years she has believed that one of her friends betrayed the others down there, and she has hated him for it every single day.

Now the Deep is waking up. The mountain shakes at night. Strange things are crawling up out of the dungeon and into the town, things that leave rust and wrinkles and dust where they touch. The town council has voted to collapse the entrance with blasting powder in five days and be done with it. And last night, a small blue moth landed on Ida Crane's windowsill, a moth she hasn't seen in fifty-two years.

She has hired the player characters to take her back down. All the way down. Before they bury it forever. She says she wants to bring her friends' bones home, and to find the traitor and break his nose. Both of these are true. Neither is the whole truth.

What follows is a **classic dungeon crawl**, five levels of traps and monsters and treasure, with one difference that changes everything: the party's guide has been here before. She knows every room. She knows it as it was fifty-two years ago, and the dungeon has changed around her memory. And in some of its rooms, time has come loose, and the young Merry Ruin are still walking through on their way down, laughing, alive, in the last week of their lives. Ida can watch them go by. She can watch herself, at twenty-nine, go by.

This is a dungeon crawl about getting old, about friendship that outlasts the friends, and about the stories we tell ourselves for half a lifetime because the truth was never there to tell us otherwise. At the bottom of the Kaldrith Deep there is a monster, a mystery, and a door. Behind the door, someone has been waiting for fifty-two years. The adventure ends in a reunion.

WHAT YOU NEED

Fifth-edition rules, dice, and a pile of chalk or white tokens to use as **Chalk**, the adventure's narrative currency (delvers mark the walls as they go down, so they can find their way back up). If you can, bring five small candle stubs to the table for Ida's ritual in Act Two. You won't need to light them. Just put them in front of her.

CONTENT AND CARE

A NOTE ON DIFFICULT THEMES

This adventure is about **old age and mortality**. Its central character is a dying woman, and the story never lets anyone forget it. It also includes **the deaths of young friends**, shown in replayed “echoes,” **survivor’s guilt**, and a monster that **steals years of life** from its victims, aging them in moments. That last is played partly for horror, partly for dark comedy (Ida is unimpressed), and it should be handled with some care at tables with older players or recent losses.

It ends hopefully. The heaviest scenes are marked with ♦. Talk to your table before you begin.

NOT IN THIS PREVIEW
PAGES 3–4

THE STORY IN BRIEF

What really happened on the fifth level fifty-two years ago, told in full for the Game Master: the Merry Ruin, the Stillstone, the Thief of Years, the blue flash Ida remembers, and why the mountain is waking now. With a timeline.



HOW THIS ADVENTURE PLAYS

This is the fourth of Tide Moon Tales' story-first adventures, and the first that is also, unapologetically, a dungeon crawl. There are maps, traps, monsters, treasure, and a long way down. The story-first tools are all here; three new ones are built into the crawl itself: **Then and Now**, **Echoes**, and **Ida's Breath**.

THE THREE PROMISES

1. **Talking is playing.** A conversation by candlelight on the second level is as much the adventure as the trap on the first.
2. **The camera follows you.** Describe what you do so the table can see it. The story bends toward a good description.
3. **Failing is not losing.** A bad roll makes the dungeon harder, stranger, or more expensive. It never just stops.

CHALK

Chalk is the narrative currency. Delvers mark the walls as they go, so they can find the way back. Each player starts with **one Chalk** and can hold **three**.

EARNING CHALK

- **Paint the shot.** Describe an action so the table can see it.
- **Tell a true thing.** Answer a conversation prompt honestly, at some cost.
- **Hear the subtext.** Name what Ida isn't saying. She'll deny it. Award it anyway.
- **Make Ida laugh.** It's harder than killing a basilisk and worth more.
- **Pull a Thread.** Bring your backstory into a scene in a way that matters.
- **Let it hurt.** Choose a complication or a cost because it serves the story.

SPENDING CHALK

- **Lean in.** Advantage, declared before rolling.
- **Try again.** Reroll and take the new result.
- **Flourish.** Add a cinematic effect to a success.
- **Not today.** Turn a hit on an ally, or on Ida, into a near miss, and describe the save.
- **Flashback.** Show how you prepared for this moment.
- **Mark the wall.** *New.* Declare that you chalked a mark at some earlier point in the dungeon. Once, later, the party can return to that spot instantly, by retracing the marks, no matter how lost they are.

CINEMATIC ROLLS

The player describes the intent, the GM names the stakes, the player rolls, and the result falls into one of four tiers:

RESULT	WHAT HAPPENS	WHO NARRATES
Triumph Beat the DC by 5+, or a natural 20	Better than hoped. Add a bonus effect or gain a Chalk.	The player, fully.
Success Meet or beat the DC	You do what you set out to do.	The player; the GM may add a detail.
Success at a Cost Miss by 1–3	It works, but something breaks, slips, or wakes up.	The GM narrates the cost.
Fail Forward Miss by 4+	It doesn't work, and the dungeon moves: a new route, a new danger, a door that closes behind you.	The GM; the player describes the reaction.

When a player drops an enemy, ask: *“How do you want to do this?”*

THEN AND NOW

Ida has been here before. She carries her old map (Handout 1), drawn fifty-two years ago in her own hand and annotated in three colors of ink over the decades since. For many rooms in the Deep, this book gives you two descriptions:

- **Then:** what Ida remembers, and what her map says. She will tell the party this, confidently, before they enter.
- **Now:** what is actually there.

Sometimes Then and Now are the same, and Ida's memory saves lives: she knows the seventh step is trapped, she knows which door sticks, she knows the shortcut. Sometimes they are not, and her confidence is dangerous: the bridge she remembers fell thirty years ago, the friendly fungus has grown into something else, the shortcut is flooded. The party can trust her, or check (usually an Investigation or Perception check against DC 12–15). Checking costs time. Trusting her is faster, and often right, and the moment it isn't, she'll have to live with that.

THE HEART OF THEN AND NOW

Then and Now is a dungeon mechanic, but it is also the whole story. Ida remembers the Deep as it was, and she's often right, and sometimes catastrophically wrong. She remembers what happened on the fifth level the same way. Every time the party finds a room that has changed from her memory, they are rehearsing, without knowing it, the moment at the bottom when she finds out that the worst memory of her life was wrong too.

ECHOES

Time is leaking from the cracked Stillstone, and in certain rooms, it has pooled. In these rooms, the party sees an **Echo**: a scene from fifty-two years ago, replaying, translucent and silvery, like a reflection in old glass. The young Merry Ruin pass through on their last descent: laughing, bickering, singing, afraid.

- Echoes can be seen and heard, but not touched or changed. They pass through the living like mist.

- Echoes don’t play in order. The party sees them in the order they find the rooms, which is not the order they happened. Assembling the true story from the Echoes is the adventure’s mystery.
- Ida can see them too. She knows exactly what each one is. She will not always say.
- Each Echo is presented as a **read-aloud** with a **What Ida Does** note. Give the players time to watch her watching.

IDA’S BREATH

Ida is eighty-one with a failing heart. She can still shoot (her hands shake; her aim doesn’t), but she can’t run, climb, or fight for long. Track her **Breath** on a scale of 0 to 5, starting each level at 5.

- Ida loses 1 Breath for each hard exertion: a long climb, a sprint, a fight in which she shoots more than twice, a fall.
- At **2 Breath** or less, she must rest, or be carried. At **0**, she collapses and must be carried, and makes a DC 10 Constitution save at the end of each hour or loses consciousness until the party rests.
- A **short rest** restores 2 Breath. A long rest restores all of it.
- **Carrying Ida** is easy (she weighs about as much as a full pack) but whoever carries her moves at half speed in difficult terrain and has disadvantage on Dexterity checks. She will complain the entire time.

Breath turns Ida’s frailty into decisions: rest here and lose time against the blasting deadline, or press on and risk her. Let the players feel the weight of that, and let Ida fight it, and lose, and be furious about it.

SET PIECES, CONVERSATIONS, AND PACING

Every fight is a **set piece** with a **Stage**, **Stakes**, **Beats**, and a way of **Ending It**. Each act has at least one **structured conversation**. The adventure runs in three or four sessions: Act One and the first level in the first; levels two through four across the second and third; the fifth level and the Epilogue in the last. The five-day deadline is real. Track it loosely: the descent should take three to four days, and the party should come up the last stair with the fuses already lit.

RUNNING FOR ONE TO FOUR PLAYERS

Companions travel with the party. Ida is the center of everything, a fine archer, and fragile. The others take the hits.

- **Ida Crane**, eighty-one, the guide. Deadly at range, out of breath at the top of every stair.
- **Tansy Burrows**, a young halfling who runs Ida’s shop, carries her pack, and refuses to be left behind.
- **The Gilded Blades**, a rival company of young delvers, who may become allies in Act Two.

PLAYERS	COMPANIONS IN FIGHTS	ENEMY NUMBERS	NOTES
1	Ida and Tansy fight	Use the “1–2 players” numbers	Start with 2 Chalk. Companions act after the player.

PLAYERS	COMPANIONS IN FIGHTS	ENEMY NUMBERS	NOTES
2	Ida fights; Tansy supports	Use the “1–2 players” numbers	Each player may call a companion once per round.
3	Ida shoots, sparingly	Use the “3–4 players” numbers	Companions take their own turns.
4	Companions mostly narrate	Use the “3–4 players” numbers	Companions handle side threats in narration.

THREADS: BACKSTORY FOR YOUR PLAYERS

A **Thread** is a loose end in a character's past that the Deep can pick up and pull. Offer these before the first session; each player may choose one, invent one, or choose none, and fills in the details. Award a Chalk whenever a player brings their Thread into a scene in a way that matters.

THE SURVIVOR'S THREAD

You came back when others didn't.

A battle, a shipwreck, a plague year, a dungeon. You've never been sure why it was you. You've built a story about what happened. Decide how sure you are of it.

The question: What if the story you've told yourself is wrong?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE GRUDGE THREAD

There is someone you have not forgiven.

They did something, or you believe they did. You've kept it burning for years. It has become part of who you are. Decide what you'd be without it.

The question: Who are you, if you put it down?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE UNSAID THREAD

There's something you never told someone.

A confession, a feeling, a thank-you, an apology. You were waiting for the right moment. Decide whether it ever came.

The question: How long would you wait?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE ELDER'S THREAD

Someone old taught you everything you know.

A grandparent, a master, a retired soldier, a crotchety neighbor. They're gone now, or going. Ida will remind you of them, uncomfortably.

The question: What do you wish you'd asked them?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE COMPANY THREAD

You once belonged to a band of friends.

An adventuring party, a regiment, a troupe, a gang. Something broke you up. Decide what, and whether any of them are still alive, and whether you've looked.

The question: Is a company still a company when there's only one of you left?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE RECKLESS THREAD

You have never once said no to a dare.

It's served you well. It's why you're an adventurer. You're young, or you feel it, and nothing's gone badly wrong yet.

The question: What will it cost the people who follow you?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

NOT IN THIS PREVIEW

PAGES 11–13

THE CAST

Ida Crane, with her surface, her subtext, and her breaking point. The four other members of the Merry Ruin, as they were. Tansy Burrows, who keeps a notebook of everything Ida says. The Gilded Blades. Foreman Hilde Grauss. A small blue moth. And the thing the dwarves bound in the deepest level, and why.



DELVERSEND AND THE DEEP

Delversend was a boomtown once: three hundred years of adventurers coming to the Kaldrith Deep, a street of inns and outfitters and temples and gambling dens, and a cemetery bigger than the town. Now the upper levels are picked clean and the lower ones are deadly, and the town is mostly old delvers drinking away their pensions, miners working the safe outer galleries, and a few young fools every season who think they’ll be the ones to reach the fifth level.

PLACES IN DELVERSEND

CRANE’S ROPE & MAPS

A narrow shop at the mouth of the Deep, crammed to the rafters with rope, hooks, lanterns, chalk, and hand-drawn maps of the upper levels. A sign over the counter: *NO REFUNDS. NO FIFTH LEVEL. NO EXCEPTIONS.* Ida lives upstairs.

THE OLD ROPE

A tavern for retired delvers. The walls are hung with old maps, broken weapons, and the names of the dead. The regulars are all over seventy and all liars.

THE MOUTH

The entrance to the Deep: a great carved dwarven arch in the mountainside, with the town’s blasting crew now drilling charge-holes into its pillars.

THE DELVERS’ FIELD

The cemetery. Three hundred years of adventurers who came home in pieces, or didn’t come home. There are four empty graves in the far corner, with headstones Ida paid for fifty-one years ago: *GARE HOLLOWAY. PERPETUA OAKES. TOR EMBERHAND.* The fourth stone is blank.

THE KALDRITH DEEP

Five great levels, each built by the dwarves for a different purpose, each changed by three centuries of delvers, and, in the last fifty-two years, by things Ida doesn’t know about.

LEVEL	THEN (IDA’S MEMORY)	NOW	ECHO
1. The Gatehall	<i>Picked clean. A few old traps. “Mind the seventh step.”</i>	The miners’ galleries; rustling-infested; the seventh step still trapped.	The Merry Ruin arrive, cocky, singing.
2. The Undergarden	<i>A fungus forest. The myconids are friendly. Bring salt.</i>	The forest has grown enormous. The myconids remember her.	Their last night of camp. Pet’s song.
3. The Forge	<i>A dead forge. A rope bridge over the chasm. “Solid as a mountain.”</i>	The bridge fell thirty years ago. The forge has woken.	Gare and Ida quarrel. Lorcan’s journal is left behind.

LEVEL	THEN (IDA'S MEMORY)	NOW	ECHO
4. The Hall of Years	<i>A dwarven clock-library. "Strange in there. Don't dawdle."</i>	Time pools and eddies. Minutes pass in seconds, or the reverse.	Lorcan almost tells her.
5. The Vault	<i>"I don't talk about the fifth level."</i>	The seal is cracked. Time is leaking. Something is waking.	<i>withheld in the preview</i>

SMALL THINGS IN THE DEEP

As the party descends, choose or roll a small thing to describe. The Deep has three hundred years of delvers in its walls.

D12	SOMETHING SMALL
1	Chalk marks on the wall, generations of them, layered like geology. Ida taps one. "Mine. Fifty-two years. Still there. Good chalk, that."
2	A skeleton in old armor sitting against the wall with a pipe still in its teeth.
3	A rusted lantern that, when you look away and back, is new. Then rusted again.
4	Graffiti, scratched with a dagger: <i>GARE WAS HERE</i> . Underneath, in a different hand: <i>SO WAS PET, AND SHE'S PRETTIER</i> .
5	A small blue moth on a doorframe, glowing faintly. It flies on ahead.
6	Somewhere far below, a sound like a vast, slow clock ticking. It stops when you listen for it.
7	A delver's ten-foot pole, snapped in half. Ida: "Amateurs. You don't <i>lean</i> on it."
8	A patch of wall where the stone has aged to sand in the shape of a reaching hand.
9	Dwarven runes over a doorway. Ida can't read them. "Tor could. Tor could read anything."
10	A faint smell of pipe smoke and roasted chestnuts, from nowhere, for one breath. Ida stops walking.
11	An abandoned camp from last season: three bedrolls, a burned-out fire, and no sign of where they went.
12	For a heartbeat, the sound of young people laughing, around the next corner. When you get there, it's empty.

ACT ONE

DELVERSEND

In which an old woman conducts the rudest job interview in history, retired heroes lie about their wounds, something comes up out of the mountain that turns iron to rust and men to dust, and the party takes the first step down.

ACT ONE AT A GLANCE

Purpose: Make the players love Ida. Make them laugh at her, be insulted by her, and want to protect her, all in the first hour. Establish the deadline, the town, the rivals, and the Thief's spawn. End on the first Echo.

Scenes: 1. Help Wanted · 2. The Old Rope · 3. The Night the Rust Came · 4. The Seventh Step

Key plants: The blue moth. The blank fourth headstone. Ida counting steps. The rumor that Lorcan ran with the jewel. Cass Bright's golden laugh. "I never said no to Gare either."

SCENE 1

HELP WANTED

Mood: Crabby, comic, sharp · **Type:** Opening and conversation

The party is in Delversend for one of these reasons, or one of your own:

- They came to delve the Kaldrith Deep before it's sealed, like everyone else.
- They saw Ida's notice (Handout 2) nailed up at every inn on the mountain road.
- A character with the **Elder's Thread** was sent to Ida by the old person who taught them; Ida trained their teacher, once, and made them cry.
- A character with the **Company Thread** has heard of the Merry Ruin, as every delver has, and wants to meet the one who came back.

Crane's Rope & Maps is a shop the width of a coffin and the depth of a mine, every wall hung with coils of rope, lanterns, iron spikes, grappling hooks, and yellowed maps of the upper levels. It smells of hemp, lamp oil, and peppermint. A sign over the counter reads NO REFUNDS. NO FIFTH LEVEL. NO EXCEPTIONS.

Behind the counter, on a tall stool, sits the smallest, oldest, fiercest woman you have ever seen, restraining a bow. She doesn't look up.

"If you're here for rope, it's on the wall. If you're here for maps, they're on the other wall. If you're here about the notice"—now she looks up, and her eyes are very dark and very sharp—"sit down, and don't touch anything, and try not to be stupid."

A round, freckled halfling with a notebook on a string pops up from behind a stack of rope, beaming. *"She likes you!"* This is Tansy. *"She doesn't usually say 'try.'"*

🐉 CONVERSATION: THE INTERVIEW

The setup: Ida has had nineteen applicants this week and thrown seventeen of them out. (The other two left crying.) She will interview the party, one at a time, with questions she has asked delvers for fifty years. Some are practical. Some are tests. One of them isn't about the dungeon at all.

How to run it: Ask each player character the questions below, in Ida's voice, interrupting freely. Let them answer in character. Ida's reactions are given; improvise freely in her spirit. Award Chalk for anything that makes Ida laugh (very hard), anything that makes her go quiet (harder), and any player who gives back as good as they get.

IDA'S QUESTIONS

"What's in your pack?" Make them list it. Whatever they say, she finds something missing. *"No chalk? No chalk? How do you plan to find your way back up, by smell? Tansy, give this one some chalk. Charge double."*

"Three ways across a pit with no rope. Go." She scores them out loud. Anything clever earns a grudging "Hm." Anything involving magic earns, *"And when the magic runs out? It always runs out."*

"Who'd come looking for you, if you didn't come back?" Let each player answer. She listens, and doesn't comment, and writes something in a ledger.

"Have you ever left anyone behind?" This one she asks quietly, looking at the bow and not at them. Whatever they say, she nods, once, and moves on very fast. A character with the **Survivor's Thread** should feel it land.

THE JOB

If the party passes (they will; she's been waiting for anyone who doesn't cry), Ida tells them the job, flatly:

"Fifty-two years ago, five of us went down to the fifth level. I came back. Three of my friends are still down there, what's left of them, and I want them buried in the Field where they belong before those idiots on the council bring the mountain down on their heads. Four days down, if we're quick. A day up, if we're lucky."

"And the fourth one," says Tansy, helpfully.

Ida gives her a look that could age stone. “And the fourth one,” she says, “ran. Took the thing we went down there for and ran, and left them to die. If he’s down there, I’m going to break his nose. If he’s not, I’ll settle for his bones.”

Payment: Her life savings, which are considerable (fifty years of rope sales and no expenses): 500 gold crowns, plus anything the party finds below the third level. And her map. “*Best map of the Deep ever drawn. I drew it. It’s fifty-two years old. Don’t touch it with your sausage fingers.*” (Give them **Handout 1** when they first go down.)

THE MOTH

As the interview ends, a small blue moth drifts in through the open shop door and lands on the counter in front of Ida. It glows faintly, like a coal. Ida goes very still. Tansy holds her breath.

“That’s his,” says Ida. Her voice is perfectly flat. “Lorcan’s. Its name’s Ink. It came to my window last night. Fifty-two years and it hasn’t aged a day.” She looks at it for a long time. “Moths don’t live fifty-two years.”

She sweeps it off the counter with her sleeve. It flutters up and lands on her shoulder instead. She leaves it there.

“We go the day after tomorrow,” she says. “Get some sleep. Buy chalk.”

SCENE 2

THE OLD ROPE

Mood: Smoky, raucous, full of lies · **Type:** Conversation and rivals

Ida takes them to the Old Rope that evening, whether they want to go or not. “*You’ll want to hear what idiots say about me. Better you hear it while I’m there to correct them.*”

The Old Rope is a low, smoky room with a fire at one end and every wall hung with relics: cracked shields, rusted swords, a dragon’s tooth the size of a canoe, and long boards painted with the names of delvers who didn’t come back, three centuries of them, in faded gold. At the big table by the fire sit six of the oldest people you’ve ever seen in one place, every one of them missing something: an eye, a hand, a leg, most of an ear. They are drinking dark ale and lying at the tops of their voices.

When Ida comes in, the room goes quiet. Then an old man with an iron hook for a hand bellows, “CRANE! You’re not dead!” and Ida bellows back, “Not yet, Silas, and neither are you, more’s the pity!” and the whole table roars.

🍷 CONVERSATION: THE STUPIDEST THING I EVER DID UNDERGROUND

The custom: At the Old Rope, newcomers buy the table a round, and then everyone, regulars and newcomers alike, tells the stupidest thing they ever did underground. The table votes on the stupidest. The winner drinks free. Nobody has beaten **Old Dunstan** in eleven years.

How to run it: The old delvers go first, to set the bar. Then the players. Then Ida, last. Award Chalk for great stories and for anything that makes the old delvers bang the table.

THE OLD DELVERS' STORIES

Silas Wick (iron hook): *"Shook hands with a mimic. Thought it was a coat rack with very good manners."* He waves the hook. *"It was not."*

Bertilda "Bert" Hask (one eye): *"Kissed a vampire. In my defense, he was **very** handsome. In his defense, I bit him first."*

Old Dunstan the Unlucky (one leg, one eye, no ears, and, it is rumored, no sense of smell): *"Read the inscription out loud."* A long, reverent silence. Everyone toasts him. He has won with this every year for eleven years.

THE GILDED BLADES

Midway through the game, the door bangs open and four young delvers swagger in, loud, glossy, and very pleased with themselves: **the Gilded Blades**, arrived this week to strip the Deep before it's sealed. Their leader, **Cass Bright**, golden-haired and golden-voiced, takes one look at the party, sees Ida, and laughs.

"Is that your crew? Gods, they're taking the shopkeeper. Granny, we're going to the fifth level, if you want a real escort. We'll carry you. You can mind the bags." His companions laugh. One of them, a thin, dark-haired young wizard, laughs nervously, and then winces and says, *"Cass, don't,"* very quietly.

Ida looks at Cass Bright for a long time. Not angry. Something worse. Then she says, mildly, *"Never said no to a dare in your life, have you, boy?"* Cass grins. *"Never."* And Ida says, *"No. I can see that."* and turns her back on him.

The Gilded Blades take the next table, and join the game, loudly. Cass's stupidest thing involves jumping a chasm on a bet. Everyone laughs. Ida doesn't.

IDA'S TURN

Last of all, the old delvers bang the table for Ida. She's refused for fifty years. Tonight, unexpectedly, she puts her cup down.

“Stupidest thing I ever did underground,” says Ida Crane. “I didn’t say no.”

The table goes quiet.

“He picked it up, and I didn’t say no. Never said no to Gare in my life. None of us did. Tor did. Tor begged him. And Gare laughed, and I laughed, and I didn’t say no.” She picks up her cup. *“That’s mine. Somebody beat it.”*

Nobody does. Old Dunstan, after a long time, pushes his free drink across the table to her, and she drinks it.

Subtext: This is the first time she has ever said any part of it aloud. She has not said what “it” was. A player who asks, now, gets: *“A jewel. Ask me on the fifth level.”*

WHAT THE OLD DELVERS SAY

Later, when Ida’s gone to the privy, the old delvers lean in. Everyone in Delversend knows the story, or a version of it:

- *“The Merry Ruin. Best company of their day. Went down to the fifth, which nobody’d ever reached, and Crane came back up alone, half her side withered like an old apple. Never said what happened. Never went down again.”*
- *“The wizard ran. Vey. That’s what she says. Used his escape spell on himself and left them. Took whatever they found down there. Never seen again.”*
- Bert Hask, quietly: *“Thing is, I knew Lorcan Vey. Shy lad. Counted when he cast. Followed her around like a duckling. I never could see him running. Never said so to her, mind. Not if I wanted to keep my other eye.”*
- Silas: *“She paid for four headstones in the Field. Three with names. One blank. Fifty-one years, and she’s never had it carved. Make of that what you like.”*

Ending the scene: Ida comes back, takes one look at the old delvers’ guilty faces, and says, *“Told you all about it, did they? Good. Saves me the trouble.”* Then she looks out of the tavern window, up at the mountain, and frowns. *“Hear that?”* Nobody does. Then the mugs start to rattle on the shelves.

SCENE 3

THE NIGHT THE RUST CAME

Mood: Night, tremors, creeping horror, then a desperate street fight · **Type:** Set piece

The tremor lasts a full minute. Mugs smash. Dust rains from the beams. The old delvers, every one of them, have drawn a weapon without seeming to think about it. When it stops, there’s a long, terrible silence, and then, from up the street toward the Mouth, someone starts screaming.

Out in the street, in the moonlight, things are coming down from the mountain. Small things, hundreds of them, scuttling like beetles over the cobbles: dull orange, the color of rust, clicking. Where they pass, iron hinges crumble. Wooden doors go grey and soft. A cart they swarm over sags and collapses into splinters. And behind them, taller, walking slowly, are shapes like thin grey men made of dust and broken clockwork, with old, old faces, and where their hands brush a window, the glass clouds over like a blind eye.

✂ SET PIECE: RUST IN THE STREETS

The Stage: Delversend's steep main street at night, from the Old Rope up to the Mouth: inns, shops, a temple, the town well, a blacksmith's forge (still hot), stacks of blasting powder in a guarded shed by the Mouth (very much not to be touched by fire), and Ida's shop with its window overlooking the street. Townsfolk running, or frozen in doorways.

The Enemies: **Rustling swarms** (Appendix A; 2 for 1–2 players, 3 for 3–4) and **hourwights** (2 or 3). Rustlings ruin metal and wood: weapons and armor that touch them may corrode. Hourwights age what they touch: their attacks inflict the **Aged** condition (Appendix A).

The Stakes: The town. The hourwights are walking toward the houses, and children are in the houses. And the blasting powder shed is directly in their path.

Ida: She refuses to stay in the tavern. She takes up position in her own shop window with her bow, where she can see the whole street, and does not miss. Each round she shoots, she loses 1 Breath. She doesn't care.

BEATS

- **Round 1:** The swarm reaches the bottom of the street. A rustling-covered dog runs past, howling, its collar falling apart.
- **Round 2:** An hourwight reaches a doorway where a young mother is holding a baby. Someone must get there.
- **Round 3:** The Gilded Blades come out of the Old Rope and charge into the fight, magnificently and recklessly. Cass Bright cuts down a rustling swarm with a dazzling flourish, laughing, and then an hourwight touches his sword arm and, for a moment, his hand is the wrinkled, spotted hand of an old man. He stares at it. It fades back. He stops laughing.
- **Round 4:** A rustling swarm reaches the blasting powder shed. Its iron door is crumbling. Inside, fifty kegs. Someone needs to stop them, without fire.
- **Round 5:** The tremor returns, softer. The surviving creatures turn as one and flow back up the street, into the Mouth, as if called home.

ENDING IT

The fight ends at round 5 or when the creatures are destroyed. Afterward, in the wrecked street, Ida is sitting in her shop window with her bow across her knees, grey-faced and breathing hard. *“Hourweights,”* she says. *“Haven’t seen those in fifty-two years. Didn’t think I’d see them again.”* Her hand is shaking. Her withered side is aching. The blue moth is on her shoulder.

THE DEADLINE

Foreman Hilde Grauss comes down the street at dawn with her blasting crew, soot-faced and furious, and finds Ida and the party among the wreckage.

“That’s the third night,” says the Foreman. “Next time it’ll be the houses. The council’s agreed. We drill today and tomorrow, and on the fifth dawn from now we bring the Mouth down and seal it for good.”

“My friends are down there, Hilde.”

“Your friends have been down there fifty-two years, Ida.” The Foreman’s face doesn’t change, but her voice does, a little. “My brother was down there one minute. Came up looking older than you.” A pause. “Fifth dawn. If you’re not up by then, you’re not coming up.”

As she goes, she stops, and without turning round, says: *“There’s soup at mine tonight if you want it. Same as every winter.”* Ida says nothing. That evening, she goes.

SCENE 4

THE SEVENTH STEP

Mood: The first descent: torchlight, chalk, and a first ghost · **Type:** Dungeon level 1 and the first Echo

On the morning of the second day, at first light, the party goes in under the great carved arch, past the blasting crew’s drill holes, with Ida at the front, Tansy at the back, and the moth flying ahead.

LEVEL 1: THE GATEHALL

The Gatehall was the dwarves’ front door: a vast hall of pillars and a grand staircase down into the dark. Three centuries of delvers have picked it clean, and the town’s miners have dug galleries off its sides. It should be the safest level of the Deep. It isn’t anymore.

THE GRAND STAIR

Then: *“Ninety-nine steps. The seventh is trapped. Pressure plate, scything blade, very old, very sharp. Step over it. Don’t step on the eighth either, the eighth’s fine but it’s loose and you’ll go over on your ankle.”*

Now: She’s exactly right. The seventh step is still trapped (DC 15 Perception to spot without her; the blade does 3d10 slashing). The eighth step is still loose. Ida counts the steps aloud on the way down, under her breath, the way someone taught her. The first time the party sees Ida be completely, precisely right, they should trust her a little. That’s the point.

THE PILLAR HALL

Then: *“Empty. Nothing in here but bats and graffiti.”*

Now: The miners’ gallery that broke into this hall last month is choked with rustlings, a living carpet of rust-colored beetles over a corroding mine cart. They are slow to wake. Sneaking past (DC 13 Stealth, group) is possible. Fighting them in a hall of crumbling iron-bound pillars is a bad idea that the players may have anyway.

THE FIRST ECHO

At the bottom of the Grand Stair, where the Gatehall opens into the first great cavern, the air goes cold and silver, and the party hears laughter.

ECHO

Down the Grand Stair behind you come five young people, silvery, translucent, like a reflection in an old mirror. They don’t see you. They walk right through you.

A big golden-haired man at the front, swinging a lantern, singing at the top of his voice a song about a bishop and a barmaid. A small woman in a cleric’s habit beside him, singing the harmony, filthier. A young dwarf behind them, reading the runes over the arch, lips moving. A thin dark-haired young man in a blue robe with wire spectacles, counting the steps out loud. And at the back, fast, light, laughing at the wizard, a young woman with a bow and very sharp dark eyes, hair long and black down her back.

“Ninety-nine,” says the young wizard, at the bottom. “See? Ninety-nine. I told you.”

“Nobody cares, Lorcan,” says the young woman with the bow, and kisses him on the cheek, quickly, laughing, and runs on ahead before he can say anything, and he stands there, bright red, touching his face.

And then they’re gone, down into the dark, singing.

What Ida does: Nothing. For a long, long time. Then she says, very quietly, *“I’d forgotten I did that.”* Then, louder, furious, wiping her face with her withered hand: *“Well? Don’t stand there gawping, it’s a long way down. Mark the wall. Somebody mark the wall.”*

Tansy, beside her, is writing in her notebook. She stops. She doesn’t write that one down.

GLIMPSES OF THE LEVELS BELOW

Here the preview stops: at the bottom of the Grand Stair, with five young ghosts singing their way down into the dark and an old woman telling everyone to mark the wall. In the full edition, the Deep goes down for another 32 pages. Here are three short excerpts from the second and fourth levels.

FROM ACT TWO · SCENE 5 · THE UNDERGARDEN · PAGE 25

On the second level, the fungus forest has grown into a cathedral. The eldest of the mushroom-folk, Old Gill, remembers Ida.

Then Old Gill sings. It's the song Ida taught it. It's a filthy song about a bishop and a barmaid, in Pet's arrangement. It's been singing it for fifty-two years, slowly, a verse a decade.

Ida laughs so hard she has to sit down. Then she isn't laughing. Award Chalk to anyone who sings along.

FROM ACT TWO · SCENE 6 · THE FIVE CANDLES · PAGE 27

At camp, Ida sets five burnt-down candle stubs in a row on a flat stone. Delvers' custom: you light one for each of you before you go down, and blow them out when you come back up. "*Nobody ever blew these out.*" She says one small, true thing for each.

Gare's candle: "*Gare couldn't whistle. Big strong lad, could lift a horse, but he'd purse his lips and nothing came out but spit. We'd all whistle at him. He'd throw things.*"

Pet's candle: "*Pet hated mornings. Holy woman, mind you, and every single morning she said the dawn prayer with her eyes shut and her middle finger up at the sun.*"

Tor's candle: "*Tor knitted. Nobody knew but me. Made me a pair of socks, as a bribe. I still have them. Wore them through twice and darned them.*"

The fourth candle: She stops. She looks at it for a long time. Then, very fast, not looking at anyone: "*He counted. When he cast. Under his breath, every spell, one two three four. I asked him why once and he said it was so he'd never lose his place. I said what place. He said, 'The place where I am.'*" She wraps the candles back up. "*Stupid. Your turn.*"

In the dwarves' clock-library on the fourth level, time runs fast, slow, and backward in pools on the floor. In the middle of a fight, Ida stumbles into a backward one.

Her hands are smooth. Strong. Young.

She stands up. She stands up straight, for the first time in thirty years. Her hair is black and long, falling down her back. Her left side, withered for fifty-two years, is whole. She's twenty-nine years old, in an old woman's coat, and she looks down at herself, and makes a sound you will never forget, half a laugh and half something else entirely.

Then she pulls her bow off her back, and she runs.

For three rounds, Ida Crane is the best archer in the kingdom again, and the players see exactly who she was. What she says when the three rounds are up, and who she says it to, is the heart of the fourth level.



“That’s it,” she says. “That’s the fifth level.”

FIND OUT WHAT’S WAITING AT THE BOTTOM IN THE FULL EDITION.

The full edition is available from **Tide Moon Tales** at tidemoontales.com