

SCRIPT – ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY: RUNNING THE SANDBOX – ICEWIND DALE

[by Justin Alexander – March 24th, 2021](#)

Auril the Frostmaiden has claimed Icewind Dale, laying her enchantment upon it: a terrible curse of perpetual winter. The denizens of Ten-Towns – ten settlements clustered around the lakes at the center of the Dale, nestled between the Spine of the World and the Great Glacier – grow increasingly desperate for a spring which never comes. When the PCs arrive in this gloom-riven land, they will discover that the cold of the wintry north has leeches into the hearts of men. Surrounded by darkness, can they be the flame that rekindles the light of hope?

The opening chapters of *Icewind Dale: Rime of the Frostmaiden* are designed as a sandbox. And I mean a true sandbox. The term is often abused to just mean any non-linear scenario, but *Icewind Dale* is the real deal: A campaign in which the players are empowered to either choose or define what their next scenario is going to be.

Now, there are a couple of caveats to this.

First, the explanation of how the campaign is supposed to be run is a little inadequate and the book's advice on best practices can be inconsistent. As a result, I've seen a lot of Dungeon Masters who are confused about how the *Rime* is supposed to work.

Second, although the opening of the campaign flirts with being a sandbox, around sixth or seventh level, *Rime of the Frostmaiden* abruptly collapses back into a linear plot.

Which is unfortunate because a bonafide sandbox is unusual (if not unique) among D&D campaigns, and the town-based structure used by *Icewind Dale* is intriguing and ripe with possibility.

Let's take a closer look.

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There are going to be some significant spoilers for *Rime of Frostmaiden* in this video. So if you don't want to be spoiled, you should turn back now! If you do have a copy of the book, you may want to grab it so that you can follow along, but it's not necessary.

Icewind Dale is a fantastic opportunity to see what a sandbox campaign looks like in actual play. Here's how it works:

There are ten towns in Ten-Towns. Each one has a quest associated with it, and these are almost universally triggered proactively – if the PCs go to the town, they're supposed to get the quest associated with that town.

There is a Stage 1 rumor table on page 18 of the book. Each rumor on this table points at one of the town-associated quests.

There is also a Stage 2 rumor table, referred to as "tall tales" on page 102, which is unlocked at either third or fourth level. These rumors point to higher level quests located in the wilderness around Ten-Towns.

Finally, there are two Starting Quests. These are to be given to the PCs at the beginning of the campaign, and each is designed to motivate the PCs to travel to other towns.

For example, the Cold-Hearted Killer starting quest instructs the Dungeon Master to:

First, randomly choose one of the towns to be the starting town for the campaign and also where the PCs get the Cold-Hearted Killer scenario hook to track down a serial killer targeting victims throughout Ten-Towns.

Second, randomly choose a different town, which will be where the serial killer can be found.

Although not explicitly stated in the book (which seems to have caused some confusion), the intention here is fairly clear: In following the starting quest, the PCs will go to another town and investigate to see if, for example, the serial killer is there. In that town they'll scoop up the quest associated with that town and, in many cases, additional rumors pointing to quests in other towns.

This is essentially the default action of the campaign: If in doubt, the PCs should go to a town and look for their starting quest objective.

The final element here is how the campaign handles milestone advancement: The characters will advance to second level after completing their first quest, then third level after three quests, then fourth level after five quests.

Now, let's talk about my quibbles with this structure.

First, the book tells the DM to only use one of the starting quests. I disagree. You should use both starting quests.

Partly this is logistically superior, because each starting quest will end in a random town. Having both quests in play makes it less likely for the PCs to prematurely exhaust their starting quests after just one town.

But it's also just a superior experience: Having both quests in hand will deepen the default interactions with each community. It will also break the players of the expectation that they'll be doing a linear set of assigned tasks.

So my recommendation is to give one starting quest in the first town visited and the other starting quest in the second town visited. This will create a motivation for the PCs to potentially backtrack to the first town – either immediately or at some later time – to investigate the second starting quest there.

My second quibble is how the book handles rumor tables. Its advice is inconsistent, but there are several places where you're told to dole them out one at a time.

The problem is that the point of a rumor table in a sandbox is generally to give the group LOTS of rumors – i.e., scenario hooks – that they can then choose between and prioritize. There's a much longer discussion to be had here, but what I would briefly recommend is:

Delivering one or two rumors whenever the PCs investigate a town for their starting quests. In other words, tie the rumors into the default action of the campaign.

Second, deliver one or two rumors any time they're hanging out in a tavern.

Finally, opportunistically drop rumors as part of miscellaneous conversations with NPCs in Ten-Towns. People gossip about current events, so rumor tables almost always make for good topics of casual chat.

You also want to generally make sure that the rumors come from an action that the PCs are taking, like chatting in a tavern or canvassing a town for information. You don't want to just arbitrarily say, "Lo! I have come from on high to deliver unto you a rumor!"

I'd probably also discard the distinction between Stage 1 and Stage 2 rumors. It's not strictly necessary, particularly for players who have experience with sandbox play. If your players are heavily conditioned to linear play, however – and might heedlessly plunge into danger they're not ready to handle – you might want to start by dropping non-actionable versions of the Stage 2 rumors.

For example, one of the Stage 2 rumors points the PCs to the Jarlmoot – a hill where the frost giant leaders once met to settle disputes.

What you could do at lower levels is just have an NPC mention the old jarlmoots of the frost giants without telling the PCs where they can find the hill.

Maybe the PCs will go hunting specifically for that information, or maybe the foreshadowing just pays off later when they learn the location through another rumor drop. Either way, the depth of the experience makes the game world feel more real and meaningful to the players.

All right, so what does this all look like in actual play?

Let's simulate a campaign (with some actual dice rolls for stuff like the campaign's starting town) and take a look.

For the purposes of this simulated campaign, we're going to mostly ignore the players being able to define their own scenarios. In actual play, this will almost certainly happen: Ten-Towns is enough of a living environment that the players can, for example, decide to become caravan guards from Kelvin's Cairn. Or re-open an abandoned inn. Or buy mead in one town to sell at a high price in another town where the taverns are running dry.

But what we're going to primarily focus on here is just the baseline play that arises directly out of the sandbox structures in the campaign.

[ROLL DICE]

I've randomly determined that our initial starting quest will be the Cold-Hearted Killer.

A dwarf named Hlin Trollbane believes she's identified the serial killer who's been plaguing Ten-Towns – it's a man named Sephek who's travelling with Torg's merchant caravan.

She approaches the PCs in a tavern and asks them to track the killer down.

[ROLL DICE]

Our starting town is Caer-Konig.

The quest in Caer-Konig sees the PCs stumble across Speaker Torvus, the dragonborn leader of the town who is drunkenly patrolling the streets in a vain attempt to capture dwarven thieves who have been sneaking into town. This will eventually lead them to a nearby Duergar Outpost, which can be found on page 47 of the book.

Right off the bat here, my instinct is to have the PCs enter Caer-Konig, encounter the drunken Speaker, and get the Duergar Outpost quest. When they get back to town (having leveled up to second level), Hlin says, "I'm impressed. I think you might be able to help me bring a little more justice to this cold-blighted Dale."

In other words, the success of the first quest can diegetically justify Hlin approaching them for the bigger job.

I now roll to see which town Sephek will be found in.

[ROLL DICE]

Easthaven.

Alternatively, if you wanted to more strictly adhere to the published structure and have the PCs receive the starting quest first, then our campaign would start in the Hook, Line, and Sinker tavern, described on page 46, where Hlin hires them to kill the serial killer. They leave the tavern and immediately stumble over Speaker Torvus, who leads them to the Northern Light tavern on the other side of town and starts the Duergar Outpost quest.

Either way, they head down the road and pass through Caer-Dineval.

Caer-Dineval is one of the towns without a proactive quest, so the PCs could just pass right through without getting one. But they're looking for the serial killer, right? So they're going to head to the local tavern, which is the Uphill Climb on page 38, and start asking questions.

The adventure tells us that Roark, the proprietor of the Uphill Climb, won't explicitly tell the PCs what's going on in town (most likely out of fear), but he WILL try to point them at the caer - or castle - in the hope that they'll get involved.

So when they start asking questions, he'll say something like, "If any caravan was looking for permission to set up here, they'd inquire with the Speaker up at the caer."

So the PCs head up there and knock on the door.

The keep has been secretly invaded by a cult called the Knights of the Black Swords that, among other things, wants to stop the duergar invasion of Ten-Towns. They've killed the guards, taken the Speaker hostage, and are ruling the town in his name. The way this quest works is that the PCs can bust up the cult and rescue the Speaker, OR they can end up allying with the cult.

The cult has some divine guidance which, if the PCs have taken any anti-duergar actions, will have informed the cult that the PCs can be useful allies and that they should go out of their way to accommodate them.

So if the PCs did the Duergar Outpost quest, then the likely outcome here is that the Black Swords form an alliance with them. "Your coming has been foretold!"

That's a second quest complete.

Alternatively, if the PCs heard about the duergar thieves and said, "Doesn't seem like our problem," or if they tried to follow the duergar tracks, got lost, and never found the outpost, then when they go up to the caer to ask questions about Torg's caravan, they're simply told, "Nope, no Sephek here," and turned away.

As the PCs head back down the hill from the caer, they meet Dannika Graysteel, who's heading back from another disappointing attempt to find a type of fairy called a chwinga. This kicks off Nature Spirits, the Second Starting Quest, when Dannika asks them to look for chwingas in the other towns of Ten-Towns.

Now the PCs head down the road to where it intersects the Eastway.

The choice of which way to go is now basically random. So, for the sake of argument, let's roll a die.

[ROLL DICE]

Looks like our hypothetical group is heading to Good Mead.

As they approach Good Mead, they encounter a trapper. They ask him about chwingas...

[ROLL DICE]

...but he shakes his head. He hasn't seen any chwingas around here. There's a 25% chance each town has chwingas and I've rolled a 47 for Good Mead, so no chwingas here.

But the trapper does tell them he just discovered five dead bodies out on the tundra. This is the quest hook for the Verbeeg Lair, which is on page 71.

These players, however, decide NOT to follow the trail from the dead bodies back to the verbeeg's lair. Tackling a giant all by themselves just sounds too tough. But they want to do the right thing, so they gather up the bodies and take them into Good Mead for a proper burial.

In Good Mead they hear that the verbeeg has stolen the town's mead supply and killed the Speaker, threatening to ruin the town's economy. This mostly just confirms that the giant is going to be too tough for them to handle, so most of the PCs think it would be best to push on.

One of the PCs, however, decides to rally the townspeople: Alone they can't stop the verbeeg menace, but together they can triumph!

The stat block for Good Mead on page 72 conveniently lists what the local militia can muster: Up to twenty soldiers and two veterans.

[ROLL DICE]

So the PCs make some solid Charisma checks and they rally the two veterans and ten of the soldiers to go giant-hunting. If they'd rolled better, they could have perhaps gotten ALL the soldiers to go with them.

On the way to the verbeeg lair, I frame a couple of scenes where the PCs are chatting with other members of the expedition. I use the opportunity to introduce Shandar Froth and Olivessa Untapoor, two wealthy merchants from Good Mead who are described on page 78. I also improvise a couple of new NPCs representing the common folk of Good Mead.

During this small talk, the PCs also pick up two more rumors.

[ROLL DICE TWICE]

Dwarves are having trouble bringing their goods to Bryn Shander due to yeti attacks. And Dougan's Hole, down the road, is being plagued by a couple of dire wolves or awakened wolves or polar wolves or werewolves...

Well, it really depends on who you ask and how tall the tale has gotten.

Note that I'm deliberately inserting uncertainty and/or broader context into these rumors compared to the default text provided in the adventure. We talked about this technique in our video on Surprising Scenario Hooks.

The giant-hunting expedition is a huge success. Maybe one of the group's new NPC friends gets killed (a little pathos never hurt anybody), but that's another quest complete, so the PCs are now 3rd level.

They return to Good Mead. While everyone is celebrating (and mourning), Olivessa Untapoor approaches them: Good Mead needs a new speaker. A strong speaker. Shandar Froth thinks he should do it, but he's a jackass. People are asking Olivessa to run against him, but she really doesn't want the position. She thinks that one of the PCs should stand for the election.

Now, if the PCs want this, it could totally happen!

They're the heroes of the hour. They've got the support of a major civic leader. On page 78 there's a whole thing where Shandar, no matter who he's running against, pulls some shenanigans during the elections, but the PC candidate can probably end up on top.

This would, of course, change the entire course of the campaign! Which is great! As the DM you'd need to come up with some civic challenges for the new Speaker (and the other PCs as their closest advisors), but you don't need to completely abandon the existing toybox while you're doing this.

For example, you can look at the existing rumor tables and think about how to re-contextualize them to the PCs' current circumstance.

Here's one: "In Lonelywood, beware the dreaded white moose! It attacks loggers and trappers on sight, and the town's best hunters can't seem to catch or kill the beast. They could probably use some help."

We could easily imagine Speaker Huddle of Lonelywood sending a diplomatic mission to the newly ensconced Speaker of Good Mead: Having heard the success they've had with the verbeeg raider, she's hoping they can send help to Lonelywood. In exchange, she promises to give Good Mead a discounted rate on Lonelywood's lumber.

Or maybe it's not Speaker Huddle. Maybe local loggers in Lonelywood have lost confidence in her and have sent their people to extend a similar offer to the PCs. Maybe the PCs will end up conspiring with the loggers to oust Speaker Huddle and another PC ends up taking HER place! Desperate times call for strong men, right?

So maybe this whole thing ends with one of the PCs rising up to become the new King of Ten-Towns... but at what cost to their soul? And maybe this is what the devil supporting the Knights of the Black Sword wanted to have happen all along!

However this might turn out, we've clearly drifted away from the baseline structure of *Rime of the Frostmaiden*. So, for the sake of argument, let's say this doesn't happen: Maybe the PCs aren't interested. Or maybe one of the PCs gets elected Speaker, but the others decide to continue adventuring without them. The player of the PC who became the Speaker, of course, would create a new character. Or maybe pick up one of the NPCs who fought by their side against the verbeeg.

In any case, they continue down the road to Dougan's Hole. Here we have a scenario hook in which the white wolves plaguing the town meet the PCs on the road and try to lure them back to their lair on page 54. But the PCs, having heard about them in Good Mead, know not to trust them. They kill one of the wolves and, as described in the book, the other one runs away.

Reaching Dougan's Hole they're told people have been kidnapped by the wolves, so they track the wolf that escaped, rescue the prisoners, and complete another quest. They also hear that there are adventurers in Targos planning an expedition to Kelvin's Cairn.

But still no Sephek. And

[ROLL DICE]

no chwingas, either. So they head back up towards the Eastway. They come back to the intersection and need to choose between Bryn Shander (where they've got a quest rumor) and Easthaven (where the killer has been known to operate).

It's still a toss-up in my opinion. Players could rationalize either choice pretty easily. They could even decide to head all the way back to Caer-Konig to see if there's any chwingas there, but that seems like a marginal possibility to me. Let's roll randomly.

[ROLL DICE]

It looks like this hypothetical group is heading to Bryn Shander.

As they enter town, they're approached by three dwarves who would like their help recovering a sled shipment of iron that they had to abandon during a yeti attack. (This is described on page 34.)

The PCs do that, completing their fifth quest and leveling up to fourth level. They also pick up two more rumors at the Northlook Inn on page 33: Kobolds have invaded the gem mines of Termalaine. And people are also talking about how no one has seen the town speaker of Caer-Dineval for weeks now...

Huh. That's weird, actually. The people in the castle were very nice, but now that you mention it, we never actually SAW the Speaker, did we?

At this point, I'm not sure what our hypothetical group will do next. Lots of options, though.

Maybe they're running low on coin and decide rescuing a gem mine from kobolds in Termalaine sounds profitable.

Or they might double back to Caer-Dineval to check out what's really going on with their "allies."

Or try to backtrack the goblins who stole the dwarves' iron.

Before leaving Bryn Shander, they might stop by the local shrine to Amaunator and speak to a gnome tinkerer on page 33 who asks them to check in on his friend who lives in an abandoned cabin north of Lonelywood.

Or they could just continue down the road to Targos, searching for fairies and serial killers as they go.

There are a couple key things to note here.

First, looking over these events, you can see how easy it would be to end up with a completely different campaign. A different starting town; a different decision by the PCs; a different random die roll; a different moment of creative inspiration and everything is transformed.

This is not just interesting and exciting, it's also EMPOWERING. The players can feel the difference, and it will be intoxicating.

Second, the level of emergent complexity that we see here – the event horizon beyond which you can have no clear vision of what the campaign will become – is inherent to true sandbox play. Do the PCs become political leaders? Run a tavern? Become security guards for a logging consortium? Start a trading company? Mount archaeological expeditions to explore giant ruins?

There's no way to know and only one way to find out!

This is why *Rime of the Frostmaiden* collapsing the sandbox of the early levels into a more-or-less linear plot at the middle levels is rather disappointing. At the very point where the limitless potential of the sandbox begins to truly explode, the book instead says, "Okay. That was nice. But let's lock it down."

If nothing else, I hope you've seen here that there's nothing magical or even particularly difficult about running a sandbox campaign: After the sandbox has been filled with a selection of simple toys (some NPCs, some dungeons, some bad guys), all you have to do is observe a fairly simple procedure and follow the players' lead, responding to their actions by picking up the appropriate (or most convenient) toys and actively playing with them.

What you discover together will be a campaign that you will never forget.

If you'd like to go with me on my next expedition, make sure to track down the Subscribe button in the Font of All-Knowledge.

If you forage around a little bit down there, you'll also find some links to more tips and tools for running *Rime of the Frostmaiden*. If you haven't seen them already, you should also check out my videos on Running the Sandbox and Surprising Scenario Hooks.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!