THE SLAG BARGAIN

A Moonsea Settlement Module for D&D 5th Edition

Levels 5-8 | 3-5 Sessions | Faction Conflict & Area Design

"Everyone in Slag Hollow is lying to you. The trick is figuring out which lies you can live with."

Designed by Andres Valbuena | 2026

OVERVIEW

The Hook

The mithral mine that built Slag Hollow is dying. Or so the Miners' Guild claims. The Zhentarim representative says they're lying to renegotiate contracts. The Harper operative embedded in town says the Zhentarim are preparing to seize the mine by force. The priest of Waukeen says everyone should calm down and let the market decide.

They're all wrong. Something in the deep tunnels has been eating the mithral for months. And it's been watching the miners get closer to its home. The players arrive as tensions reach breaking point. What they do in the next seven days will determine whether Slag Hollow survives, and in what form.

Tone and Themes

Primary Themes: Faction conflict with muddy, gray goals. Economic desperation and exploitation. The cost of 'progress' on those who were there first. Negotiation as a form of combat.

Tone: Faerun-style fantasy. Morally complex, occasionally darkly humorous, with consequences that feel earned. Arlais is a Zhentarim middle manager drowning in quotas. Kaelen is a Harper operative who has lived his cover for so long the truth feels foreign. The miners have been cutting corners for years; their hands are as dirty as the shafts they dig.

Module Statistics

Element	Detail
Levels	5-8 (optimized for 6th level)
Party Size	3-6 players
Duration	3-5 sessions (12-20 hours)
Setting	Southern Moonsea coast, Faerun
Primary Pillars	Social interaction, exploration, combat (in that order)

How Players Arrive

Hired Help: The Zhentarim hired the party to 'assess security concerns' at a remote mining operation. The pay is good. The job description is vague, and players are led on.

Harper Contact: A Harper contact asks the party to check on an operative who missed three scheduled dead drops. *'Probably nothing. Probably.'*

Stranded Travelers: A storm, a broken axle, or a washed-out road forces the party to shelter in Slag Hollow. They're stuck here for at least a week.

Miners' Plea: A desperate miner found the party in a nearby city, begging for help. 'The Black Network's going to kill us all, and no one believes me.'

SLAG HOLLOW: THE SETTLEMENT

History

Founding (62 Years Ago): Slag Hollow began as a prospector's camp when a wandering dwarf named Thordak Stoutvein discovered mithral deposits in the coastal cliffs. Word spread. Within a year, three hundred souls had carved a settlement into the rocky shoreline, extracting ore that fetched premium prices in Mulmaster and Hillsfar. The mine was never rich (not like the legendary mithral halls of old) but it was consistent. Enough to build a life. Enough to raise families. Enough to matter.

The Zhentarim Arrival (15 Years Ago): When Thordak died without heirs, the Miners' Guild lacked capital to continue operations. The Zhentarim offered financing in exchange for exclusive purchasing rights and 'security services.' The Zhentarim financing was a lifeline the Miners' Guild couldn't refuse. Fifteen years later, that lifeline has become a noose.

The Decline (Present): Six months ago, mithral yields began dropping. The Guild blames exhausted veins. The Zhentarim blame lazy workers. Neither theory explains why miners keep reporting 'sounds in the deep tunnels,' sounds that stopped when they stopped digging in Shaft Seven. No one has entered Shaft Seven in four months. The Zhentarim want to know why. The miners won't say.

Culture and Daily Life

Slag Hollow's residents are miners, their families, and those who service both. Humans predominate, with significant dwarf and half-orc minorities. Most families have worked the mine for two or three generations.

Local Customs: The Morning Bell is rung at dawn to wake the day shift; miners touch the bell housing for luck before descending. Slag Day is a monthly celebration when accumulated slag is dumped into the sea, accompanied by drinking, fighting, and reconciliation. The Empty Chair is a tradition where every tavern keeps one chair permanently empty for miners lost underground. Sitting in it is a grave insult.

Settlement Layout

The Docks (West): A weathered pier where monthly supply ships dock. Two warehouses: one Zhentarim-controlled, one theoretically independent but Zhentarim-watched.

> *The pier extends 60 feet into the water. The warehouses sit 30 feet apart with a clear sightline between them. Anyone watching from the Zhentarim warehouse can see everyone who enters the independent one.*

The Square (Center): The heart of Slag Hollow. The Broken Pick tavern dominates the north side. Goldpriestess Karys-Su's temple of Waukeen takes the east. Guild Hall on the south.

> *The Square is roughly 100 feet across. From the Broken Pick's upper windows, you can see the Guild Hall's front door, the temple steps, and most foot traffic through town.*

The Mine (East): Cut into the coastal cliffs, the mine's main entrance yawns like a wound in the rock. A Zhentarim guard post controls access.

> *The entrance is a natural chokepoint, 15 feet wide, 10 feet tall. Three guards can hold it against twenty miners. The Zhentarim know this. So do the miners.*

The Empty Quarter (Southeast): Twelve houses, all abandoned within the last year. Families left as yields dropped and debts mounted.

> *A child's doll in one doorway, too weathered to save. Chalk marks on a wall where someone measured a child's growth, year by year. A half-finished letter on a desk: 'Dear Mother, we cannot stay...'*

THE FACTIONS

The Zhentarim

What They Want: The Zhentarim's Moonsea operations require steady mithral supply. Regional Manager Arlais Vane has three priorities: (1) Resume full production, because her quarterly numbers are suffering. (2) Identify the obstruction, because why won't the miners enter Shaft Seven? (3) Maintain control, preferably through economics, but force if necessary.

What They'll Do: The Zhentarim playbook escalates predictably.

Phase 1 (Current): Economic pressure, delaying supply ships and calling in personal debts.

Phase 2: Targeted intimidation, "accidents" involving vocal Guild leaders.

Phase 3: Total displacement, bringing in a fresh, indentured workforce to replace the town.

How Players Might Align: The Zhentarim pay well and ask few questions. Players who prioritize gold, efficiency, or 'stability' may find Arlais a reasonable employer. She doesn't want violence. Violence is expensive. She wants compliance.

The Harpers

What They Want: Harper operative “Patch” (real name: Kaelen Thorne) has been embedded in Slag Hollow for eleven months. Three months ago, he stopped reporting. His actual priorities have shifted: (1) Protect the miners, because he's lived with them, eaten with them. (2) Expose the Zhentarim. (3) Survive, because he's been undercover too long. He's compromised.

What They’ll Do: Kaelen plays the long game of information warfare.

Phase 1 (Current): Observation and secret dead-drops (which he is currently failing).

Phase 2: Smear campaigns, using the party to plant evidence of Zhentarim skimming to turn the town against Arlais.

Phase 3: Extraction, organizing a mass exodus of the miners before the Zhentarim can seize the town.

How Players Might Align: Players who oppose tyranny, protect the vulnerable, or value information over force will find Kaelen a useful ally. Once he trusts them.

The Miners' Guild

What They Want: Guild Foreman Horgar ‘Iron-Lung’ Bale speaks for 60 working miners. His priorities: (1) Keep Shaft Seven sealed, because what's down there is worse than bankruptcy. (2) Survive the Zhentarim. (3) Protect the secret.

What They'll Do: The Guild relies on passive resistance and obfuscation.

Phase 1 (Current): The "Slow Walk", faking equipment failures and exhaustion to avoid Shaft Seven.

Phase 2: Strikes, shutting down the entire mine, risking Zhentarim violence to protect the secret.

Phase 3: Desperation, Horgar leads a group into the tunnels to "sacrifice" themselves or collapse the entrance permanently.

How Players Might Align: Players who side with the working class or value the "Truth" of the world will gravitate here. Alignment with the Guild requires earning trust through deeds, not just words.

The Church of Waukeen

What They Want: Goldpriestess High-Purser Karys-Su serves the Merchant's Friend. Her temple is neutral ground. Her priorities: (1) Maintain neutrality, because her power depends on being the trusted broker. (2) Profit, because the Merchant's Friend blesses those who bless themselves. (3) Prevent violence, because dead customers pay no tithes.

What They'll Do: Karys-Su acts as the "Middle-Man" through leverage.

Phase 1 (Current): Arbitrating disputes and offering high-interest loans to desperate miners.

Phase 2: Selling Information, trading the players' secrets to the highest bidder to "balance" the power scale.

Phase 3: Excommunication, closing the Temple and withdrawing the town's financial backing, effectively bankrupting whoever she opposes.

How Players Might Align: Players who enjoy political maneuvering, playing both sides, will find Karys-Su the most useful ally. She is the ultimate quest-giver for those who want a neutral path.

WHAT'S ACTUALLY IN THE MINE: THE XORN COLONY

The Truth

Twelve Xorn have lived in the caverns beneath Slag Hollow for over three hundred years, long before humans arrived. They are Earthkin, natives of the Elemental Plane of Earth pulled to the Material Plane generations ago. The mithral vein is their food source, cultivated and carefully rationed across centuries.

When the miners broke through, the Xorn faced a crisis. These soft creatures were eating their food. Worse, they were eating it wastefully: extracting ore and discarding the rest. The eldest Xorn, whom the others call Oon-Aah-Rokh, made a decision. Warn the intruders once. If they didn't listen, remove them.

The miners listened, and the mining stopped. But now both sides are starving: the miners economically, the Xorn literally.

What the Xorn Want

First, the mining must stop permanently, or at least be limited to what the vein can sustain.

Second, they want recognition of their claim. They were here first. The mithral is theirs.

Third, they need food. They're hungry, as they've been rationing for five months.

Why This Complicates Everything

The Xorn have spent three centuries grooming this mithral vein. To them, the miners are parasites eating the walls of their larder. Clearing them shouldn’t look like pest control but an eviction through bloodshed.

Any real solution requires everyone to give up something. The Zhentarim must accept reduced output. The miners must share 'their' mine. The Xorn must trust surface-dwellers. The players must broker a peace between people who don't want to compromise.

> ANTICIPATING PLAYERS: Some players will immediately want to kill the Xorn. Make clear this is possible but costly. The Xorn know these tunnels perfectly, can phase through stone, and will collapse the mine on their way out. Genocide is always an option in D&D. It should never be easy.

KEY NPCS

Arlais Vane, Zhentarim Regional Manager

Race: Human (Chondathan) | Age: 47 | Role: Primary Zhentarim authority

First Impression: Professional, the kind of person who smiles while explaining why your options are limited.

Personality: Arlais is not cruel, as cruelty is inefficient. She is utterly committed to the Zhentarim's interests, which she has convinced herself align with stability and order. She views the miners with something between pity and contempt. They had opportunities. They made poor choices. Now they face consequences.

Performance: Precise and corporate. Never raises her voice. Maintains eye contact slightly longer than comfortable. When truly angry, she becomes quieter *and* louder, somehow.

> *Example Direction: Jeanette Voerman from Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines.*

Kaelen Thorne ("Patch"), Harper Operative

Race: Half-elf | Age: 34 | Role: Deep-cover Harper agent posing as itinerant laborer

First Impression: Quiet. Observant. The kind of person who's always near important conversations but never part of them.

Personality: Kaelen took this assignment believing it would last three months. Eleven months later, something has changed. He came to observe the Zhentarim. He stayed because he couldn't watch good people be crushed. He doesn't know if he's a Harper who's gone native or just a person who found something worth protecting.

Performance: Laconic. Answers questions with questions, and uses silence strategically. Always positioned near exits. When he freezes completely still, something has gone very wrong.

> *Example Direction: Vernan Roche from The Witcher 3, or Disco Elysium's Kim Kitsuragi.*

Horgar 'Iron-Lung' Bale, Guild Foreman

Race: Human (Damaran) | Age: 50 | Role: Elected leader of the Miners' Guild

First Impression: Stubborn as a mule. A man who's spent forty years underground and carries the mountain in his bones.

Personality: Five months ago, Horgar saw something that shook him worse than any collapse: creatures from nightmare, speaking in voices like grinding stone. He sealed that

shaft, and he's been lying ever since. The lies are eating him alive. But the truth would be worse.

Voice and Performance: A heavy, booming presence with a voice to match. Damaran accent. Broad hands that never stop moving.

> *Example Direction: The Witcher 3's Bloody Baron is the perfect booming character for this. The Robert Baratheon type.*

High-Purser Karys-Su, Goldpriestess of Waukeen

Race: Human (Calishite) | Age: 45 | Role: High priestess, neutral broker, information merchant

First Impression: Warm. Welcoming. The smile of someone calculating your net worth while asking about your journey.

Personality: Karys-Su knows more than anyone in Slag Hollow because everyone tells her things. She genuinely believes in fair dealing. The problem is her definition of 'fair': a deal where both parties benefit is fair, even if one party benefits enormously more.

Voice and Performance: Warm, mercantile, sprinkled with trade proverbs. Hands always visible. The warmth vanishes when she's crossed. You realize the smile was always a tool.

> *Example Direction: Think Delilah Copperspoon from Dishonored, or Baldur's Gate 3's Lady Esther.*

Oon-Aah-Rokh, Xorn Elder

Race: Xorn (Elder) | Age: 300+ | Role: Leader of the Xorn colony

First Impression: A boulder that speaks. Three arms, three legs, three eyes arranged radially around a massive central maw. Alien, yet somehow patient. Somehow tired.

Personality: Oon-Aah-Rokh remembers when this cavern was quiet. She doesn't hate humans. Hate requires energy, and she's so hungry. She pities them, mostly. They live such brief, frantic lives. She gave the miners one warning because she remembered a human who was kind to her once, long ago. She hopes she doesn't have to kill them. But she will. Her children are hungry.

Voice and Performance: Slow and grinding. Long pauses between concepts. Speaks archaic Common. 'This one remembers.' Her central maw opens and closes when processing complex ideas.

> *Example Direction: Mass Effect's Sovereign is fitting here. Operating on a scale that makes human concerns seem small, but with more sorrow.*

NPC Relationship Web

Everyone is hiding something from everyone else. Karys-Su knows the most but understands the least. Horgar and Oon-Aah-Rokh are the only ones who might find common ground. Kaelen and Arlais are playing chess; the miners are the board.

NPC	Knows About Others	Hidden From Others
Arlais	Suspects Kaelen; knows miners hiding something	Her skimming; her brother's death
Kaelen	Zhentarim plans; most miners' secrets	His romantic feelings; his handler is dead
Horgar	Full Xorn situation; which miners know	His secret talks with Oon-Aah-Rokh
Karys-Su	Everyone's debts and deals	Her deal with Mulmaster merchants
Oon-Aah-Rokh	All tunnels; ancient history	Her dying child; her hope for peace

QUEST HOOKS AND STRUCTURE

Primary Quest: The Slag Bargain

The players must work through the tensions in Slag Hollow and determine the settlement's fate. This isn't a quest with a single objective. It's a situation with multiple possible resolutions.

Phase 1: Understanding the Situation (Days 1-2)

Player Goals: Meet the major factions. Understand the conflict's shape. Identify who's lying about what.

Key Scenes: The Broken Pick (rumors), The Guild Hall (guarded fear), The Zhentarim Post (professional pressure), The Temple (traded information).

> ANTICIPATING PLAYERS: Players will likely try to play factions against each other. Let them. But have each faction notice. Arlais has done this longer than they have. Kaelen is trained for exactly this. Karys-Su profits from it.

Phase 2: Discovering the Truth (Days 3-5)

Player Goals: Learn what's in Shaft Seven. Understand the full stakes. Build trust with at least one faction.

Earning Horgar's Trust: Requires demonstrated opposition to Zhentarim OR protecting miners from harm. DC 16 Persuasion for partial truth; DC 20 or significant proof of trustworthiness for full disclosure.

First Contact with Oon-Aah-Rokh: Can occur through the sealed wall (limited) or players can find another entrance (Survival DC 15). Oon-Aah-Rokh is willing to talk once. If the conversation goes poorly, she withdraws.

Phase 3: Brokering a Solution (Days 5-7)

Player Goals: Negotiate between factions. Build a sustainable resolution. Prevent violence (or manage it).

Key Decision Points: Who learns about the Xorn? What does 'sharing the mine' look like? What happens to Slag Hollow's economy?

> ANTICIPATING PLAYERS: Clever players will realize they can't solve everything. The best outcomes still have losers. This is intentional. RPG design philosophy values meaningful choices over happy endings.

Secondary Quest: What Lies Below

A dungeon delve into the mine's depths. Oon-Aah-Rokh mentions that beneath the Xorn caverns lies something else: a chamber that predates them, a door that doesn't open. If

negotiations stall, she might offer a bargain. Help us with that, and we can discuss the mithral further.

Optional Quest: The Long Game

Kaelen's Harper mission collides with the main quest. He needs to smuggle evidence of Zhentarim operations out of Slag Hollow, but the Zhentarim are watching every road. He needs a distraction. He needs capable people. He needs help.

RESOLUTION MATRIX

Resolution A: Zhentarim Victory

How: Players side with Arlais. Xorn driven out or exterminated. Miners brought to heel.

Outcomes: Mining resumes. Zhentarim control tightens. Horgar arrested or killed. Kaelen's cover blown.

Long-Term: Slag Hollow becomes a company town. Xorn survivors harbor hatred. One year later: production stops again. Something else lives in the deep tunnels...

Resolution B: Harper Victory

How: Players side with Kaelen. Zhentarim operations exposed. Outside intervention arrives.

Outcomes: Zhentarim withdraw temporarily. Power vacuum creates chaos. Arlais recalled in disgrace.

Long-Term: Without Zhentarim infrastructure, Slag Hollow struggles. Xorn situation unresolved. One year later: ghost town.

Resolution C: Miners' Victory

How: Players help the Guild break free but fail to resolve Xorn situation.

Outcomes: Zhentarim expelled. Independence regained. Problem delayed.

Long-Term: Ore runs out in 4-6 months. Without resolution, Xorn eventually act violently. Same crisis, later, fewer resources.

Resolution D: Xorn Victory

How: Players side with Oon-Aah-Rokh. Humans driven from the mine.

Outcomes: Mining ceases. Economic collapse. Horgar leads exodus.

Long-Term: Xorn thrive, of course. Oon-Aah-Rokh remembers the players who listened. One year later: they've found something. They want to talk about it.

Resolution E: The Compromise

How: Players successfully broker negotiation between all factions. This is the hardest resolution.

Requirements: Trust from Horgar (full disclosure). Trust from Oon-Aah-Rokh (willingness to negotiate). Arlais's pragmatism (acceptance that some profit beats none). A concrete proposal addressing everyone's needs.

Sample Framework: Extraction limited to Shafts 1-6. Xorn receive 20% of extracted mithral as food. Miners receive fair wages. Karys-Su witnesses all agreements. Annual renegotiation.

Long-Term: Slag Hollow becomes unprecedented: a surface-Xorn cooperative. Barely working, but working. Other towns asking questions.

Resolution F: Everything Burns

How: Players fail to prevent violence, deliberately escalate, or leave without resolving anything.

Outcomes: Open warfare. Mine collapsed. Survivors scattered.

Long-Term: Ruins. Ghosts. A place travelers avoid without knowing why.

RUNNING THIS MODULE

The Clock: What Happens Without Intervention

Day	Event
Day 1	Players arrive with surface tensions visible.
Day 2	Arlais delivers ultimatum: resume production or face consequences.
Day 3	Miners hold emergency Guild meeting. Armed guards increase.
Day 4	A miner 'falls' down a shaft. Accident or message?
Day 5	Zhentarim reinforcements arrive from Mulmaster (8 additional thugs).
Day 6	Oon-Aah-Rokh sends a warning: her patience ends soon.
Day 7	Violence erupts. Whoever players haven't aligned with becomes hostile.
Day 8+	Resolution F: Everything Burns (if players haven't acted).

GM NOTE: The Clock exists to create urgency, *not* to punish players. If they're engaged and making progress, try to stretch time. If they're stalling or indecisive, compress it. The Clock is a tool, not a tyrant.

Anticipating Your Players

'We Kill Arlais and Solve Everything': Arlais is protected by 12+ Zhentarim personnel. Even if players succeed, Zhentarim response arrives from Mulmaster within days. Without Arlais's pragmatism, the replacement is likely worse. Let them try. Make it hard. Show consequences.

'We Tell Everyone About the Xorn Immediately': Miners who don't know the truth will want to fight. Arlais will see opportunity for 'pest removal.' Karys-Su will sell the information. Controlled disclosure is possible; broadcast is chaos.

'We Just Leave': A valid choice. Slag Hollow's problems aren't the players' responsibility after all. If they leave early, Resolution F plays out without them. Don't guilt them, and do show what happens.

'We Try to Get Everyone in a Room': The ideal approach, and the hardest. Who agrees to come? On whose territory? What if someone lies? This should be possible but require work.

Improvisation Toolkit: Complication Table (d6)

1. Zhentarim Patrol: 4 thugs on 'security rounds.' Bored and looking for trouble.

2. Miner Confrontation: Two miners argue about talking to players. One wins.

3. Karys-Su's Interest: The priestess appears, curious. She has questions.

4. Strange Sound: From the mine direction, a sound like grinding stone. Everyone stops.

5. Weather Turns: Storm rolls in. Ships can't leave. Tensions compound.

6. The Dead Rise: Not literally. A miner shares a story about Shaft Seven…

ENCOUNTERS AND STAT BLOCKS

Social Encounter: The Negotiation Table

Setup: At least two faction representatives in neutral territory (usually Karys-Su's temple).

Mechanics: Each faction has a Trust Score from 0-10 (start at 3-5 based on prior interactions). Each round of negotiation, players make arguments; GM determines Trust changes. Trust 8+: faction considers significant compromise. Trust 2-: faction walks out or turns hostile.

Skill Applications: Persuasion for direct appeals; Insight to detect lies; Deception to misdirect; Intimidation forces concessions but reduces Trust with all witnesses.

Combat Encounters

Encounter	Enemies	Difficulty	Trigger
Guard Post	4 Thugs (MM p. 350)	Easy	Entering mine without permission
Crackdown	6 Thugs, 1 Veteran	Medium	Arlais orders enforcement
Xorn Defense	3 Xorn (MM p. 304)	Hard	Entering Xorn territory uninvited
Oon-Aah-Rokh's Judgment	6 Xorn incl. Elder	Deadly	Negotiations fail completely

Oon-Aah-Rokh (Modified Xorn)

Use Xorn stat block (MM p. 304) with: HP 85, INT 14, WIS 16, speaks Common (archaic).

Elder's Command: Bonus action to give tactical direction to allied Xorn within 60 ft. Those Xorn have advantage on their next attack.

Stone's Patience: When she hasn't taken damage this round, reaction to impose disadvantage on one attack against an allied Xorn within 30 ft.

DESIGNER'S COMMENTARY

Design Philosophy

The Slag Bargain was designed to demonstrate the RPG core design principles I admire in a tabletop format:

No Clear Villains: Every faction has legitimate motivations. The Zhentarim aren't evil; they're a corporation protecting investments. The miners aren't innocent; they've been stealing from the Xorn for sixty years. The Xorn aren't monsters; they're a displaced community defending their home. This mirrors Obsidian's approach in Fallout: New Vegas, Pikllars of Eternity and The Outer Worlds, for example.

Meaningful Choice Without Perfect Outcomes: The resolution matrix offers no option where everyone wins. Every victory comes with costs; every compromise requires sacrifice. This reflects the philosophy that meaningful choice means accepting trade-offs, not finding the 'right answer.'

Place as Character: Slag Hollow functions as a mechanical pressure cooker. The layout dictates the tactical reality of the Zhentarim blockade, and the town's history is baked into every skill check. Its history shapes the conflict; its layout affects tactics; its culture determines how NPCs behave.

Reactive Systems: The Clock, the Trust system, the faction relationships: these create a world that responds to player action (or inaction). This demonstrates understanding of how narrative systems work in video games.

Other Design Approaches

If you wanna do...

Quest Stages: Map to the three-phase structure. Phase 1 = Act 1 (investigation), Phase 2 = Act 2 (revelation), Phase 3 = Act 3 (resolution).

Dialogue Trees: Each NPC has clear disposition states that affect available dialogue. Trust scores map directly to dialogue branch availability.

World State Tracking: The Clock provides explicit world state variables. 'Day 4' triggers different NPC behavior, available options, and environmental changes.

Multiple Endings: Six distinct resolution states provide clear 'ending slides' content. Each outcome changes the game world in trackable ways.

Design Philosophy & Homage

The Slag Bargain is a love letter to the "Reactive World" school of RPG design. It prioritizes player agency, structural ambiguity, and the idea that the most memorable stories are the ones where there is no "perfect" path.

Philosophical Antagonism

Oon-Aah-Rokh is built on the foundation of the "Rational Antagonist." Commonly seen in the best RPGs, much like the Master (Fallout) or Kreia (KOTOR II), she represents a worldview that is alien but internally consistent. By making her a party to a negotiation rather than a boss at the end of a corridor, the module challenges players to engage with a philosophy that exists outside the human experience.

Systemic vs. Individual Malice

The Zhentarim presence here isn't a mustache-twirling villainy, and drawing from the corporate satire of The Outer Worlds, the conflict is driven by systemic quotas and quarterly deliverables. The "evil" isn't a personal choice; it's an institutional requirement, forcing players to fight a bureaucracy rather than just a person.

Interwoven Faction Ecology

Inspired by the reputation systems in Fallout and The Outer Worlds, and just like many other questlines in D&D, Slag Hollow is an ecosystem. No faction exists in a vacuum. Helping the Harpers isn't just a "good" act, it is a choice that actively degrades the Zhentarim's logistics and shifts the town's economic dependency. This ensures that every quest completed changes the "world state" for the others.

The Burden of the Middle Ground

In the spirit of the Independent (Yes Man) ending of New Vegas, the "best" outcome, the Compromise, is intentionally the most difficult to achieve. It requires the most legwork, the highest skill checks, and the most nuanced understanding of the NPCs. I believe that peace should be a hard-won mechanical achievement, not a default reward for being "nice."

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