

The Hound of Fallen Iron

Dungeon Master's edition

Start with the party together at Bellwether's evening market, beside Mara's open forge. No prior acquaintance is needed. Mara is publicly looking for capable travelers; a completed delivery pays 400 gp to the party, enough to clear ordinary debts or fund their next expedition. Ask each player what that share would buy. Do not invent a debt for an unwilling character.

OPENING READ-ALoud

White light cuts across the market roofs. You hear a hiss above the chimneys, then a streak of green fire drops behind the dark ridge across the river. A moment later the cups on the smith's bench jump with a distant boom. Mara lowers her hammer. "Star-iron. Four hundred gold if you bring me enough." She lifts a canvas sack from a peg. "You'll want this, and a way across Cinderwater." What do you ask before the light fades?

Overview

A meteorite falls beyond the river. A smith will pay for its heart. Something on the road has already learned to eat iron.

Party: Four level-3 characters. **Runtime:** 3-4 hours. **Rules:** Fifth-edition, SRD 5.1-compatible; the hound, star-iron, ferry and extraction procedures are original homebrew. Use your normal character rules. **Tone:** Autumn countryside, practical kindness, animal menace. **Content:** A wrecked wagon, threatened livelihoods, pursuit and optional animal combat; no graphic injury is required.

Four encounters lead from a feeding beast through a damaged ferry and crater extraction to the return crossing. Combat is optional; food, preparation and the river offer alternatives. Bellwether and its three-mile route can be placed in any rural campaign.

DM Introduction

Mara Venn, the smith of Bellwether, has a cracked collar in her water-powered forge. Without a replacement she cannot shape the new sluice pins that will keep the village's winter reservoir working. An alloy containing eight pounds of star-iron will survive the forge's heat and hammering. The village has pooled 400 gp for it. When a meteorite streaks over the evening market and falls beyond Cinderwater, Mara offers the adventurers the commission and her tools.

A solitary ironhound lives in the old charcoal woods. Its grinding teeth and overlapping iron plates come from the metal it eats. Tonight it has overturned an ore wagon on the road to the impact. It is hungry, not malicious: it ignores exposed food and frightened people in favor of a dropped iron wheel. The first encounter lets the party see its priorities and discover that water interrupts its sense of metal. The ferry beyond the wreck has also been damaged by the beast's earlier crossing. Both discoveries become useful on the way home.

The fallen stone contains twelve pounds of star-iron in a brittle shell. Opening that shell releases a scent the hound can follow for miles. The party has enough metal to repair the forge and feed the creature for a week, but only if they retain all twelve pounds during extraction. They can also mask the scent with river clay, prepare the ferry as a barrier, take a longer route or kill the hound. Carry injuries, distractions and traps forward: this is one animal, and it does not heal between appearances. If the party kills or permanently contains it early, honor that victory and run the return as a short payoff at the crossing.

Without intervention, the shell cracks naturally at midnight. The hound finds it and eats the eight-pound core before dawn, leaving four pounds in small lobes. That remainder cannot repair the forge; Mara orders a slower, ordinary repair and the village rations its reservoir through winter. Nobody dies on a secret timer. Success changes who keeps the metal, whether the hound remains hungry, and how much of the pooled reward the village pays. End at

the forge, where Mara weighs the delivery.

Hook

Start with the party together at Bellwether's evening market, beside Mara's open forge. No prior acquaintance is needed. Mara is publicly looking for capable travelers; a completed delivery pays **400 gp to the party**, enough to clear ordinary debts or fund their next expedition. Ask each player what that share would buy. Do not invent a debt for an unwilling character.

Once the meteorite falls, Mara offers 100 gp immediately and 300 gp on delivery of at least eight pounds of star-iron. She explains the forge and reservoir problem, gives the party her written terms, and lends an iron pry bar, hammer, leather gloves, a canvas ore sack, two waterskins and 50 feet of hemp rope. These mundane tools are sufficient for extraction. The advance is theirs to keep for a good-faith attempt, even if they return empty-handed. They can refuse; Mara recruits locals in the morning and the adventure ends without punishment.

Stakes

- **The village:** Eight pounds repairs the forge collar; Mara then makes the sluice pins within two days. Less metal means she must buy an ordinary replacement from outside the valley.
- **The party:** A 400 gp commission, a return journey with a conspicuous prize, and a choice about how much of that prize to feed to a dangerous animal.
- **The hound:** It seeks food. It will abandon people for enough star-iron and retreat rather than die for a mouthful.

Time and rests: Begin at dusk, about 6 p.m.; midnight is six hours away and dawn is at 6 a.m. The default expedition takes about four hours in the fiction, including a possible one-hour short rest. Sunset changes visibility, not difficulty secretly: the ferry has two lanterns and Mara offers a hooded lantern with six hours of oil. A long rest before securing the stone lets a free, hungry hound eat its core after the midnight shell fracture. This does not happen if the animal is dead, has retreated at its HP threshold, is still contained or has been satisfied with four pounds of star-iron. Explain that cost before players settle down. After the meteorite is secured, a long rest is possible only if the party has actually made a safe camp; the pursuit does not pause automatically.

Return ledger: Record hound HP and location; metal carried; metal fed; whether the ferry is repaired; whether the clay seal is intact; and how long each distraction lasts. Do not reset any of these when Scene 4 begins.

Factions

Bellwether's repair fund: Mara speaks for households that contributed 400 gp. She can pay exactly that amount, and cannot double it on a persuasion check. She wants the forge working, fears wasting her neighbors' savings, and accepts a humane solution if it delivers the metal. The community is a patron, not an armed rescue force.

Cinderwater carriers: Wagoner Pell Dorr and ferryman Orin Vale want the road reopened. They own the ore and ferry respectively. Help earns practical resources, not another hidden quest. Mara buys their work locally; they trust her written commission.

The ironhound: An unaffiliated animal with a territory, appetite and memory. A party that feeds it can direct it away from Bellwether. A party that wounds it earns caution, not supernatural revenge. It neither speaks nor recognizes the village's need.

Locations

Location: The Three-Mile Road

The route runs **Bellwether → A, Wagon Bend → B, Cinderwater Ferry → C, Impact Hollow**, one mile between each point. Each mile takes 20 minutes on foot in either direction. The wreck and ferry lie on the only cart road. Smoke and a fresh furrow point from the far bank toward the crater; no navigation check is required.

A marked charcoal path also connects B's two banks via a narrow stone footbridge one and a half miles upstream. Walking one and a half miles along each bank makes this a **sixty-minute bank-to-bank route**, compared with one minute on the ferry. It includes no extra encounter and can be used in either direction. River water is accessible along both banks and at each bridge end; a clay-coated load can be dipped or wetted there before its one-hour seal expires. The bridge is 30 feet long and 5 feet wide over the same deep river; a Large hound must squeeze and moves at half speed there. It is sound and cannot be collapsed by a single convenient shove. A party choosing this route can use its choke point instead of the ferry in the finale.

KEY	RUNNABLE SPACE	CONNECTIONS AND FEATURES
A: Wagon Bend	Road 20 feet wide; 80-foot straight approach	Wagon fills a 10-by-15-foot patch beside the eastern ditch. Hound starts on its far side, 40 feet from approaching party. Pell is under a loose canvas awning 20 feet from the hound. Woods allow a 100-foot detour outside its feeding area.

KEY	RUNNABLE SPACE	CONNECTIONS AND FEATURES
B: Ferry	Deep channel 75 feet wide; banks level	Each bank has a 20-by-20-foot landing. Ferry deck is 15 feet across the channel and 20 feet parallel to the banks, with two waist-high side rails. Measure x from the west bank (0) to the east bank (75): its deck occupies x=0-15 at the west dock, 20-35 after one eastward haul, 40-55 after two, and 60-75 at the east dock. Reverse those positions westward. Boarding gaps are measured from the nearest deck edge. Rope handrail spans the river; haul rope runs through a capstan at each landing. No bridge overhead.
C: Impact Hollow	Bowl 60 feet across, 15 feet deep	North and south ramps are each 10 feet wide and 30 feet long. Stone rests at the center. Loose glass covers the bowl except ramps and a 10-foot-wide strip linking them through the center. Three broken stumps at the south rim grant half cover.

The western ferry bank is the village side; the eastern bank leads to the crater. The river runs south. Dense trees block sight beyond 60 feet off the road. The hound can use both crater ramps and the entire ferry deck without squeezing. This keyed specification is sufficient for sketching the sites; there are no secret doors or required illustrated maps.

Location: Mara's Forge

The market faces a stone workshop with a cold waterwheel and a cracked iron collar laid on the bench. The reservoir is uphill, not immediately beside the building. An empty quenching trough stands inside the forge; it can hold the meteorite underwater if the party returns with an active pursuer. Mara closes the heavy workshop doors once everyone is inside. They delay the hound for ten minutes, enough to submerge the metal and let it lose the trail; the creature will not patiently chew through doors after its food signal disappears. Villagers scatter into houses rather than becoming compulsory hostages.

Encounter Matrix

ENCOUNTER / TABLE TIME	OBJECTIVE	PRESSURE / USEFUL APPROACH
1. Supper at Wagon Bend; 30-40 min	Get Pell clear and pass	One feeding ironhound; Distract, observe, sneak, rescue or fight
2. A Rope Across Cinderwater; 25-35 min	Cross and prepare a way home	Broken ferry locking pin; Repair, operate manually, use bridge or swim
3. Crack the Sky's Egg; 35-45 min	Recover twelve pounds intact	Unstable hot shell; Cool, brace, split; preserve surplus
4. The Weight Coming Home; 40-50 min	Keep eight pounds and reach safety	The same hound, if free and alive; Feed, seal, ferry, trap, evade or fight

Allow 15-20 minutes for the opening, 15 minutes for the forge ending, and up to 20 minutes for breaks and decisions. For a three-hour slot, provide travel facts promptly and resolve an already-prepared escape in Scene 4 without adding a second fight. Do not cut the wagon's observable clues.

Scenes

Scene 1: A Wheel Between Its Teeth

Runtime: 30-40 minutes. **Objective:** Pass Wagon Bend and decide whether to help Pell. **Stakes:** The wagoner is safe while still, but cannot leave his cover without drawing attention.

READ-ALoud

An overturned wagon blocks half the road. Beyond it, something broad-backed and plated like an old stove grips a wheel between its jaws. Iron squeals. A man's boot sticks out beneath a canvas awning; his hand waves urgently when you approach. Beside the ditch lies an untouched loaf of bread. Where do you take cover?

Known on arrival: Pell is alive, the hound is feeding rather than hunting him, and there is room to go around. Tell players the animal is roughly the size of a pony. Its left shoulder has a crescent of bright metal where an old plate broke; use that mark to identify the same animal later.

Encounter 1: Supper at Wagon Bend

Setup: One ironhound, using the complete statistics under Creature Reference. It starts at full HP, interested in the wheel. Pell stays prone and needs no saving throws. Roll initiative only when someone approaches within 15 feet of the hound, attacks it, or tries to snatch its meal. Until disturbed, it spends ten minutes tearing iron free of the wheel and wagon, then follows its den route below. This is time spent dismantling the wreck, not the loose-ore feeding rate. Simply waiting ten minutes is a valid rescue.

Observable lessons: A moment of watching reveals that it spits out wood and leather but chews iron. Pell can whisper, "It left my lunch and ate the nails." A dropped metal item makes its head turn; a dropped ration does not. No check is needed to learn its diet. If characters put a loose nail beneath an inch of water in a ditch puddle, the creature noses about until the nail is lifted clear. Pell also saw it lose a wheel hub after the hub rolled into the river. Both demonstrations reveal the water barrier.

Options and procedure:

1. **Rescue during supper:** The awning is unpinned. A character can lead Pell along the ditch with a DC 11 Dexterity (Stealth) check. Failure makes the hound rise and give a grinding warning; Pell reaches cover anyway, but the hound is now alert and anyone remaining within 15 feet must withdraw, distract or face its next turn. It does not receive a free attack from the failed check.

2. **Offer better supper:** Pell's wagon has four distinct 50-pound ore sacks. Moving or dragging a sack 20 feet away from the awning gives the hound a meal and permits rescue without a check. Once safe, Pell freely gives the party two sacks, if they can transport them. The others remain his property. Ordinary iron feeding follows Creature Reference.

3. **Bypass:** The woodland detour avoids its feeding area. No roll is needed if the party leaves the beast and wagon alone. Pell is safe under cover until the hound leaves; bypassing him does not secretly kill him.

4. **Fight:** The hound defends its wheel, uses Shove Aside against blockers, and bites only when attacked or when someone keeps it from food. It does not eat equipped armor. Apply its retreat threshold. Pursuit, capture and killing are possible; there is no escape immunity.

Discovery after rescue: Pell describes the hound crossing near the ferry and returns to Bellwether on foot. If the party helps him, he marks the upstream footbridge on Mara's note and gives them permission to take the two ore sacks. They can learn both river routes from Orin even without Pell.

Success: Pell is free or the party passes safely; record any ore taken, hound injuries and location. **Fail-forward:** If driven back, characters can wait out the meal, approach through the woods or abandon the job; the crater remains reachable. **Transition:** The road reaches Orin's ferry after one mile. If the party pursues and kills the hound, continue there with the danger already defeated.

Scene 2: The Ferryman's Missing Pin

Runtime: 25-35 minutes. **Objective:** Reach the eastern bank and establish a return route. **Stakes:** An improvised crossing may leave the ferry on the wrong bank when the party returns.

READ-ALoud

A ferry bumps against its landing. Its haul rope hums over black water, and an old man holds a boat hook through a capstan to stop it turning. Something has bitten a bright notch from the iron locking pin. He nods toward a bucket of gray river clay. "Help me fix that, or help me hold it." What do you inspect first?

Encounter 2: A Rope Across Cinderwater

Setup: Orin Vale is holding the western capstan. The hound bit the pin before leaving for the wagon. No enemies remain here. Orin explains that the deep river defeats the creature's sense of submerged metal; he saw it pace past an anchor until the anchor was hauled out. He has plenty of river clay, scrap wood and tools, and freely explains both crossings.

Ferry procedure: The ferry holds 2,000 pounds, including passengers and cargo. Unopposed travel takes one minute. Under initiative, it takes **three successful haul actions**, at most one per round, to move between banks; a creature on the deck or either landing can operate the rope. Each success moves it 20 feet. With a repaired pin, a haul action requires no check. With the pin broken, each haul requires DC 12 Strength (Athletics); failure makes no progress. Another creature spending an action to brace the capstan or haul rope grants advantage on that check. Position is preserved between actions. Stopper knots at both ends prevent drift beyond either landing. A creature may use its action to reverse direction, after which hauls move toward the other bank. The ferry never teleports back for a later scene.

Repair: Ten minutes and a hammer turn scrap hardwood into a replacement pin; no check or special proficiency is required. Mara's pry bar is also a suitable temporary pin, fitted with one action, but cannot be used at the crater while installed. Damage to the original pin does not prevent the ten-minute wooden repair. Removing a replacement pin takes an action at a landing and restores the broken-pin procedure. Orin accompanies the party across and waits on the east bank with the ferry unless they arrange something else. No fare is charged to Mara's crew.

Other crossings: The sound upstream bridge takes sixty minutes from landing to landing. Swimming the 75-foot channel uses normal swimming movement, with a DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check halfway across for each swimmer unless they have a swim speed. On a failure, current carries that swimmer 30 feet downstream to a gravel shelf; they can climb out on the destination bank, keeping worn and secured gear, but spend ten minutes reaching the landing. A secured rope or magical crossing removes the check. The river is 15 feet deep; dropped

unsecured cargo sinks and requires retrieval. Use normal breath-holding rules if someone dives, with no invented instant drowning.

Clay seal: Orin demonstrates a fist-sized iron offcut that the hound ignored while coated in wet clay. He provides a lidded wooden fish box and enough clay to coat the meteorite; the box weighs 8 pounds empty. The full masking and drying procedure is under Star-Iron. If the party does not speak to him, the clay and demonstration are available by simply asking about the bite marks; he volunteers the water observation before they leave.

Success: The party crosses and records the ferry's location, pin and waiting arrangements. **Fail-forward:** Failed hauls cost time without sweeping the party away; repairs, the bridge and the river remain alternatives. **Transition:** A line of splintered trees and smoke leads one mile from the east landing to Impact Hollow. Take the next scene from whichever river route the characters used.

Scene 3: Crack the Sky's Egg

Runtime: 35-45 minutes. **Objective:** Recover enough usable metal without wasting the surplus. **Stakes:** Careful extraction preserves four pounds that may buy peace on the return.

Arrival condition: Use the default read-aloud and untouched-stone setup only before midnight, before the shell has opened, and before a hound has arrived. For later arrivals or return visits, apply the variants below and the recorded feeding state.

READ-ALoud

A black stone sits in the center of a shallow crater. Its crust ticks as it cools. Pale metal shows through a hairline crack, and puddles beside it send up thin threads of steam. Two slopes lead down through the shattered trees; glassy splinters glitter between them. How do you approach the stone?

Encounter 3: The Unquiet Shell

Late-arrival variants: If the shell is fractured but the hound has not arrived, say: "The black shell lies split in the crater. Pale metal catches the light between its broken edges." If it is feeding, say: "Iron grinds against stone below you. The plated animal braces a lump of pale metal between its forefeet; smaller pieces glint beside the split shell." If it has finished and left, say: "The shell is open. Tooth marks score the hollow where its center lay, and small pale lobes remain among the black fragments." Append only terrain details that still apply; cleared glass stays cleared.

Changed quantities: The untouched baseline below has twelve pounds. After midnight or on a return visit, use the actual ledger instead: the hound's completed eight-pound core meal leaves four one-pound lobes, or two if a failed split previously destroyed two. During interrupted feeding, subtract one pound for each completed ten minutes of eating. Collected, fed or destroyed pieces do not reappear. An open shell needs no split roll; collecting its remaining

metal takes one minute, with cooling precautions only if it was just opened while still hot. A feeding hound remains one opponent at its existing HP; use its food warnings, morale and actions from Encounters 1 and 4. Its unfinished meal continues unless play interrupts it. The road, ferry and retreat routes remain available even when less than eight pounds survive.

Untouched setup: No creatures occupy the hollow until the route ledger brings the hound here. The sixty-pound outer shell contains an **eight-pound core and four detachable one-pound lobes**; the intact object weighs 72 pounds. All twelve pounds are star-iron. Tell anyone looking at the crack that the core and four smaller knobs can be separated; Mara's requirement is eight pounds, not "the whole rock." The stone no longer emits dangerous radiation, curses or fire damage at a distance.

Terrain: The clear ramps and center strip are safe. A creature that moves through the glass off that strip makes one DC 11 Dexterity saving throw per turn of such movement, taking 1d4 slashing damage on failure, none on success. Moving at half speed with a probe or board avoids this save. Clearing a 5-foot square takes one action. Flying bypasses it. Glass left in place remains on a return visit.

Extraction steps: Describe hissing tools, shifting crust and crumbling lobes as they happen.

1. **Cool:** Pour two full waterskins over the crack, or wait ten minutes. Appropriate water or cooling magic works as expected. Cooling is permanent. Touching the uncooled inner metal directly deals 1d4 fire damage once per turn of contact; gloves plus tools prevent contact. Carrying the uncooled intact object needs an insulating sling and two carriers sharing its 72-pound weight. The intact shell blocks Metal Sense until deliberately opened or until its natural midnight fracture. Transporting it whole is a valid way to defer the danger: if the party reaches Mara before midnight, she opens it submerged in the trough and the expedition ends safely. If still traveling at midnight, warn of widening cracks ten minutes beforehand; at midnight the signal starts unless the whole stone is continuously submerged. The standard clay recipe fits extracted metal, not the bulky shell.

2. **Brace:** Use three stones or wedges to hold the shell steady, taking one minute without a roll. The party can gather these at the rim. Attempting to crack it without bracing makes the splitter's first check DC 14 instead of DC 11; wedging it later removes that increase.

3. **Split:** One character uses hammer and pry bar for one minute, then makes DC 11 Strength (Athletics) or a DC 11 ability check with smith's tools or mason's tools if proficient. Another character can steady the tool to grant advantage. Success opens the shell and preserves all twelve pounds. Failure opens it too, but two one-pound lobes crumble into slag; recover ten pounds. State this risk before rolling. A party spending ten careful minutes on this step succeeds without a check and loses nothing. No later roll reduces the eight-pound core.

Slag from ruined lobes has no resale or feeding value. Collecting the metal takes one minute once exposed.

Dividing the core into one-pound pieces takes the same tools and ten minutes; record each portion. Extraction does not create extra metal.

The call and route ledger: Use the same location and clock from Wagon Bend, following these rules. The default starts with an undisturbed hound; a party that moved, delayed or defeated it changes that state.

1. After its ten minutes dismantling the wagon, the hound travels 2.5 miles along the west-bank track to the upstream bridge, crosses, then follows a 3.5-mile east-bank charcoal track to its den. That track goes around the north of Impact Hollow, not through it. The den is one mile east of the hollow. At its overland pace of ten minutes per mile, the six-mile den journey takes sixty minutes. It then stays there until a metal signal draws it out. Characters may use these tracks at their usual twenty minutes per mile; they contain no hidden encounter.

2. The first exposed star-iron starts the signal. From the den the hound takes ten minutes along a separate one-mile trail to the hollow, then spends three minutes sniffing the opened shell before following a departing load. From the hollow it follows the party's actual return route at ten minutes per mile. Thus it reaches the east ferry landing twenty-three minutes after exposure if the load is still detectable. Prompt carriers collect for one minute and walk twenty minutes, arriving about two minutes earlier. The sighting and initiative begin when the animal comes within 120 feet, not with an automatic attack. If it overtakes a delayed party on the road, use that actual location and let them hurry toward the landing.

3. If exposure occurs before it reaches its den, finish its remaining den journey before starting that ten-minute approach: the narrow charcoal track has no direct cross-country connection to the hollow. If a different earlier action moved it elsewhere, use the named track distances at ten minutes per mile, choose the shortest connected route to the last sensed location, and meet the party where those paths actually intersect. Metal Sense does not bypass terrain. Feeding and restraint delays are added while they actually last. A fled, dead or satisfied hound makes no pursuit.

4. An intact clay seal or immersion stops the signal. Without sight of a carrier, it reaches the last sensed location, searches for ten minutes and gives up. Faster travel, the upstream bridge, flight or teleportation may prevent the default ferry meeting. The hound can cross the stone bridge; it does not need the ferry to reach the east bank. Record its bank and route.

Midnight without intervention: At midnight the cooling shell fractures on its own, exposing the core and lobes. The hound uses the same route ledger, bites the opened crust aside in one minute, and eats the largest reachable piece first: the eight-pound core takes eighty minutes. It then leaves satisfied, with the four lobes intact. If two lobes were already ruined, only two remain. If someone separated the core, it eats the largest pieces until it has finished at least four pounds. Abandoned exposed metal follows this same consumption rule; it is never all erased automatically.

Hiding the prize: Applying Orin's clay seal takes five minutes and stops the signal as soon as complete. If the hound has not seen the party, it follows the last detectable location, searches there for ten minutes and gives up. The creature does not know which direction invisible metal went. If the party seals the stone while already watched, it still remembers who carried it; break line of sight for one minute before it abandons that visual pursuit. See Star-Iron for seal duration and renewal.

Success: Record the actual recovered weight, elapsed time and masking. An untouched find yields twelve pounds on a successful split or ten on a failed split; a previously opened or fed-on find uses Changed quantities above. **Fail-forward:** A failed split leaves eight pounds for Mara and two for other uses. If the hound arrives before departure, use its feeding and combat procedures here, then resolve the return according to that outcome. Retreating without the metal is possible; use the midnight and feeding rules to determine what remains for a later visit. **Transition:** Return toward the actual ferry location, the upstream bridge or a magical exit. Establish the plan before Scene 4.

Scene 4: The Weight Coming Home

Runtime: 40-50 minutes if pursued; 5-10 minutes if earlier choices resolved the danger. **Objective:** Bring eight pounds to Mara or choose what to surrender. **Stakes:** The beast wants the prize, not a climactic fight for its own sake.

Arrival condition: Use this read-aloud only if the hound is pursuing openly and the party returns to the east ferry landing. Otherwise use the applicable variant below. Carry over HP, feeding delays, seal state and river arrangements.

READ-ALoud

The river opens between the trees. Behind you, an iron scrape stops, then starts again. The plated animal steps into the road, its broken shoulder catching the lantern light. Its muzzle points toward the load you brought from the crater. Between the banks stretch seventy-five feet of moving water. Where do you put the metal?

Variants: If pursuit was prevented, say: "The haul rope taps its post in the current. Across the river, a forge lantern burns above the village roofs." If the upstream bridge is the chosen route, replace the ferry description with its narrow stone span. If the hound was killed or contained, describe only the crossing as they left it and ask how they transport the load. Do not read a live animal into those outcomes.

Encounter 4: A Mouthful of Winter

Setup: Use Encounter 3's route ledger. Prompt carriers usually reach the east landing about two minutes before the hound; they may hear it approaching and use that actual preparation time. When it comes within **120 feet**, reveal its position and roll initiative. A delay may instead put that meeting on the road; a successful escape may prevent it. It advances 40 feet per round unless distracted and may Dash to reach visible star-iron. Do not grant a second preparation interval after the sighting. Orin is where the party left him; he will operate the ferry, throw a line or shelter behind the landing's post, but will not stand between the hound and its meal. There is one hound total.

First response: It stops 15 feet from a carrier and opens its jaws with a kettle-like wheeze. A character who puts star-iron down can withdraw without being attacked for that act. The hound bites only when hurt or actively denied access to reachable food. It will not accept soothing words alone, but a metal offering needs no Animal Handling roll. Animal Handling DC 12 can hold it at this warning distance for one round, once per encounter; failure simply starts its advance. A creature already attacking it cannot use that pause.

Ways through:

- **Feed it:** Four pounds of star-iron satisfy it for seven days. It spends ten minutes eating each one-pound piece; the eating delays accumulate, and four pounds together keep it occupied for forty minutes before it departs. Leave the meal away from the village road and cross. With twelve pounds recovered, the party can both feed it and deliver eight. With ten, feeding four leaves six for the commission; feeding only the two surplus pounds buys twenty minutes and leaves the animal hungry later. The river or a seal can turn that delay into a clean escape.
- **Use the ferry:** Apply the three-haul procedure from Encounter 2. A hound within 10 feet of the deck can board from the bank using its movement. After the first successful haul away from either dock, the nearest deck edge is 20 feet from that bank. The hound cannot jump that gap; it will enter the water only if star-iron is visibly held just beyond reach. In water its speed is 20 feet and it cannot use Shove Aside. It returns to the nearest bank if the metal signal disappears. Once the party reaches the west bank, submerge or seal the stone and break sight to end pursuit. Merely crossing with exposed metal may send it toward the upstream bridge; tell players they see it searching the bank.
- **Use ordinary iron:** Each reachable 50-pound ore sack commits the hound to one uninterrupted minute of feeding even while star-iron is detectable; attacking it ends that commitment. This can cover a repaired ferry crossing or give time to lower the meteorite into water. Smaller ordinary metal offerings buy one round each, to a maximum of three rounds per encounter; afterward it ignores scraps while star-iron is detectable. It never destroys worn equipment through a special unstated ability.
- **Lower the prize:** The sack and rope can suspend the meteorite at least one foot underwater. One action secures

the rope; a second lowers or retrieves it from a landing or deck. Immersion immediately defeats metal sense, but a hound watching the lowering remembers the spot and searches it for ten minutes. Distracting it with food or breaking its sight before lowering lets the party retrieve the stone after it leaves. Do not forget that retrieving exposed metal within three miles can attract it again; clay-seal it underwater in five minutes, or wait until it has departed beyond range. The riverbank has enough clay without Orin's box; a wrapped sack can support the coating.

• **Fight or contain:** Use the hound's existing HP and retreat rule. Rope alone does not automatically restrain it: a prepared rope snare anchored to a tree takes ten minutes to rig and catches a hound entering its 10-foot square on a failed DC 12 Dexterity save. The trapped hound is restrained; it can use an action for DC 14 Strength to escape or bite the rope (AC 11, 5 HP). A star-iron lure can draw it into the snare. Each success buys real time, never a permanent cage by fiat.

• **Other abilities:** Invisibility hides a carrier but does not mask exposed star-iron. Flight can carry the load beyond reach and across the river; beyond three miles the sense fails. Teleportation beyond range ends pursuit. Spells that affect beasts work on the hound; a charmed animal still wants food, while magic that actually commands it can secure passage. Respect each spell's duration and conditions. No special immunity cancels an effective plan.

Combat consequence: The hound retreats when reduced to 18 HP or fewer. If allowed to withdraw, it does not return during this adventure; record its wounds rather than giving it another ambush. At 0 HP it is dead unless the party used an applicable nonlethal option. If its last attack knocks down a carrier, it spends its next action taking the accessible ore sack instead of attacking that character again; allies can stabilize and retreat. A closed worn container cannot be stolen without first being removed by ordinary actions.

Success: The party reaches safety with eight or more pounds, or deliberately trades metal for peace; go to Mara's forge. **Fail-forward:** They can drop the load and flee: the hound stays with reachable star-iron. If it takes the core, surplus pieces still earn a partial payment. A defeated party that can withdraw keeps the advance and returns to explain; do not turn loss of the commission into a forced total-party kill. **Transition:** Resolve payment and the hound's future under Resolution Paths. If the hound followed them all the way to Bellwether, use the forge's trough and doors before this conversation.

NPCs

NPC: Mara Venn

Role: Smith and patron. Broad hands, a leather apron neatly repaired with copper wire, a cold forge behind her. **Voice:** "Tell me what it costs. Then tell me what it fixes." **Want:** Repair the forge and supply the sluice pins before winter. **Fear:** Spending pooled savings on nothing. **Knows:** Eight pounds is sufficient; the core's outer rock is useless; ordinary repairs would take weeks. **Does not know:** The ironhound's appetite or the impact's exact contents. **Leverage:** The 400 gp fund, tools, shelter and a written commission. **Responses:** Honest partial success gets the agreed payment; threats cannot create money she lacks; theft makes her refuse further business but does not conjure guards. She welcomes news that the hound can be fed away from the road. **Table use:** Put the material cost beside the human benefit. She is a noncombatant; do not require a stat block to negotiate with her.

NPC: Pell Dorr

Role: Wagoner under the awning. Flour on one sleeve, ore dust on the other. **Voice:** "Take the sacks. Leave me the bread." **Want:** Get home with both legs and recover his wagon tomorrow. **Fear:** Being asked to bait the beast himself. **Knows:** The hound discarded food for iron and lost a submerged hub; the two river routes. **Leverage:** Two gifted ore sacks after help and route information. **Responses:** Rescue wins his cooperation; a demand for more ore gets a reluctant loan, to be returned or paid at 1 gp per additional sack; violence makes him retreat. **Table use:** A person to help without making rescue a mandatory combat. Once safe he leaves for Bellwether and carries no secret clue the party must chase.

NPC: Orin Vale

Role: Ferryman and practical witness. Wool cap, fish scales on his cuffs, a clay-stained thumb. **Voice:** "Water fools its nose. Whether it fools its memory depends on where you're standing." **Want:** A working ferry and an uneventful night. **Fear:** Passengers dragging the hound aboard. **Knows:** The ferry, bridge, underwater anchor incident and clay coating. **Leverage:** Boat, ropes, fish box and abundant clay. **Responses:** Repairs earn warm cooperation; a credible return plan gets his help; reckless baiting near him makes him move to the opposite bank and leave the boat available by its haul rope. **Table use:** State the tools and physics openly; ask the players to make the plan. If directly attacked, he escapes along the bank rather than fighting.

Creature Reference

Ironhound

Ironhound - Large beast, unaligned; original homebrew for four level-3 adventurers.

AC 15 (iron plates); **HP** 68 (8d10 + 24); **Speed** 40 feet, swim 20 feet; no climbing or flying speed. **STR** 18 (+4), **DEX** 12 (+1), **CON** 16 (+3), **INT** 3 (-4), **WIS** 13 (+1), **CHA** 6 (-2). **Saving throws:** No additional proficiencies. **Skills:** Perception +3. **Senses:** Darkvision 60 feet, passive Perception 13, Metal Sense below. **Languages:** None. **Damage vulnerabilities, resistances, immunities:** None. **Condition immunities:** None. **Proficiency bonus:** +2. It has no legendary actions, reactions beyond ordinary opportunity attacks, or bonus actions.

Metal Sense (homebrew): Locates unmasked fresh star-iron within three miles and ordinary exposed iron within 60 feet, including through ordinary nonmetal containers. The meteorite's unopened crust is a specific homebrew exception: it masks the metal until deliberate opening or the natural midnight fracture. This provides direction and approximate distance, not vision or permission to attack through cover. Continuous water coverage of at least one inch, including saturated clay, blocks the sense. Walls and bags alone do not. It follows recently exposed star-iron to the last sensed point, searches ten minutes, then stops if the signal and visual trail remain absent. It cannot identify a carrier without sight. Hunger explains its preference for accessible ore over armored people.

Actions - Bite: Melee weapon attack, +6 to hit, reach 5 feet, one target; 2d8 + 4 piercing damage. It makes **one bite**, not a Multiattack. **Shove Aside:** Instead of biting, one creature within 5 feet makes DC 14 Strength saving throw; on failure it is pushed 10 feet away, on success it is not moved. This special homebrew shove causes no direct damage and cannot move a target through a solid barrier. Near a river edge, announce the risk of being pushed into water before resolving the action.

Feeding and morale: A reachable offered 50-pound sack of loose iron overrides star-iron priority for one full minute: the hound commits to finishing that sack before moving on. Additional sacks can buy additional minutes if actually placed in its path. Attacking it interrupts the commitment. Scraps follow Encounter 4's separate three-round limit. With no committed meal, it chooses reachable star-iron over ordinary iron, taking the largest reachable star-iron piece first.

Star-iron takes ten minutes per pound. Once eating a piece, it finishes that whole piece before checking satiation; four pounds or more eaten in a day satisfy it for seven days. Thus four one-pound lobes take forty minutes, while an undivided eight-pound core takes eighty minutes and is consumed in full. If interrupted by attack or driven off, it has consumed one pound per completed ten minutes; the rest is recoverable. An attack interrupts feeding immediately and it defends itself. It can be lured with

newly offered food again once the attackers stop, but will not eat while taking damage. It gains no HP from feeding during this adventure. At 18 HP or fewer it Disengages and flees into the woods, abandoning the meal; if cornered it uses Shove Aside to escape and bites only when escape is blocked. Feeding four pounds ends pursuit without a check. Food placed on the ground is easier to obtain than equipment worn by a moving person.

Difficulty adjustments: For three level-3 characters use 50 HP, Bite 1d8 + 4, retreat at 14 HP. For five level-3 characters use 82 HP, retreat at 22 HP; retain one bite per turn. For four level-4 characters use the printed version and let their extra abilities help. Apply the selected numbers at the first meeting and keep them. These are practical dials, not a certified challenge rating. One bite averages 13 damage and can knock down an already wounded character; telegraph aggression and keep the food exits available. A short rest is feasible before opening the crater shell.

Items

Item: Star-Iron

Appearance: Pale green-gray metal with branching silver seams; twelve pounds total before extraction losses.

Ownership: Initially unclaimed. Mara buys whatever the party delivers under the commission. **Use:** Crafting stock and ironhound food. It grants no attack bonus, spell, light, attunement benefit or renewable charge. Turning it into a special magic item requires a separate campaign ruling. Mara uses eight pounds in the forge collar, not a weapon.

Masking procedure (homebrew): Five minutes coats the whole load with at least one inch of saturated river clay, supported by Orin's fish box or a wrapped sack. This masks Metal Sense for **one hour**. A waterskin poured over the coating before that hour ends renews it for another hour; river immersion renews it without using carried water. The coating weighs 10 pounds regardless of a load of 1-12 pounds, in addition to the 8-pound box if used. One waterskin holds enough for one renewal. After expiry it dries and stops masking; warn players with visible cracks ten minutes beforehand. Ordinary walking or combat does not break a secured box's seal. Opening it, deliberately breaking the coating, or dropping an unboxed bundle more than 10 feet exposes the metal. A broken seal takes five minutes to restore with wet clay; a mere renewal takes one action. No roll is required. Continuous submersion one foot below the river surface also masks the metal immediately.

Remaining material: Surplus star-iron may be kept or fed. No extra buyer or resale payment is included in this one-shot; record its weight as crafting stock. Used feeding pieces are gone. Slag is worthless. The hound's dead plates are brittle ordinary iron: 100 pounds may be salvaged in one hour, worth 2 gp total to Mara from her own purse, not the commission fund; no star-iron can be recovered from its stomach in usable form.

Resolution Paths

Delivery with the hound fed: Twelve pounds recovered, four fed, eight delivered; Mara pays the full 400 gp including the advance. The hound leaves for the woods for a week. After that it resumes ordinary foraging; it does not automatically raid Bellwether. Orin proposes leaving scrap at an abandoned charcoal hearth away from travelers. This is an optional maintenance problem, not cancellation of the victory.

Delivery with an escape or kill: Deliver at least eight pounds and receive the full commission. Keep any surplus not delivered or fed. A masked escape leaves a hungry but evaded hound; Pell avoids carrying exposed ore until the carriers arrange a safe route. A dead or securely contained animal stays so. If killed early, conclude with the crossing in its recorded condition and the relief of carrying the prize without pursuit; do not replace it with a larger mate. A hound allowed to retreat at its selected HP threshold stays away for the rest of the adventure: 18 HP normally, 14 for three characters, or 22 for five. Lesser injuries persist but do not end pursuit by themselves.

Part of the prize surrendered: Mara pays for each pound delivered, subject to the formula under Rewards. She thanks the party for honest work, retains usable metal and orders an ordinary collar with the remaining fund. The forge reopens in three weeks, and residents ration reservoir water until the sluice pins are ready. The party can choose this loss to keep everyone safe.

No delivery or refusal: The party keeps a good-faith advance if it tried. Mara arranges the ordinary repair; the hound eats reachable abandoned metal according to its largest-piece-first rule; record the remaining weight rather than erasing the whole find. If the party refuses before taking the job, no gold changes hands. If they deliberately take the advance and abscond, Mara asks for its return and tells other craftspeople what happened; handle that choice in the ongoing campaign.

Closing image: On a full delivery, Mara weighs eight pounds, then asks one character to hold the new collar's pattern against the forge shaft. She hangs the old cracked collar beside the door. "That one was winter," she says. "This one buys us spring." On a partial delivery, she weighs each piece just as carefully and writes the balance in the fund ledger without blaming the survivors.

Rewards and Follow-Up

All gold amounts below are **party totals**, not per character. The village's 400 gp fund is already in Mara's strongbox; no later approval is required.

SOURCE	CONDITION	TOTAL VALUE
Commission advance	Accept the job in good faith	100 gp paid now

SOURCE	CONDITION	TOTAL VALUE
Delivery balance	Deliver n pounds, counting no more than eight	Total commission = $\max(100, 50 \times n)$ gp; subtract the 100 gp advance to find balance, minimum zero
Full delivery example	Eight pounds or more	400 gp total = 100 advance + 300 balance
Partial delivery example	Six pounds delivered after feeding four of ten recovered	300 gp total = 100 advance + 200 balance
Carcass salvage	Hound dead; one hour stripping 100 pounds of plates, brought to Mara	Optional 2 gp, paid separately

Thus the maximum cash is **402 gp**, only if the hound is killed, salvaged and a full delivery is made. Keeping surplus metal grants no additional cash here. Borrowed tools, lantern, fish box and unused ore are returned unless their owners give permission to keep them; consumed ore gifts incur no debt. Do not charge the party for tools destroyed during an honest attempt.

Use a **milestone**: the party gains one level for completing the expedition and choosing a resolution, including a humane bargain or a brave withdrawal with partial metal. Do not also award monster XP for this adventure. If the campaign does not use levels, grant its normal single-session advancement. The reward measures the accomplished expedition, not whether the animal died.

DM Preparation

Read the DM Introduction, Ironhound and Star-Iron once. Put four one-pound counters beside an eight-pound core counter. Sketch A, B and C using the location table; mark the ferry on its actual bank. Copy the two handouts separately, delivering each at its stated time. Track one creature's HP through the whole adventure. Ask what each share of the commission would buy, then let the falling light interrupt the market.

Handout distribution: Give Mara's Commission when the party accepts the job. Give The Return Ledger after extraction; players fill it with what they actually recovered and learned.

Handout: Mara's Commission**BELLWETHER REPAIR FUND**

Bring star-iron from tonight's fall to Mara Venn's forge. Eight pounds pays four hundred gold for the company, including the hundred advanced tonight. Less than eight pays fifty gold a pound, with the advance guaranteed for an honest attempt. Stone crust does not count. Surplus metal remains yours unless you choose to deliver it without additional payment.

The forge collar needs eight pounds. With the forge running, I can finish the reservoir's sluice pins in two days. I lend hammer, pry bar, gloves, sack, rope, two waterskins and a lantern. Return what you can.

Signed, Mara Venn

Handout: The Return Ledger

Core recovered: _____ pounds. Small pieces recovered: _____ pounds.

Mara needs: 8 pounds. Metal reserved for her: _____ pounds.

Metal used or given away: _____ pounds. Metal still carried: _____ pounds.

Return route: _____. Ferry waiting bank: _____.

Our plan for carrying the metal: _____.

What could make us change that plan? _____.

Session Notes

Decisions, discoveries, and the next adventure.

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