

Chapter 13.

Journey to the Eastern Island

Upon a sun-drenched morning in early spring, they took their leave of the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest. They gave the crossroad at Cay's Meadow a wide berth, turning off the path even before reaching the forest's edge. Before them stretched a grassy plain, twenty miles broad, adorned here and there with thickets and groves. Beyond it, past the frontier, lay the Pocamac Jungle. But first, they had to cross the great southwestern road that ran from the capital to distant Mel Ramola. In itself, this posed no grave danger—were it not for the Trey River, which widened suddenly after leaving Ash Peak. There was but one bridge by which it could be crossed dry-shod: the one upon the road, and that, it was well known, was guarded. Their only alternative would be to follow the near bank southward, skirting the jungle in its entirety. Yet that way meant a great detour, and worse, it kept them for long upon the borderland between the Western and Eastern counties. A hard choice, indeed: the bridge was perilous but swift; the detour, safer perhaps, but shadowed their steps for many leagues.

In the end, they chose the longer path—Marden's heart was set on seeing the monolith of Master Avius. These towering stones, ancient beyond reckoning, had been raised more than a thousand years ago. Wrought with long-forgotten magics, they had once allowed swift passage between far-flung places. But the masters who wrought them, and the Order to which they belonged, had long since passed from the world.

Their descendants had died out—or lost the knowledge of their forebears. Here and there, some cunning folk still whispered that a few of the monoliths might yet stir with power—but none in these days dared test their truth.

On the day after their departure, they crossed the king's road a second time without hindrance. By mid-afternoon the monolith rose before them—visible from miles away, its sheer height cutting the sky like a tower of midnight stone. When they at last stood before it, its grandeur was both beautiful and dread. It must have stood at least twenty-five metres tall, and yet time had left scarce a mark upon it.

"This is a thousand years old?" Beldon asked with furrowed brow.

"No," said Arlo. "Older still. And I see you're pondering how sound it stands." He paused, then added quickly, catching the dwarf's bristling gaze, "I meant only that it was fashioned with strange arts and other methods, long lost to us, old and mighty magics we no longer understand."

"And how does it work?" Marden asked.

Arlo let out a thoughtful hum, then smiled wryly.

"It is better, perhaps, that we do not know... Or rather, we could know. The Guild of Magi holds tomes and scrolls that speak of these stones, and the eldest among us have studied them. The lore still lives. But..." he trailed off for a moment, "for myself, I would rather walk, or ride. Especially since the Eastern Hordes shattered two of the monoliths upon the far isle. You see, they once worked together, like a great chorus—when two were broken, the harmony was lost. Now, their powers are... unpredictable."

They lingered beneath its shadow a while longer, breaking their fast and resting their limbs. In the distance rose

the mountains of Calm Peaks, which encircled the Pocamac Jungle and its namesake lake, forming a vast valley, some twenty by forty miles in size—open to one side alone. Like the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest, which they had left behind, it felt a world unto itself, though scarcely any souls dwelled within it now. A single settlement clung to the northern edge, deep in the woods. If Bromley's realm seemed cloaked in mystery, this land was a riddle wrapped in fog. Unlike the open oaklands, here tangled bramble and thick undergrowth filled the spaces between towering trees. Fortunately, Oly usually kept to the southern quarter of the jungle, which bordered the bleak stretches of Barrenland. He knew the wild like the palm of his hand, and of this part of the journey, they had little to fear. It was the borderland that troubled them more.

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The king summoned Maida for the second time since Arlo had begun his inquiry into the prophecy. Their previous conversation had already proved difficult; yet she feared this one even more. The ceremonial prelude unfolded second by second just as it had before, until, once inside the crimson chamber, the monarch offered her a seat.

"As on the previous occasion, I have summoned you to obtain certain information," said King Winslow without preamble. "I see no reason for unnecessary pleasantries. I wish to inquire about the whereabouts of one of your order's mages—Arlo of Bluegrove. He is not, I presume, at the tower?" The question was delivered with a strained attempt at humour.

"Your Majesty, believe me, I too would like to know where he is," Maida lied. "I have heard nothing from him for

months.”

The king inspected his fingernails, then remarked:

“Then the letter you received from him two weeks ago must have met its end in the flames of your hearth, I take it?”

The chamber seemed to spin about Maida.

“Your Majesty...?”

The king fixed her with a piercing stare. Now was the moment to improvise swiftly and convincingly—but despite her efforts, no reply sprang to mind. Then, seized by a sudden impulse, she offered the following explanation:

“Our order follows a charter that we have aligned with the laws currently in effect—ratified, if Your Majesty recalls, with your royal assent. This document states...”

“I know what it states,” Winslow interrupted. “It allows your esteemed little circle to keep its precious secrets—provided none of them endanger a living being, or another’s property. However—” he raised a finger for emphasis—“your dear friend aided in the escape of two prisoners and, after blowing open the western gate, left the capital without permission.”

Maida stared at him, unblinking.

“How could he possibly have aided them? No magic is possible within the prison walls. Arlo is an old man—without his mental power, he could not harm even a fly. And yes, it is true that I received a letter from our brother two weeks ago, in which he described enjoying his freedom in the druids’ forest and expressed hope that we might meet again soon. But where he may have gone since then—I truly do not know.”

The king found her reply infuriating, insolent—and rather entertaining. In truth, he found the woman deeply intriguing; not merely in appearance, but for the boldness that

radiated from her like firelight.

“I see,” he said, smiling at her encouragingly. “You know, there are certain kinds of knowledge—when we fail to examine them from enough angles—they may lead us astray. And in doing so, we may not only harm ourselves, but bring curses upon others... even ruin entire kingdoms.”

When Maida gave no answer, he continued:

“I bear no ill will toward your friend. From the very beginning, I have merely sought to persuade this... group, this company—call it what you will—to share with me the knowledge they have gathered on the subject.”

“The prophecy?” Maida asked directly.

The king laughed aloud, then rose to his feet and began pacing toward her.

“Call it what you like,” he said as he passed her and came to stand just behind her. “But I daresay, in the end, you shall all find disappointment—for the prophecy, at least in the form so many believe it to take... does not exist.”

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One evening, frigate captain Faustus Astridth and captain Nero Gordianus gathered in the tavern of Osberth, the innkeeper. Hagley’s disappearance had caused some stir within the company, spawning theories wilder than the last. The two officers had agreed the barracks was no place for such a discussion, and so, sipping the heavenly stew of the round-bellied innkeeper, they conversed in untroubled calm. Only the flickering light of candles brightened the room, and the laughter and hoarse shouts of the regulars served as backdrop to their quiet talk.

“So he went with them, didn’t he?” asked Faustus.

“I cannot think of any other explanation,” replied Nero. “All winter long he spoke of nothing else—of the tower, and what transpired there. The matter’s become his obsession. And he takes pleasure in it. He investigates, reads, haunts the library. Were he more inclined to it, I’d say without hesitation he should hang up his sword and join the mages... But of course, that’s not how these things are done.”

The frigate captain washed down a spoonful of greasy broth with a draught of wine.

“Then the question becomes, how do we cover for him, my friend?” he said with a wink toward the captain.

“There’s hardly a way to do so,” Nero replied. “A cover story? A proper justification? It could only work if he had consulted me first. How am I to claim I sent him out on field duty, if that’s not what he says should he return—or worse, be captured? He handled this rather poorly. He knows he can trust me. After all, he fought beside my brother at that cursed tower.”

“How is your brother now?” the frigate captain asked with a look of sympathy.

“He is well. And he will be well. I no longer worry. But something was done to him. Something that changed him. I know it—I feel it—but he will not speak of it. Arlo and his lot often speak in their circles of dark magic, and the horrors of necromancy.”

Faustus leaned in, his interest alight.

“Go on.”

“Nerva told me only this: that he met someone... or something. I cannot be sure, for it is hard to question him in such moments. But there was this figure. He wore a dark cowl.

His skin was withered. And when Nerva looked into his eyes... he said that no human eyes could be like that. They were red, and they seemed to glow.”

“An undead?”

“I do not know. I cannot even say for sure that he did not imagine it all. But there is something else. I saw him packing the other day. I believe... I believe he means to follow them.”

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“Arimál, you fool!” one of the brigands bellowed at their leader. “Where do we take the soldier?”

He turned and looked at them.

“What does he look like? Who beat him?”

The bandits stared at him, baffled.

“What does it matter? Don’t tell me you’ve turned priest!”

“Bring him!” Arimál grunted, turning on his heel. “The Hooded One is already waiting. And had you not drunk away what little sense you had left, you might recall his one command—that the prisoner be brought to no harm.”

As they walked, he continued:

“Those up there came to the tower from the capital. There’s a mage among them with his boy, a druid, and that necromancer. Trained warriors too, dangerous ones. They’re after the chest—maybe they’ll open it—that one that’s been mouldering in the attic for centuries. The Hooded One needs one of them. If they manage to open the chest, we might finally be rid of this...”

“I am an officer of the Empire!” Nerva burst out. “You

will not get away with this!”

“Shut your mouth!”

They twisted and turned through the cavern for some minutes before entering a great chamber. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, and somewhere in the distance water murmured in quiet flow. The vault above curved in near-perfect semicircle over the floor, where small stones had been laid and levelled into a nearly even surface. Torches burned upon the walls. In the shadowed rear of the chamber, something stirred. At first, he thought it an animal, but as it crept closer, human garments became clear. He shielded his eyes from the torchlight with one hand and wiped the sweat and blood from its brow with the other. Then the figure stepped out of the dim and cast back its hood five paces from him.

The blood froze in Nerva’s veins. His heart pounded so violently he thought he would collapse. He turned his head aside—for he could not bear to meet the creature’s gaze. But then, breathing hard through his nose, he summoned his courage and looked again. His face twisted in horror, his jaw clenched—but he did not look away.

“You are brave,” said the other in a voice that rasped like wind through dry leaves. “You are filled with fear, and yet you can look into my eyes. Though I no longer have eyes.”

Around them, the others had begun to tremble. Arimál longed to be dismissed. The Hooded One gestured—and the others, cowed, slunk away into the dark.

They were left alone. The Hooded One surveyed him, then began to circle him slowly, at a few paces’ distance. He raised one hand and gently touched the nape of Nerva’s neck. The officer collapsed at once. With eerie ease, the creature lifted him from the ground and laid him upon a long stone

table. Taking up a torch, he drew a circle with its burning head around the slab. He waited a while in silence, then returned the torch to its bracket. Shedding his robe, he revealed nothing beneath. His skin was shrivelled and dry, creased with countless wrinkles like bark peeling from a dead tree. He raised his arms, and in a whisper, he spoke:

“O wise and ancient Haw-Mon! Greatest of the Knowers! I call this human soul into our midst. Transform him—let him join our ranks!”

Nerva’s head lolled to one side, and a long sigh escaped his lips.

“Still his heart, chill his flesh, let him breathe no more! O wise and ancient Haw-Mon! Kill this body—and let power inhabit it!”

Nerva’s body began to tremble faintly, then gave out a choked, strangled moan. But it was not enough. The Hooded One placed his palm upon the soldier’s brow and cried out—at least as loudly as his throat would allow:

“Haw-Mon! Tear a piece of my spirit from me—and plant it in this mortal!”

The prone body arched and writhed. Nerva’s eyes flew open, and in them glimmered a faint and eerie red light. A terrible scream tore from his throat. The Hooded One stood like stone, though deep pain twisted his withered face. It lasted but a few moments. Then he dropped to both knees, clinging to the edge of the table, trembling.

Nerva... still lived.

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Leaving the monolith behind, they advanced southward along

the borderlands with cautious pace. At the royal road leading toward the Gulf of Grimdor, they encountered no hindrance, and soon the path led them once more beneath trees. The jungle thickened gradually, and before they reached the truly impassable tracts, they deemed it wise to make camp and take rest. In any case, the Sun had begun its descent in the west. The Lake of Pocamac lay still some ten miles eastward, and in the mild breeze, the scent of early-waking vegetation drifted to them. The deep breath Oly took was almost visible upon his tall and slender form as he drank in the exhalation of his native land.

“Friends, behold the wonder!” he said. “The fairest place in all the realm. Pity we are not here in summer, when it blossoms in full splendour.”

Already many shrubs had begun to green, yet evening brought a biting chill to their company. Beldon and most of the band supped on salted meat, while Oly, Ivy, and the druids had stew made from freshly gathered mushrooms. Bromley had brought his sons along the road, though he had made them swear that should he deem it necessary, they would turn back. A quiet night descended, broken only now and then by the hoot of owls and the stirrings of beasts that roam about in darkness. Beldon found no sleep among them, and so he rose and set off on a short walk. Before long, Xaldimárr joined him.

“Well, well, well, the black sorcerer. Aren’t you afraid of the dark?” the dwarf teased.

“No more than you, Lord of Mines,” the other returned.

They lit their pipes and stood atop a rise, gazing southward. As far as eye could see: forest, and more forest. To the east rose the southern ridge of the Calm Peaks above the trees, and the full moon bathed in the mist that coiled over the

southern lands.

“Barely a hundred miles from here,” said Beldon, “and all is scorched by Khraoul. There, even winter is mild, and summer burns. Only the most enduring plants survive. Have you seen the southern savannahs, my friend?”

“Once, in my youth,” came the reply. “But I remember little of it now. I seldom journeyed south of Mel Ramola. I have travelled more often overseas than into those lands. That place frightens me somewhat. It suits your kind better—you dwarves with feet like elephants.”

Beldon drew deeply from his pipe.

“May I ask you something?”

Xaldimárr turned his gaze to him in place of reply.

“What drives a man to befriend death?”

The sorcerer gave a soft chuckle. Only after a brief silence did he answer.

“As you know, magic cannot be learned. It can only be nurtured. If one bears no trace of it within, he shall never conjure. And even then, one does not choose which kind of magic shall manifest. True, those born with affinity to one art may study the others—but only in one may a man truly excel. For those upon whom black magic falls, there are two paths: to walk it, or to go mad. That is why the Guild of Magi holds our kind as cursed in all but name. I was ten when they summoned me to the Tower of Magi in Mel Ramola. My mother fell ill from the day she heard it.”

He paused, and his face grew grave, his eyes staring far into the dark.

“Perhaps, had I been taught illusion or healing, it would have eased their minds. My father accepted it, but sorrow carried my mother away in but a few years. And my father, he

could not endure without her. Not long after her death, he vanished. I believe he cast himself into the sea. So, at the age of fourteen, I remained alone with my curse. It was then I had to decide what to do with it. I wished to remain in the Guild, for beyond my parents I had no kin. I had nowhere else to go. So I was careful—meticulous—to break no rule, to violate no law of our school. I need hardly tell you ours was ever the smallest of the orders, for half the necromantic students break laws, turn violent, or go mad. But I count myself among the few who, with these debated practices, remain to this day a member of the Guild. I have never harmed the living unless my life was in peril. And I have helped those in need.”

He turned to the dwarf, and with eyes black as coal yet glimmering with clarity, he said:

“Beldon, death is not only evil, and life is not only good. The necromancer serves neither. We do not seek the good or the wicked in this world, but balance. There is, in truth, no such thing as defiling the dead—for the soul has flown. When we work upon them, we move no more than a cast-off garment.”

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The next day, the weather grew warmer still. They were drawing near to the river that fed the lake from the south—a stream whose mouth lay nearly across their path. They might have journeyed farther south to avoid it, but Oly judged it wiser to stay clear of the settled regions, particularly the border-town. Winding long arcs through thinner woodland, they at last neared the ferryman’s hut when the wind carried to them the sound of neighing horses. Their number made it hard to hide,

but fortune favoured them—there proved little need for concealment. The world's dullest patrol of soldiers happened to be passing through. All twelve of the companions, gear and all, managed to slip into a crumbled ditch cleft beside the path. Nyhund stood ready, should there be need to cloud their minds. But the soldiers clattered past, unaware and chattering loudly.

"I tell you," Marden murmured, "they'd be the best source of gossip. One need only follow them and listen—they never stop talking."

At this, Ivy and Nyhund exchanged glances.

"Not a bad idea," said the woman. "Shall we go?"

Arlo squinted first at Ivy, then at Bromley. He shrugged, then offered his apprentice a sly wink.

"Why not? A fine idea, lad!"

He turned to the goblin and Ivy, who chuckled under their breath, leapt from the ditch, and followed after the soldiers in silence. Before slipping away, Ivy whispered to her fellow ranger:

"Oly, if you cross the river, meet us at the Bald Glade. We'll be by the ravine near the cave with Nyhund! We'll use the ford."

It was not long before they reached the ferry. All that remained was to find the ferryman—who, by Oly's account, was usually drunk from dawn to dusk. For a time they feared he had drowned in his own crossing, but soon a staggering figure appeared, waving enthusiastically at the ranger. His nose glowed red from afar, his eyes were crossed, and his entire bearing was so absurd that Hagley gaped at the sight—especially as it was only the eleventh hour of the morning.

He ushered them into a little cabin, seated himself in a booth opposite, and began questioning them with exaggerated

formality about their destination.

“Oh, come off it, Naudar!” laughed Oly. “Grab your biggest skiff and take us across—we’ve no time to waste.”

“That’s all well and good, you roving wretch,” the ferryman grumbled. “But who’s paying me fare? And how is it you’re sober?”

“Because, you fool, I don’t start drinking until evening—unlike you.”

Naudar frowned, trying to puzzle out what had just been said, but soon gave up and burst out laughing. He rose, caught himself on the doorframe to keep from falling, and whistled as he made for the riverbank. After bumping his head on a post and letting out a few curses, he located his pole and waved them over.

“This drunken beast is the one who’s steering our boat?” Bromley asked with a grim look.

“That he is,” Oly chuckled. “But don’t fret on his account.”

Indeed, five minutes later, Naudar appeared on the river in a large, flat-bottomed craft that was somewhere between a skiff and a raft. He stood dead straight at its stern, guiding it with the pole.

“Come on, strangers! Step lively, or the current will take me where I’d rather not go...” He spat in the direction of Lake Pocamac.

They counted out a few coins for him, which pleased him greatly, and he gave the pole a mighty push. The river was not wide—they reached the opposite bank in less than a minute. After disembarking, they helped the ferryman drag the vessel back upstream, then took their leave.

By afternoon, they arrived at the Bald Glade, where, in

good order, they lit a campfire and waited for their companions as arranged. Yet their pleasant rest was not as private as it seemed—a pair of shining black eyes watched them from the branches above. A lone black raven might not be remarkable amid the scenery of the jungle, yet Oly took note of it and drew Arlo aside from the others.

“That bird,” he said, pointing upward, “has been following us for two days. I first saw it at the monolith.”

The wizard looked up.

“Ravens are curious creatures—and terribly clever. Perhaps it simply took a liking to us?”

“That was my first thought too,” Oly admitted. “But its behaviour says otherwise.”

“Well then, shoot it!” Arlo shrugged.

The ranger stared at him in disbelief.

“If someone has enchanted this bird, they’ll see me draw aim. But you’re right—perhaps that’ll force their hand.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” the wizard nodded.

Slowly, Oly drew his sling from his pocket. He bent down for a stone—but before he could lift it, the raven gave a loud croak and leapt to another branch.

“That could be coincidence,” he muttered, “but let’s see what happens if I try with a bow.”

He returned to the fire, lifted his weapon, and aimed. Arlo barely saw the glint of movement—Oly loosed the arrow with such speed. The raven flew up at once, alighting comfortably a few yards farther away. The arrow thunked harmlessly into the tree trunk.

“Well...” Arlo began, “I’m no expert in persuasion—but I can summon a lightning bolt.”

He raised his arm—but before he could utter a word,

Nikamor let out a cry, wheeled in the air, and vanished into the sky.

“Insulting, really,” Oly muttered, eyes on its flight. “That it fears your magic more than my arrows.”

“Worse still,” said Arlo, “it knew what I was about to do. It may understand human speech.”

By late afternoon, Ivy and the others arrived at the Bald Glade. From the soldiers’ chatter, they had gathered that the king more or less knew their whereabouts. Ivy hadn’t understood the full meaning of this until Oly told her of the raven. Then the pieces fell into place.

Chapter 14.

Niverend

Two weeks had passed since their departure from Baglyas, and by now they had left the southern reaches of the Calm Peaks far behind them. That meant they had come roughly halfway toward the Green Bridge. Their original plan had been to lodge at the Tower of Magi in Niverend, which stood just outside the city proper. The tower was also known by another name: Elamond, which in the tongue of the native folk dwelling near Lake Kora meant “slender stone,” owing to its tall and graceful form. The lower wings of the building served as quarters for guests, while the soaring upper reaches of the main spire housed rooms dedicated to scholarly and magical work. At the very summit sat an observatory, where those mages attuned to such arts worked their craft with an array of lenses and mirrors.

Yet the fact that Arlo and his companions had learned of the spying being conducted against them now made it likely they would alter their course. It was an unwelcome turn, for Arlo had called this land his home, and the tower might have offered them a few days of rest in greater comfort.

“What do we do?” asked Ivy, turning to the wizard.

Arlo stroked thoughtfully at his beard with one finger.

“At the moment, I do not know. The tower is still a good ten miles away. That raven made their knowledge of our whereabouts all too clear. To be honest, what surprises me most is that imperial troops are not already swarming this place.”

“Perhaps they don’t just want to catch us,” Archibald offered. “Perhaps they want to see where we’re going.” His

brother Helge watched him keenly.

“That’s possible,” added Bromley. “Or perhaps they aim to trap us there.”

“We’ll know soon enough,” said Arlo, “once the tower comes into view. The High Mage of the order there can send a signal—a customary sign that lets all nearby members know if something is amiss. Let us say, we understand each other without needing words.”

Ivy now voiced a concern.

“Unless he has already been captured—and they’re preventing him from sending it.”

At this, Arlo let out a soft laugh that carried just a trace of quiet pride.

“It is unwise to meddle with the mages of Niverend. We are in the South now, and do not forget—it was little more than a century ago that this region tried to secede from the Eastern County. That’s part of why my name is not spoken kindly in Ash Peak. I’m the one who came from the rebellious South. And I only made it worse when I began my search for the prophecy.”

The rest of the day they marched steadily eastward. By evening, the mountain that held the tower came into sight, though even Oly could make out no detail. They pitched camp in a dense wooded glade and settled in for the night.

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A band of scrub and thicket-cloaked woodland surrounded the tower, veiling the lower buildings entirely from view so that only the spire itself, thrusting heavenward, could be seen. They approached with care, their pace slowing as they entered the

tangled maze of undergrowth.

“For now, I see nothing suspicious,” murmured Arlo, glancing back at them. “But stay sharp. The High Mage, Amosis, already knows we are near—he should arrive any moment now.”

And indeed, as if summoned by the very mention of his name, there appeared Amosis Al-Sahiro, High Mage of the Tower of Magi at Niverend. He wore a robe of deep sapphire blue and a short, cylindrical cap to match. His skin, hair, and eyes were all pitch-black as night, and though his frame was of average stature and his bearing modest, there was something in the restless gleam of his gaze that betrayed a mind vast in its knowledge. He stretched out his arms and beamed, his white teeth flashing in striking contrast to his dark features. His age was impossible to guess.

“My old friend!” he called in a voice that trembled. One unfamiliar with him might have taken him for moved to tears—but no, that was simply how he spoke. If his outward appearance concealed his years, his voice gave them away: this was a man well past his eightieth summer.

“By the beard of my late master Radulf,” Arlo laughed, embracing him, “you’ve grown younger since I saw you last!”

“And that despite your absence all this past year, you rascal—no healing draughts of yours to tend this withering frame.”

Then, turning to the gathered company, Amosis’s eyes gleamed with delight.

“So many strange faces—so many folk of different kind and kin! Good! It is good. The cause—our cause—thrives when the peoples of the world and its creatures stand together.”

Next, he turned to Nyhund.

“And who do I have the pleasure of, little green one? I have heard wondrous tales of your people’s rare and bewildering customs.”

The goblin flushed a shade of violet, and to the astonishment of many, small petal-like growths unfurled about his brow like a crown.

“I am Nyhund Trgowar, nephew to the Goblin King of Shiraed, and a mage in my own right,” he said with no small pride. “I’ve come because I heard that someone from this place seeks to vex King Winslow—and that is cause enough for me.”

They introduced themselves one by one until Ivy stepped forward. Arlo gave a small nod.

“We know it now, Amosis. It is her.”

“Well, well! So the successor of A’Nagtoth reveals herself—and a young lady, no less,” said Amosis, his voice almost ceremonial. “Welcome, then, to Elamond! Welcome all of you—Guardians and Restorers of the Legacy of A’Nagtoth! Thus do I name your company by right of the Shelion Order and Papod Plain. Come within, eat, drink, and rest awhile—for while you remain here, you shall be under our fullest protection.”

The Tower had stood for eight centuries. Around it, over the long decades, smaller buildings had gathered, forming a kind of small bastion-town. The entire domain was ringed by thick, towering walls—more fortress than academy for the mages of Niverend. Yet within, it seemed nothing like a citadel. Verdant growth spilled over stone and stair, ornamental and fruit-bearing trees softened the grey of the masonry, and grapevines hung lazily from arbours in the rear gardens. In that small green paradise, the shadows of recent days—and the trials yet to come—seemed for a few precious hours to fade

into forgetfulness.

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That evening, Marden made his way to the private quarters of Master Amosis. Arlo had earlier confided that the High Mage was himself an alchemist, and so the young man awaited the meeting with quiet excitement. At first, they spoke only of general matters, but gradually Marden steered the conversation toward the master's knowledge and lore, making no secret of his desire to learn.

"My son," the wizard said at last, changing the subject with solemn ease, "the world rests upon a few great bonds."

He rose from the fireside, circled the chamber slowly, and lifted a goblet from a nearby shelf.

"All that you see around us—whether here in this room, or in the forests, the seas, or the very wind itself—is made up of countless tiny pieces. Invisible, yes—but always yearning to remain together. This yearning requires bonds. There are many kinds of bonds, and it is our task—ours, who walk the path of magic—to tame them, to bind them anew, or to compel them to behave contrary to their nature. For generations our scholars have pondered the connection between our magic and the material world. But I have come to understand that even between matter and matter, even among the smallest, unseen fragments, bonds do exist. And it is we, the alchemists, who must unravel their secrets."

So saying, he let the goblet fall. It shattered with a sharp crack upon the stone floor. For the briefest instant Marden thought it an accident—until he noticed that Amosis had not so much as flinched. His gaze remained fixed and calm. He

continued his lesson in a hushed voice.

“And here, my son, is one such bond.”

Stretching forth his hand, the old mage began to trace slow circles in the air above the shards. At first, they merely trembled. Then, with a faint scraping sound, they began to gather—first in pairs, then in clusters—until, piece by piece, the goblet reformed itself into a single shape once more, its facets meeting with uncanny precision.

“Master,” Marden breathed in awe, “such skill is rare even among object-movers—and yet you are an alchemist!”

But Amosis had not finished. A sly smile crept across his face. Closing his eyes, he lowered his gaze to the floor in utter concentration. A faint tremor passed through the room—barely perceptible to most. The air turned colder. The curtains began to sway, dancing in rhythm as though stirred by an unseen breath. The crystals of the chandelier chimed softly against one another in accompaniment to the strange, wordless ritual.

The old man’s face grew taut; his breath came shallow. Yet he held his focus on the goblet. The candlelight waned, and then a loud, unnatural crack—the reverse of a shattering sound—resounded through the place.

Amosis sank into an armchair, visibly weary. At first, Marden saw nothing unusual—until the wizard nudged the goblet with the toe of his slipper. It tipped over and rolled toward the boy’s feet.

“A bond understood,” Amosis said quietly. “And overcome.”

“Master, this is... astonishing! I have never in all my life seen such wondrous magic. But—how? What incantation did you use?”

“Incantation?” the wizard laughed, his voice rich with mirth. He cast a twinkling glance toward the lad.

“Marden, I no longer speak incantations. As you well know, the most seasoned spellcasters need not utter the summoning words—they need only gesture with their staff. And in time, not even the staff remains necessary. I haven’t spoken a spell aloud in years. Truth be told, I’ve forgotten most of them.”

“The staff!”

“Aye, I’ve no staff either. I call it magnetism, the force that surrounds us—here and everywhere. Did you feel the cold? Did you see the candles dim?”

“I did.”

“I had to draw on the very essence—the magnetism—to reforge the bonds between the goblet’s fragments. I steal it, you see—steal it from the objects, the air, the ether. From wherever I can. And the more deftly I do it, the less it drains me. The less I must steal from my own body.”

* * *

In the morning, it was Arlo who roused Ivy from her sleep.

“There’s trouble...” he began in a low voice. “Get dressed. I’ll wait outside.”

With that, he turned swiftly and strode off down the corridor.

Ten minutes later, the ranger emerged from her chamber. Arlo rose at once and wasted no time with pleasantries.

“The Imperials have surrounded the tower,” he said grimly. “Winslow has made his move. For now, they’ve made

camp.”

They hurried to a high window. Across the field, soldiers were bustling about—horsemen tending to their steeds, officers gesturing to their subordinates. They numbered in the hundreds.

Not half an hour later came the hammering of fists upon the tower’s gate, which Master Amosis had ordered sealed the night before. A young apprentice opened the door in heedless innocence, and from the window they could see a man standing beside his horse shove him backward. The lad stumbled, then scrambled to his feet and leapt aside just in time to avoid being trampled by the riders as they forced their way in. A loud crack split the air; several horses reared in panic. Two soldiers were thrown from their saddles while the others formed up in defensive posture.

Amosis appeared upon one of the balconies and signalled to the apprentice, who—with almost theatrical simplicity—shut the gate once more and withdrew into the shadows.

“Is this for real? Are His Majesty’s men truly this dimwitted?” Oly cackled, then promptly leapt from a second-storey window. With a casual flick of his hand, he made a rude gesture toward the riders.

They spurred forward, but Oly scrambled up the thick trunk of a mighty tree. In the confusion, a young mage darted into one of the side buildings. Arlo, seizing the moment, stepped through the main entrance of the central hall.

“What errand brings you, gallant sirs?” he called, voice thick with scorn. “Have you been bested by a stripling spellcaster? Winslow the King must indeed command brave men!”

The soldiers now realized they had stumbled into a trap of their own making.

“His Majesty—” one began.

“I’d spare the formalities,” Arlo cut in. “You yourselves dispensed with courtesy when you nearly rode down one of our apprentices. What sort of conduct is this? What do you want?”

“Hand over the woman, and you may go on your way!” barked one of the riders.

The wizard narrowed his eyes.

“I see... so word has reached the king’s ears. Have you any official writ granting you this authority?”

One of the soldiers tossed a rolled parchment onto the ground. Arlo stooped, retrieved it, and with a motion bade them wait as he turned and started back toward the doors. But another of the guards drew his sword and stepped after him. Another sharp crack rang out, and the man toppled senseless from the saddle. From above, Amosis’s quivering voice rang forth as he lowered his hand.

“No steel has ever been drawn upon these grounds, and none shall be! Harm neither my guests nor my brethren of the Order, else your limbs will be carted home in wheelbarrows! Now you wait! And as for that dungheap who dared draw steel on an old man’s back—gather him up and slap him awake!”

Oly dropped from the tree, uncorked a flat bottle, and took a long swig. Then, whistling nonchalantly, he sauntered past the bewildered soldiers like a general inspecting his troops.

“Are you truly this stupid?” he said, eyeing them one by one.

* * *

In the name of the King! All persons harboured within the Tower of Magi in Niverend shall be seized; their leader taken into custody! Any who resist shall be arrested or struck down by the sword. The investigation initiated by Arlo Elderidge of Bluegrove is hereby terminated, its relevance void, and all further action on the matter is henceforth forbidden. The ranger known as Ivy Owlens shall, under the escort of the stationed battalion, be conveyed at once to Ash Peak.

“What are we to do?” Bromley pondered aloud. “There must be five or six hundred of them out there.”

“Eight hundred and fifty,” Hagley corrected without pause. “Imperial battalions are eight hundred and fifty strong by regulation.”

Amosis strode back and forth, fingers buried in his beard.

“With such a force, we can do little. They likely won’t dare breach the gates just yet, but the stalemate will last only until reinforcements arrive. It is only a matter of time before they lay siege to the tower.”

Archibald turned toward his father.

“Can we not call aid from the Oak Forest?”

The druid shook his head.

“It would avail us nothing. Though the forest lies at the same distance from the capital, our allies would come through wilderness, while their reinforcements march by road. And even if our folk made it here, the king could still muster far greater strength. Fort Solyberg lies not far to the east... He could send more troops from there.”

Then he looked to Amosis. “A tunnel?”

“There is none,” came the reply. “None that would serve.”

“Then we break out,” Beldon said flatly.

Arlo grimaced.

“You, perhaps—you are unstoppable—but we mages are not. Our strength lies in mind and spirit, and our bodies are frail. Nor can we fight in concert with warriors well enough to ensure success. If we had twenty or thirty more of your kind, perhaps. But as it stands, it is too great a risk.”

Meanwhile, outside the fortress gate, the mounted soldiers informed the accompanying mages they would wait but one hour for Ivy to be surrendered.

“Could we reach an agreement with them?” Helge offered.

“With imperial soldiers?” Hagley scoffed. “They are immovable. It’s no mystery why they’re paid what they are. Those men out there follow Winslow’s orders blindly.”

“You don’t,” said Nyhund and Nerva at once, breaking into laughter.

“Nor do you,” Hagley added, pointing to the captain.

“One hour,” Oly said grimly as he entered the chamber.

It was a tense hour. All had agreed on one thing: Ivy and Arlo would not be given up. Under Hagley and Nerva’s command, hasty barricades were thrown up at balconies and lower windows. The activity was surely visible to those outside, so the soldiers, too, began preparations for an assault. To underscore their resolve, half a dozen siege engines rolled into view behind the ranks. There was scarcely time to mark them before the first projectile struck with a thunderous crash. A section of the wall collapsed, burying two young apprentices beneath stone and mortar.

For a moment, time itself stood still. Dust settled. Silence descended like a shroud. Those who rushed to the scene could see it at once—nothing could be done.

Marden's face was frozen with horror. The others stood equally stunned. Arlo was the first to recover.

"This vile treachery shall not go unpunished. Fetch Amosis. To arms!"

"That's it!" bellowed Beldon with such force that Ivy flinched. "Hagley, Nerva—tell me what needs doing!"

At that instant, the next stone crashed down, and with it came Amosis.

"Oh... my dear children..." His voice cracked. "Gods above... they were but children..."

For a few heartbeats he knelt beside them, breath coming shallow and fast, his hand brushing the golden hair of one lifeless form. Then, slowly, he rose. Turning toward the balcony, he began to walk—slowly, terribly—his face carved in stone. All eyes turned to him. They had barely shaken off the first wave of shock when they found themselves struck anew—by the silent, looming wrath of the great mage. The room darkened. Dust motes shivered in the air. A low hum began to rise, and the two great stones that had crashed through the tower... began to stir.

Amosis now stepped out onto the balcony. Arlo turned to Marden and spoke low:

"Son, mark well what you see this day. They have roused to wrath the greatest wizard in all the world. There is but one other whose power and lore might match his."

"Who is that?" Marden asked.

Arlo paused, concern darkening his face.

"Xarfax. And I have a foreboding we may cross his path

before the day is out.”

But little more could be said, for the great stones, hurled like thunderbolts by the enemy, were stirring. Amosis stood tall upon the balcony, arms outstretched, lightning dancing at his sides, his hair whipped by storm-breath, his visage twisted with fury. With a voice like a breaking mountain, he cried aloud—and both boulders reversed their course. They soared back across the field, crashing into the lines of the imperial soldiers. One struck full among them, crushing and scattering a dozen men. The second skipped from the earth with deadly grace, toppling a siege engine and sending screaming soldiers leaping for their lives—those who could.

Then there came silence.

Amosis sank to his knees, spent. Ivy and Oly dashed to him and bore him back. A hail of arrows greeted them, but two elder mages lifted their staves skyward, weaving a protective veil: the arrows ignited mid-flight and turned to ash before they could strike.

The three warriors and the two druids hastened to the ground floor, where their outnumbered band waited in grim council. Arlo joined them.

“Bromley!” he called.

“Here!”

“The only thing that matters now is that Ivy escapes this trap. You must break out with her—at all costs. We will strike at one point in the ring of soldiers. Wait only until they are thrown into confusion, then run. If you time it well, you might break through even with so few.”

The last words were shouted, for another missile struck the tower with a deafening roar. The thick lower wall held, though it shed clouds of dust and flaking plaster with an

ominous groan.

“And what of you?” Bromley asked.

Arlo shrugged, and then, as swift as his aged limbs would carry him, ran back toward the upper halls.

“Ivy Owlens!” he called. “Bromley and the others are waiting—you must go with them!”

The ranger, in the act of restringing her bow, looked up in surprise. But she understood at once. Without a word, she vanished down the stair, her braided hair whipping like a lash behind her. Arlo, having conferred briefly with Amosis, joined several senior brethren at the windows. Eight staves rose in unison. Thunder answered. From the heavens, lightning struck down, sowing havoc and death among the host of the enemy. From a rise, Oly loosed three, four arrows in quick succession. He guided them not with incantation, but with sheer will. He knew not how his gifts worked—only that they did. But his quiver was near empty. With sudden resolve, he turned and made for the stairs below.

At the great gate, Beldon, Hagley, Nerva, Bromley, and his two sons stood with Ivy. The druid took Helge aside.

“My son... you are everything to me. Promise me this —”

“What is it, father?” the boy asked, his eyes wide with fear.

“If I say run... you run. Do not look back. Do you hear me?”

He turned to his elder son. “Archibald!”

“Yes, Father?”

“Stay close beside me. The mages will open a path. We shall break through.”

At that moment, the gate burst inward. Above, Arlo

raised his hand—the signal.

“The sign!” Nerva cried. “Now! Beldon—let that axe dance!”

With a roar that shook the very ground, the dwarf charged, cutting a path with terrible strokes. Behind him came Nerva and Hagley; at the rear, the druids. Beldon felled a rider, then hurled himself helm-first into a footman, sending two more sprawling. But three foes leapt upon him—he would have been lost had not Helge’s summoned wolves leapt into the fray, tearing at the enemy and freeing him. The sergeant and captain duelled fiercely, blades ringing. Bromley laid about him with his mace. Ivy held the rear, loosing arrow after arrow with deadly calm. Yet already she sensed the tides shifting—confusion was spreading, and she would not be able to hold them back for long.

Unseen atop the wall, Nyhund stood as if one with the stone, hurling Marden’s exploding flasks into the crowd below. The boy, crouched below, stirred fresh concoctions and passed them up dutifully to the goblin’s feet. Their work was seamless—each a vital cog in the other’s craft. High above, Xaldimárr called down a plague-rain upon the besiegers—an affliction that raised shrieks of agony from the field. Some among the mages recoiled, shaken by the horror of it, but Amosis’s voice cut through their hesitation:

“Black magic is magic still, and this day it serves the cause of light. Steel yourselves!”

Then he tilted his head skyward, closed his eyes, and summoned fire from the firmament. Meteors blazed down from the heavens.

Meanwhile, Oly had reached the battlements and began slinging stones. But when his keen eyes saw what unfolded

below, he knew the breakout would fail. With a cry, he leapt into the fray and began a grim work with his dagger, swift and merciless.

“Beldon! Fall back! Back!” he cried over the din.

From above, Arlo too saw the failing tide. He gathered what strength remained among the mages and bent their power to shield the warriors below—surrounding them in sorcery to hold off the encircling reinforcements. The dwarf, caught in battle-rage, seemed unaware he had been surrounded. With axe raised high, he spun in wild fury. None dared approach, but neither could he move. A siege of stillness ensued. Then came Oly—carving through the soldiers with savage precision—creating a breach.

“Come away! They’ll cut you down!” he shouted, dragging his stubborn friend by the collar.

In that dire moment, the soldiers inexplicably parted—hope bloomed for a breath. But Hagley, sharp-eyed, saw the truth.

“They’re bringing archers! Archers! They’ll feather us where we stand! Back! Back to the keep!”

Bromley and Hagley closed ranks around Ivy, their shields forming a shell as they charged. But the first arrow found its mark—Bromley cried out as it pierced his thigh, and he stumbled. Beldon came charging back like a bull and, without pause, hefted the druid upon his shoulder. Oly, still retreating, launched a final stone—but when the next arrow grazed his neck, he abandoned his slingshot. The druid brothers reached the gate and, with five mages at their side, strained to lift the battered portal back into place. Then Nerva was struck in the back. With a cry he fell. Beldon turned, seized him, and dragged him within.

At that fateful moment, Xaldimárr raised his totem-staff high. Just as the gate slammed shut, his lips uttered a dreadful incantation. Corpses—once fallen soldiers—began to writhe. With jerking limbs they rose and turned upon their comrades, rending flesh with mindless fury. Screams and weeping sounded from beyond the wall.

The gate, at last, was barred and nailed shut. Yet even as they secured it, one of the elder mages collapsed, stricken by a mortal wound. In this hour of grief, the two rangers exchanged a haunted glance. Oly raised his head, alert.

“What is that?” he murmured, then sprang forward like a panther and tore off toward the tower. The others followed—stumbling, breathless, limbs heavy with battle and dread.

Arlo watched in stunned silence. Most of the mages were spent, their spirit drained. Some sat slumped in corners, seeking shelter from the engines of death that hurled their ruin from afar.

Then Oly shook him hard.

“Can’t you hear it, old man?”

The wizard blinked.

“Hear what? We are finished...”

Oly leapt to the window, heedless of arrows and stone. He peered into the far distance. A breath passed. Then another.

Then his voice rang out, fierce and wild:

“The Andabatas! The Andabatas have come!”

* * *

Xarfax had just raised his wand to cast a curse when he too heard the call of the horn. About the same time as Oly, he perceived it—but whereas the sound stirred Oly’s hope, it filled

Xarfax with dread.

“Ash and marrow!” he cursed. “How in blazes did they get here?”

“Who?” asked a nearby lieutenant.

“My boy,” came the reply, “take an old fool’s advice—turn tail and run!” And setting the example, he did just that.

The blind warriors had drawn up in ranks, no more than three minutes’ march from the tower. They numbered perhaps a hundred. Silence fell upon the field. One of the Imperial officers raised his sword.

“Very well, comrades! Turn to face north! Ready the charge! Spearmen forward—build cover!”

“You’ve lost your wits!” the sergeant beside him snapped. “You would clash with those?”

His superior cast a hard look at him.

“That’s right—and so will you!”

The other shrugged.

“Why should I?” he said, and with a spit of contempt, he turned and walked away.

A third of the Imperial force followed suit, breaking ranks and fleeing. Thus, around four hundred Imperials stood now against a fourth as many andabatas.

Within the tower, the wounded were being tended. Arlo, examining Nerva’s injury, concluded that the fright had been greater than the harm: the arrow had slipped beneath his leather armour, painful though not deep. Bromley’s wound, however, required the shaft to be drawn out. The druid clenched his jaw and bore it in silence. The healing draught had already begun its work, and the sleeping potion dulled the edge of his pain.

Oly darted through the halls with word of the reinforcements, lifting the spirits of many. A few mages,

renewed with sudden purpose, hurried to the balconies and took their posts—just in time. For the two sides met in a thunderous clash, and those yet in the rear ranks received a rain of blessings from the skies.

The battle did not endure long. True to his nature, Beldon rushed to the gate, but a voice from above called down to him that it was no longer needed. The blind warriors wrought terrible havoc. Within minutes, the field lay strewn with the dead and the dying. Their side had sustained but minor wounds.

Most of the Imperial soldiers broke and fled, scattering into the nearby forests and glades. A few lightly wounded men sat on the ground, too stricken with fear to move. The andabatas paid them no heed—passing silently among them—and approached the wall of the keep. Smoke drifted low across the field, where half the siege engines now lay in ruins. Some horses neighed in confusion; others lay still and lifeless. The lieutenant who had earlier cried for battle now sat upon the ground, blinking in stunned silence. Slowly he sat up. His arms were slick with blood—not his own, but that of his comrades. A deep gash traced his scalp, the gift of a long-handled axe that had cleaved through helm and helm-bearer alike. He knew it was only the mercy of the gods that had spared him. Those still alive busied themselves dressing wounds and counting the fallen. A weary corporal popped the cork of a wine bottle and drank with trembling throat—then cast it down in rage.

“And so ends the Battle of Niverend,” said Amosis, his voice low and distant, as if to himself, “on the thirtieth day of April, the budding month, in the year 2538.”

His cloak hung tattered, soaked in blood and ash, flapping in the wind.

Oly stood beside him.

"They say I take matters lightly," he murmured. "But I'll admit this, great wizard—I was frightened."

The other turned toward him, weariness etched in his face.

"I was not only frightened, my boy... I am afraid still. Of tomorrow. And the day after."

By then the andabatas had reached the gate. Beldon and his company pushed it open, and stood watching in silence as the blind warriors entered. Arlo stepped to the edge of a balcony, his face a portrait of wonder.

"Your timing is uncanny... Pyrrhos! The unarmoured warrior, master of the two-handed axe, elder of the andabata order."

A man of plain bearing stood in the courtyard below, head bowed, eyes closed. The pale light of the sun glinted upon his bald scalp. His face was hairless, his features gentle. Behind him stood near a hundred brethren, of like build and bearing, their posture still and composed.

"Word reached us," said Pyrrhos, "that a wizard travels these lands with a company, seeking to restore the rightful order of succession. That he might be in need of aid. May we enter?"

Amosis stepped beside Arlo.

"Though this place has seen better days," said he, "and shines now in no great splendour, let Elamond's Tower be your shelter nonetheless. Welcome, saviours—make yourselves at home.—Az a hír járta, hogy egy, a trónöröklési rendet tisztelő és azt visszaállítani szándékozó varázsló járja csapatával a vidéket, és segítségre szorul. Bemehetünk?"

Amosis lépett Arlo mellé.

– Bár ragyogott már nagyobb pompában ez a hely, de ilyen leharcolt valójában is hajlékként szolgáljon nektek Elamond tornya! Érezzétek magatokat otthon, megmentőink!

Chapter 15.

On the Road to the Green Bridge

In the days that followed the siege, once the dead had been laid to rest and the wounded tended, work began on restoring the tower and its walls. In this, Beldon's strength and craftsmanship proved of great value. Though the battle had been brief, the damage it wrought was not small—though thankfully, not beyond repair. Yet more than stone and mortar, it was the mood at court that troubled them now. How would the royal household react to what had transpired? The answer came within days. First it was whispered, then widely spoken, that the Duke of Samorudn had taken great offence at the events in Niverend. Not merely offended, he had sent word to King Winslow that any further armed action within the province would be taken as an act of war.

Samorudn was a great city, spanning the isles by way of the Green Bridge. It had grown wealthy through trade tolls and harbour dues, and for many years had sought to win for itself the rights of a fifth county within the lands of Doria. A large portion of its revenues flowed northward to Ash Peak, enriching the crown. Naturally, the court had no interest in encouraging its autonomy. Yet enough wealth remained in Samorudn to raise a formidable force over the decades. In these times, Doria was but a loose confederation, no longer a true kingdom as it had once been. Cooperation was born of necessity, owing to the unpredictable dealings of neighbouring island realms. Peace held for the present, but the alliance—and cordial ties to neighbouring dukedoms—were ever a welcome

shield.

“This may serve us very well,” Ivy remarked.

“Indeed!” came the voice of a senior mage. “Amosis and the company lodged under his roof—the very ones searching for the prophecy—are now hailed as heroes in Samorudn.”

Amosis nodded gravely.

“All who stood and fought here. I shall see to it the histories record it so. But what is your plan, Arlo?”

Arlo sipped from his goblet before replying.

“We shall wait until Bromley has healed. We must go on foot—it draws less notice—but for that, his leg must mend. That may take another week, depending on the healing draughts. I do not believe Winslow will strike again soon. The duke has taken command of Fort Solyberg. A bold move—and one that draws the eye away from us all. If the king were to respond, it would be there he would begin, for any renewed attack on the tower would provoke Solyberg’s army at once.”

“And to think it was the bridge we feared most,” said Ivy. “Now we can walk into Samorudn openly and in peace. Most of our task here is done. But something troubles me. This is turning to open war. The Southern Arable Land will break from the Northern one. And if Solyberg and Aralund stand together, they may be able to defy the army of Ash Peak itself.”

“Not these two alone,” said Bromley, entering the chamber with a limp, “but mark me, Barrenland will join the fields as well—and the folk from the mining isles, too. That is Winslow’s true fear. He has bought their favour with years of concessions—trading away gold to keep their loyalty. His treasury grows thin.”

Ivy nodded and began counting on her fingers.

“Let us take stock. On one side: Ash Peak, Cleinfend, and Mel Ramola. That is, Aranea and the Western County—firm allies of Winslow. On the other: Samorudn, Niverend, and Khrul. If they unite, the balance of power is near equal. I wouldn’t count on Barrenland—barely anyone lives there. But the mining islands—they could tip the scales.”

“They will side with us,” said Beldon, his voice heated.

Nerva shook his head.

“Not if the king continues to favour them.”

Then Oly spoke up with sudden inspiration.

“Then let us win over the eastern island. They alone name the heir to the throne, after all.”

Ivy rolled her eyes in her usual way whenever her friend offered such notions.

“That won’t be easy,” Nyhund interjected. “The Owlens care nothing for the Empire’s squabbles. I doubt they care who Ivy really is. As for the goblins—it’s the same as with the miners. All they care for is gold. At least the clever ones. The rest don’t even grasp what’s going on.”

“For now,” Ivy concluded, “our one task is to cross that bridge, and to find some sign, some trace, of who I am.”

* * *

Exactly one week later, the company departed from the Tower of Elamond. The sun warmed the borderlands swiftly in this region. They crossed the broad river that fed Lake Kora from the north upon a great raft, ferried by a local woodsman. By evening, they had reached the foot of the towering heights that rose from the edge of the Shelion jungle.

“Is this where we cross?” Marden asked, eyes wide.

"No, my friend," said Oly, pointing toward the thickwood, "a cave lies hidden in the undergrowth but a few hundred paces from here. It runs for many miles beneath the mountains and emerges on the far side, in the lowlands."

"Why must we go beneath the earth?" Bromley asked, troubled.

"I'm not fond of the idea either," Arlo muttered, narrowing his eyes.

But Oly, in rare form—focused and reasoned—spoke in reply:

"There are thirty miles yet to Fort Solyberg, and the protection of Samorudn's authority begins only there. For now, we are still in Winslow's domain. He knows this well, and if he means to seize us, it must be done before then. I would wager Imperial patrols swarm these lands already."

"What if we skirt the mountains to the south?" asked Archibald.

"It would be no better than the northern pass. But this tunnel—very few know of it, save the jungle-folk. And where it emerges, the fortress lies but a few miles off. Still... Ivy must decide."

The woman paused only a moment before choosing the cave. She was eager to see the company safely out of danger and urged the others to make haste. Half an hour later, after forcing their way through thick brush, they arrived at the mouth of the cleft. Already the early spring growth was so lush that a shadowed gloom surrounded them.

"How can it be so warm at this time of year?" Hagley asked, wiping his brow.

The dwarf snorted.

"Khraoul. If you think this is warm, what would you

say of the Surada Desert? Mind you, there the heat is dry and bearable—not like this dripping, humid air. It rolls in from the sea. A cursed breath, they say, sent by old Khraoul, who roams the southern seas. His ship sails with tattered, yellowed sails, and his dead crew stinks of rot if he draws too near the coast. The plants wither in his wake, and sailors swiftly change course, for fear grips the hearts of every man aboard.”

That was horror enough for Hagley in the gathering dark; he lagged behind the others, finding excuse to linger. Oly only grinned and chewed on a blade of grass. Passages opened to the left and right—black as coal, even against the twilight. But after the heat and sweat of the jungle, the cool air from within was welcome. The scent of damp stone met them, and the soft music of water-drops echoed from the depths. Beldon led the way. This was his realm—though he had never seen this particular cavern. At his side walked Oly, who had traversed it before. Xaldimárr and Arlo lit the path ahead with the glow of their staves.

“This place is a maze,” Helge murmured. “How do you know where we are?”

“I don’t,” said Oly. “I’ve walked here so often, I remember the turns as I go.”

“And the first time?”

“I didn’t know then, either. That’s why I got lost. Repeatedly.”

“Comforting,” muttered the elder Hogweed boy.

Oly and Beldon exchanged a laugh at the front.

The druids, by contrast, looked uneasy, their spirits subdued. This was a world entirely unlike their own. But Beldon could not be silenced. He spoke eagerly, naming each kind of stone and mineral they passed, delighted to teach his

companions the secrets of the deep. Marden, full of curiosity, was quickly distracted from the oppressive surroundings.

The path descended gently and widened with each step. In the torchlight, stalactites and stalagmites rose into view—strange, delicate, and beautiful. Arlo, though intrigued by the dwarf's commentary, could not help but feel uneasy. He longed to be out of the earth. Yet by all reckoning, it seemed they would need to spend the night below. And soon enough, he learned where.

After two hours' steady march, Oly turned left at a fork and led them into a vast cavern. Marden and Hagley gasped aloud, the others staring in silent wonder.

"This," said the ranger, turning to face them, "is the Crystal Hall. Beautiful. Vast. Breathtaking."

Above their heads, perhaps twenty metres up, hung a glittering canopy of stalactites; from the floor below, crystalline formations reached upward to meet them. Two openings in the ceiling allowed beams of sunlight and fresh air to pour in, making the place habitable—almost enchanted. The air was cool and pleasant, for the openings drew a steady draught through the space. They stood in awe of that otherworldly chamber. Even Bromley and his sons seemed moved by what they beheld.

They found a sheltered corner free of wind and laid down their packs. A pleasant supper was soon underway, and soon after, pipe-smoke curled into the drifting light. The shafts of sun broke upon the crystal columns, scattering the colours of the rainbow upon the floor and walls. The quiet drip of water echoed softly. So soothing and lulling, in fact, that as twilight fell beyond the fissures, Beldon was already snoring loud enough to wake the deep.

* * *

Dawn met them with a biting chill. With the first light came a mild breeze, and soon the sounds of beasts at play echoed from above. The evening before, it had been decided that four would go ahead to scout the land beyond. Oly, Beldon, Nerva, and Xaldimárr had volunteered. For twelve souls to move without sound was near impossible—it was wiser that a few go forth quietly and sense what lay in wait. Besides, the rest were still busy with breakfast, so the four set out at an unhurried pace. The tunnels were passable, and after an hour's walk, a pale glow began to filter in from ahead. Five more minutes, and something strange occurred. Nerva grew visibly uneasy, then sank down upon a stone with a troubled breath.

“What is it?” asked the necromancer, eyeing him keenly.

In the captain's eyes he saw fear.

“I do not know...” Nerva whispered. “I have a strange feeling. Not a mere premonition—more like... as if I have stood here before. Though I know I have not, I know this feeling somehow.”

Oly and Beldon motioned to Xaldimárr to stay where he was, then crept forward toward the exit. At the chimney's edge, a faint inward draft drew across their skin—it seemed the great hall behind them pulled air like a hearth, drawing scent and current. Thick vegetation, as on the other side of the mountain, blocked the opening—roots and vines hanging thick from both sides. They crept closer. Their eyes now adjusted to the light. Oly raised a hand to silence Beldon and listened. His senses,

already keen, now sharpened beyond mortal ken. He heard the weaving of a spider's web above the arch, the faint trickle of water beneath their boots. He shut his eyes. His nostrils flared. Something was amiss. A tension hung in the air, an unease in the way the leaves stirred upon the breeze—as though the forest itself held its breath.

Voices stirred ahead. They moved closer.

Then a chill pierced the ranger's spine. A dread, cold and marrow-deep, gripped him when he saw it. With presence of mind, he gestured sharply for Beldon to halt—and Beldon did, though the axe nearly slipped from his grasp at what he beheld. By the exit, just off to the side, stood a hooded figure—gazing upward into the sky. Beside him: Xarfax.

As they gathered their wits, Oly signalled for Beldon to summon Xaldimárr, but the gesture was needless—he was already there, silent at their backs, holding one finger to his lips. He peered through the tangled roots, and saw thus: Xarfax reclined half-upright, staring toward a nearby glade; beside him the hooded figure stood motionless, seemingly idle.

“Araa bieaynayki...” Xaldimárr murmured, softly incanting, as he raised his totem wand toward a sparrow perched nearby. As though it sensed the seer's touch upon its spirit, the small bird turned its head, looked about—and then sprang skyward.

“Very well,” Xaldimárr whispered. “There are but two—and I do not quite understand it. Can you manage Xarfax? The hooded one is mine.”

Oly frowned. “What do you mean? We should talk this through, shouldn't we?”

Beldon's ears were sharp with attention.

“Whatever you do,” said Xaldimárr, “do not look

Xarfax in the eye. Not even for a moment. That is vital. When you bring him down, think of nothing—nothing that may stir the soul. Do not let his presence turn your spirit.”

“And what of you, with that... thing?” Beldon growled, voice low and wary.

“There’s no time. Do you trust me?”

The other two glanced at one another—then Beldon gave a reluctant nod.

The assault began swiftly, and ended just as quick. Oly sprang from the opening like a hare, swift and silent as a cat. He waited as Beldon forced his way through the brush—but the dwarf’s approach was less subtle. The hooded one turned. In his cowl, red light flashed where eyes should be.

Then Xaldimárr strode forth.

“Be bound, monster!” he cried, casting aside his totem wand and raising a long stave with both hands. With a swift charge, he struck the hooded one, who staggered but turned, head thrust forward to utter his own reply.

Meanwhile, Oly reached Xarfax—who was now on his feet, wand raised. But the sling was quicker. The stone struck true—his hand reeled in pain and the wand clattered to the earth. Two solid blows followed, and the warlock lay sprawled, unmoving. Oly turned and beheld chaos. The hooded creature stood tall, both arms raised toward the sky. Beldon clung to its back, dragging it toward Xaldimárr, who chanted softly in some ancient tongue. The thing growled, low and harsh—and lightning-fast, Beldon was flung to the grass as if by storm.

Oly drew his bow and loosed. The arrow flew clean through the creature’s chest, and still it moved—though now it dropped to its knees, and slowly turned. Its gaze met Oly’s. And the ranger crumpled where he stood. But the wound had

weakened it, and Xaldimárr's chant rose to a shout. With a crash, the thing slumped down.

"I claim dominion over your mind, servant!" thundered the sorcerer. The long-dead bowed its head in submission. Xaldimárr retrieved his totem wand and fixed both weapons upon it.

Assured that the spell held firm, he ran to the others. Beldon had begun to stir, eyes clouded in confusion. Oly required a few brisk slaps, but in the end had taken no grave hurt. After a few minutes, when all had regained their wits, Oly looked sidelong at the black-clad wizard.

"Who are you, Xaldimárr?"

The mage looked him square in the eye. Then, after a pause filled with portent, he spoke:

"I am the Warden of the Ancient Black Order. The Seeker of Haw-Mon. The Shepherd of the Dead. If I have hidden this truth until now, I ask your pardon. I had reason—believe me."

He turned to Beldon as he finished.

"Well," muttered the dwarf, rubbing his neck, "that's grand and all. But what in the name of stone and steel is that?"—he jabbed his thumb toward the hooded horror—"It dropped the two of us like sacks of grain. Just with its blasted will."

Xaldimárr gazed at the captive with a quiet smile.

"There shall be no trouble from him for now. We shall have a long talk. Come. And bring Xarfax. He stirs—looks like his hand pains him."

* * *

Upon their return to the great cavern hall, a stir rose among the company. Ivy and the druids leapt to their feet at once, while the rest watched the returning scouts in rigid silence. Xaldimárr raised his hand to calm them.

“He is no longer a threat.”

And he did so just in time, for Ivy’s bow was already drawn. The druids began to retreat, visibly unnerved; perhaps they, more than any other, were appalled by what they beheld. Nerva had regained his composure, but kept a vigilant eye on the two prisoners. Arlo cast him a knowing glance, to which the captain replied with a curt nod:

“Aye... I’ve met that one before,” he muttered, nodding toward the hooded figure.

Xarfax, though his hands were bound behind him and blood ran from his nose, held the group in disdainful contempt. There was little doubt he had been bested in a struggle he had not expected, and certainly not welcomed. Marden could not hold his gaze, and so Arlo ushered him away before stepping close to the necromancer. He peered into his eyes, his voice low as a whisper, but brimming with iron:

“I do not fear you, hellspawn. Take my counsel—keep your head down.”

A short council followed. It was resolved that Xaldimárr, Beldon, and Nerva would escort the two prisoners back to the Tower of Magi at Niverend, where Amosis would see them secured. The others would press on, and, if all went well, reach the fortress of Solyberg before nightfall.

The long-dead servant stared into the distance, silent and seemingly unaware. Whatever dread presence had once animated him now lay dormant—but in his eyes, a faint red shimmer still pulsed, like an ill-starred warning to those around

him. If one dared to peer too long into those eyes, they responded—barely perceptibly, but they did. Especially when turned upon Ivy. The necromancer assured them that the creature lay beneath a deep enchantment, bound in trance until his signal roused him. But this brought little comfort to Ivy, for the being's gaze lingered still—upon her, and her alone. The unease grew thick among them.

“Why?” she asked in a hushed voice. “Why does he look at me?”

Xaldimárr, too, seemed puzzled. He drew his wand and swept it once before the face of the undead. The figure turned his head, and his eyes grew cloudy, unseeing.

It was only natural, after such events, that others—like Oly before them—began to question who Xaldimárr truly was. This time it was Arlo who gave voice to the thought:

“Is there anything at all we should know about you, friend? To subdue a thing such as that is no small feat.”

“I had help,” said Xaldimárr mildly, “and a stroke of fortune.”

Arlo chuckled darkly. No one else heard this exchange.

“Do not jest with me, necromancer. When you fought that creature, the air around me burned with magnetism. I felt it—and so did Marden. I daresay the druids did too, though the mouth of the cave lies five miles from here.”

Xaldimárr smiled thinly, eyes narrowing with cryptic amusement.

“I give you my word, healer—when the time comes, I shall tell you all. You may trust me in full. I stand with you—and I shall remain.”

With a sly wink, he turned to motion the others onward.

An hour later, Arlo's company was met with an

unexpected turn at the eastern mouth of the cave. They had scarcely stepped into the daylight when they saw dust rising from the plains. A small host of riders galloped toward them, and for a tense moment all hands went to weapons—until Archibald cried out, pointing to a banner affixed to a long lance.

“The crest of Samorudn!” he shouted.

A dark-skinned lieutenant dismounted with a fluid leap.

“Greetings, folk of the West—ladies and lords alike!” he called. “I trust you will not object if we escort you to the fortress. Rumour has it a traitor-king hunts you across the northern grasslands.”

“You honour us, Lieutenant,” Hagley stepped forward, bowing with formal grace. “I am Hagley, son of Helwing, from Cleinfend—sergeant in His Majesty’s service. Though after recent events, I wonder if that still holds.”

After a swift round of introductions, one of the riders urged the lieutenant to haste—it was unwise to tarry long in the open.

“At once,” the officer nodded. “My lords and lady—we trailed two strange figures who veered west of Fort Solyberg and vanished into this region. One of them... was unnatural. Cloaked in black, face unseen, and our horses grew restless near them. You’ve not, by chance, crossed their path?”

* * *

In the uppermost chamber of the Tower of Magi at Niverend, a room some forty meters above the ground, five figures were gathered as dusk fell gently over the land. Within those spare yet strangely homely walls sat Xaldimárr, Nerva, Amosis,

Pyrrhos, and their captive—Xarfax. The shutters had been drawn to temper the chill breeze that brushed the high windows from without.

The room served as a makeshift hall of inquiry. The necromancer under question sat with insolent composure, arms crossed upon his chest, his countenance exuding a calm disdain. Nerva seemed ill at ease in his presence, though the others betrayed little of their thoughts. For nearly an hour had they pressed him with questions—yet their yield was scant.

“What is that creature you patrol the borderlands with?” asked Xaldimárr.

“You know well enough, “comrade.”

“Mockery wastes your breath—and ours. Now speak: what do you know of it, and how long have you been in its company?”

“I do not patrol with it. Only recently did we come into direct contact. Before that... we communed through other channels. Spiritual ones. It has a way of slipping into a man’s mind.”

“As you are wont to do yourself,” Nerva muttered. Xarfax offered not even a glance in reply.

“Was the creature present at the assault on the tower,” Amosis asked, “or only you?”

“It was not there,” answered Xarfax, with the tone of a model student.

Amosis pressed on.

“And why were you there? Have you no shame, turning your power against the very order that once nurtured you?”

Here, both Xaldimárr and Nerva turned toward their elder in surprise, and Amosis continued:

“Yes, this necromancer you see before you once dwelt

in this very sanctum. It was here he studied his craft—until he was cast out.”

Pyrrhos, seated with eyes gently closed, radiated a calm that soothed the room like a distant song. Nerva found himself looking to him now and again, upon which the andabata turned his head in his direction. The captain concluded that the blind sage could sense that he was being observed—though he had never assumed otherwise.

“We did not strike out of personal malice,” said Xarfax smoothly. “We gave you the chance to parley—without siege.”

“Which is better called blackmail,” Xaldimárr retorted. “Had Pyrrhos and his kind not come, you’d have left no soul living. What did Winslow offer you? Gold? Threats?”

Xarfax laughed—short, sharp, mirthless.

“You truly believe threats would sway me?”

It was Amosis who now stepped forward, gaze hard as obsidian.

“Then gold, surely. I know you well enough. You do nothing without gain. Your vanity has lured you to confession. Now tell us—what shall we do with you? I find myself in a dilemma I’ve never faced before...”

He looked around at the others, seeking counsel. A tense stillness fell. Xaldimárr’s eyes turned to Pyrrhos.

The old mystic turned his face in their direction but gave no answer, so Xaldimárr spoke in his stead:

“I do not know what justice demands in this moment. For now, let him be confined. We shall have more questions yet. Pyrrhos—how long do you remain with us?”

“For as long as we are needed,” came the answer.

They made a few more attempts, but it quickly became clear that Xarfax would only speak of trifles and meaningless

details. The archmage paced the length of the chamber for a time, then halted with a sigh. They would need more: some truth, some hidden shard of knowledge to trap the necromancer in his own words.

As they made to depart, Xaldimárr drew Amosis aside.

“Master, there is something I must tell you.”

Amosis raised a brow in mild inquiry.

“You have not yet asked me the question I most expected. If you will allow, I’ll give you the answer now.”

“What is this about?”

Xaldimárr gave him a strange look, deep and searching.

“Then it has not occurred to you,” he murmured.

“Curious... for Arlo did think of it.”

Amosis waited, patient as ever. At last, the necromancer spoke—his voice no louder than a breath.

“Amosis..., it is about the long-dead—I created it.”

The Archmage regarded him with a strange expression, but even so, trust still dwelt in his eyes. At that moment, the others returned, and the conversation was left to hang between them. Amosis laid a hand gently on Xaldimárr’s shoulder and promised they would speak again.

Night had fallen fully by now. The company agreed that a draught of wine might ease their minds before sleep. So they descended to the lower levels, where tales were told at length. Outside, the full moon shone bright, casting silver upon the north-eastern edge of the plains and illuminating the Calm Peaks beyond. Spring had come swiftly and boldly—what little remained of the short winter had been swept away in days. And the warm breeze that stirred the curtains now seemed to stir their hearts as well, whispering of hope reborn in Doria. And so, with quiet laughter and cups raised in good faith, they

passed the evening—dreaming, perhaps, of a new dawn yet to come.

* * *

The grand parade of victory never came to pass at the fortress, and the small company was sincerely glad of it. Even so, it was plain from the bearing of the garrison that they knew well who their guests were. After a brief respite and a light repast, the group resumed their journey toward Samorudn. In two easy days they reached the sea strait, and from afar the towering pillars of the Green Bridge could already be seen rising against the horizon. If their reception at Solyberg had been modest, that of Samorudn was the very opposite. Crowds clapped along their path, folk rushed from every corner to clasp shoulders and give cheer. At last, the regional prince himself greeted them in the city's main square and saw to it that they were lodged in the finest inn the place had to offer. After the tribulations and want of the past weeks, they welcomed this comfort with open hearts. Save for Arlo, none among them had set foot here before, and they turned their heads in wonder. This was a world apart from the capital, from Mel Ramola or from Niverend. In its size and the multitude of its people, it was the only city in the realm that could rival Ash Peak. To the south, the sea strait widened between sheer cliffs on either side, forming a natural funnel, and so the hot currents from the south gathered here and lingered upon the city and its surroundings. Unlike the southern shores of the western island, where the air was dry, here it came wet, draping the summers in heat and heaviness and lending the winters a gentle, almost springlike mildness. Owing to the ruling winds, this moist air often swept northward

into the land of Owlens, birthing the mysterious marshlands there.

Stone dwellings were rare in these parts. The houses were chiefly of timber, for the Rimuna Oodles supplied ample wood in abundance. This was the greatest unbroken woodland in all the realm, beginning some fifty miles northeast of Samorudn and stretching all the way to the sea.

Yet not only the forests loomed vast here; the mountains did as well. Through the heart of Owlens ran a range from the northwest to the southeast. Its northern part was known as the Brown Mountain Range; the southern, lower reaches bore the name Swampy Peaks. At the base of the latter stood the Hermit Knight's Turret—a place shrouded in mystery, like the range itself.

To cross the mountains, or to skirt them southward, was to reach the land of Shiraed, home of the goblins. If a traveller found Owlens strange and cloaked in secrets, then Shiraed was to them wholly inscrutable. Only a single monolith marked that land, standing in its exact center, connected by the same unseen paths that reached near Mel Ramola—paths they themselves had once passed by.

"A few more steps," Ivy murmured to Arlo, lost in thought, "and we shall leave behind the world we have known." She sighed. "Though I was born on the eastern island, I remember nothing of it... This pendant is all that remains to me of that past. It is how I know I hail from Owlens."

She drew forth a worn piece of bone tablet, hanging from a leather cord about her neck. Upon it was carved this inscription:

"To our beloved daughter, Ivy. Born on the sixth day of

the month Aperio, in the year 2508, in Bumat Saghira.”

“Today is your birthday,” the wizard remarked, taken aback.

“Aye,” she smiled faintly. “My thirtieth.”

To be continued...