Chapter 7

Night Wanderings in the Wilderness

Arlo unwound the parchment and, with a countenance clouded by concern, began to read. Glancing up, he beckoned Hagley with an inviting gesture toward a chair.

“Sit, I think, for what is written here is long.”

2288, Somewhere in Summer

We shall survive as long as our provisions last. From the sunken city, phantoms and the undead swarm to us. Our nights are oppressive and fraught with tension. The days, shrouded in fog, offer no solace and are as disheartening as they are damp and redolent with the stench of mould. We have been under siege for three weeks now. It’s unclear who orchestrates this, as no demands have been made of us yet. No one may enter or leave. Yet my greater worry is the unnerving quiet; it seems as though outsiders know that now is no time to approach.

An arrow was shot through my study window, a message attached to it informing us that we have three days to evacuate the tower. Naturally, I have no intention of complying. I informed the staff that anyone wishing to leave may do so at their discretion. A few have departed, and of them, I have heard nothing since. My blacksmith, his assistant, the stable master, and several others chose to stay. Regrettably,

my dear steward and friend, Adalfarus, chose to leave. A day has passed since the message. The fog appears to thicken, and the rotting-ragged horde continues to patrol around my castle, yet they still do not harm us. From the window, I see those who gather their belongings and leave are allowed passage. They watch with glassy eyes as one approaches, parting their ranks to let them pass.

With two days remaining until the deadline, my friend Urkond the mage, who still stands with me, and I have decided on a course of action. Seeing little chance of surviving beyond tomorrow, we will seal the chest with a potent warding spell. It cannot be opened, broken, or moved by anyone, except in the presence of a descendant of A'Nagtoth.

Arlo looked up. His gaze drifted towards Hagley, pondering whom the writer of these lines might be referring to. The corporal waited patiently. The mage continued to read.

"Thou who hast opened the chest! What ye seek, here it will not be found, and thus must I beg thy forgiveness, dear true-hearted soul, for the lies I previously told. I merely serve to distract our foes, and with this, my role in this tale ends. But do thou seek the prophecy, and find it! Believe thou art nearer to it than thou might think. Venture again into the ancient oak wood of 800 years! Trust that there, amidst the acorns, thou wilt discover wonders! Should the heir of A'Nagtoth be among you, thou shalt know what must be done!"

The last day. Complete darkness has fallen, and silence envelops the land. The sun should have risen on the horizon by

now, but it will not again, I know. Urkond has cast the strongest protective and concealing spells around the estate, but I feel that the doom to come will not strike us from without nor in the form of a sword, but will devour us from within. What follows next? That I cannot say, but here ends the history of Brutus Galenus. A curse rests upon this castle, one not even the mighty knowledge of the shaman can lift. May the Old Spirit guard anyone who chances here again.

* * *

On a branch of night, a solitary rider sped towards Ash Peak, his approach stirring a minor commotion among the gatekeepers. Once he identified himself, he was allowed entry. His foam-flecked horse trembled from exhaustion. After handing his steed over to the stablemaster, he made a beeline for the officers' quarters. Passing the courtyard well, he paused to gulp water from the bucket.

Among the garrison was an officer named Gordianus, specifically Nero Gordianus, the twin brother of the captain who had vanished in the north, also holding the rank of captain. Nero's stomach clenched at the sight of the approaching figure, a swordsman from the fallen tower, sent ahead by the retreating group to bring news of their imminent arrival. The officer listened in silence to the roughly five-minute report, and after the swordsman concluded, he said:

"Sit down. You look terrible," then he stood up, looking concerned, and asked, "Please tell me, is my brother still alive?"

The swordsman was at the limits of his endurance, nearly tumbling from the chair as he sat.

“Captain, we had opened the chest and what happened was a bloody nightmare... Spiders everywhere... Their eyes fulgurated. Their eyes... That was a kind of curse or something... I don’t want to hear anything about that turret... Please Captain... Let me leave! I am very tired right now...”

The other officer had turned to look out the window to the north. As the swordsman recovered, he finished:

“Your brother... they took him. We do not know where he is.”

Gordianus closed his eyes for a moment, gathered himself, then turned around.

“You’re a brave soldier. Go, get some rest!”

As the messenger departed, the captain rubbed his eyes, coughed, and attached his sword to his side. He left the room and strode along the upper corridor to stop before a door to an attic room. He knocked, and at the shout, he entered.

Inside sat the captain who had directed Hagley at the Tower of the Magi’s nocturnal meeting. He was one of the station officers of the Empire’s Inner Harbour, the frigate captain of the Red Tempest. During the winter, when shipping activities generally slowed, he served in the capital.

“Nero?”

“Faustus, do you trust my instincts?”

“I do.”

The captain exhaled, then continued.

“A messenger has arrived from Hagley’s group. The mission failed; they were beaten. They have dead and wounded. They have started back towards Ash Peak. Please, let us ride out to meet them, for I have a premonition of something bad.”

“What are you thinking?”

"There's no time, but I promise to report everything once we've returned."

The captain stood up, then looked at him sternly.

"But make sure you return! Do you hear me?" he called after the departing figure. From beyond the door, the response came:

"We will return!"

* * *

In the eerie silence of the tower's upper level, a cloaked figure stepped through the doorway, red lights glimmering where his eyes should have been. Three hooded men trailed behind him. Before them stood the large chest that Corporal Hagley had opened the previous day. The cloaked figure's eyes gleamed, and he slowly turned to face his companions. His mouth opened slightly, and in a whispering, rasping voice that seemed to reach beyond the grave, he spoke:

"The captured soldier claimed that the chest was not found."

His speech was slow, as if uttered by a phantom. The three men began to tremble.

"My lord, we brought it straight to you..."

The cloaked figure raised his hand; his skin was withered and cracked, not of a human hue but more reminiscent of an ancient, greyed root.

"Are you saying that no one has come up here since the battle?"

The one who had spoken earlier remained silent.

"I see... Your task was to secure what emerged from this chest. Is there anything else you can tell me that might be of

use?"

The other merely shook his head. At this, the cloaked figure lifted his hand and spread his fingers wide. He brought his palm close to his mouth and blew a chilling breath towards the trembling figure. The man collapsed to his knees, his body shaking uncontrollably. His head tilted back, his limbs began to crack, and a deep groan rose from his throat.

"If you fail me again, we will repeat this process. Not a bone in your body will remain intact, and it will be your last day among the living. Now, go immediately and pursue their caravan, and retrieve what should have been secured."

The three figures stumbled out of the tower, gasping for air once they reached the outside.

"We cannot afford another misstep like that," remarked the one who had been rebuked. "We must pursue the intruders immediately."

"What about the officer?" asked another.

After a brief moment of consideration, the apparent leader decided.

"We'll take him with us."

With that, they sprinted into the forest and soon reached the cave that Orman, Ivy, and Nyhund had found earlier. Following a few passageways, they arrived at a cavernous chamber. The leader touched a large stone that slightly differed in hue, which rumbled loudly as it moved inward and then slid aside, settling into place. They entered a room illuminated by torches, where dozens of armed men sat around tables, with an inn-like structure on one side and stalactites hanging from the ceiling. Part of the floor was paved with stones, while elsewhere, furniture rested on compacted earth. The crowd was loudly laughing and jeering, interspersed with snorts and

aggressive shouts.

As the leader strode past the rows of tables in a disturbed manner, some called out to him.

“Shut your gob!” he snapped back.

He approached the person behind the bar.

“Listen, Krak! Where is the officer we captured?”

“What do I know!”

“Then you better start collecting the part of your brain you haven’t drowned in drink yet. You have two minutes to find out. Get moving!”

The other grimaced and left with a scornful look. The leader reached over the bar, poured himself a mug of ale, and drained it in one gulp, belching indifferently afterward.

“How did it go?” someone at a table asked.

Suppressing another belch, he replied:

“How did it go? How do you think? If you clowns hadn’t failed to go up the tower, things would’ve gone much smoother. Because those newcomers did indeed open that blasted chest and emptied it. Now, gather this rabble and arm yourselves, we’re moving out. I’m just waiting for the officer.”

* * *

In the chilly afternoon wind, sixty mounted soldiers rode out from Ash Peak towards the west. By sunset, they had reached the Elephant Rocks. There, Nero commanded a halt. A quick bivouac, a campfire, a hearty dinner, a cup of wine for each, and sleep under thick blankets in a grove. Thanks to rigorous drills and the excellent equipment provided by the Guild of Warriors, they set off on the great road the next morning with renewed vigour. By the following evening, they

were nearing the borders of Aranea. From there, the journey became more challenging as Nero was unsure of the direction, but fortunately, they found a trail cut through the thicket from a week before. Travelling along the riverbank, they began a slow trot to avoid any accidents befalling horse or rider as twilight approached. He decided they would not stop now, as the team could arrive from the opposite direction at any moment.

"Sir!" called a sergeant. "Shouldn't we all light torches? The weather is clear, and the light would carry far."

"Brilliant idea, my boy! Make it so!"

Within minutes, the countryside was bathed in light, and Nero pondered whether the wild and malevolent inhabitants of the forest might see this as a provocation. Weighing his options, he concluded that even if that were the case, it was preferable to risking some infernal mischance that would cause them to miss Hagley and his group. This was not his first night operation, and he sincerely hoped it would not be his last.

A harsh breeze struck their faces from afar, heightening the already daunting atmosphere into a soul-gripping experience. They proceeded in silence, save for the noise of hooves and occasional snorts from the horses. For nearly an hour, nothing happened, when a faint beam of light began to appear from the north. Squinting, they tried to discern details, but the distance and the flat terrain between them and the source of light made it impossible.

"Dismount!" ordered the sergeant.

From here, they proceeded on foot at a forced march. Should they be surprised, the horses would provide some cover. Moments later, a blast was heard, followed by a flash.

"Mount up again!" commanded the non-commissioned

officer, looking to the captain who nodded in agreement. “Full speed north! Take care of your horses and riders, and let no one fall behind!”

* * *

The sentries at the rear alerted the vanguard. After detonating the flasks left by Marden, they mounted their steeds and set off towards the column at a moderate pace, forming a protective line for those fleeing southward. Within two minutes, they rejoined the rest. It was clear they were being followed, perhaps even pursued. From that point, they sought to advance in utter secrecy, extinguishing any source of light and relying only on the moon’s glow. Hagley reasoned that a sudden assault would be less effective if the attackers lacked a defined target. The lights not only blinded them with their own torches but the noise of their galloping might prevent them from hearing their quarry in time. Yet the fact they dared to illuminate their path suggested that a possibly overwhelming force was in pursuit. Tense, drawn-out minutes followed, with the spellcasters and archers leading, and the melee fighters, including Beldon and Hagley, at the rear. Nyhund had requested to take up the rear position, his illusionary spells potentially useful in an ambush. The rangers, skilled in archery and possessing keener vision, watched from atop a wagon.

The lights behind them grew increasingly vivid, confirming that confrontation was inevitable. Their only hope lay in reaching the main road to accelerate their escape, perhaps finding refuge at the edge of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest. The terrain they navigated was effectively a narrow passage through dense underbrush, where a column of their

size could not easily hide.

Arlo, burdened with concern, leaned on his staff, careful to avoid the larger stones in the dark. He occasionally looked back, though he knew it was nearly futile. They soon passed the campsite where they had recently battled wraiths and homunculi. Weariness began to weigh heavily on them. The soldiers pressed on, but the wizards' bodies were not trained for such endurance. Hence, Hagley had directed Arlo, Bromley, and Nyhund onto a wagon. Marden continued on foot, his eyes scanning the murky path ahead.

As two hours passed, the horses occasionally neighed and snorted, while the men conversed quietly about this and that. The two rangers unwaveringly scanned the pitch-black horizon and the approaching lights. Ivy began to worry about another attack from the bizarre creatures of the forest, but instead, something else occurred.

From ahead, strange noises filtered back just as she was about to signal that the lights were intensifying. Oly was the first to perk up at the sounds. Not only his eyes, but his ears too were sharper than the others', despite years affected by liquor and magic mushrooms.

"Do you hear that?" he looked at Ivy.

"Yes," she replied, surprised. "The sound of hooves and metal... Great heavens, have they cut us off? But how?"

To their astonishment, laughter followed, then a bizarre whooping.

"What the devil?" Oly leapt atop a forward-moving wagon.

"Our own!" shouted a soldier from behind.

"Thank God!" Ivy sighed in relief.

Meanwhile, at the front, there was a great embracing

and shaking of hands.

"Never better timing, sir!" the corporal ran forward, pressing his chest against the sergeant's, just as he had done days ago with a man of similar appearance, of whom they now knew nothing. This injected a tinge of sadness into his joy. The other seemed to sense this, as his face darkened and he looked at him questioningly.

Hagley was about to speak, but the pace of events quickened.

"I think they'll be here within an hour," noted one soldier who had been escorting the rear guard. "The light from their torches is growing stronger."

The corporal simply said to the sergeant:

"Let's not give up hope yet. No one saw him fall."

They regrouped and decided to allow themselves a ten-minute respite. They drank a glass of wine each, quickly depleting their stock. The sixty cavalrymen also provided fresh provisions to the weather-beaten fugitives. Beldon might have bitten twice before a sizable loaf and a huge piece of smoked meat disappeared into his mouth. They dared not start a fire, relying only on the glow from a few pipes in this utterly grotesque situation and setting. Meanwhile, Oly drank his second glass of wine, for which there was simply no explanation, but no one was particularly concerned at the moment. Finally, they did light a fire, but only with a bit of straw to melt snow for the horses to drink. Arlo queried:

"What should we do?"

Beldon was immediately ready with an answer.

"Here are sixty valiant warriors sufficiently enraged. I say we meet them and carve them up for the vultures."

"Tempting," Hagley began, "and for Orman's sake, I'd

venture it, but there are two things we yet know not. First, their number; second, whether Gordianus is with them. In that case, it would be perilous for him under a barrage of arrows."

The goblin shrugged and simply said:

"I can swiftly find the answer to the second question if I infiltrate their ranks."

"That's a risk you cannot take," Marden objected.

"My boy, it warms me that you care, but if I wish to be invisible, not even an eagle could spot me in the bare plains. Mind you, we must decide what to do should I find him. Signal or try to free him?"

The soldiers exchanged looks. The captain appraised the small goblin appreciatively, yet deep down, he harboured doubts about the success of such a venture.

Arlo scratched his head.

"Both. If you find him and can get him out, throw this high into the air and flee," he reached into his apprentice's stash of remedies. "If he's there but you cannot succeed, then… hmm, what then?"

They looked at each other, uncertain.

"Unless he's locked in a cage and lucid, I'll bring him out. The trouble is if he's immobilized or unconscious."

"It's dark; you could easily stab someone dead, especially if they can't see you."

At this, Nyhund made a strange face, puzzling everyone. Arlo suspected the issue and finally, the goblin confessed.

"I've never killed anyone before," he said oddly and a bit sheepishly. Some looked on sympathetically, prompting the captain to come to his aid.

"Then I'll go with you. It's my brother out there, after

all."

Oly objected.

"You move and make noise like a bear, sir. Your strength and arm's length are useful face-to-face in battle. But here it's a disadvantage. Only I can go."

"Or I, my friend," the woman interjected. "You'd be the obvious choice if there weren't someone here even more agile than you. And let's admit it, when it comes to a good cause or friends, I've drawn my knife before. And I know how to wield it."

* * *

Nyhund and Ivy quietly observed as their companions departed towards the south. They felt the nearing culmination of their arduous days, battling the elements, evil, and mysteries —a potentially final act in their harrowing saga. By then, the lights of their pursuers were ominously close, and occasional snippets of sound drifted from the north, revealing that their team was launching a determined, hardly concealed assault. Though Ivy had prepared a decisive plan for the imminent half-hour, she found herself needing to reaffirm her resolve repeatedly. Just the two of them, both raised by nature, stood against foes who clearly seemed out of their element in this terrain.

Intermittent animal noises punctuated the tense silence, disturbed by the enemy's thunderous approach. An agile deer paused mere steps away, eyeing them curiously. It took a deep breath and snorted softly, looking back towards the north before turning its attention to the two figures hidden in the underbrush, as if piecing together the unfolding events. With

another quiet snort, it gracefully bounded away.

How fortunate it is, thought Ivy.

At that moment, clouds drifted across the moon, seemingly aligning with nature itself to shield them further, should mere invisibility prove insufficient.

Then, they became alert to the sound of footsteps. The goblin cast a glance at Ivy in the darkness, and in an instant, both vanished from sight. He whispered to her softly:

“I can’t maintain this for long. Maybe a quarter of an hour, then my mind will tire. We need to hurry.”

With that, they rose silently to their feet.

The approaching group was a motley crew, not the well-organized battalion that had bested them at the tower’s base. From ragged, tattered figures to armoured warriors and a few hurried shamans passing just meters from them—no horses accompanied them. Where had these foes come from?

Carefully they waited until the last of the soldiers had passed, then picked up the pace and slotted in behind them. One by one, they moved silently past the armed foot soldiers, leaping forward quietly. The path, carved out days earlier, now widened, allowing for easier navigation among the column’s members. Only the protruding roots and jagged stumps of cut bushes made their progress challenging. The figures communicated in a strange speech, as if from afar—using the language of the empire, yet as if spoken by those born elsewhere.

Within minutes, they found the captain, but as they feared, he was bound hand and foot with thick chains. They approached as closely as they dared. He was seated on a wagon. Though he appeared unharmed, his gaze was weary. As he looked straight ahead, he slowly raised his head and

cautiously glanced around. He knew. The goblin gently penetrated his mind, informing him of their presence.

The situation seemed utterly hopeless. The chains were indissoluble, the wagon surrounded by armed guards keeping vigilant watch over the prisoner, and the illusion could not be maintained much longer. Ivy and Nyhund looked at each other —they saw each other. If they stayed, they would soon become visible to others, or the goblin might weaken to the point that they could not escape.

Unexpectedly, however, help arrived. The leader who had organized the pursuit approached the wagon and unfastened the chains from the captain's feet, though he left his hands bound. A few soldiers watched the events with questioning eyes, to which the leader tersely remarked:

"Have you nothing better to do? This man and I are going for a walk."

With that, he pulled the captain off the wagon and, grasping his arm, began to lead him into the bushes.

"Continue the search! If you catch up to them, do nothing. Just follow them! I repeat, just follow them!"

Astonished, Ivy and Nyhund watched the scene unfold, then immediately set off in pursuit of the leader.

* * *

"I don't know who you are, but the tip of my knife is next to your spine. I suggest you don't squirm!"

"And there's a wizard with you, because I've gone blind," the leader responded. "I won't jump, just have one request. Take me to your superior, lady!"

"Of course, you won't jump. Let's go!"

After a brief silence, the other added:

“But I can’t see... not even as much as in the moonlight...”

Ivy glanced at the goblin, prompting the leader’s sight to return. The twenty-minute journey to the camp passed without incident, the stranger proving to be truthful. Meanwhile, the captain began inquiring in a weary voice about the others.

“Many stayed behind...” Nyhund began, sorrow in his voice. “Poor Orman too. The leader of the archers and the stable master. After... But we’ll tell you everything once we get back.”

Nothing indicated that any of the pursuers had become suspicious. They quickly outpaced them, as the thicket here had thinned a bit, allowing them to reach and even pass the front of the column. However, navigating through the rocks and dense branches proved difficult and dangerous, especially with the exhausted captain, so they soon returned to the cleared path. Nyhund reminded them to keep a safe distance, feeling his magical energy waning by then.

“There is no torchlight anywhere. How are we going to find our way back?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about me getting lost in the wilderness, my friend,” Ivy reassured him.

And to prove her point, minutes later, they precisely crossed a crevice from where they had started. Silence and darkness enveloped them. The woman almost doubted her navigation skills, when the captain’s voice suddenly rang out:

“My brother!”

He then embraced his grievously exhausted sibling. The other, however, looked ahead apathetically, managing only a

weak smile.

They saw no need to interrogate him immediately. Arlo led him to a makeshift bed on one of the wagons, gave him a spoonful of a concoction, and within a minute, the captain had fallen asleep.

The chief's arrival, however, stirred intense emotions. Beldon, recognizing him, immediately reached for his axe, which was wrested from his grip with great struggle, then he lunged forward. It took four robust soldiers to pull him off.

"Calm down, dwarf lord!" Oly, slightly inebriated again, chided him. "I completely share your feelings, and had my bow been here, he would not be alive, for an arrow is quicker than any intervention, but..."

"... But he asked us to bring him before our superior. Secondly, you reek of liquor; you might not even hit him now. Thirdly, it was actually he who brought out the captain, we merely accompanied him. To understand why, we must first talk with him."

Chapter 8

In Pursuit of Dark Secrets

From the window, the smoking peak of the mountain was clearly visible. As it snowed lightly, the rising vapours painted the northern sky snow-white, even from many miles away. Now, with the temperature lingering below freezing for weeks on end, one could only desire a cosily snug room from which to sip warm drinks and gaze out upon the landscape. The crackling sounds emerged from the fireplace where glowing logs were slowly licked by flames. A few glowing embers dotted the centuries-old wooden floor, carefully oiled by diligent hands for durability. Thick carpets covered the room, with curtains of matching colours hanging beside the windows, and from the ceiling a chandelier stretched down into the room with candles pointing skyward.

Beldon was examining the furniture and the wrought iron decorative elements, while clutching a sizable cup in his hands. The stem of a pipe jutted out from his pocket. A pleasant spice aroma wafted through the air, providing a subtle backdrop to the quiet discourse. At the center, a massive table bore food and drink, surrounded by velvet-upholstered armchairs.

This grand hall was situated below Maida's study, where now the participants of the mission and a few wizards had gathered. Among the invited were Faustus, the frigate captain and one of Beldon's business associates. Nearly two dozen people and foreign creatures were preparing to discuss

the recent events in the north. They had returned two weeks earlier, and harsh winter had set in. To their great surprise, a delegate from the ruler had also arrived. Dressed in a red velvet gown, he sat indifferently by a window. They had no idea how the royal house had learned of the meeting's timing.

The captain's health had not previously allowed this gathering to occur, and had they waited for him, it would still not be happening; thus, they commenced without him.

The meeting began with the presentation of facts, led by Bromley and Arlo, and several attendees had questions, even those who had been at the tower on that fateful day.

"I just don't understand why send such a less formidable force," Faustus directly challenged them.

Some shook their heads while others nodded in agreement.

"How many swords would have been ideal, Captain?" the druid spread his arms wide. "Fifty? A hundred? How would you plan a mission when you have no idea what awaits you?"

Faustus bit his lip.

"It wasn't predictable," Hagley interjected. "We had to consider the terrain as well. Only light gear was feasible. Heavy cavalry was out of the question, and the large war chariots would have struggled in the brush. More soldiers would have required more supplies, which presents the same problem. Moreover, we were accompanied by wizards whose potent aid greatly amplified our strength. Arlo, Marden, Bromley, Nyhund, and Xaldimárr each cast spells differently, and due to their rapid response in the given situations, our swords and bows were more effective than their sheer numbers would suggest. Beldon's strength equals that of two soldiers, and the rangers shoot more cunningly than any of our archers.

Orman was a hero, and even mortally wounded, he managed to cut down several attackers to save the living.

Arlo was taken aback by the young soldier's assertiveness and determination. Due to his valorous conduct and courage at the tower, he had since been promoted to the rank of sergeant.

"Of course, I had no intention of criticizing; clearly, the esteemed assembly made the most of the situation. I merely set the stage to substantiate with arguments that... um... everything was properly planned. I believe Sergeant Hagley has already done so."

"What happened in the tower?" interjected the royal envoy unexpectedly.

Several exchanged glances. Maida glanced at Arlo. Gathering his thoughts, he stood, preparing to respond.

However, Arlo gestured to him courteously and then looked at the envoy.

"We don't know."

The envoy's gaze did not waver, just watched expectantly. The mage met his gaze, then, shrugging to demonstrate a lighter stance, asked:

"What does your excellency wish to know?"

"Everything."

Arlo showed no signs of nervousness, unlike Beldon, who shot the envoy glaring looks.

"Alright, but where should I start? With our departure from Ash Peak, or our entry into the Fallen Tower? Some guidance would be helpful."

The other smiled.

"Start wherever you like, grandmaster. I have time. However, since much has already been discussed, you can omit

those parts."

Arlo nodded, then began:

"Crossing into Aranea, we had to fight our way through the brush. Only the western side of the river was viable because steep cliffs line the opposite bank. Besides the densely overgrown vegetation, we had to drag the wagons over rocky terrain. This significantly slowed us down, and on top of that, one night we were attacked by forest wraiths. Our team successfully repelled the attack, but unfortunately, we suffered casualties and injuries. With such a prelude, we arrived at the base of Turrim Concidit, where we immediately began to inspect the place. First, we surveyed the courtyard buildings, then came the day when we also penetrated the still-standing tower. Excuse me..."

He coughed, then poured himself some wine into a goblet. After a few sips, he continued.

"What happened there was exceedingly strange and inexplicable to us. As we ascended the upper floors, darkness deepened, not only within but outside the tower as well. We might have been under some confusion spell that stole the light from the world. Xaldimárr," he gestured towards the necromancer, "a practitioner of dark arts, had also never encountered such a thing. On the topmost level, we found a chest that, we hoped, contained a prophecy hidden by a certain individual about two hundred and fifty years ago. Upon opening it, we immediately had to flee, for the chest was cursed. When opened, spider-like fiends swarmed us."

The envoy raised his hand.

"How is it that the chest had remained untouched for two hundred and fifty years?"

"Pardon...?" Arlo looked at him.

"Were you the first to open it after all this time?"

Arlo's eyes narrowed imperceptibly, then trusting that the audience would not react too vehemently, he said:

"It remained untouched because we believed that until recently, no one was aware that this particular chest, with that content, was there. We specifically went there for it, as the druid master has already reported."

After a short pause, he continued:

"However, I did not say that we were the first to open it."

At this point, the air in the room charged. Everyone silently watched the developments; only an older wizard cleared his throat. Maida stared ahead with bulging eyes. Marden cautiously glanced at his master, Oly fidgeted nervously, struggling to suppress his laughter during the scene. Deciding to pour himself another glass of wine, he spilled a little on the oak table, and with downcast eyes and a sneaky grin, reached for a napkin. Ivy gave him a stern look.

"What was in the chest?" inquired the envoy with an even smile, pressing further.

"Nothing," Arlo responded, his face impassive.

"So, you mean to say, grandmaster, that what you went for was simply not there?"

"Yes," Bromley aided the mage, "the chest was entirely empty."

The velvet-clad figure rose from his chair, glanced out the window, inhaled deeply, then turned around with arms outstretched and asked:

"Then why was it cursed?"

"Look, your excellency," the druid continued, "Grandmaster Arlo has already indicated we do not know what

spells were at play that day, and unfortunately, we also failed to decipher the motivations of those who worked there before us."

It seemed the envoy felt this was a dead end and thus changed the subject.

"I understand you captured a prisoner who is none other than the person who led the assault against our king's forces, resulting in several soldiers killed or grievously injured. Where is he now?"

Here Ivy spoke up.

"Forgive me, sir, but that individual surrendered himself right after he rescued the king's captain from captivity."

"I do not know you, young lady..."

"Just call me Ivy. Unfortunately, I do not know my full name either, as I am an orphan."

"An orphan?" the envoy looked at her.

"Yes, I was raised by the wilds on the border of Samorudn on the eastern isle before a caravan found me. Shall I speak of myself, or about the individual mentioned?"

At this point, Maida intervened.

"Please, please... Let's not harm each other as we are all trying to solve the same problem, are we not?"

The envoy did not show any signs of anger ignited by the sharp-tongued ranger's conduct. However, it was evident he was not about to be led astray again, thus he continued:

"I would like to speak with this individual. Bring him here. Now."

* * *

Atop the tower stood the hooded figure, scanning the southern distances. His thoughts and motivations were not of

human origins, yet at this moment, his emotions were partly human indeed. He felt anger, though naturally, it did not show on him. A long endeavour had come to naught. His floor-length robe whipped about in the icy wind. His glowing red eyes were just discernible beneath the hood. Cold as it was, his breath did not show, for he had not breathed for a long time.

A wolf sniffed its way out from among the pine trees and, upon spotting him, raised its head. With tail erect, it began to examine him. The hooded one returned the gaze, causing the animal to tuck its tail and quietly back into the trees. To the left, smoke billowed over the collapsed building, and human voices floated up—a typical camp chatter punctuated by shouts and laughter.

From the depths of the forest, figures approached, their feet crunching on the snow. Soon, they reached the entrance of the tower. The hooded figure watched the proceedings from above. One of the newcomers looked up, then entered the ruinous doorway with his head bowed. There he lit his pipe and, gazing at the floor, began to muse. Snow partly buried one side of the door; aside from that, everything looked just as it did on that fateful day when Arlo's party had fought the battle. The man drew deeply from his pipe, then closed his eyes and exhaled the smoke. In the cold, the fragrant tobacco smoke spread like a thick white fog throughout the room. After a few more puffs, he clapped the lid on his pipe, pocketed it, and began his ascent. His steps creaked on the ruined staircase, his breathing growing deeper as he climbed. The hooded figure on the tower top waited patiently. Glancing down, he began to speak in an ominously whispering tone:

"After the mishap at the chest and Arimál's escape, another unfortunate turn. We need that man, the soldier. You

will go after them. Find him! You may take anyone and use anything. Only one thing matters. Bring him back!"

"I understand, my lord. It shall be as you command."

He lingered a moment longer, then turned and departed. On his way down, he retrieved his pipe and resumed puffing clouds of smoke. As he reached the bottom, his companions looked at him questioningly.

"We must go. We need to find Arimál... even if from beneath the ground."

"Blimey…" one exclaimed. "And how does his lordship suppose we do that?" pointing upwards.

The other looked at him irritably.

"Maybe go up and ask him yourself! Then, if you leave by the stairs rather than plummeting neck-broken from the tower top, come back and tell us, alright?"

The inquisitive figure suppressed a laugh under his moustache and said only one more thing:

"Easy there, moron. We'll gather what's needed, then figure out where the devil they went."

"Really, genius? We know exactly they went to the capital, that's not the big question, but how do we bring back the soldier?"

The hooded figure turned southward again and continued to survey the landscape for a while. Then, he closed his eyes and began to murmur silently. He completely shut out the sensory stimuli around him—the noises, the cold, the wind. It was as if he were speaking to someone, but no sound was heard. A soft vibration emanated from his lips, travelling through the ether, then faintly spreading towards the horizon, flowing over trees and clouds. Words were carried and taken by the wind, which no ordinary human ear could grasp. He did

this for about half an hour, then scattered ash around himself and sat down on a stone. His eyes remained closed, and so they stayed until night fell.

* * *

The leader was escorted into the room. As a distinguished prisoner, he had the privilege of being personally accompanied by the sable major of the gatekeepers, the stern Galib Al-Wazir. His hands were bound, and he appeared somewhat worn. Faustus and the dark-skinned officer nodded to each other from opposite corners of the room. Hagley saluted.

The royal envoy wasted no time, posing two direct questions:

"What's your name and whom do you serve?"

The prisoner looked around the room and with a slight haughtiness stared deeply into the inquirer's eyes.

"I am Arimál, the Dart. As to whom I serve, that I cannot precisely say."

"How should I understand that?"

"Literally. I do not know my employer, and I doubt there exists a living soul who truly does."

Arlo listened intently with keen interest. The rest of the company also followed in silent, heightened anticipation as the leader spoke. The envoy patiently waited.

"The one who issued us commands at the tower is no longer of this world. I am not even sure if he ever were. We do not know his name. Sometimes he would appear in our cave, other times disappear for days. But he always returned and told us what to do. Those who did not comply were cruelly

punished."

"Your cave? Who are you people?"

"Bandits."

The envoy looked sceptical.

"In the north? There leads nothing. There is no one to rob there."

"I did not say we operated there. Only that our cave is there."

"Where did you operate then?"

"That is our concern alone."

At this, the envoy made a peculiar expression. First, a sternness crossed his face, then he discreetly chuckled. Some in the room exchanged glances.

"If I may be clear, I have just asked you a simple question, and if you do not answer of your own accord, we will extract it from you with a hot iron."

Arimál also laughed, then said:

"Seriously, does it matter to you where and whom we rob?"

Arlo interjected:

"Excuse me, there might be a way to easily answer this question," he indicated towards Marden. "But I must agree with the accused. It may not be particularly relevant to the unravelling of these events where these... how shall I say... individuals commit their thefts."

The envoy, for the first time during the session, showed irritation.

"I will be the judge of what is relevant and what is not."

"But I am the one who knows what happened in the north, or what didn't. If you can muster a mite of adaptability instead of trying to scold everyone here, perhaps you could

listen to me," retorted the wizard, equally raising his voice.

Since the other did not respond, he continued:

"The lad is a seer, and my apprentice. If he wishes, and if he can reach the necessary state, we can use his abilities, but they are limited and drain him greatly, hence I wanted to make clear that we need to ask the right question."

At this, Arimál intervened:

"Look, it's utterly irrelevant what you threaten me with, compared to what would happen if those people found out I betrayed them. So, I'll only speak if you can guarantee my protection. If I reveal everything now, then it turns out I haven't killed anyone and perhaps you let me go, I'm done for. I'd like to stay in the city, preferably locked away."

"You've already betrayed them by helping the captain escape," spoke up Oly, "so after that, you might as well tell us anything."

* * *

The discussion stretched into the late evening, and afterwards, the participants dispersed throughout the city. Marden returned to his wooden house accompanied by Oly and Ivy. To them, accustomed to the wilds, the bustling city was overwhelmingly lively. Only Arlo and Maida remained at the Tower of the Magi.

"How did Arimál describe it? A figure in a black cloak, voice a whisper, skin ash-covered and ice-cold? Breath not visible even in frost. Was that his exact description?" asked the old wizard.

"His skin scorched and covered in ash..." replied Maida.

The mage strained his memory but could not recall

anyone fitting this description. In ancient tales, there were stories of the undead who walked among the living by their own volition, yet he had never encountered one. The walking dead conjured by necromancers collapsed the moment their connection with their summoners ended.

"Once, in his youth among his studies, he read about a practice where the slain linger in a threshold before passing to the other side, remaining there temporarily depending on the spell. Naturally, he found this in a restricted section of the library. What do they say? He was young and reckless."

"My old friend, I have a suspicion," said the woman.

"Which is?"

"If Arimál wasn't lying, and that cloaked figure truly exists, I think it has an accomplice. Someone who spies for it."

Arlo looked at her, surprised, almost taken aback.

"How so? A traitor among us?"

"Not among us. But someone living in the city, able to monitor events. Think about it. Every building at the base of the tower seemed untouched, as though the occupants had just left the day before. Except for the decay. Nothing was looted or ransacked. The contingent that ambushed you must have arrived before you did. They knew you were coming."

"There is their cave..."

"That might have been merely a slip of the tongue," pondered Maida. "Or perhaps it's only been there since then."

"Why would he lie? He came to us of his own accord and brought the captain as well. I'm more concerned about why everything was untouched near the tower if their cave was nearby. We're talking about bandits. Even if uninterested in what they found, they would have at least ransacked the place in their search. I have a different hunch, but let's hope it

doesn’t prove true.”

* * *

Mel Ramola, nestled in a cove along the western coast, was Doria’s second largest city. The tranquil and serene region provided a secure haven for the massive port from which major trade routes emanated. The harbour bustled year-round since the southern warm currents, which the dwarves attributed to Khraoul’s fiery breath, kept it warm. Not as intensely as in Barrenland, the miners’ isle, or the southern parts of the Eastern County, where only the most resilient flora and fauna could survive the barren rocky desert.

This city differed vastly from Ash Peak. Its smaller buildings were spread out over a large area, plots were larger, resembling more a market town than a major hub. Life moved at a slower pace, the inhabitants spent their days more leisurely, and were somewhat wealthier than those in the capital.

Only the port area and its vicinity were bustling, exceptionally so. Due to the relatively stable weather, significant agricultural activity occurred beyond the city walls, amply sustaining the port’s ships as well. To the east, the Calm Peaks were visible, the western isle’s most prominent rise, encircling both Pocamac Lake and the jungle of the same name.

It was late winter, a harsh season nearing its end, when Marden entered the library of Mel Ramola on a dreary afternoon. He traversed through wide corridors, and his guide asked again why this matter was of importance, to which the young man again presented his commission letter.

“Regrettably, this is all I can divulge. I come at the

behest of Lady Maida, fulfilling one of the tasks assigned by my order."

After being left alone, Marden unpacked his satchel, placed his staff aside, and removed his robe. He stretched grandly and surveyed the room. Apart from him, there was but one other person present, who seemed utterly indifferent to his arrival. It was an utterly ordinary library room by the standards of wizards, of course. Long shelves bore thousands of books and codices, then maps, mosaics, and paintings of surpassing beauty adorned every wall.

He walked up and down indifferently, carefully memorizing the themes marked along the rows of shelves. As he suspected, a corner was sectioned off with grilles. A carefully secured padlock guarded the rare manuscripts stored there. The other occupant in the room merely glanced over when the sixteen-year-old boy produced a key and unlocked the padlock.

It went smoothly. It seems that unlocking the secured section here is no major event.

He found only a few shelves, and the books were not as tightly packed as those in the section accessible to all. He was searching for a dark purple codex, which, according to Arlo, contained information on necromancy and forbidden spells. The special permission was signed by Maida herself, and this proved a convincing argument for the librarian to provide the key to the boy.

On the lowest shelf, he found a now faded, barely legible book discussing persuasion—how to induce someone to perform an act they might not wish to. This could be done either with the subject's awareness or without. What could be discussed about this across an entire book became clear once

he leafed through it, as these techniques applied not just to animals, but also to plants. The text also contained the history of the science of persuasion, the founder of the school, and even the laws pertaining to it—though only as an appendix.

It might have proved an engaging occupation for weeks to leaf through these marvellous volumes, yet constrained by time, he decided to focus solely on his task and continue his search for the codex. Still, he could not help but wander off in thought. He stumbled upon a treatise on the science of curses. Like many things, this too was an evolving branch of witchcraft that traced back millennia, starting with simple folk superstitions and advancing through mildly harmful effects to curses that could bring about death.

He soon literally stumbled into a study on necromancy, for it protruded from beneath a lower shelf. Apparently, it was the work of a less fastidious author, as it was merely enclosed within a simple paper cover. To his utmost surprise, it was authored by Brutus Galenus. He looked up from the stack of papers barely qualifying as a book, which he held open in his hands, then glanced across the room. The other figure was still indifferently poring over a book, bent over a table.

Stepping out from behind the grilles, he went over to his satchel and pulled out an apple. He started back, then turned around, grabbed his satchel, and as he walked towards the grilles, he began rummaging through it as if searching for something. Then, between the shelves, he deftly slid the book written by Galenus into his satchel.

* * *

The following day he resolved to focus solely on

locating the aforementioned book. After about an hour of searching, he found it at the bottom of a cabinet. The leather stretched over the boards was almost black now, though it might once have indeed been purple. No wonder he had not found it the day before.

He opened the book at random.

"Resurrection of the Dead." The author discussed this bizarre practice at length, detailing the deceased, the state of the corpse, and the manner in which death had occurred. He had not realized how much a zombie's behaviour could depend on these factors. Yet, this was far from what he sought. He was about to close the book and return it to its place when something caught his eye.

Viewing the book from the side, he noticed a gap between the stacked pages. Carefully, he opened it at that spot and to his great surprise, found three pages were missing. Clearly, someone had torn them out.

He rushed to the window, hoping that in daylight he might discern some crucial detail. Barely visible, the writing from the opposite page had left an imprint on the previous one. Obviously, the book's long-term horizontal storage had caused the pages to impress upon each other. Much to his chagrin, however, it still proved illegible.

He looked around. He was alone in the room.

Why not?

He sat down on a chair and placed the book in front of him. He closed his eyes and pressed his palm against the specific page. He began to concentrate intensely, and faint writing appeared before his eyes, then vanished.

Patience, he thought.

After a minute of silence, maintaining steady breathing,

he began to hear sounds in his mind. A clock ticking, a cat meowing… Scratching… He desperately wanted to see those written lines, and after another brief focus, he submerged in the waves. His consciousness drifted elsewhere, but his body sensed the present and the place where he sat.

His right hand spasmodically reached for a pen. He found it and quickly began to write what his mind's eye saw.

He was in a ruined workshop.

A wizard with tangled, knotted hair sat at a table, sorting through parchments before him. His hand trembled, his breathing was laboured, and his eyes were bloodshot. The text he had inscribed onto the paper a few days earlier read:

Take a pine cone steeped in the dew of a summer's morn or the fog of winter, and mix it with the ashes from the previous night. Thrice raise the cauldron above thy head in reverence! It shall be light, for the spirits shall aid thee. Thereafter, bow deeply before the Great Haw-Mon, and a profound greeting shall be uttered, by which thou shalt be heard.

Approach the dying one, and take a few strands of hair. Cast them into the cauldron. Wait a moment, and douse it with oil. Ignite it, and carefully seal the room. Enter not before three days have passed, for great peril may befall thee. Thy creation may slay or infect thee. But after three days, the creature shall calm, and its mind shall blossom, capable of speech.

Thou must feed and water it for seven weeks, for it shall be weak as a thread. Yet after two weeks, thy long-dead shall be ready. Let this practice be known as the Long Death.

The heart of thy long-dead shall not beat, nor shall it breathe. Its skin cold as ice and ashen as if scorched and

dusted with ash. Its speech shall whisper and terrify. Its lungs undeveloped and weak, for they fill not with air save when it wishes to speak. Within weeks its eyes shall redden, its eyeball vanish.

After a month of thy care, it shall become a servant of keen wit, but beware! One thing thou must never grant it, for it shall rise above thee...

Thus ended the vision. Exhausted, Marden collapsed onto the table, then fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 9

Even Darker Secrets

The city square basked in sparkling sunshine, warming not only the cobblestones but also the hearts of those gathered there, thus drawing a large crowd for the weekend. It was the waning days of winter. A statue rose majestically over the townspeople, and town criers loudly proclaimed their news, competing with the vendors who shouted their wares. Into this hustle and bustle arrived Marden, Ivy, and Oly.

"Where is he now?" asked the ranger girl to Bromley, who had just arrived in front of the brewery to meet them.

"At Osbert's inn. But he hasn't got much time; he wouldn't want the ruler to hear of his return."

Hurrying over the cobblestones, they exchanged a few words about recent events.

"The rest he'll tell you himself. I must rush to the Wizards' Tower now."

In the inn, the host glanced at them and nodded his head, signalling them to follow. They exited through the back door, crossed a small courtyard, and arrived at the entrance to the cellar. There, a large tapestry hung on the wall, which the innkeeper pulled aside for them. Arlo was already waiting for them.

"Master, what's the hurry?" asked Oly.

The wizard offered them seats around a small table and poured each a drink from the innkeeper's brew. The ranger downed her drink and immediately asked for another.

“Arimál has been poisoned. He succumbed last night. Subsequently, there was an attempt to abduct Captain Nerva Gordianus.”

Marden clasped his hand over his mouth in shock.

“Yes, a dreadful business. But we were vigilant. Or rather, Major Al-Wazir was. After the murder, he surmised that the perpetrator’s next intent would be to do something with the captain, and his guess proved correct. However, the intruders managed to escape.”

Arlo took a deep draught from his cup.

“But there’s more. It’s very likely we’ve managed to trace who or what the cloaked figure mentioned earlier might be. I sent Marden to Mel Ramola, home to the best library of magical history in the realm. For obvious reasons, I deemed it wiser not to go myself. My appearance might have aroused suspicion, and I’ve not been in King Winslow’s good graces, especially since my recent altercation with the royal envoy...

“Pardon me, old friend, for interrupting, but about the previous topic... If the intruders fled from the captain, where does the suspicion come from that they intended to abduct rather than kill him, as they did with Arimál?”

“From this, Oly,” Arlo replied. “During their escape, they left behind their equipment. They brought no weapons, only items suggesting their intent—ropes, gags, and a strong, fast-acting sedative. But let me return to the other matter...”

He paused for a moment, then peered behind the curtain decor.

“Marden found an ancient account of a necromantic practice known to Xaldimárr, but he never believed it could actually work, let alone that anyone had successfully performed it. The matter is so dark that it was even removed

from a forbidden book. Upon my inquiry, I was told that the pages in question were removed by the head of the local Guild of the Magi, fearing someone might succeed in the spell."

Meanwhile, the sound of scurrying outside grew louder, and the innkeeper's voice argued with soldiers. Seconds later, the clatter of boots intensified, and the tapestry was swept aside. Three sword-bearing soldiers entered the room. They sniffed around, looked about, and then, turning on their heels, departed.

Ivy and Oly watched the scene in bewilderment, while only Marden and Arlo remained calm, albeit ready to spring into action. As the footsteps faded, Oly burst into loud laughter.

"Where are you, Nyhund, you miserable green rogue, let me embrace you!"

From the corner emerged the goblin in his usual unassuming guise, though a sly little smile lurked on his face.

"We can stay now, they surely won't come here again," chuckled the wizard. "But to finally finish what I was saying... Marden examined the book twice by touch, and with his abilities, he learned that the practice had indeed been successfully executed in the past, and in one case, the creature killed its creator."

"So there exists a spell by which the reanimated being remains active without the mage's ongoing participation?" asked the woman.

"Not quite, Ivy. It's not about reanimation because the subject isn't dead when the transformation starts by the master. Only dying. However, by the time the entire séance is complete, it's a living dead. Meaning, its heart does not beat, it does not breathe. Its body is dead, yet that body remains active without needing the master's control. This is astounding in

several respects. First, by law, a necromancer may only manipulate a dead body. Secondly, the resurrected body should not have its own will. Now we know, unfortunately, that this is possible."

Oly looked ahead with a troubled gaze.

"Then the hooded one…"

"A long-dead," Arlo nodded. "It can't be anything else. Everything fits from the description. Meanwhile, I've also been investigating, and learned quite a bit from the andabatas. Their records mention a cold being that speaks in whispers, its skin burnt, eyes red. I found it in their centuries-old codices, but there was no indication whether the being they described was alive or dead. I think it simply wasn't clear to them during their encounter. But there was a particularly noteworthy part of the description: its intelligence is exceptional, its thinking complex and adaptive."

* * *

The evening did not bring the mist. The cold seemed to be diminishing day by day. Winter was slowly relinquishing its grip over Ash Peak. To the west of the palace, Bromley and the two rangers, along with Nyhund, moved forward in the night's silence. Light filtered from a few windows of the massive building. From afar, the sound of hammering was heard, perhaps carpenters working in the market square, preparing the structures for dawn's early start. In a day, the celebration of the pirates' defeat would commence.

Each cloaked in dark hoods and floor-length capes, they carefully concealed their identities. The overcast weather also aided their stealth. Only the faint light from street lamps

provided them with enough visibility to see where they were stepping. Turning right past the boating lake, they reached the cemetery. From there, their destination was not far. Soon, they arrived.

"Everyone be very careful. Avoid direct eye contact with him," Bromley instructed before knocking.

They stood before the door to Xarfax's cellar, the necromancer's residence. After a few moments of rustling, shuffling, and quiet cursing from within, an anxious voice called out from behind the door:

"Who is it, and what do you want at this hour?"

"Just a few questions," replied the druid in a calm voice.

"Do I need to open the door for that?"

"We would appreciate it. We are particularly interested in knowing who we are speaking with at the moment."

The door clicked softly open, and a young necromancer stepped forward from the background. They had anticipated this turn of events, yet Bromley was slightly nervous as he indicated that it was not the apprentice he wished to speak with. The other then mentioned that his master was sleeping.

"Sleeping?" Oly questioned. "Does Xarfax sleep?"

"Leave!" came the reply, and the one who opened the door was about to slam it shut, but the ranger quickly slid his boot into the threshold. A single flash from the totem wand later, and Oly clutched his face in pain, crying out. From his mouth to just below his left eye, a glowing wound gaped open.

In the sudden scuffle, Ivy proved most adept. She struck the young necromancer with a simple punch, causing him to stagger and then collapse to the ground.

"Show it," Bromley leapt to Oly's side, but as he

touched the ranger's face, the curse began to burn his own hand as well. Before the situation could worsen, he uttered in pain:

"Ardenti Vulnere Sana!"

That was sufficient to contain the curse spreading across his hand, though Oly's face was severely marred. The counter-spell alleviated the pain and halted the tissue decay, and the wound's surface even began to dry.

"My God, Oly, show me!" Ivy approached with worried tones. "This is dreadful, we must go to Arlo immediately."

"Damn that!" the other retorted gruffly. "I didn't come here just to turn tail now. I'll be fine. Let's move on!"

With that, he charged forward, bow ready.

His action stirred some confusion, but they had little time left to ponder. Ivy followed him with a short dagger and Bromley with a mace. The goblin was ready for intervention at the back. They descended a short staircase, turned a corner, and then faced another set of stairs. A torch burned on one wall, likely lit by the apprentice. They grabbed an oil lamp and hurriedly scanned the area. Oly lowered his bow and began to inspect the rooms systematically. The place was filled with chilling items: taxidermied animals, bones, skulls, and all sorts of concoctions in glass jars, candles, and burnt-out torches. The most secluded room in the cellar seemed to be Xarfax's bedroom; like the others, it was unoccupied. Books by the hundreds were meticulously arranged on shelves along the walls, and in an open wardrobe hung robes and totem sticks.

A large crystal orb on the shelf caught the attention of the injured ranger, and he reached out for it, but the druid intervened.

"Don't! Touch nothing. Who knows what might be cursed."

"Yet by the look of it, black magic seems quite profitable," Nyhund remarked dryly. "His library alone is worth a small fortune."

* * *

Xarfax had left the city. His apprentice, eager and frightened by recent events, spilled everything. He showed such remorse that they nearly pitied him. Oly's face would forever bear the scar of the curse, and his own broken nose would never fully recover. The ranger harboured no particular resentment towards the boy, but sternly suggested he consider another branch of magic.

It was Xarfax who had orchestrated the bandit leader's assassination, as well as the captain's abduction, even participating in the latter. To their utmost surprise, the missing pages of the forbidden necromantic codex were found among his possessions. How these pages had travelled from the library at Mel Ramola to him remained a mystery. Either the head of the mage's order had not been truthful about removing the pages himself, or someone had stolen them without his knowledge and passed them to the dark mage. Perhaps he had handed them over himself.

Questions arose, such as why did he need this text? Was he attempting to create a long-dead? Had he succeeded? Could his creation be the hooded figure? Or was he planning to in the future? Clearly, he had either copied the writing or memorized the procedure.

Arlo's first order of business was to devise a plan to apprehend Xarfax. However, he first decided to investigate the nature of the curse on the chest at Turrim Concidit. The fact

that the clue leading to the prophecy was untouched inside confirmed the story of Brutus Galenus about Urkond the shaman, who had placed a protective spell on it. Yet, they still did not know who could have unleashed the monsters.

Captain Nero Gordianus suggested that perhaps Kajdum's lost staff caused the disturbance at the site. Unfortunately, due to the whirlwind of events, the examination of the room was interrupted. According to ancient legend, Kajdum's staff was lost, and inexplicable events were often attributed to it. This staff was not of this world, as neither was Kajdum, who had been brought across by a travelling monolith.

"We must visit Master Avius," Bromley noted.

The captain looked at him in astonishment:

"Have you lost your mind, Druid? To reach him, we would need a travelling monolith, and those haven't been used in living memory."

"And they are exceedingly dangerous," Hagley added.

"Yes, which is why we don't use them nowadays," Bromley concluded.

* * *

Xarfax hurried along a tunnel facing the Great Volcano, his arm clutching a bulging sack. Only his long beard peeked out from beneath his black cloak. He assumed that by now, they had probably realized his involvement in certain events, and he had no intention of answering for them. He strode with full confidence through the ancient sewer system, where his torch was the only source of light. His steps squelched on the wetter sections, and occasionally rats scattered at his approach.

At one point, the ceiling had collapsed, requiring him to navigate cautiously. Elsewhere, a deep chasm yawned where the floor had been undercut by water, and someone had thrown long beams across it. It was a nerve-wracking path, one that no sane person would have chosen to take. Yet Xarfax was undeterred by the locale's menacing character. His only worry was that they might be waiting for him at the exit. True, that would require knowledge of this serpentine section of the sewer system, but since he could not be certain of their ignorance, he quickened his pace even more.

At one junction, the path split three ways. He tossed a large piece of bread to the left, which elicited some movement and the sounds of animals fighting in the darkness. Using this distraction, he turned right, and with his hand on his wand, he quickened his steps. By the time he passed, several dog-like grotesque creatures emerged from the darkness on the left corridor. Their mouths smacking, they sniffed around in the darkness, their eyes whitened, staring into the void.

Cobwebs hung from the ceiling, occasionally holding large chunks of plaster, and bricks jutted out from the walls here and there, sometimes falling. He turned to check if the dogs were following him, but detected no movement. After about twenty minutes of climbing, he saw a faint light at the end of an ascending tunnel. It was still night, illuminated by the moon.

At the exit, Xarfax cautiously peered out, his wand held before him.

"Reveal thyself, living creature!"

He listened intently, but the night remained silent and dark.

"Show yourself, dead one!"

Faint blue lights appeared on the ground—small and large, all motionless.

“Very well, my treasures, we are alone. Just I and my dead...”

With that, he set off into the wilderness. After about an hour of trudging through dense undergrowth, he arrived at a small hut. By then, the eastern sky was beginning to lighten, and the sharp morning frost deposited rime on his beard. He touched the door handle with his wand, which turned by itself. Inside, the hut was exceptionally simple yet purposefully designed, comprising just two rooms. The walls, made of logs and thick planks, along with the shingled roof, lent warmth and coziness to its otherwise cold-hearted inhabitant, who now found himself compelled to settle here temporarily.

He lit a fire in the small fireplace, the sole stone structure within. He set water to heat and sat down at the table to rest a while. It was dawn by then, and the rising sun cast long, wintry shadows across the walls. A wolf howled outside, and from the west, dark clouds approached, perhaps embodying the last furious throes of winter.

His thoughts wandered far. The normally reserved and carefully approached necromancer felt an unusual anxiety instead of his customary calm. Generally, nothing significant changed in his life that could bring about a major shift, but now, for the first time in a long while, he encountered unpredictability regarding his future. His failed operation might make him fall from grace in certain circles. The hooded figure had not yet made contact, but Xarfax knew that it would.

Xarfax’s previously unshakeable power now seemed vulnerable. His tolerated existence could swiftly turn into persecution.

The bubbling sound of boiling water snapped him from his reverie. He removed it from the fire, sprinkled some herbs into it, and poured a cup.

From his bag, he retrieved several books and scrolls. He stared into space, deep in thought. Everything he needed was at his disposal. Everything was in place, except for one element. He had never performed necromantic practices on a living person. Perhaps due to the unpleasant nature of the act, or maybe some moral restraint, but he had yet to bring himself to do it. That scroll had been with him for a long time, and he knew every word on it by heart, yet something was missing. A thing that is absent in every young black mage at the beginning. These dark arts require more than knowledge; they demand desire. Finding a dying person isn't something one stumbles upon at every corner. Nor is it easy to bring someone to such a state, not just in reality but in desire as well. He had never felt such inhibition; from a young age, he knew he wanted to master this bizarre magic, yet now he harboured doubts.

There was one solution. And he felt, at that moment, that he could make the decision and muster the necessary courage.

He laid a pine cone and a small vial of ash on the table. His large cauldron stood next to the stove. He cut a lock of his long hair and placed it beside the other ingredients.

Outside, melting frost dripped from the roof. A mild breeze stirred the branches and the remaining dried leaves. Perhaps this was the right moment? Would there be a better time than now? Should he wait? He knew what he wanted. He had known for a long time.

He reached across the table, took out a vial from his

bag, and after a moment's hesitation, uncorked it and drank its contents. Gasping, he collapsed to the floor. With all his might, he pulled himself up to the chair, then, with trembling hands, threw the pine cone into the cauldron.

To be continued...

Notes: