

INTERMISSION

THE YURT'S INTERIOR GLOWS WITH a warm, flickering light from the central fire pit, a defiant warmth against the relentless Syrinlya wind that howls outside like a wounded beast. Doctor Pepe is the first to notice a message from Captain Stonebeard left on the yurt's only table: the Remorhaz requires weeks of repair before it might be able to make another crossing of the Frigid Depths. The clock ticks mercilessly for the Liel-Tethwick family, with Salsvault 200 miles away and the Frigid Woe's icy grip threatening to claim their lives. It had already been five days since they had left Palebank Village, and the adventurers knew that they must set out immediately.

Elara, her celestial nature radiating with optimism, sets about lifting their spirits. Her hand drum sets a vibrant rhythm, a defiant heartbeat against the wind's relentless howl. Her eyes gleam with an almost manic energy as she launches into a quick, lively beat.

Gerhard sits hunched, a man broken by loss. The *Frostfang*, his life's work, now exists only in memory. Rorik's placement aboard the Remorhaz feels like salt in an open wound. "What's-his-name is dead to me," he mutters, his voice cracking with unshed grief, whisky sloshing in a trembling hand.

Scarlet moves closer, her presence as grounding as the earth itself. "Even after the fiercest blizzard, the smallest shoot can still find the sun. Even when the great beasts tear through the forest, life finds a way to grow back, sometimes stronger, sometimes in a new and unexpected form," she says to Gerhard. "You've lost much, yes, but you're still here. And your skills, your knowledge of this unforgiving land... they're not lost. They're waiting. Our quest isn't just for some glittering bauble, though treasure does have its uses. We're seeking a cure, a way to mend what's broken in the world, much like you might one day find a way to mend the loss

within you."

Her words are a balm, cutting through Gerhard's fog of despair. He looks up, really sees the faces around him for the first time. Something shifts in his eyes— a spark of possibility rekindling. Finally, he lets out a shaky sigh. "Well, what the hell. There's really nothing I can do, stranded here with no boat and no crew. I might as well go with you lot. May I find a fortune while keeping you out of trouble."

Halite claps him on the back, the impact nearly knocking Gerhard off balance. "Welcome aboard," he rumbles with a genuine smile. Whisper offers a small, encouraging nod. The others add words of encouragement as well, all of them welcoming the skills Gerhard brings to the team.

Elara, sensing the shift in mood, launches into a rambunctious rendition of "A Troll's Grin and a Fairy's Hand," her hand drum accompanying her voice as she celebrates their new collaboration. Her lilting song fills the yurt, promising adventure and companionship, drowning out the wind's mournful song.

KRAGOR SPEAKS UP

Kragor has remained uncharacteristically silent, lost in thought. Subdued. But as Elara's last note fades, he abruptly stands. He draws a deep breath, his chest visibly expanding.

"Alright. Listen up. I got something to say," he begins, his voice raw, almost hesitant. He begins the story of his initiation into the arcane, and as the party leans in, the walls of the yurt seem to melt away, replaced by the cold, dark streets of Bladegarden.

"I've made it no secret that I get my magic from ... somewhere from without our realm. But I never told you how, or why I came here. To the north. My business is my own. Yet now... things are getting weird. Bad weird.

And I fear keeping secrets too close might bring you to your doom. And then I die too, 'cause we're stuck together now."

He stares beyond the yurt's walls, his eyes unfocused, lost in a memory that transcends time and space. He shares the story of the past, and, as he does, his listeners are able to see the world in the same bleak way that he does.

"My journey began after many, many moons of strange sleep as I lived on the streets of Bladegarden. Hearing whispers. Bad dreams full of dark shapes that called my name. Visions of stars falling, and huge dark shapes just beyond reach. And something there, watching. Always watching." He pauses, as if trying to grasp the memories. "Then, on a very dark night, some man-whelps tried to kill me. But I refused to die like a nobody. Just another forgotten orc, fatherless trash. I was scared and nearly dead. So I yelled into darkness... I gave up to... whatever the watcher was."

His eyes blaze with an inner fire as he describes the moment of transformation. "Then I felt it!" he says. "Cold like night but... nice. It wrapped around me like black smoke. It whispered secrets in a strange tongue I do not know. Then, power filled me! A war hammer appeared in my fist from nowhere. I felt no remorse when I smashed in my attacker's stupid face right then and there, then blasted the other scum with dark crackling magic that sent them running like scared rabbits."

Whisper glances at Halite, a silent question in her eyes: "Where is this going?"

Kragor's eyes harden as he adds, "But I know such magic comes at a cost. The dreams kept coming, mostly nonsensical. Gradually, they formed some thought— a command and a promise for greater power. 'Go north. Cross the frozen north. To Eiselcross.' Don't know why exactly. Maybe to find something. Maybe to smash something.

"But comrades... I've new dreams now. Worse

dreams. More than dreams." The orc shifts uneasily from one foot to another, a gesture of worry that his companions are not used to seeing. "Back at that tavern, the Jolly Dwarf, some night I slept bad. Couldn't remember what I dreamed, but when I woke up... my fingers had dirt under the nails. Broken nails. It made no sense! I am clean ... fastidious! And then on the Remorhaz, while crossing the ice sea, I woke up in the night. But I was not in my bed! I was... somewhere else. Couldn't move. Felt like mountains of ice pressing down on me. Hearing ice cracking. For a long time, I couldn't even feel myself breathing. Couldn't scream. This was no dream. It felt like I was locked away, buried under ice. Then, snap! Back in my bunk. And again, dirt under my nails! Dirt that should not be there... could not be there!"

Kragor shudders, a chill running down his spine that has nothing to do with the icy wind. "Whatever got its claws in me... it's doing something with my body when I'm sleeping. And that ain't good for any of us."

As Kragor's story ends, a stillness falls over the yurt as the companions ponder the implications.

Elara is the first to break the silence, her voice soft but resolute. "We should stay close," she says, looking directly at Kragor. "I'll bunk near you, keep watch. Maybe we can understand what's happening."

Whisper's tail twitches nervously. "Tie him up?" she suggests, her feline eyes narrowing.

"No," Halite rumbles, shaking his head. "We may need Kragor's powers if we encounter trouble. Restraints could slow us down."

Doctor Pepe leans forward, stroking his chin. "Interesting predicament. Sounds like a magical possession, or perhaps something more sinister."

Scarlet closes her eyes, communing silently with the natural energies around them.

"There's something... off. A presence. But I can't quite identify it."

As the discussion continues, Elara retrieves her harp. Her fingers dance across the strings, weaving a gentle lullaby that seems to soften the harsh edges of their conversation. The melody speaks of protection, of peaceful rest, of guardianship against unknown threats.

Gerhard, still haunted but feeling more connected to the group, volunteers for first watch. The night passes quietly, save for the discovery that someone in the group snores with the thunderous intensity of a winter storm.

Halite takes the second watch. The camp remains still, with occasional sounds of people moving to relieve themselves against the bitter cold. The wind whispers secrets outside, but nothing disturbs their rest.

Elara's watch is marked by intense focus. Her eyes never leave Kragor, watching for any sign of movement, any hint of the strange nocturnal activity he described. But the orc remains motionless, his breathing steady and deep.

As Scarlet takes the final watch, the first hints of dawn begin to paint the sky. The sounds of the camp slowly come to life—the rustling of sleeping bags, the soft clanking of cooking utensils, the preparatory movements of travelers readying for a day's journey.

Morning arrives, and Kragor's nails are clean. No mud, no dirt—nothing to suggest mysterious events.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The party decides on a measured pace, hoping to cover approximately 24 miles each day without undue risk. Gerhard, drawing on years of wilderness experience, prepares their rations. His hands move with practiced efficiency.

Scarlet sends Sparky, her faithful owl companion, to scout ahead. But the bird, more accustomed to wooded landscapes, seems perplexed by the endless expanse of snow. There are no trees, no rocks—just an infinite

white canvas stretching to the horizon.

As night falls, they make camp beneath a half-moon of Catha, the Moon Weaver. Ruidus, the small moon, hangs full—a celestial harbinger of ill tidings that sends a collective shiver through the group.

During Whisper's watch, a bright light streaks across the sky from east to west. She makes note of it but waits until morning to mention the anomaly.

The second day out from Syrinlya brings challenges. A steep cliff face looms before them, its icy surface treacherous and unforgiving. Halite steps forward, his massive frame a testament to strength and determination as he swings the grappling hook up and over the edge of the cliff. With the grappling hook secured, he scales the cliff with surprising grace, creating a lifeline for his companions. One by one, they traverse the obstacle, each movement calculated and precise.

As evening approaches, clouds gather, muting the landscape into shades of gray and white. The cold is relentless, but they sleep soundly—except for one.

During her watch, Elara notices Kragor's restlessness. He curls into a tight ball, his massive frame seeming to shrink. Unable to wake him, she watches him intently as he oscillates between struggle and paralysis. When morning finally comes, his fingernails are once again caked with mud—impossible in this frozen wasteland of ice and snow.

On the third day, as they trudge forward, the monotonous white landscape is interrupted by two rock formations, standing like silent sentinels approximately ten feet tall. Their sudden appearance is both a relief and a source of renewed tension, breaking the endless white with their dark, weathered surfaces.

Something is watching. Something is waiting.