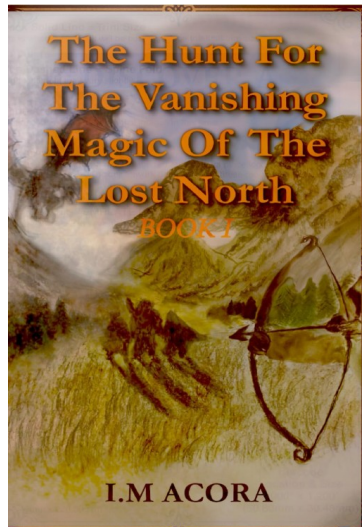


The Hunt for the Vanishing Magic of the Lost North

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Book I

By I.M Acora



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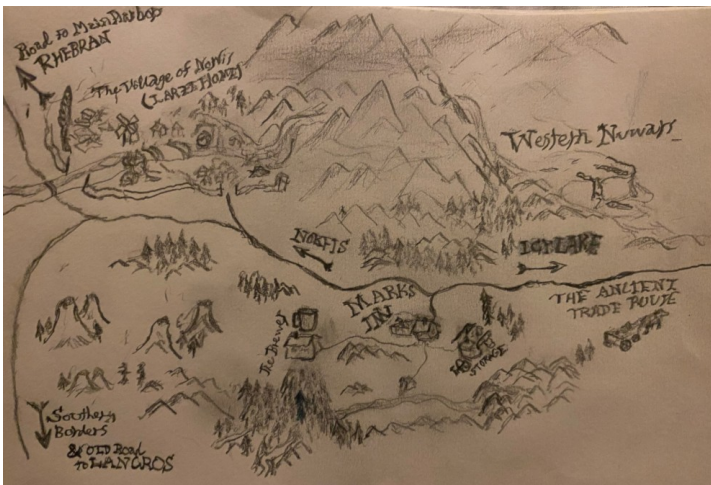
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Narration & Perspective

This story follows multiple perspectives, shifting between key figures whose paths intertwine. The italicized text represents a character's direct thoughts, offering insight into their mind at that moment. For those curious about the world's deep history, a full timeline of events can be found in the appendix.

A Tavern Sign in Mark's Inn

(A wooden plaque hanging near the fireplace, featuring Mark's unique approach to measurement conversions)



closer look around the surroundings of the Mark's Inn.

CHAPTER 1 – Home Sweet Home

24th August, Year 4586, Second World. Northern Continent, Western Nuwars.

It had been a long, wet autumn. Relentless rain, chilled winds, and skies painted gray. Yet, after wandering the northern lands, I found myself back where my heart belongs.

Nuwars...

A land where snow-capped mountains stretch to the heavens and waterfalls carve paths through serene valleys. Ancient spruce forests whisper their secrets to those who listen, and the endless mists of Icy Lake mirror the skies like a portal to another world. A place of beauty and history, soothing yet haunting.

So mused Larze, the world traveler. A short, cheerful fellow known for his charisma and knack for making friends everywhere. He was no soldier, no warrior, but his sharp tongue and charm had seen him through countless adventures.

Now, after half a year away, he returned to his home, his backpack was slung over his shoulders, filled with camping gear, and a fishing rod strapped to

its side. A scarf hung loosely around his neck, though his hood was left down, revealing messy brown hair, a small earring, and warm, lively eyes. His dusty boots crunched against the weathered road as he trudged through the stunning landscapes of the northwestern world. The inn was just a few miles away, a familiar refuge nestled among autumnal trees.

Before reaching it, Larze took a detour to an old haunt, a cave hidden behind a waterfall. The slightly blue glowing mushrooms that lined the walls cast an otherworldly light as he lit his pipe, smoke curling into ghostly tendrils. From the cave, he admired the breathtaking view of the valley below: amber trees, the endless gray-blue of Icy Lake, and the distant, jagged peaks on the horizon.

Still as peaceful and untouched as ever Larze thought as he exhaled. His thoughts wandered to the lake. *Fishing would be nice... but not today. The journey has been long, and Mark's inn is calling. A warm place to rest, gather thoughts, and maybe hear news from this quiet corner of the world.*

After finishing his pipe, Larze packed his belongings and resumed his journey. The crisp air nipped at his face as he walked. For a moment, he allowed himself to relax.

But the peace didn't last.

As he glanced back down the road, unease prickled at his senses. Something. Or someone seemed to linger in the shadows beyond the mountains. A faint presence, like unseen eyes watching.

Most of the people I met were decent folk, kind even Larze thought.

But there was that one... that one unsettling figure. He shook his head. *No, they couldn't have followed me this far, not through the shortcuts.*

The feeling persisted. He adjusted his pace, deciding to check over his shoulder a few more times on the way to the inn. The once-welcoming road now felt colder, less familiar.

Finally, he arrived. The inn stood just as he remembered it, a sturdy haven tucked into the wilderness. Yet, as Larze approached the stables, his breath hitched. A large black horse, strikingly familiar, stood in one of the stalls.

"That can't be... No, it's not", he muttered, shaking his head. *Of all the coincidences, a lightning strike would be more likely.*

Larze dismissed the thought and stepped into the inn, greeted by the scent of ale and the familiar smoky aroma of tar from the warm hearth.

“Mark! Here’s a man who’s seen the seven seas and even more inns – and you know what? This one is still in the Top Three!” Larze said cheerfully, delighted to see his old friend. “So, how’s life treating you? Has it been busy here?”

“Well, well, look who it is—World-Wanderer Larze! You made it home before winter and didn’t stay down the South like that one time when I was left wondering if you’d ever return.” Mark smirked, then shrugged. “But no, not much busier than usual... except, uh—” His expression turned a little awkward. “Well, actually, it’s been a bit livelier this autumn, but I’ll tell you about that later. For now, you must be thirsty!”

“Yeah, it’s been a long road,” Larze said, brushing off Mark’s odd tone. “Pour me a pint of your signature brew. The North’s best beer, right?”

Mark obliged, handing Larze a foaming mug of ale. As they talked, Mark eagerly asked about the lands Larze had visited. Larze’s answers were light, masking the unease that still lingered from his journey.

“Just some rumors of unrest,” he said casually, trying to convince himself as much as Mark. “Nothing serious.”

But the feeling wouldn’t leave him.

Larze glanced around the tavern's bar counter and noticed a broken window on the left wall near the passage leading to the stables. It had shattered very recently. Mark had hastily boarded it up as a temporary fix.

"What happened to that window? Has there been some trouble here?" Larze asked, puzzled with a more serious tone.

Mark shifted uncomfortably, avoiding the question. "Oh, that... uh, just a drunk guest who stumbled into it. Nothing to worry about." He quickly changed the subject. "But perhaps you could tell me how your return journey went from the Nuwars border?"

Larze studied Marks's uneasy expression for a moment but then turned his thoughts back to what had been weighing on him during his journey back.

"Actually," Larze said, lowering his voice. "Has there been anything strange around here? I swear, the whole way along Icy Lake, I felt like someone was following me."

Mark's expression darkened. He leaned closer.

"Yes," he whispered. "See the smoky corner table? Those two—" he nodded slightly, "—they've been watching you since you walked in."

Larze felt a chill run down his spine at Mark's words, his skin tingling with goosebumps. Summoning his courage, he glanced over his shoulder.

Two men sat in the smoky corner, their sharp eyes tracking his every movement.

The first was a frail-looking yet strangely imposing elderly man, his face shadowed beneath a hood that blended seamlessly with his dark gray robe. Long hair remained hidden beneath the fabric, adding to his mysterious presence.

Despite his age, there was an undeniable strength about him—an aura that Larze could sense even from afar as if the old man possessed a wealth of knowledge and wisdom.

A long white beard framed his sharp, piercing eyes, which studied Larze intently as he slowly sipped his ale and puffed on a long pipe.

The second man turned his head, revealing a broad-shouldered figure with a square jaw covered in short stubble. Despite his middle age, he exuded strength. His shoulder-length black hair framed his rugged features.

He wore a sturdy, sleeveless vest made of dark brown leather, giving him a hardened appearance. His muscular arms bore the marks of past struggles, and

a long scar traced his left wrist—a silent testament to a dark and troubled past.

The big man wore a very old but valuable-looking ring on his left index finger, adorned with a plate shaped like a wolf's head, engraved with cryptic writing. His worn boots bore the scars of countless journeys, much like Larze's.

"Hey you, little traveler, sneaking glances over here—why don't you join us?" the larger man called, his deep voice reverberating through the room.

The voice was unmistakable. Larze froze for a moment, then looked closer. A grin broke across his face as recognition dawned.

"Larze!" the man exclaimed, rising to his full, towering height. His immense stature was impossible to miss, his head nearly brushing the ceiling.

"What a surprise! It's been so long! And what are the odds that all three of us are here today?" He enveloped Larze in a bear hug, lifting him slightly off the ground.

The unexpected reunion left Larze both delighted and stunned. "What are you doing here, Nbrezor? And how have you been?" he asked, still smiling as they released the embrace. "I'd planned to enjoy a quiet ale after my journey," Nbrezor said, his booming voice

tinged with amusement. “But I’d say this is a much better evening than I expected.”

Nbrezor, the larger man, was an enigma—a lone wolf in every sense. Though he lived far away from Nuwars-I, beyond the eastern mountains, in a modest cabin, he was no stranger to wandering the northern regions. For all his size and strength, he moved with surprising agility, his skills as a hunter unmatched. Yet, beneath his gruff exterior lay scars far deeper than the one on his wrist. The “dark years,” as he called them, were a time he rarely spoke of—years when he’d been a different man, carrying out acts he could never undo.

Larze smiled to his old friend and then wondered, “How did you end up all the way out here on the west of the North and in such a rainy autumn, no less? And which route did you take?” Larze asked his large-built friend, still caught in surprise. “The hunting trip stretched on a little longer than planned,” Nbrezor replied with a laugh.

The older man sitting beside him—who had been staring almost without blinking at Larze while puffing on his pipe—suddenly burst into a maniac, hysteric laughter as he heard Nbrezor’s reply.

Larze smirked as he glanced at the older man and listened as Nbrezor continued, “My journey here... It

turned out a bit like when I traveled with you, Larze, long ago. But instead of getting lost and walking into hot springs, I ended up in a tavern. My hunting companions stayed farther north, but I kept wandering southern lands—crossing the dangerous Tundra and even more dangerous territory of the Shaman. From there, I ended up all the way to Wescros. Then, well, I got a thirst for a good ale.”

Larze let out a small laugh and replied, “Then we must have taken nearly the same route, though I didn’t even glance in the direction of the Shaman’s territory. But Wescros is still far from here, isn’t it?” “Yeah, I stopped by Wescros’ Lone Tavern. The locals there didn’t seem too loving towards me. Maybe some still hold a grudge against me for something I don’t even remember... But well, that was a long time ago,” Nbrezor answered more seriously but didn’t want to dwell on the past.

Instead, he brightened and continued his story.

“Anyway, I was sitting there with a mug of ale in that dark tavern, occasionally noticing how the locals stared at me suspiciously, only to avert their eyes when I looked their way quickly. Then I started thinking—why am I even sitting here when I could drink Mark’s beer? I was already far from home and halfway to Western Nuwars. And besides, I hadn’t

seen Mark in ages and could catch up on old times. So, the next morning, I headed west... and the rest is history,” Nberoz said with a broad grin.

Before Larze could respond, the hooded man rose from his seat. Despite his frailty, he moved with a deliberate calmness that spoke of quiet strength.

“Okar,” Larze greeted warmly as the older man embraced him briefly, his face still obscured by the hood.

“It’s great to see you, Larze. It’s been a long time..” he replied in a voice filled with age and wisdom, his loud laughter having quieted during Nbrezor’s tale, though it quickly shifted into playful teasing in the next sentence. “I assume you’re buying the next round, seeing as you were the last of the three of us to arrive?” he joked, and the friends burst into laughter.

“Agreed! Hey, Mark, we need more ale over here!” Nbrezor called out cheerfully to the innkeeper. The three friends settled at the table, ale mugs in hand, their pipes glowing faintly in the dim light.

Okar—the Wizard whose name carried whispers across lands—was more mysterious than ever. Though much older and shrouded in mystery, his sharp wit and humor made him a grounding presence in their trio. For over twenty years, these three had shared

countless adventures. Each brought a unique strength to the group: Nbrezor's raw power, Okar's wisdom, and Larze's charisma.

"Perhaps fate brought us together," Okar mused with a slight smile on his wise face, his piercing eyes glinting behind the soft glow of his pipe.

The room around them buzzed with quiet chatter, but at their table, plans began to unfold. Another journey? One last adventure? Yet none of them noticed the shadows that lingered beyond the warm glow of the inn's hearth, watching, waiting...

CHAPTER 2 – An Impromptu Idea at the Inn

The conversation flowed endlessly, punctuated by bursts of hysterical laughter from their smoky corner booth. Nbrezor's deep, booming laugh drew the attention of Mark, the innkeeper, and a few other patrons seated nearby.

The inn had stood in the same place along an ancient trade route for over two centuries. Mark upheld his family's tradition, having taken on the role of proprietor as the eldest son when his father retired. He knew all three friends very well and would occasionally sit with them to exchange stories, particularly curious about Larze's tales from faraway lands.

"Mark's beer is as good as it was the first time you brought me here, Larze," Nbrezor said. "It sure is. Do you remember how Mark's father, who was still running this place back then, gave you a thorough interrogation when you walked in? He was suspicious of you at first," Larze laughed. "But he finally trusted you after you carried those ridiculously heavy beer

barrels all by yourself. Mark got to rest properly that day.” Friends burst into laughter.

“I’ll go grab another pint since Mark is way over there,” Nbrezor said, standing up too quickly and banging his head on a beam overhead. Okar and Larze erupted in laughter, and Larze shouted, “Mark, when are you building that special corner you promised for Nbrezor? This must be the umpteenth time he’s bashed his head here.”

“He probably didn’t even hear that,” Okar said. “But watch this—this is how you order beer.” With his hands, the Wizard made strange shapes in the air and whispered words that couldn’t be heard. “There it goes. The old skills aren’t rusty after all,” he laughed as Mark came over carrying a tray and brought beers for everyone.

“I hope you’re conjuring up the bill to go with it, Wiz,” Nbrezor said, holding his head where he’d hit it. “Put the next round of drinks on Wiz’s tab, would you? Since he’s already started showing off his little magic tricks this early in the evening. He is not even too drunk at this point.” “I can’t conjure anything but free beer,” Okar smirked, taking a deep gulp from his tankard, “but I might know a small trick or two when it comes to making someone else foot the bill.” He grinned, but his expression turned more serious as he

looked at the growing bump on Nbrezor's head. "Do bring something cold, Mark—he's going to have a proper lump there soon."

"Bring a saw, too, so we can cut out a few planks and raise the ceiling a bit higher," Nbrezor added.

"I don't keep saws or axes in here anymore—they're locked in the storage room," Mark replied with an unexpectedly serious tone.

"Has someone tried to rob your inn?" Nbrezor asked. "No, nothing like that... just, things have been happening," Mark replied. "I've been chopping plenty of firewood—enough to last two winters at least. Feel free to warm up by the fireplace if it gets cold."

"Actually, it's already pretty warm in here," Larze said, "I think I'll step outside for some fresh air." He stood up from the table and headed toward the door, paying little attention to the other guests in the inn.

When Larze stepped out of the inn, the cold night air immediately wrapped around him like an unwelcome cloak. Darkness hung over the spruce forest, its shadows deep and impenetrable, as if the trees themselves conspired to conceal secrets. The warm glow from the inn barely stretched beyond the doorway, leaving most of the surroundings in an eerie half-light. A sharp breeze whispered through the air,

brushing against his face and sending a shiver down his spine. Instinctively, he pulled his coat tighter.

A sudden gust of wind surged past him—a brief whirlwind as if a small vortex had sprung to life and vanished just as quickly. He froze, his breath visible in the chill, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. Waves of cold rippled across his body, raising goosebumps on his arms. An inexplicable sensation washed over him—a creeping certainty that he was being watched.

He turned his gaze toward the forest, its dense shadows swallowing all but the faintest glimmers of moonlight. The trees stood silent and unmoving, yet the feeling persisted, growing stronger with every passing moment. It was as though unseen eyes were fixed on him, studying him from just beyond the threshold of the visible. Larze swallowed hard, his heart pounding against his ribs. The oppressive silence pressed down on him, making it difficult to breathe. Unable to shake the overwhelming sense of dread, he turned on his heel and hurried back to the inn.

Flinging the door open, he stepped inside and quickly closed it behind him, the warmth of the room doing little to calm the cold fear still clinging to him.

Still feeling the sense of dread, Larze walked anxiously back to the corner table.

“That didn’t take long,” Nbrezor said as Larze returned to the table, far from his usual cheerful demeanor.

“Did you see a ghost? You look pale,” Okar teased.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Larze muttered, “But I’ve had this feeling for a while now... like something’s been watching me. Ever since I walked the long road back to Nuwars” “Why not take Nbrezor with you next time? Maybe then you’ll get enough air,” the Wizard suggested with a smirk.

Larze knew his old friend enjoyed joking around, but what he had felt outside wasn’t a joke. That eerie sensation, the same unsettling presence that had followed him since returning to Nuwars, still clung to him. He wanted to talk about it—to say out loud that it felt like someone, or something, was watching his every move. But between Nbrezor’s deep laughter and Okar’s chuckle, he couldn’t find the right moment to speak.

Before he could try, Okar had already launched into another nostalgic tale. “Do you remember, Nbrezor, when you told us about the first time Larze visited your home in Stone Valley? You had to save

him more than once. Like when he wandered into that enormous spruce forest stretching all the way through the mountains to Nuwars?”

“I remember very well,” Nbrezor replied, “I warned him several times that it was full of those hairy mountain trolls, but Larze insisted on exploring anyway.”

“Anyone would panic a little with five hairy creatures with big noses and sharp axes would be running after them! And I’m not even joking; they ran as fast as Mark chasing after some shady customer who was trying to skip the bill. I ran so fast, you’d think my arse was on fire! Even less would’ve made a man crap his trousers. Thank goodness you showed up in time, Nbrezo,” Larze laughed just as Mark returned to the table.

“Care to tell us more stories about the distant lands you’ve visited, Larze?” Mark asked.

Larze had recently returned from a long journey that took him to the eastern shores of the Northern Continent—the same coast where Okar, the Wizard, had once arrived and marveled at its green, endless forested landscapes with giant trees and flowered meadows.

“Those were the days, truly, when we think back on the good old times, thousands of years ago,” the Wizard laughed hard.

“Indeed. At least back then, you didn’t have to breathe in the constant dust from the mines,” Larze added, describing the unrest he’d witnessed in that part of the world and admiring the massive mining operations. “There were some disturbances in the east, as far as the beaches of the Beirnas,” he said, “I didn’t pay them much attention beyond noticing that the border guards were asking more questions than usual.”

“What were they asking?” Mark asked as he briefly sat at their table.

“My name, my age, and whether I knew some Wizard named Okar who is wandering somewhere in the Kingdom called Nuwars,” Larze replied, looking with a big smile at Okar, who immediately snapped, “Why didn’t you mention this sooner?”

Larze laughed. “Just kidding! No one asked about you at the border,” he took a long sip of his ale and leaned forward, lowering his voice.

“Actually, I ran into a strange fellow near the eastern border. Hooded figure, eyes glinting like lanterns under the shadow of his hood. He was asking

all sorts of odd questions, but mostly—" Larze smirked and glanced at Okar—"he was asking about you, Wiz."

The Wizard raised an eyebrow and leaned closer. "About me? What exactly did he want to know?"

"More than I was comfortable telling," Larze said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "Names, movements, why I'd been lingering so long in the east. When I told him I needed to use the restroom, I slipped into the back room and stayed hidden long enough to doze off. It's not the first time I've met strange folks, but this one... there was something about him I just can't explain."

The Wizard's expression darkened. "Did you ask the innkeeper who he was? Did you leave anything behind to figure out what he wanted?"

"I didn't get the chance. I was too busy avoiding him. But I'll admit—he wasn't just some random passerby," Larze admitted.

Nbrezor laughed and shrugged. "Come on, Wiz. You're more famous in the North than the rest of us combined. Maybe someone just wants your wisdom?"

Okar didn't answer immediately. He scanned the other inn patrons, their movements ordinary and unthreatening.

Then he muttered, "We live in different times. It's a long story, but when I arrived here, I sensed

something far more powerful than Nuwar border guards watching me from the shadows. There are also strange folk wandering these northern lands nowadays.”

“They’re locals; they live nearby,” Mark comforted the Wizard, who seemed unusually suspicious after hearing Larze’s story while watching subtly towards the other few guests at the other side of the bar.

Okar waited for Mark to return to the bar, then whispered to Nbrezor and Larze, “Times have changed. It’s not as safe as it used to be. Danger may be closer than you realize. But this is neither the time nor the place to talk about it.” “That’s true. At least back then, you could breathe clean air in the east instead of stone dust,” Larze said. Okar muttered, a bit frustrated, “You don’t understand...”

“Cheer up, Wiz. How about we go on a camping trip together, just the three of us, into the northern, secret Magical Forest?” Larze suggested.

“Not a bad idea. I haven’t been to that magical spruce forest in years. I would love to see those giant trees surrounded by mountains reaching the height above the clouds,” Nbrezor mused. “Hey, Wiz, let’s leave first thing tomorrow. Larze has a tent and everything.”

The Wizard hesitated for a moment before replying, "But what about my horse? I'm not taking it down those rocky slopes."

"Mark will take care of it like he always does. I can even pay him," Nbrezor offered. He shouted to the bar, "Hey Mark, how much will you rent your stable for a few days?"

"Wait, Nbrezor! We haven't even decided yet," Okar protested. But Nbrezor had already risen, pulling a pouch of gold coins from his belt and handing them to Mark.

"Well, now your horse is in good hands," Nbrezor said to the Wizard, whose earlier cheer had vanished.

They spent the rest of the evening chatting, and Okar's good mood returned eventually, the three of them laughing together once more.

"Have you heard of Stelmani, the infamous King of the Mindoros?" the Wizard asked with a sly grin, lighting his pipe. Larze and Nbrezor exchanged glances, their curiosity piqued but mixed with skepticism.

"The madman with a big stomach? The one who almost started a war because the princess of the Nuwars didn't reply to his letters?" Larze laughed hard.

“That’s the one! Yet the Nuwars princess wasn’t an elf, as that rare race he had truly a twisted... and secret love,” Okar exclaimed excitedly, laughing. Nbrezor leaned closer to the table, clearly intrigued.

“But let his deeds speak for themselves. Listen to this story, and you’ll understand why merely mentioning his name is practically a crime in some Kingdoms today.” The Wizard leaned forward, lowered his voice, and began his tale:

“Two Kingdoms, teetering on the brink of war for decades, had finally agreed to come to the negotiation table. The talks were held on neutral ground—at Stelmani’s own castle, which was, in hindsight, their first mistake. Stelmani offered his guests lavish dinners and opulent hospitality, but as always, everything came at a price. On the first evening, Stelmani himself entered the negotiation room. He had no official authority to participate, but his infamous reputation forced everyone to listen. ‘My dear high lords and close friends,’ Stelmani began with a wide smile, ‘Peace is important. I’m willing to help facilitate it, but I have just one small condition: I want an elven woman from each of your Kingdoms—as a symbol of peace, of course.’

The negotiators were stunned. Was he serious? Was this truly his idea of resolving their conflict?

Stelmani, however, continued with conviction: 'Think about it. How wonderful it would be if a symbolic marriage between myself and two elven women marked the dawn of a new era. And if you refuse... well, consider the consequences if I were to take sides with your enemy.' One negotiator tried to object, but Stelmani was prepared. He presented stacks of documents claiming his bloodline traced back to the founders of both Kingdoms—entirely fabricated but delivered with such confidence that no one dared question him.

Eventually, fearing his unpredictable behavior, both sides reluctantly agreed—not for the sake of peace, but simply to rid themselves of Stelmani as quickly as possible.” Okar leaned back in his chair and exhaled a smoke ring. “And so, instead of going to war, both Kingdoms ended up hating one man more than they hated each other.”

“And did he get his elven women?” Larze asked incredulously.

The Wizard nodded gravely.

“Later, I heard he kept both for just a week before sending them back, claiming they didn’t ‘understand his grand visions.’”

The table erupted in laughter, but beneath the humor, there was a sense of unease—Stelmani was both ridiculous and unsettling.

The laughter that followed Stelmani's absurdity and the conversation shifted to reminiscing about the good old times with friends as the inn's tavern grew quieter. The three friends were now the only ones left at their table, with Mark being the only other person still around.

"Mark, how much wood are you planning to throw into the fireplace? The metal frame is already glowing orange," Nbrezor remarked to Mark, who was heating the inn so much it would soon feel like a sauna.

"He's probably drunk—let him heat it up if he wants," Okar said to Nbrezor, but Larze responded, "He could slow down a little. I'd rather not have to step outside to cool off again."

"You're not afraid of the dark, are you, Larze?" Okar asked, laughing as he sipped his ale.

"Well, with that hooded creepy earlier and the feeling that someone's been following me ever since the long straight road to Nuwars, stepping outside right now doesn't sound too appealing. Besides, those two odd guys who came in had one beer and left immediately—sneaking glances at our table the whole time—don't exactly make me eager to go out alone

into the dark,” Larze said, directing his words at Okar, who was smirking.

“Who do you think they were? Mark wouldn’t give me an answer when I asked after they left. I was about to step in—it didn’t seem like they were on friendly terms,” Nbrezor wondered aloud.

“As I said, these times aren’t like they used to be. Who knows what kind of people could wander all the way here, even though we’re far from the chaos of Mindoros—” the Wizard muttered, as if letting slip something he knew.

“What do you mean?” Larze asked, confused. “I didn’t come from that direction, but how did you hear that something might be happening there?”

“Well, you said yourself that there were disturbances in the East. But we shouldn’t get too tangled up in the affairs of the bigger world. Let’s enjoy tonight and even more tomorrow, as we can head off to the campsite in the Magical Spruce Forest. You two could even have another fishing competition, like old good times,” Okar deflected, though Larze didn’t find the response very reassuring.

The Wizard’s strange slip left Larze and Nbrezor momentarily puzzled, but soon, they were caught up in long conversations about the good old fishing trips near Icy Lake.

At some point, Nbrezor noticed that Okar had been oddly quiet. It was as if Okar had drifted into his own world, puffing on his pipe and staring into nothingness.

“You’ve gone quiet, Wiz. Are you brewing another tale in that pipe of yours?” Nbrezor asked, leaning back with a smirk. The Wizard hesitated before replying, “This next one isn’t about absurd kings or petty conflicts. It’s something darker. Something real.”

Larze paused, his hand hovering over his ale. “Now you’ve got my attention.”

Okar took a long drag from his pipe, the embers glowing faintly. He leaned forward, his tone somber and deliberate. “This is a story you need to hear. It might just save your life.”

Everyone else perked up their ears, and the Wizard now had their full attention.

CHAPTER 3 – Glimmering Eyes in the Darkness

The Wizard scanned the room, his eyes flitting toward the windows as if expecting something—or someone. Then, lowering his voice, he spoke in a tone much darker than before.

“...I hesitated to tell this story. But now... I feel I must.”

“What did you see in those windows?” Larze asked, gripping his pipe.

“Greiben...” Okar began slowly with a deep voice, “was a village near the northern borders of the Mindoros, the Kingdom Stelmani once ruled. It was there, many years ago, that the horror of the Eyes began.”

The companions leaned in, their expressions growing serious.

“You mean the haunting Eyes? The ones that just stare and vanish when you get too close?” Larze asked curiously and a bit anxious, taking a slow drag from his pipe. “I’ve heard the stories... but aren’t they

supposed to be harmless?” he inquired, his tone laced with curiosity.

“Yes, the very same Eyes,” Okar confirmed. “They appear and watch from the depths of the forest, lurking in the shadows... but the moment you try to approach them, they disappear.”

Okar paused for a moment before his voice dropped to a darker tone. “At least... that’s what I thought too. Until I heard this story.”

He took a deep draw from his pipe, gathering his thoughts before continuing.

“In that small village, there lived a young and beautiful woman named Emy. In autumns like this, she often wandered into the endless forests near Greben, gathering mushrooms and berries. One damp autumn day, she went into the nearby, deep woods as usual. While gathering mushrooms, suddenly, out of nowhere started to rain heavily, almost like a minor storm. The heavy rain caught her off guard and forced her to take shelter under a large tree. That’s when she felt it—the sensation of being watched. But by whom? And why? She glanced around nervously until she spotted them in the swampy thicket—two large, glowing eyes.” Okar paused, his voice heavy and foreboding.

It felt as if a shadow had fallen over the inn, the flickering flames in the hearth dimming ever so slightly. The listeners around them sensed the dark turn in the Wizard's tale—an ominous prelude to a grim ending.

Then, Okar took a deep draw from his pipe before continuing the story, glancing over his shoulder—just to be sure.

Then he continued, “Frozen with fear, Emy couldn't move, she couldn't even scream. The Eyes didn't attack—they simply watched. When her panic subsided, she slowly approached, hoping they'd disappear, as the old stories said. But they didn't. Not this time. Instead, they stayed, unblinking, until Emy finally whispered, ‘What do you want?’”

“And what happened?” Nbrezor asked, his booming voice uncharacteristically subdued.

“They vanished, as they are supposed like the old tales tell,” the Wizard said. “But it wasn't the last time that poor woman saw those creepy lurking Eyes.”

The room grew quieter. Even Mark, who had been polishing glasses, stopped and leaned subtly closer. Okar continued the story, and his tone of voice became even darker, “As the Eyes disappeared into the underbrush of that dark, rainy forest, the woman, Emy, ran screaming, like a headless chicken, through

the woods. Eventually, she found her way to the familiar meadow, about a mile from Greben. Emy's husband was at home, preparing to search for his wife when that year's heaviest rainstorm struck.

Just as he donned his hunting gear and armed himself with a bow and a large knife, his wife burst through the door, paralyzed with fear, sobbing uncontrollably. The husband himself was startled but quickly moved to comfort her. He asked what had happened. 'It followed me! The creature with huge eyes; it followed me!' She screamed as she was almost about to faint.

Her husband reassured her before grabbing his weapons and heading out into the dark, rainy woods to investigate, despite his wife's protests: 'Don't go! Don't leave me alone here!' But the husband, angry and armed, left to confront whatever had terrorized her.

As a skilled hunter, he combed the nearby woods and meadows for hours in the downpour, tracing her muddy footprints back through the forest. But he didn't manage to find a single minor trace of the movements of the creature that had lurked at Emy. There were no sign of the Eyes...

Until that night," the Wizard took a small puff from his pipe and kept a short, silent moment before

he continued the story, “Yes, it was later at, the very same day, when it came back, shrouded by night, free to stalk undisturbed.

It was that ominous night when Emy saw them again—at her bedroom window. She swore they’d followed her home, but no one else saw anything. Her husband dismissed her fears as imagination. But she couldn’t sleep. And just before dawn, she woke to find the Eyes staring at her once more.

This time, more terrified than earlier in the woods, Emy won the fear and could grab her husband’s hunting bow and aim at the Eyes behind the window. But before she could release the arrow, one of the Eyes raised a finger—thin, grotesque—and pointed at her. Slowly. Deliberately. She called out for help, but by the time anyone arrived, the Eyes were gone. Again. As if they had disappeared unseen by everyone else than Emy.”

The Wizard paused, his gaze hardening. “The next morning... something terrible happened in that house. Something no one in Greben could explain. Nor wants to remember...”

“What happened?” Larze asked, his voice barely a whisper.

The Wizard’s tone grew even darker. “Blood. The house was soaked in it. And a message carved into

the wall made it clear: this wasn't a random attack. It was deliberate. A warning."

The companions exchanged uneasy glances. "And you think... they're here?" Nbrezor asked.

Okar nodded gravely. "I can't say for certain. But Larze's feeling... the wind, the sense of being watched. It matches the stories too well."

The Wizard's complete shift in demeanor—from humorously telling tales to delivering an old, chilling horror story—and his retreat into his own thoughts, looking as if some long-buried and painful trauma had resurfaced, left the rest of the table feeling far from comfortable.

Okar remained largely withdrawn for the rest of the evening, silently deepening his thoughts until they finally went to bed.

It was late at night, and the sky was completely clear. The full moon reflected beautifully on Icy Lake.

Due to the small number of guests, everyone had taken their own rooms. Nbrezor slept soundly, and loud snoring echoed from the Wizard's room. But Larze woke up with an unsettling feeling. It felt as if someone was watching him.

For a while, he tossed and turned in bed, trying to fall back asleep.

The Wizard's snoring could be heard through the wall. For about fifteen minutes, Larze struggled to find rest, but the inn had been heated so thoroughly by Mark that the room felt stifling. He decided to open the window to let in some cool air.

The strange, oppressive feeling returned, this time even stronger as he rose from the bed.

The Wizard's snoring abruptly stopped, replaced by Larze's scream. Mark and Nbrezor woke instantly, each grabbing a knife to defend against any intruders. Just as Nbrezor stepped into the hallway, Larze nearly ran straight into his blade.

"Watch it," Nbrezor grumbled groggily. "What's going on? Why are you screaming?"

"It was... I don't even want to say. It was something so horrifying; I haven't felt anything like it in ages," Larze said, frozen with fear.

"What's going on here?" Mark asked, descending the stairs, also half-asleep, a long knife in his hand.

"It was the Eyes... the Eyes!" Larze finally managed to say, filled with fear.

"The ones that haunt people from the Wiz folktale? The ones that vanish as soon as you get close?" Nbrezor asked.

"Yes. Along the Wiz's story, I have heard multiple folktales of those creepy lurkers, but now that I have

seen them myself, I wouldn't wish that experience on my worst enemy," Larze said, shaking, filled with fear.

"Wait here; I'll check outside for any tracks," Mark said, putting on his boots.

"Why didn't that old man wake up to your screaming?" Nbrezor wondered, listening to the Wizard's snoring, which had briefly stopped—only to resume suddenly, louder than before. He knocked on the Wizard's door and eventually opened it.

"There was no sign of anyone out there," Mark announced as he returned inside.

But Nbrezor had already figured it out when he opened the Wizard's door. "Come take a look at this magician."

Inside the room, the Wizard was pretending to sleep but was stifling laughter. The window was wide open, and he held two shiny plates in his hands. Larze and Mark joined Nbrezor at the doorway. Finally, the Wizard couldn't hold it in any longer and burst into hysterical laughter.

"You should've... you should've seen—" he gasped between fits of laughter.

"Haha, very funny. Running outside to clang plates together while wearing only underwear," Larze said to Okar. "How long have you been planning this?"

You were only scaring me at old times while camping in the tent?"

Still struggling to breathe through his laughter, Okar eventually replied, "It worked perfectly. You should've seen Larze's face when he looked at the window. Mark, you might have some laundry to do tomorrow!" The Wizard burst into laughter again.

"Alright, let's get back to bed. We've got over a three-hour hike ahead of us tomorrow," Nbrezor said, frustrated, and nearly fell asleep on the spot.

Larze went to his room and hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to open the window. *The same feeling of being watched lingered; I can still feel it. And it's only growing stronger. He thought.*

He hesitated, gathering his courage, but just as he was about to open the windows to cool the sweltering room, something felt... off. It wasn't the Wizard's trick this time. It was something else. Something far more unsettling.

And so, he decided to leave the windows shut and curtains closed.

Larze didn't need a blanket—sweat was already running down his back. Everyone else was asleep, but Larze struggled to drift off. The hours of the night passed, and at some point, sleep finally took him.

Outside, the sky was clear, and a full moon shone bright. It was a sign of good weather for their journey the next day.

In the morning, Larze woke up drenched in sweat. *I wonder if Mark's been heating the inn all night*, he thought as he got up and began dressing. After Okar's prank the previous night, Larze had made sure to close the curtains.

The Wizard's story about the Eyes was still fresh in his mind—and not in a good way. On his travels all over the world, he'd heard multiple reports of those eerie, glowing eyes in the dark that would vanish as soon as anyone got close.

For a moment, he hesitated to open the curtains in the dimly lit room, but after mustering enough courage, he pulled them open.

The room flooded with light. It was another sunny autumn day in the beautiful wilderness of Nuwars. "Phew," Larze thought, relieved as he left his room.

"Wiz, are the plates still intact after yesterday's circus trick?" he called out into the hallway, only to realize that both Nbrezor and Okar were already up. That struck Larze as odd, especially for the Wizard, who usually slept like a log.

Larze made his way to the common room and found Nbrezor and Okar eating breakfast at a table.

“Mark, are you planning to burn through all your firewood before Yule?” Larze called out, but the reply came from a familiar voice.

“Mark isn’t here. He just left to follow some strange guy I’ve never seen around these parts before.” It was Hanz, Mark’s eldest son, who was a bit younger than Larze.

“I’ll be running the inn until Mark gets back. Want to tell me about your travels once you’ve woken up, Larze?” he asked, pouring a large mug of coffee for Larze, who still looked half-asleep.

“Yeah, I can tell you later. Right now, I’ll join Nbrezor and the Wiz at their table,” Larze said, walking over while sipping his coffee.

“Well, look who finally decided to wake up, our world traveler,” the Wizard teased, laughing. “I’ll pay Mark extra if he has to wash your sheets, Larze.”

But Larze didn’t take it personally, and they all laughed. “How much did Mark drink last night? I’ve never slept in an inn this hot before—I woke up drenched,” Nbrezor said, chuckling. “By the way, what was Hanz talking about? Something about Mark chasing after some strange guy?” Larze asked while spreading butter on a slice of fresh bread.

Nbrezor and Okar exchanged glances, their expressions suddenly more serious, as if neither wanted to be the one to explain.

Eventually, Nbrezor spoke, his tone grave. "It was less than half an hour ago. I'd just sat down here with Okar when Mark brought over bread, cheese, and cold cuts. Then we heard the door open, and Mark greeted someone without looking back. A thin man dressed in black, with a hood covering his head, walked in. He looked around suspiciously. I stared right at him, and he turned his gaze away.

"Then Mark went to serve him, but the man glanced at Okar and stared for a moment before leaving immediately. Mark called after him and told us that when Hanz got back, we should let him know he'd be running the inn. Then Mark stormed out after the guy in his heavy boots. I would've gone too, but it all happened so fast I didn't have time to react."

"What's going on around here? Should we go after Mark and figure out why that guy was so spooked by Wiz?" Larze asked, sipping his coffee.

"We probably wouldn't find them if they ran far. And we don't have time for that today. We can ask about it in a couple of days when we return to the inn," Okar said, his tone oddly reluctant. "For now, we

should take advantage of the sunny weather and get through those slippery cliffs alive,” Okar added.

Once Larze had finished eating and fully woken up, he quickly shared some stories with Hanz about the previous day.

“...And I ran into an old friend near the Nuwars border, but that’s a long story—I’ll tell it some other time,”

Larze said. “For now, we need to start packing and head toward the camp if we want to make it there before nightfall.”

CHAPTER 4 – Strange Things Happening

Larze quickly perked up along the others as sunlight streamed through the inn's windows, painting the nearby hillside in vibrant autumn hues.

"Take good care of my horse, Hanz, until Mark comes back," the Okar said as he packed his bag, which was filled with mysterious pouches and bottles.

"Of course. You take care of yourselves, too. Mark has said that those cliffs have gotten deeper and more treacherous this year. He warned me if I somehow got lost there while gathering mushrooms," Hanz said as he waved them off the door.

"No worries with Nbrezor around," Larze called back from outside.

Soon, the trio set off, walking eastward along the main road where Larze had previously traveled, then turning northward at a dense spruce forest.

In the underbrush, Nbrezor suddenly said, "Since when has Mark even been to those cliffs? There's nothing out there for an old man who doesn't care much for the outdoors."

“True,” the Wizard replied. “I didn’t think about that earlier.”

“How does he know the ravines are deeper? He couldn’t have measured them,” Larze said as he pushed through the thick forest.

“And since when does he carry a hunting knife like that?” Nbrezor mused aloud. “Has something happened here in western Nuwars since I last traveled this way?”

“There’s been talk of strange people coming through—folk from the east,” the Wizard said. “They’ve stayed at Mark’s inn but are said to be rude and—”

Crack.

A large spruce branch suddenly snapped right in front of Larze.

They all froze for a moment, but only the distant cawing of a crow echoed from the ridges.

“A bit early for scaring people, Wiz,” Larze whispered to the Wizard before him, who stood frozen in place, his face pale as if he’d seen a ghost.

“Shhh,” Okar hissed, appearing to sniff the air like he had a sixth sense. It was quiet, and Nbrezor was about to ask Okar what was going on. Then suddenly, without any word or warning, Wizard started running like a headless chicken.

For such an old man, he ran fast and left his two friends behind. Larze and Nbrezor were speechless for a moment as, out of nowhere, the Wizard ran as if his life depended on it, crashing through the forest, his long beard catching on branches as he ran.

“What was that about?” Larze asked Nbrezor, who looked just as puzzled and shrugged. They picked up their pace, jogging through the woods after the Wizard. Larze nearly collided with him when he stopped abruptly at the edge of the dense spruce thicket.

“What’s gotten into you?” Larze asked as he was still really confused about Wizard's sudden sprint.

“I thought... I sensed someone was watching us from that thicket. We’re not going back that way. Quickly, to the cliffs,” Okar said as he panicked, but he quickly took off again, sprinting towards the rockies in front of them.

Beyond the small and thick spruce forest, the ground began to slope upward, with grassy inclines that gradually transformed into rocky terrain.

“And who would be watching us? Those strange folks who’ve been staying at Mark’s inn?” Nbrezor asked, puzzled, as they moved farther from the forest.

“They were at least as quiet as Wiz was just now, frozen in place,”

The Journey doesn't end here.

This sample contains only the opening chapters of the story.

The complete novella, along with other tales set in the same world, can be found on the Author's Official Website below:

www.thelastartifact.com

The Book I full version can be found below link:

<https://thelastartifact.com/thebook1/> (Also available as a **paperback or hardcover**):

