Chapter 10

The Call of the Other Side

The royal envoy awaited outside the throne room, the same person who had participated in the briefing following the team's return from the Fallen Tower. He anticipated being summoned by the sovereign soon, given that the events of the past month and a half had not turned as expected. Winter's last frost had passed, and although a significant warming was yet unperceived, at times, a wind of change would rustle the bare branches. But it also ruffled the general mood with the spread of bizarre occurrences, whose tales grew increasingly wild as they passed from mouth to mouth. Sitting here now, he pondered how the changes among the court's people might affect his own standing, whether his hitherto illustrious career might ascend or decline. The typical concerns of ambitious men gripped him, for even among royal envoys, it was rare to be personally summoned by the king.

"You may enter!"

The door opened, and he was ushered in by a stern-looking official. Inside, the king stood with his back to him, arms folded behind. After the official had departed, the king spoke up.

"If I am not mistaken, there is no news of him…" he turned around.

The envoy looked inquiringly.

"Are you referring to Xarfax, Your Majesty?"

"Who else but him? He is the only man in the capital who could provide information in our current predicament, not

to mention—he paused here for a moment—he could intervene effectively."

"He couldn't have just disappeared into thin air."

"Congratulations, Theotimus! That is a remarkably astute conclusion," the king remarked with a mild reproach.

The king paced the room. The precious decor sparkled, not a speck of dust in sight. Through the window, signs of thaw were visible; water dripped uniformly from the melting snow on the sill. He stroked his beard, then sat on his throne.

"Any thoughts?" he looked at the envoy, who appeared taken aback.

"Your Majesty...?"

"Stop with the sanctimony! If you have an idea, speak up! As you can see, this turn of events has caught me off guard. Our most powerful ally has been missing for over a month. If a street vendor knocked on the door claiming to know the solution, by God, I would listen."

"What if…" Theotimus began, "What's the name of Xarfax's apprentice?"

The king just shook his head.

"That's your grand idea? We've interrogated him multiple times, but the poor wretch doesn't know his arse from his elbow. Terrified out of his wits. What do we know of Arlo's group?"

The other gathered himself.

"We do not know his whereabouts, but our network will notify us immediately if he appears."

"I asked in the plural…"

"Ahh... the apprentice... he has been in his village house for weeks with those two vagabonds."

The king's piercing gaze indicated his displeasure with being toyed with puzzles. Theotimus then added some additional information:

"By the two vagabonds, I meant the rangers Oly O'Monst and Ivy. The druid has travelled, we suspect, to the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest. The dwarf frequents local taverns, drinking with other traders. We have no information on the goblin, which is perhaps unsurprising, as no one is better at hide-and-seek…"

"Alright, alright, I get it, I get it…" the king stared out the window — "I know what we'll do next."

* * *

Ivy opened the door to find six mounted soldiers and a seventh horse outside. One of the soldiers, standing beside his horse, stated without hesitation:

"His Majesty, Winslow Garwulf Beorn A'Telgoth, King of the realm, summons the residing wizard apprentice here, named Marden, son of Thanebal."

At these last words, Oly stepped forward, shielding his eyes with his hand against the bright light of the early morning.

"What does the king want with the boy?" he asked, following a massive yawn.

"That is none of your concern... vagabond!" the soldier snapped.

The ranger chuckled hoarsely.

"See that pouch hanging by the door frame there?"

The soldier peered inside the door. Ivy, anticipating what was to come, rolled her eyes and retreated further into the hut.

"Right... Here's how this will go. Despite being horrendously hungover, I still possess the skill to snatch my sling from that pouch and knock you all off your horses before any of you could even flick your swords. Then, as you lay groaning on the ground, I'd educate you on how to properly introduce and greet a lady who opens a door."

The soldiers exchanged confused glances.

"So, if I may ask, what does the king require of the boy?"

The soldier beside the horse responded:

"Look, ranger, I apologize for my earlier rudeness, but I still cannot answer as I do not know the purpose of the summons."

By this time, Marden had arrived.

"A tea, gentlemen?"

The riders, now thoroughly baffled, took advantage of the momentary silence. Oly spoke up:

"Well, since the gentlemen are hesitating, I suggest we get ready. The boy goes nowhere without me. Touch him, and I'll rip off your ear."

He then stepped over to the pouch and took it down from the hook, causing one of the soldiers to reach for his sword. Delving deeply into it, he remarked:

"Ah, this one's empty. My water bottle's in the other one…"

* * *

After regaining consciousness, he immediately began to examine himself. Lying on the ground, he felt pain in his elbow and head. It seemed these parts of his body had suffered the

brunt of the impact as he fell from the chair for the second time. Touching his face, then his lips, he was struck by a terrible thirst. Barely having the strength, he crawled across the floor towards a bucket of water. With great difficulty, he pulled himself up to drink. The fireplace had long since burned out, indicating he might have been unconscious on the ground for at least half a day. The water slightly revitalized him, and he began dragging himself towards the bed, chilled to the bone. Pulling the blanket over himself, he shivered and noted with relief that he was still human. Evidently, the poison he had ingested was insufficient, or the ritual had failed.

"This is not as simple as we thought, eh, Haw-Mon…" he muttered under his breath.

Xarfax's awakening thus stirred mixed feelings within himself, for it seemed highly likely that without external assistance, he would not be able to become a long-dead. But who would undertake the ritual, and who possessed the knowledge that would not kill him but would guide him to where he so deeply yearned to be?

After dozing for another hour, hunger struck him. "Well," he thought, "I'll survive…"

He rose and moved to the small pantry, lifting a piece of ham from the hook. He broke off some brown bread and began to eat indifferently. After lengthy consideration, he decided to delay communication with the king. He had no desire to visit Ash Peak anytime soon. Further contemplation was necessary. However, he intended to make contact with the dark figure as soon as possible, as that being was the very existence he wished to achieve. He didn't even know its name. Did it even have one?

Barely had he finished his meal when a familiar sensation overtook him. He felt dizzy, then, gripping the edge of the table, he bowed his head. It seemed it would not be he who would initiate contact, but rather the other way around.

A whispering voice from afar spoke in his mind:

"What did you think? What were you expecting?"

"I… Look, I know nothing about you. Can you help me understand… who you are?"

"Someone like you," whispered the hooded figure from the ether.

Silence followed, from which the old necromancer inferred that his interlocutor had time as he was not issuing commands or demanding information, but was genuinely curious. He decided to be honest. He had little choice at that moment.

"Master, I wish to be like you."

"What am I like?" came the immediate question.

"Free. And powerful."

A brief silence ensued.

"What is freedom? What is power?"

Xarfax pondered. Reflecting on his life, he felt that despite being feared by nearly everyone, he was but a servant.

"In comparison to your previous life, you are free and powerful, master."

"My previous life? I have only vague memories of it. I died. And unlike you, I do not know where this leads. As I am now, no one knows anything. Not even I."

The magician, however, did not wish to steer the conversation towards philosophy; instead, a surge of ambition and greed overtook him.

"Can you transform me?" he asked.

"I don't know," came the response after a brief pause.

Xarfax was genuinely surprised.

"Do you remember how you were born?"

"Birth... death, leave those concepts. Freedom and power, is that all you crave? This form of existence entails more."

Xarfax considered that the other might be right. He had no idea what lay beyond, nor where that existence might lead. Yet, at that moment, he was uninterested.

"The way I live now does not satisfy me. I am certain I do not want to remain this way, for it leads nowhere. I crave change, master."

After a longer pause, the dark figure spoke again:

"I can help you."

* * *

At the gates of the capital, the procession arrived with slow-treading horses and the airily leaping wardens at their side. They passed the marketplace and then turned southward after the great statue.

"The palace lies not this way," Ivy remarked.

One of the soldiers looked at her with a grimace.

"A detour is first in order."

Unfamiliar with the city, Oly walked on unwittingly, though Ivy's concern slowly began to infect him, casting questioning glances her way. She nodded slightly, and they began to lag subtly behind the column. Within a couple of minutes, they were trailing behind the last rider, who paid them no mind.

"What is it?" Oly asked her.

"The prison lies this way."

"Hmmm…"

Ivy grabbed the ranger's arm.

"Do not do anything foolish!"

They halted before a grim building snug against the city wall. Its faded plaster occasionally crumbled onto the cobblestones below, and old slate glistened atop under the sunny sky on this crisp late-winter day. The riders dismounted and surrounded Marden. The boy looked questioningly at those around him, then at the rangers. They were amazed at the scene, then as the guards opened the gate to usher Marden inside, something snapped within Oly's mind.

With great leaps, he reached the gate and swiftly slapped two soldiers across their faces. Ivy tried to calm him, but to no avail. The skirmish was brief; the numerical and physical superiority prevailed.

"Take this fool as well!" one soldier commanded his fellows, unwittingly fulfilling Oly's own will. Ivy looked at her companion with a mixture of concern and sternness, while he, grinning despite his bleeding mouth, winked at her.

Minutes later, they passed through an iron-barred gate, and the oppressive air of the courtyard touched them. Scant greenery, a few forlorn bushes, and a smattering of grass with stones showed that the keepers gave only basic consideration to the prisoners' spirits. A stable boy, busy with his daily routine, glanced with some curiosity at the odd newcomers: an evidently youthful wizard apprentice and an unusually bald stranger, both in shackles. It wasn't his place to unravel the scene, so after a moment, he resumed inspecting the horses' hooves.

Beyond a heavy wooden door, a staircase led down to the dungeons, where the atmosphere turned markedly grimmer. Dark cells lined the way, within which broken men sat staring blankly or lay on narrow cots. In one such cell, a woman stood and reached out between the bars. A soft sigh escaped her as a guard snapped,

"Stay still! Hands back!"

In a corner, a cart full of leftovers sent a stifling odour wafting through the air. In the deepest dark of the dungeon, someone cleared their throat harshly. From there, another door opened to a room where, unlike before, the cells were closed not by bars but by solid wooden doors, each with a small opening. From several, the sounds of banging and shouting began as the prisoners noticed the newcomers. The soldiers, faces impassive, led their captives onwards.

Oly glanced at the boy, whose face had turned the colour of ash. After the previous outburst, he did not intend to draw attention to himself again, so he walked silently beside him.

The next flight of stairs led upwards, opening into a spacious hall. This section's cells even boasted windows. They were ushered into one such cell. Their shackles removed, the soldiers then departed.

"You will wait here," one of them said before turning the key in the lock.

The room was furnished simply: two beds, a small table, a clothes rack, a bucket, and a barred window. Marden looked questioningly at the ranger, who first guided him to sit on one of the beds. He pressed a finger to his lips, signalling for silence, and with his other hand gestured for patience. He began a thorough examination of the room, searching for any

cracks, openings, or hidden spyholes in the corners or walls. Finding none, he approached the door and tested it by pressing and kicking at various points before shouting sharply:

"Someone! There's trouble!"

He listened intently, then sat down on the other bed facing the boy.

"Alright, we are alone. Are you afraid?"

"Yes."

"You needn't be; we are in no danger here."

Marden looked at him, astonished.

"Listen, they don't need us. They're trying to lay hands on Arlo. By evening, every citizen of Ash Peak will know we're in jail. The king wants Arlo to know this and come for you. Ironically, his desire will indeed be fulfilled."

"What do you mean by that?" the boy asked, spreading his arms in confusion.

"What I mean is, there's no other way out of here. We can only leave if someone takes us out."

"He'll think of something…"

"There's one problem," Oly interjected. "Magic doesn't work here. This place was meticulously designed. Even Nyhund couldn't vanish from here. I'm no wizard, but I can feel that my aura is damaged. What usually aids me in battle and provides a certain level of protection was already fading before we even entered the building."

"Why did you start fighting? You knew you had no chance," Marden asked, though he suspected he knew the answer.

"I did it so you wouldn't be alone here, kid."

* * *

Arlo and Beldon entered the tunnel leading to the western gate of the capital, each carrying a torch. It was late at night. The subterranean room in the sewer system, discovered by Marden, Orman, and Beldon, proved an ideal temporary dwelling, known only to them and Maida, the exact location of which not even the sorceress could pinpoint.

After a quarter of an hour's trudge, they arrived. The dwarf had previously constructed a sturdy door in place of the one Marden had blasted open. Now, they sat under candlelight, puffing away disinterestedly. The wizard studied ancient scrolls, while the dwarf examined the carpet—a splendid piece indeed. Just days before, he had meticulously cleared it of the debris accumulated during their previous visit.

The aged wizard was so engrossed in a scroll that he murmured softly as he read, his mind traveling back nearly seventy years, summoning a cherished childhood memory. Once, he had found an injured bird on the veranda. He had grown up near the sunlit town of Niverend on a farm where injured animals were common. His parents quickly noticed that such unfortunate creatures remarkably calmed under his touch, and over time, their injuries and ailments began to heal.

Then, one day, as young Arlo, who lived on the border of the Blue Pinegrove, was heading to school by wagon with his father, a strange, hatted figure stepped onto the road before them and addressed them:

"Greetings to you, Hlotar and son, Arlo!"

His father cautiously approached, then halted the wagon. With some suspicion but civility, he responded:

"Whom do we have the honour of addressing, wizard? And how do you know us?"

The stranger removed his hat and stepped closer, leaning his staff against the wagon.

"I am Radulf Jósteinn Loffdaed of the Guild of the Magi, the High Mage of the Niverend Tower. I wish to invite you both to dine with us, and I shall explain my errand."

Arlo's father blinked perplexedly.

"That is most gracious, but we are unfortunately in haste. But what interest do you, a learned mage, have in simple folk like us?"

The towering elder tilted his head, a gentle smile spreading across his face, and replied with dramatic simplicity:

"I have come for your son. Your son will be a wizard, Hlotar.

Young Arlo's mouth gaped open on the back of the wagon, but his father was equally astonished. They exchanged glances, and then the boy spoke up in a timid voice:

"Excuse me, sir, but what do you mean by me becoming a wizard?"

"It so happens," came the reply, "that you already are one. You possess an innate ability to heal, boy. Healing is one of the most mysterious of all magics. You have a precious gift; it would be a shame to see it wasted."

"Are you a healer too?"

"Oh, no… I am a pyromancer."

Old Hlotar watched this astonishing exchange, dizzy with bewilderment. Seizing a brief silence, he tried to speak, but his son pre-empted him.

"And what can you do, pyromancer?"

Radulf raised his forefinger, which, like a candle, began to flame.

"Do not be afraid! The school has been informed. They know you will not attend today. Hlotar, I implore you to join us, for you still worry about what will become of your son. I would have you see with your own eyes that he will be in the best of places, learning from the finest, or…"—here he winked at young Arlo— "you may continue on to your town school."

"No! I want to be a wizard! Father!" Arlo looked at the old man — "May I be a wizard?"

A tear rolled down Hlotar's cheek.

"You may, my dear boy, of course, you may. But we must explain this to your mother and your siblings."

He shifted over to make room for the strange new companion.

Soon after, a weathered wagon turned right onto the road, its three passengers jostling indifferently while passersby stared wide-eyed. It was not common for one to see an aging farmer, a seven-year-old boy, and a hatted wizard traveling together on a farm wagon, the latter puffing large clouds of smoke from his pipe.

* * *

More than a month had passed since the ill-fated experiment, and Xarfax felt it was time to return to the city. Due to the assassination attempt on the bandit leader, he must tread cautiously, yet he was likely expected by the king. He just needed to devise a way to gain entry without being apprehended by the guards. He was weary of secluding himself in his wooden house, and although winter was relenting, life in the wilderness remained uncomfortable.

He decided to set out on a warmer day, and that day had arrived. Donned in a black cloak with a sizable satchel at his side, he stepped out the door. Afterwards, he cast several protective spells and curses around to discourage any potential burglars. Enjoying the sunlight and fine weather, he chose not to use the underground tunnel system he had come by. Without a concrete plan, he randomly started walking westward. Hours of walking lay ahead, so he did not hurry, merely strolling comfortably along the uneven ground. A quarter hour later, he turned south by the Trey River, hoping to find stepping stones not far ahead, and continued indifferently. His hunch was correct; large waist-high stepping stones emerged from the widened stream bed, allowing him comfortable passage.

A raven followed him from a respectful distance.

With a sudden movement, he turned, drew his wand, and aimed it at the bird. It did not flinch. The magician waited, then lowered his arm.

"Fine creature, aren't you, my friend! Surely, you're not spying for someone?"

The black bird cocked its head, watching the man from a high branch before cawing loudly.

"Alright, just shout! Behave yourself, and you won't end up roasted on my spit… Now, let's move on!"

Then he waved his wand towards the bird, uttering the words:

"Segver mé serevam!"

The raven staggered, but after a moment, it regained its balance, flew to him, and landed on his outstretched arm.

"We shall be good companions, Nikanor. Let that be the name of my bird! Fly before me, Nikanor!"

The two set forth across the field, with thickets of bushes and shrubs on either side, and the sound of the stream fading into the quiet of early morning. The ground, softened by the receding clutches of a long winter, and the scent of awakening flora struck Xarfax's nostrils—a sensation less noticeable indoors. Despite his dark arts, the necromancer found unexpected pleasure in strolling across the bright meadow, his solitude occasionally shattered by the raucous caw of his bird, reminding him of his true nature.

After an hour's walk, he deemed it time for a brief respite. Settling at a safe distance from the path leading to the Northern Elephant Rocks, he enjoyed the sunlit clarity of the day. To the west, the edges of the Big Volcano loomed, below which sprawled the rocky domains of the Andabatas. Xarfax held little regard for them, believing that raw power and sheer dominance are far superior to any piety. To him, the power of meditation was mere frivolity. The volcano's summit smoked peacefully, the silence and calm pervasive, yet in his heart, he knew this tranquillity was temporary; soon the land would churn with upheaval as events surrounding the prophecy escalated.

The raven perched on a bush, waiting patiently. Occasionally, it glanced at its new master and then burst into prolonged caws. Xarfax tossed it a piece of ham, which it swiftly devoured. Rising as if understanding the bird's squawks, he nodded.

"You're right, we must go on."

They crossed the road, and after half an hour's walk, they reached the outskirts of the city, still well beyond the walls among the agricultural expanses. He proceeded cautiously under the cover of a wooded strip. Summoning the bird to his

side, he whispered in its ear. With a burst of energy, the raven disappeared from view. Xarfax sat down on a rock and closed his eyes. In that moment, he saw the world from above, feeling the cool air stream across his face, dizzying him with the perspective. The bird dived, forcing him to grip the rock beside him. He watched the city unfold over the two-mile expanse until Nikanor swooped within the city walls, scouting for signs of active guard activity in the northwestern outskirts.

Ten minutes later, the raven returned.

"Thank you for your service, Nikanor. Go now," he said.

The bird cocked its head momentarily, squawked loudly due to the proximity of the man, then took flight. Xarfax watched it for a while longer. Then, turning on his heel, he reached the cave entrance within ten minutes—the same one into which Arlo and Beldon had previously ventured. He too entered.

Chapter 11

The 800-Year-Old Oak Forest

Bromley's court was located on the southeastern edge of the vast forest, by the shores of Pig Lake, about half an hour's journey from the village of Baglyas. The landscape was almost perfectly flat, broken only by a few ancient rocks jutting skyward at intervals. Small hills sporadically rose, but for the most part, the terrain was level. The trees grew tall, their canopy varying in density, providing a partly sunlit expanse typical of an oak grove, inviting to those who wandered there. Large clearings dotted with numerous dirt paths crisscrossed the forest, housing small villages and farmstead centres. Trees even grew on rocky outcrops; verdure was everywhere. This place was a true Eden for animals and for humans seeking peace and rest.

The trees completely encircled Pig Lake, though only a narrow strip of them remained on the eastern shore before the vast plains began. The winter here was a bit warmer than in other regions, and the summer pleasantly cooler, with less extreme variations than in the northern or southern quarters. Official visitors seldom came this way, so the world of the druids was considered quite isolated, the troubles and toils of the empire rarely reaching this far. Strangers typically passed through transiently or came for recreation.

On this pleasantly mild late-winter day, Bromley was heading to the Council of Elders in the small village of Baglyas. He ambled through the winding but sizable wooden houses, his faithful companion, a massive shepherd dog, by his

side. Upon reaching the building, he looked at the dog, patted its head, and pointed to the porch. The dog settled comfortably near the door, resting its massive head on its front paws.

From here, a large clearing extended eastward, with a wide dirt road leading towards Wonder Field. The mentioned site lay about halfway to the capital. The sunlight gently evaporated the winter's accumulated moisture from the ground. The air was so clear that a tiny plume of smoke rising from the Big Volcano was visible in the distance. Turning northeast, however, other, more troubling thoughts crossed his mind, reminding him of his purpose as he knocked on the door.

Soon the door opened, and an old, slender woman with grey hair shuffled to greet him. Extending her hand with a laugh, she exclaimed,

"Oh, dear friend, Hogweed Bromley! How long it's been since I last saw you! What wind brings you to us old folks today?"

Bromley bowed to kiss the woman's hand.

"Meloria Hoydi, my dear! Please forgive your wandering friend, but duty has called him away much of late. And now, at this hour, I've come to ask a favour, shamefully, though not for myself."

The old woman laughed heartily.

"Silly, restless Bromley, always the adventurer. Come in, the house has just gathered for tea."

They were ushered into a spacious upstairs room where half a dozen elderly and middle-aged women sat around a table, chatting idly. Constructed entirely of wood, with log walls and beamed ceilings, it was a true warm, rustic home where the wise of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest gathered.

"Ladies, Hogweed Bromley graces us on this spring-awaiting day." He bowed individually to them, followed by introductions. The druids were exceptionally courteous people, never rushed, and during their conversations, they paid particular attention to their interlocutor. They never said more than what was necessary; maintaining a balance in conversation was a fundamental principle. Now, after the initial polite exchanges were concluded and they had successfully discussed what life was like in Baglyas currently, Bromley could turn to the reason for his visit. In a few sentences, he summarised the events of the nocturnal assembly in the capital, the preparations for his journey, and finally, the mysterious events at the Fallen Tower.

The women listened attentively to his report, occasionally nodding or raising their eyebrows to indicate that they indeed understood every word. This distinguished attention also had a sly side to it. Bromley continually found himself divulging slightly more details than he had planned. Not that he had secrets to hide, but in the whirl of events, other individuals' involvements also came to light, which he did not necessarily want to highlight.

After his long monologue, Meloria spoke up.

"See, the time has come. The prophecy has emerged, and Bromley has come to us for counsel. My friend, I know what you want to find out. You know that if anyone, those present here still remember and feel. Right?"

"Meloria, Gordána, Meluzina... I know your stories. I know that you have all lived well beyond your hundredth years. I know you are members of the Circle of the Wise and that you have seen much. And I also know that you are the last living members of the Sentinels of the Dawn. I am quite

certain, and the prophecy also states, that here, amidst these oaks, a very important truth will be revealed."

* * *

Neither Beldon nor Arlo had the slightest inkling that Xarfax had just passed by the sealed door, nor could the dark mage have guessed who was within the subterranean library room. Unaware that anyone was inside, Arlo busied himself with vials, pouring liquids from one into another. Beldon, meanwhile, fiddled with a strange device.

"Master Arlo, please verify this," Beldon requested.

"If it seals perfectly, then it's good," the wizard replied without looking up.

"It's good enough for me as it is," the dwarf declared.

"We'll test it before we use it, anyway."

They spent another hour adjusting the contraption made of peculiar glass containers and tubes framed with wood, packing everything into a large backpack afterwards. Leaving the room behind, Arlo illuminated their path through the corridors with his staff, and they soon arrived at the iron trapdoor where Marden, Orman, and Beldon had initially descended. The dark mage had passed by here just over an hour earlier.

With a single motion, the dwarf lifted the heavy lid and peered out. It was late at night.

"You can come up, old friend."

They carefully replaced the cover after climbing through the opening. Heading towards the barracks, located near the burnt-out district, they did not have to walk far. Beldon's soft whistle summoned Hagley.

"Are you ready?" the wizard inquired.

The sergeant nodded.

"Do you realise that what we're about to do could lead to a court-martial if discovered?" Beldon looked at him.

"To say the least," Hagley responded.

"Good, then everyone is aware of what they are doing. Please, my son, put this on your head," Arlo said, handing him something made from one of the glass bottles.

Hagley, though sceptical, complied. He now looked out from behind a glass mask. Strings secured it around the back of his head, with a framework of branches holding it in front of his nose and mouth. A tube dangling from the side was attached to a water bottle. Each breath he took caused the water to bubble slightly.

He then stepped a safe distance apart from the other two. The wizard produced a vial and threw it by the sergeant's feet. The liquid within spread across the cobblestones. After a half-minute, he declared:

"Very well, Beldon, sir, you have done a precise job. Our operation today stands on this... No! Hagley, don't take it off!"

He spoke just in time.

"What is all this, master?" the young soldier asked.

"We're just playing a little trick on the prison guards," Arlo replied with a mischievous grin.

From there, they had to walk down from the western part of the city to the south. They smoked all their remaining pipe tobacco en route, because according to the mage, if one of the masks didn't seal properly, the previously inhaled pipe smoke would mitigate the poison's effects.

* * *

“If only I knew what we are waiting for... We have been here three days. Were it not for the window in this wretched cell, I would not even know how much time has passed,” grumbled Marden.

“Patience, my boy!” the ranger soothed him. “We are fed, there is no cold, but it is certain that once we get out of here, I will drink myself senseless. Why is there no liquor here?” he kicked the door irritably, shouting the last sentence.

After a short wait, something occurred that surpassed their wildest dreams. About five minutes later, the trapdoor opened and inside appeared a large bottle.

Oly’s mouth hung open.

“Do you see what I see, or has confinement gone to my head?” he looked at the boy.

He then grabbed the bottle and yanked out the stopper. He was about to raise it to his lips when Marden leapt forward and snatched it from his hands.

“Have you lost your mind? You trust them?” he looked reproachfully at the other, who stared back with wide eyes, a bit ashamed of himself.

Marden sniffed the bottle carefully, studying what he sensed. He closed his eyes to try to discern the bottle’s origin with his innate abilities, but saw nothing. Did even his talent as a seer not work in this cell? He could not ponder on it for long as Oly grew increasingly impatient, so he handed it back.

“I think it’s alright, I don’t smell anything amiss. But just take a sip first, and wait a bit!”

He hardly believed the other would take him seriously. He did not; instead, he took a long swig, then nodded nonchalantly.

"I didn't expect the finest ale in the empire's prisons, but it will do."

With that, he took another hearty gulp, then passed the bottle to Marden. He also took a sip, and had to admit that indeed, a good swig of beer greatly eased the tension of such a grim moment. The drink was not plentiful, so they quickly finished it. Oly appeared ready to continue.

"Do you now believe that they want nothing from us, just using us as bait?"

"Perhaps..."

The boy's eyes grew heavier by the moment. For days he had barely slept, though Oly had proven an ideal cellmate. Perhaps it was his long life in the wilderness that allowed him to sleep completely silently and without movement. On the first day, Marden had even had to look at the other's cot several times to ensure Oly was still there.

Yet despite his efforts, he could only blink wearily. From somewhere, the clanking of chains was audible, followed by a guard clattering past their door. Occasionally, the panes behind the window bars shifted with a soft clink. Oly burped softly from the other side, from which Marden inferred he was not yet asleep. From beneath his bed came a rustling—perhaps some insect living its nocturnal life, who knows? They hadn't seen any rats or mice in the past few days. The room's sole furnishings were a small table and a coat rack, which gently leaned towards him. It extended its long arms and seemed to wave at him from the corner. He pulled the blanket over himself as he felt a chill. Looking back at the coat rack, it now

seemed impatiently staring at him, even placing its arms akimbo. He didn't understand, nor was he particularly interested. Then, the object began to wink. A mouse scurried up it, which appeared to tickle.

Subsequently, the coat rack turned around and, moving gently so as not to wake Oly, started towards the door and opened it.

"Come, we must go!" it whispered softly.

He watched the scene with wide eyes and slowly lifted his head to follow what was happening. He tried to rise from the bed, but his limbs were leaden.

"Come on!" he now heard more loudly.

Then the entire room began to sway and shake as if tossed about on a stormy river.

"Wake up, Marden, wake up!" the ranger shook him more vigorously.

He startled awake.

"What's happening?" he asked in alarm.

"They're here, we must run!"

Leaping from the bed, the next sight that met his eyes was Oly standing by the door, pressing a rag to his mouth. Beside him lay another large piece of cloth; the ranger pointed to it, and Marden already knew why. His sensitive alchemist's nose was struck by the smell of a plant extract, the perfect emetic, frequently used by his schoolmates to play tricks on each other.

When he rushed into the hallway, he saw two guards writhing on the floor, retching. Fifteen paces away, two masked figures gestured to them, their faces behind glass domes bubbling air through a large water bottle. A frantic scramble and stumbling began. The two figures grabbed them and ran

towards the courtyard. There, three guards burst open the door. Oly struck the first, who hit the ground hard. Then another vial of the emetic broke, causing the remaining two guards to double over in pain.

"Forgive me, brother, and thanks for the beer!" shouted the ranger back.

They had barely reached the courtyard when a bell rang. Multiple figures rushed towards them, but by then they had reached the wall, from which a rope ladder dangled down. It took Oly just a moment to be on top of the five-meter-high wall. The other accomplice also climbed up with feline agility. The soldiers charged towards them, and from atop the wall, one of the figures tossed another vial among them. He missed slightly, so two were still on their feet. One was floored by one of the masked figures, the other Marden tried to disorient, but by then he had learned from experience that magic did not work in this place.

Then Oly threw a stone from above, hitting a guard's steel helmet. The guard staggered, stumbled, and visibly gave up any further intent to fight. Only he was left up top when arrows began flying from below. Everyone else had already escaped down the rope ladder, which then tumbled into the abyss due to a careless move. Just what he needed. He looked down from the five-meter height and jumped. Raising his hand high, he landed smoothly, to Marden's astonishment, defying gravity.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"I don't know why, but I can do things like this. Let's run as fast as our legs can carry us!"

Meanwhile, some guards who had just entered through the main gate were turning the corner and charging straight

towards them. From a corner, Beldon leaped in front of them with his terrible axe, and bellowed so mightily that the windows of the surrounding houses trembled. The attackers halted in their tracks. That's when Arlo stepped forward from the background and raised his staff high. Its tip began to sparkle, and that was enough for the guards, who were not inclined to wait and see what would happen next.

"Arlo, Beldon, come on!" called Hagley, who was now discernible and leading five horses forward. Oly was already mounted on one, Hagley himself leaped onto another, and the third was taken by the enigmatic other masked figure and Marden. At Arlo's request, a few explosive vials were tied to the tip of an arrow.

Within a few minutes, they were galloping towards the western gate, where they were expected. A strengthened guard had been on alert for days, anticipating an escape attempt. Rows of lancers were positioned to impale the horses—or them—but it never came to that, as the wizard had anticipated this and cried out with his staff extended:

"Impedimentum Destruitur!"

A tremendous wind arose, toppling the line of soldiers. The next moment, their masked companion drew his bow and fired. A massive explosion shook the city as the vials' contents blasted the gate to shreds. They could barely keep the horses on the road; the poor creatures, though battle-hardened, would have rather scattered all over the place. They managed to cover the distance to the flaming gate and were already soaring westward towards the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest. And at that moment, the boy realized who his other rescuer was.

"Ivy!" he shouted back. "May the gods bless you!"

Calm was only slowly restored at the gate. The guards regrouped for a briefing. The officer in charge was assessing the situation. Consulting with the sergeant, the conclusion was reached that it was pointless to pursue the escapees.

"We can confidently say they've made it," the officer remarked cynically. "By now, we'd be beating the air trying to find them. Damn it... Have you ever seen anything like this?"

The other rubbed his neck.

"By God... No. And I've served for thirty years. These people are mad."

"Yet, there is one notable detail. It seems that no one died, nor do we have any serious injuries. Apparently, they managed to make their escape without causing anything beyond the mere act of escaping to be pinned on them."

* * *

In the morning, a knock sounded on Hagley's door. He had managed only a few hours of sleep, having sneaked back into the city through a side gate after the night's events. The knocking was repeated, louder this time, more forceful than one might deem normal. He lifted his head from the pillow, glanced around the room, and called out to the visitor to wait. Dirty clothes lay under the bed. The letter had been burned. The mask!!! He sprang up, tossed the mask used the night before into a wardrobe, quickly dressed, and called out again.

"Yes!"

Captain Faustus, the frigate commander, entered.

"What's so urgent, sir? I'm off duty today."

"I know," the captain paused before continuing, "Marden and the ranger were broken out of prison last night."

The sergeant looked surprised.

"They were in prison? Why?"

Faustus responded with a sly grin.

"I suppose the king wanted to lure out their master. But tell me! You wouldn't happen to know anything about this, would you?"

Hagley performed a marvellous piece of acting; he narrowed his eyes, then shook his head.

"No, but I expect there will be a thorough investigation. However, I did hear some noise last night; didn't sleep well at all. Is there anything known about the details?"

The captain sat down on a chair and pulled out his pipe but did not answer. Instead, he studied his man and his gestures. Hagley, growing tired of the silence, continued his reasoning.

"If they were the ones making all that noise, then everyone in the city must know about it by now. Surely an uncomfortable explanation awaits King Winslow. Would you like a drink, sir?"

"What have you got?"

Hagley looked around.

"Let's see, I have some white wine, and a little gin from my village up north."

He poured a glass of wine for each of them while his visitor briefly recounted the events, noting that those involved in the action must have been well-versed in botany and thoroughly familiar with the prison's scheme. They also needed to know exactly which cells held prisoners incarcerated for minor infractions.

"That sounds like something Arlo would do, though the emetic cedar is a timeless classic—we used to play with it in our youth, too."

With that, he sipped his wine. They spoke of a few more matters, but the superior decided not to disturb the sergeant any further. He bade farewell, closed the door behind him, and muttered to himself with a faint smile as he descended the stairs:

"You're a good lad, Hagley."

* * *

After his long subterranean journey, Xarfax reached the lower entrance of his home. He approached cautiously, not knowing if it was being watched or if it had been sealed. To his great surprise, he encountered no resistance. Indeed, almost two months had passed since he last gave any sign of life. Pointing his wand at the doorknob, he murmured an identification spell. He waited, then made a large gesture with his hand. With some hesitation, he grasped the doorknob. Nothing happened. He pressed down, and the door opened into his home.

Apart from the cool air and dust covering the furniture, nothing had changed. Even his books and equipment remained untouched – he correctly assumed they dared not tamper with them.

"Magma ex sub terra!" he directed his wand towards the stone in front of the great fireplace, and a glowing block of stone appeared there. He dared not light the fireplace, as the chimney would reveal his presence. Thus, he chose this method of heating. The spiritual fatigue caused by the magic was

immediate, but it was safer this way. A wizard does not live without cost; what he takes from nature, his soul repays.

He sat down and wrote a letter. Then he walked around the rooms, securing the entrances with alarm spells, and lay down to sleep.

He woke late at night. After dining, he donned his black cloak, took the letter, and peered out onto the street through the upper window. He waited until the passersby had disappeared and cautiously stepped out through the top door. Around the corner, a few people lingered, but no one paid him any attention. After passing the University, he turned south towards the palace. Passing by Little Hollow, and at the crossroads, he glimpsed at the Tower of the Magi, where he had not set foot for many years. As a necromancer, he was not a welcome guest there, nor did he feel he had anything to do with or learn from that place. The typical arrogance and self-assurance of black magicians mingled healthily with his confidence. Reaching the Triangulum, a triangular junction at the southeastern part of the palace, a passerby approached him, seemingly intending to speak to him. Perhaps a peddler, a herald, or traveller…

He briefly lifted his hood and looked the stranger in the eye. The man was frightened and swiftly changed direction. He was only a turn away from his destination. However, he then noticed a group of gatekeepers. He managed to turn into the lower point of the Triangulum just in time to avoid facing them. To appear natural, he had to enter the central courtyard, where he took a sip of water. The guards surveyed him but found nothing of note and hurried on. They did not see his face; in fact, few knew what Xarfax, the fearsome black magician, looked like.

After the detour, he finally reached the Lower Lane, where he stopped in front of house number six and dropped the letter into the mailbox.

Chapter 12

A'Nagtoth's Successor

Three days post their daring escape, Arlo and his companions arrived in Baglyas. Hagley, having successfully implemented their plan, had dispatched a pigeon to Bromley who was thus prepared for their arrival. They stumbled into the inn, frostbitten, parched, and famished, where they were promptly served hot soup and provided lodging. There was no need for concealment; the politics of Ash Peak seldom reached the reaches of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest. Furthermore, the path that led there was a labyrinth of sorts, replete with dead ends and misleading turns. Without Ivy's exceptional navigational skills, they would have been sorely pressed. The forest itself spanned a circle of fifty miles in diameter on the map, and local lore suggested that only those wishing to hide or lose their way ventured here. Crossing the lake would simplify the approach to the village, but the banks were thick with undergrowth, making this route less viable. Moreover, the lake's waters were advised against disturbance; deep and home to mysterious creatures, no boat had dared the deeper waters for centuries, providing a natural barrier to the west of the wilderness.

Even Oly was wearied by the journey; Beldon devoured his meal with such vigour that there was concern he might fall ill. He did not become sick, but soon after, his head thudded onto the tabletop. The dwarf, most susceptible to the taxing travel, snored on after being helped to his upstairs room. Oly was about to follow when his fellow ranger reminded him that

he reeked as if he'd just awoken from a winter slumber, thus a bath was in order. Casting a meaningful glance at Marden, he too sniffed his own camouflaged garb.

"It appears I need a wash," he muttered quietly.

"You've all run hard; cleanse and rest! We will continue tomorrow, my friends," Bromley directed them.

Leftovers from their meal, along with a few jugs and cups, lay scattered around. Their gear was tossed aside, boots haphazardly strewn about. Arlo's staff lay on the ground, which the druid thoughtfully propped in a corner. After clearing the table and as quiet settled over the room, Bromley too relaxed, pulling a large old book onto his lap. However, his eyelids soon grew heavy, and he extinguished the candle, letting sleep take him.

A misty night stretched over the land. Only the periodic calls of owls punctuated the silence, vigilant guardians among the ancient oaks. With silent flight, they surprised the unsuspecting rodents, while they too were watched by the eyes of the forest. The moonlight filtered through the landscape, and somewhere a wolf howled. In the utter stillness, the gentle noise of drizzling rain gradually filled the vastness.

* * *

As dawn broke, the sky continued its gentle weeping. In the baths, Beldon emerged grandly from a large tub, wrapping a towel around himself and heading straight for the kitchen. He plucked a sausage from the pantry, grabbed a loaf of bread, and made his way back to his room. The common room below remained quiet for an hour more before the arrivals of the previous day began to trickle down one by one. Bromley had

returned to his own home at the crack of dawn. Ivy was the last to descend, causing quite a stir as she did.

Her hair was neatly arranged, her dreadlocks perfectly aligned, her skin smoothed. She wore a feminine dress and greeted the others with a radiant face. Though none overly exerted themselves in propriety, it was on her that the return home seemed most evident.

Beldon's jaw dropped for a moment, seeing her beauty for the first time. Arlo seemed to share his sentiment and did not hesitate to comment on the transformation: "Behold, the wild wood's daughter has turned into a fair young lady overnight."

Ivy, looking down bashfully, smiled and noted with a blush: "I have a permanent room in this inn."

"Then all is understood," the wizard spoke. "After breakfast, a brief respite, and then we are due at Bromley's. He wishes to introduce us to someone or someones."

The rest barely came to pass as Beldon and Marden, excited to witness the druid's world, were eager to move, whereas the others have been here before. After a short time, they all started their walk between the buildings towards the shore. Despite their recent ordeals leaving them slightly weary, the cessation of the rain and the emergence of the sun made the three-mile walk to Bromley's house quite pleasant. The narrow path wound through a dense patch, covered with last year's leaves, where acorns crunched underfoot. Soon, they ambled beside a small stream pointing directly towards the Pig Lake. A gentle slope broke the vast flatness. The lake sat some ten to fifteen meters below the level of the village. Blackbirds foraged in the leaf litter, casting curious glances at them. Marden, turning his head side to side in fascination, nearly

tripped over a root, but Beldon was there to catch him. Even in their winter guise, he recognized the plants needed for various concoctions and did not hesitate to share this knowledge with his companions. His master nodded at each mention, clearly very proud of him. The soil here was dark and fertile. The abundance of withered plants told them that come spring, life would burst forth rapidly, and by summer, the density would be near impenetrable.

But gradually the woods cleared, and the surface of the lake became visible. On a clear day like this, the far shore glimmered faintly, especially the peninsula next to Wonder Field. The further sections faded into the mist.

"How vast," Marden remarked, having never seen it from this side before.

Bromley's house, or rather his estate, faced directly onto the shore. It was a large log house of three stories, evidently built up by generations, featuring a grand porch with a wide carriageway. Being the lord of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest, it was expectedly no humble dwelling. The roof, of excellent quality slate, shielded the inhabitants from the elements, while tall stone chimneys stretched towards the sky, wisps of smoke curling up from all three. And at that moment, an unexpected event unfolded. Marden took Ivy's hand, and the dwarf could only exclaim:

"This is unbelievable!"

From the porch, a forest fairy hastened towards them. Her golden hair floated in the wind, her thin wings spread wide. She wore a lemon-yellow skirt and top, seemingly indifferent to the crisp weather at the end of winter. Her childlike proportions and beauty completely enchanted everyone. Her steps were light, almost airy, as if she were

flying towards them. She stopped a few meters in front of them and spread her arms wide. She bowed and gestured inside.

"Please, enter the abode, friends of Hogweed Bromley, and enjoy the comforts of his home! I am Fiona, the guardian of this household."

Her voice was like something out of a fairy tale, almost musical. In the background, Bromley appeared, greeting his guests with great joy.

"The adventurers arrive at Oakstead! Come with me! I see you've already met my fairy. She will acquaint you with the house rules—and, he added emphatically after a pause—she will ensure you abide by them. Even I must adhere.

Fiona looked at them with angelic eyes. The interior was lavish. High ceilings, spacious windows, and from the terrace, a magnificent view of the lake. Bromley's two sons were also present in the expansive living room. According to the druid's laws of hospitality, introducing the family came first. Bromley's better half was not currently in the forest, so there was no opportunity to meet her. The thirty-year-old Archibald and twenty-three-year-old Helge served under their father's tutelage, learning the ways of the wilderness, tapping into the energies of the elements, and commanding the will of animals. The elder was skilled in combat, while the younger excelled in the arts of healing.

Perhaps merely due to the dominance granted by age, but throughout the morning, as they were shown around the estate, Helge remained in his elder brother's shadow. Marden and Beldon gaped in wonder, though for the others, the sights were familiar. Arlo, able to attend to more than the immediate tour, noticed that Archibald directed most of his conversation towards Ivy, who clearly was impressed by the young druid.

They stayed until dinner, after which Bromley pulled Arlo aside, and they ascended to the third floor to the druid's study. Bromley's jovial mood faded, replaced by a visage of concern. He looked out the window before pouring wine for them both.

"Reports of stirrings in the south have reached us," he declared.

Arlo's eyebrows rose in intrigue.

"It is said that whispers of the prophecy have reached the ears of the yeomen. Arlo, you realise we have unleashed something that could fundamentally shake the foundations of the realm?"

The chair creaked under Arlo as he shifted, his excitement palpable and contrary to concern. He did not regard this period with apprehension.

"I know, and I do not regret it in the slightest. When my old master Radulf stopped my father's cart, even then I was prepared to upend our world. As a child, I sensed something amiss, and as I grew, that conviction only deepened."

"But…" Bromley spread his arms wide, "aren't you afraid? Our responsibility is immense."

"I am not frightened, my friend. My fears stem from other sources. Throughout my life, what terrified me was the prospect that all would remain unchanged. That I might close my eyes on my final night having achieved nothing of note for our descendants. Though fate decreed that I should have no grandchildren, I consider Marden my son, and for his sake alone, it is worth it. I am seventy-three years old; who knows how much time I have left. Yet, I do not feel weary; never have I been more ready to act."

"But what if we fail?" asked the other.

"Good Bromley! You are strong, and young…"

"I am not young!"

Arlo paused to reflect.

"But strong you are, and so are your sons. We may fail. Our cause might, too. Yet, there is already a new generation," he gestured downwards, causing the mighty lord of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest to feel a tightness in his chest.

* * *

"What is the meaning of this?" inquired the King of Xarfax. "This vanishing for nearly two months?"

The necromancer nonchalantly toyed with a goblet. They were in a grimy little kitchen, the very one into which he had cast his letter the day before. That letter, picked up by the King's personal secretary, had been brought to the palace so that a day later, they could meet here through the cave system.

"My lord, as your paramount ally, I suggest..."

"What do you suggest to me?" snapped the King.

"As your accomplice!" the mage raised his voice too. "Well, what is it?"

He stood up from his chair. The King made a cautious step backward.

"You are in grave peril, King Winslow. The only person who knows what the prophecy contains has fled. Likely taken refuge with the druids. No one believes that there was nothing in that chest, do they? That the wise old Arlo might have been telling the truth? Nonsense! He and his friends, including the druids, have deceived everyone. But you dare not cross the druids. Who knows what secrets that forest, or the dark waters of the lake, might hide..."

The sovereign felt a mix of outrage, anger, and a slight fear, all of which Xarfax could clearly see.

"You're afraid, King! Though you have no need to fear me. In your dealings with me, there should be only one sentiment: trust. You know me. I am not shy, nor overly moral, only helping as long as it benefits me. So, what do you propose?"

Winslow laughed.

"You really think to extort me?"

"This is not extortion, but a bargain. I'll aid you if you do the same."

The King slowly paced the room, stroked his beard and, shaking his head, looked up at the ceiling.

"Very well, you cursed spawn of death. I'll do what you ask."

The wizard, wanting to hear the promise again, repeated his earlier request:

"Exoneration from charges of murder and conspiracy. A cover story, an alibi, why it couldn't have been me. Freedom to move without having to hide from the gate guards."

The other nodded.

"But you will tell where you have been?"

The magician did something nearly unheard of from him: he chuckled softly. The King had to acknowledge that this gesture only made the man more daunting.

"Sire, there are forces at play around us, of which even we sorcerers have but a vague notion. If all goes well, you shall soon have an ally more powerful than any. Just see that your throne survives the times to come."

Winslow's eyes flashed at this impudence, yet he knew he must control himself.

* * *

Marden, Ivy, Oly, and Beldon entered the crooked house with Bromley. From the atmosphere that had pervaded everyone earlier in the home of the forest lord, they sensed that a turning point was approaching. The druid disappeared for long minutes. In the meantime, they looked at each other for lack of anything better to do. Sounds of bustling and soft laughter could be heard from inside, then a large table was moved. The druid's dog curled up in the corner, occasionally glancing up at them while resting its head on its paws. Suddenly, it looked up, panting with its tongue out. Directly after that, the door opened, and Bromley beckoned them out.

Old ladies were seated around a circular table. All four guests entered the room. Meloria, Gordána, and Meluzina greeted the newcomers with a kind smile. Hagley had arrived in the morning, so he was already in the room when they arrived. The ladies exchanged looks, then stood up to take a closer look at the visitors. They were evidently excited and curious about them. But they had only taken a few steps when Gordána burst into a deep, raspy laugh, which soon spread to the other two women. Bromley watched the scene with a bit of confusion. The others were also puzzled. But eventually, Meloria, seeing the baffled faces, hastened to their aid.

"Bromley, Bromley, you naive, blessed-hearted, good man!"

The druid was quite taken aback.

"The Lord of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest had not expected, and let us admit, neither did we, that the successor of A'Nagtoth would not be a man."

Apart from the three old ladies, if possible, everyone looked even more bewildered. Meloria then pointed to the ranger girl.

"There stands the successor of A'Nagtoth. Ivy Owlens is none other than Doria's heir to the throne, the future queen of the empire. And she's about to faint, please my son, catch her before she hurts herself!" Meloria said kindly to Oly.

* * *

The light from candles on the dangling chandelier illuminated the many book-filled cabinets, and on this chilly day, the warmth of the log house seeped into their hearts too, given the unfolding events. The first thing she noticed was the velvet curtain, then gradually she recognized the world and those standing around her.

Ivy Owlens came to her senses on a comfortable couch, surrounded by her friends. She lifted her head, but Arlo, with a raised palm, soothed her.

"Hush…" he placed his hand on her forehead. "I understand this is all too sudden, my dear girl. And I admit, I too am surprised, but if this is how it must be, so it shall."

Despite his reassurances, she sat up with a look of despair.

"What is all this??? Me, a queen? Gods, I am but a wanderer. A forest vagrant. I don't even know who I am," she wept.

Oly, with uncharacteristic seriousness, quickly came to her aid.

"No sister, you were never a vagrant. I was, but not you. You have always led with dignity and calm. Now I understand everything."

Ivy looked at him.

"What are you talking about?"

"That I am Oly O'Mons, and I will protect you and help you become who you are, even if it costs me my life."

Hagley chimed in:

"I join you, my friend!"

The others nodded in agreement.

Ivy sniffled softly, then spread her hands:

"I am an orphan. I know nothing about myself."

"Perhaps not by chance," Arlo spoke, "while you slept, the three old ladies embarked on a grand investigation to find out everything about you. They sent letters in all directions of the compass. Soon, all the druids of the empire will know your name, and they are working to find your roots."

This didn't calm the girl, but Arlo was unstoppable, enthusiastic on her behalf.

"What if they are wrong?" she ventured.

"The old ladies?" Bromley looked at Ivy, "Never. They never err in such matters. I wouldn't lead a campaign with them, nor would I hunt a wild bear with them, but I trust their knowledge of history and their hidden connection with the spiritual world, which guide their intuitions with absolute certainty. I see this stirs conflicted feelings in you, but aside from that, be certain: you are the scion of the ancient house of A'Nagtoth and the heir to the throne of Doria."

* * *

The following day, Xaldimárr and Nyhund arrived in Baglyas. The locals watched them with surprise and curiosity, prompting the duo to quickly make their way to their lodging. Bromley hastened to greet them and offered fresh food. Elsewhere, it might have seemed odd for the local lord to serve food to his guests, but not among the druids. Though they were mannered and stately, they were equally devoid of pretension.

"The northern part is swarming with soldiers. From the Hirendi region to the Yluath bridge, the roads are teeming," the necromancer began as he unpacked his belongings.

Bromley laughed at this.

"The fools. They think that Arlo and his company are still out there."

"What do you mean?" interjected the goblin.

"Just this, my master of illusions, that Arlo and his group made a loud exit from the capital, and now the county is scouring for them. I believe they know they are here, but they fear the forest. Those who enter these woods with peace in their hearts are loved and aided by the wilderness, guided by it. But the trees and the animals sense the purpose of your coming, and if darkness resides in your heart, you won't get far."

"That's curious because I crossed without trouble, though perhaps only because Nyhund is with me," Xaldimárr quipped with a hint of humour.

"My 'dark-souled' friend, had they suspected ill intent within you, you would have turned back at the first clearing, whether with Nyhund or not," Bromley reassured him.

"But to clarify the recent events for you: the king captured Marden and Oly a week ago. He attempted to lure out their master. Arlo, however, was not open to a diplomatic

solution; instead, they orchestrated an escape, blew up the western gate, and fled on horseback."

At this, Xaldimárr and Nyhund burst into laughter.

"Arlo did such a thing?" asked the goblin, continuing to laugh with uncharacteristic boisterousness.

"Indeed! And Hagley, Ivy, and Beldon aided with a few punches since magic is futile within the prison." The druid snapped his fingers. "But eat up, for our cooks have outdone themselves. Meanwhile, do tell us more!"

"Right away, just first explain, lord of the oaks, how did Oly come into the picture?" the necromancer asked.

"Ah, this is my favourite part. As soon as they would have dragged Marden through the prison gates, he provoked a fight with the guards to ensure the boy wasn't cast into the cell alone."

A field mouse, perched by the window, scampered off the sill, overwhelmed by the raucous laughter emanating from within.

* * *

"As you are aware, the wise old ladies have lifted the veil on the prophecy's most crucial secret: Ivy Owlens is the descendant," Bromley began summing up the recent days, "Why wasn't this known until now? Because they had not met her in person. It's a twist of fate that our friend has often visited Baglyas, and the inn is but two streets away from the ladies' convent; they could have crossed paths on the street if circumstances had been different. The ladies have the profound ability to see into one's soul, to know a person's name and everything about their origin without formal introductions. This

gift is granted only to us, the dwellers of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest, and even among us, only a few possess it, all of whom have been women."

The living room of the house owned by the lord of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest accommodated all of them—the landlord, Arlo, Marden, Hagley, Oly, Beldon, Xaldimárr, Nyhund, and Ivy. Bromley's sons were also present as guests. Arlo took over the conversation:

"This day marks the third day of the newest era of the realm. I believe the history books will refer to it thus. However, we must work to ensure those books are written, for it is up to us to make it so that someone will one day write them. I do not know what to call what we are about to embark on, but we certainly risk death if we fail, for our aim is to overthrow King Winslow and install this young woman in her rightful place," he pointed at Ivy. She sat with an impassive face; her emotions were unreadable. Then Bromley continued:

"Meloria suggests we must travel to the eastern island to trace Ivy's roots. It would be weeks on foot, days on horsebacks, but with the empire's forces hunting us, we'll need to take detours. I can now declare that Ivy is our leader. In the wilderness, she has already been the one to find our path, but now she also becomes our decision-maker. I would traverse the Calm Peaks, cutting through the wilderness to reach the Green Bridge and Samorudn city. The Pocamac Lake and jungle offer perfect concealment, though dense. We will bypass Niverend to the north and also skirt Fort Solyberg. The hardest part will be the Green Bridge, which is unavoidable. Perhaps if we meet someone there who can ferry us across... Originally, upon having crossed the bridge, I would have said that the eastern island was dangerous, but given our current circumstances, we

can only breathe easy once we've made it across. Shiraed is the land of the goblins, where Nyhund will lead the way, though I must admit, I do not precisely know our final destination."

"Fear not," the goblin spoke up, "The lands of Owlens and Shiraed are expressive, giving far more signs than the Eastern and Western counties. We will find what we need to find. The legends will aid us. The people living there are not without hope. They too are awaiting someone, and they sang of this arrival centuries ago.

To be continued…

Notes: