Chapter 16

Owlens

Leaving Samorudn behind, the breath of the eastern island's peculiar climate struck them at once. The air was heavy, warm, and damp. The mountains still lay some forty miles away, yet their height and the unusually clear, mistless weather made them visible already. Before them stretched the island's vast and enigmatic marshlands, a region even seasoned wanderers avoided when they could. Fate, in its irony, had it that once the threat of power receded, another challenge awaited them—this time, from the elements themselves.

They followed an old, hastily drawn map which claimed that, less than halfway toward the mountains, they would find lakes. The parchment made no mention of any settlement or place by the name of Bumat Saghira. They advanced almost blindly through rolling plains overgrown with groves and tall grass. There was no road to be found; a few miles from Samorudn the track bent southward, a direction they were not yet willing to take. After several days spent in the city, Xaldimárr arrived as well, along with Beldon and Nerva, and so the company set out at full strength. They walked with heavy packs on their backs, Marden and Hagley bringing up the rear, between them a pigeon cage, held alternately by one hand and then the other.

Though the duke had offered them horses and wagons, Arlo decided against it. A horse, he said, was as much a burden as a help, especially once the land grew dense. And that, according to the duke, they would soon have to reckon with.

They had gone over the lay of Owlens Island in detail and had been given a thorough map as well, yet for some reason Xaldimárr insisted on relying on his own.

"Wizard," Archibald pressed him, "are you certain we're heading the right way?"

"I am not," he replied, "but this is the prudent course, for the reasons already mentioned. There should be an old manor somewhere in this direction. The duke's map may be more detailed, but it fails to mark certain places that could prove dangerous."

Arlo and Marden exchanged a glance; the old man merely shrugged. He was not the only one who had no idea what Xaldimárr was referring to.

A little later, Beldon grew impatient.

"And why all the secrecy?"

"This is no secrecy," the necromancer laughed. "It is simply the map by which I was able to find my way here ten years ago."

The druids shook their heads. Oly was chewing some sort of berry that made him hiccup loudly from time to time.

With these preliminaries behind them, they made camp that evening at the base of a rock wall. An hour later, the rain came—hot, tropical, and gentle. They lay tossing on their blankets. Though, with the rangers' expertise, they had taken shelter in leakproof tents, even this could not keep out the suffocating, humid air. Bromley was the first to crawl out, accepting being soaked through if only the breeze might reach him. His half-naked body was taut with strength; his posture and height belying his age would have been enough to deter any nocturnal attacker. He wandered a little in the drizzling rain, then noticed a faint point of light to the east. It moved

slowly northward, then vanished into the mist.

"That would be Xaldimárr," came Oly's voice from the background.

The druid turned and began to scan the tents with his eyes.

"He's not inside," the ranger added. "It's been an hour, perhaps, since he slipped off into the darkness."

Bromley shook his head.

"What is going on here?"

"I don't know, master, but he swore to me—and to Arlo as well. I would wait a little longer…"

The ranger stood in the darkness even barer than the druid. Apart from a loincloth, he wore nothing.

"Oly, may the gods bless you!" Ivy burst out.

"It's hot," her fellow ranger dismissed it lightly. "Besides, how long have we known each other now? Twenty years?"

"Yes," she waved it off, "I haven't managed to discipline you since my childhood. But what do I care… That's not why I'm here; it's because of all this stirring about… Was that the two of you?"

The druid clearly did not wish to burden the woman with questions, and so he only said, quietly:

"Yes, well… we are stirring about here in the dark… and in the heat."

* * *

Morning came upon them in a heavy mood. They packed their belongings in silence. The rain had ceased, yet the stifling air remained. Beldon and Nerva huffed and puffed as they lifted

the gear, until Oly, shaking his head, set down his cup.

"This cannot go on," he said. "We'll get a heatstroke if we keep hauling our loads on our backs in such heat. The pigeon cages alone are a burden. Let's make a small cart."

"And how do you mean to pull or push it through grass this high?" Arlo asked.

"It will need large wheels," Ivy said, winking.

The two rangers and Beldon spent the better part of three hours carving and fitting, and the result—rickety at first glance—proved, once tested, a surprisingly sturdy little hand-rickshaw. Much time went into the spokes of the wheels; the frame itself came together quickly enough.

From that point onward, their progress was easier. Thanks to the sultry air, their problem of drinking water was largely solved. In the evenings the rangers weighted down broad burdock leaves, and by morning enough water had gathered beneath them in waiting vessels. After a few days a light wind rose, easing the heat somewhat.

According to the necromancer, the manor they sought had long stood empty. Though fallen into disrepair, it was safe enough, and would serve well as a shelter by night. The road to it, however, held surprises. In one place, for instance, a wide torrent barred their way: a river plunged downward at a steep angle, roaring fiercely and throwing up great sheets of foam. Its sound could be heard from far off. The crossing was no simple matter. They were forced to dismantle the cart and reassemble it on the far bank. Beyond that point the grass grew lower, and here and there rocky stretches followed, where travel became far easier. It seemed a broad, scoured land, where jungle had failed to take hold because the fertile soil had been worn away over the ages. The air grew a little drier too, making the walk

more pleasant. The sight, at any rate, was splendid. Upon reaching hilltops they would often stop for long minutes, doing nothing but gaze upon that dazzlingly green, otherworldly landscape. Even the sky looked different from that of the western island—deeper blue, with great billowing clouds, from which the high winds lashed shapes of almost unbelievable form. From every side came the calls of birds and the rustle of creeping things. The dwarf and the men took note of these details with some unease; Nyhund and the rangers, by contrast, clearly revelled in nature's embrace.

A moment of great alarm came when a spider bit Helge. The black mage examined the lifeless creature, which the boy's brother had struck down in his fright from the back of Helge's neck. He reassured them that there was no cause for fear: the wound would itch for a few days, but the bite would bring neither poison nor rot. And so it proved. All the while, strange forms of animal life watched the company from near and far; at every turn they stumbled upon creatures either frightful or grotesque.

Several more days passed before they reached a long descending stretch. Once again tall, dense vegetation blocked their way, and only with the help of brush-cutters did they stand any chance of pressing on.

"Xaldimárr!" Bromley called ahead. "I feel the moment has come when we would very much like to know where it is we are going."

The mage nodded and sat down upon a fallen tree. He wiped his brow, breathed deeply, and took a long pull from his water flask.

"This estate was raised by the settlers who once lived here," he said at last, "but when it became clear to them that

the land was scarcely habitable, it was abandoned. After that, it became the haunt of road-lurkers and of various fearsome creatures."

"Road-lurkers?" Archibald asked. "Where is the road?"

Xaldimárr's mouth twisted into a pained smile, and he began to shake his head.

"But you believe in the fearsome creatures?" he said.

"I don't know, wizard," Archibald replied. "We've followed you for nearly a week now, and you refuse to tell us anything. You wander at night, and now we are, for all intents and purposes, lost."

"My son…" his father said, raising a hand to calm him.

"But he's right," Nerva stepped forward. "What are your plans from here?"

"Give me one day," Xaldimárr sighed.

"And after that?" Arlo asked.

"Give me one day," the other repeated.

With that, he rose and set about hacking once more at the vegetation ahead. The others exchanged glances, but no one spoke.

* * *

"Fire!" someone shouted in the courtyard.

Maida snapped her head up, but she had already seen the black column of smoke that surged skyward after a dull, muffled blast. Panic broke loose within Ash Peak's Tower of Magi. Stewards ran with buckets, mages with staves, racing up and down the stairs.

It became clear with terrible speed that they had taken on an impossible task. More blasts followed in quick

succession; smoke began to pour from several points of the tower, and soon flames took hold.

When the first wave of panic swept over the sorceress, it was followed at once by recognition. She halted for a heartbeat and looked upon the tower with a grave, steady gaze. She weighed matters swiftly, then levelled her staff at a pillar standing in the courtyard and spoke. Her voice rang across the entire square; indeed, it could be heard in every chamber of the tower:

"Abandon the tower according to the evacuation plan!"

She turned away, and when no one was watching, buried her face in her hands and wept soundlessly. It lasted no more than half a minute. She mastered herself and set off toward the lower levels, toward the tunnels.

"What is happening, my lady?" asked an elderly member of the Order.

She fixed him with blazing eyes.

"King Winslow has just set our tower ablaze. Let the heads of the schools lead the apprentices out through the tunnel system. We meet beyond the eastern wall, in the forest, at the hiding place."

"And what of you?"

"I must attend to something," she said, and vanished through the doorway.

Meanwhile the tower's inhabitants streamed downward. Maida threaded her way between burning beams and, with great effort, reached the main entrance. The smoke thickened, the building groaned and cracked, yet she sat down. She stared ahead, thinking how they had come to this. The tower had been her home. Unlike many mages, she had been born there. She had never lived anywhere else. For another half-minute she

remained thus, striving to hold her emotions at bay—an almost impossible task in such a moment.

Since the great wooden doors were already ablaze, she was forced to blast them open, trusting that no one stood on the pavement beyond.

She burst into the street and became invisible at once. She headed toward the palace at a measured jog, weaving among gawkers and those who tried to help. She tore the long skirt and headdress from herself, cast aside her cloak as well, and ran on in little more than underclothes, keeping only her two-handed staff. She slipped into a nearby house and gathered a few garments and pieces of gear fit for a short journey. When she was done, she left several gold coins upon the table.

Still unseen, she turned onto the road leading to the palace and sat upon a bench to dress. She took out a sheet of paper and wrote a few lines. When she finished, she bound it to a large stone. She raised her staff. Within the palace grounds magic did not function, but across the street it did.

"Nuntima Volatar!"

The stone leapt into motion, flew straight at a window, shattered it, and burst into the antechamber before the throne room. Magic had set it in motion; inertia carried it the rest of the way. Against that, even the palace had no defence.

Two very official-looking figures sprang aside as the stone landed upon the carpet. In an instant it was delivered to King Winslow, who stood at the back with arms folded, gazing through the window at the tower burning in the city's southeastern quarter.

"Set it down," he said without turning. Only after his attendants withdrew and closed the door did he turn and unfold the paper. Bracing both palms on the table, he read:

"King. You will regret this. Come to the window."

Cautiously, he looked out into the street. Seeing no one, he opened one of the shutters. At that moment, the figure of the Grand Mistress appeared before him out of nothingness, several floors below on the pavement. She wore plain homespun, a satchel at her side, leather boots upon her feet. A gentle breeze caught in her long hair; her staff rested in her left hand. No one would have guessed who she was. For a while they regarded one another, then the woman moved. Slowly she lifted her hand to her throat and drew it across. At the end of the gesture, she pointed at the king. She held him with a hard stare for one last moment, then there came a soft pop, and she was gone. Sparks lingered where she had stood, drifting and fading into the air.

With an unflinching face, Winslow closed the window.

* * *

Xaldimárr's hunch had proven true—or his memory had served him well. Within a single day they reached the ruined, abandoned manor. By then the sun stood high, and the rangers set about preparing a meal. They decided to remain there for a few days, while they worked out what course to take next. A measure of trust had returned toward the necromancer, though there was still no settled plan for what was to follow; or else he had simply not yet chosen to share it. The only lead they possessed was Ivy's necklace—more precisely, one half of it.

The weather, at least, showed them kindness. Cooler breezes drifted in from the mainland, and the oppressive humidity eased somewhat. Beside the manor a small stream murmured along, clear enough for washing, for by now their

clothing looked little better than a beggar's rags. Oly regularly set aside lye from the campfire ash, so they had enough soap, and Ivy dried wildflowers, scattering them into the washwater to lend the clothes a pleasant scent. Their last washing had been four days past, and the need was keenly felt.

The building itself proved less ruined than they had expected. The windowpanes were gone, but in that climate they were hardly missed. The roof mattered far more, but it did not leak. In character the place resembled the Fallen Tower, though on a much smaller scale: both the house and its yard, if one could call that flat stretch among the rocks a yard at all, where a true maze of bushes had overtaken what had once been a tended garden. In one corner they found the remains of a round well, though it held no water.

They explored the whole structure with care. It was a two-storey house with a hipped roof and a single small turret, clearly meant more for ornament than for defence. In its day it must have been a splendid dwelling, even if it lay so far from all else. No trace of any road leading to it could be found, and so it remained a mystery why it had ever been built there.

There was a rear court as well, perhaps once intended for a kitchen garden and orchard. Three enormous willow trees rose at the back, their branches hanging all the way to the ground.

By evening they were all spent and turned in early, sleep claiming them at once.

Until after midnight, nothing stirred. Then Arlo's alarm charm woke them. Ivy came to herself first, but the others were already stirring.

"What is that?" she asked.

"I hope it isn't what I think," said Arlo.

They sprang to their feet, each reaching for a weapon.

"I fear this will not be enough," the mage added.

He crept to the window—or what remained of it. Outside, red eyes flickered, while their owners' shrill cries tore through the darkness. They could not see them clearly; they were too swift for that. The rustle of leaves and the shaking of bushes marked their passing.

"What are they?" Helge asked.

The goblin turned toward him with a look of dread. He had seen such things before and knew them with certainty.

"Rimuna vampires."

At that very instant something flashed through the room so fast they could scarcely follow it. At once Xaldimárr swept his totem-staff through the air, and a faintly glowing mist spread through the chamber. Its effect was immediate: their limbs grew heavy, and all things slowed.

"What are you doing?" Ivy demanded.

It felt as though they were swimming beneath water—save that they could still draw breath. Again, something streaked through the room, but now its shape was discernible, and it too seemed slowed, even more than they were. Black wings bore long claws at their tips; red-burning eyes and sharp teeth gleamed as it measured the company. Then, in a shrieking human tongue, it cried:

"You are dead meat!"

But at that moment Arlo's staff rose, and a long jet of flame burst forth, engulfing the attacker, which writhed and screamed as it fled toward the stream. Their relief was brief, for more such creatures came. Fighting them felt like struggling in a bowl of thick porridge. Xaldimárr's spell worked with uncertain effect.

“Nyhund speaks true—these are vampires, accursed things!” Bromley roared. “Only fire or the severing of the head will destroy them!”

In the chaos, the black mage vanished from sight.

Oly was struck by a passing vampire. He cried out in pain, sank to one knee, and with gasping breath drew his bow. The arrow went wide, thudding into a beam instead of its mark.

Helge raised his arm, loosing fire-butterflies into the room. It was a hasty move: though the attackers recoiled for a moment, the burning insects made it hard even for their defenders to see where to strike.

Arlo set several staves ablaze, with which they could at least keep the snapping fangs at bay, yet it was still no more than a grim stalemate, not a true counterstroke. Oly now could scarcely hold himself upright against the wall. The haze in his eyes showed that the vampire’s poison was taking hold.

The goblin tried to bend the mind of one of the attackers, driving it to strike at its own kind, but even this only delayed what seemed an inevitable end.

“They don’t want our blood; they want to turn us!” Hagley shouted. “I’d rather die!”

Snatching up a burning staff, he rushed straight at one of them. It parried with ease and struck the young soldier so hard that he fell senseless to the floor.

Next came Bromley. He managed to drive his makeshift weapon into the chest of a monster that had turned sideways. It convulsed, then collapsed writhing on the ground, and at once the others sprang upon Bromley.

Marden could wait no longer. Casting everything upon a single throw, he bellowed a spell, and a tremendous explosion tore through the room.

It was staggering. Everyone but him was thrown to the floor. The smell of burning filled the air, and almost at once all sound vanished. Stars burst before Ivy's eyes; only distant, muffled noises reached her. She could not move, scarcely breathe. All six vampires perished in the blast, and the boy stood gasping at the center of the chamber. After a few heartbeats he dropped his staff and ran to her.

"Ivy, no!" he lifted her head. "Say you're alive, please!"

Out of the corner of his eye he watched the others. Only Nerva and Arlo were stirring. The woman drew a long breath.

"That's it, breathe!" he said, laying her gently back down. He moved among them, checking each in turn. After a few minutes, dazed, glassy eyes met one another as they lay or propped themselves on elbows, some rubbing their ears. Only Bromley did not move. When Marden reached him, he knew at once how grave it was. Archibald crawled on hands and knees across the floor, watching the boy and his father.

The latter opened his eyes and spoke softly.

"What was that noise, my friend?"

Marden stared at him in shock.

Deep wounds gaped in Bromley's chest; his face was deathly pale, his clothing soaked in blood. The attackers had not sought to turn him—they had meant to kill him outright.

"Be still! We will help you. Master!" Marden searched for Arlo, who only now managed to sit up, horror etched deep upon his face.

The great druid lord smiled faintly through his pain.

"You cannot… not anymore," he said between two coughs. "Watch over my sons…"

"Father!" Helge cried, moved beyond words as strength returned to him. He crawled closer, trying to help. Archibald

only sat, leaning on his arms, tears streaming as he watched his father die. He already knew there was no hope.

"Is Ivy well?" Bromley asked, then added, "And the others?"

Marden could only nod; he could not speak. He cradled the head of the mighty druid warrior-mage until his vision blurred. One long, final sigh and Bromley Hogweed passed from the world of the living.

* * *

Xaldimárr returned an hour later. The two druid brothers fell upon him at once, and the others had to tear them away. In the sudden chaos, no one noticed at first that the black mage did not resist. Nor did anyone immediately see that at his right stood a ragged figure, gazing upon the scene in utter bewilderment. His skin was strange, his face stranger still. He could scarcely have been more than five feet tall. Yet stranger than all was Nyhund's look when their eyes met.

Arlo levelled his staff at them and spoke:

"Everyone calm yourselves. Xaldimárr and the stranger, step back into the corner and sit down. Hands clasped behind your backs."

They obeyed without a word. The two druids stared at the newcomers with tear-swollen eyes and a fierce, resolute anger. Oly lay unconscious on an improvised pallet, breathing in ragged gasps. Marden dripped something into his mouth. The others closed in around the corner. Nerva and Hagley stood with drawn swords pointed toward the captives.

"Who is this man?" Ivy asked, indicating the stranger.

Then something happened that none of them could at

first comprehend. The necromancer began to gape, his eyes filling with tears. A great sigh burst from him, and he covered his mouth with his hand.

"Gods… so much torment, so much suffering…"

The others watched him with wide eyes, waiting. But Xaldimárr was not speaking to them—he was speaking to the stranger.

"Oh, Gnammy, we did it. Almost flawlessly." Here he gestured toward Bromley, then broke into near-hysterical laughter. "In the end it failed, and yet it did not. Bromley is dead. Oly hangs between life and death. We lost Ormant at the very beginning. But I kept my promise. Didn't I, my friend? Tell them. Please, tell them… It was so hard. Ivy, you wondrous being!"

The stranger, who had remained silent until now, was also shaken by the weight of events, but he gathered himself.

"My name is Gnammy, son of Walbeny," he said. "I was Ivy's father's childhood friend."

A look crossed Ivy's face such as none of them had ever seen before. A long silence followed. Only Marden failed to notice it, for he was still tending the injured. Ivy's gaze darted from one face to another. Xaldimárr, meanwhile, forced himself to continue.

"I told you to trust me… He, who came with me, is who he claims to be. But I could not tell you, for I feared she would break." He gestured toward Ivy. "I could not allow anything to cloud her judgment. Nor could I tell any of you what I had long known… nor anyone else. I could not risk certain truths becoming known; truths that had to remain secret… by those who might harm the cause—or them."

His voice faltered again. He swallowed hard and went

on.

"I do not even know where to start."

The others began, little by little, to ease. Nerva and Hagley sheathed their swords and sat down on the floor. Beldon and Nyhund began to pace. The druids remained seated beside their father.

"Do you remember the Dead Cave, when you set out north toward that accursed tower? I had been waiting for you. I knew of the expedition, and of the road you would take, and when you would arrive. I joined you because I knew you were seeking the prophecy. I also knew that Ivy was the Chosen, and the heir of A'Nagtoth. But had I told you, you would first have laughed, and then the enemy would have seized her at once. And who knows… what else might have followed."

Ivy spoke at last, her face softened, yet her voice filled with pain.

"My parents? What do you know of them? What happened to them?"

The necromancer glanced at Gnammy, who nodded, and he continued.

"Your father was killed before you were even a year old. He died in my arms. He was a dear friend. Your mother fled the scene and hid with you for a long time. It took time to find her. She had taken refuge in a small village, for you were being hunted. We debated long over what should be done. In the end we convinced her that you had to vanish from the eastern island, or sooner or later they would find you. Your uncle agreed to take you west. Your mother nearly died of it, but she knew she had no other choice than to send you into the unknown for your own sake. All went well for a time, but your uncle was attacked by road-lurkers. When they believed him

dead, they left you behind. Enough humanity remained in them not to kill you as well." Here he bowed his head. "There are few things I deeply regret but what I did to them… I was different then… There were three of them… I did not hasten…"

He wiped his eyes and looked up at them.

"May I sit somewhere? My arms are in great pain."

The others stepped aside, allowing the two men to rise and take seats in greater comfort.

"Only after I had taken my revenge did I realize that your uncle was not yet dead. It was a grievous and amateur mistake on my part, though his wounds were such that even if I had realized sooner, he could not have survived. And what I did then, woe to me... No one will ever forgive me that. I will never do enough good to erase it."

Ivy buried her face in her hands. Marden rose in stunned silence from Oly's side. Even Arlo could not yet piece it together when Nyhund spoke in a trembling voice:

"Pinecone and last night's ash! Haw-Mon! Gods above, Xaldimárr…"

Beldon's axe slipped from his hand. Horror flooded Ivy's face. Xaldimárr, as if bent on penance, spoke in a raised voice:

"Ivy, the long-dead is your uncle. I was twenty-six, confused, standing at a crossroads. I could let him die, or bind his spirit here for a time, in the hope that he might one day be healed. His injuries left no chance. I chose—likely wrongly. Forgive me."

* * *

They did not set out the next morning. The two sons, crushed beneath the weight of their grief, sat staring into nothingness. Oly lay unconscious. His drawn face bore witness to the struggle within, as his body fought the poison of the vampires. For all his knowledge, Arlo judged the chances no better than even that he would neither turn nor die. Nyhund alone managed to sleep with some semblance of calm. His small form was scarcely visible in one corner, where he lay curled upon himself.

"When we asked you what it was that Marden had found… The necromantic rite of summoning the long-dead…" Arlo began, turning to the black mage, "then…"

"I said what I had to say," Xaldimárr replied. "What else could I have done? That I knew how to carry it through?"

"I believe my master means something else," Marden interjected quietly. "That, as matters stand, we know of no living person to have ever succeeded in that."

The old mage looked at Xaldimárr.

"He speaks well. If all that you have told us is true…, and I believe that it is… then perhaps you are the most powerful black mage alive."

Xaldimárr's mouth twisted into a deeply pained smile. His garments were torn, his skin smeared with grime.

"That is a fine distinction," he said. "Yet for all that, I am now a very weary and spent man. This secret has consumed me. I feel like a man grown ancient before his time … so many years…" His face contorted as he faltered.

"Rest," Arlo said, laying a hand upon his shoulder.

The other placed his own hand over Arlo's and looked at him with gratitude, struggling against tears.

They took leave of Bromley according to druidic rite.

Ivy gathered wildflowers and covered the great leader's body with them, and they placed his mace within his grasp. His younger son, who bore the grief with greater strength of spirit, stepped forward, pointed with his long dagger, and spoke the words:

"Nii liberiigus viaan animun!"

At once his father's body began to glow, then to burn, and within minutes it was gone. Butterflies scattered into the air, the scent of lavender arose, and somewhere in the far distance the voices of bears and wolves were heard. The great leader had returned to his forebears.

Chapter 17

Baron Borgoli

Maida quickened her pace, and a corner farther on she became visible once more. She turned eastward and went on foot along the northern side of Little Hollow. No road led from there to the eastern gate; she had to cross the low hill whose gentlest slope lay at the foot of the Ruined Temple. Once down on the flat, a narrow footpath led toward Sheila's shop. She knew she must conserve her spiritual strength, and so chose instead to risk recognition. She braided her long hair into a knot and drew her hood low, trying to hide her face. Yet no matter how she tried, she could not wholly blend into her surroundings. She bought a little food from the baker, then set off toward the eastern gate. First and foremost, she had to leave the city. From a distance she saw that a line had formed, though the great gate stood open to admit wagons and rickshaws. She decided to try her luck there. Becoming invisible was no simple matter either, for one could not simply vanish in an instant from the midst of a crowd. She slipped into a stall and made the change there.

The trick worked, of course. She passed easily through the wide-open gate beside the great hay-wagons. One soldier lifted his head; perhaps her perfume had caught his nose. For a few moments he stared in confusion, wondering which swineherd gave off such a pleasant scent, then, shrugging it off, went back to herding the merchants bound for the city.

Maida struck out into the wilds. The land itself—the scents, the billowing clouds—softened her bitterness by a breath. The Big Volcano puffed its vapours calmly skyward,

offering a sense of constancy amid change, as though casting her a rope to cling to. She felt herself balancing over an unseen chasm, and knew that for the sake of her companions she must not let go. Brushing away her tears, she pressed on, steadfast and unyielding. From a tall tree a white-tailed eagle followed the hooded figure with its eyes as she moved swiftly, leaning on her staff, glancing back from time to time to see if she was being followed.

She had been crossing the fields for nearly an hour when, nearing a hollow oak, she slipped beneath a bush at its roots. She scanned the land carefully and waited in silence. Closing her eyes, she tried to draw what knowledge she could from sound alone. “If only I had a ranger with me,” she thought.

The hollow tree was an entrance. To an untrained eye there was nothing remarkable about it. At the base of a gnarled oak, at least five hundred years old, lay the doorway to the Order’s refuge, leading down into a cave. Bushes clustered thickly about the trunk; beyond them stretched an endless forest, though even here the damp, mould-laden air of the Fekü Swamp could already be felt. By all hopes, the rest of the Order was now safe. What mattered was that she could enter unseen. She looked about once more, making sure she was alone and that no mushroom-gatherers or hunters lingered nearby, then moved toward the tree. Above her, a squirrel danced along the branches, watching her fuss with frank curiosity.

“Basil,” she said, and nothing more—and the tree began to creak.

Moments later the back wall of the hollow slid open, leaving a gap wide enough for a grown person to pass through with ease. The tip of her staff glowing, she stepped inside. A

stale smell drifted outward; darkness and deathly silence lay within. Her heart tightened, for it seemed to mean that her companions had not made it out.

Then something gave a great crack, and light blossomed in the chamber. From a smaller hall some fifteen members of the Order blinked at her.

"The others?" she began.

"All are safely out, my lady. We were worried about you. But where did you vanish to?" said an old, bearded wizard, helping her to a seat.

"I had to go to the palace."

He looked at her in shock, and she went on:

"Master Druvak, there is war—and I was naïve. My messengers told me that Arlo and Master Amosis had fought the Imperials. I believed these were but local skirmishes. Now I see they are not. Winslow took his shameful failure out on us…"

Breaking off, she suddenly looked at the old man with anxious eyes.

"The others?"

"They are well. Some are resting in the rear chambers; others are taking stock of what we managed to save… from our home. We blasted the tunnel entrance. They cannot follow our trail."

She gathered her strength.

"We will not lose heart, old friend. We go to Amosis. I do not yet know how, but we will reach Niverend. There is no remaining here for us. South of Fort Solyberg it is still safe. The iron fist has not yet reached that far."

* * *

“I am of mixed blood,” Gnammy began. “My father was human, my mother goblin. Because of my appearance neither folk welcomed me among their own, and so I was raised for the most part in the deep wilds. There an old ranger took me in and taught me all that he could.”

“I have heard of others like you,” Nyhund said. “Tell us more.”

“First, I will tell what concerns Ivy… The ranger I honoured as my father was one of the high-ranking leaders of the eastern island’s foresters, and so I received a fine upbringing. Ivy, I met your father only after I had found my new home, for he too was one of the foresters. We became friends. For many years all went well. We were already in our youth when word began to spread that somewhere in the region a child would be born who would bring lasting prosperity and peace into our world. Decay set in at once… Strange figures appeared in the villages—tall folk, plainly come from far lands. They asked questions, sought tidings; in a word, they infiltrated us. More and more doors were barred, friendly gatherings ceased, and mistrust took hold of the countryside. A few years passed thus. Your father met your mother, and then you were born,” he said, looking at the girl. “By then every newborn was being registered; you were no exception. And it was then that your mother had a vision.”

Ivy listened, taut with attention. The others no less so.

“A white wolf appeared to her on a misty evening in the yard of your home. She reached for her knife—for she was a strong woman, not easily frightened—but as she drew it, her arms went slack and the weapon slipped from her grasp. The beast looked upon her and spoke:

‘In the lower quarter of your village, in Bumat Shagira, on the fourth day of the year, you gave birth to the girl whom many had awaited. At her coming the sea roared, the trees trembled, and the rivers stood still for a heartbeat. Those who cannot abide change are lying in wait for her. They want to take her. So, hide her. Guard her well. The place where you shall find a sign is a long-forgotten tower in the far north. A black mage and a half-blood will aid you. Trust them.’

“This, then, was the prophecy by which your mother acted. Not at once. She could not bring herself to let go. But the following spring your house was broken into, and your father was slain. Your mother fled, and saw at last that you were not safe at her side. She made the hardest choice of her life and entrusted you to your uncle. His sorrowful tale we already know.”

“Why did you not simply tell all this to Ivy?” Archibald asked.

“We did not know where she was,” Xaldimárr answered. “That was the chief reason. The second you have already heard: we feared she would set out at once in search of her mother, and so walk into her doom. Moreover, we did not know the further turns of the prophecy. Before the heir to the throne came forth, we wished to see how events would unfold.”

“Well, unfold they did,” Helge muttered, rubbing his reddened eyes.

Arlo looked at him.

“Helge, your father died a hero. His name will be praised in the chronicles. I know this brings you little comfort now, but in time, believe me, you will find peace.”

"I have already found it," Helge said softly. "But I still miss him."

A brief silence followed. Then their newly found companion, Gnammy, broke it.

"One more thing… This bone tablet, I believe, is the other half of what hangs about your neck."

And he placed it in Ivy's hand.

* * *

Maida and two members of the Order moved forward through a narrow underground passage. An aged wizard went first, supported by two apprentices. Long ago a film had settled over the old man's eyes; he was all but blind. After a few minutes the tunnel broke through to the surface, and they found themselves within a stone house set among the rocky reaches of the forest. The building blended so completely into the crags that from without it was almost impossible to discern. There was no door, only small, glassless windows like arrow-slits. It had been designed so that it could be reached only from the refuge below. A gentle breeze drifted through the structure. In scarcely six or seven steps one could cross the circular chamber from side to side. At its centre stood a stone altar painted pitch-black, and beyond this there was no furnishing at all. Plainly, it had never been used.

The old man stepped closer and laid his hands upon it. He bowed his head; a few wisps of hair fell forward, partly veiling his misted eyes. He let out a long breath and extended his left hand to the side. One of the youths placed an ancient parchment into his grasp. He took it and set it upon the stone. Lifting his hand, he raised his clouded gaze toward the sky, as

far as his stiffened limbs allowed.

"Iahmesu…" he whispered.

He drew forth a wand and touched the parchment with it. It began to glow, then burst into flame, filling the chamber with the sharp scent of burning.

Almost imperceptibly, the sky darkened. A dull trembling rose beneath their feet. The two apprentices were startled, but Maida looked upon them with calm reassurance.

Meanwhile, something strange caught the attention of the folk of Ash Peak. From among the ruins of the Tower of Magi a faint red light rose straight into the heavens. At the same moment the tremor was felt there as well, accompanied by a distant rumble. At once, in every mage-house and tower across the Empire, the same beam of light appeared, illuminating the clouds for a full hour. It meant only one thing: the Guild of Magi had been attacked. One of its towers had fallen and been evacuated.

Amosis was standing upon the high terrace when he perceived it. He hurried back into the tower and called to one of his apprentices:

"Saddle up! We ride north!"

* * *

Oly sat up for the first time since the vampire attack. They had been sheltering in the ruined building for three days now. He was still dazed and weak, barely able to speak, yet to everyone's great relief the signs of recovery were plain. He asked for water and raw mushrooms. Evening was drawing on, and the land, with its customary warm, stifling air, at least spared them the cold. The forest provided food in abundance,

and they also had enough drinking water. By good fortune, only those few bloodsuckers had laired here, so they did not have to flee deeper into the wilds with their wounded companion. As far as the vampires were concerned, the danger had passed. Yet aside from that, strange eyes watched them from time to time from every corner of the forest, and now and again threatening sounds slipped between the trees. Owls hooted near and far alike, and beneath the light of the full moon this lent the evening a curious, ominous, yet enchanted air. The ranger had known of Bromley's death even before they told him. By his own account his dreams had been confused and mist-laden, but while they believed him unconscious, at times he had heard clearly what was spoken around him. These moments of clarity were followed by deeper plunges, when baleful sounds and screams came toward him from somewhere beyond. Even now, in wakefulness, he said, such things brushed against his senses.

"It may be, my son," Arlo said gently, "that the poison of the vampires did take hold—yet so did the healing. You will never be quite as you were before. A part of their being has settled within you. In the coming days we shall learn how much, and which of their traits. What is most evident now is a trace of red in your eyes, and by my oath, it is not the colour of blood; it almost glows in the dark."

With a worried look, Oly instinctively raised a hand to his face.

"Do not fear. I think you will be well. Rest for now."

By the stream, Ivy and Archibald sat listening to the voices of the evening. Grief had somewhat blunted the feelings that had begun to stir in the man toward the woman, yet her nearness was a comfort. For a long while they sat in silence,

then began to speak of days long past. Archibald told of his childhood, spent largely in the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest; of the barges rocking upon the treacherous waves of Pig Lake; of the luring calls of creatures that dwelt in its depths. He spoke of Helge, who once fell into the water and nearly perished among the merfolk, and of course of his father, from whom they had learned so much. In Baglyas, Ivy had been a frequent guest at the inn, yet they had crossed paths less often than one might expect. In his memories there lived a wild ranger-girl with dreadlocked hair, yet until they met again after the great flight from Ash Peak, she had scarcely stood out to him—no more than a traveller passing through. Now, here in the land of Owlens, sitting by a stream and gazing at the full moon, it seemed strange to him that he had remained indifferent to her for so long.

A fish leapt from the water; on the far bank deer rustled; and as the quiet night settled, they found themselves holding hands.

"May I see the bone tablet you received from Gnammy?" Archibald asked.

Ivy drew it from one of her pockets.

"Does it fit the other? Have you tried it?"

"No. Let us see."

She brought the two pieces together. What followed nearly made her drop them. The fragments began to glow, then grew hotter and hotter—just to the point she could still hold them. She tried to pull them apart, but by then they had already fused. The light intensified, then slowly dulled; the heat ebbed. For a while it continued to shine, and at last, as the marvel reached its end, the small tablet—once two bones—had become a single, gleaming object of metal. Its hue lay

somewhere between gold and silver. There was no doubt that an ancient, magical relic had come into her keeping.

She turned it over. The original inscription was still there, but another had appeared as well, in a language she did not know.

Ivy's breathing quickened. Archibald steadied her so she would not sink to the ground, and she spoke in a rush:

"This is wondrous, my gods! I see my birthplace, and so many other things. My mother is there as well," she said, pointing before her, then shaking her head. "Or rather… I know where we are: the stream, the far bank… but if I wish, I see entirely different things. And I know it is she. My mother. Though… I do not even know what she looks like… I will show you! Touch it too!"

Archibald laid his hand upon the object with care, but it had no effect on him.

"Ivy, I see nothing. Only you do."

* * *

For two days the mages of Ash Peak had been walking across the open fields. The Calm Peaks now rose directly before them when, to the right, they noticed a cloud of dust swirling in the distance.

"Hide!" called a wizard in a blue cloak.

Within minutes everyone had slipped into the nearby groves. The illusionists did not move at all; they merely turned invisible or took on the likeness of stones, shrubs, or other features of the land. By then it was clear that riders were approaching. Soon the thunder of hooves could be heard. One of those riding at the front bore a yellow banner raised high,

upon which an acorn was marked in the centre of a shield. As Maida strained her eyes for further detail, the outlines of archers became visible upon the horses' backs, clad in leather armour.

"Mages ahead!" someone shouted from among the riders. "Have no fear! We are druids of Baglyas!"

A great weight fell from their hearts. Maida at once made herself visible. The newcomers slowed and reined in. The banner-bearer leapt down, and with him a strange little being who until then had been clinging behind him—much to the astonishment of all present.

"Be welcome, folk of the oak-woods! And you as well, woodland fairy!" the sorceress called.

Fiona, keeper of Bromley's homestead, hurried forward on airy steps.

"Maida, Fair of the Dawnflame! High Mistress of Ash Peak's Guild of Magi! Receive my warmest greeting! I am Fiona of the Great Forest."

"Oh, little fairy! What a relief this is to us! What news from the Oak Forest? Where are now the Guardians and Restorers of A'Nagtoth's Legacy?"

Fiona's face darkened. Her singing voice took on a tone of mourning.

"My lord, the master of the Oak Forest, was taken by death four days past. Servants of the Shadow-Realm, Rimuna bloodsuckers, fell upon them. They left the city of Samorudn and fled into the deep forest. The last word came by dove, sent to us by the duke of the city. He too learned of the death by pigeon-post."

"My gods… great Bromley…" Maida stared ahead. "Whom else will these events claim…? And what errand brings

you here?"

"We are needed, Fair of the Dawnflame," answered one of the riders. "King Winslow will surely seek you out, and we thought a few bows might be of use upon the meadows."

Thus they went on together, some forty druids in their company. Unlike Arlo and his companions, they chose the eastern side of the Calm Peaks, along the broad plain. By evening they crossed the river, where to their great surprise no one stood guard upon the bridge. From there, two days' march would bring them to the Tower of Elamond. Two smaller streams would bar their way, but at this season both were hoped to be easily forded.

With the waning of spring, the fields lay in bloom as far as the eye could see. The plain south of Ash Peak was less suited to tillage and was used chiefly for pasture. Mile upon mile of grassy steppe stretched there, broken here and there by watering wells and scattered groves. The hayfields and grainlands lay farther east and south. The alluvial lands fed by the Northern Kora River, the Northern Arable Land and the Southern Arable Land south of Fort Solyberg formed the granary reserves of the realm. King Winslow will fight tooth and nail to retain these. The northern lands he could hold with ease, but the southern meadows were broader and richer still. The Elamond–Solyberg–Samorudn line stood as a chain of border strongholds dividing the two. Now, with war standing at the threshold, His Majesty faced a grave dilemma.

* * *

Meanwhile, the small company of mages riding out from Elamond under Amosis's lead had been on the road scarcely a

day, and were now nearing the crossing roads coming from Inner Port and Ash Peak. The river that feeds Lake Kora from the north runs, between Niverend and that junction, pressed close against the cliff-face of the Calm Peaks, leaving barely the width of a single cart along the ancient road. Beyond that stretch, ten miles on, lies a fork: to the right one comes to Fort Solyberg, while to the left, after another fifteen miles, the crossing itself is reached. Here too the plains were broken by ancient groves, and where they now arrived the trees thickened into something near a small forest. As they emerged from among the trees, imperial soldiers barred their way. This place lay almost exactly halfway between the capital and Fort Solyberg, and thus Amosis had not expected to meet them here.

"Who are you, and what brings you this way?"

"Farmfolk."

A non-commissioned officer eyed them with suspicion.

"All of you on horseback?"

"We're takin' our masters' horses back t' the capital," replied the Archmage, dressed in ragged clothes, and then—overplaying his part a little—he spat loudly into the dust.

It was still not convincing enough, for the soldier continued to scrutinise the band of some two dozen riders. One chewed on a plug of tobacco; another held a flask. Their eyes were oddly intent—not the bored, unshakable look to which he was accustomed.

"Your boots are well made, your horses clean. You're a queer lot of farmfolk."

Amosis urged his mount forward into the first rank. He wore coarse homespun and a shabby fur cap. His voice he roughened deliberately.

"Don't be pesterin' us, m'lord, 'cause sure as sure the

honourable Baron Borgoli don't take kindly to delays. An' if we're late, we'll have t' say it was on account o' yer overseers here that we didn't reach the cap'tal by ev'nin'."

"Well, from here you won't reach it by evening nor by ev'nin' neither," the soldier said with a shrug. "But that's none of my care. On with you."

With that he slapped Amosis's horse on the rump. The beast sprang forward, and the wizard very nearly found himself in the dust.

"Hah!" the soldier laughed. "Not used to horses, eh, peasant?"

He waved them on. Meanwhile, one of the younger apprentices sneezed, and his false moustache slipped free; clapping a hand over his mouth, he hastily grabbed the stray hair and hurried past the watching soldiers.

About an hour later, one of the Order rode up alongside Amosis.

"Who the blazes is this Baron Borgoli?"

"Damned if I know," Amosis said. "I was more afraid he'd ask to see our palms. Truth be told, they look more like a newborn's than the calloused hands of a stout labourer. There! Look yonder!"

Far off, faint but discernible, the marching column of Maida and her company could be seen.

Chapter 18

The Curse of Sneferu

"That," Arlo said, pointing to Ivy's pendant, "is an ancient relic of extraordinary power; one that has long remained hidden in shadow, awaiting the worthy soul who would reunite its two halves. They are called Vision Pendants, for they are able to form a kind of bridge between the distant past and the present. The strongest among them can even be used to call upon those who dwell beyond the veil, and—should the summoned spirit be able—communication may pass between the two realms."

Marden listened with such intensity that he seemed to have forgotten how to blink.

"How does it work?" he asked, his excitement plain.

But Arlo was obliged to disappoint him.

"Marden, my dear boy, I have never in all my life encountered one."

"Ivy had—how shall I put it—a vision while she held it," Archibald added.

Marden all but caught fire with eagerness.

"Master Arlo, may I touch it?"

At this request the old mage pulled a most peculiar face.

"My dear child, your gifts, your powers, your immersion as a seer… I cannot say what might happen if you were to lay hands upon it. This object contains vast powers, and you yourself are a potent conduit of spiritual currents."

"We shall only know if we try," Hagley said, arms folded. Captain Gordianus stood beside him, nodding, a

roguish smile playing about his lips.

It was early afternoon. Oly was much improved by then. Several times a day he rose and moved about, though he still felt too weak for any long journey. By evening a reddish gleam showed in his eyes, and by his own account he could see far better in the dark than before. Sunlight, however, troubled him somewhat—sign enough that a small part of his body would henceforth answer to vampiric nature. To his great relief he craved neither blood nor meat, and so his habits of eating were unlikely to change. He studied the medallion and then spoke.

"May I try first?"

After a brief moment's thought, Arlo handed it to him. Nothing whatsoever happened. Seeing the others' wide-eyed looks, he added dryly:

"What? Did you think I'd sprout wings and drain someone dry?"

"All right, that's quite enough," Ivy said, rolling her eyes, and took the object back. At once she swayed slightly, and another place appeared before her—faintly, as though through a veil. She felt as if she stood in two places at once. "Strange… I see a kitchen. An ordinary village kitchen. A loaf steaming on the table. Bowls on an old, worn cupboard painted with flowers. A mirror in a browned frame upon the wall. A jar of honey… And now, at this very moment, I feel that I know where this place is… That way!" She pointed south. "I think this pendant would lead us there."

"Let us wait a little," said the younger of the Hogweed brothers. "Could it be that this thing is a compass meant to guide us?"

"But toward good or ill?" the goblin asked. "In my view

we should not trust it until we know whether its intent is fair or foul."

They debated the matter for some time longer, and then placed the pendant in Marden's hands. All watched with keen interest to see what would come of it. At first—nothing. And then…

The boy's mouth fell open, his eyes widening, and the world around them shifted, ever so slightly. The forest grew still; in the humid air, falling droplets of water seemed to hang suspended. It was as though time itself had halted.

"Good… a very good sensation!" he gasped.

In thought he lifted from the ground toward the clouds, then beyond them. He slipped free of the earth's pull and soared. It did not last long. Suddenly the scene changed. He stood in the chamber where they had found the glass-encased scroll in the sewers, with Beldon and Orman. Two men were there. One was Brutus Galenus; he knew it without ever having seen a likeness of him. The other he could not name.

Beldon spoke.

"What do you see, lad?"

"They are talking… drinking. In good spirits. Galenus lied. He claimed he had never found the chamber, but he'd been there indeed. The stranger offers him a drink, but draws it from his own satchel… Pours it into a cup and hands it to Galenus, who takes a sip… Minutes pass, and his arms begin to weaken. The other man is gone now; stepped out into the sewer passage for something… Galenus realises he is being poisoned, but the poison is too weak, or does not take hold enough… When the other returns, he steps out from behind the door-leaf and strikes him with the glass… again. Six times in all, hard enough that the glass cracks."

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

Beldon looked at him inquiringly as Marden sank wearily to the ground.

"That is what Marden said when he tried to learn the origin of the glass with his gift back in Ash Peak, in the tower. Are you well, my son?"

Marden nodded.

"Yes. It was tiring again, but not as it once was. I need not sleep at once. I would try again."

The second vision was wholly different. The amulet carried him to a far land where searing heat and drought held sway. Stone and sand lay everywhere, with scarcely a trace of life. Cacti thrust skyward, and the desert wind caressed all things softly. He stood before the entrance to a labyrinth; before him rose two statues that stood guard: wolves' heads upon human bodies.

"The Doomed Maze of Stingland," Nyhund whispered.

"May the High Ones shield us from it," Beldon breathed.

Arlo's eyes narrowed.

"I have heard something of it, but not enough. Beldon? Nyhund?"

"The Ghost with the Twisted Neck," they answered together.

Then Beldon continued:

"The *Great A'Nagtoth*—Ortrun Suarius A'Nagtoth, the mightiest king the family ever knew, whose forebears even counted dwarves—suffered rebellion, yet returned and had his nephew, the rebel, executed. That nephew was Sneferu. He is the Ghost with the Twisted Neck. With his head indeed twisted

back and his gait a stagger, he haunts the southern lands. Or so the legend says. In truth, none ever knew what became of Sneferu A'Nagtoth after his death."

"But what has the maze to do with it?" Ivy asked.

"This," Xaldimárr said, taking up the tale, "that the first necromancer dwelt there. Long ago, on the western edge of Stingland, there stood a flourishing port city, now known as the City of the Dead. Fifteen hundred years past, Ash Peak was not the capital; that harbour was. Its original name was Sneferu… Yes, the city was named after the Great A'Nagtoth's nephew. Indeed, it was the Great A'Nagtoth himself who named it after his beloved kinsman, who at that time ruled it as city-lord. By the age of forty-five he was astonishingly popular and wealthy, but greed became his undoing. And he was not only rich; he was learned in magic, and above all fascinated by the spirit that remains after death. He gathered a small order, which we hold to be the ancient forebear of black magic itself… Thus rebellion, death…" He paused. "And resurrection."

All listened, holding their breath. The black mage went on:

"Yes, my dwarven friend—we do, in fact, know the rebel's fate. After Sneferu was executed, his body was carried west to the Surami Desert, with the intent of casting it into a mine-shaft on the Miners' Isle. That isle, approached from the sea along the eastern coast, is unreachable because of its sheer cliffs; the bridge was their only path. They feared the corpse so greatly that they wished it as far away as possible."

He drained a goblet of wine.

"Within Sneferu's order there was no accord. One faction held the execution just, wishing to remain loyal to the king; the other foresaw the birth of a new power. The royalists,

led by Haw-Mon, returned to Sneferu—the city—but Haw-Mon bore a terrible guilt, an irredeemable error. Hmm…"

Oly's eyes glowed redder than ever.

"Haw-Mon was the necromancer who raised Sneferu in the Surami Desert. The tale of the Ghost with the Twisted Neck is true. He exists. His curse fell upon Stingland. The city withered, and in time died. Haw-Mon repented and returned to the hill-country of his birth. In shame he sought to hide, and so had the maze built, where death at last overtook him decades later. He was the first necromancer—our Grand Master. The bloodline of A'Nagtoth was broken by Sneferu's curse. His descendants lived on, but no longer as kings. They became ordinary folk. Over the long centuries their house faded from memory, surviving only in the chronicles… as we know them—imperfectly."

"Brutus Galenus…" Arlo said.

"Yes," Xaldimárr nodded. "Brutus Galenus is none other than a descendant of Ortrun Suarius A'Nagtoth. Your forebear, Ivy—your great-great-grandfather. You are of the line of the great A'Nagtoth dynasty. Your task is to break the curse in the south."

* * *

As might have been expected, Xarfax escaped from captivity, taking advantage of the fact that Amosis and the chief mages were absent from the tower. He worked upon the mind of the guard posted at the door, poisoning it with whispered persuasion until the man was driven mad and released him. Immediately thereafter the guard leapt from a high balcony and broke his neck. Xarfax then roused the long-dead from its

stupor and set it loose within the Tower of Elamond. Further tragedies followed, for by the time the creature was subdued, one apprentice lay dead and three others were grievously wounded. Thus the sorrowful tale of Ivy's uncle came to its end within the tower, where at last he was halted by spellcraft and then consumed by fire. First, a mage of moving objects rendered him immobile; in return the long-dead cursed him with a single glance, so that he lay unconscious for three days. Yet that was time enough for a fire-mage to cloak the monster in flame. At the touch of fire, the paralysis was broken. The creature fell to its knees, and in that posture continued to burn. Those present watched in horror. In its final moments the features of the being seemed to clear, and they thought they glimpsed the weeping face of a man. Its body did not crumble to ash; instead, there remained a pitch-black figure, as though someone had carved a human statue from charred wood. The chamber was rendered forever unusable. All who entered it thereafter were seized by dread. At last, the human soul received absolution and was freed from its dreadful prison. The suffering, however, was left behind—an eternal reminder of what may and may not be done to one who is dying.

From that day on, the room was known as the *Chamber of Suffering*.

Past this place Maida now hurried, on her way to meet Amosis. Upon reaching his study, she took her seat in the very armchair where Marden had once sat when the dark-skinned mage had shown him the goblet-spell.

"Ivy and the others have set out," the old man began. "Oly has recovered, though he will feel the mark of the vampire poison for the rest of his life."

"That was to be expected… poor soul. Where are they

bound?"

"They are guided by an amulet. Arlo believes it to be a Vision Pendant, formed from the two bone tablets. The second piece was given to Ivy by a goblin–human half-blood."

"Wait. How?" the woman asked, startled.

Amosis then told her everything in detail that he had learned from the letter borne by dove: Xaldimárr's confession, the amulet, the truth that Ivy's mother yet lived. He also told how, after brief deliberation, the company had decided to cautiously, yet decisively heed the pendant's guidance.

"They are going into the Doomed Maze?" she demanded.

Amosis raised a hand.

"Be calm, please. I trust Arlo."

"That is an even more reckless notion than the Telamy Marsh was, back in the day."

* * *

Arlo and his companions had been on the road for two days. They had spent nearly a week in the ruined building, and the enforced rest had given them time to set their gear in order, tend to themselves, and wash every scrap of clothing they owned. They were travelling south. To their left stretched a great lake, and the wind carried toward them the sour scent of marshland. In the distance rose the peaks of the Swampy Peaks, as they knew from the duke's map. Samorudn, though it bound two worlds together, concerned itself in detail with only one of them. The reason had never seemed clear, for there were no great hostilities between humans and goblins on the eastern island; rather, neither folk had ever shown much interest in the

other. Moreover, the lands of Owlens and Shiraed were divided by the highest, snow-clad peaks of the realm, where passage was exceedingly difficult. The soil here was fertile, yet for some reason it did not lend itself to farming, as though it wished to nourish only what it itself chose to sustain.

This change of direction had the further effect of drawing them once more closer to Samorudn, and after leaving the lake behind they reached within hours the only road that ran toward the border. It was a long-neglected, ancient stone way, clearly little used. There were no towns or villages. They had not encountered a single human soul since leaving the Green Bridge behind, nor even seen signs of distant habitation. Yet the jungle's dominance began to ease, and stretches of land appeared where trees grew sparse or not at all.

Because the pendant hung about Ivy's neck rather than resting in her hand, she felt its power less keenly. Even so, the superhuman sharpness of her sense of direction rose to new heights under its influence.

"Somehow I know that if we were to turn east, we would come upon the Hermit Knight's Turret," she said. "But that is not our goal. It is possible we shall see it, yet north of it lies the village where… you understand…"

"No," Oly said bluntly.

"Never mind, I don't either," Ivy replied.

By evening all were thoroughly wearied. The campfire was lit before dusk had fallen. Oly found a measure of comfort in the gathering dark; sunlight troubled his eyes. Once night had settled, he gazed long upon the horizon. He could see almost everything. As the medallion sharpened Ivy's gifts, so the vampire poison had heightened his own already formidable senses.

Beldon returned in the twilight with a small stag. He had stalked it for nearly a quarter of an hour before bringing it down with a single, well-thrown hand-axe.

"I'm fond of this little hatchet," he said, turning it in his hand. "It once belonged to my grandfather. He taught me to hunt with it."

After the hearty meal, several of them withdrew to their tents. Helge and Archibald remained by the fire a while longer. They spoke quietly of the oak forest, of their father, and of their home. The air had cooled pleasantly and felt far more bearable than the jungle heat they had left behind. The Moon rose upon the horizon, and at its coming the meadow and the nearby wooded groves seemed to stir. A few deer snorted nervously, their usual calm unsettled by the death of one of their kind. A gentle breeze drifted up from the south, as though offering them a greeting, and in that moment Archibald found himself wondering where the current of events might yet carry them. Helge soon left him to seek rest. Archibald lingered a little longer, then rose and brushed the dust from his clothes. Before long he heard footsteps. Turning, he saw Ivy approaching. His heart gave a sudden leap and he stepped toward her. He stood a head taller than she. She slipped her arms about his neck. It was but a soft kiss here in the eastern wilds, and then clouds veiled the pale moon so that the newly found lovers could hide from its light.

* * *

During the next stretch of their journey, Gnammy joined them once more. For the past two days he had gone by separate paths. He still wore ragged clothes, filthy and worn, trudging at

the rear of the line while conversing quietly with Xaldimárr. They had left the ruined road some time before, turning south, and as they crossed open lowland, Oly squinted into the distance and caught sight of the Hermit Knight's Turret far to the southeast. The others, of course, saw nothing at all.

"Some twenty miles off, up the mountainside," the ranger said, pointing. "But Ivy is not leading us there—rather, I think, to that place." He gestured a little north of the tower.

"We can't see it, Oly," the captain said, looking at him.

"Never mind."

Moving from grove to grove, they soon reached the rolling foothills at the base of the mountains. Here and there rocky outcrops thrust upward, yet the land retained its gentle character. For several miles more the ground continued to rise, as though giants had built the vast mountains and scattered a handful of stones as they worked. It was a place of great fascination, rich in secrets and surprises, threaded through with strange, unsettling sounds. They had walked perhaps another half hour when Oly raised a hand for them to halt, then pressed a finger to his lips to still the company, who had been laughing boisterously over something, Beldon at their head.

"What is it?" Ivy asked.

Oly narrowed his eyes and listened.

"The wind carries odd sounds from somewhere."

Xaldimárr glanced at Gnammy and nodded.

"No one be alarmed. All of you remain where you are."

The warning proved useful, for something unexpected followed. Gnammy winked, then began to undress. It was thoroughly disconcerting, yet he calmly shed his garments one by one. Before removing even his loincloth, he turned modestly away. At last, he kicked off his boots as well.

After this strange prelude he shook himself, and his body began to lengthen and curve. Fur sprouted across his skin, and the uncanny transformation did not cease until a sleek, catlike creature stood before them. It was larger than a lynx, yet smaller than a panther.

The two soldiers recoiled. The mages looked on with admiration. The two druid brothers, however, burst into laughter—for the first time since their father's death. Then Helge spoke.

"Surprises upon surprises, Gnammy! Well done! A gheeta in the flesh!"

"A what?" Hagley blinked, staring. Beldon scratched his head.

"The gheetae are shape-changers," Helge said. "You may come closer without fear; his soul is still that of a man, only his body is that of a cat."

With that he reached out and stroked Gnammy, who answered with a vigorous purr.

"He's going ahead to scout," the black mage said from the rear.

In the next instant the man-turned-cat vanished almost soundlessly from their sight. With a few swift bounds he reached the nearest rocky rise.

"Now we wait," Xaldimárr said, settling himself on a stone. He drew an apple from his pocket and took a hearty bite.

"But what manner of transformation was that?" Hagley asked, still perplexed. "I've never seen its like."

Helge was quick to explain.

"The gheetae are strange folk. They are not human, yet they possess human souls. They are born as men, but in time they change. Whether, in Gnammy's case, the mingling of

goblin and human blood gave rise to this peculiarity, I cannot say. But this I know: they are singular creatures. A few dwell in the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest. They are usually shy, yet when they take human form, they are kind and helpful. Most often they can become cats; more rarely some manner of dog, or even a bear."

"But which is their true shape?" the sergeant asked.

"That is not so easily answered," Archibald said. "We know of some who feel more at ease in an animal's skin, while others scarcely ever change at all."

* * *

Xarfax and the king met in the throne hall. As the mage had previously requested, Winslow had cleared him of all charges, and so he now moved freely within the capital.

"Where is that ally stronger than all others, "my friend"?" the king demanded. "You promised him the last time we spoke."

The other gazed off into the distance, his face devoid of feeling.

"Alas, he is no more. I was forced to leave him behind when I fled from Elamond. A great loss… he was a truly remarkable being."

"May I know a little more?"

After a brief pause, Xarfax decided to lay his cards on the table.

"It was a creature who, after death, remained bound to this world—and whose mental power surpassed that of any living mage."

Winslow looked at him as one does when one senses

mockery.

"And you left him behind… Forgive me if my understanding is slow, but we are speaking of a dead being, are we not? One who does not exist—therefore—" here he made a gesture as though blowing a feather from his palm "—gone, and of no use to us."

"A dead one… well, yes. Twice dead," the mage mused, which forced the ruler to summon his patience once more.

After a few moments, he continued.

"An ancient practice has recently come to light. Very dark. Very dangerous. But if it succeeds, your power will be beyond imagining. It must be performed upon a dying person, and, well… essentially… it is utterly unlawful. Why do you look so troubled, my king? Nothing scandalous has happened of late, has it?" He gestured southeast toward the window, where the soot-blackened remains of the Tower of Magi stood.

Winslow folded his arms across his chest.

"And where am I to procure dying men for you? Do you even hear yourself?"

Xarfax changed tactics. He rose and began to pace the hall.

"The Southern Arable Land stands against you—and the Northern one too. Fort Solyberg, Samorudn, the 800-Year-Old Oak Forest as well. The Andabatas have declared their allegiance at Elamond. You are left with Aranea, Mel Ramola, and the capital itself—which, to be fair, is no small force—and perhaps the mines, since you grant the dwarves privileges none other would. It is not a strong alliance you command. Owlens remains an enigma, though you are hardly beloved there since you keep sending agents to harry them. The goblins live in another world entirely. You burned the Tower of Magi. A

colossal blunder. Every mage now stands against us. Perhaps not in Mel Ramola—but even so, you are in need of something only I can give you."

Winslow listened to this outrageously brazen assessment with eyes wide and unblinking.

"What do you want?" he asked at last, his voice rigid. "You do nothing for free. You will demand payment."

Xarfax drew once more upon the tactic of the dreadful smile.

"I do not yet know," he said, fixing the king with a look that made the blood run cold in his veins.

* * *

"Come," said Xaldimárr. "The coast is clear."

Then, seeing the doubtful faces, he turned back and added with an apologetic incline of the head:

"I promise you—this is the last surprise. From here on, I will play with open cards."

Archibald shook his head. Arlo and Marden exchanged a glance. Oly and Ivy, however, did not hesitate in the least. And at last, one by one, they all rose and followed him. For several minutes they threaded their way among rocks and larger stones. The ground rose now so gently it was scarcely perceptible, and as they looked ahead, the outlines of rooftops slowly emerged above the scrub. Looking back, the long-stretching plain lay behind them, crowned with billowing, heavy clouds, as though a chapter had been symbolically sealed. They felt that something was about to happen—and, truth be told, they longed for it. When events follow one another in a long and tangled chain while questions only

multiply, there comes a point when, by the logic of anything will do, even an ill turn can feel satisfying—so long as it brings an answer.

They passed barns and animal pens where livestock grazed, watching the strange company with mild curiosity. The dirt track gradually gave way to a stone road, which made it certain they were nearing some sort of settlement. And so it was. Before long they saw signs on either side bearing street names. A square opened to the left, scarcely larger than a spacious yard. Wooden frames stood about its edges, perhaps the skeleton of a market place. The smells of food and the sounds of life drifted toward them from every direction: hammering, sawing, the distant clamour of children at play. A few locals blinked at them oddly from behind fences. Arlo nodded in greeting to each in turn, and the others followed his example.

The village reminded Marden faintly of Baglyas. Once again, he found himself studying the flowers of unfamiliar plants, though here there were far more he did not recognise. Arlo spoke quietly with the dwarf—no doubt of the same things—for the latter was reeling off strange names. The boy drew closer to catch them. From a smithy came the rhythmic ring of hammer on metal, and the long-moustached craftsman glanced at them between blows. His wife stood in the doorway, eyeing the group with evident suspicion. From another yard a small dog leapt the fence and fastened itself to Beldon's clothing. The dwarf tried to shake it off, taking care not to harm the reckless creature, until its owner hurried over, gesticulating sharply and calling it back. He nodded apologetically toward them and scolded the dog.

They had been walking for perhaps ten minutes when

the black mage turned in through a gate. A modest house stood at the far end of the yard, a grapevine-trained arbour before it, with a vegetable patch and fruit trees below. In the doorway stood a woman, no longer young. Her gaze was worn, yet hopeful. From afar they could see the great sigh that broke from her. Ivy stared rigidly, forgetting even to blink. Then, in that charged moment, a large cat emerged from the house and sat down at her feet. The woman covered her mouth with her hand and looked at the approaching figures with tear-filled eyes.

"Mother," Ivy whispered in a choked voice. "Mother!"

She ran across the yard and flung her arms around her at once. The other could not speak. At their feet, Gnammy lay down and, with a deep, rumbling purr, gently bumped his head against them.

The careless ease fell away from Oly at last. With a drawn face and a tight throat, he stepped forward. His belongings slipped from his hands to the ground as he joined the embrace as a third. Slowly, all of them gathered around Ivy's mother—one stroking her hair, another her back. Xaldimárr was the first to find his voice.

"I brought her to you, Lutgarda. I brought her home. I promised you—decades ago."

The woman could only nod. She was unable to speak. Meanwhile the gheeta changed back into human form within the house and returned to them wrapped in a robe. After a few minutes, Ivy's mother spoke for the first time. She herself did not know why, but the first words to leave her lips were these:

"Gnammy, my dear friend, it is high time you took a bath."

That was enough to loosen the last of the tension, and a

ripple of quiet laughter passed through the company. The woman ushered them all inside. They entered an ordinary village kitchen. Bowls rested on a flower-patterned, old, worn cupboard. A mirror with a browned frame hung on the wall. A jar of honey stood nearby. Exactly as the amulet had shown Ivy.

The sun, too, emerged from behind the clouds over Bumat Saghira that early summer afternoon, and it shone until it decided it would be better off beyond the mountains.

To be continued...