

Chapter 1

A Mage Enters the Guild

A peculiar liquid was dripping in the vial, and the repetitive stream of sound further stretched the already tedious hours of waiting. A smouldering pipe lay on the table among scattered parchments, and the dripping sound was occasionally interrupted by the faint rustle of a quill furrowing the paper. Outside, the falling leaves were being chased by the autumn wind, and the apprentice stood up to close the window.

As he drew near, he caught sight of a lantern's light unmistakably heading towards his house. Guests were rare at this hour, so he placed his cane a safe distance from the chair. Unlike the swift and jarring lights typical of carriages, this was more akin to a pedestrian carrying the light source. Whoever it was, it couldn't have come from far, although the neighbourhood comprised rather private individuals, which heightened his anticipation for the approaching figure.

The visitor shuffled along, and occasional soft thuds signalled the presence of a stick in his grasp. The apprentice stepped through the door and ventured forward.

"Master!"

From the outlines of the trees emerged a bearded figure with a finely crafted wand in his left hand.

"Why not illuminate with that, sir?" gestured the lad towards the wand.

"I didn't wish to attract attention."

He stepped in and took a deep breath of air. He glanced

around with a scrutinizing look, then, with a satisfied expression, gazed deeply into the other's eyes.

"I see you're a quick learner, my boy. But careful with the toad-moss! Especially the one from the Western County."

"From the..."

The old man grinned mischievously.

"My nose hasn't changed, Marden. That's still the same. Though there are skills in the vast world of magic that I still do not master, I came to this world to sniff out the charming and wrathful herbaria, or so says the head of my order. Only my legs would carry me as swiftly as my sense of smell. Son, please give your master something to drink."

"Right away!" said the youth and vanished into the back rooms of the log cabin.

The mage took a seat and carefully surveyed the room. Papers scattered on the table, glasses strewn about—clearly, hard work was under way. Some yellow liquid was dripping from a flask, and in the corner, the host's black cat was lounging by the fire. Above the fireplace, on centuries-old wooden shelves, lay a sea of books, a few magnifying glasses, and the most essential tool for a budding talent: the grand cauldron. Currently waiting for its task, scrubbed clean, it was resting to the right of the fireplace on a small table. The master gathered his strength and walked over.

He touched it, felt it, and concluded that this was indeed masterful work. It filled him with joy that the apprentice was about to feather his own nest for one could never spend too much on this important tool; it mattered greatly who crafted it. Indeed, only the blacksmiths and wiremakers of the Baglyas land were capable of such refinement. Its brass gleamed, its hooks were sturdy, and when flicked, it produced a pleasant

sound, much like the dwarves' tambourines.

Meanwhile, Marden arrived with a bottle in his hand.

"Master, this is a ten-year-old red wine. I set it aside back when the traders came to Ash Peak, and Osbert, the innkeeper, stocked up on it."

The house stood in a small village, a mere ten minutes on horseback from the empire's coronation city. If anyone from the surrounding area went to the city for some reason, they usually stopped by Osbert's inn to gossip with the locals.

"Why don't you move in?" asked the mage.

Marden looked at him in surprise.

"To Ash Peak? And what about the forest? And the trees? Life in the village is much calmer; just listening to the birds chirping and watching the deer. You can grasp the ether, and everything sparkles with life." He paused and continued, "Look at that stone on the table. I only use it to keep the draught from taking my papers, but what did the stream use it for? See these cracks and abrasions? For eons, it would just wash away until it came ashore, where the ice would cleave it, and the wind would gnaw at it. In the city, where all is refined, the noise of carts drowns out the wind. It is only here that I find solace to work and learn, dear master."

The old man lit his pipe and blissfully listened to his disciple's words. As he observed the earnest flush of the apprentice's face and watched his gestures of determination, the picture of his own youthful self blurred his eyes. In about five minutes, the lad succinctly summed up why he loved the countryside, which, though still close to the city, seamlessly melded with his entire life.

"You speak eloquently, Marden; you will become a great wizard. After sunrise, I will seek out the Grand Mistress

and present your application.”

Marden’s mouth fell open, and his eyes grew misty.

“Master... I don't even know how...”

“Hush while I speak to you! Henceforth, my name to you is Arlo Elderidge of Bluegrove, your initiator. Prepare for tomorrow, for we rise early. Unless you have other plans after your initiation, retire for the evening, and sleep tight!”

* * *

Since the onset of King Winslow’s reign, two archmages had been dismissed, the oracle had closed, and the hordes on the eastern isle had destroyed two travelling monoliths, rendering direct communication between the alliances impossible. For a while, trade could only be conducted by sea, as the brigands had seized control of the bridges. However, pirate ships began appearing regularly on the Northern Sea, much to the chagrin of the merchants. This island, surrounded to the north by snowy peaks adorned with deciduous trees, and to the south by a coastline turning into a desolate shore, expanded in the midst of the Big Cloudy Ocean, adorned with numerous smaller islets and rocks. King Winslow, hailing from the A’Nagtoth lineage, sought to keep his nobility united and maintain relative prosperity among the people, all while overseeing the peculiar creations of the islands, encompassing both the intelligent and the foolish, the magical and the mundane.

Thus far, he managed to stay aloof from the skirmishes of the surrounding smaller realms, although the aforementioned seafaring bandits would occasionally swoop down on shipments. If their mood allowed it, they let the crew continue

on their way; if not, no one returned home to the harbour. The eastern isle, with its swampy lands often shrouded in twilight, harboured hydras and similar slithering creatures, as well as the four tribes of goblins residing in the mysterious, labyrinthine hills and mountains. The ruling house maintained a cool but diplomatic relationship with them; a prudent choice, as they possessed usable magical power and were an exceedingly covetous people. They harboured no grand ambitions for power, but the shrewdest among them were cunning and ruthless in trading.

To the south stretched the Surami Desert, separated from the mining island by a narrow sea channel. A few bridges connected the closer regions, allowing passage. Greed was prevalent there too, as toll collectors imposed hefty fees, although not many sought entry into the desolate and barren island. According to an ancient legend, the Ghost with the Twisted Neck roamed there—a distant nephew of A'Nagtoth, who was defeated in a rebellion he had incited fifteen hundred years ago, and was subsequently sentenced to exile. However, ignoring this, he attempted to break into the treasury of the palace but was caught and executed. They twisted the corpse's head, so that it could only stumble and walk backwards, should it resurrect. Legend has it that a necromancer struggled for days to resurrect him in the Stone Desert, but failed. Instead, he summoned his spirit into the present world, where it has been haunting ever since. Some claim the ghost killed the necromancer, but this is only a myth to frighten children with.

The reality was that the Saruda Desert Rocks housed the empire's most crucial mines, where dwarves laboured and traded with the king. This was almost the sole reason for traffic on the bridges. It was not at all surprising that the dwarves

were not devoid of greed, and, while we're at it, neither was King Winslow himself.

Now, on a grey autumn day in the Onion Moon, two wizards approached the southwestern border of Ash Peak. One on an old horse and his apprentice on a donkey. Judging by the apprentice's appearance, one could easily guess the profession he aspired to—simple homespun attire, the kind worn by the average folks in the vicinity, with a satchel at his side.

"Arlo, my old mentor, how did you actually come to me yesterday?"

The old man snapped out of his deep thoughts.

"Well... Hmm, miners brought me to the capital from the south. The deal was that I would protect them from the night spectres in exchange for bringing me here."

"But you arrived on foot at my house."

"They took a detour for my sake. I paid their leader ten copper pennies to bring me a horse from Osbert. At first, they doubted whether it would work, but I assured them that if they mentioned to Osbert... hmm... anyway, I had my ways. But now, please, quiet down a bit, young friend, as we're arriving at the gate."

* * *

How the people passed their time in the grand city depended on various factors. The upper echelon, with little to occupy them in life aside from periodically taking stock of their wealth, resided in large manor houses in the northeastern part of Ash Peak, near Little Hollow and Eastern Hollow. The streets were lively with revelry around there. The lower, yet largest, part of the city was mainly inhabited by merchants and

craftsmen, with the bureaus of officials also situated there. To the west, the temple quarter bordered the city, but otherwise, schools, blacksmiths' shops, and horse stables operated in the area. To the south, the impoverished gathered near the gates, where they had the best success in begging from passers-by.

The city was bisected by the Trey River. Ash Peak's welcoming verse went like this:

*Hills and shrubs,
stone and hay,
embraced by walls,
nourished by the Trey.*

This little greeting adorned every major gate, of which there were a total of four.

To the north, the Big Volcano rose above the horizon, separated from the city by the Death Swamp. When it was in an active mood and lava streams reached the waters, massive steam clouds ascended, shrouding the entire horizon in mysterious fog. From the southeast, another marshy area, the Fekü Swamp, extended, through which the treacherous Karst Road curved towards the Inner Port. This was the road the mage took with the miners from the south.

* * *

Through the western gate of Ash Peak and beyond the Western Square lies the charred district, partially under reconstruction. Two streets away from the disheartening sight of the soot-covered stone walls, there was the market square; they say, what couldn't be bought there, it couldn't be bought

in the entire empire. The bustle was immense with wagons and hoofed animals parading with discordant clamour. The scent of roasted meat and beer wafted through the air, and hawkers loudly proclaimed their wares for streets on end. The two travellers watered the horse and the donkey at the large well beside the palace, then, after a brief rest and a breakfast at a nearby inn, they arrived at the Tower of the Magi.

“Marden, there are certain rules within the order. You must not speak until you become a member. Only if questioned. If the Grand Mistress deems you worthy, then you can freely access our public spaces and engage in conversation with anyone... Are you paying attention, my boy?”

“Of course, Master.”

“Grand Mistress Maida, the most formidable sorceress of the county guild hall, will personally receive us. Now, let us go.”

He rapped his cane on the massive wooden door three times, and it swung open resoundingly, creaking. The fragrance of frankincense and jasmine spilled out. A stone path followed, leading through a lush herb garden after a long flight of stairs. Defying his age, the old one stepped forward, waving his cane and nodding in greeting to a few hatted figures sipping tea on the other side of the garden. Another door had to be crossed, and they found themselves in a crimson room. The sight left the boy breathless.

Arlo whispered in his ear,

“Maida is an illusionist, don’t be surprised if...”

He spoke just in time, as a large blue bird flew into the room, then landed in front of an armchair. Turning its head, clicking its beak left and right, it then underwent a stunning transformation. The bird’s legs began to grow, its feathers

transformed into a robe, its crest changed into long curly hair, and after a blink, a delicate woman stood before them. She lifted her head, slowly exhaled, and opened her eyes just as slowly. They bowed towards each other with Arlo, and with unveiled curiosity, she began scrutinizing Marden.

“Lady...”

“Hush...” Arlo gently rebuked, looking at him.

However, Maida seemingly took no offense at the timid address. Instead, she spoke up in an angelic tone:

“Marden, Thanebal’s son, your master and mentor has applied for your membership in the Guild of Magi as an apprentice, within the school of potion and matter enchanters, within the domestic class. Come closer, let me have a better look at you.”

The boy approached the armchair, and the woman stood up. She placed her hands on his head, and they stood like that for quite some time. The autumn sunshine streamed through the high-set windows of the room, occasionally causing the willow branches to tap against the window in the breeze. Velvet curtains adorned the room with splendid colours around the large chair. Distant sounds of lutes and lyres reached them, accompanied by the chirping of forest birds. Shaken to his senses, the boy realized this must have been all in his head, especially that he found himself standing in the middle of the room, while the two wizards were sipping wine by a table. He gazed at them, bewildered and confused. Then, with a smile, Maida addressed him:

“Welcome to the Guild of Magi, young alchemist!”

* * *

Beneath the city, a labyrinthine system of sewers sprawled. They were built by the rulers of the fourth century when marauding hordes swept through the islands of A'Nagtoth during overseas invasions. These were not mere sewers; they evolved into extensive halls in places, surrounded by chasms, and hiding secret chambers in the depths. Some collapsed, others were intentionally demolished or sealed over the centuries. In the present age, there was no one in the vicinity with precise knowledge of these winding corridors; maps were lost or destroyed over time. Occasionally, enterprising explorers would venture in to survey the underground system, but not a few returned deranged, others needed rescuing, and it was not uncommon for them to disappear altogether.

Evil spirits are said to lurk below, and there is a tale of the Old Rat King who surfaces during the new moon to poison a few wells. Then, he departs through one of the city gates and finds his way back into the sewers through ancient forgotten caves within the marshes. Many tunnels were solely constructed to exit the city. The longest such passage stretches for miles in a westerly direction.

But, of course, most of the canals are not perilous; they are often cleaned, chosen as meeting places for guilds, or even inhabited. For instance, there is Xarfax, the black mage, who allegedly is over two hundred years of age and consumes neither food nor drink. He is seldom seen on the city streets because he frequents one of the tunnels leading towards the Big Volcano, and generally has little need for things available in the city. Since the Guild of the Magi turned away from black magic, necromancers and black magicians have been tolerated individuals in the empire, provided they do not harm intelligent beings. Anyone who does so faces the gallows. Considering

that Xarfax's residence is located near the cemetery, rumours suggest that he acquires some of the necessary components for his repulsive practices from underground. Nothing serves as greater evidence for his power than even representatives of the Guild of the Magi are intimidated when paying him a visit. These visits are brief, few words are exchanged, and the delegates usually cannot endure more than half an hour underground. Somehow, Xarfax can penetrate their minds. Only high-level illusionists can maintain their unwavering will against him, apart from the members of the Andabatas and the Order of the Touched. Although these two castes lack active magical power, they are endowed with strong passive, ethereal defence, and are regarded as the most successful fighters of the islands. They would rarely visit Ash Peak. The former's stronghold was built a few centuries ago near the Northern Elephant Rocks, while the Touched operated secretly for timeless ages; no one really knew where they came from or where they went. They were friendly and helpful, but they never spoke to anyone about their origins.

With these precedents, Marden may have received the news of his first mission into the sewer system with misgivings. Assigned as companions were a dwarf miner and a gatekeeper, who also didn't expect this to be the adventure of their lives. They met near the burned-down quarter at dawn.

"Whose idea was this?" asked the gatekeeper with a piercing stare.

The dwarf must have felt the same way, although he appeared slightly calmer; he simply spat over his shoulder while using his axe as a support.

"My order's," came the short response. The emphasis carried a hint of pride and a reproachful tone.

“Aren’t you a bit young for magic?” asked the dwarf.

Marden didn’t deign to respond; instead, he pointed at the trapdoor, on which a large ring indicated where to grip. He and the gatekeeper tried to lift it, but it didn’t budge. The gatekeeper gave a reproachful look to his shorter comrade, who scratched his beard and then shooed them away from the trapdoor. He grabbed the ring and pulled it hard. The stone started to crack around the trapdoor, and with another heave, it squeaked away from the ground. The dwarf didn’t loiter long, immediately jumping into the hole and climbing down the ladder. Marden would have been ashamed going last, so he started moving but the gatekeeper blocked his way.

“Sure, sure... Then I’ll get to hear how I went down third. I suggest you watch yourself, young one, or this imp and I will get punished!” said the gatekeeper, then followed the dwarf, holding the torch.

He followed them with mixed emotions. They entered a broader section of the underground system. Even the trapdoor indicated that no one had been there for a long time. Water was dripping from the ceiling in places, and cobwebs glimmered here and there in the light of the torches. The sound of their footsteps echoed far away as they navigated around puddles in this surreal environment. A strange smell lingered—not the typical sewer stench, but rather something like mould working its way through the depths. Decay was palpable; some animals must have breathed their last there recently. Judging by the direction and the time passed, they were now likely passing under the castle walls, where the passage continued with a gentle slope in the pitch darkness. Arrows and drawings occasionally marked certain directions on the walls, but most of the inscriptions had become illegible over time, and some

were probably meant to be obscure. The path soon split into two. Marden gestured towards the left passage.

"I hope you know what you're doing," grumbled the gatekeeper.

"If you stopped pestering me once in a while, I could concentrate," the boy shushed him. "First, we must find an old door. A solid one, with a rusty chain hanging on it. In the room behind the door, there will be a bookshelf. What we're looking for will be on that shelf."

"How do you know all this?"

"That's irrelevant now... Here's the door. And, as one might suspect, others have been trying to open it."

Bricks were scattered everywhere, and it seemed like a recent demolition. Clearly discernible outlines indicated the path, along which the centuries-old stones covering the door had been dislodged. This time, even the dwarf's strength proved insufficient. The three of them tried, but in vain. Oddly, whoever dismantled the wall did not touch the door. The axe came next, but even for a miner, breaking through this door would have been a half-day's work. Indeed, there was no other solution here. Marden ushered his companions backwards.

"Go even further, as a part of the ceiling may collapse. Cover your ears; it'll be loud."

He took out two small vials from his satchel and poured their contents together. He scraped some mould from the walls and tore off a substantial piece of cobweb. Having stuffed all of these into a flask, he then poured the mixed liquids over them.

*"Oil, oh, corrosive mire,
force-sealing juice, bottled fire!
Spider's poison, fungus sap,*

burn your flames to crush this trap!"

He himself ran ten paces back, then threw the flask at the door. He had just enough time to cover his ears before a loud explosion followed, and the room was shrouded in choking smoke. When the air cleared, the following scene unfolded before their eyes: the door had twisted out of its place, held only by one hinge, with bits of plaster scattered everywhere. It caved in the middle, the door frame was torn apart, creating a gap large enough for them to enter.

To their surprise, they entered a neatly arranged library room. Hundreds of books lined dark oak shelves, and showcases displayed maps and maritime navigation instruments. In the middle of the room, there was a large table with chairs, as if it served as a meeting place for some society. A thick carpet lay on the lacquered ship deck, seemingly crafted in a distant land by skilled hands. Despite the way it could be reached through tunnels, the room exuded a surprising warmth. Only one thing was missing that could have made it even more homely: a light source. There were no oil lamps, candles, or torches anywhere, somewhat indicating that the builders had not planned any activities there. Beneath the shelves, in drawers and cabinets, rested a series of books and codices. Dictionaries filled a smaller wheeled table. They also found a considerable amount of high-quality paper, ink, and writing tools, which seemed quite contradictory considering that without a source of light, these items had no purpose.

All in all, after a spontaneous survey of the room, Marden concluded that whoever designed it intended it more as a storage space than a creative one. He lingered for a while, then peeked into the compartment his mentor had specified,

only to be disappointed. The specific parchment they had come for was not there.

“We underestimated you, wizard. Solving the door problem was quite a feat, but what do we do now?” asked the gatekeeper.

“Let me think for a moment... Let’s see. We’re looking for a note left here many years ago. With its help, we can embark on a longer journey later. Look for a rolled-up parchment. We need a map.”

* * *

“I trust it wasn’t a hasty decision to entrust him with it,” remarked Maida.

“The boy is both clever and skilful,” reassured Arlo.

“But he’s only sixteen.”

The Tower of the Magi cast its shadow on the two wizards enjoying tea on an unusually warm autumn afternoon. Apprentices were sitting around a table in the large courtyard, diligently writing. The caretaker was raking the lawn with his assistants, and in this idyllic moment, the overcast clouds attempting to overshadow the empire’s future seemed unbelievably incongruous. According to King Winslow’s intelligence, something was stirring in the mines to the south and in the goblin territory on the eastern island. Miners reported strange lights and sounds at night, and if the miners themselves feared something, then the common folk began to fear it, as well. Production declined, many gave up their work, and the treasury dwindled. A wind of change blew over Ash Peak in these times, and what it would bring was a mystery. People became distrustful, secretive, and hoarded things. It

seemed like merriment was fading from the city, except for the wealthy quarter near Eastern Hollow and Little Hollow; everyone was rushing in the market square, trying to speak as little as possible to each other.

“At sixteen, I had already fought pirates in the far north,” said Arlo, gazing into the distance.

“That was a different world, my old friend. If they can experience their youth nowadays, why can’t he?”

“You don’t understand, Maida. Marden is not interested in the affairs of his peers. This boy is much more advanced in spirit than them. At the age of ten, he concocted a potion that could open things sealed by goblins. If he hadn’t been such a rascal and troublemaker, I might not have discovered his talent. And the mysterious disappearance of his parents may have influenced him. He had to grow up prematurely, but he has been self-sufficient for years. In the months I lived in his house, I quickly realized that I was almost unnecessary because his love for order and adherence to rules developed very quickly. Of course, I had to manage his temperament and fervour, meaning I had to work hard to calm him down, but believe me, if anyone can do it, it’s him.

“I hope you’re right. We still have time. The emissaries’ assembly will be in a week.”

“He will do it. I’ll come at cockcrow tomorrow. Meet me at The Ragged Inn. And until evening, I’ll be at the archives. There might be something important there; I can feel it.”

Chapter 2

Scrolls, Parchments

A month before our story unfolded, on a gloomy afternoon, Arlo shook off the rainwater from his hat and entered the archives. The chamber of ancient histories was stacked from floor to ceiling with meticulously catalogued books. There was little usable writing about the construction of the sewer system, as mentioned earlier. However, Arlo was not interested in the details of the construction or the blueprints. Instead, he sought a rumoured chamber, carved out of stone about three hundred years ago by a brigade of dwarves, the location of which was unknown. The stone was hard, the rock rooted deep, and the miners struggled with it. Volunteers were offered a fortune on the condition that they never returned to the western island and did not interact with anyone during the construction. Thirty miners worked for two months, taking on carpentry and furniture making since they wanted to involve as few people as possible. Dwarves had no problem being without sunlight for two months. Once the chamber was finished, and the wooden structures and furniture were treated for durability, they furnished it with carpets and armchairs. With that, their mandate expired. Many moved to the goblins on the eastern island, some started families on the mining island, and quite a few left the empire altogether.

Despite all the great caution, rumours had spread that beneath the city, there was a secret chamber with its door bricked up, hiding a prophecy about someone who would bring

eternal prosperity to the island's people, confront the spectres of mountains and forests, and raise the flag of Doria high.

Arlo had been searching for this chamber for years. He found no trace of it in the Tower of the Magi and the palace library. However, about a month ago, as one of many possibilities, he visited the city archives, which was also a simplified library. There, he came across something in a history book that greatly piqued his interest. It was a codex bound in faded brown leather, made of parchment between wooden panels. While flipping through it, a papyrus slipped out. A tattered old page, barely readable, awaited the right person to find it. The following was written on it:

Erected in the year 2238 of Doria's existence, during the reign of Leopold, for the edification of posterity and the glory of its discoverer, leaning upon the wisdom and inquiries of the bowmen from the westerly quarter and the venerable druids. May the wisdom contained on this page, succinctly transcribed herein, divulge the whereabouts of the exile and the lineage it carries. It is imperative that this revelation be unveiled and transformed into a proclamation of public renown for the world's glory.

Descend where blades clash and where the sunset appears from the very core of the circle. With due care, shroud your head, then set forth towards the invisible Sun. Having journeyed a sufficient distance, veer left and tread exactly thirty-five paces as the Argyle deer steps. The portal shall manifest itself on the right, though it shall remain unseen.

Carefully transcribing the writing, he then dispatched a letter by pigeon to the archers who dwelled by the Southern

Elephant Rocks, to the north of the Pig Lake in the vicinity of the Eight Hundred-Year Oak Forest. An exciting two days followed, and then a caravan arriving from the west brought a letter to The Ragged Inn, notifying Arlo of the imminent arrival of the archers.

Utilizing these two days, the wizard descended into the canal system and, guided by the description but taking a circuitous route, set out in search of the designated place. He wandered extensively; an entire day passed before he discovered it, and with a muffled incantation, he maneuvered the stones away from the door. It took him several hours, upon which he returned to the inn half-dead from exhaustion. His fear of what awaited him below was overshadowed by his determination to act in utmost secrecy, so the only solution was to embark on this journey alone. Upon waking from the long rest the next day, he already knew what he must do.

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Marden and his two assistants had been searching for hours, yet they found no trace of what brought them there. The two companions were growing impatient; so much so that the otherwise almost entirely silent dwarf grumbled:

“Forgive us, young wizard, but we haven’t had a bite to eat since morning. Through the noble science of alchemy, could you conjure up a bit of lamb roast and some malt beer?”

“Anyone displeased with the situation is free to leave. I appreciate your coming with me, but if you’re not willing to help, you know the way back.”

The gatekeeper suppressed a grimace and promptly headed towards the door. Then he stopped and pointed to the

ceiling.

“Look at this!”

Barely visible, thin cracks ran in a circle around an area as large as a child stretching out its arms.

“Someone wanted to conceal something here. I hope...”
— said Marden tapping the ceiling with his cane.

He stood on a chair and scratched off the white paint with his fingers. It was intact, except for those hairline cracks. The guard, with his blade, reached into one such crack and applied pressure. Nothing. He didn’t want to blow it up, so he asked the dwarf to hand him the axe.

“It’s not that simple, young lord! It has to be propped up, or the whole thing will collapse on your head. Let me take a look, too!” He pulled another chair over. “Uh-huh... We’ll need beams and planks, carpenter’s clamp, ladder, and some bricks.”

Marden scratched his head. Arlo had impressed upon him that everything they did down there had to remain a profound secret. Now what?

“Apart from that, can you handle it alone?”

The dwarf looked at him with mild offense.

“Sure, I can! But you’ll need to help hold it up while I cobble the pieces together.”

Where could he find such things now? Hold on! Those who built this must have needed these tools, too.

“Let’s look around the cabinets and under the floor!”

Indeed, unrolling the carpet revealed a trapdoor, and upon opening it, they found a complete scaffold in a disassembled state.

“Well, this will require some strength. Can you get some provisions?” said Marden, looking at the gatekeeper.

He nodded and left.

In the meantime, Marden had some time to chat with his other assistant. They sat in two armchairs, and the dwarf lit his pipe.

“I am Beldon, Rigby’s son, from the southern island. My ancestors hailed from the Surami Desert and migrated to the island. They lived through hardship, constructing the mines, so that their grandchildren would have a better life. Their name endured, and we still sing songs of their heroic sacrifice. Their sons and grandsons gradually began to establish themselves both down below in the deep and on the homesteads. When the first bridges were built, they started trading with those on the western island. But then the pirates came, who had been plundering even the southern seas for centuries, and they burned down the bridges. So, there was only maritime trade left for us, causing the dwarf miners to endure deprivation once again. It lasted until the lords of Ash Peak forged an alliance with us, realizing that with the drying up of raw material shipments, their own dominion could become precarious. Though not entirely selfless, they aided us. They provided money and ships, and the first southern sea war ensued, where we achieved a glorious victory. We permanently chased the pirates away from there. This, too, we sing to our children as a lesson.”

He took a deep puff from his pipe. It was so quiet down there that one could hear the crackling of the tobacco. And since it was dark, the room even lit up a little. The young alchemist sensed that the tobacco hailed from Grimdor’s island.

“Why did the guild send the two of you alongside me?” asked the lad.

“Arlo arrived with our caravan from the south. We

know each other. From before.”

Ah, of course. The fog began to lift for Marden.

“What is the southern region like?”

The dwarf pondered for a moment. His face brightened, and he smiled.

“It depends on who you ask. People usually dislike it because at first glance, everything seems deserted and too quiet. The savannas are quite dry, scorching with heat. It’s not much farther south, though; it’s just that those mysterious ocean currents steer a cursed wind in that direction. They say it’s the work of the gods, but I don’t think so. I say it’s the Khraoul. He roams the wild waters out there, and with his fiery breath, he scorches the shores. We dwarves like those lifeless rocks because we don’t care what’s above the surface. In the mines, our ancestors piled up everything we need. We trade the ore with you, the goblins, and anyone else willing to pay a good price. As long as there’s trade, we enjoy prosperity... Do you know what my home is like? It’s massive and beautiful, located within the mountain. It has an exit to the cliff face and to the heart of the mountain. When we’re done with the merchantry here, which takes a few weeks, we head home and rest with our families for a whole month. Then we go down into the mines and work hard for a month or two. This cycle keeps us alive. The journey from there to here is ten days, and back is the same. We can complete three such rounds in a year. Thanks to our ancestors and the spirits watching over us in the heart of the mountains, we are not deprived of anything, and the future of our sons and grandsons is secured.”

On this closing note, the guard returned. The sullen mood from a few hours ago vanished as the roasts and loaves dwindled. A stout, sturdy dwarf, a trained and keen-eyed

gatekeeper, and a young lad were feasting in an underground library by the light of a torch. It was a peculiar sight on a peculiar day.

After a short while, Beldon stood atop the scaffold, casting an inquisitive glance at Marden. The lad nodded, prompting the dwarf to manage the ceiling cautiously at first, and then with more force. A while later, the beautiful rug was littered with bits of plaster, and the axe touched wood. Carefully, he pressed its edge until the wood yielded with creaks and cracks, creating a hole large enough to reach through. He felt around, then a sudden fright crossed his face, and he began to pant, clawing at his wrist.

“What happened?” the guard asked alarmed, then dismissed it with a wave upon seeing the dwarf’s laughing face.

Soon, all the planks were freed, revealing a sight beneath: a sizable, empty cavity loomed above their heads. The guard stretched his neck, Marden shook his head.

“Could they have outsmarted us? But the door to the corridor didn’t seem like a forgery...”

They scratched their heads, and Beldon spoke up:

“No, but the craftsmanship of the ceiling was. They can’t fool me...”

He tapped every square centimetre of the small cavity meticulously.

“Here it is.”

The attempt was crowned with success as a new cavity opened from which emerged a large bottle containing a rolled-up parchment. Beldon jumped down and, with dramatic simplicity, handed it over to the lad. He summarized what had happened up to that point.

“Fine work! Behold, the young wizard breaks a door in the wall, the gatekeeper’s keen eyes spot the telltale signs of the hidden nook, and the dwarf’s expertise opens it. My friends, this is why my wise master did not send me alone. Without you, I would have achieved nothing.”

“Thank you for the praise, my son, but I believe it’s time to leave,” the guard spoke up. “The chill of this chamber is getting to me.”

“Why, it’s a wondrous place,” Beldon joked. “Just us and the spirits of the depths.”

“I’ll leave those to you. Now, let’s be off!”

So, they continued down the passage they had taken thus far, leading them straight towards the wilderness. Following Arlo’s guidance, if they continued for three times the distance, they would surface in a thicket, two kilometres from the western gate.

* * *

The glass lay on the table, corked and sealed with wax. Barely touched by dust, as it had long been shut away from anything that could soil it. It was a truly cheap but sturdy piece, the kind one could find in any market. A tiny crack was visible at the bottom, and there was a dark spot, perhaps a liquid that had dripped onto it. Inside rested the scroll that the three-member expedition had found in the recesses of the ceiling. Arlo picked it up and gently shook it. He clinked it lightly against the table. The paper moved freely inside, and he hoped it would come out without having to break it. The cork didn’t seem to be anything special, either; perhaps closing a larger wine bottle in its time. Untouched wax sealed it. Considering

that the paper hadn't decayed or moulded, either its quality was very good, or it hadn't been hidden for long. He delicately peeled off the wax from the glass and tried to pull out the cork. It didn't work the first time, so he took out a corkscrew he had previously put in his pocket. The tool squeaked as it turned. A soft pop, and the paper's prison opened. With a finger, he reached in and managed to pull it out neatly.

Maida looked at him questioningly.

Thou who hath found this writing hereby learnest that the prophecy is no longer here. I have hidden it in the north. It must never be revealed, for it is not the one that would raise the banner of Aranea high, but it would bring about the downfall of the empire. Seek it not!

B.G.

It was the second message written on paper within a month, which pressured Arlo's chest with sharply contrasting suspicions. They looked at each other in surprise, and then the old man turned the page as if he'd felt something was missing. There was nothing on the other side.

"B.G.? Who could it be?" asked the Grand Mistress. "Nothing comes to mind about this monogram."

"But I recall something..." Arlo rubbed his forehead. "B.G., as in Brutus Galenus. He lived in the Eastern County a hundred and fifty years ago and obsessively searched for the prophecy. He came to the capital from the north, from Cleinfend. He was associated with the chamber, but according to his own account, he never found it. In fact, before his death, he repeatedly asserted that his search had been unsuccessful. Then he returned to Aranea and moved into the ruined tower

west of the Telamy Marsh. He started renovating it, but he died before completing the restoration. They say he was cursed or poisoned. In any case, there is a lead.”

“What kind of lead?”

“The paper says he hid it in the north, and although someone else could have the same monogram, the thief isn’t talking about the rise of the empire but only about Aranea. Could it be a slip of the tongue? Who knows.”

“The writing seems hasty; they just scraped it onto this paper,” said Maida. “Most likely, they didn’t carefully craft the text; it was improvised.”

The old man sniffed the paper.

“It’s a good thing I immediately put the stopper back on the bottle. This requires an alchemist’s nose,” he said glancing out of the window, where Marden was taking notes in the lower courtyard of the tower, near the herb gardens. A butterfly landed on a holly bush, and he was admiring its wings when a cool breeze caught his shoulder-length hair.

He straightened up and faced the direction of the wind. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. Opening his senses, he utilized his ancient instincts to visualize. In his mind’s eye, a frail, ragged figure appeared—a man stumbling out of a pine forest. The face wasn’t visible under the hood, and upon closer inspection, there seemed to be no face at all. Wheezing, the figure moved forward, and as he progressed, a river came into view in the east. The scent of sulphur lingered, and this undead apparition continued its journey downward on the embankment, straight towards the water.

“Brother...” one of his fellow apprentices addressed him.

Marden blinked in a daze.

“Are you well?”

“Of course, of course, just... What can I do for you?”

“The mistress summons you.”

* * *

The Grand Mistress had her living quarters in a tower in the southern part of the magicians’ guild, which, in terms of arrangement, also served as her office. The boy was waiting in front of an ironbound door, contemplating how long it had been since he ate when the lock clicked loudly.

The door opened by itself. He peeked in cautiously and entered just as cautiously. He was thinking about courtesy, how one should close the door after entering, but it started to close by itself with a faint creak. A calling word echoed in his mind, guiding him through the chambers, and soon, he spotted a small gathering around a large table.

“Marden, my boy, we haven’t had the chance to properly thank you for your swift and precise execution of the task amidst the rush,” Arlo began. “With your helpers, you managed to locate a room and, with your knowledge of explosives, break into it. The mission was to bring something from the room we suspected was correctly identified earlier. This part was completed, although at the time, you couldn’t have known that what you brought back wasn’t precisely what I sent you for. This parchment here...” he pointed to the table. “It attests that a certain person stole the prophecy and left a message for whoever might seek it again.”

He paused to let the words sink in.

“This was your exam, where you demonstrated your courage, your knowledge of the noble craft of alchemy, and

your diplomatic sense. I assigned two seemingly less friendly but knowledgeable and resourceful companions to accompany you. You managed to work together with them, and the result is here on the table. This is the bottle that contained the message; I opened it just now. There are a dozen scholars in the room, but your presence is precious to me, and I've always encouraged you to show the world what you're capable of. Therefore, I ask you first to uncover the secret of this bottle."

A soft murmur of restlessness and confusion spread through the room, prompting the old mage to turn around and cast a pleading look at the assembly. Then, he sat down beside the head of the order and whispered something into her ear.

"Now pay attention, Maida!"

Marden approached the table somewhat shyly and took the large bottle into his hands. His face showed a look of confusion as he glanced at his master as if seeking guidance. The old mage nodded almost imperceptibly and smiled encouragingly.

Well then... He gazed deeply and scrutinizingly into the bottle. For half a minute, he simply rotated it, then removed the stopper. Some started to stretch their necks to get a better view. Carefully, he brought it up to his nose and took a sniff. Then he extended his tongue and, with noble simplicity, licked it.

"This bottle was last touched by a one-hundred-and-seventeen-year-old man before us. The wax is from the north, where the pines turn white from green. The ink is ordinary, but they didn't pay for it. The bottle had Tharok Frostbringer's gin before it was poured out. I see... I still see... Bad, very bad..."

Here the boy's face contorted.

"With this bottle, they killed. A crack at the bottom, oh, no... It struck six times... My God..."

After a short silence he continued.

“The man who placed it in the recess was called Brutus Galenus; he wrote the paper that he put inside. Why and exactly what, I cannot see. He was extremely burdened and worn out. He left heading north to the collapsed tower, on the third floor of which... I’m uncertain. Spiders and owls. It’s very cold on that floor now. I can’t... I can’t see anything else.”

The boy opened his eyes, and his breath emerged as a frosty mist, as if he stood in a frigid place.

Maida exclaimed,

“How wonderful!” Arlo, my dear friend, why didn’t you tell me that your apprentice is a seer?”

“Because I didn’t know myself. I only suspected and hoped.”

A loud murmur arose in the room. Everyone became genuinely curious, and all eyes were fixed on the young apprentice.

“I am tired now. Please... Let me sit for a moment...”

Three of the dignitaries sprang up and helped the young man to a comfortable chair.

“Being a seer is a very deep and rare ability, and I have never seen anyone with this knowledge,” Maida began. “I last found something about this in records from many decades ago, but not even in my dreams did I dare hope that I would ever meet someone with this gift. The School of Alchemy is a perfect match, my son; we expect great deeds from you. Rest now; we leave you in peace. You are free to stay as long as you wish. My home is your home.”

Chapter 3

Night Gathering

Hagley, the young corporal of the empire's army, had just finished his duty that day when a footman reached him, informing him that he couldn't leave just yet. He angrily slammed his belt to the ground, mounted his horse, and trotted towards the warriors' guild.

Upon his arrival, they shouted to him that the captain was looking for him. He rushed up the stairs and found his captain in the officer's lounge, peacefully enjoying bacon with a dagger big enough to butcher a cow.

"What's so urgent, sir?" he asked with a slightly offended tone.

"This is going to be something serious, Hagley. You're a good lad, so I'd tell you, but I don't know much myself. What I do know is that the mages are looking for someone who knows the Telamy Marsh. You were born there... you know it, don't you?"

The corporal shook his head as if wishing he hadn't known.

"Like the back of my hand, damn it."

"Well then! What's the problem?"

"I have no desire to go to that place. The cold season is coming."

At the end of autumn, Aranea's landscapes are covered by a months-long period of foggy weather. Even experienced wanderers cautiously approach that region during this time. There are three roads leading to the county seat, Cleinfend, of

which only the eastern one is safe at this time. The marsh is nestled under the great pine forest among the mountains. Hagley lived in the north, where snow blankets the winter landscape, and where the air is much cleaner, albeit very cold. Living near the capital is much safer, and the weather is more predictable.

“Captain, the marsh is a destination for the mad and death-wishers at this time. The air is suffocating and foul, the streams are contaminated. Even watering the horses is a dangerous task, let alone our own sustenance.”

“It is not me you need to convince of that; I’m just a messenger. Grand Mistress Maida and Arlo are waiting in the Tower of the Magi. Do me a favour and talk to them.”

He set off on foot towards the other side of the city. He stopped at the market square to grab some dinner, which he washed down with a glass of wine. Meanwhile, he listened to the locals’ gossip. After the strict hours of service, he took joy in spending time in the crowd, just observing the masses. White smoke curled up from the direction of the Big Volcano in the distance, and as the evening fell, the light of the setting sun gave it an eerie glow. He closed his eyes, trying not to think about the reasons for being ordered to the marsh. Pigeons watched the bustling activity from the great equestrian statue. Occasionally, they landed and picked up some food scraps from the ground. A few drunken locals paraded southward, singing merrily. Two patient gatekeepers shepherded them. Truly a charming evening this was. “Well then, let’s go...”

He rose and continued walking. His horse faithfully and calmly clopped beside him on the stones. Lights began to illuminate in the windows, and the lamplighters started their evening shift on the streets. It was still warm in the evenings,

although the sun had already set beyond the horizon. Passing by the edge of the Ragged district, he could observe commoners sitting on terraces, watching him. Further on, in the centre, he watered his horse at the well and took a short rest. The palace loomed behind him.

They must have been waiting for him at the Tower of the Magi, as everything was wide open. In the courtyard, he spotted a gathering, and some of them waved towards him. Being late at night, torches were lit, and a pleasant fragrance wafted through the air. Perhaps some kind of spice; he had never smelled anything like it before.

“Welcome, warrior friend! We’ve been waiting just for you,” greeted an apprentice.

There were eleven individuals around a table. A few faces were familiar, while the others seemed to be complete strangers from various distant lands. Seeing this, his curiosity grew even more. What could be the reason for gathering such exotic individuals in the capital?

Arlo spoke up:

“What we are about to discuss concerns only those present. You need to go somewhere and bring something back. It is a dangerous matter, but I assure you, those who undertake it will be duly rewarded—he paused for a moment—and I don’t necessarily mean material rewards...”

He scratched his forehead, then continued, bringing great relief to Hagley:

“We won’t force anyone into this. Anyone can leave. But we would ask that if you decide to do so, make your decision now, before I reveal any further details.”

Hagley waited anxiously. What if he decided to leave later, after finding out what it was about? Three didn’t think so;

they stood up somewhat awkwardly, bowed, and left. Arlo looked into each person's eyes one by one before continuing.

"I am Arlo Elderidge of Bluegrove. Everyone knows Grand Mistress Maida. The lad next to me is my apprentice, an alchemist, and a seer. This is Beldon, Rigby's son, a dignitary from one of the dwarf clans working in the southern mines. Orman, the lieutenant of the gatekeepers, is known to many. The two of them have been on a mission with my apprentice before. Ivy is a ranger from the eastern isle.

The corporal scrutinized everyone carefully. Ivy immediately drew his attention, finding her a particularly surprising figure. Despite being a woman, her hair hung in long dreadlocks, and she wore a colourful outfit and tall boots. He recognized her equipment by its equally vibrant colours. Typical forest-tracker tools: nets, lassoes, daggers, a bow, and quiver. The dwarf flaunted himself in the proud pose expected of him, leaning on his axe with his log-thick arms. Another invited guest for the meeting was a druid, none other than the Lord of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest, Bromley Hogweed. His leather attire was adorned with decorations and polished bones. Even had a wolf-skin headdress with a tail dangling from it.

"And here, none other than Nyhund Trgowar from Shiraed. He is the nephew of Goblin King Dgur Trgowar," Arlo introduced.

Beldon subtly narrowed his eyes, and Orman's mouth hung open. Clearly, the diminutive figure, not even reaching one and a half metres, was a noticeable presence to all the invitees. However, in his eyes gleamed a cunning intelligence and unshakable confidence. He had no equipment whatsoever, only the clothes he wore.

"Perhaps it seems strange to you that we've invited

participants from so many places to this gathering..."

"And someone hasn't even arrived yet," Ivy interjected.

"Yes, yes," Arlo responded. "Indeed, we are still waiting for someone. But to sum up my message, believe me, everyone's knowledge and skills will be needed for what we are about to ask of you..." After a brief pause, he continued, "The prophecy... that many have been searching for centuries, is now within reach."

Here, a louder murmur arose, but Arlo gestured for calm.

"Unfortunately, not in the literal sense. We already suspect where it vanished from and where it was taken, hidden. The tracks lead to the Telamy Marsh. Within that, to the fallen tower of Nuranor. Nowadays, it's called Turrim Concidit. Once it belonged to a noble family and nearly perished in the blood storms of our history. The building, or rather its remnants, were bought by Brutus Galenus before he became obsessed with the search for the prophecy, and apparently, he went mad in the process. This scroll..." he raised the bottle with its contents, "...was found by my good apprentice Marden and his two companions in one of the hidden libraries of the sewer system. After some examination, they figured out that Brutus Galenus himself hid it. Based on the content of the text, it is clear that the prophecy was stolen, but Galenus took care to ensure that only someone with keen eyes, astute mind, and good thinking could discover it."

At this point, the dwarf, if possible, straightened himself even more.

"So, the three of them deciphered the secret of the underground chamber, a possibility that Galenus had perhaps left open due to his ego... Who knows why, maybe he wanted

those worthy to discover his ruse. Maybe he wanted his name to be passed down this way... We'll never know. What we will know, however, is whether he took the prophecy to his distant home in the far north. We ask you to join us on this journey."

After some hesitation, Hagley raised his hand and looked questioningly at the wizard, who nodded.

"You can't just stroll into the Telamy Marsh at this time. It's not safe even in summer, with numerous sinkholes and muddy bogs, but in this season, it's hell itself. It's cold, raining, and due to the endless fog, impossible to navigate. The animals are dangerous and inhospitable. Bushes move like arms, and the water is undrinkable. We need to reach the river from the edge so that we could provide water for the horses and ourselves. I say we wait for warmer weather."

"We only need to get to the fallen tower, my son," said Arlo.

After some consideration, Hagley spoke up.

"That might work. The conditions are similar under the mountains, but a tad milder. Mind you, there we'll have to contend with the river, surrounded by thickets on both sides that pose a great challenge to pass."

"The thicket can be overcome," Ivy chimed in.

"We'll need to carry a load," added Arlo.

To this, Beldon had something to say:

"Load everything onto me; I'll carry it as far as needed."

"I didn't doubt that, Beldon, son of Rigby, but I assume you'll get hungry from all the heavy lifting. We'll have to hunt and prepare food. My lord Druid? Lady Ranger?"

Bromley nodded.

Then, Hagley had another very ordinary doubt.

“Will we need to fight as well?”

Maida's response was even more mundane.

“We don't know.”

“Do people even inhabit that tower now?” asked Hagley.

“We have no word about that either,” replied Arlo.

The corporal scratched the back of his head with a peculiar grimace.

“Are you perhaps afraid, young warrior?” Beldon asked.

Orman smiled.

“Master Dwarf, based on what we've heard about the place, it's presumable that we'll all be scared once we get there.”

At this point, Arlo wisely intervened before the present company's pride could spark a heated debate.

“Gentlemen... my lady... It's important to recognize that bravery isn't the absence of fear. We haven't even started, and yet I'm already afraid.”

Upon hearing this, a quiet ripple of uneasiness ran through the company, even Beldon's moustache twitched. However, much greater excitement ensued with the late arrival of another person. Sometime before midnight, the previously closed gate creaked open, and a recruit hurried in somewhat nervously. Behind him followed an utterly astonishing figure.

“Mistress, this person claims to be authorized for the meeting. I didn't want to let him in, but he insisted I announce him...”

“Calm down, little brother, believe me, they really are expecting me here.”

A hooded figure, clad in mud-coloured attire, stepped

forward from the background. Tight-fitting trousers and a cape covered his dried frostweed of a body. He was towing his equipment on a wheeled cart, which he leaned against the wall, then unloaded his bow, and threw back his hood. With a broad smile and slightly misty eyes, he greeted the company. The torchlight gleamed on his bald head, and his beard and moustache showed a hint of grey. This was Oly O'Mons, the ranger from the eastern island.

"Welcome, my friend! Have you been taking shrooms again?" Ivy asked. "We thought you wouldn't make it here today."

The newcomer exchanged handshakes with everyone, eliciting mixed reactions. The druid and the goblin, for instance, gazed wide-eyed at the somewhat eccentric entrance of the ranger. Beldon chuckled to himself, while the others, already anticipating what to expect, greeted the late guest with indulgent smiles. Hagley observed the quiet and somewhat comical storm with indifference.

"Where are we going?" Oly asked as he comfortably sat down, reaching for the jug. "What's in it? I hope it's what I'm thinking."

"That's in the other one," remarked Beldon, who had already poured himself a fair share of wine.

Oly quickly put back the water jug and filled a cup with red wine. He downed it in one go and, if possible, was in an even better mood than before.

Hagley enlightened him: "The southern part of the Telamy Marsh is the target, Master Oly."

The ranger made a face as if he understood the joke, then became slightly more serious. Still, he asked more with amusement than gloom:

“Is this serious? Because I’m feeling more cheerful than I should. And if it is, then I’ll drink myself into a better mood afterwards.”

The sorceress remarked with mild sternness.

“It’s about the prophecy.”

“Is it?” Oly gobbled a massive scone, which left him momentarily speechless, so he could only roll his eyes. After finally managing to swallow, and after a hearty belch, he looked at Maida.

“I bet this bloke comes from there,” he pointed at Hagley, “because he’s tall, blonde, and currently has the most troubled face among us. Broad shoulders, blue eyes, born in the north. Despite being a corporal, he must have been invited to the gathering because he knows the area. But he’s young, so he might have brains too, considering his peers are still squires in the army.” He paused for a moment, setting aside the jest. “Didn’t he say that marsh was evil?”

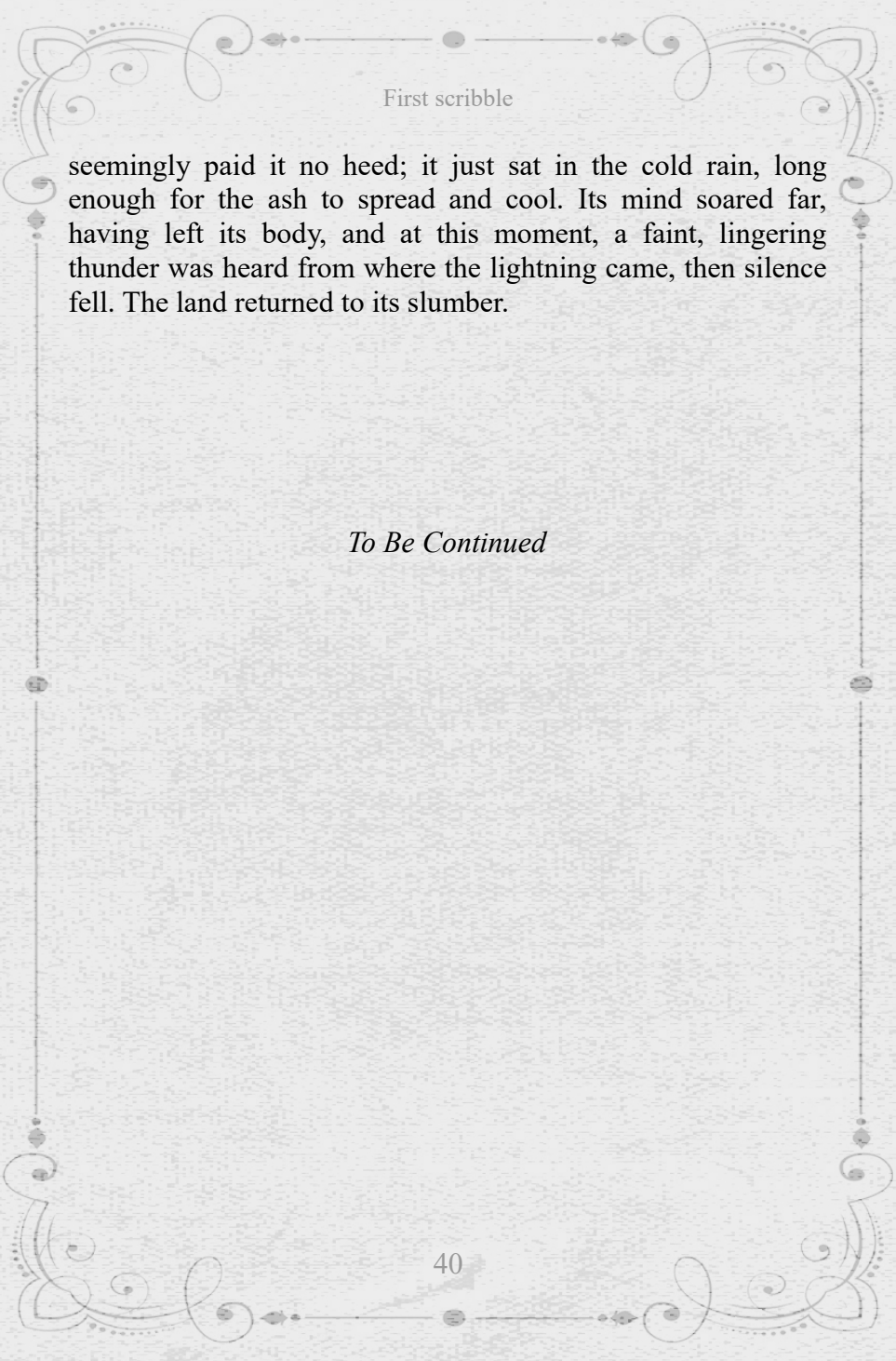
* * *

A dark hooded figure stumbled up to the upper level of the tower. Its blackened bricks and stones rose uncovered towards the sky. In the gently drizzling rain, the scent of decaying trees lingered, and as it was the season of passing, the months-long fog descended. An owl hooted among the trees, and all herbivores fell silent, as if they knew that a dangerous creature had emerged on top of the tower. The remains of a campfire were smouldering at its feet, occasionally sizzling as raindrops fell into it. The figure reached into the hot ashes with bare hands, sprinkling a streak of them onto the floor. It moved in a spiral until the figure itself became the centre. With smoky

hands, it rubbed its face beneath the hood. Faint red dots marked its eyes or the cavities where they once were. Slowly, it sank to its knees and sat on its heels. It perceived the world in shades of red, and with its refined hearing, it caught every sound around it—the raindrops, the gentle melody of the breeze, the scratching of mice near the walls and in the crevices; the wildcat, currently stalking a rodent in the courtyard, or the creaking of the trees in the cooling weather. It hadn't felt pain or fatigue for a very long time, having merged with the pulsating energies of the land.

From the south, occasional silent flashes of lightning illuminated the horizon, and in this cursed place, this was the only sign that there was still light in the world. The area was so desolate that for many, even memories of it had faded away. The rare wanderer who stumbled upon it instinctively felt the need to move on. In the daylight, the sombre walls rose above the bushes and taller trees as a memento of a bygone era. But when night fell, the entire structure seemed to come to life. Odd, faint lights appeared here and there, barely noticeable at all, but enough to make the observer uncertain if it was real or imagined. Under the light of the moon, everything seemed even more eerie. The animals were more active, and as they lurked around the tower, their rustlings added to the noises of the dead place. Among them were those more daring and shy. Many creatures avoided this place from afar, but some almost seemed to consider it home. The winged ones were less affected by its essence, so bats and owls particularly liked to dwell within the walls, in the smaller or larger cavities. The gentler, more timid, or cautious creatures, such as deer or wild boars, did not even dare to come close.

The hooded figure was now thoroughly soaked, but



First scribble

seemingly paid it no heed; it just sat in the cold rain, long enough for the ash to spread and cool. Its mind soared far, having left its body, and at this moment, a faint, lingering thunder was heard from where the lightning came, then silence fell. The land returned to its slumber.

To Be Continued