

## Chapter 4

# On the Road to Aranea

In the company of thirty riders, several participants of the night gathering set forth on their journey. It seemed an odd alliance, tacitly led by Arlo, hand in hand with a barely twenty-year-old lieutenant. Their initial destination lay at the juncture of the eastern and western parts of the realm, where they planned to rest in beds at one of the inns along the border. The journey to the Pig River would take a leisurely pace of four days. The real challenge would begin from there. There are two paths to the fallen tower. The northern one cuts directly through Telamy Marsh, an option they promptly dismissed. The southern route skirts past the Great Dwarf Mine and between the Northern and Southern Elephant Rocks. Beyond that lies the Black Lands, on the eastern border of which the Dead Cave is situated. The area is safe during the day, but at night, creatures that shun the light emerge from the cave, such as vampires and the wraiths of the forest. Timing here will be crucial.

Unfortunately, the Pig River flows in an unwelcome direction, so the prospect of an easy boat ride was abandoned. Besides, it would be cumbersome to travel this way with horses. The river's western bank is calmer and more navigable, whereas the other side runs directly at the foot of the mountains, bordered by rocks, cliffs, and frequent landslides. However, the tower is on the eastern side, to which they must eventually return. There is no bridge near the tower anymore; they must ford or build rafts. For Beldon, this would pose no

problem, but it is questionable how the horses might tolerate such a water crossing. By then, the water will be too cold to swim through.

“How wide is it there?” Marden asked the ranger.

“Half of what you can shoot with a bow, young brother. But fortunately, it is gentle and slow. We’ll pass the larger rapids in the southern sections. What concerns me more are the Dead Cave and its inhabitants.”

In the morning hours, their progress along the road was brisk, with only the occasional joke and quiet conversation disrupted by the clatter of horses’ hooves—a sound that could hardly be deemed intrusive. By midday, they had settled under a grove where the warmth of a campfire was a welcome comfort. Ivy set about preparing lunch, as the company had vehemently expressed their need. Marden sprinkled yellow powder on the tinder and muttered a verse that made the flames leap up. Two soldiers ventured into the thicket and soon returned with a wild boar they had downed with arrows, which Bromley and his group skewered over the fire. Meanwhile, Oly emerged with a few eggs he had carefully packed before departure, for he did not partake in meat. He was somewhat sullen, as Arlo had declared that spirits could only be consumed upon nearing the tower.

The afternoon siesta lasted about an hour, during which Orman played his lute and the soldiers hummed softly along. Those few were not in need of resting. Not so the rangers and Bromley, who, with heavy bellies, were sawing wood, beside whom Beldon was snoring. The wizards dozed quietly, while Hagley and a few soldiers strolled around the camp, eyeing the bank of fog gathering to the north. The weather remained benign, with few clouds chased by what could scarcely be

called a breeze, and it was quite pleasant at the sunny spots.

By evening, they had drawn close to the Great Dwarf Mine, where they camped near its deserted entrance. Beldon became sentimental and briefly recounted the events that had transpired there. Yet, it seemed he did this more out of duty than desire, keen not to prolong the report unduly. The others noticed this and did not press him further.

The soldiers withdrew into their tents, and most of the others joined them. Only the rangers, the druid, and Nyhund, the goblin, chose to sleep under the open sky. Three soldiers took up the watch, rotating every two hours.

Ivy pulled her blanket up to her neck and then addressed the goblin:

“What is life like on the eastern island?”

Nyhund’s wrinkled face showed a flicker of surprise, but he quickly masked it.

“What do you mean, young huntress?”

“I’m merely curious... anything you can tell. My lands are on the western edge.”

The other blinked a few times, then his expression became troubled. His gestures revealed that although he tried to maintain some semblance of pride as a scion of the ruling house, he was quite willing to open up to Ivy.

“Our world is highly stratified. Our kind is not uniform. They say it’s because of inbreeding that some among us are weaker and others stronger, but I reckon it’s our punishment for the many wrongs we’ve done to those around us. Goblins were once a people blessed with extraordinary magic and intelligence, but for a long while now, the dullards have been appearing. Picture the same small, agile, and well-hidden clever folk, but now they are suspicious, instinctual, and

behave oddly. Our chief magic has always lain in creating illusions, persuading, and hiding. A skilled goblin, if he wishes, can stand before you undetected. Watch this!”

As Ivy listened to Nyhund’s words, scanning the sky, she was startled to find upon looking down, that where her conversational partner had been, there was now only a log. She burst into laughter, then quickly covered her mouth not to disturb the sleepers.

“The dullards can’t do such things, though they speak. Apparently, they can’t orient themselves well. They live in caves and small houses, sustaining themselves with hunting and farming. I come from a direct line of our dynasty, was thoroughly trained, and served for many years beside the city of Reed at the Great Grain Guard. It was my father’s wish that I not only enjoy the comforts of the palace but also see the world as it truly is. By the age of thirty, I had learned from our wizards how to cloud minds, create fear and panic, and become invisible, merely with my will. We are not great warriors; I carry no weapon, indeed, I have no equipment, as I can fend for myself in the wilderness alone if need be. We, the original bloodline goblins, can eat almost anything, be it plant or animal-based.”

He paused briefly, then continued:

“You asked about the island, but see, I have spoken mostly of myself... It is different there. The forests are wild and shadowy. The mountain peaks loom ominously. Life is more comfortable in your lands, and it is easier to thrive. Owlens and Shiraed are deep wildernesses, where one must be vigilant. It’s a beautiful place, the air thick and warm, almost stifling, but when you breathe it in, you feel the steam of life. We are not afraid of it. I do not know Stingland, nor do I wish to.”

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Morning greeted them with a biting chill. After gathering their gear and hoisting the tents onto the wagons, they immediately set off along the great western road. Within a few hours, they reached the Elephant Rocks, on the northern side of which resided the Andabata Order. They were the blind warriors, among the most steadfast combatants in the empire. Encounters with them were rare, and guests seldom visited. Their combat prowess was such that sight impeded them, hence their eyes were almost always closed. They could see, yet never had need to. Some of the older Andabatas could no longer open their eyes at all.

As Arlo was eager to reach the border, namely, to pass beyond the Dead Cave, he tried to hasten the company's pace, but met with strong opposition.

"Master, let us camp now and then with a longer stride tomorrow, we can comfortably cross into the Western County," suggested Bromley. "If we continue now, we'll only manage to camp beyond the cave but too close for comfort."

After brief contemplation, the wizard decided:

"We shall stop. And since the sun is well past its zenith, we do not proceed today. Tomorrow, however, we must reach the border... Diiiiis-mount!" he shouted back, ensuring those at the end of the column heard him.

After lunch, driven by curiosity, Marden and Ivy walked towards the Northern Elephant Rocks. They climbed a hill a hundred meters high, from where a magnificent view opened to the north. Stout limestone cliffs stretched upward as far as the eye could see. Here and there, paths led through



wider and narrower crevices. A small stream flowed below, destined to join the Pig River somewhere far to the west. A few pine trees stood green; otherwise, the landscape dressed in winter's garb revealed only a few deciduous groves, their bare branches reaching skyward. And atop the rocks, where possible, a few straggling weeds clung, fighting for life. From afar, a thin plume of smoke rose, perhaps from the domain of the Andabatas.

"How far might it be?" asked the boy.

"What?"

"That smoke."

Ivy squinted, then shaking her head, replied,

"Farther than you think. We won't meet them now.

Come, let's go back before Arlo starts to worry."

However, on their descent, they noticed another smoke, ominously coming from the direction where the Dead Cave should be.

"Rather, the question is how far that smoke might be," Ivy pointed out. "Honestly, I thought that cursed place was further still. Perhaps your master was right, and we should have travelled further today."

Upon returning to the camp, they reported their observations to Arlo.

"We must be vigilant. Although the cave is still some distance away, I know its location, and the smoke is revealing; perhaps someone else has lit a fire. But whoever they are, they are much closer to it than we are, my friends. Now come, let us eat. Oly and his group have made soup."

Some grumbled for meat, but Oly cooled their tempers.

"There's no meat today; forget it. Not every day needs a bloodshed for you to be well-fed."

Upon these words, some began to grumble, and Beldon glared at the ranger. However, their ill humour lasted only until they tasted the hot, steaming, thick soup.

“By all that is holy, ranger sir! You certainly know how to impress a dwarf!” exclaimed Beldon. “I swear, at this moment, this suits me better than roast lamb. With this finger-thick layer of fat on top and the hefty loaf, I’ll be good for a few hours.”

Oly smiled and carefully hid the amphora in which he stored the pressed oil.

Then, a barely audible blast sounded from the west. Several heads turned.

“Thunder at this time?” the dwarf looked up from his plate.

Arlo cast a suspicious glance in the direction of the sound.

“That was no thunder, Rigby’s son, but magic. Someone is fighting.”

This gave rise to speculation, and Orman was ready to rush to offer help.

“While your heart is noble, I must restrain you for two reasons. By the time you’d arrive, the skirmish would be over; secondly, it would be needlessly perilous. If that noise came from the cave, we will find out tomorrow what caused it. Now let everyone rest; night is soon upon us.”

“And it looks to be a cold night ahead,” Oly surveyed the land.

Late into the evening, a few more noises came from the west, then all quieted down. Only the caterwauling of the tawny owls and the soft flutter of bats were heard. The soldiers began to mingle with the civilians, and secretly, a bit of ale

made its appearance. Oly naturally was among the first to join the circle, where hissing and gesticulating accompanied pleas for quieter conversation among the late sleepers.

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On the third day of their journey, no sooner had they set out than they stumbled upon traces of the previous night's blasts of magic. After a brief hour's march beside the road, they found remnants of a campfire and scattered belongings. All signs suggested that those who had camped here had departed hastily, perhaps not of their own volition. A donkey grazed peacefully tied to a tree, taken under the care of a soldier. Orman organized a makeshift scouting party to penetrate the thicket in search of survivors. Half an hour later, they returned fruitlessly. Whoever had fought here had either fled leaving all behind or had been abducted.

"Arlo!" called Hagley from beside a bush. "Here is a..."

The mage hurried over, but before he arrived, he knew what he would see.

"A totem staff. Such as necromancers use."

He picked it up from the ground, then clenched it between his palms.

"This discharged the fire last night. Recently used, but... other abominations have transpired here too," he uttered, discarding it with disgust.

Just then, Marden arrived, closing his eyes.

"It went that way," he pointed down a narrow trail. "I see it! Now I see, let us proceed!"

Arlo signalled to Hagley, who in turn motioned to a few



riders to follow. The trail meandered long, along which the boy surged forward, occasionally with closed eyes. He envisioned a figure in dark attire in his mind, stumbling forward in the dim light. Meanwhile, Arlo shouted after him, partly unable to keep up the pace, and partly fearing that the rush might cause harm to him or others. They reached a thin stream into which the boy carelessly stepped and promptly fell—fortunately landing on the far side, thus not soaking through. This scene snapped him out of the seer’s immersion, leaving him looking bewildered at the others, who likewise stared back.

One of the soldiers spoke up:

“Let’s go, if he came this way, he could only have gone on, for in this dense thicket there’s no other path...”

Thus, they continued to jog until, after about five minutes, the path widened, and they stood before the entrance of the Dead Cave.

“Well, I’ll be damned...” grumbled the old wizard uncharacteristically.

But by then, events had spiralled uncontrollably forward, culminating as a person of astonishing appearance stepped out of the cave. A slight surprise was evident on his face, but beyond that, he seemed unafraid. His black robe bore crimson embroideries and his grey hair cascaded out from beneath his hood. A crafted pouch lay at his side, no other gear evident. Of the half dozen people before him, he immediately spotted Arlo. Squinting at him, he yielded the initiative, quickly assessing that he was outnumbered.

Arlo waited a few seconds, then, having thoroughly assessed the stranger and similarly gauged the balance of power, he spoke:

“We mean no harm. We are merely passing through.”

Meanwhile, a soldier from behind brought forward the stick and handed it to Arlo. The mage balanced it in his hand for a moment, then extended it towards the seemingly relieved stranger. The sunlight filtering through the trees glinted off the polished handle.

“If I am not mistaken, you left this behind.”

The other quickly reached for it and sheathed it at his side. After some deliberation, he threw back the hood from his head and spoke in a hoarse, deep voice:

“Thank you! I am Xaldimárr of Mel Ramola. My last night was anything but peaceful.”

“We heard. Being a necromancer brings us some unease, you must understand. And according to your wand...”

“...they were already dead... My fire took down two attackers, whom I brought back to life. I harmed no living creature.”

Arlo scrutinized him suspiciously, but Marden quickly came to his aid.

“He speaks the truth...” he said, then felt dizzy.

“My son...” the elder turned to him. “You are overburdening your mind. Rest now.”

Hagley used the moment to join the conversation.

“Forgive me if I seem overly inquisitive, but what does a necromancer do alone in the wilderness, near the Dead Cave?”

Xaldimárr straightened with mild pride.

“Forgive me if my response seems disparaging, but a young swordsman would not understand.”

After seeing that the corporal was not offended, he continued:

“Am I suspected?”

Hagley shrugged.

“Not by me, just mere curiosity.”

The necromancer sat down on a jutting rock.

“Well then... I am here on an errand for my order, but of that, I regret I cannot speak. I have harmed no living being, as the pious lad there confirmed,” he gestured towards Marden, who by then had also seated himself and was sipping water from a flask. When no one responded to this, he ventured an unexpected question.

“Where are you headed? I am going west... perhaps we could travel together for a while.”

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In the Tower of Magi, Maida was sipping tea by the window when an apprentice abruptly entered.

“My lady, a pigeon has arrived from Master Arlo.”

Though winter’s frost had not yet cloaked the land, a few early snowflakes danced briefly before melting on the sill. The sorceress gazed long towards the west, where the detachment was presently journeying, then, roused by the words, turned to receive the parchment.

*To the head of my order, my dear friend!*

*As we marched uneventfully into our third day, pondering the cold that slowly encroaches with the season, at night we encountered our first notable event. Approaching the Dead Cave, we heard nocturnal skirmishes and by dawn had uncovered their cause. Alongside, we gained a new companion—a necromancer. The cave’s denizens had assailed him,*

*forcing his flight. He spoke not of his purpose, but on the morrow, sought our protection and aid to reach the region of Hirend. Needless to say, several among us were taken aback by his presence, and by the prospect of his traveling with us for a few days. Yesterday afternoon, we crossed the border and, to the great relief of many, managed to find lodging in an inn, though beds were not sufficient; some soldiers and our rangers, the druid and the goblin, comfortably slept in the stable.*

*I suspect that some, unbeknownst to me, have brought spirits along, as evidenced by louder evening conversations, a broken bottle I found this morning, and Oly's unusually good mood, unseen since our departure. Regardless, as long as it causes no trouble, I am inclined to turn a blind eye.*

*Upon nearing the border, a pack of wolves attacked one of our lagging horsemen, but Beldon and the soldiers reached him in time before they could disembowel his horse. Beldon slew one beast with his bare hands, his axe resting on a wagon at the time. The rest scattered, so the soldiers' only remaining task was to tend the horse's wounds. Though terribly frightened, the poor soul survived. Fortuitously for its rider, the brutes could not knock the animal down, though he could not defend himself with his sword, nor risk harming his own mount.*

*The innkeeper gave us precise directions for our onward journey. He claims that upon reaching Aranea, there is no border watch, but alas, we cannot enter anywhere; from there on, we must rely solely on the moderate comfort of our tents. Our provisions are plentiful; we have yet to touch the salted meats, opting to hunt as long as possible. Ivy and the soldiers abundantly supply us with meats, and Bromley always*

*knows which berries are safe to eat; a pity that fresh vegetables are no longer available this month. From the innkeeper, we purchased pickles and smoked cheese, so even Oly's fastidious diet will not be an issue. I am unsure of his digestive system, but he seems to manage quite well on waterweeds and mushrooms, including those intoxicating and poisonous ones that would bedridden a dozen of our companions.*

*I shall send my next report from Aranea, trusting that all will be well. The safest part of our journey, the Hirend road, lies ahead.*

*Greetings from the wilderness, your old friend: Arlo*

Scarcely had she reached the end of the letter when the apprentice re-entered. This time, she had been summoned from the palace, but the boy knew not why, nor by whom, a fact she accepted with some astonishment. After donning her warm robe, she descended the staircase. Her thoughts were turbulent as she stepped out into the street where tiny snowflakes fell. The court's massive administrative buildings were close to the Tower of Magi, so she chose to walk. A gentle breeze stirred late autumn leaves mixed with snow down from Little Hollow. She pulled her hood tighter around her neck and quickened her pace. Passersby were surprised to see such a distinguished person from the Tower of Magi walking alone, drenched in the snow. She stepped into one or two puddles, and at a crossing, nearly got struck by a donkey cart whose driver muttered an apology from beneath his moustache. Regretting her simple approach, she shook the water off her robe when the gatekeeper barred her way.



“Greetings, my lady! May I inquire your purpose?”

She almost laughed, reminded of Oly’s entrance at the nightly assembly.

“Yes, thank you... um... I was informed they are expecting me here. No details were provided.”

The guard looked at her quizzically, then stepped aside, offering her a place to wait. After five minutes, two remarkably official-looking men entered the foyer.

“His Majesty King Winslow awaits her ladyship, the head of the order,” declared one.

Taken aback, Maida nearly forgot to rise from her chair. She slowly stood and followed the very official-looking men. She attempted to tidy her appearance as they passed through long corridors, finally arriving at a crimson room, the door of which was opened for her by one of her guides. They indicated with a hand and a bow that she should enter. The door closed, and for about five minutes, nothing happened. During this time, she marvelled at the opulence surrounding her. Despite noticing no windows or visible light sources, the room was brilliantly illuminated. Eventually, another door opened, and a man entered to loudly announce the arrival:

“His Majesty, King Winslow Garwulf Beorn A’Telgoth!”

A slender man with greying long hair entered the room. He wore an orange cloak adorned with velvet patches and embroidery, white gloves, and comfortable white footwear. Maida stood up and bowed. The king gestured towards a chair beside a table, waited for the woman to sit, and then did likewise. They faced each other at opposite ends of the table. A cuckoo clock loudly marked the time, then, settling down, continued ticking quietly. The ruler took a deep breath, ran his

fingers through his hair, and began:

"I have been informed that in recent days, the Tower of Magi dispatched a scouting team to the lands of Aranea to investigate a castle ruin now known as Turrim Concidit. However, I am not aware of the purpose of this mission. If your ladyship would care to summarize this in a few words, this gap in my understanding would be remedied."

Feeling a hint of reprimand, Maida cautiously began her report.

"Your Majesty, we are following an ancient script that mentions certain events occurring there."

The king gazed at her with an impassive face, compelling her to continue in silent demand.

"The prophecy... since its disappearance..."

At this, the other raised his hand.

"What affair do the magi have with the prophecy?" King Winslow asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Maida was utterly taken aback, so much so that she could not immediately respond.

"Your Majesty...?"

The king stood up, crossed his arms over his chest, and began to pace slowly around the room. The excitement previously felt by the sorceress slowly turned into tension within her chest.

"Year after year, expeditions, companies... adventurers throw themselves vehemently into the search for the prophecy. Unfortunately, none have yet come closer to the answers, and there have been instances where the threads only became more tangled. In this case, we speak of a joint mission between the Guild of Warriors and the Guild of Magi, which is considered a more thorough starting point than previous initiatives.

However, it struck me as odd that my court was not informed about these developments.”

Meanwhile, Maida gathered herself, and it dawned on her that the ruler surely knew everything about the background of the journey, so she replied accordingly:

“My lord, why should we have burdened the court with a matter where there is yet no development to speak of?”

However, the king might have felt that his tone had been too inquisitorial, for the first faint smile since the beginning of their conversation appeared on his face.

“I could have offered effective assistance,” he spread his hands.

They conversed for about half an hour more, and the subject gradually shifted away from the tower and its purpose. As Maida left the palace, she pondered the entire series of events, which now undoubtedly was moving forward in its unfolding. It was indeterminate from Winslow’s gestures and his words whether their venture was to his liking or perhaps distasteful to him. Returning to the Tower of Magi, her first task was to sit down at her desk to write a letter to Arlo.

## Chapter 5

### **Turrim Concidit**

Back at the Hirend junction, they were joined by one of the empire's captains, who had been notified of the approaching company by pigeon. Given the unusual nature of the situation, he relinquished his command and instead intended to offer support as an advisor. Another curious turn of events was that Xaldimárr's planned meeting fell through, so he decided to accompany them on the road leading to the tower. Arlo received his request with mixed feelings but agreed to include him in their odd company, because having one more person in times of peril was prudent, though suspicion gnawed at him that the necromancer was drawn to the tower by some perverse allure.

They crossed the boundary of Aranea so seamlessly they hardly noticed. The terrain became increasingly challenging; the erstwhile flat and grassy meadows gave way to dense thickets and woods studded with rocks and stones. They wound their way through undulating hills, and the cutlass was frequently in use. They could barely make a third of their usual daily progress and by evening, wearied, they gathered around the fire. Although the river was very near, Hagley decided they would cross it only on the morrow. During the evening meal, many cast glances northward, now only ten miles from the tower. The druid and the two rangers scouted around the camp to an arrow's flight, thoroughly inspecting every nook and cranny. The forest was quiet, the river flowed silently not far from them, and only the biting cold that came

from its direction told them it awaited them.

After stuffing down the roasted drumsticks, those weighed down by heavy eyes headed towards the water cart to wash, but the majority skipped this evening ritual and immediately threw themselves down on their cots, dirty as they were, especially since their nights had gradually become frosty. Hours may have passed, but there were still some who lay awake. The place exuded an extraordinarily oppressive atmosphere, and the old mage too lay restlessly on his back, watching the play of light from the campfire filtering through the tent's roof.

Hagley grew tired of his restless tossing and thus sat up. For hours he had been unable to sleep, and so he decided to take a walk around the camp. He donned his warm cloak and began to move slowly around the line of wagons. The sky was devoid of stars, with only sombre clouds visible in the moonlight. Somewhere a wolf howled, and in this idyllic peace, he had no inkling that within mere minutes the entire camp would be on its feet.

At first, he thought of a deer as a twig snapped underfoot. Then he felt an icy gust on the back of his neck and turned around. As his eyes adjusted, from the dimness emerged a shapeless mass that slowly morphed into an entity with discernible limbs. By the time he saw the rest, he could also hear their voices, and stepping back in alarm, he gasped out:

“Wraiths! Wake up, all of you! Come on, hurry!”

The shrieking apparitions were halfway between the camp and the tree line, just enough time for everyone to jump into their boots.

A soldier fired an arrow, which passed straight through one of the ghosts.



“This isn’t going to work, my friend,” Oly called out to him and grabbed a log from the fire.

The next moment, he hurled it among the approaching figures, scattering several of them. He reached for his bow, then pulled several arrows from his quiver, which he had already attached to his side. He dipped their tips in oil, then held them in the campfire to light them.

“Shoot them with these!” he pointed to the fire.

The wailing only grew louder, and if that were not enough, strange gnomes were approaching them much faster than the wraiths, holding sharp spears in their hands, their faces showing complete apathy.

Marden’s mouth fell open.

“Homunculi!”

Arlo watched the scene in horror.

“Lord have mercy! Vial-bred half-men... Soldiers! Attack the gnomes! Spare them no pity, they have neither souls nor consciousness.”

Then he drew his stick and thus he intoned:

*“Lightning, light up the pyre, set my enemy afire, perish, thou who assails us this night!”* and holding out his staff, he uttered the spell – *“Fulgurem-multum!”*

At once, six to eight bolts of lightning crashed down from the heavens with a loud rumble, and three wraiths burst into flames. Their screams intensified, then they fled headlong toward the forest. Yet they did not reach it; before then, they dissolved into nothingness.

Meanwhile, the rangers and a few soldiers launched flaming arrows among them, achieving a similar effect, but more of the creatures hurried towards the camp. The soldiers met the gnomes with fierce swordplay. The gnomes stabbed

emotionlessly in front of them. Bromley raised his hand to the sky and shouted loudly:

*“Your jaws are strong, your feet are fast, let there be wolf!”* – and he flicked his index finger three times.

Three wolves appeared before him, who without hesitation threw themselves into the attackers.

Beldon, screaming, leaped with his axe among the homunculi, but soon his true adversary appeared in the form of a giant. Seemingly human, yet towering and grotesquely gnarled all over his body. It was clear he was controlling the gnome-like creatures, who were hardly taller than a metre. He spotted the dwarf in the turmoil and charged at him.

“Watch out, Beldon!” Orman shouted just in time for the dwarf to dodge the enormous cudgel. Following this, he simply ran between the giant’s legs and then, with a backward overhead swing of his axe, struck a mighty blow to the giant’s backside. The giant collapsed to his knees from the blow but in his turn struck Beldon with his weapon, causing the dwarf to reel momentarily. As he struggled to stand and keep his senses, the giant rose and raised his dreadful club for a final blow. That’s when Orman arrived to sever the weapon-raising arm with a single stroke of his two-handed sword. The club fell to the ground along with the arm.

Yet this still did not fell the monster. Marden’s decisive intervention was needed next. He pulled a fist-sized vial from his pouch, kissed it, and hurled it at the giant’s head while running. The explosion made everyone flinch, and by the time the smoke cleared, the giant collapsed, soundless and headless.

A bluish glowing light appeared around the goblin’s body, then he charged into the homunculi. A rhythmic echoing sound issued from his mouth, creating total chaos. Some of the

homunculi looked at him, and when he turned his tiny arms towards the wraiths, from then on, they attacked them. They had no effect on them, but this meant fewer attackers for the soldiers to contend with. The bewitched soulless horde's assault turned into complete disarray.

In the ensuing chaos, the necromancer seized his moment. Arlo watched with narrowed eyes as the totem staff rose. Xaldimárr's eyes began to glow with a faint red light, and in a hoarse voice, he uttered the dreadful command:

*"Rise and serve!"* – he pointed at the stunned giant.

The headless giant rose and began pummeling the gnomes with bare hands, what remained of them. Meanwhile, the necromancer waved his other hand, sending a foul stench of decay around, causing several homunculi to start choking, their expressions unchanged.

The sight caused panic among some soldiers; one even began to vomit. Xaldimárr, with an unflinching and perhaps perversely gleeful gaze, directed his staff towards the giant, who continued to thresh his own kind until one of them knocked the mage off his feet.

The giant collapsed just as Xaldimárr did. A more quick-witted soldier dragged him out of the melee before he could be beaten to death. Like Nyhund, a faint light began to glow around Oly's body, which, though he could not control it, automatically appeared to protect him in dire situations. He swung a flaming staff at anything that crossed his path, cackling madly.

Ivy rushed to the necromancer, and upon finding that he was not gravely injured, squatted beside him and swiftly aimed two flaming arrows. One arrow passed through two homunculi before lodging in a tree trunk. The second sliced through the

thickest cluster of wraiths.

The momentum of the corporeal attackers broke, and the soldiers quickly dispatched them with swift strokes of their swords, but the wraiths still surged from the forest. Arlo circled his staff, creating a ring of fire that scorched several ghosts.

"I can't keep this up!" he shouted – "There are too many."

Then Marden's voice overrode his master's.

"Everyone down! Cover your ears!"

He swung another vial over his head.

"Are you ready, master?" he looked at the elder. Arlo nodded.

In the sudden silence, some glanced up from the ground, and the next sight unfolded:

The boy tossed the vial up, which slowly began to glow, then Arlo aimed his staff at it and uttered:

*"'alaenuk 'an tahtariq!"*

A tremendous explosion followed, shaking the entire camp. The horses reared up, whinnying, and the shockwave nearly extinguished the campfire.

Ash drifted down, and everyone waited for what would come next. Around Bromley, hawks circled in neat figure-eights, searching for targets. At his gesture, they dispersed. Only a pair of eyes remained visible from the goblin. After a soft snap of his fingers, he became visible. The wraiths had vanished.

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"Someone come quickly!" a soldier cried out.  
Others also shouted for help.

“Any wounded?” asked Ivy.

“Dead!” came the reply from near the campfire. “Three of our comrades will not return home,” the captain reported, head bowed.

They had been butchered by the homunculi, unable to defend themselves amid the wraiths’ shrieking. There were other injuries as well. A hussar had nearly had his leg severed, the broken bone visible beneath a terrible gash. He groaned, half-conscious. Arlo rushed to his side.

“Ivy, Oly! I need juniper ash and blue mould, you know what for! Hurry, his leg can be saved. No major artery was cut, his blood still holds. Soldiers! Bring bandages, lots of them!”

The two rangers plunged into the thicket, each with a torch. Meanwhile, the druid set a pot of water to boil, then ran to the severely injured soldier. He laid his hands on the wounded leg and began to murmur under his breath. The bleeding soon ceased.

While the soldiers cut branches and twigs to fashion makeshift stretchers, half a dozen injured were in no condition to walk. Meanwhile, the necromancer came to, looking around with a foggy gaze.

“As I am still alive, I assume we prevailed,” he began in a weary voice.

The night passed under a sombre mood. They decided not to move on, but double the watch instead. Wraiths rarely attack a caravan twice in succession, especially if they were defeated the first time.

In the morning, Arlo let his people rest as long as they wished. It was noon before they set out again. The wagons had enough space for the injured soldier to lie down, and Arlo applied a freshly prepared magical concoction to the wound.



Arlo was a grandmaster of healing magic, his knowledge renowned far and wide, especially since he had tended to the wounded almost single-handedly during the pirate wars while still a child. At just ten years old, he was admitted to the Guild of Magi, and by fifteen, he was already practicing at the conductor level. Now, he murmured spells from the ancient Herbal School, with which the soldier could regain his health within a few days. Though he looked worn and appeared apathetic, he claimed to be free of pain.

“You’re doing well, my friend, strong as a bear, and resilient as a stag. You’ll be on your feet by tomorrow.”

Though a path cut through the wilderness at this place, the reality proved far more nuanced. It could scarcely be called a path, more a trail where cobblestones jugged out here and there, causing more stumbling than aiding their journey. The cutlass and the axes were all in use, and even Beldon grumbled vehemently. Two soldiers still needed to be carried on stretchers, one of whom had developed a fever. Arlo bustled among them, providing drink and food, and occasionally pressing his hand to their chests as he murmured words of healing.

The weather was no kinder to them, with large snowflakes falling from the sky, slowly turning the landscape from grey to white. From a bird’s eye view, the picturesque land was bisected by the river, indicating that by the next day they could reach the tower. Curious eyes watched the marching column from the depths of the forest. Sounds of animals rustling, crows cawing, owls hooting, and deer leaping up were heard. They moved in utter stillness, and during rests, even the snowflakes seemed to make noise as they settled. Hardly anyone was in the mood for conversation; most just stared

ahead. After lunch, the smell of pipe smoke and beer wafted through the tents, a pleasure permitted by the old mage to ease the tension.

The last night before reaching their destination passed uneventfully and quietly. Only the crackling of the campfire and the occasional snorting of horses punctuated the silence. Among Xaldimárr's practices was a humble spell with which he could conjure hot lava in the center of the tent, allowing them to sleep comfortably despite the cold outside. Those who found sleep elusive watched the cauldron-sized glowing molten mass for a while and the air quivering above it.

\* \* \*

By the next day, they had reached the river, and to their surprise, remnants of an old weir protruded from the riverbed, allowing them to cross without difficulty. A quarter of an hour later, Orman called out loudly from the front of the column:

"I see the goal!"

Barely an arrow's flight away, a blackened tower loomed above the trees. A while later, Turrim Concidit, the Fallen Tower, dramatically emerged before them. After unloading their gear, they unhitched the horses from the wagons and stood silently, gazing at the ruinous structure. It towered six stories high, with long wings stretching to the east and north. Of the castle's original towers, one had completely collapsed, and the other bore jagged battlements on its crumbling top. Here and there, beams jutted from the walls, many charred black. Vegetation had forcefully invaded from the opposite side, with roots splitting the stones in a display of nature's power. Where the company stood, a broad clearing

offered an ideal campsite. Among the deciduous oaks, a few pines, junipers, and other evergreen shrubs were visible. From the top of one oak, a curious scops-owl watched the detachment. The normally nocturnal creature piqued Ivy's interest. It was not the first sign that many things in this region operated abnormally.

"The animals are strange and different here," she murmured.

The building had two longer wings that opened perpendicular to each other, with the still-standing tower rising at the angle formed by their junction. Smaller buildings stood within the embrace of the wings, perhaps once serving as quarters for the servants. A dilapidated stable, a well, a building reminiscent of a small barracks. A chapel also found a place in the courtyard. Once, it must have been a truly splendid domain out here in the wilderness. Where the vegetation had not completely dominated, traces of paths radiating outward were still visible. Perhaps this castle had once been a centre of something. Many rocks jutted out around the complex, almost encircling it, and perhaps this was a factor in choosing the site for construction. Although the river was very close, and the well in the centre of the courtyard was impressive in size, they also found a ditch system that evidently served as a secondary water supply. Slowly, they circled what they could, and a good hour was spent in this way. The rear was bordered by an impenetrable thicket, and they sensed that axes would be needed there.

It would take days to thoroughly search through the ruins. After yesterday's snowfall, brilliant sunshine now melted the fallen precipitation into slush. A complete stillness and silence dominated the landscape.

“Do not let the snow melt away! Pack it into barrels, so we’ll need to fetch less water from the river,” the captain commanded.

Oly stood beside a juniper, contentedly nibbling on its berries. Unaware and curious, a soldier plucked one and popped it into his mouth.

“No!” the ranger admonished. “Not that one! It’s poisonous. There, try the other one. See how they differ? This one is bluish, the other more purple. Never eat blue berries from an evergreen! Though I doubt even the purple would suit your taste.”

“How can he eat those?” Marden watched the scene, bewildered.

Arlo simply shook his head in response as the soldier spat out the berry with a sour face.

“Blimey, you are sick...” he wiped his mouth.

Oly chuckled heartily, stuffing a handful of the dreadful fruit into his mouth.

The druid and Ivy pulled out a large cauldron, into which they packed vegetables and spices they had brought along, then three soldiers returned from the forest with several pheasants.

“Would you mind adding the meat only at the end?” Oly burped into his fist. “I’m in the mood for a fine vegetable soup, the kind only you can make, dear sister.”

“Of course, if you’d move away with your juniper stench, dear brother. Must you always gobble such inedible horrors? Eat some bark instead, at least it’s odourless.”

Meanwhile, under the leadership of Orman and Beldon, the soldiers began constructing a makeshift log cabin. With many hands, the building progressed quickly. By evening, the

columns and the frame of the roof were in place.

"This will be finished by tomorrow," the dwarf announced. "The trees here are strong and straight. The animals may not, but at least the plants evidently thrive in this area. We'll bring some stones here too, and it will make a fine lodging. With this and the tents, we should be quite comfortable."

\* \* \*

That evening, something alarming occurred. They were awakened by a man's bone-chilling scream at around one in the morning. One of the hussars sat bolt upright on his cot, his eyes glassy and staring into the void, screaming incessantly. It took a long while before they managed to rouse him, at which point he awoke but the terror remained in his eyes. He refused to speak, merely trembling like an aspen leaf. Arlo gave him something that swiftly put him to sleep. By morning, he remembered nothing.

Everyone was allowed to sleep as long as they wished. Hagley, valuing rest over haste, especially after the frightful incident of the night, appeared in a ceremonious and official mood, or perhaps he simply wished to pass leadership to his superior, for he approached the captain with the following words:

"Hail Captain! Our forces are ready to explore the secret of this ruin. We are the troopers of Arania and we will open that chest hidden in the upper turret. Our horses are grazing on the field that surrounds the castle. Waiting for further orders!"

"I understand, Corporal! Rocks and bricks everywhere,



so be careful! This is the Manor of the Ancient Catty, and eyes look on us from all over. Hungry teeth are awaiting you all over and over. The Old Spirit shall be with you and have a good luck in the fight!”

They clasped hands and pressed their chests together in solidarity.

They set about their task, then the captain turned back:  
“Hagley... what chest?”

He shrugged, then remarked with a smile:

“Beats me... But it sounded good, didn’t it? Anyway, I suppose the prophecy must be locked away in something. Captain! What fight?”

Oly, Beldon, Bromley, and a few soldiers went to the rear of the building to start clearing the underbrush. Led by Arlo, others scouted the courtyard buildings, and after some time, decided to enter them. Large stones had to be moved to open the entrances. Doors and windows were almost non-existent; where they did exist, they had to be opened with care, as they almost immediately fell apart. A separate team followed along the ditch. Here, too, the axe and cutlass were put to work. The goblin, Ivy, and Orman scanned the forest, their task appearing the least exhausting.

The group exploring the buildings was the first to find something of interest. At first glance, it appeared to be some sort of temple, but the structure resembling a totem tower turned out to be a chimney. This was indeed a wizard’s dwelling, and no ordinary one. The shelves were laden with cobwebs and thick dust covered the vials and scrolls scattered in great disarray. The chimney rooted in a fireplace, with additional shelves and tables in the side rooms. Further papers and books were neatly stored in drawers.

“How has so much remained intact here? I mean, to such a degree,” Marden began. “This mess seems more the work of animals that have wandered in. No man has set foot here, but I wonder why?”

“I suspect, my son, that it is because we are the first mad enough to venture here,” his master replied.

“This place is a treasure trove, Master Arlo.”

“Right you are. We shall stay here a while.”

He then lifted a vial from the shelf, which, although tipped over, had its contents untouched, thanks to the careful wax sealing around the stopper.

“I recognize this by its colour alone. There lives a jellyfish in the deep seas that paralyzes everything it touches. Extracting its distinctive yellow-green essence is one of the greatest dangers I know, as the creature must still be alive during the process and must not perish from it, for the fluid extracted thereafter will not function. Its preservation also requires further rare substances. I wonder what they needed this for...”

The boy watched with wide eyes; his face flushed with childlike excitement.

“Do you reckon they succeeded?”

The old man winked conspiratorially.

“Most assuredly. The contents of the vial move freely, no signs of cloudiness. A single drop of this could knock out an elephant for hours.”

\* \* \*

Journal of Imperial Captain Nerva Gordianus:

The Empire's Year 2537, the 2nd day of the Frost-

Month:

*Corporal Hagley relinquished command to me today. I accepted the honour with mixed feelings, but given the circumstances, my choice was limited. It seemed that Grandmaster Arlo was not perturbed by this change. Although this place is beautiful, a chill runs down my spine here, and I believe I am not alone in this sensation. I know little of it, save what my companions have recounted on our journey from Hirend. The soldiers, and even the horses, are nervous; we feel as though unseen eyes constantly watch us. Even when the sun shines, a heavy atmosphere settles over us, making us anxious for nightfall and each dawn brings a new relief.*

*Upon arrival, we surveyed everything visible in the vicinity. Some were eager to penetrate the corridors and even the tower itself, but I deemed it unwise to do so just yet. Until we know what awaits us inside, should we need to flee outward, I prefer not to let anyone in.*

*Our wizards found very exciting and useful things in one building, which also served as a mage's residence and workshop. It was once a repository for numerous herbal remedies, poisons, miraculous liquids, herbs, wands, and the like, now all in great disarray. A wild orchard still bears fruit on the northern quarter. We saw this from the fallen fruits, those that the herbivorous animals had left behind.*

*The manor's stable remained in such good condition that we housed our horses there. We have plenty of hay and fodder, and with the snow melted, they can graze freely for now. I admonished a few soldiers for their negligent handling of the horse gear and improper treatment of the animals. They acknowledged the validity of my concerns. On such a barren*

*land, the horse's health and vigour equals the soldier's well-being. It's crucial to be strict in such matters.*

*Orman's party found almost nothing in the forest, except for a cave. They ventured about a hundred paces inside before encountering several forks and decided it was best to cease exploring for the time being. Ivy is concerned about the odd behaviour of the animals, suspecting that some curse on this place disturbs their way of life. This sentiment is sensed by the people too, and indeed, I feel it myself. I hope we can complete our task soon and begin our journey home. Ivy also noted the presence of many non-native plants here, suggesting significant horticultural activity once took place.*

*A water ditch leads to the castle, apparently channelling river water here. Corporal Hagley's group followed it and found sluices and watchtowers, now inoperable but once likely served the inhabitants well. Oh, how I wish I could see this place in its heyday. I could not wish for a better life than what might have been here. Ample drinking water, lush fields, and the forest enveloping the vast courtyard like an armchair. Rocks rise all around.*

*Now the evening is upon us, silent, but it is a fearful silence.*

\* \* \*

*They began the exploration of the castle starting with the east-facing wing. This was a two-storey building, about one hundred and fifty metres long, with service rooms on the ground floor and rooms filled with chambers on the upper floor. The main entrance opened on the opposite side of the tower, at its end, and it was through this that they entered.*

Since most of the doors had fallen or rotted away, the originally dark corridor now bathed in light, which was made even more mysterious by the rays of light in the gentle morning mist. Apart from the druid, the rangers, and four armed guards, everyone entered. They began examining the rooms in groups of three. The entire operation lasted only a few hours and yielded nothing. Debris, decayed planks, dangling beams were everywhere, and all objects seemed entirely devoid of interest.

“This here,” Beldon began, pointing to a cabinet that still stood intact with its sides and doors, “is from the Rimula Wilderness.”

“Only there do such oaks grow that once processed into furniture or building material, withstand the ravages of time for centuries. What craftsmanship, what noble material,” the dwarf caressed it fondly.

“Forgive me, my dear sir, but I am but a simple soldier, and I am very eager to leave this place soon. So, if you do not mind, let us continue...”

Beldon was a bit embarrassed.

“Oh, yes, yes. Of course, brave sir! Let us continue the work, you are right!”

Kitchens, baths, a library room, storerooms, a lounge, and a small theatre with chairs and a stage all appeared as if they had been abandoned in a panic. In the kitchen, a pot with petrified remnants of food indicated it might have been left there about a hundred and fifty years ago.

“What in the blazes happened here?” Orman asked. “Did these people flee or simply vanish into thin air? If they fled, from whom? And if so, why did the ones they fled from leave everything behind? There are quite valuable things here... Look at this!” he picked up what appeared at first glance to be



a precious metal timepiece, possibly inlaid with gemstones. In another drawer, he found coins.

Many of the library's books were starting to decay, and those that hadn't were losing pages, so Arlo ordered that no one touch anything there. Although he did not really believe they would find any valuable documents, he did not rule it out entirely, either.

## Chapter 6

# Exploration of the Tower

On the third day, under the leadership of Corporal Hagley and Captain Gordianus, two teams set out to explore the tower. There were staircases on each side of the building, interconnected at each floor by a corridor. The tower itself had a base area of twenty-by-twenty metres and contained ten to fifteen rooms on each level, varying greatly in size and shape. Even the sweep through the wings had revealed this place to be a labyrinth; now, with six floors to map, they truly felt daunted. The day was unusually gloomy, a near-dusk enveloping the land. Even the whiteness of the fog failed to aid them, which seemed rather grey on this day. It did not feel cold, but everything was damp, their joints ached, and their lungs laboured.

Corporal Hagley's brigade included Arlo, Oly, Xaldimárr, and Bromley. In the other group, Ivy, Beldon, Nyhund, and Orman accompanied the captain, each team further bolstered by five swordsmen. The rest kept watch from below. Naturally, the archers, not much use in enclosed spaces, stood ready outside. The staircases were narrow, allowing only single-file progression upwards. A few of them climbed atop the crumbling roofs of the wings and courtyard buildings, from where they could have a better view of the tower. Marden, with the archers, kept watch from outside, his stick and explosive vials ready to be used.

Under Beldon's direction, a few skilled soldiers constructed two long ladders, which they secured up to the

third-floor balconies in case they needed to ascend quickly.

On the ground floor and first floor, they encountered little of note. These were likely the estate's grandest rooms, primarily tailored for the comfort of the host and his family. There were also a multitude of guest rooms and ornate dining halls. Decay was at work here; once-luxurious velvet curtains hung in tatters, finely crafted sofas and armchairs were rotting in the damp sea air. In some places, rats and other rodents scurried away at their approach; in others, pigeons flew out the windows.

"Arlo!" Xaldimárr called back, or rather down, "Look at this!"

A corpse lay at the junction of the third-floor staircase and the corridor. They didn't need to get closer to determine that this person had not died recently. But why hadn't the wild animals touched it?

"If it doesn't bother anyone... well, I can tell you exactly when this person died," the necromancer said slyly.

Some exchanged glances, Arlo shrugged, but Oly, looking at Bromley, said:

"Master, shall we not enjoy the view from the south side?"

"Yes, yes, let the mage do his work."

"My thoughts exactly. Come on, please..."

Xaldimárr raised his totem staff, and the following words escaped his lips:

*"Ptóma apokalýpsei ta mystiká sou!"*

The corpse moved almost imperceptibly, then a tremor ran through it. The corridor darkened, and strange human voices echoed from afar. One of the soldiers joined Oly and the others, while the rest merely gaped in bewilderment. Arlo, with

a grave expression, awaited the outcome of the examination. The necromancer's eyes rolled back, and he stood motionless as a statue. This lasted but half a minute, but finally the darkness dispersed, and he spoke:

“This man has lain here frozen in his own blood for about forty years. A wild beast killed him but did not touch him afterwards. It was likely a feline, perhaps a lynx.”

“A lynx?” a soldier exclaimed in surprise. “They do not attack humans. Even a fully-grown male would struggle to overpower a man.”

“Do not judge by your own measure, my friend,” Xaldimárr looked at him. “An average adult might flee in terror from such a creature, and instinctively, it might attack.”

As they ascended to the higher levels of the tower, everything seemed to grow darker. It was too early for such gloom, but somehow the light began to fade from the world. The members of the two teams blinked in confusion at each other, not understanding the nature of this phenomenon.

From one end of the corridor linking the staircases, Oly called to the other team:

“Have you noticed this? What’s happening with the light?”

“The thing is, there isn’t any,” came the reply from the goblin. “My word, this is a strange illusion. Whoever crafted it knows their art.”

By the time they reached the top floor, it was pitch dark around them. Looking out the windows, the landscape below lay in its nocturnal state. Arlo conjured light with his staff.

“I’ve never seen anything like this in my life,” he remarked. “Let’s search what we can, then get the hell out of here.”

It was then that Hagley shouted.

“The chest!”

They looked at him in puzzlement.

“I mentioned it in jest to Gordianus in the courtyard, and now, behold, here it is!” he pointed at a large and ornate chest. “Captain! We’ve found a chest, come over to this side.”

They had discovered an ancient but intact storage chest, its large, rounded lid secured with heavy wrought iron bands. No lock, no padlock. Nothing else was in the room, only their shadows danced on the walls as light poured from the end of the mage’s staff. The corporal circled the chest, and just then, the other detachment arrived.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, down in the courtyard, Marden surveyed the tower with keen eyes.

“What might be happening? It is too quiet,” he said to an archer.

The other simply shrugged.

“I don’t like this.”

He whistled long and sharply. The archer shouted the names of their superiors into the fog. No response came. The unusual calm had been noticed by others as well, as more began to whistle and call out.

“Ladders to the balconies. We’re going up.”

“And the camp? The horses? The gear?” asked a soldier.

“You’re right, four stay here to guard: two archers and two swordsmen. Let’s go, up the ladders!”

Initially, there was a hint of uncertainty on their faces,



partly because they had to take orders from a sixteen-year-old mage apprentice. Nevertheless, soon nearly all the soldiers had entered the building through the balconies on opposing sides of the tower. Marden shouted his master's name into the dense twilight. Meanwhile, the soldiers also noticed the darkened sky and began murmuring among themselves.

"We're on the roof level! Wait there!" came the reply from above.

Hagley stood next to the chest and then declared:

"Warriors! A relic held in this chest may help us to revive our empire! I, Hagley who was sent by the King Winslow open this box now. – At this point, Arlo raised his eyebrows hearing the king's name. – "Let us see what is hiding in it."

He slowly lifted the lid. What happened next unfolded almost instantly. A loud screech sounded, akin to that made by wraiths, but this time from a different source. A strange rustling started above, dust fell, and the noise stopped. Instead, scraping and clattering came from here and there, and large spiders with flashing eyes began to descend on thick webs, their mandibles clicking. Their abdomens were covered with thick fur and dripped corrosive saliva through their fangs. There was no doubt these creatures were not there to welcome them. As one descended, it lunged towards the druid, who just had time to dodge the flashing stinger.

One of the swordsmen, quick to react, drove his dagger precisely into the head of the attacker, between its eyes, causing it to tumble down and die instantly. Meanwhile, the others recovered. Two additional soldiers acted, reducing the number of monsters by two. More of the creatures from the ground level started advancing towards them with flashing eyes

and clacking mandibles.

“Down the stairs!” roared the captain.

But it was not so simple; due to the narrow space, they could only move single file, leaving the one at the rear to face the creatures alone. A shield-bearing soldier covered the others. He struck just in time, wounding the beast but in his haste tumbled down the stairs, and soon the entire group lay sprawled in the more spacious foyer one level below. At least this had the advantage of not facing the attackers in the cramped attic space, and as they descended, the group managed to form a battle line.

Just then, Marden reached the top with the soldiers. Most of the swordsmen, amidst loud cries, charged up the stairs, slashing whatever came down.

“I can’t get a clear shot!” shouted one of their comrades, who had also brought up a bow. “I’ll hit our own.”

“This is close combat terrain; it’s tough for us here,” Arlo commented, then, struck by a sudden idea, he swung his staff and shouted into the fray, “*Gladii ardeant!*”

At this command, the soldiers’ swords began to emit flames, which sizzled and spattered as they seared the spiders.

“Back, back!” ordered Gordianus. “Wizards, descend! Warriors, retreat! We’re moving down one level!”

On the slightly wider stairs, they could retreat faster from the overwhelming force.

Meanwhile, Marden rushed to one end of the quickly forming front line, where he threw a small wooden bobbin, around which a long strip unwound, into the space between the attackers and the defenders.

“Close your eyes! Now!!!”

He struck the end of the strip with his stick. The

soldiers turned away, and the strip flashed brilliantly, filling the room with a choking smell. Many of the spiders were disoriented by the sudden light. Beldon lifted a fallen beam and, with a mighty yell, hurled it among them, knocking several down.

Then the necromancer stepped forward and resurrected a few of them. These, snarling, turned on their own kind. That was enough for everyone to escape from that floor. The attackers' strength was broken, and within a few minutes, they all burst out through the main entrance of the tower into the open.

However, just then, the leaves in the forest began to tremble, and several dozen masked warriors leaped out, swinging maces, battle-axes, large shields, and other weapons. Without a second thought, they began charging towards the surprised and narrowly escaped group, heralding the onset of a new, fierce battlefield. They were no more than a hundred steps away, and the turn of events caught them all completely unprepared. The captain tried to rally a formation, but Hagley saw that there was no solution here.

"Ambush! Run for dear life to save one's hide!" – the corporal bellowed.

Arlo's group sprinted towards the wagons, from behind which a few archers began to fire. Marden hurled a vial that exploded with a loud bang, scattering glowing embers among them. His master pulled him back behind a wagon just in time to avoid a spear. Orman was not so lucky. Standing firm against an assailant with a mace, he was just raising his sword when a flying dagger struck his thigh. He struck down, beheading the enemy, but the next dagger hit his chest. Staggering, he dropped to his knees. With a determined look,

he stared into the eyes of an onrushing figure and with his last effort thrust his sword through the attacker. Then, looking back towards the wagons where Marden watched in despair, he said with a painful smile:

“I had a good life, may yours be even better!”

With that, he fell to the ground.

Shock etched on Arlo’s face, but there was no time for grief. Bromley also saw the gatekeeper’s death and roared aloud. He leapt from cover, and with a circular motion of his arm in the air, wolves appeared and threw themselves at the enemy, creating a brief disarray. The goblin cast a blinding curse on them, but it was not enough. The archers and two rangers rushed to the top of a side wing, which immediately collapsed under them, and Oly sank up to his waist in the shingles. Cursing, he gave up trying to extricate himself and started shooting arrows from his precarious position. The downpour of arrows from about a dozen archers broke the momentum of the attackers, but it became too risky to shoot into the melee.

Arlo felt powerless, unwilling to risk hitting a comrade with a spell, so he only shouted into the melee:

“Back, back! To the forest, come!”

Shortly after, the survivors rushed towards the woods lining the southern edge of the courtyard. Oly was dragged out from the wreckage. Their pursuers, having thrown their spears, were now only brandishing close-combat weapons as they chased the fleeing group. By the time everyone had reached the cover of the forest, the old mage struck the ground with his staff, causing a thick column of smoke to rise from the earth, separating the two clashing sides. Xaldimárr ran through the smoke and shouted towards the attackers:

*"Ulcerinum!"*

His staff traced a circle in the air, from which green, foul-smelling droplets began to fall, covering the advancing horde. Where it touched them, burning ulcers sprouted on their skin. Screaming in agony, they scattered in terror, then turned around and fled from whence they came.

\* \* \*

The field suddenly fell silent. The remnants of the company, panting and ready to spring, blinked at one another in disbelief. Slowly, Arlo began to edge towards the bushes to scout the clearing. Some followed him. Half a minute later, it dawned on them that the battle had ended, their mysterious assailants had vanished like smoke. The druid and the two rangers hurried around first to assess the terrain and account for the wounded and the dead.

"Gods, Orman!" Beldon's voice boomed, and he rushed to the gatekeeper's side, then to everyone's astonishment, he bowed his head. "It's over..."

"So much death... So many of our comrades lie here on the ground," the old wizard surveyed the scene with a heavy heart. "And who were these assailants?" He gestured to an unknown fallen foe.

They all wore similar gear, differing only in their armaments. Dark, light cloaks with minimal armour underneath, their faces covered, only their eyes visible. One of them was still alive, but as they approached, he quickly consumed the contents of a vial. Within half a minute, his eyes rolled over.

"Don't you die on me here, or I'll kill you myself!" the



dwarf shook him by the shoulders. Arlo placed a hand on his shoulder and, shaking his head, left him there.

Meanwhile, Bromley and Ivy began tending to the moaning wounded. The corporal watched the grim scene for a while, then looked questioningly at the druid who shook his head. He went over to Arlo, thinking he might need something. The mage looked at him uncertainly, so he said:

“We need to disappear. If we stay, we may all perish here,” he looked at him.

A profound sadness etched across the old man's face. He simply said:

“I know.”

“Where is the captain?” shouted an archer.

Gordianus was gone. That much was becoming clear.

“What more can happen now?” Marden exclaimed. “We need to find him.”

Many were ready to set out immediately. Oly cautioned them against dispersing, so the corporal sent out teams to search. About an hour later, one of the teams found a note that read:

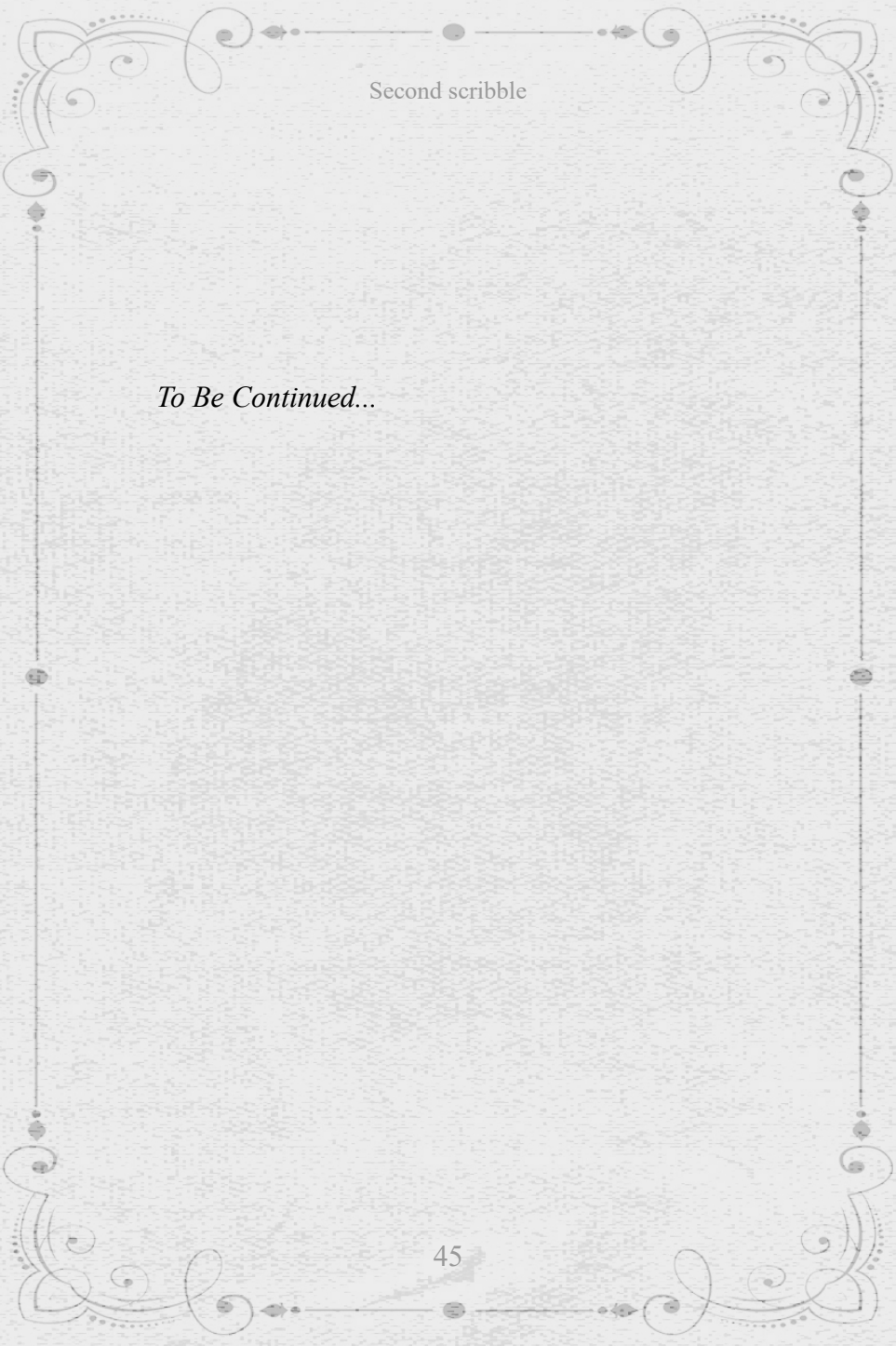
*Your companion has been taken by us. Do not pursue! Leave this place immediately! You have one night to rest and bury your dead, but if you are still here before sunset tomorrow, we will end all of you. What you came for is not here.*

“What was in the chest?” Arlo looked at the corporal.

He paused for a moment, then said:

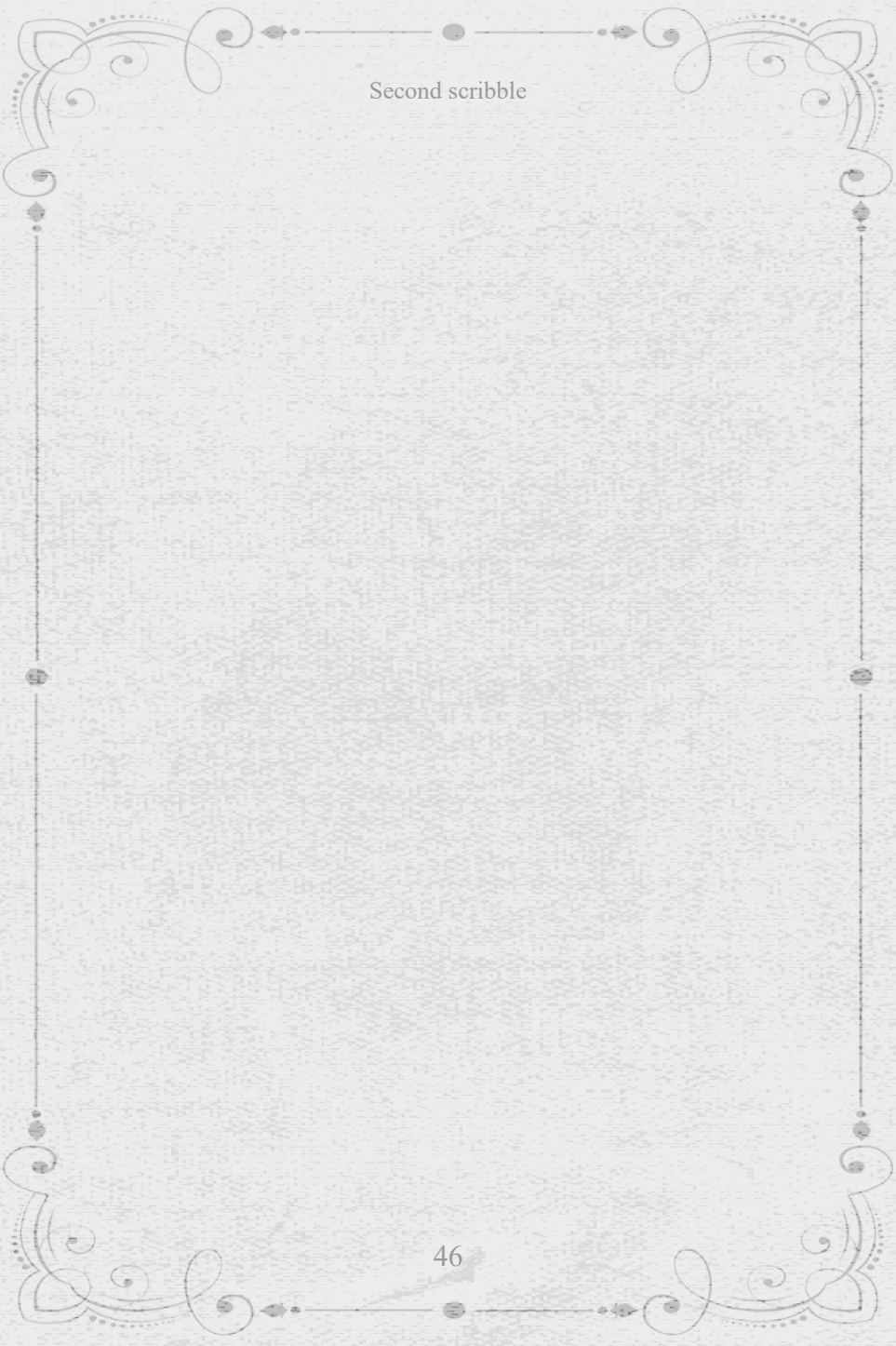
“This.”

And he handed a scroll to the mage.



Second scribble

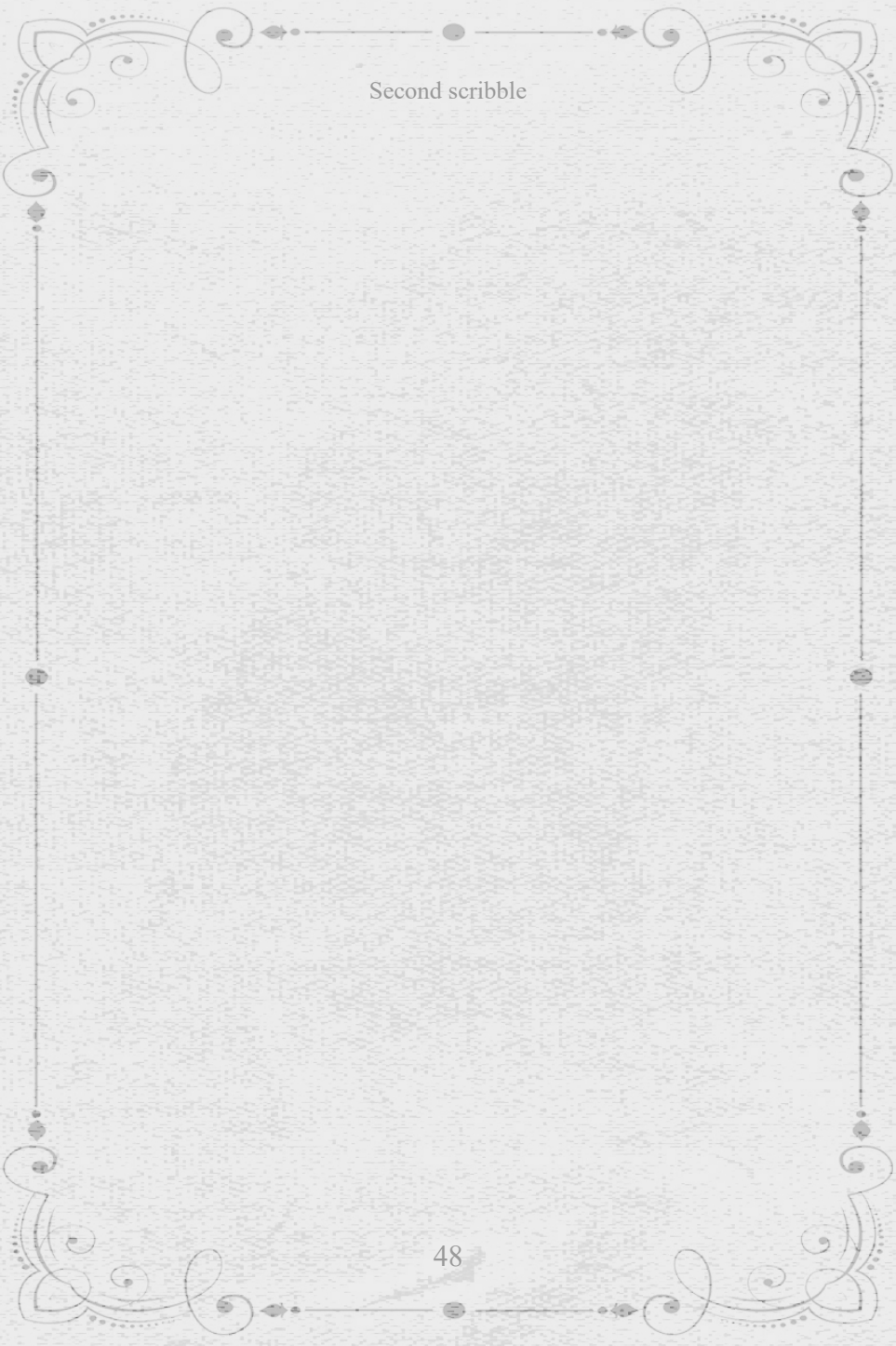
*To Be Continued...*



Second scribble



Second scribble



Second scribble