

The Eternal Library



# The Eternal Library

By Stephen J Dutton

# **The Eternal Library**

When the Oscari came to the world they took some of the primitive humans they found living there and from them created the other intelligent species. Now though the Oscari are long gone, with only a few ruins and many legends to remember them by.

In the Elf land of Syldarin two high born Elves foresee a time when their people will become eclipsed by the more numerous humans and resolve to prevent this by recovering the knowledge of the ancient Oscari from the mysterious continent that they called home, a place that few now visit and none return from.

However, there are more forces at work as another individual of great power tries to claim the power of the Oscari for himself instead.

The question remains though, can either of them be trusted with such great power?

## Prologue

The large house had stood empty for decades, remote enough from the nearest settlement that even the long-lived Elves had largely forgotten that it was there. In keeping with much of Elven architecture the structure was circular and tapered for stability before the roof sloped towards a spire that rose up high above the ground. However, as Prince Orcan of Sylldarin led the force that included his twin sister Princess Ammaril of Sylldarin as well as a dozen elite guardsmen through the heavily overgrown land that surrounded the house, it became rapidly apparent that they were not the first ones to come this way recently.

"My lord there are guards ahead." the Elf located at the head of the force said softly. Unlike the other Elves who wore armour and the uniforms of the Royal Guard this particular Elf was dressed in well worn and dull clothing that blended more into the background.

"How many Yilven?" Orcan asked.

"Just two. They're outside the main door." Yilven answered and behind Orcan his sister smiled.

"I told you Orcan, the monster has thralls to guard him while he cowers in daylight." she said.

The monster that the Elven force had come to kill was a nocturnal predator and although the signs of its presence had been detected by the Elves soon after it had begun killing it had taken a long time to pinpoint its lair. Knowing about the monster's dislike of daylight the raid had been timed to take maximum advantage of it and the sun was high overhead. Orcan moved further forwards and crouched beside Yilven to take a look at the guards for himself. As expected the pair of guards were Elves that looked like they had been part of the nearest community before they had fallen under the sway of the monster. The were both armed with large axes rather than proper weapons and both of the stood outside a large door that had had the wood that appeared to seal up all of the windows had been ripped away from. Although they were as much victims as those Elves who had been found brutally killed Orcan knew that the damage to their minds was permanent and they could never be freed from its influence.

"Can you take them both without raising any alarms?" Orcan said.

"As long as it is just the two of them, yes. But if there are others watching then they'll see." Yilven replied and Orcan took a deep breath.

"I don't want to waste our time by circling all around this place to see if there are any entrances that have been left open and unguarded. Just kill these two and we'll see if there is any reaction." he said and Yilven nodded.

"Yes my lord." Yilven said and he moved to the cover of a nearby tree that allowed him to watch the entrance to the house while standing up and as he held his long bow towards the guards he took an arrow from the quiver on his back. Slowly he drew back the bowstring while pointing the arrow towards one of the guards. Rather than just release the arrow though he held his aim for a few moments before turning towards the second guard and back. Yilven then released his arrow and before it had even completed its flight towards the guard he turned back towards the second Elf while plucking another arrow from his quiver that he fired as quickly as he could.

The first arrow struck the Elf it was aimed at right through his heart and the second guard had just enough time to start to raise his axe before the second arrow hit him in the side of his head and punched through both sides of his skull so that both guards fell dead almost simultaneously without either of them being able to call out an alarm.

Yilven took another arrow from his quiver and drew back his bowstring, aiming the weapon towards the door just in case any more guards appeared but there was no further activity.

"All clear." he said and Orcan turned to his sister.

"Well what do you think?" he asked her.

"We'll get nowhere if we just sit here long enough for someone to find those bodies or for the sun to set and our quarry to emerge. We should get inside quickly." she replied.

"You have your weapon?" Orcan added and Ammaril tapped the flask that hung from her belt.

"Right here." she said.

Orcan then turned to the warriors waiting behind him.

"You know why we're here and you know what had to be done." he said, "There will be more thralls that must be dealt with as quietly as possible."

"We should also do what we can to remove the boards from the windows." Ammaril added, "More light we can let into the house, the fewer places our quarry will have to hide."

"Right then, let's go." Orcan ordered and with him at the head of the group the Elves hurried towards the now unguarded doorway. As they reached the bodies of the guards Yilven slung his bow across his back and

rather than draw the sword he carried at his side he picked up one of the axes that had been carried by a guard.

"For the windows." he said when Orcan looked at him and the Elven prince nodded before he turned to the doors in front of them.

Unsure of whether they were locked he reached out to grab the handles and slowly turned them but he encountered no resistance and the doors began to open.

"Be ready." he said softly to the Elven warriors before he shoved the doors and they swung open, allowing the Elves to rush inside the old house. Inside the large hallway was devoid of furniture but several doors led from the room as well as a set of stairs that led upwards.

"Ignore the upstairs for now." Ammaril added, "The monster will stay close to the ground or even better below it."

"Maybe there's a cellar." Yilven suggested.

"If there is then it will probably be accessible from the kitchen and that will be towards the back of the house." Orcan said.

"We'll split up." Orcan said, "Three groups of five, one for each of these doors. If you come across more thralls then you know what to do."

"But if you find the monster fall back and find me. He will be more than a match for any of you." Ammaril pointed out.

The Elves divided themselves into the smaller groups Orcan had dictated and they each made their way through a different door. Yilven accompanied Orcan and Ammaril as well two of the Royal Guard and when they entered the next room he quickly dashed to the boarded up windows and used the axe he had picked up to pry some of the boards away, allowing sunlight to shine into the room.

All of a sudden a door on the opposite side of the room opened as another thrall entered. This Elf came to a sudden halt when he saw the intruders and immediately realised that they were not supposed to be inside the house. He took a breath to call out a warning but before he could speak Orcan lunged forwards with his sword held out ahead of him and thrust it through the chest of the thrall, twisting the blade to open the wound and make sure that the man could not call out a warning in the moments before he died.

"Come on, let's hurry." Orcan said before he hurried through the doorway that the thrall had entered through. Like the previous two rooms this one was deserted with very little to show what function it had played before the house was abandoned but there was another set of stairs that led upwards, "The only exit leads up." he said.

"Then we should double back." Ammaril said, "We need to find the monster."

Orcan nodded and turned back around when there was a scream from elsewhere in the house that was rapidly followed by another before there was a shout.

"Prince Orcan! The monster is-" one of the Royal Guard who had been a part of one of the other groups called out before his warning was cut off by yet another scream.

The Elves turned and ran back towards the front hallway where they encountered another of the groups that had gone through one of the other doors.

"This way." Orcan told them, pointing towards the doorway that the third group had headed through. Unlike the other two doorways that led around the house this third one led towards the centre instead.

The first room through this doorway was small compared to the others encountered so far and it had just one other doorway that led even deeper into the house. This doorway also stood open and Orcan led the Elves through it. As soon as he stepped through this he found the body of a Royal Guardsman at his feet, his throat slashed. The room that Orcan now found himself in was obviously located at the heart of the house and it extended upwards enough to meet the base of the house's spire where there was a ring of boarded up windows and a landing that gave easy access to them from the inside. This landing was one of two in the room, with another, wider one below it so that the room was effectively divided into three floors. One of the windows had been partially ripped open and there was a narrow shaft of sunlight shining in. Orcan looked down from this and on the floor of the large circular room he saw the crumpled body of another of the Royal Guard. This still left three members of this group unaccounted for though and Orcan waved the other Elves into the room behind him.

"Spread out. Stay in pairs though, there is something in here." he told them, "Yilven, get these windows uncovered."

"Yes my lord." Yilven replied and he beckoned for one of the Guardsmen to follow him up a narrow set of steps that led to the upper landing.

The ceiling of this circular room was supported by a number of columns that extended upwards from the edges of the landings and also from closer to the centre in a circular pattern. In addition to these columns the room contained a number of wooden boxes, barrels and sacks that bore no noticeable markings of what they

contained. With only the single narrow source of daylight into the room these obstacles combined to create large patches of darkness. Elves had naturally good night vision but it still took their eyesight time to adjust to darkness and so there were large parts of the room that they could not see into clearly as they advanced cautiously.

"Take care brother, the monster is likely in here with us." Ammaril whispered to Orcan as she followed him closely.

"Then here is where it dies." Orcan whispered back with a grin.

"There are books up here." Yilven said when he reached the first landing and found that the wall was made up of bookshelves that, as far as the Elf could see, ran all the way around and all of these had books on them. The books were not tightly packed but it was obvious that this pattern continued.

While Yilven was looking at the bookshelves the Guardsman who had accompanied him continued up the next flight of stairs to the upper landing and Yilven turned to follow him. However, just as he took his first step on this next flight of stairs the guardsman screamed in terror before something hurled him back down where he struck Yilven and both Elves were sent tumbling down the lower flight of stairs to the bottom.

Another nearby pair of Elves immediately rushed towards the stairs with their swords held ready and Ammaril's eyes widened.

"No! Stay back!" she yelled at them just as they vaulted over Yilven and the other Guardsman but before they could react a figure in black robes suddenly dropped down from above and landed right in front of them.

Startled by this, the Elf standing closest to the figure did not even have time to raise his shield in front of him before it thrust out a pale hand and delivering a powerful blow to his throat. Choking, the Elf dropped his sword and shield and fell backwards into his comrade who caught him instinctively. Meanwhile the hooded figure caught the Elf's dropped sword instead and with lightning speed turned it around and used it to stab the second Elf in his side with enough force that his chain mail simply split apart, spilling fragments of metal onto the floor at the bottom of the stairs. The Elf cried out in agony for a moment as the sword was withdrawn before he too collapsed and the robed figure then leapt over the heap of four bodies at his feet.

"To me!" Orcan ordered and the remaining four Royal Guardsman rushed to his side before the five of them raised their shields to form a barrier in front of them that Ammaril stood behind as they all looked at the robed figure that now wielded a sword identical to the ones they were armed with.

The figure strode towards the Elves, barely visible in the darkness though by this point their eyes were starting to adjust and the figure began to become clearer to them. All of a sudden though the figure raised the arm in which it held its stolen weapon and hurled the sword at one of the guardsmen. The sword flew over the surprised Elf's shield and the blade struck him in the head, the force of the impact as the blade impaled him sending his ornate helmet flying.

"Down!" Ammaril yelled and as the Elven warriors standing between her and their foe dropped to their knees she opened the flask she was carrying to reveal a glowing gemstone that caused the hooded figure to suddenly recoil as a broad beam of light being cast by the stone hit the figure.

"It's working!" one of the Royal Guard shouted as he looked up at their opponent and he leapt back to his feet before charging at the figure.

"No, not yet he's still-" Ammaril tried to warn the guardsman just before he ran into the path of the beam and in an instant the hooded figure was freed from its influence.

The figure immediately reached out and grabbed the charging Elf by his wrist before twisting it hard enough to break it and the Elf screamed as his sword fell from his grasp. The hooded figure then grabbed him with both hands, picked him up and hurled him towards Ammaril.

Ammaril ducked as the Elf flew towards her and in the process the gemstone fell from her hand and shattered when it landed on the floor. Hearing this, Orcan knew that the plan to incapacitate their enemy had failed and now a more direct means of attack was necessary.

"Together." he said as he and the last two guardsmen got back to their feet and stood side-by-side with their shields held in front of them and their swords raised, ready to attack. At the same time their opponent reached for the clasp that held its hooded robe closed and released it, pulling the robe free and then tossing it aside. This revealed the creature beneath the robe to be what looked like another Elven male who was tall with white hair and skin even paler than the Elves who had come to kill him.

Orcan and the two guardsmen charged at the white haired Elf in unison, hoping to overwhelm him but their opponent thrust out a hand towards them and gave a shout.

"Phyan-sa!" he snapped as a blast of energy erupted from his palm and spread out to strike all three of the charging warriors at once. Being in the centre, Orcan bore the brunt of this attack and although his shield prevented the blast from striking him directly the sheer force of it was enough to knock him off his feet and he collapsed. Meanwhile the two Royal Guard were caught further towards the edge of the blast and rather than being knocked over they just stumbled but continued with their charge. However, rather than acting as a pair

the two Elves were now approaching their opponent one after the other and as soon as the first of them came close the white haired Elf lunged forwards, pushing the guardsman's sword aside before slashing at his throat with fingernails that suddenly extended from their previous short length before retracting once more just in time for him to be able to turn to face the last of the Royal Guard.

The guardsman swung his sword towards the white haired Elf and this forced him to jump aside. However, the guardsman's momentum took him onwards further and before he could stop the white haired Elf managed to slip around behind him and wrap an arm around his neck before grabbing his head with his other hand and twisting sharply so that there was a 'snap' sound and the guardsman collapsed in a heap with his head hanging at an unnatural angle.

Ammaril was now the only member of the party now left and the white haired Elf slowly turned towards her and smiled, baring the fangs he possessed. In response Ammaril drew the narrow knife that was the only weapon she had left.

"I suppose that you are considered the brains of this operation." the white haired Elf said to her.

"I know how to destroy you." Ammaril responded.

"Ah yes, your little enchanted gemstone to drain my strength. Such a shame you failed to account for its destruction, but then the power you wield is just a fraction of what I possess despite our shared heritage."

"We have nothing in common." Ammaril hissed and she scowled at him.

"Oh young child you know so little of the world's past. The Oscari knew that they were doomed and both of us are the results of their efforts to preserve themselves in some form. Mages such as yourself represent a mere fraction of the power that they wielded while my curse is a result of their attempting to put so much more into a mortal frame but at least I retained some knowledge of where we came from and I have spent my time gathering even more for my library." the white haired Elf said before he smiled again and as he advanced towards Ammaril he added, "Perhaps I'll even add a paragraph or two describing our little encounter. A side note at least."

Ammaril suddenly leapt towards the white haired Elf with her dagger held out towards his chest, hoping that she would be able to take him by surprise. However, the white haired Elf reacted much faster than she had anticipated and he knocked the dagger from her grasp before grabbing her by the throat. Ammaril struggled, beating her hands against him as she tried to get free but his grip was too strong and he opened his mouth wide as he leant in closer towards her throat. However, before he could sink his teeth into her flesh there was the sound of splintering wood and a shaft of daylight pierced the dimness of the room, striking Ammaril and also shining on the skin of the white haired Elf. Immediately the skin of the white haired Elf began to turn red where the sunlight touched it and he screamed in pain as he abruptly released his grip on Ammaril and staggered backwards, retreating from the sunlight. There were more sounds of breaking wood as he retreated though and more sunlight penetrated into the room. Looking up to the upper landing the white haired Elf saw Yilven, now having regained consciousness still wielding his axe and using it to break the wood covering the windows. With each section of wood he destroyed, more of the room was exposed to sunlight and the white haired Elf found himself with fewer places that he could seek shelter from it.

"If you think that this will stop me then you are-" he called out before all of a sudden he was stabbed from behind and he looked down in horror as an Elven sword blade emerged from his chest and Orcan leant over his shoulder.

"I'm pretty sure that this will stop your reign of terror." he said calmly before he lifted the blade slightly so that it cut through the white haired Elf's heart and the moment that the organ was pierced he let out a gasp before his flesh turned grey and then crumbled into nothing but dust.

Orcan first looked down at the floor where he could see the scattered dust among the Elf's black robes then he looked towards his sister.

"You did it." she said to him and he smiled.

"It was a close run thing though." he said before looking around at the bodies of the Royal Guard who were strewn about the room, "It cost a dozen lives."

"They knew what was expected of them and they all volunteered." Ammaril replied.

"Is it gone for good now though?" Yilven asked as he started to descend the stairs from the landings and Ammaril nodded.

"Yes, there may still be some thralls who will continue to follow the last orders he gave them but the monster himself is dead." she said.

"We should leave." Orcan said, "We can send people to collect these bodies and dispose of everything else."

"No." Ammaril said as she looked at the bookshelves, "I believe that this library should be preserved. It may contain knowledge that cannot be found anywhere else in the world."

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Orcan climbed down from his horse and removed his helmet before he looked along the beach where the raiders had been intercepted while still in the process of loading the longship that had brought them to the island of Sylldarin. Although the humans had successfully attacked and pillaged a few small farms they had not accounted for how quickly the Elves could rally a force of soldiers to counter attack them and they had been totally overwhelmed. At the head of a unit of cavalry Orcan himself had dealt with the leader of the humans, cutting him down with a single swipe from his longsword but he needed to confirm that the battle was truly over. Looking towards the longship he took note of the lettering painted on the side and although he could not read this particular language he knew enough about the alphabet to realise that the humans had travelled a great distance to reach Sylldarin.

“Did any escape?” Orcan asked, striding towards a nearby captain who was directing his men to begin clearing the beach.

“No your highness.” the captain answered, looking around at Orcan the moment he heard the prince’s voice, “We’ve counted more than seventy human bodies. A few tried to surrender, but as per your orders my men put them to death for their crimes.”

Orcan nodded, relieved that he could now consider this incident over with rather than as sometimes happened having to deploy a large number of soldiers to search the land for miles around for just one or two human stragglers who had managed to escape the battle on the beach. Then he noticed one of the Elf soldiers carrying some of the humans’ possessions towards where a pit was being dug and firewood gathered. Here the human bodies and their belongings would be gathered together, burned and buried but Orcan saw something that intrigued him.

“Wait!” he called out, waving to the Elf and the soldier halted immediately.

“Yes my lord?” he said.

“Let me see that.” Orcan told the soldier and reached out to remove one of the human weapons he was carrying from his arms.

“Yes my lord.” the soldier said again and while Orcan studied the weapon the soldier continued on his way towards the pit.

The weapon was one of the bows that a small number of the human raiders had brought with them but unlike the long and slender curved sections of wood used by the Elves for their bows this weapon had a short and horizontal bow assembly mounted horizontally at the front of the weapon that was mounted onto a stock that allowed it to be braced against the firer’s shoulder. Rather than relying on the firer to physically draw and hold back the bowstring the stock had a mechanism build into it to do this instead. The weapon reminded Orcan of one of the ballistas that were mounted on some human warships but much smaller.

“Your highness is there a problem?” the captain asked, walking up behind Orcan to try and find out what had attracted Orcan’s attention.

“Yes captain, I think there is a very big problem indeed.” Orcan responded.

The Royal Palace was located at the very centre of Sylldarin’s capital city that bore the same name as the island itself. It had the same circular and tapered construction as most of the city’s other buildings but in addition to the tall spire that rose up from the centre of the building there were also six similarly shaped towers around its edge. There were further towers of the same design set into the wall that in turn surrounded the palace grounds and the main gate was set into the base of one of these.

The guards standing sentry outside the gate recognised Orcan as he approached the palace on horseback and they called out to the guards inside the gate that he was on his way. This prompted the guards in the grounds to line up in two rows between the outer gate and the main entrance to the palace and by the time Orcan got to the end of this there was one of the palace staff ready to take the reins of his horse while he dismounted.

“Is Crown Prince Dellaron here?” Orcan asked the palace servant.

“He is your highness.” the servant replied while Orcan removed the human projectile weapon from the saddlebag he had stowed it in, “He is in the throne room.”

“Thank you.” Orcan said before he strode up the steps that led to the main doors to the palace and as he approached them servants opened them for him without him needing to order it. Once inside the palace Orcan made his way directly to the throne room, paying no attention to the staff who moved aside as he approached. On the other hand he did come to a halt when he found Ammaril sat beside a window reading.

"You've returned." she said, smiling and closing the book she was reading before getting to her feet. Then as she walked towards Orcan she looked down at the weapon he held.

"Is that a crossbow?" she asked, "I've never seen one before."

"Yes it is." Orcan replied, holding up the crossbow so that Ammaril could see it more clearly, "This and at least twenty others like it were among the weapons that the humans had with them. I wanted to discuss it with our older brother. Assuming that father isn't in the throne room as well of course."

"You know that he isn't. Father isn't well. While you were out hunting down human raiders I was speaking with the royal doctors and they say that it will be a miracle if he lives even another year. Dellaron is king in all but name now and soon the crown will be his." Ammaril said.

"Assuming we still have a kingdom for him to rule over." Orcan said and Ammaril smiled.

"Dellaron isn't a fool Orcan. He can see the danger that the humans pose just as much as you and I can." she replied.

"Then why doesn't he do anything about it?" Orcan said, "I think that he still just doesn't realise what is happening in the world and he needs to be made to understand one way or another."

Before Ammaril could speak again Orcan stormed off towards the throne room and when he reached it he simply threw open the doors and marched inside.

The throne room was laid out to draw attention to the throne itself that was mounted on a dais at the far end of the room but this was unoccupied. Although given his father's illness Crown Prince Dellaron had taken over the reigns of power in Sylldarin he was not king and so did not have the right to sit upon the throne yet. Instead the crown prince sat on one of the smaller but still ornate seats positioned beside the throne itself while he spoke with two finely dressed Elves that Orcan recognised as senior members of the government. As well as these high ranking Elves and a number of Royal Guard there were two large dragons present, each of which was the usual pale green in colour and about the size of a horse. Greater dragons such as these were naturally solitary and to be properly domesticated they had to be trained from birth. This meant that as well as being incredibly effective guard creatures, having even one of them was a considerable status symbol.

"What is the meaning of this interruption?" Dellaron said as soon as the doors to the throne room opened and Orcan entered.

"You told me to bring you news of the human raiders as soon as they were dealt with." Orcan said and Dellaron waved the two ministers away. In response both of them bowed their heads before they turned and walked away, passing by Orcan on their way out of the throne room. Then Dellaron got to his feet as well and walked towards his younger brother.

"So what can you tell me about these raiders?" he asked.

"They came from the far north. That means they must have sailed through the territory of at least six human kingdoms." Orcan answered, "They see us as an easier target."

"How are we such an easy target Orcan?" Dellaron replied and Orcan held up the crossbow.

"Take a look at this Dellaron. It was taken from one of the raiders and it wasn't the only one that they had." Orcan said and Dellaron frowned.

"A crossbow? What-" he began.

"These were outlaws Dellaron." Orcan interrupted, "The outcasts of human society but they still had access to weapons like this. It takes us years to train our archers and decades for them to become truly expert but with a weapon like this the humans can create new archery regiments in a day and this is just the beginning of the issue. The humans are getting stronger every year. Their numbers are steadily increasing and their weapons are getting better. According to our cousins in the east the humans there are experimenting with burning powders that can shatter stone. What happens when they turn that into another weapon Dellaron?"

"Then it will probably be another of the many weapons they seem intent on using against one another."

Dellaron said, "Let them smash their own fortress walls, it will only weaken them, not make them stronger."

"Yes, among the humans every baron wants to be a duke. Every duke wants to be a prince. Every prince wants to be a king and every king thinks his kingdom should also include the lands controlled by his neighbours. You know that the Hadarians have conquered another of their neighbours?" Orcan said, "Well what happens when one of the human kings decides that Sylldarin would make a fine addition to his kingdom?"

"Orcan you are overreacting. To invade and conquer Sylldarin would take an army of tens of thousands. Do you really think that the humans could move an army that large across the ocean? Even if they could we would hear about the construction of the fleet it would require and we could act against it." Dellaron said.

"Now maybe, but what if it happens in fifty years time? Or a hundred? Or five hundred? Dellaron surely you can see that Sylldarin, all the Elf kingdoms in fact, are stagnating. We live ten times longer than humans yet it is their societies that are now producing weapons like this crossbow while we still use the same longbows we



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have since the days when the Oscari still walked among us. Everything we have was given to us by them.” Orcan said.

“The Oscari created us for a purpose Orcan. Everything they needed or wanted us to have they gave us.” Dellaron said.

“And because of that we’ve become complacent Dellaron. It may be because they are looking for better ways to kill one another but the humans are driven to improve themselves and we need to do the same. The Dwarves have seen the dangers that the humans pose, why can’t you? The Dwarf King Hemnar has called humans nothing but ‘thieves and spies who would split open a Dwarf’s head to steal his thoughts if they could’ and he has banned their merchants from entering his mines.” Orcan replied.

“Just as we have kept their ships away from our shores for centuries Orcan. What more would you ask of me?” Dellaron said.

“I’ve talked this over with Ammaril and we think that we need to send an expedition to Oscay itself.” Orcan told him and he let out a sudden laugh.

“Oscay? The continent of the Oscari? Orcan there is nothing there but ruins.” he said.

“Ammaril thinks that there is still something there that is useable.” Orcan replied.

“And if the tales are true the ruins are not only littered with traps meant to stop robbers from plundering them, the surrounding countryside is inhabited by some of the world’s most dangerous creatures. I don’t believe the tales of legendary dragons with wingspans the size of ships and able to breathe fire there could be other wild creatures or tribes of Ogres.” Dellaron said, remembering some of the many stories that had been told to Elf children over the centuries about why no-one ever ventured to the lands that had been the centre of the ancient Oscari empire, despite the possibility that some of their treasures could still exist there, “Besides there are Oscari ruins right here on Sylldarin and nothing special has been found among them in the thousands of years since they disappeared.”

“That’s why we need to go to Oscay itself Dellaron. I just need one regiment of troops and the ships necessary to transport them and provisions for half a year. The books we took from-” Orcan began before Dellaron held up his hand for him to stop.

“Orcan there is no way that I am going to base my actions on the ravings of a monster.” he said and Orcan frowned.

“Dellaron you’re a fool.” he said, “A human army could be at the palace gates and you’d just be sat in here thinking that everything will just work out for the best.”

“Get out.” Dellaron said sternly.

“Dellaron can’t you-”

“I said get out!” Dellaron yelled and behind him the two dragons stood up on all fours and stared at Orcan. Orcan knew that even trained dragons could sometimes attack without being instructed so he decided that arguing his point with his brother was not the way to proceed. Instead he turned around and strode out of the throne room. Once outside the room he made his way back through the palace to where he had previously encountered Ammaril and he found her still sat there reading the book.

“You look angry.” she said when she saw the expression on Orcan’s face, “I take it that your audience with our dear older brother did not go well.”

“No it didn’t. He’s a fool and I told him so.” Orcan replied.

“So he won’t give you the soldiers we need to travel to Oscay?” Ammaril said.

“No he won’t so that leaves us with no choice. Our brother may rule in our father’s name but father is still king. Maybe I can convince him to overrule Dellaron.”

King Larallus had his chambers at the top of one of the palace’s towers and owing to his poor health he was largely confined to this area. Leaving or returning to it required a number of servants to carry him up and down the stairs so this was done as infrequently as possible. Therefore, Orcan was confident of finding his father here. This belief was confirmed when he reached the top of the final flight of stairs and found the door to his father’s chamber’s guarded by two members of the king’s personal bodyguard who were stood directly in front of the door.

“I need to speak with my father.” Orcan told the guards and they both stepped aside without speaking while continuing to hold their swords up in front of them. This allowed Orcan to open the door and enter his father’s chambers where he found his father sat in a chair looking out of a window at the city below while behind him stood another pair of bodyguards and two servants waiting for him to need them.

“Orcan is that you?” Larallus said when he saw his son and he tried to focus his eyes on him, “Come closer so I can see you clearly.”

“Yes father.” Orcan replied and he walked towards the king who then pointed to an empty chair nearby.

“Sit, sit.” he said before waving to the servants, “Bring some wine for my son and I.” then while one of the

servants was fetching wine Larallus focused his attention back on Orcan, "So tell me what brings you here my son. From the armour you are wearing I suspect that this is not simply to check upon my health."

"I'm sorry father, no." Orcan said, "There has been another raid by humans on some of our coastal settlements father."

"Again? How many is that now this year?" Larallus said and as the servants placed a pair of goblets and a jug of wine on the table between the king and his son Orcan nodded.

"Four. The humans are becoming bolder and their weapons are improving. We were able to defeat them again this time but Ammaril and I foresee a time when these small raids could turn into something far worse. The humans are savage and warlike, not a single year goes by without thousands of them killing one another in some squabble over their land." he said before picking up the jug of wine and pouring out some for both himself and his father.

"Orcan I have spent four hundred years watching the humans commit any number of vile acts upon one another. When the Oscari created our people we were lucky that they decided to remove that savagery from us."

"They may be savages father but our superior civilisation will not protect us if an army of them lands on our shores instead of a few dozen raiders." Orcan said.

"We too have an army Orcan." Larallus pointed out, "You have spent almost a century in it yourself."

"Yes father and I would wager one of our warriors against five humans but the problem is that the gap is closing and it is closing fast. Eventually their technology will make their soldiers as effective as ours and then we will be vulnerable." Orcan said, "We need to make changes. I've tried speaking to Dellaron but-

"Ah so that is why you came to speak to me." Larallus said, smiling and pointing at Orcan, "Your brother refused to do what you wanted so you thought that you could convince me instead."

"Father this is serious." Orcan responded, "I've been studying our reports on the humans and I know that they are a threat."

"So what would you do about them Orcan?" Larallus asked him.

"Ammaril thinks that the knowledge of the Oscari still exists in Oscay father. With that sort of power at our control the humans could never threaten us. I want to take a force there to one of their cities and find out for certain." Orcan told the king, "If you could just release a single regiment to me along with-

"No." Larallus interrupted and Orcan stopped speaking, startled by the unexpected interruption.

"But father-" he began eventually but yet again the elderly king interrupted him.

"Orcan I know that I am dying and I will not spend my final days undermining my heir. Dellaron has made his decision and I support that. If you want a different answer then you need to persuade him, not me." he said.

"Once Dellaron has made up his mind he is not one to change it." Orcan commented.

"You two have always argued, ever since you were children but if you can make your case then he will listen to you." Larallus said.

"In the meantime I have to stay here knowing that the humans get stronger with every passing year." Orcan said angrily.

"Orcan you are not a prisoner." Larallus said and Orcan frowned as his father continued, "You want to go to Oscay and Dellaron has refused to give you the men or the ships you need but you can obtain these for yourself. Our harbours are filled with ships that are for hire, surely you will be able to find at least one captain willing to take you and whatever troops you can recruit yourself."

"You're telling me to go anyway?" Orcan said.

"I'm telling you that there is nothing to stop you Orcan. You have always been independent so why base your actions now purely on what your older brother or I give you permission to do?" Larallus said and Orcan smiled.

"Thank you father." he said as he got to his feet.

## 2

Leaving the king's chambers Orcan made his way back down the tower to the main section of the palace where he located his sister again and from the expression on his face she knew that he was bringing her good news.

"Father agreed to help." she said with a smile as she set down her book and got up.

"No I'm afraid not." Orcan replied and Ammaril's face fell.

"But you're smiling Orcan. If father won't help then why are you so happy?" Ammaril asked.

"Father doesn't want to be seen to be undermining Dellaron. But he pointed out that there is nothing to stop me from organising the voyage myself. We'll need to hire ships and troops as well as buying the provisions we need but it can be done." Orcan explained and Ammaril smiled again.

"That's excellent news." she said, "Do you have a plan?"

"Yes." Orcan said, "Securing transport to Oscay will be the most important part of the expedition so that must take precedence. Then once we know what we have then we can determine how many soldiers we can take with us. After that I think we should approach Uncle Tial." Ammaril commented, "I can still remember the stories he told about times he fought off their raiding parties."

"Uncle Tial certainly has no love for the humans." Ammaril commented, "I can still remember the stories he told about times he fought off their raiding parties."

"Exactly and given that he is in charge of watching over the southern shores he has thousands of troops under his command. We only need him to provide us with a fraction of that. Hopefully he'll also be able to provide the provisions we'll need." Orcan said, "Though there is still one problem we need to overcome."

"What is that Orcan?" Ammaril said.

"Oscay is far away and getting there will involve navigating around hostile human lands. Hadar lies between us and Oscay and they are well known for attacking ships that stray too close to their shores, not to mention the legends surrounding the dangers that lurk around Oscay itself. Finding captains willing to take their ships on such a dangerous journey may not be easy." Orcan said and his twin stared directly into his eyes.

"Orcan I have every confidence in you." she said, "Just in case though I will join you in searching for a captain willing to take us. Perhaps I can be more persuasive."

All of the Elf kingdoms were islands and this meant that they had a long history of sea travel that had led to the construction of well developed ports and on the island of Sylldarin the largest of these was located a short ride by carriage from the capital. Not wanting to attract a lot of attention and risk angering Dellaron, Orcan and Ammaril rode on horseback to the port rather than taking a carriage, dressing more plainly than a prince and princess typically would. Orcan carried his longsword for protection and Ammaril a knife, but rather than a unit of Royal Guard to defend them they rode only in the company of Yilven who dressed as plain as he always did. When the trio of Elves arrived at the port they took the time to look at the wide variety of vessels present in the harbour. These varied in size from small coastal fishing boats right up to the largest ocean going cogs. Most of Sylldarin's navy was based here and the warships were visible in a row at the far end of the harbour. These were easily identifiable by the fortified structures at the fore and aft of the vessels from which archers could fire their longbows at nearby ships as they closed to board one another. Often the arrows used would be set alight in the hope that they would cause an enemy ship to catch fire but the majority of naval combat involved opposing crews fighting hand to hand.

Most of the ships had been built in Sylldarin and were crewed by Elves native to the island but there were also ships present that had come from the other Elven lands in the north, south and east. In addition to these there were also a handful of human ships, a small number of which were allowed to dock to conduct trade each year, though their crews were watched carefully by the port authorities and any of the crew who attempted to leave the port itself would be forcibly returned to their ships.

Orcan immediately discounted the idea of approaching any of the human captains, though he expected that they would be greedy enough to risk the voyage to Oscay when they learned how much the Elf prince was willing to pay them, he knew that they could not be relied upon to support his mission and there was too much risk that they would betray him. Thus limited to the Elven vessels, Orcan further narrowed his search by the size of the vessels present, knowing that he needed to find ships that were obviously capable of travelling a great distance over deep water and this most likely meant the sail powered cogs rather than the longships or hulks.

"It seems we have a great deal of choice." Ammaril commented, "Where do we start?"

Among the larger ships Orcan noticed a group of five cogs that were all painted in identical colour schemes with Elven markings on the hulls, suggesting that they were part of a fleet and he smiled when he saw this. If

these vessels were all operated by the same owner then it would make his job of finding sufficient transport for several hundred troops along with their supplies much easier than having to deal with several different owners, each of whom may want to be considered superior to the others.

"They look promising." Orcan said and he pointed towards the group of similar ships, "If they are all a single group then we can obtain all the transport we need in one go. Wouldn't you agree Yilven?"

"I'm sorry my lord but I'm more familiar with game keeping than sailing. I've never actually been on a boat in my life." Yilven replied.

"But you'll come with us to Oscay won't you? I'll feel a lot better knowing that we have someone like you with us when we get there." Ammaril said and Yilven smiled.

"Of course. Someone needs to keep you two youngsters out of trouble." he responded before he looked at the ships Orcan had pointed out again, "At least they seem to be unloading cargo from them." he said.

"Why is that important?" Ammaril asked.

"It means that they probably haven't been in port for long so it's unlikely that anyone will have already hired them for an outward voyage." Orcan said.

"Yes my lord." Yilven added, "Though if they are on a regular run then they may not need to wait to be hired. They could already have a cargo or passengers waiting for them."

"Then I suppose we should go and ask." Ammaril said.

Riding slowly through the crowds Orcan, Ammaril and Yilven headed straight for the closest of the five identically painted cogs and as they got closer they were able to get a good look at the crew of these ships. While the Elves of Sylldarin had pale skin the sailors that crewed all of these ships had the much darker skin of the southern Elves and Orcan smiled. Given the distance that they must have sailed to reach Sylldarin this meant that they were willing to undertake long journeys.

"You there!" Orcan called out to a crewman just after he had set down a sac that he had carried down the gang plank from one of the cogs.

"Yes lord?" the Elf sailor replied, looking up at Orcan and despite not knowing exactly who he was determining that he was a noble from the quality of his clothing and horse.

"Who do I need to speak to about chartering these ships?" Orcan asked and the sailor pointed behind him towards another of the five ships.

"Captain Vendril is aboard that ship there, the *Torsol*. He owns all five and that one is his flagship. He decides whether to accept charters." he said and Orcan nodded as he took a coin from his purse and then tossed it towards him in gratitude before he made his horse start walking again.

Orcan, Ammaril and Yilven rode the short distance to the ship that the sailor had pointed out before Orcan and Yilven dismounted. Then while Yilven secured all three horses to a nearby post Orcan helped his sister down from hers. Then all three of them made their way to the gang plank where they encountered another of the dark skinned Elves with a ledger who was marking off cargo as it was unloaded.

"We're looking for Captain Vendril. We were told that he is the one to talk to about chartering these ships."

Orcan said but before the Elf with the ledger could respond another voice came from aboard the ship.

"I am Captain Vendril." the voice said and when Orcan, Ammaril and Yilven all looked up the gang plank they saw another of the dark skinned Elves but in clothing that was noticeably finer than that worn by the Elves unloading the cargoes from the ships.

"We have come to discuss chartering your ships. Are they available?" Orcan asked and Vendril waved the Elves standing at the bottom of the gang plank towards him.

"Of course. Come aboard and we'll see if we can work something out." he said with a smile on his face. Vendril waited at the top of the gang plank while his three visitors walked up it towards him. When they reached the top of the plank and stood on the cog's deck they saw that there was a large hatch set into it just behind the ship's single mast where several of the crew were hoisting cargo from the hold below, "Come with me please." Vendril then added and he led Orcan, Ammaril and Yilven towards the structure at the back of the ship where he opened a door that led into his cabin. In here there was a bunk as well as a large table that had shelves of rolled up maps beneath it. More interesting than this though was the individual who was already in the cabin apparently cleaning it. The young woman stood out from the rest of the crew not only by the colour of her skin that was as light as that of the Sylldarin Elves but also because she was human rather than an Elf and immediately Orcan stared at her, "Lucia our guests have come to discuss a business proposal. Bring us wine."

"Yes captain." the human woman replied before she hurried from the cabin.

"You have humans among your crew?" Ammaril said when Lucia was out of the room.

"Just Lucia." Vendril answered.

"How did a human come to be among you?" Yilven asked out of curiosity.

"Believe it or not I bought her." Vendril said, "I'd made my way up to one of the kingdoms that Hadar had conquered and I encountered her family at the docks. The Hadarians were taxing the locals heavily and they couldn't afford to pay. The only way they could afford what was being demanded of them was to sell some of their children. I'd like to think that they wanted them all to become apprentices of some sort but I suspect that they knew that the daughters would likely suffer a far less pleasant fate."

"You bought a slave?" Orcan said sternly. Like the other Elven kingdoms, Sylldarin did not allow slavery and the punishment for having anything to do with the slave trade was severe.

"I paid her parents but she is free to leave if that's what she wants and in the meantime I pay her a fair wage to help clean my cabin and do other jobs." Vendril said, "Of course I don't visit human ports very often and I doubt that if she tried to leave the ship here or any other Elven land for that matter then the local militia would probably just bring her back."

"Still sounds like a slave to me." Yilven muttered.

"I am sure that Captain Vendril is an honourable man who treats his crew fairly." Ammaril said.

"Can the girl be trusted not to interfere with our expedition?" Orcan asked.

"She has never shown any interest in my voyages before, although it may help to know exactly where it is that you want me to sail and why." Vendril responded before one of the doors to his cabin opened again and Lucia returned bearing a tray of cups and a jug of wine.

"Your wine captain." she said in fluent but accented Elven.

"Thank you Lucia. Put it down and then you may leave us." Vendril said as she set the tray down on the table before exiting the cabin again. Vendril then began to pour wine into each of the cups and handed them to his guests, "So where do you want to go?" he added before he sipped at his drink.

"Oscay." Ammaril answered and Vendril spluttered as he lowered his cup and then laughed.

"Very amusing." he said.

"My sister was not joking captain." Oscan said, "We are taking an expedition to Oscay to study the Oscari ruins there."

"Surely you cannot be serious about this." Vendril said.

"Their highnesses are serious." Yilven responded.

"Highnesses? Who exactly are you?" Vendril asked, looking back and forth between Orcan and Ammaril.

"I am Prince Orcan of Sylldarin and this is my sister Princess Ammaril of Sylldarin." Orcan told him, "Our companion is Yilven. He has served the royal family for more than sixty years and is a trusted retainer."

"So if you are members of the royal family then why not make use of your navy?" Vendril said.

"Using navy vessels would attract far too much attention in the wrong places." Ammaril replied, "We are hoping that you can be trusted to keep our agreement quiet."

"Oh I take the confidentiality of my clients very seriously. But why would you want to risk the voyage to Oscay and back?" Vendril said.

"How much do you know about the Oscari captain?" Ammaril asked.

"About as much as anyone else. The Oscari created us and then vanished. What more is there to know?" Vendril answered.

"The Oscari came from another world that exists with ours but is not a part of it." Ammaril began, "When they arrived they found the humans had spread across several continents. The Oscari selected the tribes that lived in what are now the Elven lands and improved them to create our ancestors, granting them much greater lifespans and superior reflexes and senses so that we could serve them better for they were few in number and could not afford to devote their population to basic tasks such as farming. Later on they also made the Dwarves to be miners and carried out the experiments that created both Halflings and Ogres."

"How do you know all of this?" Vendril said.

"Because something about either this world that was different from that the Oscari came from originally or possibly the act of travelling from there to here meant that they could not survive here forever and they could not return to their own or find another where they could live." Ammaril continued, "The Oscari knew this and so searched for a means to preserve their minds even though their bodies were doomed. Their first attempts involved directly placing their consciousness into the body of a human or an Elf but they soon found out that this was not possible, our bodies and those of the humans cannot support such power and while those who tried it were able to retain some of their knowledge and magical power their survival came at a cost and they were cursed for all eternity to have to consume the life force of other intelligent beings in order to survive and forever avoid the sun." Ammaril explained, "Seeing what had happened to those who had gone before, the remaining Oscari opted to abandon most of their power and placed just fragments of themselves into new hosts. In this they were successful in creating beings who could wield magic and pass this power on through the generations but at the cost of their memories. Now the spellcasters of Elves and men are powerful among their own species but their power is but a fraction of that which the Oscari once wielded."

## The Eternal Library

"You still haven't explained how you know all of this your highness." Vendril pointed out.

"I know this because I wield some of the power of the Oscari." Ammaril said.

"My sister is a sorceress." Orcan added, "The gift runs through our mother's side of the family."

"You're telling me that somehow she's a descendent of the Oscari?" Vendril said.

"In a sense, yes. The power is hereditary, though not guaranteed to be passed on to all members of a family."

Ammaril replied and she looked at her brother, "Orcan for example has no power, nor does our older brother Dellaron or any of their own children. I am the only current member of the royal family with such power."

"But I thought you said that all of the Oscari's memories were lost." Vendril added.

"To spellcasters like me, yes." Ammaril said, "But several years ago we defeated one of the monsters that had been one of the earlier hosts and that had created a library to try and preserve what he and others like him knew. I don't know what he aimed to achieve from this but since then I have spent almost every waking moment reading from his books and because of the contents of them I believe that there is still something to be found in Oscay that we can use to protect all Elvenkind from the increasing threat posed by the humans."

"Ah so that is why you were concerned about my cabin girl, Lucia." Vendril said with a smile and then he took another drink from his cup, "You think she might tell others of her kind. Well don't worry about that, by the time she finds out where we are going there won't be any humans for hundreds of miles."

"Then you'll take us?" Orcan said.

"Of course I will. I've travelled to all of the Elven lands and many of the human ones as well but Oscay is somewhere that I've only ever heard stories of, I've never had a reason to go there before now." Vendril explained.

"So how much will it cost and how soon can we leave?" Orcan said.

"I charge a hundred for each of my ships for every five days, including time in port. Usually if I'm moving cargo then I also charge a percentage of the value but for passengers I just charge for any rations I have to buy. As for when we can leave depends on how soon you can get your expedition aboard. I don't anticipate unloading my current cargo to take much longer." Vendril answered.

"Then we have an agreement captain." Orcan said and he held out his hand towards the captain who responded by reaching out his own hand and taking the one offered to him.

### 3

Prince Tieral, the younger brother of King Larallus lived in one of the fortresses constructed along the south coast of Syldarin to defend against human raids from that direction. Human raids were less common than they were on the northern and western coasts but the Elves still maintained several fortresses with strong garrisons that Tieral commanded and it was this that brought Orcan here while Ammaril remained in the capital. The fortress that Tieral lived in was located at the top of a steep slope that led down towards a secluded beach that had proven to be a popular landing site for human raiders who thought that it would enable them to come ashore unseen by the Elves in the nearby settlements. However, instead of being able to simply leave their vessels here while they went off to raid those settlements they found themselves facing a fortress of Elves that overlooked them and to reach it they had to charge up a steep hill while under constant fire from archers stationed on its battlements.

Orcan approached the fortress from inland instead though and was allowed to enter the main courtyard before he was shown into the interior of the fortress and asked to wait in a hallway while Tieral was summoned.

"Orcan, it is good to see you again." Tieral called out as he entered the hallway where his nephew waited.

"Uncle Tieral, you honour me with your time." Orcan replied, bowing to the older Elf. Tieral bore a resemblance to Larallus that was only to be expected but he was several decades younger and far healthier than the aged monarch.

"Nonsense, I always have time for family. Now how is your father? I hope that this visit is not to tell me that he has passed already." Tieral said.

"No uncle. Father remains unwell and physically weak but I spoke with him just yesterday and his mind is still as sharp as ever." Orcan told him.

"Then what brings you here? Tieral asked.

"Ammaril and I are organising an expedition to Oscay and we need a force of troops to protect us." Orcan answered and Tieral frowned.

"Oscay? Why would you go there?" he said.

"Uncle even here to the south you must have seen how the raids by humans are becoming more numerous and larger." Orcan said and Tieral nodded.

"Yes, they are becoming bolder." he replied.

"Ammaril and I are concerned that if things continue as they are then eventually we will find ourselves facing an all out invasion that we will not have the means to defeat. Even this mighty fortress that we are standing in will be nothing to their weapons." Orcan said.

"I see." Tieral said and then he paused before adding, "I can certainly see how you would draw such a conclusion but how is taking an expedition to Oscay meant to solve anything?"

"Do you remember the creature that Ammaril and I destroyed two years ago uncle?"

"Of course I do. Given the number of our people it killed it's destruction was a blessing."

"Well Ammaril took its library and has been studying the texts. She thinks that we can still find secrets of the Oscari in Oscay that will help defend us from the humans. Dellaron won't listen though and father won't overrule him. He did remind me that I can just organise an expedition privately though so that's why I'm here. Ammaril and I found a captain with ships who is willing to take us but we don't have the troops or supplies that we need."

"I see." Tieral said, "So you came to ask me for these troops and supplies?"

"Yes uncle. Other than the capital garrison you command the largest body of troops in Syldarin. Can you spare three hundred of them?"

Tieral paused while he considered this. It was true that he shared Orcan's concerns about humans and the number of troops his nephew was asking for could be spared without significantly weakening the defences of the stretch of coast that Tieral was responsible for but three hundred soldiers was still a significant commitment.

"I can spare the troops Orcan. Will fifty horsemen and two hundred and fifty foot soldiers be good enough?" he said eventually.

"That would be perfect." Orcan said.

"Then they are yours." Tieral told him.

"Thank you uncle, this means-" Orcan began.

"Do not thank me just yet Orcan." Tieral interrupted, "If I agree to send these troops on your expedition then I will be sending your cousin Tiellan to command them." Orcan hesitated when he heard this. Tiellan was close

to Dellaron in both age and temperament and Orcan was concerned that his cousin could challenge his authority. However, Tial noticed the reaction from Orcan and continued, "Don't worry, I'm not asking for him to be given command over you or your sister on your own expedition. He will only be there to assist you. He is an experienced battlefield commander and if there is danger then I think you will find him valuable."

Orcan smiled.

"Thank you uncle." he said again but this time Tial did not interrupt him, "I knew that we could count on you to see the sense in this expedition."

With troops, supplies and transport to Oscay secured Orcan had only one last task to carry out before he could depart but this was a personal one rather than one required to the success of his expedition. The sun had set by the time he returned to the palace and he made his way to his chambers, entering them quietly to avoid disturbing anyone inside. However, as he entered a figure holding a candle appeared in a doorway across the room from him. The figure was a female Elf wearing a night gown and she smiled as she looked at Orcan.

"Orcan I was starting to wonder whether you would return at all tonight." she said, using the single candle to light more of them and increase the level of illumination in the room despite the ability of Elves to see in low light.

"Are the children in bed Lyrialla?" Orcan asked and the woman nodded.

"Yes, they have been asleep for some time now." she said.

"A pity. I had hoped to be able to say goodbye properly and I hate the idea of waking them just to tell them that I'm leaving." Orcan said.

"Then you have acquired everything you need and you're following Ammaril to the other side of the world." Lyrialla said.

"Yes. Uncle Tial agreed to provide the troops we need and we have the ships. We need to get everything loaded as quickly as possible." Orcan told her.

"Can't you even wait until the morning to say goodbye to the children properly Orcan?" Lyrialla asked.

"No. This may be a private expedition but that doesn't mean that Dellaron can't cause trouble for us if he finds out what we're planning." Orcan answered.

"And what if you never return from this expedition Orcan? How am I supposed to explain to them why you just disappeared?" Lyrialla said.

"Tell them that I did what I did because I love them and wanted to see them grow up in safety." Orcan said before he stepped forwards to embrace his wife and before he kissed her he added, "The same goes for you Lyrialla, if I could do what I must do without leaving you behind then I would but I promise you that I will do everything I can to make sure that we see one another again."

Exiting his chambers Orcan turned to make his way from the palace but he had barely taken three steps before he heard a voice call out from behind him.

"So you've managed to assemble your expedition?" Dellaron said and Orcan halted and turned around to see his older brother standing alone in the hallway.

"So you found out. Let me guess, Tiellan." Orcan said.

"Tiellan is a part of this as well? Well I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised since Uncle Tial is providing you with the troops you need." Dellaron said, "But no, it wasn't Tiellan who told me what you were planning it was father. He summoned me just after you left the palace to plan your little trip."

"I suppose you're going to try and stop me then." Orcan said.

"Stop you? Why would I?" Dellaron replied, "If you're so desperate to waste your time then who am I to stop you?"

"You're just letting me go?" Orcan asked.

"I'm asking you to think again Orcan." Dellaron answered, "I don't believe that the humans represent the risk that you do but the journey you're planning on taking is nothing if not dangerous. It's been thousands of years since the Oscari disappeared and since then hundreds of Elves and thousands of humans have been lost on voyages there. Did it ever occur to you that perhaps the Oscari made sure that their secrets would remain just that? I know that we don't always see eye to eye but that doesn't mean that I want to see you join those who throw away their lives on such reckless endeavours. Look Orcan, you've spent many years playing a key role in protecting our shores from raiders. If you are so concerned about the threat they pose then why not stay and continue to do just that?"

"You know why Dellaron." Orcan replied, "We can fend off the humans for now but eventually that is going to change and if you won't do anything about it then Ammaril and I must do it by ourselves."



"Then if you've made up your mind and you have everything you need for your journey I suppose there's nothing more that we have to say to one another is there?" Dellaron said and Orcan paused.

"No, I don't suppose that there is." he replied and then he turned around and continued to walk down the hallway.

"Oh Orcan there is just one thing." Dellaron then called out after him and he turned back around to face his brother.

"Yes Dellaron?" he asked.

"Good luck Orcan. Take care, you and Ammaril. I'd hate to lose you both." Dellaron answered and then before Orcan could respond to this unexpected gesture his older brother turned around and walked away from him instead.

Ammaril was waiting for Orcan in the palace's main courtyard where some of the staff had just loaded several trunks onto the carriage she sat in.

"You've said your goodbyes then?" she said when Orcan appeared and mounted his horse.

"Yes though I'm not sure that Lyrialla will ever entirely forgive me for this." he replied. Then he glanced at her luggage and added, "I thought we were going to be travelling light."

"Those are books Orcan. I've picked out the ones that relate specifically to Oscay so I can study them more closely on the journey there. If the voyage takes as long as we think then I should have plenty of time for studying." Ammaril said.

It was just after dawn that Tiellan and the soldiers under his command arrived at the docks with the infantry marching in ranks behind the horsemen at the front while wagons filled with provisions brought up the rear of the column. Each of the Elven warriors was well armed with a longbow slung across their backs where they also carried packs that contained their belongings while they had swords at their waists as well as quivers of arrows and carried shields on their arms. All of this was to be expected for a regiment of Elven troops who could be required to carry out a variety of roles on the battlefield but rather unexpectedly though Orcan saw that the column also included a number of dragons that moved ahead of Tiellan himself. There was a pack of four of the beasts, all of which were about the size of large dogs. Orcan knew that his uncle kept several trained packs of the beasts but he had not mentioned sending any of them along with the expedition.

"Dragons?" Vendril said from beside Orcan and Ammaril as they watched the approaching troops from the deck of his ship.

"Is that a problem?" Ammaril asked.

"That depends. Moving any animals can be problematic. Frankly I'm more worried about the damage that fifty panicked horses could cause than a few dragons but I'd still rather not have any of my crews savaged." Vendril replied.

"Tiellan." Orcan called out to his cousin as the column was brought to a halt.

"Good morning your highness." Tiellan responded, "How do you want my troops loading?"

"Captain Vendril will tell you how he has assigned your troops and their equipment but we weren't expecting you to bring dragons." Orcan told him.

"My apologies your highness but when was told what our destination was I thought having them to hand would be useful. Don't worry though, they'll tolerate being caged and we have one in the wagons. It just needs putting together on whatever ship I'm aboard." Tiellan said and Orcan looked at Vendril.

"Will that satisfy you captain?" he said.

"Yes as long as the dragons remain caged then I'll accept having them aboard my ships. You may tell your officer that he will be aboard this ship with us. We'll split the horses between all five ships to limit the damage they can do if they panic so their riders will have to be split up as well." Vendril replied and then he looked towards the wagons, mentally picturing the amount of supplies that they were carrying, "My men should be able to load the wagons by nightfall but we can cut that time in half if your soldiers can be persuaded to lower themselves to some honest manual labour."

"I think that can be arranged." Orcan replied.

Vendril was as good as his word for the amount of time that it took to unload all of the wagons and transfer the supplies that they carried onto the ships. As he had said the horses were divided up between the five cogs and led below decks while several of Tiellan's soldiers assembled a large iron cage on the deck of the *Torsol* that the four dragons were led into. This was large enough for the four creatures to stand up in and walk around but there was insufficient room for them to unfold their wings.

Despite being relatively large vessels putting around sixty passengers plus cargo on each of them meant that they were all incredibly crowded and Vendril gave his cabin to Ammaril so that she could have some privacy

while he bunked with the rest of the crew and the other passengers. As the loading process was nearing its end Vendril, Orcan, Ammaril and Tiellan all gathered on the roof of the rear structure of the *Torso* by the tiller and looked down onto the deck as the final pieces of cargo were taken below. Soon after this Yilven climbed up from the deck to join them.

"Your highness, all the ships are fully loaded." he said and Orcan looked at Vendril.

"Over to you captain." he said and Vendril smiled.

"Heave off!" he shouted and his crew immediately sprang into action, withdrawing the gangplank from the harbour, unfolding the sail and releasing the moorings. The order to set sail was quickly passed to the other ships in the small fleet and they too readied themselves to set sail.

The *Torso* was the first to pull away from the shore and immediately made for the exit from the harbour while one after another the other four ships followed in a single line that kept them close enough to be able to keep the vessel ahead in sight but without getting so close that they risked colliding.

"So what happens now?" Tiellan asked.

"Now we head north." Vendril said, "We'll pass through the Strait of Lerron and then turn west around Hadar. We'll make a run along their coast far enough out that hopefully they won't spot us from the shore. Then it's just a direct line across the ocean."

"If we went west straight away wouldn't we avoid most of Hadar?" Orcan said.

"Yes but unless we head straight for the open ocean there are more Hadarian patrols to the south. They may not have invaded all the nations there yet but they are happy to raid any ships they spot. The chances of encountering their ships are a lot lower to the north." Vendril explained.

"What if we encounter a naval patrol anyway?" Tiellan asked.

"How good are your archers?" Vendril responded, looking at the Elf nobleman.

"The best. They can fire faster and more accurately than any other force." Tiellan told him proudly.

"The Hadarians typically use only single ships in their patrols. As long as they don't notice us in time to gather a larger force we'll have a massive advantage in numbers and as long as your archers are as good as you say then I don't think that they pose any threat at all." Vendril said.

4

While aboard the small fleet of ships tasks were assigned to the Elven troops to make sure that they were kept busy. While they were not trained sailors and so could do little to help with the operation of the ships there were other tasks that could be assigned to them instead. Some would be assigned to watches in addition to the usual ships' watches while the animals brought along with the force required feeding and cleaning. For most of the troops though their days were filled with training instead and even Orcan, Yilven and Tiellan took part in these exercises.

The one exception to the assigning of physical tasks was Ammaril who remained shut inside Vendril's cabin surrounded by the books she had brought along with her, reading and cross referencing them against one another over and over again hunting for even the smallest details about Oscay that could help in their search for the knowledge of the Oscari while committing as much as possible to memory. For the most part the rest of the crew and passengers left her alone to carry out her studies but Lucia was an exception to this, with the young human woman taking Ammaril her meals three times every day and then collecting the used plates to be returned to the galley.

"Will there be anything else mistress?" Lucia asked Ammaril when she arrived to collect the dishes following her evening meal. So far Ammaril had not asked for anything beyond her regular meals but Lucia asked the question anyway. Although Vendril's ships were most often used for carrying cargos there had been other times when he had carried passengers and some of them had been incredibly demanding.

"No, nothing." Ammaril replied as she always did and Lucia picked up the used dishes and turned to leave. However, when she was about half way to the door Ammaril suddenly called out after her again, "Wait girl." she said and Lucia turned back around again.

"Yes mistress?" she said.

"Do you know where we are?" Ammaril said and this surprised Lucia, who had been expecting a request to fetch something more from the galley.

"Not exactly mistress." she replied, "But I do know that we are in the Straight of Lerron. We have passed Lerron itself and Captain Vendril is keeping us to the east of the straight to avoid Hadarian waters."

Lucia had heard many of the Elves mentioning the likelihood of encountering Hadarian ships and this made her think that they were heading for somewhere in Hadar but she had never enquired about Vendril's destinations and she was not about to break that habit now.

"You're wondering whether that's where we're going aren't you?" Ammaril said, looking directly into Lucia's eyes and this startled the human woman. She had heard that Ammaril was a sorceress but she had not considered the possibility that she would be able to read her mind.

"You read my thoughts mistress?" she said and Ammaril smiled.

"Oh no. There are spells for reading minds and sending thoughts over great distances but like all magic they take a lot of effort. I just know that you come from Hadar originally and I've overheard it mentioned by people passing by this cabin. Figuring out that you would come to the conclusion that Hadar was our final destination did not take a lot of work." she explained.

"It's none of my business where you wish to go mistress." Lucia said, "I go wherever Captain Vendril takes his ships."

"Very good." Ammaril commented with a smile, "You may go now girl. I will send for you if I need anything."

"Yes mistress." Lucia replied before she hurriedly left the cabin and made her way to the galley where she placed Ammaril's plates with the others to be washed.

Upon leaving the galley Lucia headed towards her private bunk. As the only woman among the regular crew of Vendril's ship, even if she was a human rather than an Elf, she had a bunk in a small compartment that was hers alone. However, as she made her way there she encountered Yilven while he was checking on the four caged dragons on the ship's deck.

"Hey there." he said to her and she came to a stop.

"Yes my lord?" she asked and he smiled.

"I'm no lord." he replied and Lucia frowned.

"But I thought you were-" she began before he interrupted her.

"I've worked for the royal family for several decades." he said, "Soldier, gamekeeper, scout, bodyguard or whatever other role they can find for me but I'm of common birth."

"Then what do I call you?" Lucia said.

"Yilven will do. That's my name after all." Yilven told her.

"Yes my – yes Yilven." Lucia responded.

"I have some questions for you." Yilven said.

"Of course, what would you like to know?" Lucia asked.

"I'm wondering why you stay with Captain Vendril." Yilven said, "Haven't you ever thought about trying to leave?"

"Leave? No. Why would I?" Lucia said.

"Because he bought you from your parents. You do know that there is no slavery among the Elves, don't you?" Yilven said.

"Of course I do. But if I left Captain Vendril's service then what would I do for work? Working for him I don't need to worry about keeping a roof over my head, food on my plate or being beaten for making a trivial mistake. I doubt that I could find other work in any of the Elven lands and if I left the ship while we were in a human port then I'd be on my own in a land I didn't know. I don't even remember much about Hadar other than life was so difficult that my parents decided to sell me and some of my brothers and sisters. If I left this ship then I would run the risk of ending up as a real slave so why would I take the risk? Now if you don't mind Yilven I'd like to get to my bunk before the storm hits us." Lucia replied and Yilven frowned.

"Storm?" he said and Lucia nodded before pointing ahead of the ship where the sky was noticeably darker.

"I've been aboard this ship long enough to know storm clouds when I see them and that is a large storm. I hope your dragons don't mind the rain." she told him.

Lucia was not the only member of the ship's crew to notice the storm clouds ahead of them and from his experience Vendril knew that it would be powerful.

"Is there a port nearby that we can shelter in?" Tiellan asked as he and Orcan stood with Vendril while he surveyed the ocean ahead of the vessel but the sea captain shook his head.

"No. The port of Heindorf is still about a hundred miles ahead of us and if that storm is as big as it looks then we'll still be in the middle of it when we get there. We could turn around and try heading for Lastallo but that will cost us time in retracing our journey as well as however long we have to spend in port waiting for the weather to clear.

"What are the risks of sailing through it?" Orcan asked and Vendril paused to consider this.

"It'll be rough." he said eventually, "But the water here is deep so we won't be in danger of running aground and we'll maximise our spacing to avoid collisions. The biggest risk will be damage caused if any of the cargo breaks free but I doubt that would be enough to sink any of my ships either."

"In that case keep going." Orcan said, "I don't want to waste any time on turning back."

With the course of action decided on the crews and passengers of the five ships made preparations to secure the ships for the rough weather expected. In the holds of the ships cargo was double checked to make sure it was secure and additional ropes used to strengthen those already used where necessary. In addition to these precautions the crews set up and lit lanterns all around their ships to make them as easy to see as possible.

Each of the five ships had just a single mast, as did all sailing ships of the time and as they drew nearer to the edge of the storm the sails mounted on these were taken in. The wind had already begun to increase in strength by this point and the crews worked hard to take them in and make sure that they were secured. The ocean currents continued to carry the ships along and several Elves aboard each one were stationed by their tillers to make sure that they still had some semblance of control over their heading.

By the time the storm hit the ships their occupants were as prepared as they could be but this did not make things easy for them by any means. The strong winds created huge waves that tossed the ships around, causing them to rock back and forth violently. Below decks the Elves did their best to calm the horses carried aboard the ships but they were unable to get the distressed animals to settle down entirely.

Meanwhile on the deck of the *Torso* the four caged dragons roared loudly as the ship rocked back and forth. A sheet had been secured over the top of their cage to try and protect them from the storm as much as possible but this could not protect them fully against it. With only limited space to move in the dragons snapped at one another as they tried to keep out of the weather.

At the back of each ship the teams of Elves manning the tillers fought to try and keep their ships heading in the right direction but even with four of them working together this was still hard work as they fought against the ocean.

Even with the ships' sails taken in they still flapped in the wind as much as the ropes that secured them would allow and aboard one of the ships one of these proved to be insufficient and a section of the sail broke free. By itself this was not enough to be dangerous but it provided a much larger area of sail for the storm to act on and in turn it ripped more of the sail free.

"The sail is loose!" one of the Elf sailors manning the tiller called out when he saw the fabric flapping in the wind and a pair of other Elves ran towards the mast, knowing that despite the storm they needed to climb up

and make the sail secure. However, before they could begin to scale the mast there was a sudden crashing sound as the cross mast that bore the sail was ripped away from the mast itself and the Elves were forced to dive out of the way as it plummeted towards them and struck the deck, smashing a hole about a yard across when it landed.

Despite the five Elven ships keeping their distance from one another the fall of the cross mast was visible from the other ships and aboard the *Torsol* one of the crew pointed it out to Vendril.

"Captain look! They've lost their mast." he called out, pointing across the water and Vendril scowled. As long as a ship was not totally wrecked, most damage could be repaired at sea or at least patched well enough to get to a port but any damage also represented a weakness that could become worse as the storm continued to lash against the ship. All he could do for the time being was trust in the crew of the damaged ship to carry out whatever repairs they could during the storm to prevent a fallen cross sail from turning into something much worse.

"I don't see any distress lights. There's nothing we can do about it now." he responded, "Once we're through the storm I'll go over and take a look at how bad the damage is. Until then just keep focused on not crashing us into any of the other ships."

The Elves continued to hold the tiller tightly as they fought against the storm and shortly after they saw two figures emerge from below deck and make their way towards the tiller. Both figures wore cloaks for some limited protection from the storm and this meant that it was not until they were standing right in front of him that Vendril recognised them as Orcan and Tiellan, "What are you two doing on deck?" Vendril asked.

"Your crew are saying that one of the ships is damaged." Orcan responded and Vendril nodded.

"Yes, the cross mast has collapsed on the *Mirra*." he replied.

"How bad is the damage?" Tiellan added.

"The ship still looks to be in one piece and the crew haven't signalled for help so they must have everything under control for now. Once we're out of this storm I'll take a boat over there and see the extent of the damage for myself." Vendril told him.

"I want to go with you." Orcan said.

"What for?" Vendril asked.

"If the damage is going to require any change to our journey then I want to be there to discuss it with you." Orcan said.

"Very well your highness, you can come with me to the *Mirra* but right now I suggest that you and Tiellan get below again. You don't want to get washed overboard, we'd probably never find you in these conditions."

"Very well. I'll be ready to go as soon as the storm clears." Orcan said, nodding his head beneath his cloak and then he and Tiellan started to make their way towards the nearby hatch that would take them back inside the ship. As soon as they were back out of the storm the two Elves lowered the hoods of their cloaks and Tiellan turned towards Orcan.

"I don't like the captain's attitude." he said, "It's as if he was threatening to leave you to drown."

Orcan smiled in response to this.

"Think about it Tiellan." he said, "I may be a prince but on this ship Captain Vendril may as well be a king and he wants to protect his little kingdom. Don't worry about him. Now come on, I want to look in on Ammaril."

Then as Orcan turned towards Ammaril's cabin Tiellan snorted.

"It's a pity she can't just conjure up some good weather for us." he commented.

Being located in the ship's rear structure, the cabin that Vendril had let Ammaril use was located very close by and Orcan and Tiellan were soon outside her door where Orcan knocked.

"Ammaril it's Orcan and Tiellan." he called out.

"Come in." Ammaril replied from the other side and the two Elves entered the cabin, "I hope you will excuse the mess." Ammaril added as she looked up from where she sat on the floor, surrounded by books and papers.

"What happened here?" Orcan asked.

"I was not prepared or how rough the sea would be." Ammaril answered, "These are the items I was working with and when the first wave hit us they all ended up on the floor like this. I had them organised just how I wanted them and now I'm trying to sort them out again. This weather is most inconvenient."

"Let's just hope that it isn't a sign that we shouldn't be going to Oscay." Tiellan said.

"My dear cousin Tiellan," Ammaril began, looking up from the floor, "I doubt that even the ancient Oscari could have set a trap that would cause a storm like this more than a thousand miles away from their land so long after they died out. On the other hand if what I have read so far is true then this storm is nothing compared to the full extent of their power and you should concern yourself more with what we will face when we arrive at Oscay."

The storm cleared shortly before dawn the next day and there were no more instances of damage as serious as that to the *Mirra* and signals from the other ships informed Vendril that his fleet had come through the storm without any serious injuries. However, this still left the damage to the *Mirra* to be inspected and before any of the Elven ships deployed their sails again a rowing boat was lowered over the side of the *Torsol*. First to climb down into the boat were two of Vendril's crew before Vendril himself climbed down the ladder. "Come on your highness, it's your turn now." he called out, looking up at where Orcan was looking over the side of the ship at him.

Orcan then climbed down the ladder to the boat as well and as he sat down Vendril released the mooring line that held it to the *Torsol*.

"Off we go then captain." Orcan said to Vendril and the captain nodded.

"Heave away." he told the two Elven sailors and one of them used an oar to push the boat away from the *Torsol* before both dipped their oars into the water and began to row towards the *Mirra*.

The boat was large enough to fit a dozen men inside so there was plenty of room for the four Elves that it was currently carrying but this did not prevent the sea from rocking it back and forth significantly and Vendril smiled to himself when he noticed Orcan clutching onto his seat so that he would not fall overboard.

The *Mirra* was barely a hundred yards away from the *Torsol* so it did not take the two sailors long to row the distance between the two ships. The crew of the *Mirra* were expecting the boat and by the time it pulled alongside the ship there was already a ladder and mooring line lowered over the side for it. As soon as the boat was tied up Vendril climbed up the ladder, followed by Orcan. As soon as they reached the top of the ladder and stood on the deck they saw the crew hard at work repairing the damage that had been done by the falling cross mast. Looking up Orcan saw several more crewmen who had raised the cross mast and were in the process of reattaching it.

"Captain Vendril." one of the Elves who met Vendril and Orcan said.

"Tyllas, how are your repairs going?" Vendril asked him.

"We were able to prevent the damage from getting worse during the storm and everything looks like it is fixable with the materials we have aboard." Tyllas answered.

"Good. How long before you can be underway?" Vendril added and Tyllas glanced up at the Elves working on the mast.

"We should be able to sail by about noon. We'll be adrift until then." he said.

"That doesn't sound too bad." Orcan commented.

"No, it's good." Vendril replied.

"That's just for the mast though. The deck will take most of the day to finish." Tyllas said before he paused for a moment, "There are two problems though." he added and Orcan's heart sank.

"What?" Vendril said.

"Firstly although we have the materials we need to make the repairs we won't have much left once we're done. If the ship suffers any more damage then we could be in trouble." Tyllas explained.

"And the other problem?" Vendril asked.

"No-one was hurt when the cross mast smashed through the deck but some of the cargo was lost. The falling mast crushed some and the rain soaked more of it." Tyllas said.

Orcan knew immediately that by 'cargo' Tyllas meant the provisions that had been loaded aboard the *Mirra*.

"How much was lost?" he said.

"Almost all of the rations and some of the barrels of freshwater have been spoiled. It's already been thrown overboard." Tyllas told him.

"That's going to be a problem." Orcan said to Vendril, "We don't know what conditions will be like when we reach Oscay and we could need those provisions."

"I'm not happy about the idea of making an ocean crossing of more than two thousand miles without adequate materials to carry out repairs. If you think that the storm that hit us last night was bad the open sea can be far worse." Vendril said.

"Then what do you suggest?" Orcan asked and Vendril paused to consider the options.

"We're already past Heindorf." he said, "But there are some more human ports further along the straight. Personally I'd recommend that we wait until we get right to the end and dock at Teuten."

"Teuten?" Orcan replied, frowning, "Teuten is in Hessenland, it's nothing but a base for smugglers and pirates."

"That's not entirely true your highness." Vendril said, "I've visited Teuten several times and while it may be true that a lot of stolen cargos are unloaded there to be exported again by smugglers who will take them all along the straight but that's because Hessenland is notoriously independent. By turning a blind eye to what goes on outside their borders they make a profit from supporting the ships that engage in piracy and smuggling. Our arrival with a few hundred soldiers might make them nervous initially but once they see that

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we aren't there to invade they'll sell us whatever we need with no questions asked just like they do for every other ship that goes there. It might help if you let your troops off the ship to visit the local taverns as well. The more people that make a profit from our presence, the more helpful and less curious they will be."

Orcan was not eager to have to dock at any human port, let alone one with a reputation for supporting criminals but he could not find any flaws in Vendril's assessment of their situation. Replacement supplies and materials to carry out repairs were needed and Teuten was a conveniently placed port that would require only a slight diversion from their course around Hadar.

"How long will the diversion take?" he asked.

"It depends on how long we spend in port. If we can get there early enough in the day then we could be in and out before dusk but if we get there later we may have to stay overnight before everything we need can be delivered and loaded. Getting there and then back onto our intended course shouldn't take more than a day. About half that with a favourable wind each way."

Orcan sighed.

"Very well Captain Vendril I'll accept your advice. Tell your ships to set a course for Teuten as soon as the *Mirra* is able to get underway again." he said.

## 5

When Yilven emerged onto the deck of the *Torso* to begin his shift on watch he was expecting nothing of note to happen. So far the storm the previous night had been the only thing to interrupt the journey so when he saw that Ammaril was also on deck his interest was piqued. As far as he knew she had not yet left the cabin she had been given the use of but now she was crouched beside the cage that held the four dragons and Yilven approached her to find out why. When he approached he saw that one of the dragons was located immediately on the other side of the bars where Ammaril crouched, close enough that either of them could reach through and touch the other. That might not be a problem for the dragon but it meant that Ammaril was potentially in danger of being clawed.

"Taking a break from your studies your highness?" he asked.

"Not really Yilven." she responded without looking around and Yilven noticed that she had a dagger in one hand and was holding one of the dragon's front paws in the other. Then she gently drew the dagger across the bottom of the paw so that it drew blood. Immediately the dragon roared and snapped at Ammaril with its jaws only to hit the bars of the cage before it could strike her. Without flinching Ammaril quickly withdrew her hand and held up the dagger to inspect the blade and she smiled when she saw the tiny amount of blood on it. Then she took a small glass phial from inside her robes and tapped her dagger against the top so that the few drops of blood on the blade flowed down into it before she sealed it with a cork.

"What's that for?" Yilven said as Ammaril got back to her feet.

"Surely you have heard the legends about dragons the size of buildings that can breath fire Yilven." Ammaril replied.

"Of course I have. All Elf children hear those stories but they're nonsense. There isn't a single recorded sighting of any dragon larger than a greater dragon the size of a horse. Anything bigger than that couldn't fly anyway." Yilven answered and Ammaril smiled.

"Perhaps not, but the creature that we killed had the collected memories of many of his kind in his library and there were several mentions of dragons of such size. The accounts are vague at best, perhaps due to the imperfect transfer of the Oscari's power but if there really are such legendary dragons in Oscay then this may come in useful." she said and she held up the phial of blood.

"Blood magic?" Yilven commented. Even though he had no magical ability himself he had heard about some of the ways in which those who did have such power could apply it and one of these ways was related to the blood of a subject. Sometimes this had to be the blood of a specific individual but sometimes the blood of any creature of the same species would do.

"Don't worry Yilven." Ammaril told him, "I know what I am doing."

In the port of Teuten Captain Edwin Atwood came onto the deck of his ship to find both his first mate and the ship's Halfling chef standing by the wooden rail at the side looking out over the harbour. Like all Halflings, Horace could be mistaken for a child from behind but from the front his adult features betrayed his true nature.

"Mister Beckett, Mister Bramble, what's so interesting?" he asked and the pair both looked at him.

"Ah captain, Horace suggested that I come and take a look at this. Perhaps you'll find it interesting as well." the first mate said and then he turned again to point across the harbour at the small fleet of ships that had sailed into it.

"Okay Will, let's see what's got you so interested." Edwin replied and he joined his two subordinates by the railing. Looking across the harbour he saw the five identically painted cogs and noticed the lettering on each of them that revealed the nature of their occupants, "Elves?" he commented.

"I thought you'd find it interesting." Horace added with a grin, "You don't see many of them here. Especially not in these sorts of numbers."

"No. A few of their ships every year." Will said, "Normally travelling between their northern and western lands."

"And they rarely stay long." Edwin said, "This is nothing to do with us." and then he turned and walked away.

"So why do you suppose they're here Will?" Horace said and the first mate shrugged.

"I don't know. As the captain said it really has nothing to do with us, or at least it shouldn't have but when five shiploads of Elves turn up I can't help but think that it's bad news." he said.

"Look at it this way. It could be worse. It could be the Dannaron navy." Horace said and Will looked at him.

"Yes I suppose them wanting to put a rope around my neck for deserting could be considered worse." he



said. Then he sighed, "Oh well I suppose I'd better go and see to the repairs to the sail. Having to tell potential customers that we can't set sail yet isn't good for business." and he also walked away.

When the five Elven ships were moored they were met by a small group of armed men who watched with stern expressions as Vendril descended the gang plank from the Torsol.

"Good day to you dock master. I am Vendril of Samman, owner of these fine vessels." the Elf said with a smile.

"Good day Captain Vendril, what is the purpose of your visit?" the dock master asked.

"My ships encountered a storm and we were forced to make some repairs. These have depleted our stores and we also lost some of our provisions. We just need to secure replacements and then we can be gone." Vendril answered.

"How long do you expect that to take?" the dock master added and Vendril glanced up into the sky. The sun was already low in the sky and he knew that it would not be long before it set. Finding and agreeing a price for the materials and supplies they needed before the sellers ceased working for the night it was unlikely that they would be able to get them loaded before the next morning.

"We should be done by noon tomorrow." he said.

"Then that's five ships for two days." the dock master said and he opened a ledger that he held.

"Two days? We'll be gone well before this time tomorrow dock master. One day surely." Vendril replied.

"Part of today and part of tomorrow. That's two separate days." the dock master told him and Vendril smiled again.

"Look I have three hundred passengers who are likely going to be taking advantage of being in port to enjoy a few of the businesses this evening. That is assuming that they have money to spare and if you're going to charge me for an extra day then I'm going to pass that cost onto them. Now how do you like the local taverns would react if they found out that the reason half my passengers aren't spending money in their establishments is because you've taken it?" he said and the dock master frowned.

"One day then." he said after a short pause, "But if you're still here a minute after midday tomorrow then you pay for another day in port for all five ships. Am I clear?"

"Perfectly my good friend." Vendril answered with another smile and he handed over a small purse of coins. The dock master took this and tipped the contents out onto his ledger to check the number and denomination of the coins before he wrote the figure down. Satisfied that he had been paid for the use of the harbour, the dock master and his escort departed without a further word. As the humans were walking away Vendril headed back up the gang plank to where Orcan waited for him.

"Well?" Orcan asked.

"We have until noon tomorrow to acquire the supplies we need and depart. After that we'll have to pay for another day." Vendril answered, "I pointed out we have three hundred potential customers for the local businesses aboard."

"You're sure that it's safe?" Orcan said and Vendril shrugged.

"As safe as any place. Just advise your soldiers to stay in groups." he said.

"I think that will be essential anyway, not all of them speak the local human language." Orcan pointed out.

"Of course. Will you be joining them?" Vendril asked.

"No. Ammaril, Tiellan and I will all remain aboard. It's unlikely that any of the locals would recognise any of us but I don't want to take the chance. If the humans knew that we were aboard your ships then it would raise questions that I don't want to have to answer. Yilven can handle replacing our spoiled provisions." Orcan said.

"Well at least I know that there is someone aboard that I can rely on while I'm onshore." Vendril said.

"You expect finding the materials you need will take that long?" Orcan asked.

"No, I don't expect that to take much more than an hour or two but your expedition could last a long time so I'm going to make the most of our night in port." Vendril responded.

One of the men who had accompanied the dock master entered one of Teuten's many taverns in the port area and looked around for a particular person. Although he was no longer on duty and no longer carried his sword and shield he still wore the uniform that marked him out as a member of the dock master's guard force but the sight of such men was common enough in this part of the city that it did not attract any more attention than anyone else entering the tavern would.

Being evening time the tavern was filled with a lot of workers who had come here to mark the end of their working day with something to eat and an alcoholic drink and there was a considerable amount of noise from the crowd. The dock guard made his way through the crowd, continuing to search for the person he had

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come here to meet. However, by the time he reached the bar he had still not seen them.

"What can I get you?" the middle aged woman behind the bar asked the guard.

"I'll take an ale." he said, placing two small denomination coins on the bar and sliding them towards her.

"Of course." the woman replied as she took the money before she filled a mug with ale from one of the barrel set against the wall behind her, "Will there be anything else?" she added as she placed the mug in front of the guard.

"Yes, I'm looking for Thomas Cooper. Have you seen him in here today?" he asked and then a moment later he added, "It's a personal matter. Not official."

"Try out the back. The last I saw of him he was heading out to join the crowd playing knucklebones out there." she told him and he nodded.

"Thank you." he said, picking up his drink and then making his way to the rear exit from the tavern. This led to a courtyard that held more tables where people sat drinking and among these the guard recognised the man he was looking for among a group sat around a table playing a game with carved pieces of bone that they threw in the air and then tried to catch as they came back down again. Each of the men at the table had a stack of coins in front of him and as each of them took a turn these changed hands depending on how well they scored. Not wanting to disrupt anyone's game of chance the guard walked close to the table so that the man he wanted to speak to could see him but did not say anything, instead waiting to be noticed.

"Ah I think I must drop out for a few rounds." Thomas said when he saw the guard and he gathered up his coins and stood up, taking his drink with him as he walked around the table, pointing the guard towards a quieter area of the courtyard. The two men walked across the courtyard without them saying anything to one another until they got there," So what do you have for me?" Thomas said quietly, not wanting to be overheard by any of the tavern's other customers.

"Five ships filled with Elves arrived today." the guard replied just as quietly, "The captain of one of them said that there were three hundred of them. They'll be here overnight but they have to be gone by noon tomorrow or the dock master will charge them for staying for another day."

Thomas smiled when he heard this.

"So there'll be hundreds of Elves about with money to spend and if any of them don't make it back to their ships promptly the others can't afford to wait in port or search for them." Thomas commented and he smiled.

"And what a pity it would be if one of them suffered an unfortunate accident." the guard added.

"Yes, it would be tragic indeed." Thomas said as he reached into his coat and removed two silver coins before pressing them into the guard's hand.

"Thank you." the guard said as he quickly put the coins away.

"You're welcome. Your information has been good so far and don't think that my patron hasn't noticed."

Thomas said before he turned away and returned to the group of drinkers playing knucklebones at the table, "Okay I'm back." he told them while the guard, satisfied with the extra money he had just made for doing what he saw as nothing quickly finished his drink and left the tavern.

6

Thomas did not wait long after the guard left the tavern before he also exited. The information that the guard had provided him with was valuable and he wanted to deliver it as soon as possible, however he wanted to avoid the guard or any of his other informants being able to follow him to discover the identity of his patron for themselves and potentially cut him out of the flow of information. Thomas checked the street outside the tavern as soon as he stepped into it, searching for anyone in the uniform of one of the dock master's guards just in case the man he had paid was still lying in wait to follow him.

As soon as he was satisfied that the guard was no longer in the area of the tavern Thomas began to walk away from it, making his way towards a part of Teuten that was filled with large houses that were surrounded by high walls. Aware that this area of the city was well patrolled by the city watch Thomas moved carefully to avoid being seen. Fortunately he was familiar enough with the area that he knew the best places to keep out of sight whenever he heard someone approaching.

The various houses in this part of the city were large enough that they were visible even over the walls that were intended to protect them and in the failing light the flicker of candles coming from inside could be seen through the windows of many.

On the other hand the house that Thomas made his way towards displayed very few lights at all, though he knew that there would be someone at home to speak to him at this time. Thomas did not approach the main gate to the particular house that was his destination, people like him were not admitted to such places through the front door. Instead he made his way to the rear of the building where there was a smaller gate that allowed deliveries to be made discretely. He was met there by a man in plain dark clothing who admitted him without speaking. The gate was closed behind Thomas and he was allowed to walk up to the house unescorted where he let himself in through the back door. Although he entered the house through the kitchen he found no staff at work. This did not surprise him though and he made his way from the kitchen to the nearby dining room where his patron waited, sitting at a table with numerous papers in front of him. Thomas' patron was a tall man with grey hair and he looked up when Thomas entered the room.

"Ah Thomas my loyal servant." the man said, "What do you have for me this time?"

"My lord a fleet of Elven ships has arrived in port." Thomas replied.

"Elves? Interesting." his patron commented.

"The ships are carrying more than three hundred passengers and crew my lord." Thomas continued, "They are in port to purchase supplies before they leave again tomorrow. According to my information they have to leave port by noon tomorrow or they will have to pay more money to stay another day. I doubt that they will wait for just one man if he failed to return to his ship."

"No, that does seem unlikely." his patron said, "If they are buying supplies then they must be going on to another destination though. Do you know what that is?"

"No my lord, I'm sorry but-" Thomas said, concerned about disappointing his patron.

"Never mind. That is a question that can be asked of one of them." his patron said and Thomas relaxed somewhat now that he knew his patron was not angry at the lack of this piece of information, "Now where can I find these Elves?"

"My informant didn't have that information my lord, but if they are coming ashore from ships in the harbour then I would expect them to be in the taverns nearest the waterfront." Thomas said and his patron glared at him.

"You would expect?" he said, "Do you also expect me to visit each one until I happen to find them?"

"No my lord I-" Thomas began.

"Then I suggest that you either go and find them yourself or get one of your informants to tell you. I want one of these Elves Thomas, they intrigue me and you do know how much I hate being disappointed." he patron interrupted though he did not raise his voice even slightly above the level at which he had spoken so far.

"Of course my lord, I'll find out immediately." Thomas replied before he turned and hurried from the room.

Once Thomas had left his patron reached for a small bell that was on the table close by him and rang it before waiting. He did not have to wait long though, one of his servants was always close by waiting to be summoned and a smartly dressed man soon entered the dining room and stood at the far end of the table.

"You rang my lord?" he said, bowing his head to his master.

"Yes Obadiah," the man sat at the head of the table replied, "have my carriage prepared, I expect that I shall be needing it tonight. Possibly within the hour."

"Of course my lord. I shall see to it immediately." Obadiah said and he bowed again before he left the room.

Thomas ran towards the docks, not wanting to take a moment longer than was necessary to find out where the Elves who had left their ships had chosen to go in the city and then get that information back to his patron. The first of the taverns that he to from was filled with sailors but all of them were human. Thomas was not particularly surprised by this since the tavern was run down and had a reputation among the locals for serving poor quality and often watered down drink but he did not want to risk missing the Elves for any reason.

The second tavern that Thomas entered was also devoid of Elves but the third one contained about a dozen of them, recognisable instantly by their pointed ears and all wearing uniforms that marked them out as soldiers. This was a mixture of good news and bad for Thomas, he could have simply returned to his patron and told him about this group but he was not certain that it would be possible to separate one of them from this group where they would be vulnerable and with three hundred of them supposedly in the city he was sure that he could find a better target.

Thomas visited several more taverns that had groups of Elven soldiers drinking in them and although he made a mental note of the name of each one he continued in the hope that he would find a group that looked more vulnerable. The solution to this problem came not by looking into a tavern window though, it came when he heard singing coming from down an alleyway. It was common enough for groups of men in taverns to sing songs, frequently with crude lyrics referring to women who were extremely free with their affections but this song was different. Firstly the singing was too good to be produced by a group of drunken sailors or dock workers and it was obviously the product of many voices rather just one, so that ruled out the possibility that it was a bard performing in the hope of earning a few coins by the drinkers he entertained. More important though were the words that were being sung. Like most humans Thomas could not speak the language of the Elves but he did know a few words and he recognised some of these among those being sung.

Making his way down the alleyway Thomas came to a large courtyard that was filled with tables that were occupied by both humans and Elves, though they appeared to be seated separately rather than mixed together. Just as he had expected Thomas saw that one group of Elves was singing loudly To one side of the courtyard there was a large open door and Thomas could see that this led to warehouse that was filled with barrels and another row of tables had been set up just in front of the doors to act as a bar. It was not unheard of in Teuten for impromptu taverns such as this to spring up when large numbers of ships entered the harbour and tavern owners would open their warehouses and sell direct from there. Looking around the courtyard Thomas also saw that there were several other approaches to it, many of which appeared to be narrow and dark.

Smiling to himself he backed down the alleyway he had used to reach the courtyard, knowing that he had found exactly what his patron wanted before he ran as fast as he could to tell him.

"Not going ashore Yilven?" Orcan asked when his family's loyal servant approached the prince while he sat eating in the Torsol's galley and in response Yilven smiled and sat down opposite Orcan.

"No your highness. My purpose here is to make sure that you are kept safe. If you're staying aboard then my place is here as well." Yilven said before the galley door opened again and Lucia entered.

"Excuse me." she said, "Mistress Ammaril has requested something to eat. I came to fetch it for her."

"Of course." Orcan commented and while Lucia placed a selection of food onto a tray Orcan continued to eat. On the other hand Yilven remained silent, just watching Lucia until she exited the galley again. Then he leant forwards slightly.

"Your highness, what do you know about blood magic?" he said and Orcan frowned at him.

"Blood magic?" he said, "Yilven if you want to know about magic and sorcery then I think you should be talking to my sister."

"Your highness forgive me but it's your sister that concerns me. I found her taking blood from one of your cousin's dragons. She said that it was intended as a protection against what we might find when we reach Oscay." Yilven told him.

"And you think that she wasn't telling you the truth?" Orcan said.

"Not the whole truth, no." Yilven replied, "I think that she is planning more than just a few warding spells and I thought that maybe you'd know what she intends to do."

"Ammaril hasn't discussed her exact plans with me Yilven. She's studied the books from the library we acquired thoroughly though and I trust that she thinks we can find something in Oscay that will benefit us." Orcan said.

"Your highness, are you seriously telling me that you don't know exactly what Ammaril's plan is?" Yilven said in disbelief.

"As I said, I trust her and you should too." Orcan said.

"Your highness I've served your family for a long time and I've never known any of you do anything that you didn't believe was in the best interests of Sylldarin and its people but I can't help but shake the feeling that whatever Ammaril found in those books is something that should have been burned along with the corpse of the monster we slayed when we found them." Yilven said and Orcan leant back in his chair.

"Are you having second thoughts about our mission Yilven?" he asked.

"No your highness. I think you're right that the humans pose a threat to our lands and our people and we need to do something to protect ourselves but the possibility that what your sister has planned could be even more dangerous is starting to worry me. Perhaps if you were to speak to-" Yilven answered before Orcan cut him off.

"No." he said, "I won't second guess what she does. Ammaril is the only one among us that can interpret the writing in those books and without her this expedition will undoubtedly fail. I'm not about to start accusing her of being reckless now."

"If that is your final word on the matter your highness-" Yilven began.

"It is." Orcan told him and Yilven got back to his feet before he bowed his head slightly.

"Then I'll wish you a good night. I'll be on deck keeping watch if you need anything." he said before he exited the galley.

The carriage that bore Thomas' patron was pulled by four horses and had both a driver and a second servant sat on the seats mounted at the front of its roof while its owner sat within the carriage itself, hidden from outside view by curtains. He moved one of these aside slightly to peer out towards the alleyway that led to the courtyard and he listened to the sounds of the singing that the Elves were still taking part in. Thomas' patron then sat back and looked across the inside of the carriage to where Thomas himself sat, along with a young woman in a black cloak that had the hood down to reveal her attractive features and long dark hair that covered the tops of her ears.

"Well done Thomas." he said, "I think that this will do perfectly." then he looked at the woman sat beside Thomas and added, "You know what you have to say Diera?" The woman then nodded and spoke a brief sentence in the Elf language, prompting her employer to smile, "Good enough." he said, "The accent isn't quite right but it will do. Now let's get on with this shall we?"

"Yes my lord." the woman called Diera said as her employer opened the carriage door and stepped down to the ground. Then he held out his hand to help the young woman down as well.

Diera raised the hood of her cloak so that it covered most of her features and scurried into the alleyway, disappearing into the darkness. She followed the alleyway all the way to the courtyard where both humans and Elves continued to drink and she picked out a nearby cluster of Elves that were all looking towards the larger group that was singing. Making her way to this group she approached them from behind and stood by the Elf at the edge of the group, leant her face towards his ear and whispered to him in the Elven language.

"There is something I need to discuss with you. Alone. Follow me now." she said before she turned around again and hurried back towards the alleyway leading back towards her employer and his carriage while the surprised Elf turned around only to see a figure in black vanish into the darkness.

Although the Elves had been instructed to stay in groups the fact that he had been addressed in his own language caught the Elf soldier off guard and he hurried after the mysterious figure in the cloak, following her into the alleyway. As he got closer to the other end of the alleyway he saw the carriage that was parked in the street as well as hearing the sounds being made by the horses as they waited obediently before they were called upon to pull the vehicle again. The Elf could not be sure that the mysterious hooded woman who had spoken to him in his own language owned this carriage but the fine quality of her clothings indicated to him that she was the sort of person who would travel in such an expensive carriage. Looking around he could not see the woman herself and the Elf did not think that asking either of the men sat on the roof of the carriage would be of any use. He did not speak any human languages and he doubted that they would speak the language of the Elves so instead he started to walk around the carriage, hoping that he would be able to see the woman from the other side. Circling around the carriage he found Diera standing with her back to him, the hood of her robe still raised and he approached her.

"Hello. You said that you had-" he began as he walked up to her and he reached out to place a hand on her shoulder. However, as he did so she suddenly spun around with her hand held out in front of her face. Diera wore gloves that were as black as her cloak and in her palm was a small pile of a pale green powder. Before the Elf could react she blew into her palm and the powder was scattered into a cloud that spread out towards him. The Elf could not help but inhale some of the powder and he staggered backwards. Realising that he had walked into a trap his first instinct was to call out for help from the other Elves still in the nearby courtyard but he found himself unable to speak. After that his vision started to blur and he felt himself falling to the ground.

Upon hearing the sound of the falling Elf, Thomas emerged from the carriage and looked down to where he was lying on the ground. The Elf's eyes were still open and moving back and forth as he looked around but the powder had obviously done its work perfectly and he was completely paralysed.

"Good work." he said to Diera as he crouched down and he briefly searched the Elf, smiling when he found a purse that still contained a number of coins that he quickly pocketed for himself. The coins would undoubtedly be foreign so worth less than local currency but anything was better than nothing, "Give me a hand with him." he then told Diera as he hooked his hands under the Elf's arms and she took hold of the Elf's legs. Between the pair of them they then lifted the helpless Elf into the carriage where their master sat waiting.

"Ah, it is so good to meet you." he said to the Elf in fluent Elvish as Diera pulled the carriage door shut, "I know you may not be up to talking much at the moment but the effects of my magic won't last long and when you recover I think that we will be able to have a very productive conversation." he then banged the walking stick he held on the roof of the carriage, "Driver take us back home." he ordered and the driver of the carriage immediately yelled at the horses to set off.

Yilven made the most of his Elven ability to see well in poor light to study each figure that walked up the gang plank to the *Torsol*. He had seen several figures lurking in shadows close to the ships ever since most of the Elves had gone ashore and it was easy to determine that they were studying them for the opportunity to try and sneak aboard and steal anything that looked worth taking. Yilven knew that this was an issue in many ports and did not mean that someone was suspicious of why the Elves were there. Each figure that he observed boarding the vessel was clearly an Elf though and Yilven had no need to challenge any of them. However, when he saw Lucia emerge onto the deck with a bucket that she carried to the edge of the ship before tipping the contents over the side Yilven made his way to the deck below to speak to her.

"Waste from the galley?" he asked and Lucia smiled as she nodded.

"Yes, I'd have emptied it earlier but I didn't want to do it while Prince Orcan was using the galley. I only interrupted you because Princess Ammaril had specifically requested a meal." she said.

"Yes I was wondering about what you may have seen in the princess's cabin. What's she doing in there?" Yilven said.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure that I understand." Lucia replied.

"I know that she has all those books in there that she has told the rest of us that she spends all her time reading but have you ever seen her doing anything else?" Yilven said.

"No. I haven't even seen her eat or drink. Every time I go in she's reading and she just has me leave her tray to take away her used plates." Lucia told him.

"Have you spoken with her?" Yilven added.

"A little, but mainly to discuss her meals. I'm not sure that I'd understand anything that is in the books that she's reading. I don't have the power that she has. Why are you asking this?" Lucia responded.

"I'm just worried that she might be messing with power that even she can't control and I'm concerned about what the consequences for us all could be." Yilven said.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Lucia asked.

"I don't think so. I doubt that I know much more about magic than you do and I can't tell you exactly what to watch for. On the other hand if Ammaril starts to behave differently towards you from how she's acted so far, especially if she asks to take some of your blood then don't be afraid to come and tell me. Orcan won't confront her on the basis of just my bad feeling but maybe if her behaviour starts to change radically then he'll try to find out why. Until then though just keep acting as if nothing's wrong. With any luck I'm just being over cautious." Yilven told her.

Obadiah and Thomas were both waiting when their master emerged from the room where he had been interrogating the kidnapped Elf. No sound had been heard from inside the room during the interrogation and both men waited for him to tell them what he had discovered.

"The Elves are going to Oscay." he said.

"The continent of the ancient Oscari master?" Obadiah replied.

"But nobody goes there. It's cursed." Thomas added.

"Perhaps but nevertheless that is where the Elves are going. It seems that they think there is something in the ancient cities of the Oscari that they can plunder." their master said.

"Treasure?" Thomas said, a smile appearing on his face as he considered how much artefacts created by the long vanished Oscari might be worth if they could be brought back from Oscay.

"The greatest treasure of all. Knowledge." his master said and Thomas' face fell.

"How do you wish to continue master?" Obadiah asked.

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"The Elves cannot be allowed to plunder Oscay for themselves." his master answered, "There is no way that we can stop them from leaving port tomorrow and continuing with their expedition so we have no choice but to go after them. We will need a ship, soldiers and an engineer."

"An engineer? What do you need an engineer for?" Thomas said, confused.

"The Oscari have been gone for thousands of years. Their structures could be on the verge of collapsing or even trapped. An engineer will be able to make structures safe and bypass any traps that have been set." his master told him. Then he turned to Obadiah and added, "You will remain here while we travel to Oscay and look after my affairs." he added.

"We? Wait, I'm not going as well am I?" Thomas exclaimed, before he suddenly considered that his outburst may not have been a wise idea.

"I will have need of your services Mister Cooper. You cannot serve me from here." his master told him.

"But my informants are all here." Thomas pointed out, hoping that this would change his master's mind.

"But I will not be. Any information they provide would be useless to me on the other side of the world." his master reminded him, "You will be coming with me Mister Cooper. The only alternative is for you to leave my employment now and you know what that entails."

Thomas' eyes widened when he heard this. He knew that the amount of knowledge he had about his master's activities meant that he would not be allowed to freely leave his service. Instead his master would likely kill him on the spot to ensure that those secrets remained safe and after a brief pause a nervous smile appeared on his face.

"Thank you for offering me the opportunity of sharing in the spoils to be found in Oscay master." he said.

"I am happy to have you coming with me Thomas." his master responded, "Now we must hurry, we cannot afford to have the Elves depart too far ahead of us."

## 7

“Orcan wake up!” Tiellan yelled as he shook his cousin awake.

“What’s wrong?” Are we under attack?” Orcan replied as his eyes snapped open and he reached for the sword that hung close by.

“No don’t worry cousin, we’re quite safe but there is a problem.” Tiellan said and Orcan frowned.

“What is it?” he asked.

“One of the soldiers aboard the *Lilsa* didn’t come back last night.” Tiellan told him.

“What happened to him?” Orcan said, swinging his legs over the side of his bunk to sit up.

“Nobody seems to know. He went with a lot of the others from the *Lilsa* and they found some sort of outdoor tavern where they stopped to drink. Everything seemed fine but at some point in the night he must have left the group because when they decided to come back here they found out that he was missing. They searched the area for him of course but there was no sign of him at all and no-one they spoke to admitted to seeing him.” Tiellan told him.

“So who is this missing man? Does he speak the local language?” Orcan said and Tiellan shook his head.

“No, at least not enough to hold a conversation by himself. He may know the odd word.” he said.

“Then he obviously didn’t decide to try drinking somewhere else by himself.” Orcan commented.

“I doubt it. The best explanation that I can think of is that he needed to relieve himself and someone attacked him when he slipped away.” Tiellan said and Orcan considered this. Given that the Elves were in a human port this explanation seemed highly likely. If the missing Elf soldier was expecting to return after just a few minutes then he would not necessarily have alerted any of the other Elves that he was leaving them, “I’m going to order search parties to be sent out.” he continued, “We’ve still got some time before we have to leave port but I don’t want to leave searching until the last minute.”

Orcan knew that the missing Elf could not simply be abandoned but having dozens of troops wandering around the human port city risked having even more Elves absent when the time at which the ships had to depart arrived.

“No, we can’t risk turning one missing man into twenty.” he said and Tiellan frowned.

“But Orcan we have to at least try to find him.” Tiellan said.

“Don’t worry we will but I don’t want to risk leaving behind more people than necessary.” Orcan told him,

“Where’s Yilven?”

“Yilven? I think he’s on deck.” Tiellan replied as Orcan started to put his boots on.

“Good, I’m going to send him out to look. He’s the best tracker in Syldarin whether it’s the middle of a forest or a city.” he said.

William and Edwin were watching from the rear structure of their ship while members of the crew carried out basic maintenance when they saw an expensive looking carriage draw up on the shore close to the far end of the gang plank.

“Now this is interesting.” William said, “Are we in trouble? I don’t think I’ve seen anyone who could afford a carriage like that turn up here unless someone was in trouble.”

“Not that I know of and I don’t see any king’s heraldry on it.” Edwin replied before the carriage door opened and Obadiah emerged, “Hello there.” Edwin called out, “I’m Edwin Atwood, captain of the *Storm Chaser*. Feel free to come aboard.”

“Thank you captain.” Obadiah replied and as he began to walk up the gang plank Edwin descended to the main deck to meet him.

“So what I can I do for you? Mister-?” Edwin asked as he and Obadiah shook hands.

“My name is Obadiah captain and I am here on behalf of my employer. He is looking to charter a ship for an extended voyage.” Obadiah told Edwin and the captain smiled.

“Then you’ve come to the right place. Where does he want to go?” he said.

“If you are interested then my employer would like to discuss the details with you in person.” Obadiah told him, “I am just here to make sure that his time isn’t wasted on anyone who is not prepared to undertake a long and potentially arduous journey.”

“Don’t worry, the *Storm Chaser* is a strong ship and has a good crew. We can go wherever your employer needs us to go.” Edwin said.

“My employer will be glad to hear it captain. Though if he were to charter your vessel he would need to depart today. His journey is urgent and he needs to be able to reach his destination quickly. Is your ship fast?” Obadiah asked.



"Fast? I call her the *Storm Chaser* for a reason. In the right conditions she can get up to eleven knots. Is that fast enough for your employer?" Edwin responded.

"It may be captain. If you'd like to come with me then I'll take you to him." Obadiah said.

"Can't your employer come here?" Edwin said.

"No, he has a lot of arrangements to make in a short time. You will need to come with me to his residence." Obadiah told him. Edwin did not like the idea of leaving his ship but a long distance charter was too good a proposition to just let it slip through his fingers so he relented.

"Oh very well. I take it that your driver will take us?" he said, looking towards the carriage that Obadiah had arrived in.

"He will." Obadiah replied and Edwin turned to look up at William.

"Mister Beckett I am going ashore. The ship is yours until I return but if anyone asks about chartering us then put them off for now. I'm going to discuss an important voyage." he called out to his first mate and William waved at him.

"Don't worry captain, we'll still be here when you get back." he said.

Edwin let Obadiah walk down the gang plank first, following him to the carriage and then getting inside. He took note of the quality of the carriage's interior, observing that it was just as well maintained as the outside. This suggested that the owner had considerable wealth and Edwin was already considering how much extra he would charge for the journey that Obadiah's employer was planning.

The carriage then moved off as soon as Edwin and Obadiah were inside and as it drove through the streets of Teuten Edwin pulled back the curtain that covered the window beside him to peer out and see where they were going. Unsurprisingly he quickly determined that their route was taking them towards the most expensive area of the city, known for the number of wealthy merchants who lived there and he smiled as he thought again of how much money he stood to make from this voyage.

The driver turned the carriage off the road and drove through the open front gateway of one of the houses and around to the rear entrance where the carriage came to a halt.

"We're here. Please come inside with me captain." Obadiah said.

"Of course." Edwin replied and the two men got out of the carriage and went inside the house.

Even if Edwin had not been there to negotiate the chartering of the *Storm Chaser* he would have been able to tell that the owner of the house was preparing for a significant voyage from the trunks that were already stacked in the main hallway of the house. Oddly he also noticed that despite it being the middle of the day the house's curtains were closed and the interior was lit by candles. He did not have much time to consider this fact though before a door in front of the two men opened and Obadiah's employer emerged in the company of a second individual. Edwin had to look down at this second person since his height was barely four feet. He had a muscular build that marked him out as a true Dwarf rather than a Halfling or a particularly short human but whereas most Dwarven males had beards that were long and flowing this one had one that was short and well trimmed. Edwin knew just enough about Dwarves to know that this marked him out as some kind of artisan since they tended to cut their beards to prevent them from getting tangled up in their work.

"My lord this is Captain Edwin Atwood of the *Storm Chaser*. I have brought him to you so that you may discuss your requirements with him." Obadiah told his employer and in turn he smiled at Edwin.

"Excellent, it is a pleasure to meet you captain." he said as he reached out to shake Edwin's hand. Then he pointed to the Dwarf stood beside him, "This is Gromar Stonebreaker, an engineer who has agreed to accompany me on my voyage."

"Pleased to meet you Mister Stonebreaker." Edwin said and he reached out to shake the Dwarf's hand as well.

"Likewise captain. Though if you'll excuse me I have to go and get ready for departure." he replied.

"Obadiah please show Mister Stonebreaker out." Obadiah's employer told him.

"Yes my lord. This way please Mister Stonebreaker." Obadiah said and he led the Dwarf away,

"Captain Atwood, if you'd like to step into my office I shall explain the details of my journey." Obadiah's employer said and he stepped aside to allow Edwin past him.

"Thank you." Edwin replied, "I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"Of course, how rude of me. I am Magister Marcus Quinnus and I need to arrange passage on your ship. I presume that it is fast and capable of an extended journey?" the man said before he and Edwin sat down either side of the desk that was the central feature of the room.

"Yes, the *Storm Chaser* is a cog. She's good for open water and as I told your man she can make eleven knots with a favourable wind." Edwin said as he looked around and studied the décor of the room. Behind the desk and mounted above Marcus there was a painting of the man himself while other paintings instead featured images of star constellations.

"Excellent, that's exactly what I wanted to hear." Marcus said and then he reached for the ornate bottle that sat on his desk along with a glass, "Can I interest you in a drink of port?" he asked Edwin.

"Thank you, yes." Edwin responded and Marcus poured him a drink before sliding it across the desk to him, "Aren't you having one as well?" Edwin commented when he saw Marcus put the top back in the bottle.

"No, I don't partake in alcoholic beverages. I keep this just for guests. I've been told that it is very good though." he said and Edwin picked up the glass and took a sip.

"They're right." he said before he set the glass down again and added, "Excuse me for asking but you're a wizard aren't you?"

"I have some ability in that regard, yes." Marcus replied.

"So where is it that you want me to take you?" Edwin asked before he took another sip of his drink.

"Oscay." Marcus said simply and this caused Edwin to lower his glass as his eyes widened.

"Oscay? You're joking, right?" he said.

"It is no joke Captain Atwood." Marcus told him, "Are you aware that there are a number of Elven ships in port?"

"Yes, I saw them arriving yesterday." Edwin answered and he nodded his head.

"Well I have learned that they are on their way to Oscay themselves. They seem to think that there is something there of great value and I don't intend to let them have it." Marcus said.

"But Oscay is the most dangerous place in the world to visit. Every experienced sailor can tell you the names of at least five or more ships that went there and never came back but I've never heard a single name of a ship that did return." Edwin said.

"I will of course pay extra for the risk." Marcus said.

"Money's no good if you if you're dead Magister Quinnus." Edwin said seriously.

"Five times your usual rate. Plus a share of any treasures recovered." Marcus said and Edwin hesitated.

Then he took another sip of the port and shook his head.

"It isn't an issue of money magister." he said, "It's an issue of being alive."

Marcus leant forwards and stared directly into Edwin's eyes.

"Captain Atwood listen to me." he said, focusing his thoughts and Edwin suddenly sat still.

"I am listening." he replied without any hint of emotion.

"We have agreed a price Captain Atwood. Now all I need to hear from you are the arrangements for the journey." Marcus told him, maintaining his direct eye contact with Edwin. Then he leant back in his chair and released his mental hold.

"So how many will be in your party magister?" Edwin asked.

Yilven stood in the centre of the courtyard where many of the Elves, including the one now missing had been drinking the night before and looked around. There were half a dozen exit points that he could see and this meant that the missing Elf could have gone in almost any direction when he left. According to the Elves who had returned to their ship there had also been a number of humans drinking here and the drink itself had come from a warehouse on the north side of the courtyard. There was only one building that fit the description of a warehouse on that side and its doors were currently open so Yilven made his way towards them to look inside. Here he saw stacks of barrels that were being sorted by a small group of humans who appeared to be dividing up those that had been used the night before by whether they still contained any drink or if they were completely empty.

"Excuse me." Yilven called out and the humans all stopped what they were doing and turned towards him.

"Here for some more ale? Didn't you get your fill last night?" one of the men asked him.

"Actually I wasn't here." Yilven responded and the man slapped the top of the barrel he was standing beside.

"Then you're in luck friend. There's still a few drinks worth left in this one and for a couple of coins I'm sure that we can find you a cup." he said.

Although the motive behind this statement appeared to be profit the fact that the men were willing to deal with Yilven was a good sign and he took three small coins from his purse as he approached them.

"There is no need for a cup," he said before he placed the coins on top of the barrel, "but I will leave you these for your trouble."

"No trouble at all." the man who had previously spoken said as he picked up the coins and pocketed them,

"Now what do you want if it's not drink?"

"One of the Elves who drank here last night did not return to our ships with the others. I'm hoping that someone may have seen what happened to him." Yilven explained.

"Yeah one of your people asked about him last night." another of the men working in the warehouse said,

"Whatever happened to your man, we didn't see it."

"Are attacks on visitors common in this area?" Yilven said.

“Not really.” the first man to have spoken replied, “There are pickpockets and muggers around as there are in any city but they don’t focus on visitors, they’ll target locals as well.”

“They wouldn’t have risked coming here last night though.” another of the men commented, “It would only take one person to have spotted what they were up to and they’d have taken a serious beating.”

“Thank you for your help anyway.” Yilven said, realising that these men would not be able to help him and he exited the warehouse, taking another look around the courtyard as he stood outside. Most of the other Elves who had been drinking here the previous night had not taken note of where their missing comrade had been sat before he disappeared but a few of them had recalled seeing him at the opposite end of the courtyard from the warehouse itself so Yilven began to walk in that direction. There were two exits from the courtyard along the side that Yilven now approached and he picked one of them at random, a narrow alleyway that would undoubtedly have been very dark during the hours of night though of course an Elf’s ability to see even in low light levels would have meant that one of them would most likely have still been able to see clearly.

Following the alleyway to the far end Yilven found himself standing in a street that was largely lined with shops which meant that they would have likely been closed the previous night when the Elves were drinking in the courtyard. However, given the presence of living quarters above many of the shops it was still possible someone would have been present and would have seen something. The nearest shop was a wicker maker and a large variety of open baskets and other wicker storage boxes were on display. The wicker maker himself was visible as he worked on another item and Yilven approached him.

“Do you see something you like? Or would you like to order something made to your instructions?” the man asked as he stood up to greet Yilven.

“I’m sorry I’m not here to buy anything.” Yilven replied and the man frowned before the Elf placed a coin on the table where he was working, “Though I will pay for your time. I’m interested in the events of last night. Were you here?”

“Of course. All night. I live above the shop.” the wicker maker told him and Yilven smiled, knowing that the man was exactly the sort of person that he was looking for.

“I’m looking for an Elf who may have been near here last night. He was drinking in the courtyard but left early and hasn’t been since. I was hoping that you can help me find him.” he explained to the wicker maker.

“Does this have to do with that carriage?” the other man asked.

“Carriage?” Yilven commented and the wicker maker nodded.

“Yes, I heard a carriage draw up outside last night and took a look. It seemed pretty fancy and I figured that it was some noble out looking for entertainment. Then I saw someone in a hood get out and head towards the courtyard where the ale warehousemen set up their outdoor tavern sometimes. Whoever they were they weren’t gone long and when they came back they were being followed by someone else.” he said.

“An Elf?” Yilven said.

“I don’t know. It was pretty dark and not all of us can see well enough in the dark to pick out the shape of your ears.” the wicker maker said and for a moment Yilven wondered whether the man was trying to insult him, “They went behind the carriage so I didn’t see what happened next but he must have got into it because it drove away soon after and there was no-one left behind.” the man continued. All of this sounded like exactly the sort of information that Yilven needed to find the missing Elf and this made Yilven suspicious. It was very convenient that apparently the wicker maker had been just looking out of his window upstairs while all of this took place.

“How did you happen to see all of this?” he said.

“I heard the carriage pull up right outside and took a look. I hear plenty of people walk past my shop when the courtyard is in use for selling drink but carriages are rare so I took a look. Then when I saw how fancy it was I started wondering why they’d be coming to somewhere like this instead of one of their fancy taverns so I kept watching.”

This made sense to Yilven, even among the Elves the possibility of catching someone important doing something compromising held a sense of wonderment. Unfortunately it also suggested that the missing Elf had been abducted by someone with significant resources.

“What did this carriage look like?” Yilven said, hoping that there would be some feature that would make it easy to identify the owner.

“Like I said it was fancy. Clean and polished. There was a driver and a second person sat beside him but I didn’t get a good look at them. It was pulled by four horses and everything was black.” the wicker maker replied.

This was unfortunate. Yilven had seen numerous carriages on his route from the docks to here and many of them had been painted plain black, this apparently being a popular colour for the vehicles in Teuten.

“Did you see which way the carriage came from and went?”

"I think it came from that way." the wicker maker told him and he pointed along the street, "I didn't see it arrive but when it left the driver turned it around to head that way."

Yilven knew very little about the layout of Teuten beyond the dock area but he suspected that if he travelled that way then he would find himself in an expensive area of the city.

"What's that way?" he asked and the wicker maker shrugged.

"It depends on how far you go." he said, "There's a large market every other day but that's not today and after that it's just houses."

"Large ones?" Yilven said.

"The biggest in the city. That's where the wealthiest people live. I'd be careful about going there if I were you. The watch keep a careful eye on what happens there and anyone who looks like they don't fit in is likely to get hauled off to the cells." the wicker trader warned him.

"Thank you. You've been very helpful. I'll let you get on with your work now." Yilven said and he turned to leave the shop. Standing outside he looked down at the ground, hoping that perhaps something would have been dropped that would provide him with a clue as to who owned the carriage. However, if anything had been left behind then someone else had already removed it.

It was then that the sound of a bell rang out and Yilven realised that he only had an hour before he had to be back at the dock and as much as he hated the idea of abandoning a member of the expedition this was not enough time to carry out a full investigation into where the mysterious carriage came from so instead of following the direction pointed out by the wicker maker Yilven started on his way back to the docks.

Vendril made his way below deck to where Orcan and Tiellan were both sat studying a map of the eastern coast of Oscay. Although the continent had not been successfully visited since the Oscari vanished from the world the ancient civilisation had left behind a large number of maps that all of the other species now made use of and even those places that were seldom or never visited were still fairly well charted.

"Ah captain, we've just been reviewing prospective landing sites. We thought that this area here would be the best place to land. It is less than a day's march from the ruins of one of the cities that Ammaril wants to visit though we'll need your input on whether it is suitable for your ships." Orcan said and Vendril looked at the map.

"It's hard to tell from that map your highness. Besides, it's been thousands of years since those maps were drawn up and a lot can change in that time." he said, "I wanted to discuss your man Yilven though, he's not back yet and we're coming up on the time when we need to be leaving port."

"Everything else is aboard?" Orcan asked and Vendril nodded.

"Yes, all materials and supplies have been stowed and we can depart at any time. The only thing stopping us is Yilven and the other missing man." he answered.

"What about the dock master?" Tiellan said.

"He and about a dozen of his men are standing close by, trying to look like it's normal but I'm certain that they're just waiting for midday. The moment that those bells ring they'll be demanding more money." Vendril told him, "Of course if you do want to pay him for another day then-"

"No." Orcan interrupted, "I'm not holding up the expedition for the sake of one man and Yilven will be-"

Your highness!" Yilven's voice then called out from the deck above as Orcan was himself interrupted and the Elven prince smiled.

"You see captain?" he commented before he called out to Yilven, "We're here Yilven." he said and moments later Yilven also descended from the ship's deck.

"Did you find him?" Tiellan asked.

"No my lord, I'm afraid I didn't and I think that he was kidnapped." Yilven said.

"Kidnapped? We've not had any sort of ransom note." Vendril commented.

"I don't think it was just thugs trying to extort money from us. I think that there was more to it than that."

Yilven said and Orcan frowned.

"Explain." he said.

"It looks like he was abducted by someone in a carriage. I suspect that someone well resourced was looking for information about us. Possibly just who we are but possibly why we are here. I don't think that money comes into it, at least not what you could expect to be demanded as ransom for a soldier." Yilven said.

"What makes you so sure of that?" Tiellan added.

"The description of the carriage suggests that it was expensive and it was last seen driving off in the direction of the city's more exclusive homes. It could just be a local merchant looking for some commercial advantage but-" Yilven said.

"But it could also have been someone opposed to our expedition." Orcan said before he could finish and then he looked at Vendril, "Captain we need to leave immediately." he ordered.

## The Eternal Library

"We're not going to try and rescue our man?" Tiellan asked.

"We can't afford to. Money aside, the longer we are in port the longer whoever is behind the kidnapping has to move against us. Once we're at sea we'll be safe. Captain Vendril I want us to cast off immediately." Orcan said.

"Yes your highness." Vendril said before he hurried back onto the deck. The three other Elves followed and as they emerged they found the sea captain yelling orders to his crew while they pulled the gang plank aboard and began to detach the ship's moorings. Orcan's orders were also relayed across to the other four Elf ships and their crews also began preparing to depart from the harbour.

The *Torsol* was the first to move away from the dock once again and its sail was unfurled before the ship began to head for the ocean.

"Steady now." Vendril called out as the ship began to pick up speed, "How's she looking ahead?"

"We're heading straight for the centre of the harbour exit captain." one of the lookouts positioned to the front of the ship to make sure that it did not collide with the harbour walls on its way out to sea responded, "Keep us on this course." Vendril then told the pair of Elves manning the tiller before he looked back at the shore and saw the dock master glaring angrily back at him, clearly annoyed that the Elves had managed to leave Teuten on schedule before he could charge them for another day in port. Behind the *Torsol* the other Elf ships also moved away from the dock one at a time so that they formed one long line as they left the harbour and put to sea.

"All clear of the harbour your highness." Vendril called out to Orcan from the top of the rear structure while Orcan himself along with Tiellan and Yilven watched from the main deck, "If conditions stay the same as this all the way to Oscan then we'll be there in no time at all."

8

“So how did it go captain?” William asked when he saw the carriage drop Edwin off at the dock and he walked up the gang plank.

“Excellent Will.” the captain replied with a wide grin, “The magister is offering us five times our usual rate.”

“Magister?” William commented, “Who goes by magister?”

“He’s a wizard of some kind so I’m guessing that it’s some sort of title that his order uses. Whatever order that might be. I didn’t enquire after he told me how much money we’d be getting.” Edwin said.

“Five times our usual rate? That’s a lot of money. Where exactly are we heading to make that much?” William said.

“The fool wants us to take him to Oscay.” Edwin responded and William stared at him in a mixture of surprise and horror.

“Oscay? You can’t be serious!” he exclaimed and all of the crew within earshot suddenly turned to look towards them.

“Look it’s all fine. Magister Quinnus explained everything to me.” Edwin said and then he looked across the harbour, “What happened to those elven ships that were in port?” he asked.

“They left not long before you got back but what’s all this about Oscay. You’ve always said that you wouldn’t go within five hundred miles of that place. Cursed you called it.” William answered.

“That was before I heard what the magister had to say. William the Elves are going to Oscay and he wants to beat them to whatever it is that they’re after. All we need to do is follow the Elves to Oscay and then we help the magister and his men take care of them.”

“Take care of them? Are we mercenaries now?” William said.

“You were in Dannaron’s navy. You’re no stranger to battle. The same goes for most of the crew, they can take care of themselves. Plus the magister will be bringing troops of his own. Thirty of them apparently.” Edwin said.

“So thirty soldiers plus the twenty-three of us and we’re going up against five ships full of Elves. They’ll have us outnumbered by at least five to one.” William pointed out.

“Maybe so but we’ll have one advantage Will.” Edwin replied and William frowned.

“Oh really captain and what’s that?” he said.

“The Elves don’t know that we’re coming after them. The plan is to pick off isolated groups to reduce their numbers before they even realise that they’re under attack. Plus there’s Magister Quinnus himself, his power will be worth another fifty men.” Edwin said but William was still unconvinced about the wisdom of the journey. Although it was widely known that wizards were capable of unleashing spells that could kill a dozen or more men with a single strike it was also known that wielding their power took a lot of effort and concentration. In a battle this often made them an asset to employ carefully, unleashing a single strike at a key target before they had to retire to recover. Less destructive spells took less effort but most of these were mere parlour tricks rather than magic that could overcome huge odds on a battlefield.

“I still don’t like the sound of any of this captain.” William said.

“If you’re too scared then leave. Though good luck in finding another captain to take you on Will. You deserted from Dannaron’s navy and if you jump ship from me as well then no-one will trust you.” Edwin said. This attack surprised William. Edwin was well aware that William absconded from his naval posting to escape the corruption that he encountered at almost every turn and had never used that as something to threaten him with. He knew that the captain was always on the look out for ways to make money but he had never thought that the promise of a high paying voyage would trigger such a change in his personality.

“I’m not about to abandon this ship or its crew captain. I’m trying to point out that maybe we should think about this carefully.” William said.

“I have Will, I have. Five times our usual rate. Taking into account how much of that usually goes on things that won’t cost us any more for this voyage than they would for any other that still leaves enough money to give the crew a bonus of six or seven times their regular pay and ten times it for the pair of us. That’s before we even get started on any treasure we find Will, the magister’s promised us a share of that as well.

Obviously anything related to his studies will be his but we get a third of anything of purely monetary value. Another third goes to his troops and the rest to him and his two assistants. With this one voyage we’ll be rich. You know as well as I do that any voyage we take has its risks. The Elves know more about the Oscari than anyone else so if they’re heading for Oscay then it must be safe” Edwin said.

“I still don’t like this captain, but this is your ship. Just promise me one thing, just don’t let this wizard and his gold blind you to risks you’d normally avoid.” William said but before Edwin could give a response a cart

loaded with trunks and with both Thomas and Diera sat among them drove up to the dock and came to a stop at the end of the gang plank.

"Ah, the magister's belongings have arrived." Edwin said with a smile, "Round up four of the crew to take them to the master cabin."

"Aye aye captain." William responded and as he headed for the gang plank he called out to a group of nearby crewmen, "Alright you lot our passenger's luggage has arrived so let's get it on board before he shows up and finds it still sitting on the dock. Come on, look lively."

William and the four crewmen hurried down the gang plank to the carriage.

"Be careful with these. The magister's luggage is very valuable." Thomas said in a manner that William would normally expect to be addressed by someone of much higher social class than he appeared to be.

"Feel free to lend a hand if you're so concerned." William replied and then he looked at the crewmen and pointed to the largest of the trunks that was secured at the very back of the wagon, "We'll take that one first." he told them.

"That one is particularly valuable. It must be placed where the magister will be sleeping." Thomas said and then he looked at Diera and added, "Go with them. Make sure that the magister's trunk is not damaged."

Diera glared back at Thomas for a moment and William suspected that she did not appreciate him acting as if he was her superior any more than he did.

The four crewmen took the weight of the trunk while William untied the ropes holding the large trunk in place and then between them they carried it up the gang plank while Diera followed them. In the meantime William remained by the wagon and began to unload some of the smaller trunks that he could lift by himself. As he was doing this Thomas simply stood back and watched, doing nothing to actually help. When the crewmen returned Diera was not with them and William directed them to the smaller trunks that he had already unloaded from the wagon.

"We'll take these next." he said before picking up one of the trunks that he had judged that he could carry by himself and while the crewmen were picking up some of the other trunks he carried this one up the gang plank, "Our passengers have a lot of luggage." he said to Edwin as he walked past the captain. Heading towards the structure at the rear of the *Storm Chaser*, William took this trunk inside and then went through the doorway he encountered directly ahead him. This took him into a large cabin that despite being largely functional in it was considered the most luxurious space aboard the ship and every effort was taken to make sure that it was kept clean. The cabin extended as far as the very back of the ship and when William entered the room he found Diera in the process of closing the shutters, "I've got the next of your boss's cases." he told the young woman as she looked around at him.

"You can put it down over here. Don't stack it with the large one." she replied and William nodded before carrying the trunk closer to her and placing it down on the floor. Glancing towards the larger trunk William saw that it was still closed. On the other hand Diera walked over to the newly delivered trunk and immediately opened it, allowing William to see that it contained a number of smaller wooden boxes and tubes. There was a large table in the cabin that had a number of drawers built into it and as William was heading back out of the cabin Diera began to move the contents of the smaller trunk to these drawers. He heard the sound of movement from the hallway outside the cabin just as he was getting to the doorway but as he stepped through it he was startled to find himself almost face to face with a Dwarf who appeared laden down by his own personal luggage that was kept in a backpack and a pair of bags that hung either side of him while he carried a hefty warhammer in his hands.

"Can I help you?" William asked.

"I hope so." the Dwarf replied, "Gromar's the name, Gromar Stonebreaker. I've been hired by Marcus Quinnus to help out on this expedition. Your captain told me I should bunk below with the rest of you. I'm guessing that only the magister himself and his personal staff get actual cabins. Which way do I need to go?" "I'm William Beckett but you can call me Will. I'm the first mate of the *Storm Chaser*." William told him, "Come with me and I'll show you to a bunk."

Gromar nodded.

"After you then." he said and Will turned in the direction of a set of stairs that would take them down below decks. Down here at the rear of the ship there were three small cabins that contained the bunks used by the ship's more senior crewmembers. The captain himself had a larger cabin in the rear structure but William, like the others slept below decks. Two of the small cabins were kept free for passengers such as Gromar and William showed him towards one of these. As they were making their way there though they were interrupted by Horace as the Halfling emerged from his own cabin.

"Ah Horace, this is Gromar Stonebreaker. He'll be accompanying us on this voyage. Gromar this is Horace Bramble our ship's cook. See him if you want anything to eat." William said.

"Pleased to meet you. It'll be nice not to have to strain my neck looking up at someone else aboard this ship

for once." Horace said with a smile, "I confess I don't know much about Dwarven cuisine but I'm sure I can whip something up that will satisfy you."

"Oh I'm very easy to satisfy. Us Dwarves don't go in for a lot of the fancy foods the rest of you eat." Gromar replied.

"I was just showing Gromar to his cabin. It will be the one at the end of the hall where he can have some privacy." William said and Horace nodded.

"Well I'm just off to make sure that there's some lunch ready for after we leave port. You and the captain have had the crew running ragged to get ready and no-one's had time to eat yet." he replied before he carried on his way.

William then led Gromar to the end of the hallway and opened the door that led to the small cabin that the Dwarf was to be given.

"I'm sorry there aren't any windows." he said as they both went inside and Gromar grinned as he was putting his belongings down on the floor beside the doorway.

"I'm a Dwarf." he said, "Our kingdoms are all underground. I didn't see the sun until I was fourteen. A week or two sleeping below decks is nothing." he said.

"Of course." William said and then he frowned for a moment, "If you don't mind me asking, what exactly is your job on this voyage?"

"I'm an engineer by trade. Humans are expanding their cities at an incredible rate and I've been helping them build all the palaces and temples they are filling these with." Gromar replied.

"Is that how you met Magister Quinnus?" William asked.

"No, in fact I'm only here in Teuten because I was supposed to be travelling to Lerron but the owner of the ship that was supposed to take me there decided that docking at Teuten was a waste of his time and he just left me stranded. I've been stuck here for more than a month so when this magister offered me a tidy sum to join his expedition I agreed." Gromar answered. Then he added, "What is a 'magister' anyway?"

"It doesn't mean anything as far as I know." William responded, "I think it's from one of the classical languages that haven't been spoken for centuries. Mind you, 'Quinnus' doesn't sound exactly modern either. I know it's a family name but I don't think I've ever heard one that old before. Frankly I'm worried that this magister thinks himself to be far more important than he is."

"As long as his gold is good and he showed me plenty of that." Gromar commented.

"I'm more worried about what we're going to find when we get to Oscay. Assuming we do make it there."

William said and Gromar frowned again.

"Don't you have faith in your own ship?" he said.

"My ship, yes, but there are a lot of stories about Oscay, none of them good." William said.

"Well the Dwarves have stories about Oscay as well, but they just talk about huge cities the like of which haven't been seen since the Oscari vanished. If they do exist then I want to see them for myself and maybe learn how they were built." Gromar told him.

"And I suppose going home wealthy is just a coincidence." William commented and Gromar smiled at him.

"That could be considered a bonus, yes." he said.

When William returned to the deck of the *Storm Chaser* he saw that there were a large number of men coming aboard the ship. These men wore similar jackets to one another and it was obvious that all of them were wearing chainmail beneath these. Some also wore helmets while others carried them along with the teardrop shaped shields, crossbows and swords that appeared universal among them. Some of the Storm Chaser's crew were guiding these men to a hatch that would take them below decks to the part of the ship where most of them slept. There were no proper bunks here and instead everyone who slept there did so in hammocks. William saw that there were two men in similar clothing were standing beside Edwin at the gang plank and he made his way to join them.

"I've shown Gromar to his cabin captain." he told Edwin.

"Gromar? Oh yes, the Dwarf." Edwin responded, "This is Alphonse Gerard and Everad Dorrall, the leaders of the soldiers hired by Magister Quinnus. We've just been discussing how they foresee engaging the Elves."

"Pleased to meet you." William said to the two men.

"They'll need cabins below as well. Their men are sleeping with the crew obviously." Edwin said.

"So I see." William said, glancing at the soldiers as they carried their equipment below deck, "Well now that they're here I suppose we're just waiting for the magister himself."

"No he's aboard. Didn't you see him? Apparently he's already in his cabin." Edwin told him.

"The only person I saw in there was that woman who came aboard with his luggage." William said.

"Well the men taking the rest of his luggage to his cabin said he was there." Edwin said, "I didn't notice him



coming aboard myself though. He must have slipped past me while I was busy. I assumed that you'd have been the one who showed him to his cabin."

"I haven't had the time captain. Someone else must have shown him the way. Maybe one of those two assistants of his, assuming that the man ever actually does anything other than stand back and watch." William said.

"Maybe but I'm more concerned about getting us out of port quickly. Those Elves have a head start on us and I don't want to let them get too far ahead. I want us ready to cast off the moment these soldiers and their equipment is secure below decks." Edwin said.

"Yes captain." William replied.

"Come in." Marcus said when William knocked on the door to his cabin and the *Storm Chaser's* first mate entered the room to find their guest sat behind the table with several large books laid out in front of him. There was no sign of either of his assistants though and William's first thought was whether they were wandering the ship and potentially causing problems for the crew.

"Good afternoon magister. I'm William Beckett. I'm the first mate of this ship." William told him.

"Of course. Captain Atwood told me about you. How may I help you Mister Beckett?" Marcus replied.

"Everyone is aboard and we're ready to depart." William told him, "The captain was wondering if you'd like to join us on deck while we leave port and put to sea."

"You may thank the captain for the invitation Mister Beckett but I have a great deal of studying to do before we reach Oscay. My library included several tomes that contained references to the continent but it is not something I have focused on in a long time. I need to review the information and attempt to reconcile any contradictions. What I really require on this journey is privacy." Marcus explained and William nodded.

"Yes magister, I'll pass your message along to the captain." he said before he turned around and left the cabin. William then returned to the deck and climbed the steps leading up to the roof of the rear structure. Here a pair of crewmen stood by the tiller at the rear while the captain stood at the front along with Alphonse and Everad, both of them no longer wearing their chainmail or carrying helmets. On the other hand, both of them still carried their swords on their belts.

"Ah Will, where is the magister?" Edwin asked.

"I passed along your invitation to join us while we leave port but he declined. In fact he has requested that we don't disturb him during the trip." William answered and Edwin shrugged.

"Well if that is what he wants then I see no reason not to give him his privacy. He is paying us well enough after all." he said before he looked down at the main deck, "Release the lines and let's set sail." he called out. The *Storm Chaser's* crew had been waiting for this order and they complied with it immediately, releasing the ship from the dock and deploying the sail. Meanwhile the men on the tiller angled it so that the ship's rudder guided it away from the shore, heading towards the exit from the harbour. As soon as the *Storm Chaser* was out on the ocean Edwin unfurled a map and glanced at it, "Helm turn us west and keep us on course to head along the north coast of Hadar."

"Aye captain." one of the men at the tiller responded as between them they turned the ship to the west.

"I want someone up at the top of the mast around the clock. I want to know the moment that we see any signs of another vessel. Those Elves have a head start on us but I'm confident that we can catch them."

Edwin then ordered and one of the crew on deck rushed to the ship's mast and began to climb it, "Will, see that the look out is changed every three hours. I don't want them getting too tired up there and losing focus on what they're supposed to be doing." he added and William nodded.

"Yes captain." he replied.

"I think we're far enough from the harbour now." Alphonse said unexpectedly.

"Yes, there shouldn't be any issues now." Everad agreed and William frowned.

"Issues with what?" he said.

"Some of the supplies that they brought aboard Will." Edwin told him and then he pointed to several crates that had been left out on the deck of the *Storm Chaser* rather than being stowed more securely below.

"What's in them?" William asked.

"The parts for a ballista apparently." Edwin told him.

"And a rotating base." Alphonse added.

"The Elves' ships didn't look to be armed so they must be relying on the bows that their soldiers undoubtedly have." Edwin said, "With that ballista installed we'll be able to shoot at them long before they can shoot at us. Sinking their ships before we even reach Oscay will certainly offset their numerical advantage. Of course we couldn't assemble it while we were in port. We aren't a warship and the dock master would have objected rather strongly I think."

"Yes, I think we would." William said, picturing Teuten's dock master thinking up how much he could fine the

*Storm Chaser* for installing a weapon that was capable of firing a steel tipped bolt almost half a mile that could penetrate the walls of many of the buildings surrounding the harbour. Despite its lack of a thick hull to resist damage or armoured ram, by fitting this to the *Storm Chaser* the transport cog suddenly became a warship with the power to sink other vessels from a significant range.

"If we aren't able to destroy all of the Elves' ships before we reach Oscay then we can dismantle it again and take it ashore with us." Everad added.

"How long will it take to assemble it?" William said.

"On land about four hours. Having to fix it down to a ship will probably add another hour or two though." Alphonse told him.

"In that case I suggest that your men get started. I'd hate to run into the Elves before it's ready." Edwin responded.

"You wanted to see me Captain Vendril?" Orcan asked, walking up behind the sea captain while he stood at the prow of the *Torso!* looking out over the ocean.

"Yes your highness." he replied.

"Is there a problem?" Orcan added and he too looked ahead of the ship.

"Of a sort. Do you see that on the horizon?" Vendril asked and he pointed ahead of them to where thanks to their superior Elven eyesight a dark line was just about visible separating the sea from the sky.

"Land?" Orcan commented and Vendril nodded.

"Yes. That's the northern tip of Hadar. Once we round that we'll have the choice of following the coast or just making a straight run across the open ocean for Oscay. The course we currently have plotted follows the coast but I wanted to confirm that with you. The open sea is rougher and takes more of a toll on ships and crews but it will keep us away from the Hadarians. There's always a risk of running into their navy." Vendril explained.

"And what are the chances of encountering rough weather if we stay further out to sea?" Orcan said.

"Almost inevitable." Vendril said.

"Then we stay closer to the coast. I have every confidence in your and your crews' abilities to avoid the Hadarian navy and if we do run into one of their patrols then my archers can handle a single ship." Orcan responded.

9

The sun had set by the time the Hadarian coast came into view from the *Storm Chaser* and it was visible only because of the lights shown by the various fishing villages. There were also several small fishing vessels that were visible by the lanterns that the fishermen were using while they attempted to catch the various types of fish that came closer to the surface during the hours of darkness. The *Storm Chaser* itself was also showing lights from lanterns that had been lit on its deck so that the crew could work through the night without needing to carry their own illumination.

"Lights to port!" the *Storm Chaser's* look out called out from the top of the mast and with Edwin currently below deck William was in command and he made his way to the side of the ship so that he could look for himself. Although he could not see any of the fishing boats clearly he could tell that they were not the Elf ships that they were chasing. The lanterns were too low and spread too far apart to be mounted on a handful of cogs. However, William did not want to risk getting too close to the Hadarian coast, especially while it was dark and obstacles in the water would be difficult to spot.

"Take us to starboard." he told the men on the tiller and he extended his arm in the direction he wanted the ship to go, "We'll put an extra couple of miles between us and the coast before we turn back on course."

"Yes Mister Beckett." one of the crewmen responded and the *Storm Chaser* began to turn.

William watched as the lights from the fishing boats and shore grew more distant before he heard the sound of someone walking up the steps from the main deck to the roof of the rear structure and he turned to see who it was.

"Magister Quinnus." he said, surprised to see Marcus above deck with Diera standing beside him, "Taking a break from your books I see."

"Yes Mister Beckett." Marcus replied with a smile, "I thought I'd take a stroll with my assistant before I retire and I noticed that we had changed direction."

"You felt that?" William commented. He knew that turning the cog would cause it to tilt slightly but picking that out from the regular motion of it on the open sea took some experience.

"Yes, I do have some experience of ocean voyages Mister Beckett. In my younger years I travelled considerably." Marcus said.

To William, Marcus did not look particularly old. His hair was starting to go grey but that was the only indication of age that he showed.

"Well I thought it wise to put some more distance between us and Hadar." William told him and he pointed to the spots of light that could still be seen in the distance.

"Of course. We can't allow any encounters with their navy to delay us." Marcus agreed while Diera looked around the deck of the *Storm Chaser* and took note of the lanterns that kept its deck lit.

"Won't they be able to see our lights like we can see theirs?" she asked.

"Yes they will. The light from our lamps will carry just as far as the light from theirs but they won't be able to tell much about us from that. We can judge the size of their fishing boats from the distance between us, them and the shore but they won't have anything to relate to when they look at us. We'll just be a ship passing by in the distance. There isn't even the slightest chance that they'd be able to see the way our ship is painted to identify us." William answered.

"Very good Mister Beckett. we shall leave you to your duties now. we will finish our stroll and return to our cabins for the night." Marcus added before he walked back down the steps and William heard the sound of the door into the rear structure opening and then closing again.

"What do you think the deal is with that woman?" one of the crewmen at the tiller commented.

"I'm not sure." William said, "She might be more than just an assistant but it's not really any of my business."

"Do you really think we are far enough out to sea not to be noticed Mister Beckett?" another nearby crewman who had overheard the conversation between him and Marcus asked and William smiled as he looked towards the distant shore.

"Even an Elf couldn't see this far from the shore. Unless there's a wizard out there scrying then we ought to be safe enough." he replied before he looked towards the structure at the front of the ship where the ballista was now mounted. This had a limited traverse that meant the *Storm Chaser* did not need to be pointed directly at an enemy vessel to fire on it but a target would still need to be ahead of the ship, "And if we do run into any of their ships at least we'll be able give as good as we get."

It was not long after the *Storm Chaser* had resumed its original course following the coastline of Hadar that William was relieved from command of the ship and he made his way below deck. He entered the rear

structure through the door that was close to the cabin occupied by Marcus and he paused just outside the door and put his ear to it to see if he could hear any activity inside. However, there was only silence from within and William continued on his way. This took him past the ship's galley and he noticed that there was a light coming from within. Suspecting that Horace was in there despite the late hour he decided to enter and see what the Halfling was doing.

"Horace what-" he began as he opened the door but instead of the ship's cook he found Gromar sat at the table with a plate of bread and cheese. These foods were a staple aboard the Storm Chaser. The ship's lower hold, located below the water line where it was coolest contained numerous sealed barrels of cheese, while sacks of flour were carried that allowed Horace to cook fresh bread throughout their time at sea, "Sorry, I thought Horace was in here."

"You just missed him. I was hungry and bread and cheese are foods that we have in common so he cut me this and said he was going to bed. I don't think he's happy about all the extra cleaning of plates he has to do for us so I said that I'd give this one a wipe myself." the Dwarf replied before he took another bite of the cheese.

William walked over to a barrel that was stood in the corner of the galley beside the brick lined oven where whatever cooking was done aboard the ship would be done and lifted the lid to expose the apples that filled it. Such fresh food would have to be consumed within the first few days of the voyage so he was not worried about Horace's reaction to him taking one. After removing an apple from the barrel he quickly inspected it to make sure that there were no signs of decay before replacing the lid and then sitting down opposite to Gromar.

"You said earlier that the Dwarves tell stories about Oscari." he said before he bit into the apple. Meanwhile across the table from him Gromar swallowed what he had been eating and nodded.

"That's right. Proper stories though, not your human fairy tales about ghosts, monsters and ancient curses." he replied.

"So how about you tell me about them then? The only other person aboard that claims to know anything is the great magister himself and I'm not sure that I trust him." William said and Gromar smiled.

"Yet you trust me enough to say that, even though I'm being paid by him. Paid well I might add." he said.

"But I'm not asking you to betray him. I just want to know more about this voyage. The captain may be satisfied with the gold we're being paid but I'd like more than just that." William said and Gromar paused, looking at him directly.

"Oh very well, but listen closely because I'm not going to repeat myself human." he said.

"You can call me Will. Most people do."

"Except for your underlings." Gromar pointed out and William smiled.

"No, they're far too afraid that I'd keel haul them for it if they did." he joked, "So what about your stories?"

"As I'm sure you know the Oscari created the Dwarves to be their labourers, we were made to be stronger and tougher than the Elves and not to have heads so high above the ground that we'd bang them on the ceilings of the mines we dug." Gromar began and William smiled again.

"I can see why that would be a problem." he said before Gromar continued.

"Just like they did to make the Elves the Oscari took some of the early tribes of humans and shaped them according to their wishes, except that all of our ancestors came from the northern parts of Entris rather than the other continents as well like they did with the Elves. Initially they set us to work in the mines under the mountains of Oscay before they sent us back to live under the mountain ranges in Entris and the north of Yaysa where we still have our kingdoms today. During the time that the early Dwarves lived in Oscay though they saw a lot of the Oscari and their cities and they passed down details of what they saw. Images of the Oscari cities are carved into the walls of some of our great halls along with statues of the Oscari themselves from the days when we welcomed them as honoured guests when they came to collect the metals and gemstones we mined for them." the Dwarf said.

"So you've seen these images then?" William asked.

"Aye Will, I have." Gromar answered, "The buildings they made were huge compared to the ones that humans or even the Elves construct, though when you see an Oscari you can see where the Elves got their style of architecture from. You see the Oscari built huge stepped pyramids, much wider at the base than at the top just like the way the way Elven buildings taper only the Oscari made theirs much bigger. Some of them were so big that they were practically small settlements themselves, with each different level of the pyramid being used for a different purpose. Of course the most important Oscari lived near the tops of their pyramids. That's not to say that the Oscari considered any of themselves to be unimportant mind you, they had the Elves and us Dwarves for their simple tasks. Plus the Halflings and Ogres later on, though I've never heard anyone explain what the Oscari were thinking of when they made either of them."

"So you're hoping that even after all this time those pyramids will still be standing?" William said.

"The pyramids that the ancient humans of Dyra built are still standing Will and the Oscari knew more about construction than any of us do today. There should be something left." Gromar pointed out.

"Is that all you know though? About the buildings that the Oscari built? What about the Oscari themselves?" William said.

"The Oscari had more knowledge than any of the civilisations in the world today have. As well as their skills in construction somehow they were able to turn humans into Elves, Dwarves, Halflings and Ogres as if they were farmers selectively breeding their stock. Many of them were powerful sorcerers as well, it's said that they travelled the world simply by willing themselves from one place to another. Unfortunately if it's true then that is something that they kept to themselves. You see they maintained small outposts all over the world and whatever they took from us was taken to one of them before they took it back to Oscay. Maybe the secret of how they travelled is still there as well." Gromar replied.

"You don't know how they travelled?" William said.

"Not over great distances, no." Gromar admitted, "There were Elves with them who drove wagons and carts of course and they took the metals and gemstones from our mines to the outposts but after that no-one can say exactly what happened to any of them. Or at least if they can say then they aren't saying and I wouldn't put that past the Elves."

"So the Elves that we're following after could already know everything about Oscay?" William said.

"Aye, that's a possibility. The Elves are devious like that. Dwarves live as long as Elves do and we do our best to maintain our history. History that tells us that the Elves always saw themselves as superior to anyone else. They were the chosen of the Oscari they said, the first to be elevated from mere humans and allowed to live alongside them rather than banished underground like Dwarves or exiled into the wilderness like Ogres."

Gromar said, "Mind you when the Oscari disappeared the Elves weren't treated any better than the rest of us. The Oscari were gone and we were all just left behind."

"Gromar, do you know anything about why they disappeared?" William said and the Dwarf snorted.

"No and I'm pretty sure that the Elves don't either, no matter how much more they know than they admit to. I can tell you that it didn't happen all at once though. Oh it was relatively quick, perhaps it took a few years, but our history tells us that to begin with the Oscari came to our mines in groups, then there would just be one or two of them at a time and eventually they sent the Elves on their own until the Oscari were gone and the Elves left at their outposts had to fend for themselves for a time until they could find a way back to their own lands." he said and then he noticed that William had a stern expression on his face, "Something wrong Will?" he asked.

"I was just thinking that maybe the Oscari didn't just disappear by accident or leave of their own accord. Suppose that they were under attack by someone that wiped them out. Whoever that is could be waiting for us in Oscay." William said.

"Not a pleasant thought." Gromar said as he considered the possibility, "Though if that were the case then I'd have expected at least some of the Oscari to flee to other places in the world. The Dwarven kingdoms would have made a very good place to hide."

"So you're confident that Oscay is deserted and there aren't any hostile armies waiting for us?" Will said and Gromar smiled, "What's so amusing?" William added.

"Like I said earlier, Oscay is where the Oscari created the Dwarves and the Elves too. The first Dwarves lived there under mountains like those in Entris and Yaysa and for all we know some still do. I have to say that I'm curious to find out." Gromar replied then he took another bite of his cheese and chewed it quickly before he added, "In all honesty though I doubt that we'll find anyone in Oscay that isn't currently on a ship heading there and apart from any predatory animals that we might find there the biggest danger will be from any traps that the Oscari left behind to protect their cities or any instability to them that has come from a few thousand years of neglect. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Yes it is thank you. I'd still be happier if I knew more about our mysterious magister but I suppose that I can't have everything." Will said and then he took another bite of his apple as he got to his feet and turned towards the galley door.

"Will." Gromar said before he could open the door and he looked back around at the Dwarf.

"Yes?" he responded.

"Will I think you're right to be suspicious of Magister Quinnus." Gromar said, "I think that there's a lot more to him than meets the eye."

Hadarian territory had been expanded over the years as its rulers invaded one neighbouring nation after another so that now it controlled most of the landmass on which it was located other than a relatively narrow strip of land to the west of the mountain range towards that end of the land and several kingdoms to the

south and east that had yet to face invasion. This meant that the Hadarian coast to the north was thousands of miles long and it took many days for the Elven ships to travel the distance.

Aboard the ships the Elf soldiers continued to pass their time with training while Ammaril studied the texts that she had brought with her. The only member of the crew who had any contact with Ammaril was Lucia but even she was surprised when one morning she encountered the Elf princess in the hallway just outside the galley. Unusually it appeared that Ammaril had returned her own plates after finishing her lunch instead of waiting for Lucia to collect them from her cabin.

"Your highness, is everything okay?" Lucia asked, "I would have come to collect your plates if I had known that you were finished."

"Everything is fine Lucia." Ammaril answered, "I just thought that I might take a walk after my lunch and it seemed reasonable to return my plates myself. Would you care to accompany me?"

"Of course your highness." Lucia said, not wanting to offend the Elf princess even though she had duties to attend to. Luckily these were relatively minor and she could easily do them later.

"Very good. This way, I wish to go up on deck." Ammaril told Lucia and she proceeded to walk in the direction of the *Torso's* deck. Lucia followed close behind Ammaril and then darted ahead of her to open the door that led to the deck and held it for her, "Thank you." Ammaril said as she walked out onto the deck."

The weather was dull and cloudy but that did not stop the crew of the *Torso* from working in it or Tiellan's soldiers from training. Meanwhile Tiellan's four dragons paced in their cage as far as it would allow them to.

"How long have you served Captain Vendril?" Ammaril asked Lucia while she watched a pair of the dark skinned Elf crew at work checking the ropes that secured the *Torso's* sail.

"A little over twelve years." Lucia replied, "I'm quite happy in his service if that's what you're worried about. I explained to Yilven that-"

"So you've been talking to Yilven?" Ammaril commented, interrupting Lucia and she nodded in reply.

"Yes your highness. I know that Elves don't keep slaves and I think he was worried that Captain Vendril-" she began before Ammaril interrupted her for a second time.

"It is the captain that I am interested in." she said and Lucia frowned.

"Oh. I'm sorry." she said.

"There is no need to apologise Lucia. I'd like to know more about what sort of person the captain is. How loyal are he and his crews to one another?" Ammaril asked.

"As loyal as can be your highness. Although all five ships are operating together now, sometimes the captain will send just one or two of his ships on a particular route while we go somewhere else. If the crews of those ships weren't loyal then it would be very easy for them to never come back." Lucia explained. Then after a moment's pause she added, "Are you worried that the crew might mutiny?"

"Do you know where we are going?" Ammaril asked in response and Lucia shook her head.

"No your highness. I assume that it is somewhere in Hadar." she said and Ammaril smiled.

"No Lucia, we are going to Oscay." she said and Lucia's eyes widened.

"Oscay?" she exclaimed and nearby several of the other Elves on deck looked in their direction, including Orcan where he was helping to drill a group of soldiers.

"Yes Oscay, the ancient home of the Oscari." Ammaril said, "What do you know of it?"

"Only that nobody goes there because it is supposed to be very dangerous." Lucia said.

"Perhaps it is but I have studied everything there is to know about the continent and I think that we will be safe enough. However, there is the possibility that some of the crew may lose their nerve the closer we get to our destination." Ammaril said before Orcan walked up to her.

"May I have a word?" he asked and then without waiting for an answer he glanced at Lucia and added, "I need to speak with my sister privately."

"Yes your highness." Lucia replied and she turned and hurried away as the two siblings turned to one another.

"Finished your studies I see." Orcan said.

"Yes actually." Ammaril replied, "Remember Orcan I've been studying those books for a long time and I'm confident that I know all that we need for our landing. I'll probably need to refer to them again later on but at least now I have a good idea of where relevant information is in the library. That will be enough for now."

"So now you tell that human exactly where we're going? Have you considered the possibility that she might try to sabotage our expedition?" Orcan asked and Ammaril laughed at him.

"That girl? How is she supposed to sabotage us exactly Orcan? We won't be making landfall again until we reach Oscay and that could be twenty days away. You're not afraid that she'll organise a mutiny are you? Look around you, we're surrounded by Tiellan's soldiers and Vendril's sailors. If there's going to be a mutiny against you then it will come from one of them. Not some human who cooks and does laundry for a living."

## The Eternal Library

she said before there was a loud shout from overhead.

“Ship ahoy!”

As Lucia hurried back through the door she almost ran right into Yilven as he was making his way to the deck.

“Is something wrong?” Yilven asked her.

“Are we going to Oscay?” Lucia replied and Yilven hesitated.

“Where did you hear that?” he said.

“Princess Ammaril told me just now.” Lucia answered, “I think that she made Prince Orcan angry by doing it though. When he heard he came over and ordered me away.”

Before Yilven could respond though they both heard the cry of the ship’s lookout from on deck.

“Ship ahoy!”

“I don’t like the sound of that. We’ll talk about this later.” Yilven said before he stepped around Lucia and rushed out onto the *Torso’s* deck.

On deck Orcan and Ammaril were stood beside the rail at the side of the ship and looking out over the ocean and Yilven rushed to their side to look for himself. In the distance he could see a cluster of dark shapes that were undoubtedly other ships.

“Are those what I think they are?” he asked and Orcan nodded.

“Hadarian longships.” he said.

## 10

The four Hadarian longships were built specifically for war. Their hulls were thickened to resist damage and their prows featured rams that were tipped with metal spikes that would enable them to smash the hulls of other ships by crashing into them. Two of the four also featured large catapults on their forward decks for attacking from a distance while groups of archers gathered on the decks of the others as they sailed towards the vessels they had spotted. At this point the Hadarian crews could not identify the passing ships as Elven but this did not concern them, all they cared was that they were sailing past the Hadarian coast and that was enough to prompt an attack.

"Everyone on deck now! Stand ready!" Tiellan yelled at his soldiers and the Elven troops carried aboard the Torsol rushed onto the deck, all of them wearing their helmets and chain mail coats. Each of them also had their bow and sword and they made their way to the forward structure of the Torsol where they stood on its flat roof. On the other four Elven ships this process was being repeated and in a matter of minutes the entire complement of Elven troops was standing ready to engage the approaching Hadarians who still had no idea of what they were facing. On the other hand Orcan turned to head for the rear structure of the Torsol where Vendril had taken up a position where he could easily give orders about the handling of the ship to the Elves on the tiller and Ammaril began to follow him.

"Where are you going?" Orcan asked his sister.

"With you." she replied.

"You'll be safer below deck. Yilven, take her-" Orcan said.

"No." Ammaril interrupted sternly, "You may need my power and I can't exactly make the best use of it below deck now can I?"

"Oh very well." Orcan said with a sigh before he looked at Yilven, "Stay right beside her Yilven. I'm trusting you to protect her." he added.

"Don't worry your highness, I've been looking out for you two for decades and I'm not about to change that now." Yilven replied before the trio rushed to join Vendril.

"How long until they reach us captain?" Orcan asked while Vendril stared at the oncoming longships.

"Not long. Maybe a quarter of an hour. We could turn north, out to sea and maybe outrun them." Vendril said.

"If we change course that will only add to our journey." Ammaril pointed out.

"Are you sure we could outrun them anyway? If they caught up with us then we won't be able to fire on them while they're directly behind us and our sail is deployed." Yilven pointed out and Orcan nodded.

"Stay on course." he told Vendril before he looked towards the forward structure where the Elven archers were gathered under Tiellan's command, "Prepare to fire as soon as they come within range." he shouted and Tiellan nodded.

Those elves on deck who were not actively involved in the running of their ships watched as the Hadarian ships came steadily closer and the archers notched arrows on their bows in preparation to fire. However, the first shot came from one of the Hadarian longships as its catapult let loose with a large stone that flew through the air towards the Elves. Luckily for them the human crew had misjudged their range and the rock landed in the ocean well short of any of the cogs, producing a large plume of water as it hit before it sank without a trace.

"If they all have catapults then this could be a problem." Vendril said as he considered the effect that such a missile would have if it struck one of his valuable ships. However, before Orcan could say anything Tiellan judged that the Hadarians were now in range of the Elves' longbows and he gave a shout.

"Fire!" he ordered and the Elven warriors assembled on deck all lifted their bows and released a volley of arrows. As soon as the warriors carried aboard the other cogs saw this cloud of arrows fly from the Torsol they too released their arrows towards the human ships.

Against the thick wooden hulls of the longships the damage that could be caused by the arrows was insignificant but they were capable to tearing holes in sails and injuring or killing any crewmen that were struck. Firing from the deck of a ship was not the same as firing from land though and most of the arrows came down harmlessly in the water or embedded themselves in the hulls of the Hadarian longships but a few of them struck members of the crew and these men screamed as they fell, one of them tumbling over the side of his ship into the ocean. This man was the only confirmation that the Elves had that any of their arrows had done anything but it was enough to give them confidence that their weapons could have some effect.

"They're armed!" the lead captain of the Hadarian vessels exclaimed when the arrows rained down on his task force.



"What are your orders captain?" one of his subordinates asked.

"Keep firing the catapults and take us directly at them. They don't look to be built like warships and they haven't turned towards us. Let's see what happens if we ram them."

The longships continued to advance on the Elven cogs and the catapults fired one after another, sending two rocks towards them. Once again though these missed the Elves and they fell into the sea.

"They're coming right at us. They may be intending to try and ram us." Vendril said as he watched the oncoming Hadarians, "If they don't sink us they'll try to board."

"Do you have a recommendation captain?" Orcan asked and Vendril nodded.

"Burn them. Light your arrows and aim for their sails." he answered.

"Tiellan! Have your archers light their arrows. Target the sails of the Hadarian ships." Orcan called out to Tiellan and his cousin passed on the order to his men.

The Elf warriors had been prepared to take this action and in addition to arrows with tips wrapped in oil soaked rags they had several small braziers set up among them to provide a source of ignition for them.

"Make ready." Tiellan ordered, bringing his arm up as he spoke and the archers all drew back their bows with their burning arrows loaded in them just as yet another rock was hurled through the air from one of the Hadarian ships only to miss the Elves yet again. There was nothing unusual about this, the accuracy of such weapons was always poor and they remained in use purely because of the destructive power they possessed should they happen to hit an enemy vessel, "Fire!" Tiellan yelled and in unison the archer released the burning arrows.

This volley of burning projectiles was aimed towards the closest of the longships, one of the two that was armed with a catapult and as they saw the volley heading towards them the Hadarian crew knew exactly what the intention was and the captain quickly ordered his men to prepare to deal with fire. Had they known in advance that they would come under attack in such a way then the Hadarians would have been ready to take in their sails and switch to the oars that their ships were also equipped with but when they had begun this assault they had thought they were attacking a group of helpless merchantmen. Therefore, as the burning arrows came down from the sky the large fabric sail was still fully deployed.

A significant portion of the burning arrows aimed at the ship landed in the water as had happened in previous volleys and these were immediately extinguished before floating back to the surface. More arrows embedded themselves in the side of the ship where the flames began to char the thick timber but did not cause any fire to spread while one of the men positioned close to the captain was struck in his chest. Of all the arrows though, the ones that did most damage were the ones that hit the ship's sail. Possessing enough energy to rip through the sail, these arrows continued on their path and most passed over the rest of the ship to land in the ocean rather than embedding themselves in the deck. However, as they passed through the sail the fire from the rags wrapped around the arrows spread to it and the numerous holes all became the epicentres of fires that began to spread to consume the entire sail.

"Drop the sail! Drop the sail! Get that fire out! Get it out now." the Hadarian captain yelled at his crew as he looked in horror at the burning sail.

Seeing the volley of burning arrows from the *Torsol* prompted the Elven warriors aboard the other cogs to also switch their arrows for ones that could be set alight. However, by this point the two opposing forces were getting closer together and this meant that the archers aboard the Hadarian ships who were armed with shorter bows than the Elves were now in range of the Elves' cogs and both units of archers released volleys of their own arrows. The Hadarians had hoped to be able to recover some plunder from the ships they were attacking, even if it meant picking it out of the debris of a ship smashed by a catapult but they had not wanted to reduce their targets to charred hulks so their archers were not prepared to fire burning arrows so their volley was fired in the hope of striking exposed crewmen.

The volleys were targeted at the *Torsol* and the *Lilsa* and aboard both ships the Elves ducked as the arrows flew towards them. In spite of this a handful of the arrows still hit some of the Elf sailors and warriors, including one of the Elves manning the tiller of the *Torsol*. Seeing this Vendril rushed to the tiller himself and took the place of the injured crewman while another Elf helped him away. While Vendril was doing this though Ammaril ran to the side of the ship facing the oncoming Hadarians.

"Ammaril! Wait!" Orcan called out after his sister before he saw her reach to the pouch at her waist from which she took a small amount of powder that she held up in front of her face.

"Phyan-sa!" she shouted before she blew on the powder and the *Torsol* rocked suddenly as she unleashed a blast of magical energy similar to the one used against the Elves when they had confronted the monster whose library Ammaril now possessed years earlier. Ammaril had found the spell in one of his books and learned to duplicate it over the years, though she could not yet perform it with a mere wave of her hand like he had been able to but the results were significant. The energy blast spread out as it sped across the ocean

until it slammed into one of the Hadarian ships, splintering some of the outer hull at the point of impact and pushing the prow to one side, changing the ship's heading sharply enough that its crew were thrown to the deck. This included the men on the tiller and as the captain looked up from where he had landed he saw in horror that they were now headed directly for another of the Hadarian longships, its crew waving frantically and yelling at them to change their course. However, before the stunned Hadarian crew could do anything to rectify their heading their ship smashed into the one they were heading towards.

The first part of the diverted ship to make contact with the one it struck was the iron ram located just below the waterline and there was a loud 'crash' following by the sounds of breaking wood as the thick hull of this second ship was broken open, just as the ram was designed to do. The ram was not capable of smashing all the way through the other ship given its reinforced hull and so this left the two ships locked together and drifting helplessly. The damaged vessel was taking on water rapidly and as it started to sink it dragged the other vessel down with it.

With one ship on fire and two others slowly sinking the only Hadarian vessel that remained operational was the flagship of the group and its commanding officer looked around at the ruins of his patrol. By not confirming the nature of the ships he had chosen to attack he had led his force into a disaster. Rather than a convoy of helpless cargo vessels he had found his ships outnumbered by a superior foe, one that not only had armed warriors aboard each vessel but also someone capable of wielding magic aboard at least one of them.

"Hard to starboard!" he ordered and the men on the ship's tiller pushed it as hard as they could, causing the ship to tilt as it turned to travel eastwards, the exact opposite direction to the one that the five cogs were travelling in, "Man the oars. Get us out of here."

"Captain what about the other ships?" his first mate asked, "There will be survivors-"

"We can't help them. If we stay we'll be wrecked too and then who will save us?" the captain snapped back at him before he could finish.

Back aboard the *Torso* Yilven rushed to Ammaril's side and caught her as she collapsed.

"Easy there your highness." he told her, "Are you hurt?"

"No." Ammaril replied, shaking her head, "Channelling that much power was just very exhausting. I'm not sure that I'll be able to do it again soon."

Yilven then looked over the side of the ship and saw the two sinking Hadarian longships as well as the vessel that continued burn while all three crews leapt over the side. Turning his head towards the rear of the *Torso* he then saw the final longship disengaging. Its crew had taken in their sail to avoid it being set alight by the Elves' burning arrows and it was now travelling under the power of the oars it could also use.

"I don't think you'll have to." he told her.

"Your highness what are your orders?" Vendril asked and he also looked behind his ship and watched the Hadarian longship as it continued to flee.

"Let them go." Orcan told him, "We're too far along their coast for them to organise a stronger attack on us now."

"What about the humans in the water?" Vendril added.

"What about them?" Orcan said, "Leave them to drown as they would have left us."

## 11

The sun had set and William was on his way to his cabin when he heard a crashing sound from the galley, followed by a shout that obviously came from Horace.

"Damn it!" he called out and William went to investigate.

"Horace?" he said as he opened the door to the galley and immediately his nostrils were filled with the smell of cooking meat. Looking towards the small stone lined oven he saw Gromar sat watching it while Horace was picking up bowls from the floor.

"Ah Will, what are you doing here?" Horace asked.

"I was going to bed when I heard a crash. What's happening?" William answered.

"What's happening? What's happening is I'm looking either for some scraps of meat left over from dinner or any that's starting to go bad. The problem is that the crew aren't likely to leave any decent sized lumps of meat in their bowls." Horace replied and William frowned.

"I'm not sure I understand." he said and Horace then reached to the table and picked up a fishing line that was coiled up on it.

"You know how I catch fish to make sure that there's some fresh meat in our food even on longer trips as well as all the smoked and salted stuff we keep?" he said and William nodded.

"Yes but don't you just catch rats from the hold and cut them up?" he commented, knowing the Halfling's habits well after the years that they had travelled together.

"Aye, I do." Horace said before he glared at Gromar, "Only our Dwarven friend over there is catching the rats and cooking them for his own supper."

William was suddenly struck by the smell of cooking meat. The meat that was stored aboard the *Storm Chaser* for its crew and passengers was precooked and preserved so did not need cooking and any fresh meat that had been brought aboard before they left Teuten would have gone rotten days ago. Occasionally ships would carry live animals that could be butchered but William knew that no livestock had been brought aboard on this voyage.

"Rats? You're eating rats?" he said, looking at Gromar and the Dwarf turned to look back at him.

"Of course I'm eating rats.." he responded, "What sort of meat do you expect us Dwarves to eat in our mines? Your fancy sheep, pigs and cows are all very well when you've got miles of fields for them to graze in but we don't have that. Of course we've got goats but we use them mainly for their milk and their wool. Their meat is only eaten by the nobility who can afford it. The rest of us eat rats. There's never any shortage of them wherever you go, even underground. Would you like to try one?"

William could see the logic in what Gromar had to say about the available sources of food in underground cities and he had heard of people eating rats out of desperation to avoid starving so he knew that it could be done, but he had never found himself in such a situation.

"No thank you." he said and Gromar smiled.

"You might like it you know." he said, "You'll never know if you don't try it."

"No thank you. I'll pass." William replied.

"Ah, here we go." Horace said, grinning as he plucked a piece of meat that looked like salted pork from a small barrel on a shelf and sniffed it. Despite the measures taken to try and preserve this the meat had begun to spoil and Horace placed it on a nearby counter before taking a large knife from the hook where it hung and began to slice up the meat before putting the pieces into a bowl, "Now time to catch us some fish." he added.

"I don't need your help." Horace told Gromar as the Dwarf followed the Halfling onto the *Storm Chaser's* deck. In one hand Gromar held a roasted rat that he took another bite of while in the other he had an empty basket to put the fish that Horace caught in.

"Well I have eaten your bait. The least I can do is help you out with your fishing, but why are you doing it now? Wouldn't it be easier to do in daylight?" Gromar replied.

"Maybe, but the fish I'm after only come near the surface during the hours of darkness." Horace replied, setting down the bowl of bait and then placing one piece onto the hook before he tossed it over the side of the ship, keeping the short stick that the other end of the line was tied to in his hand.

"So now we just wait for a fish to come along and eat your bait?" Gromar commented and Horace nodded.

"Yes, that's right." he said, "On a good night I can catch half a dozen or so. If I keep that up then everyone aboard gets fresh fish every other day. Or at least they would if we weren't carrying so many passengers. I'm sure that the captain will insist that I give Magister Quinnus fresh fish every day for starters."

"Maybe he doesn't like fish." Gromar commented, "Come to think of it what does he eat? I've heard that fopdoodle Thomas complaining about the food but I suspect that he doesn't normally eat as well as he has on this voyage."

"You don't think that the magister feeds his servants?" Horace commented.

"I went to the magister's house. I saw his chief manservant, a man called Obadiah who dressed as finely as the magister himself. I think that whatever this Thomas normally does for him, he doesn't help around the house. I think he goes places that a wealthy man like the magister can't afford to be seen." Gromar explained before he glanced out over the ocean and frowned.

"What's wrong?" Horace asked.

"Is that wreckage in the water?" Gromar said and he pointed to where his natural low light vision enabled him to pick out a number of dark shapes bobbing about on the surface of the ocean.

Horace looked out over the water for himself. Being descended from hybrids of humans and Dwarves, Halflings had limited night vision but it was inferior to that of Dwarves who had been created to life almost entirely underground. However, he too could just about make out several shadows on the surface of the water. Then a moment later he and Gromar both heard a cry.

"Help!"

"There are men in the water!" Gromar exclaimed.

"What's going on down there?" the senior crewman on duty shouted down from the rear structure and Horace looked up.

"He's right. There are men in the water over there." he said and he pointed to where the cry for help had come from. Although Horace could barely make out the men he was not surprised that they would have been able to see the *Storm Chaser* even in the dark given the lanterns that it was showing. The senior crewman looked out over the water but his eyesight was not good enough to enable him to see anything.

"I don't see anything." he said.

"They're there all right." Gromar replied just as Marcus came onto the deck with both Thomas and Diera.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"I can see men in the water." Gromar told him, pointing again.

"I can't see anything sir." the senior crewman added as Marcus looked out to sea as well.

"Dwarves can see better in the dark than humans." he pointed out, "If Mister Stonebreaker says that he can see men in the water then there are men in the water. Change your course."

"But sir I can't." the senior crewman began.

"Get your captain if you must, but I want those men saved." Marcus said.

"My lord are you sure?" Thomas asked, "The Elves will get further ahead."

Marcus pulled Thomas aside and began to speak to him quietly. In the meantime the crewmen on the tiller turned the ship as sharply as they could to head in the direction pointed out by Gromar and Horace while another crewman rushed below deck to fetch the captain.

It did not take long for Edwin and William to come rushing onto the deck.

"What's going on? What's this about men in the water?" Edwin demanded.

"It seems that we have come across some unfortunate victims of a shipwreck Captain Atwood." Marcus told him.

"And you ordered us to change course? I thought you were in a hurry magister." William said.

"I am not a monster Mister Beckett. I won't leave men to drown." Marcus replied before Edwin looked at William.

"Get a boat ready. Get out there and recover those men. Bring them aboard." he told his first mate.

"Yes captain." William responded.

As the *Storm Chaser* continued towards the floating wreckage the crew heard more cries for help coming from the darkness and when they came close enough they saw several men clinging to the floating pieces of wood and waving to try and attract attention to their locations. Then when the floating wreckage was barely a hundred yards away from the *Storm Chaser* the sail was taken in and the ship left to drift with the ocean current just as the wreckage was doing. The *Storm Chaser* carried three small rowing boats, each capable of holding no more than eight people and under William's supervision one of these was lowered over the side into the water and a ladder lowered down to it so that William and two crew could climb down into it. They then released the boat from the *Storm Chaser* and pushed off before the two crewmen began to row towards the nearest piece of wreckage that had men clinging to it.

Two men were holding on to what looked like a section of a mast from its shape and as the row boat got closer to them William saw that they appeared identically dressed. It did not take him long to place the uniforms that they wore as belonging to crewmen from the Hadarian navy and he saw that while one had grey hair the other looked as if he was barely out of his teens.

"Take my hand." he called out to the two men

"You first boy." the older man told the younger and then he waited while William pulled the younger man from the water into the rowing boat. Once the younger man was safe William then turned his attention to the older man and pulled him from the ocean as well.

"Thank you. Thank you." the older man gasped as he sat down.

"I thought we'd drown." the younger man added.

"Good job you listened to me and held on boy." the older man told him and he nodded.

"Yes chief." he said.

Meanwhile another man had let go of the wreck he was holding on to and swam towards the rowing boat. This was only a distance of twenty yards or so but the man was already cold and tired from being in the water for so long and he began gasping.

"Help me! I can't make it!" he called out.

"Quick toss him a line." William said and the older Hadarian sailor picked up a length of rope and tossed it towards the drowning man.

"Grab hold of this." he said as he threw the rope and the man in the water was able to catch it.

"Okay let's pull him in." William said and between them he and the two Hadarians already in the boat pulled the third man towards them and then dragged him in as well.

There was just one more Hadarian in sight and William directed the two crewmen from the *Storm Chaser* to row towards him. This man had been able to climb onto a relatively flat piece of wreckage and was holding on to a wooden beam that stuck straight up from it, an arrangement that kept him relatively clear of the water except when a wave washed over it. As soon as the boat came close enough though he let go of the wreckage that had kept him alive so far and took the hands of William and the older Hadarian before they pulled him aboard the boat.

"Are there any more of you out here?" William asked the older Hadarian sailor, "We can still take one more."

"No." the older man answered and he shook his head, "There were seven of us at first but the other three all went under."

"There was a boat." the younger Hadarian added and he snarled, "Somehow it was left afloat when our ships sank. We tried to get to it but a pair of officers took it and wouldn't let us aboard. They rowed away and left the seven of us to die out here."

William considered this for a moment. Given the reputation that Hadar had it did not surprise him that a pair of officers would abandon enlisted and possibly conscripted crewmen to die but he did not like the chance of survival that two men in a small boat such as the one he was now sat in would have if they attempted to row all the way to shore. It would take only one large wave to swamp such a boat. Of course the officers would have had no idea that the *Storm Chaser* would arrive in time to rescue any of the men they left behind or them if they had stayed so perhaps they too had been aware of the long odds of survival.

"Let's get back to the *Storm Chaser*. I expect the captain will want to know what happened to you." William said and the two crewmen from the *Storm Chaser* began to row the boat back towards the waiting ship, "I'm William Beckett by the way, first mate."

"I'm sure I speak for us all when I say that we are very glad to meet you and the rest of your crew." the older Hadarian replied, "I'm Aldbertus de Wit, bosun. These other men whose lives you've saved today are Lens Visser, Ecbertus Smits and the boy is Oric van der Meer."

When the boat reached the *Storm Chaser* the crewmen tied it to the ropes that had been used to lower it into the water while the four Hadarian sailors climbed up the ladder one at a time to the deck. As soon as they reached the top they were handed blankets that they draped over their shoulders before Edwin and Marcus approached them.

"I'm Captain Atwood, master of this vessel and this is Magister Quinnus, leader of our expedition." Edwin told the Hadarians.

"Bless you for saving us sir." Aldbertus replied, "If not for you we'd all have been dead before the sun came up."

"What happened to your ship?" Marcus asked.

"There was a battle." Aldbertus answered, "The captain of our flagship ordered us to attack a group of cogs. We all thought that they were cargo ships but they were all carrying archers."

"Were they Elves?" Marcus added.

"I'm sorry sir, if anyone got a good look at them I didn't hear about it." Aldbertus responded.

"There was a wizard on one of the ships as well." Lens added, "That's what did for our ship. They hit us with something that sent us into one of the other ships in our squadron."

"A wizard magister?" Edwin commented and he looked at Marcus nervously.

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"Yes. According to my information Princess Ammaril of Sylldarin is aboard one of those ships and she has a reputation as a competent sorceress." Marcus told him.

"Excuse me sir but what is to be done with us?" Aldbertus asked Edwin and he glanced at Marcus again.

"We can't afford the time to divert to Hadar." Marcus said and Edwin turned back towards the four rescued sailors.

"You'll have to stay onboard until we are returning." he said and Aldbertus nodded.

"Yes sir." he replied.

"Mister Beckett put these men on the books." Edwin told William who by this time had also climbed back aboard the *Storm Chaser* along with the other two crewmen and was supervising as the boat was being lifted back out of the water, "Assign them bunks and add them to the duty roster."

"Of course captain." William responded, "Come this way please." he then told the four Hadarians and as the five men headed towards the back of the ship William heard an excited cry.

"Got you!" Horace exclaimed and William looked towards the Halfling cook just as he pulled a fish onto the deck. Still alive, the fish flapped wildly while Horace took a wooden mallet and with a single blow he used it to swiftly kill the fish. Then he looked up and smiled as he held the fish in front of him, "Excellent news captain." he called out, "Fresh fish for dinner tomorrow."

As the crew returned to their regular duties or retired to their hammocks if they were off duty Marcus led his two assistants aside.

"Opinions?" Marcus asked.

"They may prove useful." Thomas commented, "Which would you start with?"

"Diera?" Marcus said, turning to the young woman standing close by, "Do you have a favourite?"

"I think the young one will be easiest my lord." she said, "I doubt he he is very experienced. It will be easy to manipulate him."

"If you can get him alone." Thomas added, "There isn't a lot of room below decks. Between the crew and our mercenaries everyone is crammed in tightly."

"Don't worry. I'll handle it." Diera replied.

"When do we need to start my lord?" Thomas said.

"There's no hurry yet." Marcus answered, "I think that we should give our new arrivals time to settle in before we move."

## 12

The *Torsol* was moving about more than usual as Orcan made his way on deck and he looked up at Vendril where he stood looking at the ocean ahead. As usual there were a number of the Elf warriors about but the pitching and rolling of the ship was making it difficult for them to move in unison as they trained.

"Captain," he called out to attract Vendril's attention and the other Elf looked down at him.

"Yes your highness?" he replied.

"Are we sailing into another storm?" Orcan asked and Vendril smiled, "What's so funny?" Orcan added.

"Take a look behind us your highness." Vendril told him and Orcan looked behind the *Torsol*. Following the cog he could see the other four vessels of their fleet and these were also moving up and down in the rough sea. Beyond that though there was just water until it met the sky above without any land in between them. Though the sky was dull and overcast it was not as dark as it had been during the storm that had damaged the *Mirra*.

"I don't see anything." Orcan said.

"Exactly." Vendril said, "We're out on the open ocean now your highness. The nearest land is more than thirty miles away. From here until we reach Oscay we can expect the sea to be rougher than we've experienced so far. Of course if we do hit bad weather it will be much worse than this."

"And we have twelve days of this?" Orcan said and Vendril nodded.

"Give or take, yes." he said, "Trust me your highness, if the motion is getting to you then I advise staying on deck. You won't feel as unwell as long as you can see the ocean moving around us."

"Thank you. I'll bear that in mind." Orcan said.

"Plus it's a lot better to be sick over the side than in your cabin." Vendril added and Orcan smiled back at him.

Below deck Lucia knocked on the door to Ammaril's cabin.

"Yes?" Ammaril responded from inside.

"Your highness it's Lucia. Have you finished with your meal?" Lucia asked.

"Yes, you may come in." Ammaril said and Lucia opened the door. Inside the cabin the empty plates and cup were on the tray Lucia had delivered them on while Ammaril was sat by the table making notes in a journal.

"I see you managed to finish your meal. I wasn't sure if you would." Lucia commented.

"Why wouldn't I?" Ammaril replied.

"I thought maybe being down here you'd get seasick your highness." Lucia said and Ammaril smiled.

"Haven't you ever met a sorcerer or sorceress?" she said.

"No mistress. Is that important?" Lucia responded.

"Yes, there's something about our power that means we don't suffer from sea sickness. We're too aware of the world around us to be affected by it. Even human spellcasters with their limited senses benefit from this." Ammaril explained, "Does the motion of the sea bother you?"

"Oh no." Lucia said, shaking her head, "I've been travelling aboard this ship long enough that I'm used to it. Right now I'm just glad we're past Hadar. When we encountered those warships I couldn't shake the feeling that if they got aboard then they'd drag me back to Hadar and sell me into slavery."

"You need have no fear of that my dear." Ammaril reassured her, "When we have acquired the power of the Oscari the Hadarians will have no choice but to behave themselves when it comes to their dealings with us or face our wrath."

"Would you free every slave in the world? Do you really think that what you'll find in Oscay will give you that sort of power?" Lucia said. She knew that slavery existed in almost every corner of the world. It was practised by every human kingdom in one form or another as well as by Ogres. Halflings rarely became involved in the trading or owning of slaves but because they lived within human territories some of them did. On the other hand very few Halflings themselves were taken as Slaves since they were ill suited to most of the heavy labour that they would be used for. Only the Elves and Dwarves, whose societies had been created by the Oscari had outlawed the practice and even then there were some members of each species that travelled to human controlled lands and indulged in the practice. Not every slave bought by an Elf trader was as lucky as Lucia had been.

"Perhaps." Ammaril answered, "To change an entire world is a challenging task, no matter how much power you can wield. Though I can promise you that not one Hadarian slaver will set foot on Sylldarin or any Elf land." Ammaril then closed the journal she was writing in and placed it on the table, taking care not to

position it too close to the edge where it may fall off due to the motion of the ship, "Walk with me. I'd like to take a stroll on deck." she added.

"Yes your highness." Lucia replied and the two women walked together to the *Torso's* deck.

"Not feeling well Orcan?" Ammaril commented when she saw her brother holding onto the rail at the side of the ship.

"I think I'll be fine." he replied as she and Lucia approached him and then he glanced at Lucia.

"I asked her to come with me. She is the only other woman aboard after all and it's nice to have some female company." Ammaril said, noticing this.

"Of course." Orcan said, "Captain Vendril says that we can expect conditions to be like this or worse until we reach Oscay."

"The return leg will be easier, trust me." Ammaril told him.

"Do you think that you'll find something there that will let you control the weather?" Orcan asked and Ammaril smiled.

"Perhaps." she answered, "Though I think that there may be other discoveries to be made that will be of far greater use to us."

Orcan smiled back at his sister.

"You know Ammaril this habit you've got into of only giving me half an answer can be very annoying at times." he said.

William leant on the rail at the front of the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure, looking towards the front of the ship along the deck to where Thomas leant against the rail at the side, standing just behind the wall of the forward structure. The man had first come up on deck before the sun set but had stayed there rather than retiring below deck. This was a pattern that he had repeated for several days now, ever since the *Storm Chaser* made it out onto the open sea and conditions became rougher. Thomas was not the only one of the passengers to be experiencing some degree of sea sickness but for most of the mercenaries the problem could be alleviated simply by lying in their hammocks. This provided them with a way to reduce the amount of motion that they felt. On the other hand the bunk in the small cabin that Thomas had been assigned moved with the ship and lying in it did nothing to make him feel better.

Hearing the door below him open William looked down to see Horace emerging onto the deck carrying a basket in which he had put his fishing line, bait and mallet.

"Catching tomorrow's supper Horace?" William said and the Halfling looked up at him and smiled. Then he carried the basket up the nearby stairs to the roof of the rear structure.

"I take it that it's okay to fish from up here Will?" he asked and William nodded.

"Be my guest. I'm not about to stop you catching us fresh fish." he said, "Gromar was telling me that he's getting a taste for it himself."

"He still prefers roasted rat though." Horace replied as he set the basket down and started to bait the hook. Then he glanced towards the front of the ship as well, looking at Thomas, "So he's here again is he?"

"I don't think he's got his sea legs yet." William said.

"Not much use at sea is he?" Horace commented and he began to lower his fishing line over the side of the ship, "Mind you I still can't quite figure out what use he'd be back in Teuten. Do you think that Gromar was right about him doing illegal jobs for the honourable magister?"

"I'll just say that I don't think I trust either of them. Or that woman for that matter. How old do you think she is compared to Magister Marcus Quinnus?" William responded.

"Young enough to be his daughter, easily." Horace said, "Ordinarily I'd have said that she was attracted by the contents of his purse but for that I'd have expected her to be sharing his cabin instead of having her own private one."

"Maybe she genuinely is an assistant to him. Though exactly what she's assisting him with is a mystery to me." William said.

"Yes, as far as I know she only leaves her cabin to take walks around the deck with the magister and sometimes that fellow currently retching over the side into the ocean." Horace commented and he pointed with a thumb over his shoulder towards Thomas and William frowned, "Something wrong Will?" Horace asked.

"It's just that normally I would have expected the magister and the young lady to have come up on deck to take their regular stroll." William pointed out, "I wonder what they can be doing instead tonight?"

The *Storm Chaser* had a number of cloaks and hats aboard that were meant for the crew to wear if they were to be on deck during poor weather and Diera took one of each of these from the hooks on which they were hung before putting them on. However, instead of heading up onto the cog's deck she made her way



down to the compartment where the lower ranking crew and mercenaries were quartered. This large communal space was filled with hammocks strung up between the vertical supporting struts. She made her way quietly between the sleeping sailors and mercenaries as she looked for one individual without waking anyone else up. If any of the other sailors did happen to wake up then all they would see was a figure in a cloak and hat rather than Diera.

The first clue that Diera had found the man she was looking for was the Hadarian uniform that he was wearing and she moved closer until she was able to confirm that it was Oric, the youngest of the four rescued sailors. Walking up to Oric's hammock Diera placed a hand on his shoulder and shook him gently to wake him up.

"What-?" Oric said as his eyes opened but Diera placed a finger on his lips.

"Shush." she said softly, leaning in closely so that he could see her face beneath the hat she wore, "You don't want to wake any of the others up."

"What do you want?" Oric asked and Diera smiled at him.

"Come with me and stay quiet." Diera told him and he quickly got out of his hammock.

"Where are we going?" he said as he put his boots on.

"To my cabin of course. That's why we can't let anyone else see." Diera replied and Oric grinned.

"Okay I'm ready." he said, nodding his head and Diera took him by the hand as she led him between the other hammocks with the sleeping sailors and mercenaries inside them blissfully unaware of either of them.

As soon as they were outside of the crew's quarters Diera removed her hat but she continued to move carefully as she led Oric by the hand towards her cabin, peering around each corner that they came to.

"What are you doing?" Oric said.

"No-one can see us together." Diera replied, "They might tell on us."

"Your master?" Oric commented.

"The rest of the crew. I don't want them talking about us." Diera told him, "Look, there's my cabin."

The pair then darted to the door to Diera's cabin and she went inside first, holding the door open for Oric to follow. The young sailor walked past Diera into the centre of the cabin where he saw that although it was not luxuriously decorated it was clean and in place of the hammocks he was used to sleeping in had a proper bunk. Behind him he heard the door close and a 'click' as Diera slid the bolt shut to lock it. Smiling he then turned around.

"So what do you want-" he began before he saw that as well as Diera standing by the door Marcus was standing where he would have been positioned behind it as it opened, meaning that he had walked right past the magister without noticing the man, "Sir I am sorry I-" Oric began, thinking that Marcus was about to lose his temper at him.

"Be silent." Marcus said sternly but calmly and he stared straight into Oric's eyes.

Oric opened his mouth to speak again but found himself unable to utter a word while Marcus continued to stare directly at him. The magister then advanced slowly towards Oric while maintaining eye contact with him all the time and the young man found himself unable to move from the spot, locking in place and silenced somehow. All Oric could focus on was Marcus' face and as he saw the man's mouth began to open wide it looked as if his canine teeth were growing before his eyes.

"Ah, look at you my lovely." Horace said as he pulled another fish from the water, lying on the deck in front of him before using his mallet to finish it off rather than leaving it to suffocate. Then he removed the hook from its mouth and placed it in his basket with the other similar fish that he had already caught that night.

"I'm impressed Horace. Two already." William commented and the Halfling nodded.

"The shoals are bigger out here further from land." he said, "The problem is that there are bigger fish too. They could take the bait or perhaps even try to swallow the fish that I've already hooked but they're too big for me to get aboard. The line would snap and I'll lose the hook."

"You have spares don't you?" William asked.

"Of course I do but not that many. We could be out here for weeks and weeks. Each hook lost is one that I can't replace until we're back in Teuten." Horace pointed out. Then he looked along the deck to where Thomas had been stood earlier but the man was now gone, "I see he's gone." he commented.

"Probably nothing left in his stomach to send over the side." William replied before they both heard the sound of something hitting the water behind the Storm Chaser.

"What was that?" Horace said.

"I don't know. It sounded like something just fell off the ship." William replied and he and Horace both walked to the back of the vessel and looked down into the water, "See anything down there Horace?" he asked, knowing that the Halfling could see better in the dark than he could.

"Yes, there's something out there." Horace said as he tried to focus on the object he could just about make out among the waves and then he gasped as he realised what it was, "It's a body! There's someone in the water!"

"Man overboard!" William yelled and then he waved to the men on the tiller, "Take us about. Take in the sail and get a boat ready. Horace go and get the captain."

William stayed at the side of the Storm Chaser, looking out towards the body floating in the water doing his best to keep it in sight while the rowing boat was prepared to recover it.

"What's going on?" Edwin asked as he rushed up the steps from the main deck with Horace close behind him and William pointed to the shape in the water.

"Someone's gone overboard captain." he replied and Edwin rushed to his side to see for himself.

"Have you got a boat ready?" he said and William nodded.

"It's being lowered now." he told the captain.

Although a small boat was better suited to use near the shore than on the open ocean the water was not so rough that it was likely to be swamped and the body was only a few yards away by this point. While two of the crewmen in the boat rowed it towards the floating body the third extended a hook mounted on the tip of a long pole to grasp the body before pulling it to the boat.

"It's one of the Hadarians." the crewman shouted as soon as he saw the uniform that the body was wearing.

"Which one?" Edwin shouted back from the *Storm Chaser*.

"I'm sorry captain, I can't tell." the crewman replied and Edwin frowned.

"What does he mean he can't tell?" he said, looking at William.

"Perhaps we should just get the body aboard captain." he suggested and Edwin nodded.

"Yes of course. Perhaps the poor soul struck the side of the ship as he fell and the impact has disfigured his face." Edwin said before he looked down at the crewmen in the boat and yelled to them, "Get back aboard now and we'll take a look at him."

"Captain perhaps I should go below and wake the other Hadarians. Whoever died was one of them." William said.

"Yes and if we have the other three then we'll know who went into the water, won't we?" Edwin commented.

William did not reply to this comment though and instead he rushed below decks to fetch the other three Hadarian sailors that had been taken aboard the Storm Chaser. Before he could get to the compartment where the crew's hammocks were located though he encountered Marcus and Diera in a hallway.

"Mister Beckett there seems to be a lot of commotion on deck and Diera and I were just about to take our stroll. Is something wrong?" Marcus asked calmly, seemingly oblivious to what was happening.

"I'm afraid that one of the Hadarians went overboard magister. I'm just on my way to wake the others while we bring the body aboard." William told him.

"You've recovered the body?" Marcus said and William noticed his eyes widen slightly.

"Yes, we lowered a boat as soon as we saw it. Now if you don't mind I need to wake the other Hadarians." William said before he sidestepped Marcus and Diera and hurried past them.

## 13

The body was left in the boat while it was lifted up from the water before being lifted out and placed on the deck. Just as the crewman who had dragged the body from the water had said it was in a very poor condition and it appeared to have been dead for a long time.

"That's a Hadarian uniform alright." Edwin said.

"But what happened to him?" Horace asked.

"He drowned, he must have drowned." Edwin said.

"Captain I've pulled men from the water before and none of them looked like that." a crewman commented.

"Something in the water must have had a go at him then." Edwin replied.

"He doesn't look like anything has tried to eat him captain." Horace said, "The fish in these waters-"

"Is there a problem captain?" Marcus' voice said suddenly and Edwin turned around to see the magister and Diera standing close by.

"Ah magister." Edwin said, "I'm afraid that we've had a man fall overboard."

"Yes, Mister Beckett told me that it was one of the Hadarians but he didn't say which one." Marcus responded.

"I'm afraid we can't tell magister. The body is badly damaged, so badly that we can't tell who it is." Edwin said before he saw William coming back onto the deck with three Hadarians, "Ah it seems we have our answer." Edwin added.

"Captain I've brought the others." William said as they approached the group clustered around the body, "It's young Oric."

"He was supposed to be in his hammock." Aldbertus added, "What was he doing on deck?"

"He wasn't." William said, "He must have fallen from a window."

"A window? How would he have gained access to a window?" Aldbertus asked, "Aren't all of them in your cabins?"

"Captain if I may interject here?" Marcus said and the assembled crewmen all turned to look at him.

"Of course, please do." Edwin replied.

"Thank you captain." Marcus said, "I think it is obvious what has happened here. Young Mister van der Meer obviously suffered some minor injury when his ship sank that subsequently became infected. The results of that infection led him to walk in his sleep before he tragically fell from an open window. I suspect that he died very soon after he entered the water, possibly even before and there is nothing that could have been done to save him."

"An infection?" Horace said.

"Exactly. I'm afraid he was probably doomed before he was even first brought aboard the *Storm Chaser*." Marcus said.

"Yes of course, that must be the answer." Edwin said.

"Captain I hate to say this but keeping the body aboard could be dangerous. The infection may spread." Marcus said.

"You're right of course magister." Edwin replied, "We'll carry out the burial immediately."

"Captain the body should be examined. The death will have to be reported when we return to port." William pointed out and Edwin glanced at Marcus for a moment.

"The longer the body is aboard the greater the risk." Marcus told him.

"You heard the magister Will. That poor young man had an infection and in his delirium he fell overboard. There's no need to go cutting him open and putting the rest of us at risk of getting sick as well. Now let's show some respect for young Oric and lay him to rest properly like a good sailor." Edwin said sternly.

The body of Oric was wrapped and sewn up in the hammock he had been sleeping in for the short time he had been a part of the crew before his three fellow Hadarians tipped him over the side of the *Storm Chaser* into the ocean while Edwin recited words intended to ease his passing into the afterlife. Once this was done the gathered crewmen dispersed and given that his shift was now over William headed back towards his cabin. However, as he approached it Gromar suddenly emerged from his wearing his nightshirt and beckoned him closer.

"Will., this way. We need to talk." the Dwarf said softly and William looked around before he headed for Gromar's cabin instead of his own.

"What is it Gromar?" William asked.

"Will, what's happening up on deck?" Gromar asked, "Someone's dead, aren't they?"

William nodded.

"It was young Oric van der Meer, one of the Hadarians. Somehow he fell out of a window into the sea." he answered and Gromar frowned.

"You don't sound so certain." Gromar said as he sat on the side of his bunk, "Tell me exactly what happened."

"Well Horace and I were up on deck. I was on watch and he was catching more fish for the galley." Will began as he pulled a nearby chair closer to him and then sat down on it, "That's when we heard the sound of something hitting the water behind the ship and looked over to see what it was. I couldn't see much of course but Horace saw that it was a body so we raised the alarm for a man overboard. We put a boat in the water and the body was brought back aboard but by then Oric was already dead."

"He drowned that quickly? Didn't he call out for help?" Gromar asked and William frowned.

"No, no he didn't cry out but he may not have died from drowning. We didn't know that it was Oric at first when the body was recovered because his face was, well it's hard to describe. Captain Atwood suggested that he'd struck his head against the side of the ship as he fell and that had caused the damage I saw." he said.

"Is that what it looked like to you?" Gromar said.

"No, not really. There was no blood that you'd expect from a blow like that. He looked more as if the life had simply drained out of him." William replied.

"Drained?" Gromar commented and William nodded.

"Yes, drained." he responded, "Anyway once the body was brought aboard Magister Quinnus came on deck, for his nightly stroll he said, though he was taking it later than usual and he said that he thought it likely that Oric had had some sort of infection when he came aboard. That he was sick and went wandering about the ship before falling overboard. He thought that Oric died almost as soon as he hit the water if not before."

"And what do you think about this so-called infection Will?" Gromar said.

"Well I suppose that it's possible but we couldn't even carry out an inspection of the body to determine what happened to him. We may not have a surgeon aboard but drive a spike into a dead lung and whether you get water, pus or air leaking out will tell you if they drowned, had some sort of infection or-" William began before he stopped and after a moment's hesitation Gromar spoke up.

"Or if something else happened to him before his body was dumped over the side into the ocean where his killer expected it to drift away unseen in the darkness because everyone knows that you humans have terrible night vision." he said.

"You know something." William said, staring at Gromar and the Dwarf engineer sighed.

"You asked me before about the stories that the Dwarves tell." he replied, "Well there are more stories than just the few I told you. Some of them start from the years just before the Oscari disappeared entirely. This was during the time that we didn't see them much and the Elves were doing most of their work for them. Anyway, some of the Elves that came to collect what we had mined for the Oscari started to vanish while they were in our kingdoms underground. As far as we could tell they had just wandered off and little was thought of it. They were searched for of course, just in case they had gotten lost but they weren't found, not at first that is. After that though the bodies of Dwarves started to be found in the mines or underground halls. All of them appeared gaunt and old even when it was known that while alive the person had been young and in very good health. It was like the life had just been drained out of them somehow. It was also said that if you opened one of them up then you'd find little to no blood left inside their bodies even though there had been no sign of bleeding where they were found." he explained and William stared at him for a moment.

"You're talking about vampires, aren't you?" he said.

"Aye, I'm talking about vampires." Gromar said, nodding his head slowly, "Or at least that's the name your people gave to them when they became aware of their existence. We never really had a word for them ourselves, all we knew was what they were doing and we hunted them down. We found that they were able to corrupt a number of our people to serve them but they were relatively easy to kill. On the other hand the monsters themselves could only be killed by decapitation, impalement through the heart or exposure to sunlight. That's probably why they came to the Dwarf kingdoms to begin with. We lived underground where they could hunt at any hour without fear of the sun and they thought that would protect them. It didn't in the end though and when my people found them they made sure to make them pay. Some were killed outright, nests of them were sealed up to entomb the occupants and leave them to starve while other were just taken outside and staked out for the rising sun to deal with. I think the vampires themselves know all this as well which is why they don't try to bother us any more. An underground kingdom may be convenient for avoiding the sun but it makes it difficult to skip town when the going gets tough. On the other hand anyone can leap in a cart to flee a human or Elf city."

"You think that Magister Quinnus is a vampire?" William said.

"I think that all the signs are pointing to it Will." Gromar replied, "He only goes above deck after dark and no-one ever sees him eat do they?"

"No they don't. In fact this could also explain another mystery." William said.

"Oh really and what's that?" Gromar asked.

"How he came aboard in the first place. It was the middle of the day and no-one saw him walk up the gang plank. Everyone seems to have been somewhere else or looking the other way when he boarded but there was a rather large trunk that had to be carried aboard carefully from the cart that brought his luggage and servants. When the crew were carrying it aboard that toady of his Thomas was quite insistent that they take good care of it." William said.

"Let me guess Will. The box was at least six feet long." Gromar commented with a smile.

"I'd say about eight." William told him and he smiled back.

"Ah, so our vampire wanted to be carried around in comfort. What a pity that your crew didn't drop it in the water just to spite Thomas." Gromar said.

"The question now has to be what can we do about it?" William said, "Marcus Quinnus has got the captain eating out of his hand."

"How many of the crew do you think you can persuade to follow you instead?" Gromar asked and William sighed.

"I don't know." he said, "Horace would be with us of course but-

"But a Halfling doesn't make much of a soldier. Do you have any experience in military matters?" Gromar interrupted.

"I was in the Dannaron navy for a while. I got sick of the corruption so I jumped ship." William told him.

"And I learnt engineering with my army. So that's two soldiers and a cook who's rather handy with a fishing hook. Not much of a force to seize control of a ship and kill a vampire." Gromar said.

"Oric was a Hadarian. I'm sure that his fellow countrymen would join us to get justice for him. They don't owe anything to Captain Atwood or the magister. But that still leaves us with only six against two dozen crew and thirty mercenaries." William said, "I'd suggest trying to bribe the mercenaries to join us but I'm not sure that we can compete with the stories they're telling one another about cities of gold that they'll plunder when we reach Oscay."

"I don't suppose that Horace can whip up something we can put into everyone's food can he? Not enough to kill them but enough to make them unable to fight while we deal with the magister." Gromar suggested.

"I doubt it. If there's anything that could be used for that aboard this ship then either the magister or his mercenaries brought it aboard." William said, "I've heard of vampires of course, but I've never met anyone who had actually tried to kill one. What do you think our odds would be of overpowering the magister with just the six of us before anyone could come to help him?"

"If what I've heard about vampires is true then the reason you've not met anyone who tried to kill one is because most who try end up dead themselves. They have power that even wizards can't match and they've been around longer. Or so I've heard, remember that there are no wizards among the Dwarves just as there are no vampires."

"Do you think there's a connection there? That wizards and vampires could be related? The Hadarians said that there was a wizard aboard the ships that sank theirs." William reminded Gromar and the Dwarf paused to think for a moment.

"Possibly, but when it came to fighting vampires my ancestors raised armies to drive them out of our kingdoms. We didn't have wizards and the Elves sent no help." Gromar said, "Six of us might be enough but if that's all we have then we should wait until we reach Oscay."

"Why?" William asked.

"Because I expect that he'll send his mercenaries ashore first. Maybe those two minions of his as well. That will increase our chances somewhat." Gromar answered.

"Then I'll speak to Aldbertus and warn him about our suspicions. If Oric was targeted because he wasn't one of the regular crew then the other Hadarians could be at risk as well." William said and Gromar nodded.

"That's a good point. I think we should also keep an eye on Thomas and Diera. If we can arrange for either of them to have an accident then that would work in our favour." he said, "In fact just watching the magister's behaviour in general could reveal something that we could use against him."

"We should also see what we can do about getting more of the crew on our side. I doubt that I'll be able to convince the captain to change his mind but there may be some of them that will listen to reason." William added.

"Yes but take care. From the sounds of it Captain Atwood is under the magister's control and there could be more among the crew. Say the wrong thing to one of them and you may as well be telling the vampire himself what we're planning." Gromar warned him.

"Land ahoy!" the *Torso's* lookout yelled from his post at the top of the ship's mast and he pointed ahead of the ship to where a narrow band of grey had appeared between the blue of the sea and the sky. Upon hearing this Orcan and Tiellan came rushing onto the deck and up the steps to join Vendril.

"Is it Oscay?" Tiellan asked.

"What else could it be?" Orcan added and Vendril nodded.

"Yes, it's Oscay." he said, "There's nothing else out this way until we get to Yaysa and we haven't been sailing long enough to reach that continent yet. I suppose the question to be asked now is where do you want to land? There are thousands of miles of coastline to choose from after all."

"I'd better go and get Ammaril. She's been studying all the information that we have about this continent for several years now. I know she has a specific destination in mind." Orcan said and he started back down the steps.

"I'll get our warriors ready." Tiellan said and Orcan paused and turned back towards him.

"What for?" he asked.

"Orcan you know the stories about this continent as well as I do. The ships that never came back. If there is danger here then we should be ready to face it." Tiellan pointed out and Orcan nodded.

"Yes, do it. From now on I want archers in position around the clock." he said before he turned around again and continued down the steps.

When Orcan reached Ammaril's cabin he rushed inside and found her rummaging through some of the papers that she had brought with her from Syldarin.

"Ah Orcan." she said, looking up at him when she heard someone entering the room.

"Ammaril the lookout has sighted land ahead of us. It's Oscay, we're there. We made it." Orcan replied excitedly.

"Yes, I heard. I'm looking for the map that will show us the best place to land. Go and get Captain Vendril, Tiellan and Yilven. Bring them all here." Ammaril told him.

"Tiellan and I had already discussed a landing site with the captain. Just a short walk from-" Orcan began but Ammaril shook her head.

"My studies have shown me the best place to land Orcan. I will brief the captain myself." she interrupted.

"As you wish Ammaril but aren't you coming up on deck?" Orcan asked but Ammaril shook her head again.

"No. The map is large so we're better off studying here in my cabin on this table." she said.

"Very well, I'll be right back. You just find the map." Orcan responded before he hurried back out of the cabin.

While Orcan was gone Ammaril continued to search through the material that she had brought with her.

While she had not been able to bring everything in the library that she had acquired she had been able to bring a lot of the books and papers and she knew that the map she wanted was among them.

"A-ha!" she exclaimed as she found what she was looking for, a large map contained within a leather tube that she unrolled onto the table and weighing it down at the corners to prevent it from rolling up again by itself before her brother returned with the other senior Elves. The map showed just the eastern part of Oscay, including the secondary landmass located further north than the course that the Elves had followed.

"Ah there you all are." she said and then she pointed to the map, "This map shows the area of Oscay that we're interested in. It is a copy of one left behind by the ancient Oscari themselves so its accuracy can be relied on. Captain Vendril, can you estimate our position on it?"

"Of course your highness." Vendril replied and he looked down at the map. Most voyages by sea kept within sight of land and navigation was based upon known landmarks while when it was necessary to travel further out to sea, when sailing from one continent to another for example a compass bearing would be used to keep a ship on a steady course. As well as showing the outline of Oscay, the map was also marked with navigational lines that the Oscari had used to divide up the world and were still used to this day by the species they left behind. Therefore, knowing the distance that had been travelled and the bearing that had been followed as closely as possible Vendril was able to rapidly calculate the position of their ships, "We should be about here." he said, placing a finger on the map just north of the point where the coast line changed from running north to south and turned sharply westward.

"Then we need to follow the coast around to the west." Ammaril said, "This city here is our destination." and she pointed to a marking that represented a city on the coast, "There was a harbour there during the time of the Oscari though it may not be serviceable after all these years. The city was not the Oscari's capital but according to my information it was a major hub for travel and trade and its library was extensive, bringing together the knowledge that the Oscari gathered from around the world."

"Whether or not the harbour is still intact we can still row ashore. It will just take us a while longer." Vendril said, "I'd recommend sending a boat ahead anyway to test the depth of the water before we risk the ships though."

"Will that take long?" Orcan asked and Vendril shook his head.

"No, maybe an hour or two at most. All it needs is a couple of my men to row into the harbour while a third uses a wooden pole to probe for the bottom. If he hits it then the water is too shallow for our ships. Hopefully the Oscari marked the harbour itself with something that will tell us what the high and low tide levels are that will still be there and readable. If not then there's a chance that we could be arriving at high tide and find ourselves stuck when it goes back out again."

"Shouldn't a harbour be deep enough to avoid that?" Tiellan commented.

"Any well maintained harbour, yes. But I doubt that the harbour we're making for will have been cleared out in centuries." Vendril pointed out.

"Then hopefully the harbour will prove adequate for our needs. If not then we will just have to be patient while we use the boats to disembark." Ammaril said, "Captain Vendril, please set your course to take us here." and she tapped the map once more where the ancient city was located.

"Of course your highness. If my estimate is correct then we should be there tomorrow." Vendril replied.

"So that's it then is it? That's Oscay?" William said as he and Edwin looked over the *Storm Chaser's* prow at the land that was just about visible ahead of them and Edwin nodded.

"That's it. You see Will? I told you that this voyage would be a success. We've made it here safe and sound. You were worried about nothing." he said excitedly, "Just think of all the loot."

"I'm not convinced we're out of danger just yet captain." William replied before he heard the sound of footsteps from behind them and he looked around just in time to see Thomas and the two mercenary officers Alphonse and Everad as they passed by the ballista that had gone unused during the long voyage from Teuten, "Come to take a look at Oscay then?" William said and then before any of the men could respond he quickly added, "So where's your master? Isn't he coming out of his cabin on this fine day to take a look at the mythical Oscay as well?"

"Magister Quinnus has other matters to attend to." Thomas responded, snarling at William as he spoke.

"It doesn't look like much, does it?" Everad commented as he looked across the sea.

"No different to any of the other shorelines we've seen on this trip." Alphonse replied.

"I'm sure that it will be more interesting when we get ashore." Thomas said.

"So where are the Elves?" Everad then asked, "Aren't we supposed to have been following them? We still haven't seen any sign of them."

"Other than the wrecked Hadarian ships." William pointed out.

"They may have followed a slightly different course across the ocean. They could make landfall a hundred miles away or more." Edwin told him.

"Magister Quinnus needs to be told. He'll know what to do next." Thomas said.

"I'll go and tell him." Edwin replied, "Will keep on this course until I get back."

"Yes captain." William said with a nod and while Edwin headed for Marcus' cabin William made his way to the rear structure to direct the men on the tiller and it was just after he got there that Gromar came on deck and up the stairs towards him.

"I hear we're there." the Dwarf said and William pointed towards the land.

"Right there." he replied and the pair of them walked away from the tiller so that they could talk in private.

"So how many do you think we can count on?" Gromar asked quietly.

"In addition to the six of us we counted on originally?" William responded and Gromar nodded, "Another six. That gives us about a third of the regular crew once you add in Horace and myself. If we can make sure that none of them are assigned to the boats then we'll have almost even numbers providing we make our move when the last of the mercenaries are being taken ashore."

"Let's hope that it's enough." Gromar said.

"I don't suppose you can tell me what will happen if we kill a vampire can you? Once he's dead everyone else is going to think that we killed the man paying us." William said.

"Don't worry about that Will. Some of the stories mention them crumbling to dust once destroyed." Gromar told him, "Once we've killed the monster it will be obvious what he was. Of course it would help if we could kill him in front of everyone else so that they can see him crumble."

"You say that we have to either cut his head off or stab him through the heart?" William said and Gromar nodded.

"That's right. Head or heart." he replied.

"So what if we hit him somewhere else?"

"Then you'll just make him angry and an angry vampire is going to kill you." Gromar answered.  
"I was thinking that if we can get him on deck then maybe we can shoot him with a crossbow." William said, "Hit him in the heart and he'll crumble or hit him somewhere else and everyone will see that he isn't human if he doesn't fall."  
Gromar looked William directly in the face and a smile spread across the Dwarf's face.  
"Now that is a good idea." he said, "Do you have any crossbows in the ship's armoury or do we need to try and get one off the mercenaries'?"  
"We have a dozen of them aboard." William said, "I can easily get us a couple of them."

When Edwin entered Marcus' cabin he found his passenger sorting through a small pile of books as if he was looking for a particular piece of information.  
"Magister I'm sorry to disturb you." Edwin said as he closed the door behind him.  
"That's quite alright captain. I understand that Oscay is within sight." Marcus responded and Edwin nodded.  
"Yes magister. Though there are no signs of the Elves we were following." he admitted.  
"No, that doesn't surprise me captain. The Elves likely have a specific destination in mind and will have changed course towards it." Marcus said and Edwin frowned.  
"Then what are we to do magister?" he asked.  
"If we just continued directly towards Oscay how long until we get there?" Marcus responded.  
"We'll probably be able to make landfall just after dark magister." Edwin answered and Marcus smiled.  
"Excellent timing." he said, "Then that is what I would like us to do captain. Continue towards shore and inform me when we arrive. Just in case I think that we should keep the ballista manned and several of our troops on deck. Please see to that as well."  
"Yes magister." Edwin replied and then he left the cabin again, making his way back to the deck where he found William and Gromar still standing in front of the tiller.  
"Is the magister still not coming out to take a look at Oscay for himself captain?" William commented.  
"No, the magister has other things to occupy his time Will." Edwin replied, "We're to keep on this course until we reach land and inform him when we get there."  
"Which at our current rate will be just after sundown." William said, glancing at Gromar.  
"Yes, I advised the magister that that would be the case." Edwin said, "He was happy with the estimate."  
"Yes, I bet he was." William said.

While Edwin remained on the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure to direct the vessel from near the tiller Alphonse kept watch from the forward structure instead where three of the mercenaries stood by the ballista, the weapon loaded with an iron tipped bolt that was capable of piercing the hull of most ships and another squad of men armed with crossbows waited close by just in case the ship came under attack. This precaution appeared to be unnecessary though as the ocean and the sky above it remained empty as the cog continued towards land.  
Meanwhile below deck Gromar and Aldbertus made their way to William's cabin together and went inside.  
"So can you get us the crossbows Will?" Gromar asked.  
"I was just about to go and get them." William replied, "Come, the pair of you can help me carry them."  
"Do we need a key?" Aldbertus said and William looked at him.  
"No, why would we?" he responded.  
"On Hadarian ships weapons are locked away to prevent mutinies." he said.  
"You mean mutinies like the one we're about to stage?" Gromar commented and William smiled.  
"Yes. Exactly. Only the captain and a few officers are able to get to the weapons. Of course the crew have tools that could be used as weapons but no swords or bows." Aldbertus said.  
"Well here on the *Storm Chaser* our armoury is kept open just in case we come under attack and no-one can find a key." William said as he walked towards the door from his cabin.  
In the hallway outside he walked calmly towards the ship's small armoury, ignoring other crewmen as he walked past them. The armoury was just a small compartment that had been set up to store enough weapons for the entire crew. Most of these were short swords of various patterns that had been acquired over a period of time from different sources but along one wall there were a dozen crossbows all hung up on large hooks with quivers of bolts beneath them.  
"Here, take one each." William said as he unhooked one of the crossbows from the wall and handed it to Gromar. Then he took a second and passed it to Aldbertus.  
"Won't there be a dozen of us? Why not take them all?" the Hadarian asked.  
"Because anyone who saw us carrying a dozen crossbows would know that we were up to something." William pointed out, "We'll just take these back to my cabin and keep them there. We may have time to come



back later and get some more but for now these will do. Grab yourself a quiver of ammunition though." he added before he picked up a quiver of bolts and slung it over his shoulder before Gromar and Aldbertus did the same.

The trio then exited the armoury and began to make their way back towards William's cabin when they heard a shout from on deck.

"Ship ahoy!"

"A ship out here?" Aldbertus said.

"Sounds like we've finally caught up with those Elves." Gromar said and then looking at Aldbertus he added, "The ones who sank your ships."

"This complicates matters." William said.

"So what do we do now?" Aldbertus asked and William unslung his quiver before handing his crossbow and its ammunition to Gromar.

"Take these and the pair of you should head back to your cabin. I'm going to go and find out what's happening." William told him before he hurried towards the stairs leading up to the ship's deck.

The sun had just set when William emerged onto the *Storm Chaser's* deck and then rushed up the stairs to the tiller.

"Will there you are, the lookout has spotted ships ahead of us." Edwin said to him.

"Ships? More than one then?" William asked and Edwin nodded.

"It could be the Elves but we're too far away to see them clearly in the dark." he answered.

Looking ahead of the *Storm Chaser* William was just about able to make out several shapes in the darkness but as Edwin had said it was impossible to tell exactly what they were from this distance. However, as William studied the mysterious shapes he noticed something significant.

"There are too many." he said, "There were five Elven ships in the harbour at Teuten and there must be at least twice that here."

"You're right." Edwin replied. Only a few of the ships had been visible at first but as the *Storm Chaser* closed on them the shapes separated out and it was now clear that there were too many ships to be only the Elven vessels that he had already seen. The vessels were still too far away to be seen clearly in the dark though so all that could be done was to wait until the *Storm Chaser* got closer to them.

All of the ships that had been spotted were located very close to the shore and as the *Storm Chaser* continued towards them it became apparent that there were more ships that had been washed up on the shore itself. In addition to this as the outlines of each ship became clearer they were revealed to be of a variety of types and vintages.

"It's a graveyard of dead ships." Alphonse called out from the front of the ship as he stared in amazement at the ships.

Looking at the ships for himself William was able to start picking out the different types of vessels that were present. He saw several longships in addition to a handful of cogs more similar to the *Storm Chaser* but there were even a few hulks among them despite the difficulty that such vessels would have in crossing the open ocean. More startling though were the ships that had been wrecked on the shore, among which was a type of vessel that William had heard of and seen depicted in drawings and paintings but never in real life.

"That's a trireme." he said in amazement.

Triremes had once dominated sea travel using a combination of sail and oar power to propel them. Like hulks though they were better suited to travel close to shore and it was a miracle that it had been able to get to Oscay.

"A what?" Edwin responded and he turned his gaze from the ships still at sea to those on the shore where he saw the same vessel that had attracted William's attention, "You're right Will. That really is a trireme. It must be hundreds of years old."

"I think a lot of these ships could be." William added before Marcus came out on deck.

"Magister." Edwin said when he looked down and saw him.

"Captain Atwood, I heard the call that ships have been sighted." Marcus replied as he walked up the steps to join Edwin and Marcus. At the same time Thomas started to walk towards the back of the ship to join his employer.

"Yes magister, though they are not the Elves we were chasing." Edwin replied.

"What are they all doing here?" Thomas asked as he reached the top of the stairs as well, "Isn't it rather convenient that we happen to reach Oscay right where they all did?"

"Not really." William commented, still looking at the mysterious ships rather than facing Thomas while he spoke, "We just took the most direct route we could so it's reasonable to think that the crews of those old ships did the same. Even if currents and winds took them to different places on the coast within say fifty or a hundred miles they could have sailed along it looking for somewhere interesting to land. Seeing another ship

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would probably attract their attention, after all if someone else thought a particular place was interesting enough to land then why not do the same and see what they found?"

"Will's right." Edwin added, nodding his head in agreement, "I'd say that there are about a dozen ships here but given how long it's been since the Oscari disappeared I wouldn't be surprised if several hundred ships hadn't risked the crossing. There could be clusters of ships like this up and down the coast."

"The question we should be asking though is what happened to all the crews of these ships?" William said, "They obviously survived the ocean crossing and went ashore but obviously none of them survived to make the return trip."

"We should go aboard them and find out." Edwin said, "Their captains may have left logs."

"Or they could be so rotten that the first man aboard will put his foot right through the deck. Those ships have been here years, centuries even with no-one to maintain them." William pointed out.

"I don't like the sound of that." Thomas said.

"There is also the matter of treasure." Edwin added and Thomas' eyes widened for a moment.

"Treasure?" he said.

"Yes. Coinage to pay the crew or purchase supplies." Edwin replied, "Plus anything that the crews could have found here of course. Bringing that aboard and sharing it among the crew would boost morale and show them the benefits to be had of coming here. Don't you agree Will?"

"Yes captain." William said reluctantly but he suspected that Edwin was correct. Handing out handfuls of coins to the crew while promising them that there was more to come would most likely encourage them to follow Marcus when he decided that it was time to go ashore, "But what if whatever killed the crews is still aboard the ships?"

"Will you're speaking as if the ships are cursed." Edwin said with a smile.

"Cursed? What do you mean cursed?" Thomas said, looking nervously back and forth between Edwin and William.

"Sailors have always been superstitious Thomas." Marcus said, "If there is any danger then our soldiers will be enough to deal with it."

"Exactly magister." Edwin said, "We have three boats and each can take eight men. I suggest loading two of my crew and six of your mercenaries into each of them. They can search the ships for anything of interest and bring it back here."

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Gromar raised his warhammer when he heard someone turning the handle of his cabin door from the outside while Aldbertus drew his dagger. However, when the door was thrown open it was William that burst into the room.

"Will what's going on?" Gromar asked.

"There are about a dozen abandoned ships out there. Some of them look hundreds of years old." William answered, "The captain and Magister Quinnus have decided to send boarding parties to investigate them before we make landfall."

"How many are going?" Gromar said.

"All three boats will be full. Two of our crew plus six mercenaries each." William told him.

"That's more than half of the mercenaries gone." Aldbertus added and William nodded.

"Exactly. This could be our best chance." he said, "We'll need everyone on deck."

"What about these?" Aldbertus said and he picked up one of the nearby crossbows.

"We'll need a bag for them. Get them by the tiller so we can hit the magister wherever he is on deck." William told him.

"You're sure that he'll be there?" Gromar said and William nodded.

"He and the captain are hoping that there'll be information about Oscay aboard those ships that could help us. He'll be there to see what the boarding parties bring back." he said.

"I'll go and get Horace." Gromar said.

"Good. He'll probably be able to find us a bag to hide the crossbows in." William responded.

"And I'll get the others." Aldbertus added, "Where should we meet?"

"On deck will do. I'm going to head back up there now." William said, "Everyone can just act like they're up there to look at the other ships. That's what everyone else on deck is doing."

The three men then left Gromar's cabin, leaving the crossbows behind and split up. William made his way back up on deck and climbed up towards the tiller. With the *Storm Chaser* anchored the men usually stationed there had moved to the side of the ship to look at the cluster of ancient, abandoned vessels.

Looking out over the deck William saw that the *Storm Chaser's* three rowing boats had already been lowered into the water and the crew had already climbed down in to them while three groups of mercenaries were getting ready to join them. The soldiers had all donned their chainmail coats and had their shields slung on their backs. They were all armed with their swords but their crossbows were nowhere to be seen at this time suggesting that any opposition they were expecting to meet would be close to them rather than far enough away to justify going through the process of loading and aiming a ranged weapon. One at a time these men climbed down into the waiting boats and as each one was filled the crewmen untied their boats from the *Storm Chaser* and pushed away from the cog before they started rowing.

William was unsurprised to see that the crewmen in the boats started by rowing towards the nearest of the other ships which consisted of a pair of longships and a cog that was slightly smaller than the *Storm Chaser*. Although the darkness made it difficult to determine the exact condition of any of these vessels they were close enough to the *Storm Chaser* that William was able pick out some signs of damage, though whether this had been caused by simple exposure to the elements or an attack could not be determined.

Turning his attention to the deck he saw Edwin and Marcus standing where the occupants of the boats had boarded them from and would therefore, return to. Both Alphonse and Everad were standing close by them while three other mercenaries remained by the ballista. The remaining mercenaries were all still below deck as opposed to the crew of the *Storm Chaser*, many of whom had also come up on deck to look at the other ships and William saw to his relief that this included all of the crewmen who shared his reservations about their voyage. These men as well as the three Hadarians had all positioned themselves at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the top of the structure where he was. This meant that anyone who wanted to reach William would have to get past them first.

It was then that Gromar and Horace emerged onto the deck as well and William saw that each of them carried a sack. Before coming up the stairs they stopped by Aldbertus to speak with him briefly before the Hadarian and one of the conspirators from the *Storm Chaser's* regular crew took the sacks and together with Gromar and Horace they all came up the stairs.

"Somebody order a course of crossbows?" Horace said softly when he reached the top of the stairs.

"Where do you want them?" Aldbertus asked and William looked around. With the *Storm Chaser's* helmsmen standing at the side of the ship there was no-one near the tiller and keeping the weapons here would keep them out of sight from the main deck.

"By the tiller is good. Then we'll wait. I want to see what everyone is up to before we make our move."

William replied and the two men carried the sacks towards the stern of the ship while Gromar and Horace waited beside him.

"So when do we begin Will?" Gromar asked as he leant his warhammer against the rail in front of them but before William could answer there was a shout from the deck below.

"Look! They're coming back." a crewman shouted and he pointed towards the nearby cog. Looking in that direction it was easy to see the rowing boat returning to the *Storm Chaser* by the lantern that was aboard it and it was obvious that it was no longer fully manned.

"Let's find out what happened first. Maybe this will work in our favour." William said as he straightened up. The row boat continued to make its way towards the *Storm Chaser* before the two crewmen at the oars tied it up.

"What happened?" Edwin called down to them and William listened carefully, knowing that if they had found something dangerous lurking aboard the wreck then it could be just the catalyst he needed to incite a wider mutiny, "Where are the rest of your party?"

"They're still aboard the other cog captain." one of the crewmen shouted up loud enough that it could be heard from the rear of the ship, "We had to bring Johan back here though. Parts of the cog are rotten and he put his foot right through the deck and cut his leg open. The wound needs treating before it goes rotten as well."

"Very well, can he climb?" Edwin asked.

"No, the wound is too deep. We'll need a rope sending down." the crewman responded.

"Give them a rope and fetch water and bandages." Edwin told a nearby crewman and the man nodded in response to the order. Meanwhile Marcus backed away from the side of the ship.

"Our vampire doesn't want to be near the man with a bloody wound when he comes aboard." Gromar commented.

"Do you think that he'll give himself away if he's near a lot of blood?" Horace suggested.

"It doesn't matter." William replied, "Look, by backing away from the others he's putting himself out in the open. We move now." Before he did anything about retrieving any of the crossbows by the tiller though William turned to the crewmen who were officially on duty here, "Go and help. We'll keep an eye on things here." he told them.

"Yes Mister Beckett." one replied as all of them rushed down the stairs to the main deck and before they had even reached the bottom William, Aldbertus and the crewman loyal to William were already unpacking the crossbows. As quickly as they could the three men took the weapons from the sacks and drew back their strings to cock them. Then as they each picked up a quiver of bolts they loaded one into their crossbow before hurrying to the railing from where they could look out over the deck. When they got there William saw that the men he had just sent down from the rear structure had joined the main group of crewmen around where the injured mercenary had been brought aboard and that Edwin was talking to them, apparently wondering why they had left their post. In response to his question one of them pointed back towards William and Edwin turned to see him along with Aldbertus and the other crewman pointing their crossbows across the deck.

"Will what are you doing with those weapons?" Edwin called out and upon hearing this Marcus also turned to face the rear structure.

The moment that William saw Marcus turn he knew that this was their best chance.

"Now!" he snapped before he raised and fired his crossbow directly at Marcus. William's aim was good and the bolt struck Marcus in his chest, just beneath the base of his neck. Although this missed his heart by mere inches it was still a fatal wound, or at least it was to a human. On the other hand Marcus simply shuddered as he was hit and he glared angrily at William.

Before anyone could react though there were two more shots from Aldbertus and the other crewman that struck Marcus. One of the other bolts struck him at the side of his chest. Striking between his ribs it found no bone to resist its passage and the bolt embedded itself deeply into his lung while the third bolt struck lower and hit Marcus in the stomach.

Any one of these hits would have been enough to kill a human but Marcus remained standing while the crew and mercenaries on deck just stared at him in horror, fearing that the man who had promised to make them all wealthy men had just been murdered right in front of their eyes.

"He shot the magister!" Thomas exclaimed before Marcus reached for the crossbow bolt sticking out from the base of his neck and plucked it out with a single pull.

"You'll regret that Mister Beckett!" he hissed despite the crossbow bolt still sticking out of his chest.

"You're looking very well for a man that's just been shot three times magister." William responded loudly,

making sure that everyone on deck would be able to hear his words clearly.

"Will what you playing at? Put that weapon down now." Edwin shouted.

"Captain you've got us following the orders of a vampire." William replied as Marcus pulled the bolt from between his ribs.

"He killed Oric." Aldbertus added and on hearing this many of the crewmen present began to mutter among themselves.

"Does any of that matter?" Marcus asked and then he pulled the final crossbow bolt from his stomach and stood up straight, "I haven't harmed a single member of this vessel's regular crew since we left Teuten and if I hadn't given the order to stop and pluck the Hadarians from the sea then all of them would have drowned. Yes I'm far more than a mortal man and it is because of that our voyage stands a much better chance of success than any of the others who have tried it. Continue to follow me and you will get the riches I promised you."

"Assuming that you don't eat them as well." Gromar added.

"Mister Stonebreaker I thought Dwarves were known for their honourable behaviour. It seems that I was wrong." Marcus said.

"Monsters aren't known for honouring their deals. Especially not when they regard the other party to them as food." Gromar replied.

"Which of my men will be the next on your menu magister?" Aldbertus said.

"Could you blame me if you were? You have just shot me after all." Marcus said before he turned to the crewmen gathered on deck and added, "I have no immediate need to feed on anyone. By the time I do we will have located the Elves and I can feed on them quite easily. Now Captain Atwood, what do you intend to do about this mutiny?"

"I want those mutineers taken into custody now." Edwin announced, looking towards the cluster of crewmen at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the top of the rear structure without realising that they too were a part of the uprising against his command and they remained in place, "Well what are you waiting for?" he added but the men just drew the knives they carried and moved to block the stairs.

"I think that this mutiny is more widespread than we first thought captain." Marcus told him.

"What about the rest of you?" Edwin called out, looking around at the rest of his crew who were on deck, "Do you want to go home rich or skulk back to Teuten with nothing to show for this voyage?"

"I'll increase my payment and your cut of the spoils by ten percent." Marcus added.

"This is your ship captain." a nearby sailor replied and then he looked around, raised a fist in the air and yelled, "Am I right?" before the other sailors let out a cheer.

"I don't like the sound of that." Horace said.

"Nor do I." William replied as he hurried to reload his crossbow before the crewmen on the deck began to advance towards the stairs while Everad hurried towards the door in the forwards structure that would take him below deck to where he could summon the rest of the mercenaries who were still aboard. It may take a few minutes for them to put on their armour and make it to the deck but when they did arrive they would be more than a match for the band of mutineers, especially if they brought their crossbows with them and could attack without needing to get up the stairs first.

"Get them!" Edwin ordered and the crewmen on the deck surged towards the stairs, some of them drawing knives while others picked up tools that they could use as improvised weapons.

"Back up the stairs." William ordered the mutineers at the bottom, "Force them to come at you a few at a time."

He then brought his crossbow up to his shoulder and aimed it towards the deck but he did not fire at any of the men rushing towards him. He had served with most for several years and he knew every one of them by name. However, although he could not immediately bring himself to fire Aldbertus had no such qualms and he shot a bolt into the man leading the charge, hoping that it would give the others pause for thought. The bolt hit the man in his leg and he fell to the deck in pain but this did not prevent the rest of the crew from continuing towards the stairs.

The first man to reach the stairs rushed up them by himself with his knife in his hand but when he neared the top one of the waiting mutineers grabbed his arm before another stabbed him. The crewman's body was then pushed back down the stairs, temporarily preventing the other crewmen from following him up the stairs.

All of a sudden though one of the crewmen who had joined the mutiny let out a brief cry as a crossbow bolt hit him and he collapsed. Looking around for the source of the attack William saw that one of the mercenaries had decided to forego putting on his armour to just grab his crossbow and rush to the deck. Though he had been reluctant to shoot any of the men he knew William had no issues in this regard when it came to any of the mercenaries and before the man could reload William shot him in return.

Two more of the crew then tried to rush up the stairs, one of them armed with a boat hook that he used to impale one of the two Hadarians at the top of the stairs but as he tried to pull the tip free he just dragged the man's body down the stairs towards him and his comrade and both men had to retreat.

"If we shoot the monster the others might give up." the crewman beside William said and he fired his cross bow towards Marcus again. However, this time the bolt missed him narrowly and flew over the side of the ship harmlessly.

Marcus knew that a lucky shot from a crossbow could end his centuries long existence but he did not want to appear cowardly in front of the crew. If they had anything but total confidence in him then there was the possibility that they would stop fighting the mutineers and join them instead. He did not want to risk damaging the *Storm Chaser* though so attacking the men wielding crossbows directly was not a good idea, there was too much risk of damaging the tiller and the repairs could take several days that they may not have. However, it was obvious that if the stairs could be cleared then the crew could rush the crossbowmen easily.

Rapidly extending his arm out towards the men at the men clustered at the top of the stairs he gave a brief shout as he released a bolt of magical energy at them.

"Phyan-sa!" he snapped and the energy bolt leapt across the deck, expanding as it went so that by the time it reached the top of the stairs it was wide enough to catch all of the men standing there.

The strength of the blast was enough to send all of the men flying backwards and two of them screamed as they were hurled over the side of the ship into the water below. The others were pushed back across the deck but still struck with enough force that they did not get back up again when they came to a stop and as Marcus had intended the way up the stairs was now clear.

"We can't stay here." Gromar said when he saw the effect of the magical attack.

"Where do you suggest we go?" Horace asked before he grabbed one of the wooden belaying pins that were used for securing ropes aboard the *Storm Chaser* and hurled it at the men already charging towards the stairs and this gave William an idea.

"Horace the lantern!" he exclaimed, "Throw it at the deck to starboard."

"What are you doing?" Aldbertus asked in surprise, "That will-"

"It'll start a fire that the crew have to deal with and with any luck it will open a path for us to get to the boat. We need to get off this ship now but we need a distraction if we're going to make it out alive." William explained and Horace immediately grabbed hold of the lantern that was located behind him before hurling it at the deck where it broke open and spilled burning oil across the timbers.

Edwin and the other members of the *Storm Chaser's* crew on deck stared in horror at the flames burning on the ship's deck. Even though they were close to shore any fire aboard was potentially disastrous and William's faltering mutiny paled in comparison to how serious this situation was. More was yet to come though as William fired his crossbow again, though this time it was not aimed at Marcus or any of the crew who had remained loyal to Edwin. Instead it was aimed at one of the lanterns hung near the ship's forward structure and the bolt knocked the lantern from its hook, causing it to fall to the deck and begin to roll around. This simple fall was not enough on its own to break the lantern though and it just rolled across the deck, the oil inside spilling out of the small reservoir and turning the small flame into a much larger one that filled the entire interior of the lantern. The lantern's casing was not sealed so as it rolled this burning oil in turn spilled out onto the deck of the ship, leaving a path of flame behind it until it rolled into the barrier at the side where the fire began to spread.

"Fire!" Edwin yelled, "Put it out quickly!"

Most of the crewmen who had been about to charge up the stairs towards the remaining mutineers now broke away from this group to deal with the fires, leaving just a small group at the bottom and William saw their chance.

"Go!" he snapped and the remaining mutineers all came rushing down the stairs. Gromar led the way and as the loyal crewmen tried to block his path he swung his warhammer towards them, striking one hard enough to hurl him backwards and causing the others to back away far enough to allow the group to slip past them on their way to where the rowing boat was tethered.

"They're escaping." Thomas called out and he pointed to William and the others as they ran along the far side of the deck.

"Never mind that, help us with the fire." Edwin responded, more concerned about having his ship burned out from beneath him than in a handful of mutineers.

Given the dangers of a fire at sea the *Storm Chaser* carried basic equipment for fighting fires. There were buckets of sand that could be thrown over flames to smother them as well as axes that were intended to cut through parts of the ship that were on fire so that they could be pushed overboard. Since these axes also made very effective weapons several of the crew had already grabbed hold of these and they rushed to the

side of the ship where the second burning lantern had ended up, hacking at the planks of the barrier to make a hole that it could be pushed through.

Meanwhile the small band of mutineers rushed towards the rowing boat.

"Horace you first." William told the Halfling cook and he nodded before he began to descend the rope ladder towards the boat that was still bobbing about on the water below, "Gromar you next." William added, not waiting for Horace to reach the bottom, "Now you." he then told Aldbertus and while William and the other crewman pointed their crossbows towards anyone who looked as if they were advancing towards them the older Hadarian also began to descend towards the rowing boat.

William was about to tell the other crewman to go next when all of a sudden Marcus charged at them with the inhuman speed that only a vampire could manage and he slammed into William with enough force to send him flying over the side of the ship into the water. Terrified, the other crewman tried to bring his crossbow to bear but Marcus simply swatted at him, knocking the weapon from his hands before he grabbed the man by his throat and lifted him off the deck with just one hand.

"I suspect that your captain will want to deal with your betrayal himself." Marcus hissed.

In the rowing boat below Horace, Gromar and Aldbertus could only watch as William flew over their heads and landed in the ocean several yards from where they were. For a few brief moments he disappeared beneath the surface of the water only to resurface with the crossbow still in his hand as he kicked to stay afloat and spat out a mouthful of water.

"Quick! Cast off and let's get him in the boat." Aldbertus said as he used his quickly released the ropes tying the small boat to the side of the *Storm Chaser*. He then pushed the boat away from the larger ship and he and Gromar began to row towards William. As soon as the boat was close enough Gromar held out his oar for William to grab.

"Here, take this." he said and William used his free hand to take hold of the oar before the Dwarf pulled him to the boat, at which point William tossed his crossbow into it and then dragged himself aboard.

"Hand me that oar." he told Gromar before he looked at Aldbertus and added, "Okay, let's go."

"Where to?" Aldbertus asked and William looked around.

"Over there." he said, pointing to a bulky ship that looked to be just over a hundred yards from their position, "We'll hide in that hulk."

William and Aldbertus began to row as quickly as they could towards the hulk before there was a whizzing sound followed by a splash as a crossbow bolt flew close by them and then landed in the water.

"Horace put that light out." William told Horace, looking at the lantern mounted at the back of the rowing boat. Without the light of that to aim at he knew that it would be much harder to target the occupants of the rowing boat in the dark and Horace nodded before quickly opening up the lamp and dowsing the flame.

Even with the lantern extinguished the occupants of the boat still heard the sound of several crossbow bolts fired seemingly at random into the darkness but none of them came close to hitting any of the group before William and Aldbertus were able to get them around the hulk and into its protective shadow.

"What now? Do you want to go aboard this thing?" Gromar asked, looking up at the ship. Though smaller than the *Storm Chaser* this vessel also had low structures both fore and aft and a single mast mounted centrally. However, the ship had obviously been abandoned for some time and the mast itself had snapped near its base, the rest apparently having been washed away to leave just a low stump in the middle of the deck.

"Yes, I think we should." William replied, "But we shouldn't stay too long. As soon as the crew of the *Storm Chaser* finish putting out those fires they'll be coming after us and we need to get ashore."

"So why go aboard at all?" Aldbertus said.

"Because there may be something aboard that we can make use of. Right now we have the lantern at the back of the boat with just the oil that's inside it now, a few knives, a pair of crossbows and Gromar's hammer. That's not much. With luck there'll be tools aboard that we can use." William explained.

"Blankets too hopefully." Horace added, "If you don't dry off soon you'll catch your death of cold."

"He has a point Will." Gromar said in agreement.

"We'll worry about that later on. For now we need to get supplies." William replied.

"And if these ships are cursed?" Aldbertus commented.

"I doubt any curse can be as dangerous as the monster aboard the *Storm Chaser* right now." William answered.

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Back aboard the *Storm Chaser* Edwin glared angrily at the crewmen who had joined in with William's attempted mutiny but not either escaped or been killed. A total of three had survived, including the man who Marcus had captured before he could get into the rowing boat. All three now knelt on the *Storm Chaser's* deck with their arms tied behind their backs while some of the mercenaries held them down. The fires had been extinguished before any serious damage was done to the ship and although repairs would still be necessary for now the more pressing matter from Edwin's point of view was punishing the men who had turned on him.

"You mutinous dogs!" he hissed at them, "Betray me will you? Well I know how to deal with mutineers." he added before he looked towards one of his more senior crewmen, "Fetch some rope. We're going to string these wretches up from the mast. Let Beckett and the other cowards who fled see their bodies hanging when the sun comes up."

"Captain Atwood, may I interject?" Marcus asked from behind Edwin and he turned around again to look at the vampire.

"Yes magister?" he said.

"These men are traitors and as such they deserve death." Marcus began, "However, they may still be of use to me. Although as I said I do not have an immediate need to feed, the lives of these men could sustain me even longer and enable me to wield more of my power than might otherwise be possible. Instead of hanging them why not give them to me?"

"A fair offer my lord. Waste not, want not." Thomas commented from beside Marcus.

Edwin considered this. The revelation of Marcus' true nature had been a surprise but Edwin still felt that he would keep his word despite not being entirely human. On the other hand it was one thing to know that someone was a creature that drank the blood of people and drained their very life essence to survive but another entire to witness the process and there was the possibility that seeing this would make the crewmembers who for now had remained loyal to Edwin reconsider whether what they were doing on this mission was in their best interests. However, Edwin could also see this as serving as something of a powerful deterrent to further mutinies. Merely being stranded in Oscay or hanged was one thing, but if it was known that anyone who refused to follow orders could become the next meal of their employer then that would give the crew a strong motive to stay loyal to Edwin.

"As you wish magister. The moment that these men turned on me and tried to kill you they condemned themselves to death. Whether that is by a rope or, or-" he began before suddenly trying to think of how he ought to describe the process by which Marcus would feed on the captured mutineers.

"I don't think we need to go into further details captain." Marcus said before Edwin could decide what to say next and then he glanced at Alphonse and Everad who had been standing close by and pointed to one of the captives, "Just bring him to my cabin now. I'll send for the others when I'm ready."

Marcus then began to walk away, heading for his cabin and Thomas rushed to follow him. Meanwhile at a nod from Alphonse the mercenaries holding the man that Marcus had picked out now dragged him to his feet and began to pull him towards Marcus' cabin as well. The doomed man and his two comrades began to scream, pleading for the mercy of a swift death rather than risk the various fates that legends suggested the victims of vampires could befall. Some stories suggested that the victims of vampires became such creatures themselves while others indicated that their souls would instead be damned to wander the world forever. Regardless of what the truth was, the prospect of choking to death with a noose around their neck scared them less.

"What do you want done with these two?" Everad asked Edwin, looking at the two remaining mutineers.

"Oh just get them below and out of my sight. Secure them and make sure they aren't able to do something like kill themselves before Magister Quinnus can have them." Edwin answered and Everad nodded to the mercenaries holding the men. As the screaming captives were being led below decks Edwin in turn faced the two mercenary leaders, "So did you know what he was? The magister?"

"No, not a clue." Alphonse replied.

"We guessed that he was hiding something but there's nothing unusual about that in our line of work and it doesn't do to dig too deep into a client's motives when you're being paid to kill people for them." Everad added, "What about you?"

"It never occurred to me. Looking back I suppose that I should have noticed more but I can't say that it bothers me even though part of me thinks it ought to. The magister is our employer and we're here now so why not just carry on with his mission? I should have just thrown Will off the ship before we set sail. He



thought all this was a bad idea from the start and I should have realised that he'd try something stupid." Edwin said.

Aboard the abandoned hulk the four mutineers split into pairs. William and Aldbertus remained on deck where they could use the limited light available to search among the scattered barrels and boxes for anything of use while Horace and Gromar instead went below deck and started by searching for the galley. Given the length of time that the hulk appeared to have been abandoned it was obvious that any foodstuffs aboard would have gone bad long ago but there were still things likely to be found there that could prove useful to the group.

"Spoons?" Gromar said when Horace excitedly pulled a handful of cutlery from a drawer and dropped it onto a nearby table.

"And knives and forks too." Horace replied as he took more cutlery from the drawer, "We may be stranded thousands of miles from civilisation but that's no reason to eat like savages."

"Hmmm." Gromar said, picking up one of the spoons while Horace was sorting out four sets of cutlery and studying it closely, "Well I suppose they are metal. Not Dwarf forged metal mind you, but any metal tool is better than none. Better count out some spares just in case."

Horace paused in his counting to smile at Gromar before he counted out another four sets of cutlery.

"Now we'll need a bag of some sort." he said, looking around the dim compartment.

"We should look for where the crew slept." Gromar suggested, "If they left anything behind surely it would be there."

"Good point." Horace said.

"Follow me then." Gromar told him and he walked out into the hallway outside the galley.

On a ship the size of the hulk there was little room below deck so finding the large compartment where the crew would once have slept, recognisable by the rotten remains of their hammocks still strung up between supports took a very short time. As Gromar stepped into the compartment though there was a 'crunch' and both he and Horace looked down to see what he had trodden on, prompting a gasp from Horace.

"Rats." he said, looking at the numerous tiny skeletons that were scattered around them.

"Even rats won't infest this ship any more." Gromar muttered.

"I wonder what happened to them?" Horace said.

"Possibly they killed and ate one another when all the other sources of food ran out." Gromar said, "That would explain why there aren't any skeletons of the crew aboard. Rats can chew through bone as well as meat. Mind you that still wouldn't explain what killed the crew to begin with."

"Perhaps we should search this room as quickly as possible. Just in case whatever killed them is still here." Horace said and Gromar nodded.

"I think so." he said.

The pair of them then advanced further into the compartment, with Horace remaining behind Gromar and his warhammer initially. However, when he spotted what looked like a leather bag hanging from a hook on the wall the Halfling went to investigate it. The bag looked to be in good condition despite having hung here for an unknown but extended period of time. Horace untied the leather cord that held the bag shut and opened it. Inside the bag Horace saw several small items that he guessed represented everything that one of the hulk's crew had considered he needed for life aboard ship. This included a small axe shaped razor and pouch of the same type of leather as the larger bag itself. Guessing what this was, Horace removed the pouch from the bag and he heard a jingling sound from within it. Hearing this sound, Gromar stopped and turned around to see Horace open the pouch and tip the contents into his hand.

"Someone's purse." he said and Horace nodded. None of the coins were of a particularly high denomination and all of them had lost the shine they had when first cast.

"Not much in it though. If this is representative of the riches of this continent then the *Storm Chaser's* crew are going to be disappointed with their share." he replied before tipping the coins back into the purse and then stuffing it into his own pocket, "No sense wasting it though."

"Anything else in there?" Gromar added.

"A razor." Horace said and he reached into the bag again to rummage through its other contents, "Looks like there's a sharpening stone as well." he added before he then produced a small wooden box and smiled, "Ah now this could be useful. I wish I hadn't left mine aboard the *Storm Chaser*."

"What is it?" Gromar said.

"A tinderbox." Horace told him and he opened the box to peer inside, "Yes, here we go. A piece of flint and metal."

"What about the tinder itself?" Gromar commented.

"It's here, though it's a bit damp. We'll have to find something else to take its place." Horace said.

"That should be easy enough. The flint and metal are the important part." Gromar said.

"What about you. Anything interesting over there?" Horace asked as he slung his newly acquired bag over his shoulder.

"Blankets." Gromar answered and he bent over to pick up a blanket from the floor by his feet. There were several of them strewn around him and Gromar just picked the first that came to hand. Holding this up in front of him he was able to look at Horace through the large hole in the middle, "Or at least what's left of them." he added before he dropped it back to the floor and picked up another, "Ah now this one is better." he said, seeing that apart from some minor fraying at the edges this blanket was intact and he continued to search for more.

Being on deck carried with the risk of being seen and although the darkness gave them some cover William and Aldbertus did not want to risk being discovered so they made sure to keep low as they searched and they checked regularly to see if they could see the tell tale light of a lantern anywhere close by. Whatever had been in the boxes and barrels on the deck of the hulk had either been removed or rotted away and neither man found anything of use in them but that was not to say that there was nothing of use on deck at all.

First of all there were still some lengths of rope that had been part of the rigging and the men coiled up the longest lengths that they could find so that they could take them with them when they went ashore. The more significant finds though were located at the stern of the ship near the tiller where a long handled axe and a sword were both embedded in the timbers of the deck.

"Think these are still good?" Aldbertus said and he pulled the axe free of the deck to check the blade before William did the same with the sword. Having been left exposed to the elements since the hulk was abandoned there was rust on the metal of both weapons but the two men inspected the blades as closely as they could.

"I think this is just surface rust. It shouldn't be a problem as long as we can find something to clean it off with." William replied before they both heard the sound of Gromar and Horace returning to the deck.

"Will. Aldbertus. Where are you?" Gromar said, keeping his voice low rather than shouting and risking giving away their position to anyone who may be hunting them.

"Up here." William responded before he and Aldbertus went to meet the other two members of the group.

"Find much?" Aldbertus asked.

"Some blankets. Here take this and wrap it around yourself." Gromar answered and then he tossed one of the rolled up blankets he was carrying at William.

"Thank you." he responded before he draped it around his shoulders and pulled it closer around himself.

"There was also some cutlery in the galley and a razor and sharpening stone and a tinderbox where the crew slept." Horace added.

"Don't forget the money." Gromar commented.

"Money? Are you holding out on me Horace? After all the years we've known one another?" William said.

"Just a few coins." Horace replied and produced the purse from his pocket and shook it.

"May I see. I promise I'll give it back. All of it." William said and Horace handed him the purse.

"I know how much is there. I had long enough to count it." he said and William smiled before he opened the purse and took out one of the coins.

"Are the all like this?" he asked and Horace nodded.

"Yes, all of them." he answered, "Why?"

"That coin came from Falland. I've seen a few myself. Usually turned into necklaces." Aldbertus said.

"Falland was conquered by Hadar almost ten years ago and they stopped producing their own coins then.

The Hadarians wouldn't recognise them and replaced them with their own coinage." William explained.

"So this ship has been here that long at least." Aldbertus said and William nodded as he put the coin back in the purse and returned it to Horace.

"Want to count it again?" he said and Horace smiled.

"No, I'll trust you." he replied.

"Now that that's settled I don't suppose you found any vinegar in the galley did you?" William said.

"Vinegar?" Horace repeated, "I didn't look. What do you want vinegar for?"

"My guess would be to scrub the rust off that axe and sword they've acquired." Gromar said and William nodded.

"Exactly. Mix some vinegar with a handful of sand and we should be able to clean these up." he said.

"Wait here. I'll be right back." Horace said and he rushed back below deck, making his way to the galley once more where he turned his attention to the rows of clay jars on shelves. Each of these had a small clay

stopper in but Horace still knew that any contents would have been spoiled long ago. However, though spoiled vinegar was of no use for preparing food it could still be used for cleaning. He had used the fluid himself a number of times for getting dirt off cooking utensils. One at a time he took jars from the shelves, removed the stoppers and sniffed the contents until he found one that obviously contained vinegar. Then he left the other behind while he took this back up on deck and presented it to William.

"There you go Will. Vinegar. Or at least something in vinegar." he said.

"Thanks Horace." William replied, taking the jar from the Halfling.

"So we have tools, weapons, blankets and something to clean with. What now?" Gromar asked and William looked towards the shore.

"Now we need to get to shore while it's still dark." he said, "We'll drag the boat ashore and conceal it just in case we come back later but we need to get clear of the beach before the sun comes up and the crew and those mercenaries can see us clearly."

"What about that vampire? Can't they see in the dark?" Aldbertus pointed out.

"Yes but he's the only one and I expect he's got better things to do than look for us. If anyone is out looking then it'll be Alphonse and Everad's men in the other two boats." William responded.

"And what happens when we do get to shore? What's our plan then?" Gromar added and William paused to think.

"Magister Quinnus, or whatever his real name might be must have a way to locate the Elves. This may be somewhere that people don't normally return from but we know from the maps left behind by the Oscari themselves that Oscay is a big continent. Fifty men couldn't search it all in a hundred years." he said eventually.

"So we follow them and they lead us to the Elves. Then what?" Aldbertus said.

"Then we try to find out what they're doing here. They probably don't even realise that they've been followed here yet." William said, "With any luck if it's something that a vampire doesn't want them to achieve it's something that we can cooperate with them over."

"And then we get a ride back with them." Horace said, smiling.

"Hopefully, yes." William responded, nodding his head in agreement, "Now let's get off this ship before it just crumbles around us."

The search parties despatched to search the abandoned ships close to the *Storm Chaser* all returned largely empty handed. Despite finding a few trinkets or handfuls of coins the ships were devoid of anything of material value and everything that was found could be identified as originating from lands far more commonly visited than Oscay. They had only had the opportunity to search a handful of the vessels but these initial results had clearly dampened the crew's expectations of easy riches to be found here.

"Not exactly an impressive haul my lord. This hasn't excited the crew much." Thomas said to Marcus.

"That shouldn't be too much of a problem Thomas. We can count on them to go ashore and there will be far more valuable things to be found there." Marcus responded while looking at the horizon to the east, "The sun will rise soon. I must move below decks again. I will need you to monitor events here while I rest."

"Of course my lord. What are your orders?" Thomas asked.

"Our mercenaries will need to be landed. They should secure the immediate area but remain close to the shore. I will join them as soon after sunset as possible and then we will begin our hunt." Marcus told him, "Also make sure that my tent is also taken ashore and checked for damage. I will need it to shelter during the day so it must be flawless. Even the smallest hole could threaten me. Once I am ashore I will locate the Elves and we will go after them."

"Yes my lord, I will see to it myself." Thomas replied but Marcus was not listening. Instead he just turned around and strode away from him, heading back towards his cabin. Thomas then smiled and he looked around to where the two mercenary leaders were stood with Edwin while they reviewed the paltry haul from the searched ships. Calmly he walked over to the three men who glanced at him in return but did not say anything, "The magister has issued me with his orders that you are to follow."

"Oh really and what does he say?" Edwin said.

"He wants the men taken ashore as well as his tent. It must be assembled carefully so that the magister remains safe during daylight hours." Thomas told him.

"The men have been up all night. They need rest." Alphonse pointed out.

"Then they can rest when they get to shore. All the magister needs for now is a secure camp. We won't begin our hunt for the Elves until he gets ashore himself tomorrow night." Thomas responded.

"We've only got two boats now thanks to Will's little mutiny." Edwin commented, "Getting everyone ashore with our provisions will take longer because of it but it should be doable by noon."

## The Eternal Library

“Get the troops over there first.” Everad said, “They can check that the area is safe while your crew set up camp for us. Then we’ll rest and wait for the magister’s arrival.” then he looked at the ballista mounted at the front of the *Storm Chaser* and added, “What about that?”

“It shouldn’t take too long to dismantle.” Alphonse answered, “Then we’ll see if we can find a good place to site it ashore. If not then it can stay packed up until we need it.”

“Do let me know if there is anything that you need from me as well.” Thomas said and Alphonse looked at him.

“Just stay out of our way.” he said.

## 17

The first signs of civilisation on Oscay came in the form of ruined structures that were just about visible as the Elven ships sailed past them. These were heavily overgrown and barely visible but their regular outlines proved that they were not a natural occurrence. However, while these attracted some attention from the Elves as they sailed past it was not until they came close to their intended destination that they were truly filled with awe.

Before the port city that Ammaril had identified on her map was visible a huge statue started to come into view over the horizon. This was a representation of a robed figure standing up straight with its arms crossed in front of it. The head of the statue was hairless and it extended upwards at the back.

None of the Elves on deck could help but look at the statue but while most also had other work to be getting on with Ammaril, Orcan, Yilven, Tiellan and Captain Vendril all stood at the front of the *Torsol* to watch as ever more of the statue came into view.

"Incredible." Vendril said when everything above the statue's waist was visible and he began to get a better idea of just how large it was.

"Is that an Oscari?" Tiellan said and Ammaril nodded her head.

"Yes. Only a handful of images of them have survived to this day but those that have depict them like that." she replied.

"But can you tell us who he was?" Vendril asked.

"No, unfortunately not." Ammaril answered and Orcan smiled.

"Even my sister's knowledge has its limits." he added.

"Quite, although hopefully that will soon change. The secrets of the Oscari are waiting for us. That statue itself is proof that not everything they created has crumbled." Ammaril said.

"I estimate that we'll be there in an hour or so." Vendril said, "I'd better prepare the boat for depth testing."

"I'll go with them. They can drop me on the shore." Yilven added.

"Do you want some of my men to go with you?" Tiellan asked but Yilven shook his head.

"No. I just want to take a quick look around to make sure it's safe for us to land. I need to move quickly and I move quicker alone." he explained.

"Of course." Tiellan said.

"You might want to keep some archers on deck just in case though." Yilven suggested to him, "If there is anything dangerous ashore then it might be a good idea if we could hold them off long enough for me to get back aboard." Yilven added.

"Of course. I'll see to it." Tiellan told him.

Even though its buildings largely lay in ruins and the streets were overgrown the sight of the Oscay city fascinated the Elves as their ships sailed towards it. From the sea it was not possible to see how far inland it stretched and it was obvious that at one point it must have been home to tens of thousands of the legendary Oscay and whatever secrets they had left behind could still be waiting to be discovered. The statue that the Elves had first seen as they approached the city was not located by the shore and instead it loomed over the city some distance away, now seeming to be looking towards the Elves.

The harbour itself was surrounded by solid looking stone walls that had lasted through the thousands of years since the city was abandoned even without anyone to maintain them against the ocean waves and the entrance was wide enough to admit three of the Elven ships side by side. However, before attempting to enter the harbour the five cogs were brought to a stop, their sails brought in and anchors dropped about half a mile from the shore. Though there was no visible threat to the ships there was no telling what lay beneath the surface of the water that was murky enough that the bottom was not visible.

The rowing boat lowered from the *Torsol* was capable of carrying more than just the four Elves who then climbed down from the cog into it. Three of these were crewmen from the ship, two to man the oars and the third of them equipped with a long pole with which he was to measure the depth of the water in the harbour. The fourth was Yilven who was armed with his sword and longbow to defend himself with just in case some unseen danger did turn out to be lurking in the city. He could not hope to search the entire city in a reasonable time but he could definitely check the area around the harbour itself.

"Just get me to the wall." Yilven told the other Elves as he looked at the harbour walls. Like much of the rest of the harbour vegetation had taken root on the walls and vines now hung down from the top Yilven guessed that by using these he would be able to climb to the top of the wall.

"Yes sir." one of the crewmen replied and as soon as Yilven sat down they pushed away from the *Torsol* and began to row directly towards the harbour entrance.

The crewman with the pole counted softly to himself as the others rowed and every time he reached fifty he ordered them to stop before dipping the pole over the side of the boat into the water. There was a coloured band marked around the pole and as long as it would get to at least this mark then the depth of the water at this point was enough to permit the five cogs to pass as well without getting stuck. Then after each test the crewman waved back to the Torsol to indicate that the water was deep enough before the others started to row once more and he started counting again. There was still no guarantee that there would not be smaller obstacles that might be missed by this test but there was no way to test every square inch of the seabed. The boat got all the way to the harbour entrance without the water ever proving to be too shallow for the Elven cogs and the crewmen then turned it towards the nearby wall, rowing all the way up to it. Yilven stood up in the boat as it came close to the wall and he reached out to grab hold of a hanging vine and tugged on it to test its strength. Then satisfied that it would tolerate his weight he stepped from the boat and used the vine to support him while he pressed his feet against the wall and began to climb. The wall was about thirty feet high above the waterline and Yilven was soon at the top where it was more than ten feet wide and easy for Yilven to stand on and walk along without worrying about falling into the water below. Initially he looked over the side of the wall and checked on the position of the rowing boat below, waving to the crewmen looking back up at him.

"Carry on." he told them and the Elf with the pole nodded before the other two Elves on the oars started to row again, taking the boat into the harbour itself where they could test the depth of the water within it. Meanwhile Yilven darted along the harbour wall to the dock that was equally overgrown. From this vegetation it was easy to tell that the harbour had not been used in a long time and Yilven decided that it was time to move further inland to investigate the numerous buildings all around him. Although he could see faded painted or engraved lettering protruding through the various plant life that covered large portions of what remained of the city's buildings all of it was in the language of the Oscari and Yilven could not read this so he had no way of knowing what the purpose of any of them had been and instead he just picked the closest building to investigate first.

This structure was a large rectangular building that was several storeys high. It looked like at one time it had been an imposing structure and the remains of ornamental carvings now covered in moss and vines could be seen around the outside. Even from the outside it had been apparent that the roof had fallen in and when Yilven entered the building through a doorway that no longer possessed a door to block it he saw that it was not just the roof of the building that had fallen in. All of the upper floors and most of the lighter interior walls had also collapsed, leaving the building as one massive empty shell open to the sky above. Although fragments of roof tiles could be seen between the plants that had sprung up in cracks in the floor at Yilven's feet the remains of the upper wooden floors had long since rotted away, most likely helping fertilise the plants he could see.

All of a sudden Yilven heard a shrill chirping sound and he drew his sword as he spun around only to see a dragon perched on the remains of a stone wall that was about chest high to him. This was a lesser dragon with a body about a foot long and a thin tail of a similar length and it was looking straight at Yilven as if trying to decide what he was. Dragons of this size were frequently domesticated by Elves, humans and Halflings but Yilven knew that this was a wild example and despite its small size he needed to be careful around it. Wild dragons could become easily spooked and even the teeth of a lesser dragon could tear through thick clothing and skin. More dangerously though such wounds could easily fester and become rotten. Yilven glanced around, wondering if he had made the mistake of blundering into a building that had become the nesting site for a swarm of lesser dragons, for they often lived in large groups in the wild but he could see neither other dragons themselves or any signs that they nested here such as the material of their nests, eggs or droppings. Then he looked back at the lesser dragon that was still staring at him before it let out another screech and suddenly took to the air, flying up into the sky and Yilven smiled as he lowered his sword.

"So much for the beasts of legend." he said, remembering the stories of Oscay being inhabited by dragons the size of houses that could breathe fire at will. A large enough swarm of lesser dragons could be a threat to an individual or small group of Elves but the hundreds of well trained and equipped warriors aboard the cogs could easily protect themselves against a swarm of thousands of the creatures.

Satisfied that this particular building was empty Yilven headed for a doorway in another wall and exited the building on the far side from where he had entered and this brought him out onto an abandoned street that was lined by yet more ruined buildings. As Yilven looked around though, considering which building he should search next he saw something that stood out. Lying on the ground, not covered by any plant growth like the ground itself or the walls of the buildings there was an axe. This axe had a crudely made metal head that looked more like iron than steel but more significant than its design was its size. The wooden handle of the axe, which did not appear rotten as something that had been here for years or centuries ought to be, was about as long as Yilven was tall while the head was easily eighteen inches long and the weapon as a whole

looked too heavy for Yilven to even try lifting. There was only one species in the world that Yilven knew would make and wield a weapon like this axe.

Ogres.

Ogres were the largest of the world's intelligent species, though the term 'intelligent' barely applied to them. Their technology was crude, this basic iron headed axe being about the most complex tool that they could create. Standing twice the height of a human or Elf on average they had been created by the Oscari not long before they vanished and the few scholars who studied such things sometimes debated what their intention had been. Although strong they were known for their savage behaviour and they largely lived in scattered bands that inhabited the world's more remote areas. Occasionally an individual Ogre that was cast out of their own tribe would find their way into a human settlement and be able to live among them. The raw strength of an Ogre made them useful as long as they could be controlled. More rarely a human leader might be able to bribe a handful of Ogres into their service as troops, in which case they would usually be equipped with steel weapons and chainmail armour that were custom made for their size. However, such an arrangement came with great risks and more than one human leader's household had been slaughtered when their hired troops turned on them. Such arrangements were confined to humans though, Ogres did not interact with either Elves or Dwarves in this way. For the Dwarves it was a matter of simple practicality, although their strength could be useful in Dwarven mines Ogres were simply too large to live underground while the Elven lands were unreachable to Ogres. The most advanced watercraft they could manufacture were simple rafts that were totally unsuited to crossing anything more than a relatively calm river.

This lack of seafaring capability raised a significant question regarding the presence of any Ogres in Oscay though. They could not have constructed a ship to bring themselves here and although they were known for making use of items taken from the other species, sailing a ship across an ocean was too complicated for Ogres to master on their own. That left only two possibilities for how they could come to be here. The first was that somehow a handful of Ogres had been left here when the Oscari vanished. All the stories about the final days of the Oscari suggested that they had removed all of the other species from the continent but it was possible that some had been missed. Some of the legends regarding Oscay suggested that bands of Ogres wandered the land, killing and possibly eating anyone who stepped foot on it. On the other hand the leader of a human expedition may have been able to tempt a handful of Ogres to join it and they could have survived the deaths of the humans to be left stranded here.

Regardless of how the Ogres had come to be here in Oscay though, they did pose a threat to the Elves and Yilven looked around for any more signs of their presence. It was possible that they had just passed through this area on their way somewhere else but there could also be several hundred of them living among the ruins and Yilven needed to find out before the rest of the Elves came ashore.

Vendril offered his hand to the crewmen from the rowing boat to help them back aboard the *Torsol* when they returned.

"So the water is deep enough for us all the way into the harbour?" he said and the crewman with the pole nodded.

"Yes captain, I gauged the entire path as well as the west side of the harbour. We can easily dock our ships there." he said and Vendril smiled at him.

"Excellent work." he said, "I don't mind telling you that I wasn't looking forward to having to ferry all of our passengers back and forth in our boats." then he glanced back towards the cages that held Tiellan's dragons and added, "Especially for whoever had to take them across."

The four Elves laughed briefly before Vendril headed towards the prow of the ship where Ammaril, Orcan and Tiellan were still watching the shore while a dozen archers stood behind them ready to defend the ship if it became necessary.

"So I take it that the water is deep enough for us to dock." Orcan commented.

"It is your highness. Is there no sign of Yilven yet?" Vendril replied.

"No, not yet." Orcan said.

"We cannot delay too long waiting for him." Ammaril added and Vendril frowned.

"I thought the plan was for him to confirm that it is safe for us to go ashore." he said.

"It was." Orcan agreed before he looked at Tiellan and then the archers behind them, "Though we have significant protection. If danger was lurking close to the shore then Yilven would have already found it and alerted us."

"My men can deploy quickly and my dragons are fast and strong." Tiellan said.

Orcan then looked at Ammaril.

"Well sister, should we go?" he asked.

"Yes. There's no need to wait for Yilven before we land." she answered.

"There's your answer captain. Take us into the harbour." Orcan told Vendril, "Tiellan prepare your men. They must be ready to disembark the moment we dock and secure our vessels."

The *Torsol's* anchor was raised and its sail was deployed again to get the cog into motion, heading directly towards the harbour entrance. Despite the depth tests Vendril still felt nervous as the ship ventured towards the shore, just in case there was some unseen obstacle beneath the water. The sail was not fully unfurled this time though, the reduced area of sail limiting the *Torsol's* speed for docking. Ahead of the ship the rowing boat previously used to test the water's depth now carried a small party of Elves to shore. Their job would be to catch ropes thrown to them from the ship and secure it to the dock before gang planks were lowered.

At the same time as the ropes were thrown to the shore the *Torsol's* sail was taken in again, leaving the ship to drift the last few feet to the dock where the Elves sent ahead worked quickly to secure the ship and the moment that they were done the crew aboard the *Torsol* hooked a pair of gang planks to the side of their ship so that they stuck straight up before lowering them like drawbridges to the dock. On the deck of the *Torsol* the Elven warriors it carried were already lined up ready to disembark and Tiellan raised his hand.

"Disembark!" he shouted and the warriors began to march, one rank at a time making their way down the gang planks. The ten horsemen aboard waited while the infantry marched ashore ahead of them. While the infantry had their swords at their waists and their bows across their backs the cavalymen carried only their swords with the rest of their equipment loaded on the backs of their horses. Rather than ride their horses down the gang planks these Elves instead walked down them, leading their horses behind them. As soon as the deck was clear Tiellan opened the cage that his dragons were held in and after weeks of confinement the beasts rushed out onto the deck and unfolded their wings briefly as they gathered around their owner.

"Ready?" Orcan asked and Tiellan smiled.

"Ready." he answered and then the two cousins walked down the nearest gang plank with the dragons following after them.

For the time being Ammaril remained aboard the *Torsol*, watching as the Elven soldiers deployed to form a wall that would block the path of an approaching enemy while the cavalry and Orcan and Tiellan waited behind them. After a short while of this she turned around and headed for her cabin to gather the books and documents that she wanted to take ashore with her. While she was part way through this there was a knock at the door.

"Your highness?" Lucia's voice asked from outside.

"Come in." Ammaril responded without looking away from the table where her books were located and Lucia opened the door to enter the cabin.

"Your highness, Captain Vendril sent me to see if you require any assistance." she said.

"No, I can pack my books myself thank you. Besides you wouldn't understand what was in them to pick out the ones I need." Ammaril said.

"No your highness, I mean is there anything you wish me to bring with me when we go ashore." Lucia said and upon hearing this Ammaril paused and looked around at Lucia.

"You are accompanying us as well?" she asked. Ammaril knew that most of the crews of the Elven ships would also be going ashore to act as labourers but she had not been aware that Lucia would be going with them as well.

"Yes your highness. Prince Orcan thought it would help you if you had someone to prepare your meals and arranging your bedding." Lucia told her and Ammaril smiled.

"How thoughtful of my brother." she said and then after a brief hesitation she added, "I suppose it can't do any harm. Though I will expect privacy in my work. Some of the dangers we may face will be magical in nature and I will need to perform a number of potent spells to counter these. Even the slightest error in the casting of these could have disastrous consequences. You must not interrupt me under any circumstances. Is that understood?"

Lucia suddenly thought back to the conversation she had had with Yilven when he had shared with her his concerns about the magical power that Ammaril may be considering using. The problem was that Lucia knew nothing about magic herself and with Yilven still off the ship she could not go to him and warn him that Ammaril was definitely planning on making use of the powers she possessed. She also knew that she could not challenge Ammaril herself so for the time being at least she had to go along with what the Elf sorceress was telling her to do.

"Yes your highness." Lucia replied, nodding her head politely and hoping that Ammaril did not possess some strange ability to read her mind and sense her concern.

"Very good." Ammaril said and she turned back to the table and began sorting through documents once more, "Now pack me two spare sets of clothing. I will need you to carry them."

"Yes your highness. What about your books?" Lucia said.



"They will be too heavy for you Lucia. One of the crew can carry them instead. They are coming along to work after all." Ammaril answered.

One by one Vendril's other four ships entered the harbour and manoeuvred towards the dock where crew from the *Torsol* were waiting to secure them. As with Vendril's flagship the Elven warriors carried aboard each of these ships were already lined up on deck and as soon as their gang planks were deployed they marched down them to join the others.

With more troops available to form an armed perimeter around the dock this pushed outwards and a second rank of Elves formed behind the warriors armed with swords and shields who instead drew their bows and searched carefully for targets among the ruined buildings.

"How long do we give Yilven to return?" Tiellan asked, glancing momentarily at Orcan beside him, "You know that sooner or later we're going to have to go into the city whether or not he comes back. Ammaril is too determined to let a little thing like his suspicious disappearance delay her for too long."

"I have faith in Yilven." Orcan replied, "He has served our household well for decades. I doubt that these ruins hold anything that could trouble him."

Yilven found a few other indications that there had been Ogres in the city fairly recently in the form of track and discarded tools that had yet to become covered in significant amounts of dirt or be overgrown but he did not see or hear any of the creatures themselves. This suggested that the city had been visited by Ogres in the recent past but that they had now moved on. The city was much larger than such settlements in human or Elven lands and there was still much of it that even a large group of Ogres could be hiding in but they would not be in a position to threaten the Elves before they could disembark from their ships and deploy for battle. A more cunning force might be able to use the ruins to stage ambushes as the Elves moved through them but such tactics were beyond the skills of Ogres and so Yilven started to head back towards the harbour.

As he got closer to the harbour he heard the sounds of men at work and when he came around the closest building he found himself confronted by a rank of Elf soldiers standing with their shields held in front of them to form a protective wall behind which Yilven could make out the second rank of archers.

"How many are ashore?" he asked as he approached the warriors.

"All of the troops plus Lord Tiellan and Prince Orcan sir. The crews of the ships are bringing our supplies ashore now and putting together the carts." one of the warriors replied and the shield wall parted to allow Yilven through beside him, "Did you find anything out there?" the warrior added as Yilven walked through the gap and Yilven paused and looked back down the street.

"Yes I did. Keep an eye out. There are signs that Ogres have been here recently. If they're still around they could be on their way now." he told the warrior and he nodded in reply.

"Yes sir. Don't worry, if there are Ogres about then I expect that we'll hear them well before we see them." he said with a smile and Yilven smiled back, knowing how accurate the comment was.

Yilven then carried on his way towards the dock and the gap in the shield wall was closed again. Locating Orcan among the Elves did not take long, he and Tiellan were stood with Vendril and the other ships' captains as well as a handful of the more senior warriors while they surveyed the city around them.

"Ah Yilven, it's good to see you back in one piece." Orcan called out when he spotted Yilven approaching them at a jog.

"Thank you your highness." Yilven replied.

"So what did you find? What great secrets does this city hold for us?" Vendril added.

"Everything I saw was in ruins." Yilven told him before he looked at Orcan and added, "But we may not be alone here."

"The city is still inhabited?" Orcan said.

"Perhaps. I found tools that were obviously made by Ogres that can't have been here for even a year. I didn't see any Ogres themselves but they could still be around." Yilven explained.

"Ogres? What would Ogres be doing here?" Tiellan asked.

"Some of the legends about Oscay said it was inhabited by them. Perhaps an older expedition encountered some and then made it back across the sea." Orcan suggested.

"Can your warriors deal with Ogres?" Vendril asked.

"Of course they can." Tiellan answered defensively, "Ogres may look intimidating but their size is no match for our intelligence or the discipline of my men."

"What is all this talk about Ogres?" Ammaril's voice said from nearby and the group of Elves turned to see the princess walking towards them with Lucia close behind. Lucia carried a pack on her back and a bag at her side but Ammaril was relatively unencumbered, carrying only a much smaller bag and a leather tube.

## *The Eternal Library*

"There may be Ogres living within the city your highness." Yilven told her and she appeared to consider this for a short time.

"Ogres? Really? How interesting." she said and a smile spread across her face. Then all of a sudden she opened the leather tube she was carrying and tipped a roll of paper out into her hand before unrolling it for the other Elves to see. The map was one of a large settlement with the streets and major buildings all marked on it, "This is a map of the city," she said and then she pointed to the docks area, "and this is where we are. We need to get here." and she moved her finger to a more central point on the map.

"That looks about two miles at most." Yilven said, considering the distance he had travelled and mentally matching the layout of the streets to the map. As far as he could tell it was a good representation of the city despite having been drawn long after it was abandoned and most likely by someone who had never been there themselves and the thought of how the cartographer would have known what the city looked like intrigued him for a moment.

"Then we can be there before dark." Tiellan said.

"Do you have copies of this map?" Yilven asked.

"No, this is the only one. But more can be made if they are necessary." Ammaril answered and Yilven nodded.

"Yes, I'll need one for starters." he said.

"Each of our commanders should have one as well." Tiellan added.

"Then we'll make them while we wait for the cart to be ready." Orcan responded.

"What about my ships?" Vendril said, "If there are Ogres about then I don't want them left undefended."

"Don't worry. For now this will just be a scouting mission, though in significant force." Orcan told him and then he glanced at Tiellan.

"I'd recommend half the infantry and forty cavalry." he said, "That will leave a strong force here to protect the ships and both groups can send riders to warn the other if they are attacked."

"Very well. We'll take just a few provisions. Each warrior will carry his own rations and we'll take a single cart for additional support. Captain Vendril, when will they be ready?" Orcan said.

"Within the hour your highness." Vendril answered and Orcan smiled.

"Then we leave within the hour." he said.

When the force was ready to be sent into the city the Elven infantry was divided into three groups. One group was placed at the forefront of the column while another brought up the rear. The final group held the centre of the column and was placed between the column's leaders who went in front of it while behind them rode the cavalymen in addition to a small group of crewmen from the Torsol who rode a small cart pulled by a single horse. This cart carried limited provisions for the column since they were not expected to travel far from the docks where the rest of their supplies were still stored safely aboard the ships. Lucia was the only member of the ship's crew that was part of this column who did not accompany the cart, instead she travelled on foot with Ammaril closer to the front.

Meanwhile Yilven started off before the rest of the column to act as a scout. While the column had to march in the open along the overgrown roads he was able to move through the ruins either side of them instead, keeping out of sight while remaining ahead of the column. Moving in this way Yilven covered ground relatively quickly and periodically he would stop to allow the column to close the gap between them before it got so large that an enemy could get between them and Yilven without being seen.

Entering yet another ruined building along the route Yilven was suddenly struck by the foul smell that filled the air inside. It was obvious to him that this was caused by something emptying its bowels close by and the strength of the odour he could tell that either there was a great deal of physical waste or it was very fresh. Despite the unpleasantness of the smell he knew that he need to investigate, since it could indicate the presence of a dangerous animal in the area and the Elves needed to know about such a thing. However, as he followed the smell to its source he saw that the walls in this direction had been crudely defaced. Whoever had carried out this act had just scratched the surface of the walls with something that could have been as simple as a piece of debris or a stone that happened to have a sharp enough point on it. Yilven swatted at a fly before he continued and he quickly noticed that there were a lot of the buzzing insects around, suggesting that he was very close to the source of the smell. Sure enough several yards ahead and just beyond the remains of a wall he came across a hole in the stone floor. Quickly peering into he saw that there was a basement level below this one that was flooded with waste. This combined with the markings on the wall told Yilven all he needed to know about who was responsible for it all.

"Ogres. Using this place as their latrine." he said to himself before he heard the sound of heavy footsteps. Yilven darted aside and leapt over another ruined internal wall where he ducked out of sight and waiting while the footsteps went past. Peering out from behind this he was able to see that it was indeed an Ogre that had entered the building and the huge brutish creature had squatted down over the hole while he emptied his bowels. Yilven considered killing the Ogre, in his current vulnerable position and taken by surprise, Yilven was confident that he could kill him quickly despite its advantage in size and strength, though he was not so sure that he could kill him quickly enough that he would not be able to call out. Despite not having seen any other Ogres in person the general condition of the building suggested to Yilven that there were more of them in the area, probably a typical tribe and he knew that he could not handle so many of them by himself. Instead he waited for the Ogre to finish relieving himself and replace his clothing before exiting the building again. Once Yilven was sure that he was alone he dashed back out of the building in the direction of the Elf column.

He moved as quickly as he could until he reached the column where he waved.

"Halt!" the officer in charge of the forward element of the column ordered. Yilven did not engage with the officer though, instead he ran through the ranks of warriors to where Orcan, Ammaril and Tiellan were walking along behind them.

"Your highness there are Ogres ahead." Yilven told Orcan.

"How many?" Tiellan asked.

"I don't know. I saw only one but there was evidence of a larger number." Yilven answered.

"We should deploy the column for battle." Tiellan told Orcan.

"I want to know more about how many Ogres we're facing." Orcan responded.

"Give me a dozen warriors your highness. I'll take them ahead and try to find out where the rest are located." Yilven said.

"I want to see for myself. I'm coming with you." Orcan told him.

"Perhaps I should go with you as well Orcan." Ammaril suggested, "My powers could prove useful against Ogres."

Orcan frowned when he heard this. He was reluctant to place his twin sister in obvious danger but he could not deny that she was right about the usefulness of her magic.

"Okay then, you're with us as well." Orcan said before he glanced at Lucia and added, "What about her?"

"Lucia is carrying some of my belongings that I might need. She'll have to come along with us as well."

Ammaril told him and he looked at Tiellan.

"We'll need two more men to protect them both." he said.

"I do not need protection Orcan." Ammaril said.

"Ammaril you may be able to use your magic at a distance but if an Ogre gets too close then I want to know that you're safe. A dedicated bodyguard will ensure that you are." Orcan told her.

"Very well, if it will make you happy I'll agree to a bodyguard." Ammaril replied and Orcan smiled. At the same time Yilven made his way to where Lucia stood watched and leant close to her.

"Don't worry, just keep close to the warriors assigned as your bodyguards." he whispered to her, "They'll keep you safe and if they can't then I'll come and get you. Whatever happens don't just run off on your own, no matter what's happening."

It did not take long to assemble the small advance party from the force that had advanced from the docks. Both the Elf warriors selected to act as bodyguards to Ammaril and Lucia wielded their swords and shields in anticipation of fighting at close quarters while half of the other warriors chosen for this scouting party were also armed in this manner, leaving their bows and arrows with the main column. On the other hand the remaining warriors did the opposite, bringing their bows with them so that they could strike from a distance and leaving their shields behind instead.

"What signal should I look for if you need the rest of the column to come and support you?" Tiellan asked Orcan as the scouting party was getting ready to move out.

"Don't worry Tiellan," Ammaril responded before her brother could, "I'll send you a signal that you can't possibly miss."

"We should go. Yilven, lead the way." Orcan added.

"Yes your highness." Yilven replied before he turned and headed down the street again. Rather than continue in the open though he moved into the ruins beside it to advance in cover just as he had earlier and the rest of the scouting party followed him. As well as surveying the ground ahead for any signs of Ogres, Yilven also regularly checked behind him to make sure that the rest of the party was still with him. He was not surprised that Orcan, Ammaril and the Elf warriors were able to keep close behind him but he was pleased that Lucia had not fallen behind either, neither was her movement so loud that even Ogres would notice her presence close by.

When the scouting party got close enough to see the building that was used by the Ogres as a latrine Yilven paused and crouched down, a move that was then copied by everyone else behind him.

"That's where I saw the Ogre." he said quietly, pointing across the ruined street.

"Then their camp must be close by." Orcan replied.

"And something else as well." Ammaril added and both Orcan and Yilven looked at her.

"What do you mean Ammaril?" Orcan asked.

"I can sense a great deal of power close by Orcan. Far more than I've ever sensed before." Ammaril answered.

"Magical power?" Orcan commented, though he already knew that that was what Ammaril meant, "But there has never been a wizard among Ogres and from what you told me there can't ever be. Only Elves and humans were used by the Oscari as hosts for their power."

"I know that, but magic is being used close by Orcan and it is stronger than anything I've encountered before. It must be the Oscari themselves." Ammaril said.

"But the Oscari died out thousands of years ago." Orcan pointed out, "How could a spell cast by one of them last for that long?"

"I've heard of wizards storing power in magical objects so that they can continue to cast spells for longer without tiring." Yilven added, "Could the Oscari have created something to store their power that could still be here?"

"Maybe, but this doesn't feel like that." Ammaril said, "Somewhere close by a spell has been cast, the most powerful spell I have ever encountered."

"What about all those books we took from the vampire's library? Don't they tell you what this could be?" Orcan said.

"No, nothing. This must be some magic that was lost when the Oscari abandoned their bodies." Ammaril said.

"Are we in danger?" Lucia said unexpectedly from close by.

"Well Ammaril, are we?" Orcan added, looking at Ammaril.

"Possibly. I need to know more." she responded and Orcan turned to Yilven.

"What are your thoughts Yilven?" he asked.

"Your highness, I don't like the fact that the princess is telling us that there is a powerful magical spell in effect right where I encountered an Ogre. There may not be any Ogre wizards but what if this spell is why they are here?" Yilven answered. Then he looked at Ammaril and added, "Your highness, could magic be used to transport Ogres from another continent?"

"Not by any wizard alive now, no." she replied.

"But the Oscari could have done it?" Orcan commented and Ammaril took a breath as she thought about what to say.

"There are passages in some of the books in the library that talk about how the Oscari travelled the world but fail to explain how. Some mention being on one continent one day and on another the next." she said eventually.

"Even the fastest ship couldn't sail an ocean in a day." Yilven said.

"So either the books are wrong or the Oscari had some means of long distance travel that has been lost." Orcan added.

"I do not believe that the books are wrong Orcan but I cannot explain how the Oscari travelled so far and so fast or how these Ogres came to be here in Oscay." Ammaril replied.

"Then I suppose the only way to find out is to go a look for ourselves." Orcan said and he looked at Yilven again, "Lead the way."

"Yes your highness." Yilven replied with a nod and he started to walk onwards again, heading in the direction of the magical energy that Ammaril had sensed.

Given that Yilven had turned back when he encountered the Ogre he was now entering what was now unknown territory to him and he was especially cautious now that he knew that there could be Ogres close by. As expected though Yilven heard the Ogres before he saw them when the sound of crude shouts came from ahead of him and he made his way to the front of a ruined building so that he could look outwards while avoiding being seen in return.

Outside Yilven saw several dozen Ogres, a mix of both male and female as well as a number of younger ones who even at their age were still taller than an elf. All of the Ogres, male or female and young or old were stood watching two of their number fight barehanded. This could be the result of an argument between the pair or perhaps something more organised, the pair appeared to be among the largest members of the tribe so it could have been a battle for leadership but whatever the reason for it both of the combatants were bloodied though apparently unwilling to back down. Looking around Yilven saw all the signs that this area was being used as a campsite by the Ogres with several tents set up and walls marked with crude images painted on them, sometimes clearly painted over other such markings and this suggested that they had been here for some time.

What really attracted Yilven's attention though was the building that was just beyond the Ogre camp. This appeared to be circular from the angle he was looking at it from and was built above ground level so that steps were required to reach it from the street. What really stood out about this building though was that unlike all of the other buildings Yilven had seen here in the ancient city it was perfectly intact, even the large dome on its roof and the statues of Oscari that were placed at regular intervals around the outside wall were still in perfect condition. As well as the structure of the building being intact there were no signs at all of it becoming overgrown, with not one single vine or patch of moss being visible anywhere from the base of the steps to the top of the domed roof. The building clearly had some sort of meaning for the Ogres and it was surrounded by totems that they had erected. Despite the presence of these totems though Yilven did not believe that the condition of the building was a result of the Ogres acting to maintain it. Not only were they not known for taking such care of anything, it would have to imply that there had been a continual Ogre presence here since not long after the Oscari disappeared.

"Yilven what do you see?" Orcan asked quietly from behind Yilven.

"It's the Ogre camp your highness." Yilven told him while still looking at the Ogres and the impossibly preserved building beyond them, "But there's something more. I think Princess Ammaril should take a look at this."

"What is it?" Ammaril said as she made her way closer to Yilven and he pointed towards the building.

Peering out of the ruins for herself Ammaril studied the perfectly intact building herself for a few seconds before a smile spread across her face.

"Ammaril does this mean something to you?" Orcan said, noticing the smile on her face after he had looked at the building as well.

"Yes Orcan it does." she replied, "This is what we are looking for. This is the Great Library of the Oscari. Everything that they knew can be found inside it."

"There are too many Ogres between us and it to be able to get through them your highness." Yilven said, turning his attention back to the large creatures outside the library.

"Perhaps there's another way inside around the other side of the building." Orcan suggested.

"No we don't need another way in." Ammaril said, shaking her head, "The main doors are right in front of us and that is how we will enter."

"If we're going to go through the Ogres then we'll need the rest of the warriors we've brought. Our column and the troops left behind with the ships." Orcan said and he beckoned for one of the warriors that they had brought with them to come closer, "I'll send a runner." he added.

"No wait." Ammaril said, holding up her hand and the warrior stopped.

"What's wrong?" Orcan asked.

"Nothing Orcan." Ammaril answered, "I just don't think that it is necessary to fight these Ogres when they may be of use to us."

"Use to us? How?" Orcan said in surprise.

"They have been here longer than we have Orcan. Possibly for their entire lives. They will know far more about this area than we do." Ammaril pointed out. Orcan could not deny what she had just said was true but there was still one major problem with her idea.

"And how do you propose that we convince the Ogres to help us rather than attack us?" he said.

"Ogres are known for their violent ways your highness." Yilven added.

"See? Yilven knows what he's talking about Ammaril." Orcan said, nodding in agreement.

"As do I Orcan. Watch." Ammaril told him and before anyone could stop her she climbed over the low ruined wall they were using as a hiding place and began to walk out in the open directly towards the Ogres.

Even with the ongoing fist fight to distract them it did not take long for the Ogres to notice Ammaril walking down the ruined street towards them and as soon as the first one saw her a warning was called out to the rest of the tribe. Whatever the reason for the fight, the two Ogres who had been battling one another now stopped and joined the others in turning their attention to Ammaril as she continued to walk calmly towards them. Ammaril said nothing as she walked, waiting to hear the Ogres speak first.

"Get weapons!" the largest Ogre yelled, "This one might not be alone."

Immediately the Ogre tribe rushed to arm themselves with a variety of crude clubs, axes and spears but Ammaril remained unconcerned for the time being. So far the Ogres were still adopting a defensive posture rather than rushing to attack her and that gave her a chance now that she had heard them speak. Even though the apparent leader of the tribe had spoken only a few words these were enough for Ammaril to be able to identify the language that they were using. Like all Ogre languages it was a crude form of human language and derived from one that she understood, Communicating with the Ogres may still be difficult but Ammaril was still prepared to try.

"We do not want to fight." she called out and she came to a stop about twenty yards away from the Ogres. It would take only a few seconds for an Ogre to charge this distance and it was unlikely that Ammaril would be able to cast a defensive spell during that time but she wanted to remain close enough that she could communicate with them easily as well as standing a fair chance of being able to overhear what they said to one another.

"Who's 'we'?" the largest Ogre asked.

"I have friends over there." Ammaril told him and she pointed at the ruined building where the rest of the scouting party were hiding. Seeing this Yilven winced.

"I wish she hadn't done that." he said.

"Let's just see where this goes." Orcan told him while he continued to watch his sister.

"There are many more Elves down the road and more by the ocean." Ammaril said to the Ogres.

"More meat." another Ogre shouted and he raised the club he was carrying.

"More slaves!" a third Ogre yelled and most of the tribe roared.

"Grab her and the others hiding over there." the largest Ogre commanded and about a dozen of the tribe began to advance.

"Wait, I will surrender. So will my friends. But I want to talk. All we want is to get into that building behind you. Agree and you will be rewarded." Ammaril said and she pointed towards the library.

"Ha!" the largest Ogre exclaimed before he looked around at the rest of his tribe and added, "Did you all hear that? She wants to get into the palace of fire!"

For a moment Ammaril wondered what this meant but then she looked at the stone paved ground surrounding the library where it suddenly ceased to be cracked and overgrown and saw that the vegetation ended in a neat line rather than an irregular one as would be expected if the growth was natural.

Furthermore she saw that the edge of the vegetation was charred and blackened as if it had been burned.

She had not noticed this previously because she had been focusing her attention on the Ogres instead of the ground and as she looked closer she saw the occasional bird or animal skeleton lying at the edge of the vegetation that also looked like it had been burned. Most significantly though were the charred bones that lay

at the base of the steps that led up to the main entrance to the library. From the size and shape of these Ammaril knew that they had to have come from Ogres.

It was obvious that anything that approached the library, whether animal or vegetable would be burned as soon as it got close and she suddenly realised how the building had survived in such perfect condition for thousands of years.

"I offer you a deal." she said loudly and clearly, "By sundown tomorrow I will get into the palace of fire or you may take us all a slaves."

This seemed to confuse the Ogres, knowing how they treated slaves they could not understand why anyone would willingly agree to become one.

"It's a trick. Kill her!" one shouted.

"It is no trick." Ammaril responded, "I will enter the palace of fire by sundown tomorrow or every Elf here will surrender to you."

"What do I get if you do get inside? Seems like its better for us just to make you slaves now." the largest Ogre said.

"Are you the chieftain of this tribe?" Ammaril asked in response.

"Yes. I'm Trollog the Mighty. Strongest and most powerful Ogre for a thousand miles." he answered, raising his axe in the air and the other Ogres all let out a cheer as he did so.

"Trollog the Mighty I am Ammaril of Syldarin and if I am able to get into the building that you call the palace of fire I will make you the most powerful Ogre in the world. Every Ogre will bow before you as their king." Ammaril said and Trollog frowned.

"How will every Ogre bow to me? The only other Ogres are all far away across the sea." he said.

"I will take you and your tribe across the sea Trollog the Mighty. I will take you to lands where Ogres exist in their thousands and you will be the lead of every one of them. All I ask in return is the chance to get into that building." Ammaril said and she pointed to the library again.

"She's lying! Kill her!" one of the other Ogres shouted.

"With every Ogre in the world at Trollog's command he will need many leaders for his armies. You can all be those leaders." Ammaril shouted.

"What does one day matter?" Trollog said, looking around at the other Ogres before turning back towards Ammaril and adding, "Okay then, you've got until the sun sets tomorrow to get into the palace of fire and make me the king of all the Ogres in the world. Do it and you and your friends are free. Fail and you're all our slaves. Or maybe dinner." and then he grinned.

Ammaril turned back towards where she knew the rest of the scouting party were hidden and waved them towards her.

"You can all come out now. It's perfectly safe." she called out to them.

"It's your decision your highness." Yilven said to Orcan when they heard this and Orcan nodded.

"You heard her, it's safe so let's go and find out what's going on." he said before he emerged from his hiding place and started to walk towards Ammaril, "Come on." he said to the others when none of them copied him at first and the Elf warriors all obeyed immediately, getting to their feet and emerging from the ruined building. Despite having been told that it was safe for them to emerge though they retained their formation with the shield equipped warriors taking the lead while the archers followed behind them. This left only Yilven and Lucia in the ruined building.

"What do we do?" Lucia asked.

"Go out there of course. Prince Orcan and Princess Ammaril ordered it." Yilven answered, "But I think we should keep our distance from those Ogres just in case. They may have promised not to attack us for now but there's no telling if any of them will change their minds later." and then he and Lucia also emerged from the building.

"Ammaril what's happening?" Orcan asked as he walked up behind his sister and she smiled at him.

"Trollog's tribe have agreed a truce with us Orcan. We have until sundown tomorrow to get into the great library, or the 'palace of fire' as the Ogres call it." she told him.

"Place of fire?" Orcan commented with a frown, "Why would they call it that?"

"Look at the boundary Orcan, beyond the totems where the vegetation and damage to the ground ends. Do you notice anything?" Ammaril said and Orcan looked at where she told him to. Just as Ammaril had done when she focused on this area he saw that the vegetation ended in too neat a line to be natural and that it appeared burned. Then as he looked further he saw the charred remains of animals and Ogres as well.

"It's all burned. What happened?" he said.

"It's the library Orcan. Anything that approaches it gets burnt." Ammaril said, "Watch." and then she looked in the direction of the Elf warriors behind them, focusing on one of the archers, "Fire an arrow at that building." she ordered.

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"Your highness?" the warrior said, confused.

"Just do it." Orcan told him.

"Yes your highness." the archer responded before he quickly drew an arrow and fired it at the library. This sped through the air until it reached the point where the vegetation ended and it suddenly stopped dead, bursting into flames in mid air before its remains fell to the ground.

"Incredible. But what made it happen?" Orcan added.

"I think that the reason that the library building is so well preserved is that it has been frozen in time. To us and the rest of the world thousands of years have passed since the Oscari disappeared but the building and everything in it still exist on the very same day as when this was done." Ammaril explained.

"How though? And why does that cause an arrow to burst into flames?" Orcan said.

"Because you can't cross from today to a day thousands of years ago Orcan. If you try then the magic that was used to cause this will flow into you and burn you to a crisp. This is what I've been sensing, the power required to do it is unimaginably vast and it's inside that library." Ammaril continued.

"Then how are we supposed to get inside if just getting close will burn you to ashes?" Orcan said.

"It's simple Orcan, All I need to do is find a way to draw off that energy, either disperse it or drain in into something else." Ammaril told him.

"Do you think you can do that?" he asked.

"Probably, yes. Though I will need to consult my books. Creating a receptacle for that much power will be difficult." Ammaril said.

"Then you'll disperse it somehow? Is that safe?" Orcan replied.

"Possibly not. If there is as much power here as I think then releasing it all at once could destroy everything that is left of this city." Ammaril admitted, "I am sure that I will come up with a solution by nightfall tomorrow though. At least I hope I will."

"Why? What happens when the truce expires Ammaril?" Orcan said.

"I have promised Trollog that we will willingly become his tribe's slaves. All of us who came here to Oscay." Ammaril replied and Orcan frowned.

"You offered us as slaves? Everyone in the expedition?" he said.

"It was the only way Orcan. Don't worry though Orcan, I am sure that it won't come to that. Just have faith in me to get this done." Ammaril replied.

"She promised them what?" Tiellan exclaimed when Orcan returned to the column to tell him what had happened, "I will not become a slave. Just how many Ogres are there in this tribe anyway?"

"About fifty or sixty from what I saw. That includes women and children." Orcan told him even though it was well known that the females of the species could be just as dangerous as the males and even adolescents had more strength than any human, Elf, Dwarf or Halfling.

"Sixty at most? Orcan you know that we can handle that many. We outnumber them five to one and we have my dragons. Let's just wipe them out and have done with it. Then your sister can have all the time in the world to find a way into this library." Tiellan said.



“Here he comes.” William said to the other surviving mutineers. The four of them were concealed just beyond a hill that overlooked the beach where the crew of the *Storm Chaser* as well as the mercenaries it carried had been landing during the day. After they first landed the mercenaries spread out to secure the area with pairs of them positioning themselves about a hundred yards away from it and this had forced the mutineers to position themselves further back. From this distance they could not accurately target the camp that was being set up on the beach with their crossbows but they could still observe what was happening there as well as watch the two remaining rowing boats moving back and forth between the shore and the *Storm Chaser*. They had been able to watch as the crew and mercenaries on the beach set up tents and search the remains of the ancient wrecked ships that were also on the beach. Now though the mutineers were directing their attention out to sea again where one of the rowing boats was heading towards the shore once again and now that the sun had gone below the horizon Marcus himself was aboard it. The vampire sat up straight at the back of the boat with Diera while a pair of crewmen rowed.

“If we were just a hundred yards closer I could get a good shot at him.” Gromar commented.

“Are we safe staying here?” Horace asked nervously.

“That’s a good point. Can’t vampires see in the dark?” Aldbertus added and Gromar nodded.

“Yes they can. Possibly better than any Dwarf or Elf. They wouldn’t be very good nocturnal hunters if they couldn’t.” he said.

“It doesn’t matter.” William responded, “We’re too far away for him to do anything about us before we see what’s happening. If it looks like he’s found us we’ll retreat and try to catch up with them later. He can’t stay out in the sun so he’ll have to take shelter in the morning.”

“Where do you think he’ll do that?” Horace said.

“Probably in that large tent your former shipmates spent so much time and care setting up.” Gromar replied and he pointed towards a large, square tent that stood out among the rows of much smaller ones on the beach.

Thomas, Edwin, Alphonse and Everad stood waiting by the shore as the boat carrying Marcus came closer. “Do you have that board ready?” Thomas asked, looking at another nearby pair of crewmen from the *Storm Chaser* and one of them nodded. Between them they carried a wooden board that was about six feet long and two wide.

“Can he not stand in the water?” Edwin asked.

“Of course he can but his boots and clothes are expensive. He won’t want to ruin them by standing in the sea.” Thomas responded.

“I’d feel better about this if we’d managed to find those mutineers.” Alphonse commented.

“Blame him. They’re his crew.” Thomas said and he looked at Edwin again.

“Only Will and Horace.” Edwin protested, “The magister brought the Dwarf aboard my ship himself and he also gave the order to pick up those Hadarians.”

“I would advise you not to suggest that the mutiny was the magister’s fault to his face captain. It will probably displease him.” Thomas said before the rowing boat got close to the shore and the two crewmen in it got out, standing in the water up to their knees as they dragged the boat onwards until it became beached. At this point the crewmen holding the wooden board dashed forwards, also running into the water before they laid the board down with one end resting on the side of the rowing boat and the other in the sand of the beach above the water line. Without speaking Marcus and Diera then both got to their feet and walked down this bridge, stepping onto the beach without getting their feet wet or their clothing dirty at all.

“Everything is as you wished it my lord. I have overseen everything.” Thomas told him.

“My tent is prepared?” Marcus asked and Thomas nodded.

“Oh yes master. Once closed no sunlight can get inside. I tested it myself when the sun was at its highest.” he told the vampire.

“I take it that there have been no signs of any of our rivals.” Marcus added as he looked around, focusing his attention on the horizon.

“None magister.” Alphonse answered, “We have sentries a hundred yards out from the beach and we haven’t seen any signs of either the Elves or the mutineers.”

“Nor any signs of any of the crews from these ships magister. It’s as if they all just disappeared.” Everad added.

"What is your plan for finding the Elves magister?" Edwin asked and Marcus looked upwards, studying the sky.

"They shall be our eyes and ears." he said.

"Who?" Edwin said, frowning as he looked up into the night sky himself and saw nothing. However, Marcus seemed to ignore him and just reached his arm up above him.

"Come to me hunters of the night!" he shouted, "I command it!"

This was followed by a chirping sound from the sky and the gathered humans suddenly realised that there were hundreds of bats above them that now swarmed together instead of remaining spread out as they had been. A smaller number of these dived down towards Marcus and the humans clustered around him and this made the humans flinch and duck to avoid being hit by any of the bats. These bats then circled around Marcus before landing and clutching onto his outstretched arms. Marcus looked closely at these bats on his arm and smiled before his eyes began to glow a pale blue.

All of the bats then turned their heads towards Marcus' face and he opened his mouth and exhaled. As he breathed out his breath formed into a glowing mist that matched the colour of the light coming from his eyes. Rather than simply expand as it got further from Marcus' mouth though this cloud instead began to form itself into narrow streams that wound through the air to be breathed in by each of the bats on his arm and as they inhaled the mysterious mist the eyes of the bats also began to glow the same pale blue. This continued until the eyes of all of the bats glowed and Marcus closed his mouth, at which point his eyes and also those of the bats returned to their normal state.

"Now fly!" Marcus yelled and the bats on his arm took to the air once more, flying upwards to join the hundreds of others that were still circling overhead before the massive swarm suddenly dispersed again, all of them heading inland.

"What was that?" Edwin asked in amazement and Marcus smiled at him.

"A simple spell of distant viewing Captain Atwood. The swarm's senses are now my own." he answered, "What they see, I also see and what they hear, I also hear. They will fly far and fast and they will find our enemies for us."

Watching from the hill hundreds of yards away the four mutineers saw the light cast by the spell that Marcus worked.

"We need to move." Gromar said, "Now!"

"What's the matter?" William asked.

"If we stay out in the open he's going to find us. We need to get under cover before those bats come for us." Gromar told him.

"Bats?" Aldbertus said and Gromar nodded.

"Yes, bats." he replied.

"What about those trees over there?" Horace suggested and he pointed towards a dense cluster of trees about a hundred yards from their position.

"It's all we've got. Let's go." Gromar said and he immediately began to run towards them.

"You heard him." William added, looking at Aldbertus and then they and Horace followed Gromar.

The two humans could move faster and they reached the trees first, rushing into the undergrowth and looking back towards Gromar and Horace as they rushed to keep up, "Come on! They're coming!" William called out to them when he looked in the direction of the beach and saw the swarm of bats starting to disperse, part of it heading in their direction.

William waved Gromar and Horace onwards as he continued to look up into the sky and the pair of them rushed into the woods one after another before the bats flew overhead.

"Can someone explain to me what is going on?" Aldbertus asked and Gromar looked up into the sky before he spoke.

"In the old stories it was done with rats." he said, "Vampires would possess them with their magic somehow so that they could use them as spies."

"The difference is that bats can move a lot further and faster than rats can." William said, "My guess is that the magister will use them to find the Elves."

Gromar then nodded in agreement.

"That would be my guess as well. Though I must confess that I don't know much about bats. Some live in the upper levels of our cities but they tend to stay away from us and we don't hunt them for food like we do rats. They're too hard to catch to justify the effort." he said.

"If what I've heard about bats is true then they could have found the Elves by daybreak." William added.

"In which case they'll probably set off tomorrow night. Unless they plan to carry that vampire around in a box during the day." Aldbertus said.

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"I didn't see the one he was brought aboard the *Storm Chaser* in being brought ashore." William replied, "So I think that them travelling by night is a good bet."

"Then what do we do Will?" Horace asked.

"The opposite." William replied, "We'll rest by night and catch up to them by day. More than fifty men all going the same way are going to leave an obvious trail that we can follow."

Initially the entire Ogre tribe gathered to watch Ammaril as she consulted her books but they soon lost interest and most of them drifted away, returning to their usual activities instead. On the other hand Trollog himself remained close by her along with two other members of the tribe to keep a close eye on her while she worked, not wanting to risk her get inside the library without him knowing about it. On the other hand a party of Elves remained close to Ammaril constantly. As well as Orcan and Tiellan at least a dozen warriors remained close enough to protect her at all times. Tiellan had also brought his dragons to the library with him and he was pleased to see that the Ogres did not seem to want to get near them.

While they had been gathered together as close to the entrance to the library as they could get without the time freezing spell burning them Yilven instead circled around the building to scout out the area, taking note of places that seemed to have attracted the attention of the Ogres.

"Your highness." Yilven said when he returned and walked up to Orcan.

"Yes Yilven? Did you find anything interesting?" Orcan replied.

"Nothing that stood out to me. I'd say that the Ogres have made use of the area all around the library for about a hundred yards or so at one time or another. I think they take everything they can from a few buildings at a time before they move on to others instead." Yilven explained.

"So nothing left for us to examine then?" Orcan said and Yilven shook his head.

"I can't say for certain your highness. I doubt they carried out detailed searches so there could be something that they missed, though whether it's worth the effort in searching ourselves is questionable." he said. Then he added, "I'd like to head further out if it's alright with you."

"How much further?" Orcan asked.

"I was thinking of making my way around the edge of the city itself. I'd like to get a feel for the surrounding area." Yilven answered.

"How long do you plan on being gone?" Orcan said.

"I'm not sure. Judging by the map we have it could be a day or two. I want to find out exactly what the land is like," Yilven said before he glanced in the direction of some nearby Ogres, "and I'd rather not trust them to describe it accurately."

"Very well." Orcan replied with a nod, "What will you need?"

"I'll take some water and a little food, though I don't think that I'll need much. If those Ogres can survive here then we can too." Yilven said. Then he smiled and added, "Though whether or not we'll find whatever they've been eating appetising is another question."

Orcan smiled back at him.

"Go." he said and Yilven darted away, allowing Orcan to return to his sister's side, "How is it going?" he asked her.

"Slowly." Ammaril answered while still looking through the book she held, "I don't think that I can just shut down the spell though. I need to channel the energy into something. Something that can store a lot of power, I'm talking about far more than any ordinary talisman is capable of."

"Can you make something like that Ammaril?" Orcan said.

"No, no sorcerer alive can." Ammaril replied and then she looked up from her book and smiled.

"What?" Orcan said.

"No sorcerer alive." Ammaril repeated.

"Yes you said that but what do you mean?" Orcan said.

"I mean that although I can't create a vessel to store the power in that doesn't mean that there have never been sorcerers who couldn't and if we're lucky then what we need may not be too far away." Ammaril said as she closed the book she held and reached for another out of the nearby chest filled with them. She quickly flipped through the pages of this book but did not find what she needed so she put it back in the chest and began to rummage through it further in search of the one she was looking for, "Where is it?" she muttered to herself before she found a large volume bound in black leather, "Ah, this is it." she added as she turned the pages of the book until she found one that had an illustration on it and she held it up so that Trollog and the other nearby Ogres could see it clearly. The illustration was an ink sketch of a large standing stone that had various runes engraved into it, "Trollog have you ever seen something like this?" she asked, "There would probably be more than one of them together, arranged in a large circle and standing taller than you."

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"The circle?" Trollog commented and Ammaril smiled.

"You have seen something like this?" she said, "Where is it?"

"A circle of stones to the north. Just outside the ruins. We saw it when we came here but there was nothing there that was worth taking." Trollog explained.

"What did he say?" Orcan asked, unable to understand the Ogres' language himself.

"He said that we can find what we need to the north of the city. A circle of standing stones." Ammaril told her twin brother.

"A stone circle? How big are these stones?" Orcan said, remembering the ancient stone circle that he had seen on Sylldarin. The stones that made up that particular circle had stood twice the height of an Elf and were correspondingly heavy.

"Big Orcan. Big enough and so perfectly crafted that they can store massive amounts of magical energy. I don't know exactly what the rituals were that the Oscari used them for but I've found several references to their use in magic. I need to-" Ammaril said before she suddenly stopped talking and looked up into the sky.

"Need to what Ammaril?" Orcan asked, looking at his sister.

"We're being watched Orcan. There's someone else on this continent with us." Ammaril replied as she continued to look up into the sky.

"What do you mean? I don't see anything." Orcan said as he also looked upwards. However, all he could see was the occasional bat as the creatures hunted for food.

Ammaril could also see the bats but with her senses also attuned to magic she could make out the faintly glowing lines of energy that extended from some of the creatures and headed in an easterly direction like lengths of string connecting them to whoever was using them to spy on the Elves.

"The bats Orcan." Ammaril told him, "Someone has cast a spell on them, a very subtle spell but one that stands out to me. Whoever cast it is using them to extend their own senses far beyond what they can see and hear themselves."

"Who though?" Orcan said, now trying to follow the path of the bats as they flew through the air.

"I don't know. Maybe someone followed us here or maybe they were here all along and use the bats to watch the city on a regular basis." Ammaril told him, "Whatever the answer is though we need to be prepared for whoever has sent them to come in person as well, likely in significant force."

"Can your senses tell which direction they'll come from Ammaril?" Orcan asked and Ammaril nodded.

"The trail of magic leads to the east. Whoever is controlling the bats is there." she told him.

"Well spying on us is one thing but coming after us in person is another. We need to be prepared for that." Orcan said.

"And while you are preparing our defences I need to see this stone circle." Ammaril added.

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Sat in his tent with a book in his lap, Marcus smiled. Since the fabric of the tent was thick enough to prevent any light from getting from outside illumination was provided by a pair of candlesticks. The interior of his tent was large enough for several people and furniture had been set up inside it. In addition to the main room there was a second smaller one that stuck out at one side that was the only way in and out of the tent. With separate flaps separating the two rooms and also on the outside of the smaller one it was possible to enter or leave without any sunlight getting into the main room where Marcus sat.

"What is it master?" Diera asked from the chair she was on across the tent from him while a lightweight table was set up between them.

"My spies have found the Elves." Marcus told her, "Fetch the others."

"Yes master." Diera replied and she got up to leave the tent, closing the flap that separated the two rooms behind her before opening the outer one even though it was still dark outside.

While Diera was gone Marcus got up and took a map from the tube it was stored in before unrolling this on the table. Then he moved his hand slowly over the map before stopping and leaving it above the area where the Oscari port city was located and he smiled.

"Magister, you summoned us." Everad said as he entered the room and Alphonse, Edwin and Thomas followed him.

"Yes, the bats have found the Elves." Marcus told the men as they gathered around the table.

"Where my lord?" Thomas asked.

"Right here. A city on the coast where they appear to be in the company of a tribe of Ogres." Marcus answered.

"Ogres?" Alphonse commented.

"Yes. Will that be a problem?" Marcus said, looking at the mercenary leader.

"No magister, we've dealt with Ogres before." Alphonse replied.

"There's a lot of money to be made from people who need protection from Ogre raids." Everad added.

"How far away is it?" Edwin asked.

"A little over a hundred miles in a straight line." Marcus responded.

"Normally I'd say that we could make that in about five days." Alphonse said, "But since we're limited to marching only by night and having to dismantle and set up this tent during that time as well then it'll probably take a day or two longer than that."

"What if the Elves move on during that time?" Thomas said.

"They won't." Marcus said, "As well as telling me where the Elves are the bats have also shown me what they are here for."

"The secrets of the Oscari." Thomas said.

"Yes, though now I know where they think that they can obtain these and in theory they are right." Marcus said.

"In theory?" Edwin commented.

"Yes. The Elves are trying to get into the Great Library where the Oscari gathered their knowledge." Marcus said.

"Is it still standing after all this time?" Alphonse said and Marcus smiled.

"Yes, the building is protected against the ravages of time by a spell cast by the ancient Oscari sorcerers but that same spell makes it impossible to get inside without disabling it first and that will take time. Enough time for us to reach them." he said.

"When do we leave?" Everad asked.

"Tomorrow night." Marcus answered, "There is not enough time before sunrise to be worth setting off now. Have your men rest for the day and be ready to go at sunset."

As well as Trollog himself, half a dozen more Ogres took Ammaril to the stone circle just outside the ruins of the city. In addition to them Orcan sent along a dozen warriors to protect Ammaril while Vendril and five of his crew also accompanied them with ropes and tools that would enable them to transport the standing stone to the library.

The circle consisted of two rings of standing stones. The inner ring had eight stones while fifteen more made up the outer one and one of these had toppled over during the centuries that the area had been abandoned. Just as Ammaril had hoped all of the stones that she could see clearly had arcane symbols carved into them. Many of these she recognised either from her training in the use of magic or from the books she had taken

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from the vampire's library but there were some that she had never seen before as well. Those that she was familiar with though suggested that just as she had hoped the stones were capable of storing magical energy.

"These are huge." Vendril exclaimed when he saw the stones.

"Yes they are, if they weren't then they would be of no use to us captain." Ammaril told him.

"So how do you propose we move one princess?" Vendril asked and Ammaril looked towards a nearby forest.

"Depending on the properties of the stones we may need more than one captain. I will know that after I have had a chance to examine them more closely. In the meantime we will need the trunks of as many trees as possible. All of them should be the same width." she said and Vendril smiled.

"Ah, we're going to use them as rollers." he said.

"Quite right captain. We'll pull the stones down onto the trunks so that they can be pulled, continually moving the trunks from the back to the front. The humans of ancient Dyra used the technique to build their pyramids so it should serve us just as well." Ammaril said.

"We'll get started now princess." Vendril said, "This shouldn't be too difficult, it's just like cutting wood for a new mast."

"Very good captain and while you and your men are doing that I shall select a suitable stone." Ammaril replied.

Vendril and his men then headed for the forest while Ammaril made her way towards the stone circle.

"Where are they going?" Trollog asked, walking alongside Ammaril while watching the Elven sailors head away.

"We need tree trunks for this Trollog." Ammaril told him, "Don't worry, they'll be back soon."

"Good because if it looks like they're running off before you lose your bet and you all become our slaves then my warriors are going to be angry." Trollog said.

"Send one of them to watch if you want. I'm sure the captain won't object." Ammaril suggested and Trollog looked at one of his warriors.

"Go with them." he told the other Ogre, "They are going to cut down trees. Watch them and make sure they do it right."

"Yes chief." the other Ogre responded and he turned to follow the Elf sailors heading for the forest.

In the meantime Ammaril strode towards the stone circle, making her way to the closest of them where she pressed the palm of her hand against it and closed her eyes.

"What are you doing?" Trollog asked but she ignored him, "I said-" he called out in a much louder voice and Ammaril opened her eyes and sighed without turning away from the stone.

"I need to know whether these stones can contain all of the power I need them to." she interrupted, "It would help if you remained quiet and let me continue."

Trollog frowned when Ammaril said this and he let out a low growl but he did not say anything, instead letting her continue with her work. However, he did make a mental note to take revenge for the way she had spoken to him should she fail to get into the library and thus become his slave.

Despite the arcane carvings on the stone, Ammaril could not sense any power within it and she hoped that this did not mean that it was in some way damaged. Destroying objects used to store magical power was difficult but it was possible. Usually it resulted in the sudden and uncontrolled release of any stored energy though so since the stone was still in one piece it suggested that this was not the case.

To test the stone's ability to store energy Ammaril focused her mind on it and pushed some of her own power out through her hand. Small arcs of lightning danced across the surface of the stone around where her hand was placed and the nearby carvings began to glow as the stone absorbed the power. Ammaril stopped this after just a few seconds and pulled her hand away from the surface of the stone, watching as the carvings stopped glowing. She then waited a few more seconds before she placed her hand back against the stone and took a deep breath as she concentrated.

This time she could sense the power within the stone, but only just. She knew that the amount of magical energy that she had transferred into the stone would have been enough to power a strong but short lived spell such as a magical attack but the condition of the stone had barely changed. This indicated that the maximum amount of magical energy that it could contain was vast, greater than anything she could hope to channel at once.

"This stone will do." she announced, "When Captain Vendril returns with the logs we will bring it down."

The rising sun meant that the bats Marcus had used as spies would be returning to their nesting sites and it was safe for the mutineers to come out from their hiding place and returned to the hill from where they could look down at the beach where their former comrades had set up their camp.

"Just like we thought." William said when he saw the tents still in place, in particular the large one that protected Marcus from the sunlight, "They're camping by daylight."

"Not quite everyone. Look." Aldbertus added and he pointed to where a group of four of mercenaries was walking away from the camp.

"Are they deserting?" Horace asked.

"I don't think so. Look, there are more men over there watching them." Aldbertus answered and he pointed to another pair of mercenaries who seemed content to let the first four leave the camp unchallenged. Then he looked at William and added, "A patrol?"

"More likely, yes." William replied, "I wouldn't be surprised if that was the direction that they'll be travelling in tonight. Those men are probably scouting it out ahead of the others."

"Do you think that they're supposed to go back before the rest set off?" Gromar said, "If not then there are only four of them. We could probably handle them."

"Whittle down their numbers you mean?" William said and Gromar nodded.

"Exactly." he said, "Use those crossbows to bring down two before they even know that we're around and then we can deal with the other two up close."

"If they carry on going in the direction they're heading in now then they should get to that hill over there before too long. If we can get to it as well then maybe we'll be able to find them." William said and he pointed out a hill to the south of their present location.

"Sounds good to me." Gromar responded, "Does anyone else have any objections?"

"We'll need to move fast. I'm not sure that I can keep up." Horace said.

"I'm not so fast myself Horace." Gromar pointed out, "We'll just have to do our best."

"We should try to wait for all of us to be there before we attack. Aldbertus and I will just have to wait for you both." William said as he stood up.

The four mutineers then set off to the south, moving as quickly as they could to try and catch the mercenaries they had seen leaving the camp. As expected William and Aldbertus were able to move faster than the much shorter Gromar and Horace and a gap soon opened up between the two pairs. Continuing until they reached the hill the two men came to a stop and took their crossbows from their backs before cocking and then loading the weapons. Then with these held at the ready they began to climb the hill at a cautious pace, looking and listening for any indications of a human presence other than their own. It was only when they reached the top of the hill and were able to see the ground on the other side that they were able to locate the four mercenaries. The ground on which these men were now walking on differed from the grass that most of the surrounding area seemed to be covered in. There was still some vegetation beneath their feet but instead of totally covering the ground it was poking through cracks in what appeared to have been a paved road at one time, now long since abandoned and unmaintained.

"A road." Aldbertus said as he watched the mercenaries continue along the road in a loose square.

"Yes but do those shapes about half a mile along look interesting to you?" William added and he pointed further down the road in the direction that the mercenaries were heading.

Looking in this direction himself Aldbertus saw that the ground either side of the ancient road became uneven after about half a mile. However, although thick vegetation still covered this ground there were obvious vertical lines that made it apparent that it was not a natural occurrence.

"Buildings?" Aldbertus commented and William nodded.

"I think so." he said, "They don't look very big and there can't be more than a couple of dozen of them so I think this more some sort of outlying village than a major town."

"Unless something happened to totally wipe the rest from the land without leaving anything behind." Aldbertus suggested.

"Except the road." William pointed out, "This could work for us though." he continued, "Those men must have seen the ruins as well as us and I doubt they'll just ignore them. I'm sure that any potential historical significance of them will be lost on mercenaries but I also suspect that they'll want to see if there is anything valuable inside them worth talking."

"Ah, greed. A powerful motivator." Aldbertus replied, smiling and nodding his head at the same time.

The leader of the mercenary patrol raised his shield in front of him when he saw the ruins ahead of them and recognised them for what they were.

"Form wall." he said sternly and the men changed their formation from its current square where they were spaced out to be able to observe as much of the area around them as possible to a line where they stood almost shoulder to shoulder with their shields positioned in front of them so that that they formed a single barrier.

"What is it sergeant?" another of the mercenaries asked.

"Don't you see those walls?" the sergeant responded.

"What? Wait, I think I do." another mercenary added when he saw the too-straight lines.

"What is it?" the fourth said.

"I don't know but if we're lucky there'll be something inside that's worth a few coins." the sergeant answered, "Advance but stay watchful. There could be almost anything lurking in there."

The mercenaries advanced steadily, staying in their side by side formation for mutual protection and observing the overgrown ruins ahead of them carefully. The closer they got to these the easier it became to make out their shapes under the vegetation that had covered them and it became possible to pick out the remains of individual structures. These all appeared to be a similar size to one another, covering roughly the same area as many rural human dwellings intended to be inhabited by a single family although many of those tended to be made of wood whereas these ruins were definitely stone.

None of the structures that the mercenaries could see had survived the centuries of being abandoned intact and when they reached them they could see into the areas that had once been inside. Now though they too had various plants growing through cracks in what had been their floors. Features that would have been made of wood such as doors and any furniture that may have been left inside the buildings when they had been abandoned had long since rotted away to nothing and this left the ruins as mere empty shells. This did not stop the mercenaries from splitting up when they reached the ruins though, with each man taking a separate building to search through the layer of vegetation for anything of interest that may have survived and as one of them was using his foot to scrape aside some vines from the ground he heard the sound of something metal scraping across stone.

"Sergeant over here!" he shouted out as he dropped to his knees to inspect what he had found more closely and he set down both his sword and shield so that he could use both hands.

"What is it?" the sergeant asked as the other mercenaries came to see what he had found. However, rather than some fabulous ancient treasure that would make them all rich all that he held up was a rusted metal spike and the mercenaries other than the sergeant groaned.

"What's that supposed to be?" one of them commented and the sergeant glared at him.

"Don't you know anything?" he said, "That's a spear tip. An old one. I'd say that it belonged to a legionary from the Trayman Empire."

"Sergeant if a Trayman legionary left that here then what happened to him?" one of the other mercenaries asked.

"I don't know and I don't like the thought." the sergeant replied, "The Trayman legions maintained strict discipline. One of their soldiers wouldn't lose his weapon."

"Then he never left this place." the mercenary who had found the spear tip said.

"Carry on searching." the sergeant ordered, "If there's something dangerous around here then we need to know about it before the others just blunder right into it."

The four soldiers separated again to each search a different part of the ruined settlement. The sergeant himself made his way towards what looked to have once been the centre of the settlement and despite the fact that none of the buildings were still intact it was still possible to tell that the buildings here had been larger than those further out. Stepping through what remained of a doorway, now nothing more than a gap in a ruined wall he looked around at what remained of the floor and stopped when he saw the gaping hole in the middle. This was rectangular in shape, with sides too regular to have been created by damage to the floor and the sergeant guessed that it had once represented the entrance to a cellar or other underground chamber and he peered down into the darkness below.

Initially he saw nothing, even any trace of steps or a ladder leading downwards having been lost. The sergeant tested the floor around the opening with pressure from his foot, making sure that there was no give before he went right up to the hole and crouched down beside it, setting down his sword and shield beside him. Still unable to see anything but shadows he slowly lowered his head further until it was within the hole and he was finally able to make out some details of the chamber below.

A chamber that was filled with bones.

The sergeant had seen many terrible things during his life of warfare but the sight of this crude mass grave still took him by surprise and he leapt back away from the hole, kicking his shield as he did so.

"Sergeant! What's wrong?" one of the other mercenaries called out when they all heard the clattering of the shield.

"I think I've found our Trayman legionary," the sergeant called out, "and a whole lot more as well. Maybe everyone from those abandoned boats anchored at the beach."

The other three mercenaries then all rushed to see what the sergeant had found for themselves. All of them saw the hole as soon as they stepped through the gap in the wall but that did not stop the sergeant from



pointing it out to them.

"They're down there sergeant?" one asked and the sergeant nodded.

"What's left of them, yes. Just bones now, take a look." he said and the other mercenary also made his way to the hole before looking down into it, lowering his head until the carpet of bones came into view. Like the other mercenaries he had seen enough split open bodies on the battlefield to be able to identify the bones as human, even those not as obvious as the skulls.

"The sergeant is right. There must be hundreds down here. Somebody make me a torch, I want to get a better look." he said.

It did not take long for the mercenaries to gather the materials need for a simple torch and once this was lit the man who had asked for it leant into the hole again, this time also holding the burning torch in his hand so that he had more light. This revealed the chamber to be large, about the same in area as the smaller outlying buildings in the ruined settlement and there was a doorway at one end that led into a second chamber that he could not see into from where he was lying. With more light though he was able to see the bones that covered the floor in more detail and took note of the number of skulls in particular that he could see.

"So what do you see?" the sergeant asked.

"I think you could be right about these being all of the crew from those ships sergeant." he answered, "There must be hundreds of skeletons down here. There's another room as well but I can't see what's inside it from here."

"We're not going down there are we sergeant?" another mercenary said nervously.

"That depends." the sergeant replied and the mercenary frowned for a moment.

"Depends on what sergeant?" he said.

"Depends on how you think the magister will react if we tell him about this place but then tell him that we didn't properly investigate it." the sergeant said.

"I'll do it sergeant." the mercenary already looking into the hole said, "Just get me a rope and make sure that you're ready to pull me back up if there's any trouble okay?"

"Well done. Now who's got the rope?" the sergeant said and he looked around at the other mercenaries.

"Right here sergeant." one of them said as he placed his sword and shield down and then took off his pack so that he could remove the rope he carried from inside it.

Tying this around the mercenary with the torch, the other three were then able to slowly lower him down into the hole where he stood on the bones that covered the floor and as his weight was transferred from the rope to the bones there were snapping sounds when those directly under his feet broke.

"What's it like down there?" the sergeant called down from above.

"These bones are piled deep." the mercenary replied as he looked around and he took an experimental step, hearing more bones crunching under his weight. Despite hearing the bones break the mercenary was able to retain his footing and he undid the rope from around him so that he could proceed without it limiting his movement, "Okay I'm moving towards the door now. Keep that rope where it is." he said as he kept on walking towards the doorway to second chamber.

When he reached the doorway he stopped and as he looked through he saw that the floor of the second room was also filled with bones and this time he also noticed the remains of metal helmets still on some of the skulls. However, in addition to the skeletal remains of dozens more people there was a stone dais in the centre that was clear of bones and instead had a small obelisk on it that was about the same height as the mercenary. This obelisk had carvings around the base while from about a third of the way up it was just covered in rows of small rectangular indentations, some of which were used to store small gemstones that reflected the light cast from the torch carried by the mercenary.

Upon seeing these gemstones the mercenary smiled and reached out to pick one up.

Horace was out of breath by the time he and Gromar reached the top of the hill where William and Aldbertus were still watching the mercenaries while they searched the ruins and the sound of his breathing made both look around at the other two mutineers.

"Need more exercise Horace?" William commented.

"Most cooks don't need to run up and down hills Will. We have serving staff to rush around with people's food instead." Horace responded before he added, "What about you two, can you see those mercenaries?"

"Yes, all four are down there now searching the ruins of a small settlement." Aldbertus said.

"Ruins?" Gromar commented, "Let me see. This is why Marcus Quinnus hired me in the first place. He thought that a lot of them could be rigged with traps."

"Well it doesn't look like they've triggered anything yet." William said as Gromar made his way to the very top of the hill and looked over it.

"What are they doing?" he asked.

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“We think that they’ve found an entrance to an underground chamber. The fourth one went down a couple of minutes ago.” William told him and Gromar frowned.

“Why do I get such a bad feeling about that?” he said.

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The three mercenaries waiting by the hole heard the scream that ended abruptly as the man who had gone into the hole died and they exchanged nervous glances.

"What's happening down there?" the sergeant shouted into the hole even though he suspected that the mercenary down it was already dead. Meanwhile the other two mercenaries backed away slowly, "Careful with that rope. If he's still alive then-" the sergeant started to say to the man holding the rope before all of a sudden it was pulled tight with such force that he was pulled forwards so rapidly that he could not let go before he was dragged down into the hole where he too let out a scream.

The sergeant and the other remaining mercenary now stood with their swords raised, watching the hole closely.

"What do we do sergeant? What's even happening?" the other mercenary asked.

"How should I know?" the sergeant replied and then after a brief pause he added, "Okay I think we should go. We'll tell the magister about this place and he can figure out what to do about it."

The two mercenaries started to turn to leave before they felt the air become cold and a strange green glow appeared in the hole as they turned back towards it. This light then started to flow from the hole like a mist, causing the mercenaries to back further away for fear of letting it touch them. Rather than continue to spread though the mist rose up and formed itself into an ethereal and partially transparent humanoid form draped in a cloak so that only its skeletal face and hands were visible.

"You dare disturb me?" the apparition asked the obviously terrified men before the sergeant lunged towards it with his sword held outstretched in front of him. However, the moment that the blade pierced the glowing form the previously shiny metal dulled rapidly and the sergeant pulled it back before staring at it in confusion. The apparition was obviously unharmed by this and it drifted forwards quickly, reaching out with one hand before plunging it into the sergeant's chest as soon as he came within reach. The effect of this was unlike anything that the mercenaries were prepared for as the chainmail vest he wore started to rust where the ghostly hand passed through without otherwise damaging it. At the same time the sergeant dropped his sword and screamed while he began to visibly age at a rapid rate. This continued until he simply collapsed, landing in a heap on the ground and the apparition turned its attention towards the last remaining mercenary who reacted by dropping both his sword and his shield before spinning around on the spot and fleeing as fast as he could.

"What the hell is that thing?" Aldbertus exclaimed when he and the others saw the glowing apparition emerge from the hole and kill the mercenary sergeant. They were far too far away to make out the grisly details of his death but from the way that the final man simply turned and ran it was obvious that what he had seen had deeply disturbed him.

"I've no idea. If I believed in ghosts then that's what I'd say it was." William replied.

"What sort of ghost can kill a man though?" Aldbertus added.

"You know that last man is coming this way." Gromar commented and William looked down at the road and realised that the dwarf was right, the last of the mercenaries was running back along it as fast as he could, obviously trying to reach the beach where the rest of his comrades were camped.

"Think you can hit a moving target Aldbertus?" William said as he aimed his crossbow at the fleeing man.

"Look, that thing is after him as well." Gromar said and William looked towards the ruins again to see that the glowing apparition was in pursuit of the mercenary, however its speed appeared limited and the gap between them was increasing.

"It won't catch him." William said.

"Maybe not, but if you shoot that man will that come after us instead when it realises that we're up here?" Horace asked and William sighed.

"I don't know. It might." he said.

"So we're letting this guy go?" Aldbertus said.

"From the looks of it the other three are already dead and without any cost to us." William pointed out, "That's a tenth of the men that Marcus Quinnus brought with him. I call that a good start."

"My lord!" Thomas called out as he, Alphonse, Everad and Edwin entered the outer room of Marcus' tent.

"Enter." Marcus responded from the other side of the inner flap and Thomas opened it so that the three men could enter the main room. Inside they found Marcus sat reading while Diera lay on the bed that had been set up at one side of the room, "Now what is so important that the four of you need to come rushing in here?"

"Magister we sent a patrol to scout the route ahead." Alphonse replied and Marcus looked at him.

"Oh really? Did they find something interesting?" he said.

"They were attacked magister. Some sort of creature they found in ruins not far from here." Everad told him.

"A creature? Tell me more." Marcus said, closing the book that he had been reading.

"The survivor described it as some sort of ghost magister." Alphonse said.

"A ghost? Now that is interesting. I thought it was supposed to be sailors that were superstitious, not soldiers." Marcus commented, glancing at Edwin as he said this.

"Magister we need to know what to do." Alphonse continued, "The only man who made it back said that his sergeant's sword passed right through the creature before it just drained the life out of him."

"Drained the life you say? Even more interesting. How exactly was this survivor able to escape from this creature? Did he just run while his comrades were fighting it?" Marcus said.

"No magister." Everad answered, "The others were dead before he ran. He says that the creature did start to follow him but seemed to give up. Apparently it got slower."

"Slower the further away from its source of power it got." Marcus interrupted.

"You know what this was my lord?" Thomas commented.

"I have a suspicion Thomas, nothing more. Unfortunately the knowledge that any of my kind has about this continent is incomplete, a problem caused when we took these forms that cannot be corrected. However, I suspect that we are dealing with a wraith." Marcus said.

"Excuse me magister, but what's a wraith? Some sort of evil spirit?" Edwin asked and Marcus smiled.

"I suppose you could call them that, yes. A wraith was once an Oscari who tried to escape the death of their people but failed. Instead they became trapped, most often trapped inside an object that was part of the process they were attempting but sometimes instead bound to the place where they made the attempt. The key factor is that the further away from the object or place to which they are bound, the weaker they become. Weaker and slower. That is how our man was able to escape." he explained.

"So how do we kill it magister?" Alphonse said.

"If it is a wraith then you can't kill it for it is already dead, its body reduced to dust by now probably. All that is left is the rage of a spirit that has been trapped for thousands of years. Unfortunately if the Oscari ever did discover a way to destroy a wraith then it is knowledge that I no longer have." Marcus said.

"Magister with respect the men aren't going to like that." Alphonse commented.

"Can't you control your men?" Thomas responded and both of the mercenary leaders glared at him.

"Now, now Thomas. Men can be afraid." Marcus said before he looked at the two mercenaries, "You may tell your men that I am considering the matter and that I will have made a decision about what to do by nightfall. Oh and do please send the man who survived his encounter with the wraith to me. I wish to hear his story from him first hand."

Short sections taken from several felled tree trunks were laid out on the ground beside the standing stone that Ammaril had selected to take back to the library, placed against one another so that there were no gaps between them. Then to stop any of them from simply rolling away if pressure was applied smaller stakes were hammered into the ground to block their movement. At the same time as this was going on ropes were being wrapped and secured around the stone itself. Once these ropes were in place and secure the Elven sailors began to dig a shallow pit at the base of the stone to undermine it at the same side the tree trunks had been placed. This pit only needed to go as deep as the stone was embedded in the ground before Vendril had his men stop digging and he turned to Ammaril.

"Okay your highness, It's over to Trollog and his Ogres now." he said.

"Thank you captain." she replied before she turned to Trollog and switched to his language, "Trollog please have your men use the ropes to pull down that stone as we discussed. Do you understand?"

"Yes I understand." Trollog responded before he waved to the other nearby Ogres, "Okay get into your places." he told them. Two of the Ogres then moved to pick up the ends of the ropes fixed to the standing stone while the rest went around the other side and pressed up against it, "Now go." Trollog called out and while the Ogres holding the ropes started to pull those behind the stone started to push.

At first nothing seemed to happen but then the stone began to tilt slightly towards the tree trunks. Then moments later the stone fell to the side just as planned and landed on the tree trunks.

"They've done it!" Vendril exclaimed.

"Yes they have captain." Ammaril replied, "Now it will be up to your men to handle the tree trunks while the Ogres move the stone."

The Ogres took up positions in front of the stone, still holding the ropes attached to it and also behind it where they could push it along with the tree trunks forming a crude rolling platform. All that was needed for

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them to be able to move the stone now was for the stakes to be removed from the ground and as soon as the Elf sailors did this Trollog signalled for the Ogres to begin.

While the Ogres were pulling the stone from the front and pushing it from behind the Elves stood close by and watched for the tree trunks rolling out behind the stone as it moved forwards. When this happened they quickly pulled the trunk clear of the Ogres behind the stone and then moved it to the front, inserting it right in front of the other trunks. This way the stone permanently remained on its rolling base while the Ogres used their strength to slowly but steadily move it back towards the library.

It was about an hour before sundown when Thomas, Alphonse, Everad and Edwin returned to Marcus' tent. "My lord it is almost time to depart." Thomas said.

"And the men are waiting to hear your plan for dealing with these wraiths magister." Alphonse added.

"Ah yes, the wraiths." Marcus replied, "I will need your swords and shields and those of say your six best men as well."

"Six best men?" Everad commented.

"Correct. You see the best analogy I can come up with for what a wraith is is a form of residual spell, in this case the ancient spell intended to transfer the mind of an Oscari into a new body. The spell failed but its energy still persists so we need a way to drain it and there is a very easy way to do that." Marcus explained.

"What is this way magister?" Edwin asked.

"Simple my dear Captain Atwood," Marcus said, "I am going to convert some of your swords and shields into vessels for storing magical energy, similar to the ones used by various wizards and sorcerers to create additional stores of energy for their own use."

"But how will that help magister?" Everad said.

"If a wraith is just magical energy then should it come into contact with such a vessel then that energy will be drained away into it, effectively draining the wraith of the power that sustains it." Marcus told him.

"Will it damage our weapons magister?" Alphonse added.

"No, your weapons and shield will be unharmed. Unfortunately they will not be able to benefit from the usual increase in their power that comes with such enchantments. Fully crafted, any energy stored within them would be released by physical impact. That would make any blows you struck more powerful while also creating a push back against blows struck against you. Given the time constraints placed upon me though I will not be able to make them do this and the energy that they absorb will sadly be lost. Now hurry, I need your swords and shields now if I am to create these vessels. I should be able to manage enough for a unit of eight men before we leave but I need to start now. Tomorrow morning I will start work on creating more to expand the size of the force so equipped just in case we encounter more creatures like these wraiths. We are going to a city after all and there is no telling how many could be there." Marcus said and the two mercenaries glanced at one another before they drew their swords and without question placed them on the table.

"We'll go and get our shields and those of our men." Alphonse said.

"What should I do in the meantime my lord?" Thomas asked and Marcus just waved him away as he picked up one of the swords.

"Just get out and let me work. Take Diera with you as well, I need to concentrate on this." Marcus ordered.

Unable to understand one another's languages, the Elves and Ogres who had remained outside the library remained apart from one another and watched one another suspiciously while they waited for Ammaril and Trollog to return with the stone. Their wait came to an end just as the sun was setting when the Ogres pulling the stone first appeared.

"Look! There they are!" Tiellan exclaimed when he saw them, "They have the stone."

"Let me see." Orcan said as he rushed to join his cousin and he was in time to see Vendril's crewmen adjusting the tree trunks they were placing in front of the stone so that they would be in the right place as the Ogres dragged it to the side while turning the corner they had just appeared around. Turning the corner was an even slower process than moving the stone in a straight line as Elves and Ogres both worked to turn it and the need for them to work together required Ammaril to remain with them to translate instructions instead of moving ahead to meet Orcan and Tiellan so instead the two male Elves made their way towards her.

"You did it then. Will this stone be enough?" Orcan asked.

"It should be, yes. Apart from the power I transferred into it to test it the stone is empty of power and its capacity is greater than anything I have seen before." Ammaril answered.

"So what did the Oscari use it for?" Tiellan asked.

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“Unfortunately that is still a mystery Tiellan.” Ammaril replied, “Whatever it was though it required a vast amount of power.” then she looked at the library, “Hopefully the answer to that question will be inside there though, along with the answers to many more.”

“So how will this work Ammaril?” Orcan said, turning his attention towards the stone itself.

“We just need to move the stone to the edge of the area covered by the spell. As soon as that is done the power should just flow into it like a river heading towards the ocean.” Ammaril told him.

“That simple?” Tiellan commented.

“Yes, Tiellan, that simple. What did you expect? Animal sacrifice and chants by moonlight?” Ammaril replied and Tiellan just smiled at her. Ammaril then turned to address Trollog himself and pointed to the library, “I want the stone moving there. Have it pushed right into the area of the spell. Your men pulling the stone from the front will have to move to the rear before they touch it themselves.”

Trollog just nodded before shouting out the orders to the Ogres moving the stone and they continued to head towards the library.

Now that the stone had arrived everyone, both Elf, Ogre and in the case of Lucia human gathered to see what was going to happen. Although Ammaril had announced that the stone could be used to drain the energy of the spell that had frozen the library in time, she had not described the way in which this would happen and there was a great deal of interest in witnessing it happen.

As the Ogres moved the stone close to the outer perimeter of the area covered by the spell those holding the ropes in front of the stone let go and hurried out of the way while the others pushed it from behind.

Meanwhile the Elf sailors continued to move the tree trunks from the back of the stone to the front until it was just a few feet from the edge of the spell when they instead just put them aside while the Ogres behind the stone continued to push it forwards. Then, just as the stone was about to tip forwards the end made contact with the edge of the spell and there was a sudden flash of light that made those watching recoil. Unlike when other objects or creatures had strayed into the zone covered by the spell though, the stone was not instantly destroyed by it. Instead this initial flash was followed by arcs of lightning that danced around the library building and extended towards the stone to connect the two and Ammaril smiled when she saw that this prompted the carvings on the stone to glow brightly as it absorbed all the power of the spell.

“It’s working!” she exclaimed, “The power of the spell is being drained.”

“How long will this take?” Orcan asked.

“I don’t know Orcan, maybe just a few more moments or maybe all night but the spell is being drained.”

Ammaril answered and Tiellan glanced at the nearby Ogres who appeared transfixed by the lightning now surrounding the building that they had set up their homes close to but never been able to access.

“As long as it doesn’t take tomorrow night as well.” he commented.

Yilven knew that even with the excellent night vision of an Elf there were limits to what could be seen in the dark, especially when tired so he had set up camp for the night in the ruins of a building on the outskirts of the ancient Oscari city. Remembering what Ammaril had said about there being others on the continent who knew about the Elves’ presence there though he refrained from lighting a fire, the light from which would give away his position. Instead he selected a ruin that would give him protection from the prevailing wind before he set up his bed and lay down to sleep for the night. Before he could get to sleep though he saw the sudden flash of light from with the city that lit up the sky and he knew immediately that it was coming from the area around the Great Library. Although he could not see the localised lightning storm that followed this initial flash from his location he could see the way it produced multiple flashes of pale blue and white light that lit up that part of the horizon and he knew immediately that Ammaril had to be attempting to remove the protective spell from around the library.

“Princess Ammaril, you had better know what you are doing.” he muttered to himself before he lay back down again and closed his eyes to try and get some sleep.

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With the sun down it was safe for Marcus to emerge from his tent once again and men from Edwin's crew began to dismantle it, packing it away in such a manner that it could be carried between several of them on the hand pulled carts that would be used to carry all of the force's supplies. More of Edwin's men also brought out the swords and shields that had been delivered to him and they followed Marcus as he walked up to the mercenaries who were waiting for them.

"Gentlemen here are your swords and shields just as promised." he announced, stepping aside to let the sailors hand over the items to their owners who took them and eagerly inspected them to see how they had changed since the vampire had taken them. In terms of weight and balance none of the swords or shields had changed at all, nor did they give off any sort of magical glow or aura that would make them stand out to an enemy. However, even in the poor light from the moon overhead it was possible to see that the blades of the swords and the front faces of the shields had had markings added to them.

"Magister what do these symbols mean?" Alphonse asked as he tried to read what was on his sword blade only to be unable to identify any of the symbols used.

"Merely minor incantations that will allow magic to flow into the metal of your swords and timber of your shields." Marcus answered, "Had I been able to empower these items in the proper fashion then the markings would be engraved into them but as I am sure you appreciate that takes a significant amount of time that we do not have. Making the markings on the surface only made the process vastly quicker but as I have already mentioned that does mean that they are not as effective as they otherwise could have been."

"How do you want us to use them magister?" Everad added.

"Just as you would ordinary swords and shields. I suggest you position yourselves to the front of our column. That is where the wraiths will be most likely to attack. Keep your formation close and don't let them get past you." Marcus told him and he nodded.

"Yes magister. I understand." he replied before the mercenaries turned and walked away, heading to where the rest of the force was gathering.

"Will those weapons really work?" Diera's voice said from behind Marcus and he smiled as he turned to see her standing close to him.

"That depends on what you mean." he said, "They will absorb magical energy just as I have said, for a time at least. The incantations are only marked on the surface and they will fade the more that they are used. Whether they are enough to destroy a wraith is also open to question, the enchantment may overload and fail as soon as they come into contact with the creatures before they can be destroyed. On the other hand I am certain that I would be able to destroy one if it comes to that. There is no doubt about my power."

"And what about the rest of us master?" Diera asked and Marcus slid his right hand into his left sleeve before he produced a slender pointed dagger and held it out towards her.

"Here, take this." he said and Diera looked at the dagger's blade as she took the compact weapon from Marcus. Like the blades of the swords he had just handed over to the mercenaries this was marked with strange arcane symbols but unlike on them these were engraved into the metal.

"Your dagger." she commented.

"Yes, a weapon I have had far more time to craft over the years. I know it isn't much when it comes to fighting some ethereal monster but it is all that I have to give you. Keep it hidden though my dear, especially from Thomas. I suspect that if he discovered that you had that while I have left him defenceless he would not hesitate to try and acquire it for himself." Marcus told her.

"I will. I can handle Thomas master." Diera responded as she slipped the dagger into her dress.

"Yes I'm sure you can. You have proven an outstanding student Diera and while it's a shame that you never inherited any of your mother's power, which would have increased the number of weapons we could have enchanted for our troops, I am no less impressed at your skill." Marcus said.

The storm of magical lightning surrounding the Oscari Great Library continued for more than a quarter of an hour before suddenly tapering off and ending. By this time the stone taken from the circle was glowing brightly, the light coming from it not limited to where the carvings were located.

"Is that it Ammaril?" Orcan asked, "Is it safe to go inside now?"

Before Ammaril could say answer Orcan's question though one of the Ogres rushed up the steps that led to the main entrance, proving that the magical zone surrounding the building had been dispersed.

"Stop him!" Ammaril called out in the Ogre language but it was too late to prevent the Ogre from reaching the

entrance and trying to barge through it. However, before he could even touch the door a heavy portcullis dropped from above it and impaled him.

"Is there someone inside?" Tiellan exclaimed while the watching Ogres roared with rage. Luckily the tribe had become used to seeing members who became careless killed approaching the library over the years they had lived by it and so they did not instantly all charge up the steps after the dead Ogre to try and avenge him.

"No Tiellan, there is no-one inside." Ammaril told him, "That trap was purely mechanical in nature. Fortunately one of my books includes information on how many of the Oscari traps work. With luck it will not take long to disarm it safely."

With another of the books taken from the vampire's library in her hand Ammaril stood at the bottom of the steps and looked up towards the entrance that was now blocked by the portcullis. Turning through the pages she eventually came to one that had an illustration of the Great Library and she stopped to read. After a few moments she smiled and closed the book again.

"I'll need a lantern." she said and a nearby Elf warrior stepped forwards to hand her the lantern that he was holding and using this to light her way Ammaril started to walk up the steps.

"Ammaril are you sure about this?" Orcan said as he started to follow her, holding up his own lantern.

"Stay back Orcan." she told him without looking back around, "I am reasonably sure that this is safe if I do it alone but a second person could complicate matters."

Obediently Orcan came to a stop before reaching the first step and watched as his twin sister finished climbing them. However, rather than heading to the door where the pool of blood from the dead Ogre was getting steadily larger she turned towards one of the nearby statues and walked up to it. This statue stood on a stone plinth that was detailed with a row of regularly spaced square protrusions that ran all the way around the base. Ammaril started to count these protrusions and when she got to six she pressed that one firmly.

This caused the protrusion to collapse under the pressure and Ammaril started to count again before pressing a second protrusion so that it too collapsed. She repeated this process twice more, forcing her to make her way all around the statue and when the fourth protrusion was depressed there was the sound of a mechanism running as the portcullis started to rise, returning to the concealed position that it had occupied before the Ogre triggered the trap.

Ammaril then strode to the library's entrance, pausing to glance down at the body of the Ogre before stepping past. Then she placed her hands on the door handles and turned them together. There was no resistance from the handles and the doors were not locked. This allowed Ammaril to simply push them open, using enough force that when she let go of the handles the doors continued to swing open wide.

"The knowledge of the Oscari is mine." she then said to herself before stepping across the threshold.

At the base of the steps outside the gathered Elves and Ogres saw Ammaril go inside the library without harm and immediately both Orcan and Tiellan started to run up the steps after her. At the same time Trollog pointed to another nearby Ogre.

"Come with me. Let's go and see what's inside this place after all these years. Everyone else stays outside." he said loudly and the two Ogres followed Orcan and Tiellan up the steps. The two Elves gave the dead Ogre outside the door the same casual glance that Ammaril had but the two Ogres behind them did not even bother with that, ignoring him entirely as they rushed into the Great Library, eager to find out what it held.

Immediately inside the main entrance there was a large hall that was lined with more statues of Oscari, each one with a small plaque that presumably identified who it was that the Oscari had chosen to honour but to anyone other than Ammaril these were illegible. However, while these statues held no interest to any of those who had followed Ammaril into the library there were other objects present that attracted their attention the moment that the light cast by the lanterns they carried revealed them.

"Are those what I think they are Tiellan?" Orcan asked and his cousin nodded.

"If you think that they look like dragon skulls then yes, I'd say that they are." he replied as they both looked at the skulls positioned either side of the large doorway that led deeper into the library, "Of course I've never seen any that large before."

The largest species of dragons known anywhere in the world were still no bigger than horses but the examples of skulls that Orcan and Tiellan now found themselves looking at were that size on their own while the teeth varied in length from about eight inches to almost feet in the case of the largest fangs.

"They can't be real." Orcan said but before he or Tiellan could say anything else Trollog and the other Ogre with him both rushed up to one of the skulls and began to examine it more closely. This was not mere curiosity though and Trollog soon reached for one of the larger canine teeth at the front of the skull and began trying to rip it free of the skull.

"Hey stop that!" Orcan called out but Trollog, unable to understand carried with attempting to claim the tooth for himself while the second Ogre just looked around at Orcan and snarled at him.



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It was then that Ammaril appeared in the doorway between the dragon skulls, alerted by Orcan's shout and she saw the Ogres by the skull.

"Trollog I did not open the doors to this library so that it could be destroyed from the inside." she said and the Ogres turned around to face her.

"So what good is this place if we can't take what we want from it?" Trollog asked.

"As I told you Trollog, it contains the power that I need to make you the strongest Ogre leader in history but if I am to do that then I need the library to remain intact." Ammaril told him and Trollog considered this for a moment before he looked at the other Ogre and nodded.

"Alright then we'll leave this place to you but if think that you're keeping something from us then my entire tribe will tear this place apart and take anything we want." he said and Ammaril smiled at him.

"Good. Now feel free to come inside and see the real treasures that this building contains." Ammaril said.

Then she looked at Orcan and Tiellan and added, "I think they'll behave now but perhaps you should keep an eye on them still. I don't want to take any chances in here." and then she turned and walked back through the doorway.

The two Ogres were first to follow Ammaril, rushing in ahead of Orcan and Tiellan but all of them just ground to a halt when they entered the next room. They found themselves standing in a small relatively clear area of what was obviously a vastly larger room. Here there were several chairs as well as a table set up just inside the door but these were irrelevant compared to what existed beyond this small area. Extending outwards from it were row after row of shelves that were filled with books, scrolls and bundles of papers.

"You really did it Ammaril. The sum total of everything that the Oscari knew and you found it. Now the humans will never be a threat to us." Orcan said as he looked around.

"Everything? Perhaps. It will take a long time to go through all that it contains in full. As we saw from the outside there are two more floors above this and I suspect that each of them contains just as many books as this one." Ammaril replied.

"So where do you start?" Tiellan asked.

"At the beginning of course Tiellan." Ammaril responded and she pointed to a nearby shelf that stored only scrolls, "That is the catalogue of the Great Library's contents. It should give me an idea of where to find the knowledge we need most quickly. In the meantime I have work for you."

"You want us to fortify the area don't you?" Orcan said and Ammaril nodded.

"Yes Orcan, whoever sent those bats to spy on us is probably on their way and if they discover that we have access to the Great Library then they will probably seek to get here even faster to prevent us from gaining access to any of its secrets. You must do everything you can to make sure that no-one else gets inside." Ammaril told her brother and he nodded in agreement.

"Yes Ammaril." he replied, "We'll block all the potential entry points on this floor except for the main entrance and focus our defences there."

"We should detail some of our archers to the roof and upper floors." Tiellan added but Ammaril glared at him.

"No!" she snapped and he jumped in surprise at the outburst, "I apologise." she added when she saw this, "Tiellan I cannot be disturbed while I search the library. Use the roof if you will but no-one except Lucia can be in here with me and she will need to wait here until I call for her to assist me."

"The human cabin girl?" Orcan commented, "What use is she now?"

"The same use she was aboard the Torsol Orcan. She can fetch my meals and run errands while I focus on my work." Ammaril said.

"Very well, I'll make sure that everyone is told to stay out of the building and let Captain Vendril know that you need his girl." Orcan said. Then just as he started to turn to leave another thought occurred to him and he turned back towards his sister, "Do you know if there's a way that we can get that portcullis working?"

"Perhaps. As long as you remain in the outer hall you may investigate but now I need to get to work."

Ammaril responded.

Alphonse, Everad and the other mercenaries equipped with the weapons and shields that Marcus had enchanted marched in a single rank at the front of the column as it made its way inland while behind them two other mercenaries carried torches to light their way. When they reached the ancient road they began to follow it just as the original scouting party had done and it did not take long for them to reach the ruined settlement.

"This must be the place." Everad said as he looked around. The nature of the ruins offered many places for an ordinary enemy to hide and the mercenaries did not know how easily a wraith could conceal itself.

"Stay clam and alert." Alphonse added as he looked around as well, trying to peer into the shadows that dominated the surrounding terrain.

All of a sudden a green mist darted from behind the remains of a pillar to behind a ruined wall and one of the mercenaries turned his head to follow it.

"Over there!" he exclaimed, though the other mercenaries had already seen the light and Alphonse raised his sword arm as they came to a halt, signalling the rest of the column to come to a stop behind them as well. The mercenaries continued to search the ruins for any further signs of activity and just a few moments later they saw another green light as it passed from one dead spot to another.

"That one was closer. Do you think they're using the ruins for cover while they get close enough to strike?" Everad suggested and Alphonse nodded.

"It makes sense. It's what we'd do." he said before all of a sudden a glowing spectral form rose up from behind a nearby wall. Like the wraith that had attacked the scouting party this figure appeared to be dressed in a hooded cloak with a skeletal face and hands. The glowing green creature flew through the air towards the mercenaries with one of its arms stretched out in front of it. In response to this the mercenaries instinctively brought up their shields. This did not put the wraith off though and the creature continued its charge right up until its arm touched the shield of one of the mercenaries. The wraith had expected to be able to simply reach through the wooden shield to strike at the man behind it but instead there was a crackling of energy and the wraith let out another shriek before rapidly recoiling away. Then after retreating a few yards it appeared to glare at the mercenaries again and let out a hiss.

"The shields work!" the mercenary who had been attacked exclaimed.

"Stay in formation." Everad told him and he took another look around the immediate area, "There could be more of them about."

Moments after he said this another wraith appeared close by and both the ethereal creatures began to move back and forth in front of the mercenaries as if searching for a weak point to strike at. Then all of a sudden both of them rushed at the men from different directions. Not needing to remain on the ground the two wraiths ascended higher into the air to get over the mercenaries' shields.

"Down!" Alphonse ordered and the eight men dropped into kneeling positions while holding their shields above their heads. The second wraith still descended towards them to strike at one of the mercenaries on the end of their formation but he was able to block the attack with his shield and the wraith screeched before retreating again. On the other hand the first wraith slowed rapidly when Everad put his shield between them and the mercenary leader saw his chance to strike, thrusting his sword through the narrow gap between his shield and the one of the man beside him. Had the wraith been solid then this sword strike would have impaled it through its abdomen, instead just passing through the strange mist that the creature seemed to be made of. However, the symbols used to enchant the blade suddenly glowed brightly as it came into contact with the wraith and lightning surrounded the sword for a moment while the wraith screamed loudly until all of a sudden it seemed to explode and vanished without a trace.

Never before had the wraiths encountered anyone who could resist them, let alone destroy them and the other wraith that had attacked the mercenaries backed away from them but did not flee. Instead it waited while more of its kind began to emerge from among the ruins and their glowing forms floated several feet in the air while they watched the mercenaries for any signs of vulnerability that they could exploit. As immortal entities they had little need to act quickly and could afford to wait as long as it took for their enemies to make a mistake. However, the mercenaries also had reinforcement.

Marcus strode to the front of the column alone.

"So the weapons work then." he said and Everad nodded.

"Yes magister, I ran one of them through as easily as if he was an ordinary bandit." he replied.

"I'm glad to hear it. Though we cannot afford to simply stand around and wait." Marcus said as he looked at one wraith after another. Marcus knew that the wraiths could create havoc simply by bypassing the forward unit with their enchanted swords and shields but the wraiths themselves could not. That they did not simply either launch into an all out assault or flee though suggested that there was some degree of intelligence remaining within them rather than them acting on instinct alone and this meant that eventually they could decide to test out alternative strategies and Marcus wanted to drive them off before they did. In addition to this he also knew that the longer the column was forced to wait here the less distance it would be able to cover before the sun rose again and he had to take shelter from its rays, "Wait here. Don't let them get past you." he told the mercenaries before he walked out in front of them and spread out his arms either side of him. Then he started to advance slowly along the ancient road.

One of the wraiths moved closer, its eyeless face directed towards Marcus at all times as if it was studying him. It could see that he held no weapons in his hands and it suddenly let out a screech as it charged at him from the side. Marcus spun to face the oncoming wraith and dropped into a crouching position, bringing in his arms to point at the entity and with a thought he released the magical energy he had built up for this

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purpose in the form of a bolt of lightning that leapt from his hands towards the wraith. The lightning bolt struck the ethereal creature and it immediately evaporated, letting out one final screech as it did so.

"You do not need to be my enemies." Marcus called out to the remaining wraiths that now all stared directly at him, "If there is anything of the beings you once were left within you then know that I share that same origin and do not seek your destruction. I seek only to defend our legacy and if you continue to stand in my way then I will have no choice but to destroy you."

The wraiths did not move or make any sound in response to this initially but then they began to drift back deeper into the ruins, slowly at first but then they began to increase in speed, heading towards the centre of the settlement where the stones that their existence was now tied to.

"Is it safe to continue magister?" Alphonse asked as the wraiths continued to retreat.

"Possibly." Marcus answered, "Though I suggest that you remain cautious. Just because those particular wraiths retreated does not mean that there are not others nearby that will attack."

"Yes magister." Alphonse said before he and the other mercenaries at the front of the column started to advance again while Marcus waited instead, watching the pale green glow coming from where the wraiths had retreated to and now appeared to be observing the column from. He continued to watch the light while the column marched past him until Diera and Thomas reached him and he took his place with them again.

"My lord would it not have been easier to just destroy those things?" Thomas asked.

"Those 'things' as you call them were once people the same as myself Thomas. Remember that." Marcus responded.

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When the sun rose the next day William and the other mutineers made their way to the hill that overlooked the ruins and looked down towards them.

"I don't see any bodies down there so I guess the magister and his followers made it through." Gromar commented.

"Yes but what about us?" Horace asked, "If we go down there to follow them the won't we get attacked by those creatures, whatever they are?"

"I don't know. Maybe if we don't go poking around in the ruins then they won't even realise that we're there." William answered.

"That's a big assumption to make Will." Aldbertus pointed out and William nodded.

"Then we'll have to go around the ruins entirely. It'll slow us down but hopefully not by enough that we won't catch up with the column." he said.

"Better safe than sorry though." Gromar added.

The column reached a river about an hour before sunrise and it was decided that the availability of water made it a good place to set up camp for the day. The most important task though was to set up Marcus light blocking tent so that he could take shelter there. Unlike the previous day though he could not merely spend the day studying.

"These are all of the swords?" Marcus asked when two barrels filled with swords were brought into his tent so that he could carry out the same enchantment on them as he had on the first few the previous afternoon.

"Yes magister." one of the mercenaries who had brought them in replied, "The men who already have charmed blades are standing sentry but once these are done all of us will have one. Do you want the shields bringing in as well?"

"No, not yet." Marcus replied as he picked the first sword from the barrel closest to him and examined the blade, "It will be far easier to just do the swords for now. Then I'll do as many of the shields as I can before sundown. Now go, I need to work."

After leaving the tent one of the mercenaries sought out Alphonse and Everad, finding them in another tent along with Edwin and Thomas while the four men discussed the previous night's march and the encounter with the wraith in the ruins.

"I take it that you have delivered the weapons to the magister." Alphonse said when the man entered the tent and he nodded in return.

"Yes sir, all of our swords as ordered. The magister said that he would work on our shields once he had finished with them." he said.

"Very good. You are dismissed." Alphonse told the soldier and he bowed his head again before exiting the tent.

"I must say that I don't like the idea of your men turning over their weapons like that." Edwin commented when the mercenary was gone and Thomas looked at him.

"Captain are you suggesting that Magister Marcus Quinnus is not to be trusted?" he asked.

"Of course not. It's just that soldier needs weapons. What happens if we come under attack now and fewer than a dozen men have swords?" Edwin responded.

"Don't worry captain. Our men still have their crossbows and every one of them also carries a knife. We're far from helpless here." Alphonse pointed out.

"You see captain?" Thomas added, "Magister Quinnus knows what he is doing. Now if you'll all excuse me I intend to get some sleep before we march again tonight."

Thomas then turned and strode out of the tent before any of the others could reply and he headed for his own. On his way to his tent though he stopped at the one that had been given to Diera and went inside without bothering to ask first. Inside he found Diera in bed and she sat up when he entered the tent, sliding her hand under her pillow to where she had placed the dagger given to her by Marcus.

"Thomas? What are you doing in here?" she asked.

"I want to know what our employer has told you that he hasn't told me. I know he confides in you, what has he said?" Thomas said and Diera sighed.

"Told me about what?" she said.

"These wraiths. Are they going to be everywhere we go? After the mutiny he made promises about loot and we weren't able to get a single coin out of those ruins. If there are wraiths everywhere then that could be something that will be repeated and sooner or later those mercenaries and sailors are going to start asking

questions about why they aren't getting the treasure they were promised." Thomas said and Diera smiled. "Ah, so you're afraid that there'll be another mutiny and as our lord's right hand man you'll be the first one they come for?" she said.

"Doesn't it worry you too Diera?" Thomas said.

"Not really, no." she replied.

"Well it should. But if you promise to keep me informed of anything you are told then I'll make sure to watch your back." Thomas told her.

"I think I'll be fine on my own and in reply to your first question I don't know anything more about these wraiths than you do. Now would you mind getting out? I'd like to get some sleep." Diera said as she lay back down again without taking her eyes off Thomas while he remained standing in the entrance to her tent.

With no knowledge about what would alert the wraiths to their presence and provoke an attack the four mutineers kept as far away from the ruins as they could without losing sight of them entirely and after this they moved along the side of the ancient road, ready to take cover at the slightest sign that they were not alone.

"Is that smoke?" Gromar asked suddenly as they walked and he pointed into the sky where several thin wisps of grey could be seen.

"Cooking fires?" Horace suggested and William nodded.

"I think so. We must have caught up with them." he said.

"How long would you say until the sun goes down enough for that vampire to emerge?" Aldbertus said, looking towards the sun which was now very low in the sky.

"I'm no expert but I think that it needs to be fully set." William replied.

"So where are we going to set up camp for the night?" Horace asked.

"Why not just use their campsite after they leave?" Aldbertus suggested and he pointed along the road.

"That's not a bad idea Will." Gromar added, "If they don't extinguish their fires properly then we can use them to keep warm without worrying about being seen."

"I like that idea." Horace commented before William suddenly dropped into a crouching position.

"Get down!" he hissed and the other three mutineers did as he said. Looking along the road they saw a pair of mercenaries appear around a bend in the road.

While watching these two men closely William and Aldbertus both aimed their crossbows towards them.

"Do we shoot them?" Aldbertus said.

"Only if it looks like they've seen us." William responded.

"They've painted their shields." Gromar said unexpectedly as he looked towards the mercenaries as well.

"What?" William asked.

"I said they've painted their shields. Or at least someone has." Gromar repeated, "I think it might be writing."

"I didn't see anything like that on their shields aboard the Storm Chaser." Horace commented.

"No, nor did I so it must have been added since they landed." William said, "Maybe it's got something to do with fighting those creatures back in the ruins."

"A warding spell to drive them off?" Aldbertus said and William nodded.

"That's my guess." he replied.

"Then getting hold of at least one might be useful if it keeps restless spirits or whatever they are away." Gromar said.

"That's a good idea but not something I'd like to try now." William said, "If we just shoot these two down then the others will know that we're around and they'll start hunting us. We need more time to plan a way to make stealing a shield look like anything other than us taking it."

"How are we supposed to do that though? By the time we catch up to them at the end of the day they'll be getting ready to move out again when it gets dark." Aldbertus pointed out.

"I know. We'll have to travel by night as well so we have longer to plan." William said.

"You mean follow them for a few hours before setting up camp until morning?" Gromar asked.

"Yes, that's what I was thinking." William said and Horace frowned.

"Walking all day and now half the night as well? It's a well known fact that Halflings need at least ten hours of sleep per day." he said.

"Which explains why your people never get anything done." Gromar commented.

"I can't have had more than six or seven last night." Horace added, ignoring Gromar.

"I'm sorry Horace but if we're going to find a way to ambush some of those mercenaries and take their shields then we don't have a choice." William said, "If you'd rather stay behind we can leave a trail for you to follow instead and maybe you can catch us up."

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Horace hesitated when he heard this. Although his sleep was something that, like all Halflings, he valued greatly he did not like the idea of being alone on this strange continent.

"I suppose losing a few hours for a couple of days is something that I can deal with." he said, "Though when we get back to Teuten I think that I deserve a lie in."

"Okay then, we have a deal." William replied with a smile.

When Ammaril heard the sound of footsteps approaching her while she continued to make her way through the contents of the Great Library her first thought was that it was Lucia bringing her something to eat and drink but then she realised that the sound was of someone bigger than the human cabin girl. Looking around she saw Orcan walking between the rows of bookshelves towards her.

"I asked not to be disturbed Orcan." she told him.

"I know but I decided to ignore you." he replied.

"Why?" Ammaril asked.

"Because I think that you're pushing yourself too hard Ammaril and Tiellan agrees. Lucia tells me that you haven't taken a break at all. You even read while you eat. You need to rest." Orcan said.

"I need to unlock the secrets of this library Orcan and it's especially important that I do it quickly now that we know there is someone else on this continent that could be coming for us." Ammaril responded.

"Look at this place Ammaril. How many books are there here? Five thousand? Ten? Twenty thousand even. Now how long will it take you to read them all?" Orcan said, spreading out his arms to indicate the expanse of written material that surrounded them both.

"I don't need to read it all Orcan. I only need to find the right pieces of knowledge that will help defend us." Ammaril said.

"To me that sounds like looking for a needle in a haystack." Orcan commented, "Besides our defences are adequate against any conventional threat. We have troops all around the library with archers on the roof and cavalry ready to outflank and counter attack any threat. Plus we have Trollog's Ogres of course. You may be the only one who can talk to them but I get the feeling that anyone who attacks us will have to deal with them as well. Not to mention Tiellan's four dragons. They're worth an extra ten men each. On the other hand if we come under magical attack then I need you and your power to support us. That means having you well rested and alert."

"Orcan believe me, I know what I am doing and the knowledge in this library will let me contribute more to our defence than I could without it. Already I think that I'm on the trail of something big." Ammaril told her brother.

"How big? What exactly are you doing here Ammaril?" Orcan asked,

"Exactly what I said I would do Orcan. Unlocking the power to protect all Elves from the human threat forever. I just need a few days and I'll be ready." Ammaril answered.

"Or maybe you'll collapse from exhaustion or be too distracted and miss a key piece of information." Orcan responded, "What will you do then?"

Ammaril stared at Orcan for a moment before she smiled and closed the book she was reading.

"Of course you are right Orcan. You are always looking out for my best interests. I will rest until morning. The library is not going anywhere after all." she said.

"Good. Now come on, there is still some food left." Orcan told her before they both began to walk towards the exit from the library.

It was dark when they left the building and the two siblings started to walk across the street towards a building where the glow of a fire was visible. On the way Ammaril glanced up into the sky where she could see bats flying and among them she saw the glowing line of magic leading away.

"It looks like our watcher is back Orcan." she said, "I think it's time that we did something about that."

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With only limited hours of darkness available the column had begun to march before Marcus had been able to even cast the spell needed to use more bats to gather information about the Elves and this meant that they had already been marching for some time before his magical link to the flying creatures gave him a picture of what was happening in the ancient Oscari city.

"The Elves have entered the library." he said as he walked along behind the mercenaries but in front of the sailors who brought up the rear of the column with the provisions. Walking with him were Thomas, Diera and Edwin, "I did not expect them to manage that so quickly."

"Does this mean that we've failed magister?" Edwin asked nervously.

"No, though it does mean that we need to reach our destination as quickly as we can. With access to the library there is no telling what power the Elf sorceress may stumble upon. The faster we can get there, the less chance she has to learn something dangerous." Marcus explained.

"How much of a threat to you is she?" Diera added and Marcus smiled.

"By all accounts Princess Ammaril is an accomplished magic user, though she cannot possibly match the experience that I have built up over the centuries. She has neither the skill nor the power to match me directly and thanks to my bats we will be able to monitor the deployment of her forces every night." he answered.

Tiellan looked up into the night sky where he could just about make out the tiny forms of the bats overhead. "Well Tiellan, are your pets up to this?" Ammaril asked as she and Orcan stood behind him.

"Easily, I've trained them to hunt. Normally their prey is located on the ground. I don't think that having to hunt in the sky will pose them any problems though." he responded before he pointed upwards and let out a whistle.

As soon as the four major dragons he had brought with him heard this particular sound they all turned their heads towards the source and saw their master pointing skywards. The four beasts then spread their wings and roared as they leapt up into the air and took flight. They flew straight into the swarm of bats with their mouths open and snapped at the tiny creatures, crushing them between their teeth or just swallowing them whole. The sight and sound of the approaching dragons caused panic among the bats that were local to the area and they scattered, fleeing for their lives. On the other hand the bats acting under Marcus' influence remained where they were and the dragons easily homed in on them and consumed them.

Marcus suddenly gasped and staggered for a moment.

"Magister are you injured?" Edwin exclaimed while both Thomas and Diera looked on in surprise, never having seen him exhibit any signs of illness or injury before.

"I'm fine captain, thank you." Marcus replied, "It was merely a problem with my connection to the bats. It appears that our enemies were able to discover my observation of them and taken action against it. It was disorientating but I am unharmed I assure you."

"Can't you use the bats again then my lord?" Thomas asked.

"I could but I doubt that we would gain much useful information before the Elves reacted again. When we get to within a mile or two of our destination I will try something similar but not before then." Marcus told him.

The four mutineers had set up their small camp so that the first light from the sun in the morning would shine directly on them and William, Aldbertus and Gromar all woke up with this. On the other hand Horace simply rolled over in his bed and continued to sleep, letting out a loud snort as he did so.

"Typical Halfling." Gromar commented while he and the others were already packing up their beds in preparation to set off after Marcus and his force and then he walked over to Horace and reached down, grabbing hold of the side of his blanket and tugging it sharply, "Wake up!" he shouted as he rolled Horace from his bed.

"What? What's happening?" Horace asked as he looked around in confusion.

"The sun is rising Horace. We need to set off." William told him.

"Is there time for breakfast first? I think that there's still some rabbit soup left from supper." Horace said.

"I'd rather not travel on an empty stomach either." Aldbertus added.

"No neither would I." William agreed, "I tell you what Horace, you heat up the soup and we'll get your things packed. Then we'll eat and leave."

As soon as the mutineers had finished their breakfast they set off after the column again, following the same road that they had. This time though they stayed on the road rather than travelling on the rougher ground alongside it that would slow them down more. Pausing only to shoot several more rabbits for their next meal travelling on the road allowed them to catch up with the column just as the sun was reaching its highest point in the sky and they took cover as soon as they heard the sounds coming from the camp.

"I don't see any sentries." Gromar said.

"They'll be there somewhere." Aldbertus replied.

"Perhaps watching from the top of that." William added and he pointed to where an overgrown stone structure could be seen among the trees to the side of the road.

"A tower?" Gromar commented.

"What's left of one at any rate." William said, "I don't know about you but I think it would make a good look out post."

"If there's someone up there then won't they have already seen us?" Horace pointed out.

"Horace could be right Will. Perhaps we should get off the road and into the trees." Gromar suggested.

"I think so, yes." William agreed, "I think that tower's about a mile off so we should be able to get there pretty quickly even using the woods for cover."

"What then?" Horace asked.

"Then we'll figure out a way of dealing with any lookouts in the tower." William told him.

The four mutineers then got off the road, entering the woods that surrounded the ruined tower and with the vegetation to conceal them they started to approach it.

The woods were dense enough that the mutineers rapidly lost sight of the tower while they walked through them but in turn they knew that this meant that it was unlikely that anyone inside the tower would be able to see them either. As an observation post it was better suited to watching for larger forces approaching over the more open ground beyond the woods. As they got close to the tower it became apparent that it had once been part of a cluster of small buildings though now it was the only one left standing. The others had been reduce to ruined walls that were heavily overgrown. Meanwhile the tower itself seemed to have remained largely intact, though any roof it had once possessed was now gone. The presence of the ruins had prevented trees from taking root and there was a small clearing around the tower that allowed the mutineers to observe it more easily from the treeline.

"I don't see anyone around." Aldbertus commented as he studied both the tower and the smaller ruins around it.

"Think this place is haunted too?" Horace added.

"There's only one way to find out." Gromar replied and he looked at William.

"You and me." he replied as he set his crossbow down and then removed the quiver of bolts from his back before drawing his sword.

While Horace and Aldbertus watched, William and Gromar then began to move cautiously towards the tower, making their way between the ruined walls between them and it, alert for anyone else who may be lurking within the ruins or the tower itself. However, as they got closer they saw an entrance to the tower that was now blocked by vines.

"See that Will?" Gromar asked and William nodded.

"Yes, I think we're the first ones here for a long time." he replied.

"Do you think that maybe those mercenaries are ignoring it?" Gromar said.

"I think it's more likely that they haven't got around to searching this area yet. So anything that was in there is still in there." William responded.

"In that case I think that your sword will be more use than my hammer." Gromar said and he stood back and watched while William moved up to the tower entrance and began to use his sword to hack through the vines that blocked it.

As soon as the entrance was cleared enough for them to pass through William and Gromar stepped across the threshold into the tower and looked around. William could barely see in the gloomy interior of the tower but to Gromar everything was still clear.

"I'll say this for this place, it was well built." he said.

"So not about to fall down around us then?" William asked.

"No, not at all. I think it was probably designed to withstand attack by something, though what exactly I couldn't tell you." Gromar answered as he continued to look around. The ground floor of the tower consisted of a single room that had a solid stone floor and a wooden ceiling that had managed to survive the centuries. The room was empty but to the side of it there was a set of stairs that followed around the edge as they climbed up to the floor above and Gromar pointed to them, "Shall I lead the way this time?" he suggested and William nodded.



"I think so. You're less likely to trip over your own feet in the dark." he replied and he waited while Gromar began to climb the stairs before following him up them.

It rapidly became obvious that the floor above was better lit than the ground floor was and William found himself being able to see more clearly as he climbed the stairs and when he and Gromar reached the first floor they found that this one possessed a pair of windows on opposite sides that had not been covered by vegetation, thus permitting light to enter the room freely. Again this single room made up the entire floor but this time it was not quite empty and there was an ancient looking chest beneath one of the windows.

"Now that's interesting." William said when he saw this.

"Looks like the sort of thing that I was hired to take a look at." Gromar added.

"You think it could be rigged with a trap?" William asked.

"It was obviously built to last so whatever was put inside was probably considered important. Even if it isn't trapped I would expect it to be locked." Gromar answered.

"Feel free to take a look then, but don't take too much time about it. We're not here after hidden treasure." William reminded him.

Gromar then walked towards the chest but stopped just over a yard away from it before he looked at it carefully. Then he walked around it, inspecting it from as many sides as he could before he returned to the front of the chest and looked at it again.

"It's trapped." he said.

"You can tell that just by looking?" William said.

"Of course. I've seen this sort of trap used in Dwarven cities on vault doors. Locking the door, or in this case the chest arms the trap and using the key to unlock it will disarm it. On the other hand if the chest is forced open then a cloud of darts will be fired from the small holes you can see in the metal band around the top of the base." Gromar explained.

"How many is that?" William added as he walked closer so that he could see the chest more clearly.

"Looks like a couple of dozen at least. This looks like it was designed to spread darts around this entire room." Gromar told him.

"What if you pick the lock?" William said.

"The lock will open but I'm not so sure that the trap will be disarmed." Gromar answered.

"So if you could force the lock but don't open the chest then the trap will be triggered by whoever comes along next and opens it?"

"Someone like a mercenary thinking that he's found a chest full of treasure you mean?" Gromar commented and William smiled at him.

"Exactly." he replied.

Gromar considered this for a few moments before he then smiled and nodded his head.

"I think I can rig something up." he said, "You might want to stand back though, just in case this doesn't work out so well."

William retreated to the top of the stairs and used them for cover while Gromar set down his hammer on the floor and knelt right in front of the chest before he pulled a small rolled up pouch from inside his jacket and unrolled it to reveal the tools inside it.

"You just happened to have a set of lock pick's tools on you?" William commented when he saw these.

"I told you I was hired to deal with traps. I spent some years as a locksmith. Now be quiet while I work unless you want to see just how deadly this trap is." Gromar told him as he selected two of the tools and then inserted them into the lock until he felt resistance.

Without any knowledge of locksmithing all William could do was wait, listening to the various clicking sounds that came from the chest as Gromar continued to manipulate his tools in the lock until all of a sudden he stopped, withdrew his tools from the lock and got back to his feet.

"Is that it Gromar?" he asked and the Dwarf nodded.

"Yes, that's it Will. Or at least I think that it is." Gromar replied, "The only true proof will come when someone lifts that lid."

"Perhaps we shouldn't be here when that happens." William suggested.

"Yes, that could be a good idea." Gromar replied and he looked towards the stairs that led up to the tower's next level, "Are you thinking up there perhaps?"

"Yes, if we get right to the top of the tower then maybe we can get a good look at what that vampire and his minions are up to." William said.

"Want to take a look now?" Gromar asked.

"I think so. Then we'll get the other two and make that door look like less like I cleared it with my sword." William answered.

Heading up the stairs they found themselves on what was the top floor of the tower now that the roof was gone and it was open to the elements. However, by looking from one of the windows they were able to make out the area of open ground that was now dotted with tents.

"So that's their camp. It doesn't look any smaller than the one they made on the beach so they can't have taken many casualties from those things that were underground." Gromar commented.

"Perhaps those markings on their shields really do the job." William responded before he shifted his attention from the camp to the trees between it and the tower, "It's just a shame that these woods will give anyone heading this way cover." he added.

"There's still some clear ground below us. We'll know when they're coming. Assuming they do of course. I know that the magister promised everyone loot but if they're in a big hurry to reach wherever the Elves have got to then they may decide to just ignore this place." Gromar said.

Thomas emerged from his tent when he heard the sound of men talking as they walked past it and he saw a group of four mercenaries and one of the *Storm Chaser's* crew heading in the direction of the tower that was just about visible over the trees beside the campsite. It was quite obvious that the ancient building was where the group was heading and Thomas frowned. Although the scouting of the ruins two days earlier had proven disastrous for those concerned he had wanted to be a part of whatever group headed out to investigate the tower. Somehow it seemed more likely to him that a structure that had survived thousands of years abandoned but remained relatively intact would contain something that someone else would be willing to pay a considerable sum for when he got back home to Teuten.

Looking around he saw both Alphonse and Everad as they made their way towards the tent they shared and he hurried towards them.

"Hey!" he called out to them and the two mercenary leaders turned back towards him.

"What do you want?" Everad asked.

"Where are those men going?" Thomas demanded and he pointed to the group that was now disappearing into the woods in the direction of the tower.

"They're going to investigate that tower while it's still light. The camp is set up and we've placed sentries at key points" Alphonse told him.

"Why wasn't I informed first? I wanted to join that party." Thomas said.

"Take that up with the magister. He cleared this patrol himself." Everad responded.

"Worried that you might miss out on anything they find Thomas?" Alphonse added and the two mercenaries smiled while Thomas scowled at them.

"One day you two are going to regret the contempt you show to me." he said before he simply turned and strode towards Marcus' tent, "My lord it's Thomas." he said after he entered the tent's outer room but rather than simply telling Thomas to either enter the main room or leave Marcus opened the inner flap himself just enough to look through the gap.

"Come in but keep your voice down. Diera is sleeping in here." the vampire said and when Thomas entered the room he saw the woman sleeping with her back to him in the bed set up at the far side, "Now tell me what brings you here Thomas." Marcus added.

"My lord I'd like to join the party heading for the tower." Thomas answered and Marcus smiled.

"Ah, you are keen to find out what treasures may be hidden there." he said, "You know that I have ordered that anything they find must be presented to me before it can be distributed to the men?"

"My lord these are mercenaries. They fight only for money. I'm concerned that they may not-" Thomas began.

"You serve me for money also Thomas. Are you saying that you are untrustworthy?" Marcus interrupted as he made his way back to the chair he had been sat in when Marcus arrived before sitting back down and Thomas found himself at a loss for words. In addition to the sometimes illegal tasks he carried out for the vampire he also supplemented his income with other activities that were almost all illegal and often making use of the resources granted to him by Marcus without ever telling him about what he was doing.

"Oh no my lord. You have no more loyal servant than myself and I think that I should go along just to make sure that your best interests are represented." Thomas said.

"And you aren't worried about the possibility that there could be more wraiths in the tower?" Marcus asked and Thomas hesitated again as he considered this. The chance of encountering more of the ethereal creatures had not occurred to him after the previous night's march had not resulted in a single one of them being seen. Thomas had hoped that this meant they had left them all far behind after the initial encounter but if Marcus considered them worth mentioning then he had to take them into consideration as well.

"My lord I'm sure that the men who have already been sent are capable of protecting me." he said, thinking about how at the first sign of a wraith he could just turn and run while leaving the mercenaries to fight them.

"Well if you are so adamant that our mercenaries need watching you may go after them. I expect a full report when you get back though Thomas." Marcus said and Thomas smiled.

"Yes my lord. Thank you for the faith you have placed in me." he said before turning around and exiting the tent.

It was then that Diera rolled over to reveal that she had been awake while Thomas was in the tent.

"Do you trust him?" she asked and Marcus smiled at her.

"I trust Thomas to do what he sees to be in his personal best interests. In this case I suspect that he is genuinely concerned that if anything is discovered in the tower then whoever found it may decide to keep it for themselves rather than bring it to me but I also believe that he is more concerned that he would lose his share of something that does not interest me than I may lose something valuable to me." Marcus told her.

"So why send him? Won't he just steal what he finds for himself?" Diera pointed out.

"If he was by himself then that would have been a highly likely possibility. However, if he wanted to try that on this occasion then he would have to be able to keep his theft a secret from the others who are there." Marcus explained.

"So you're counting on one group of people that may not be trustworthy to keep an eye on someone else that you don't trust?" Diera said.

"That is one way of looking at it my dear, yes." Marcus said.

"Master why keep Thomas around if you don't trust him?" Diera asked.

"He has his uses." Marcus replied.

"Like I do master?" Diera said.

"In a way, yes. Though your skills are obviously different to his." Marcus answered.

Thomas did not want the patrol heading towards the tower to get too much of a head start on him but he still wanted to be as well equipped as possible before leaving the camp so rather than just follow them he rushed to his tent to collect some belongings, including a bag he could use to carry anything he found and the short sword he had been provided with. Like the larger weapons carried by the mercenaries the blade of this had been enchanted to drain the energy of wraiths but Thomas did not plan on using it unless he had absolutely no choice in the matter.

As soon as he had these he headed after the patrol, making his way towards the woods where he had seen them enter. Once in the woods however, he lost track of where the patrol had gone. Thomas was used to following people in urban environments from a close distance where he could keep them in view at all times rather than rural ones where he needed to follow a trail and he found himself without any idea of where the five men that made up the patrol were now. In addition to this he could not see the tower through the trees and for a moment he just looked around. Then he looked back towards the camp before he started to walk in the opposite direction, reasoning that that would take him to the tower.

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The patrol came to a halt when they reached the treeline at the edge of the ruins surrounding the tower and looked around, remembering that the last set of ruins they had come across had been inhabited by wraiths. "There's a way in to the right. Let's go." the patrol leader said when he spotted the entrance to the tower and the five men began to move through the ruins, the mercenaries advancing ahead of the sailor who had accompanied them. They looked out for any signs of underground chambers like the one that the wraiths' had been discovered in but by the time they reached the entrance to the tower they had seen nothing out of the ordinary.

William and Aldbertus had removed the damaged vines from around the tower's entrance, giving it the appearance that it had simply escaped becoming overgrown rather than someone having hacked their way inside and the mercenaries failed to notice anything wrong as they peered inside.

"It's dark inside. I can barely see." the first of them said.

"Then tread carefully. We're right behind you." the patrol leader replied before the first mercenary stepped across the threshold of the tower, holding his shield up in front of him just in case there was anything lurking in the darkness. After a few moments though it became clear that the ground floor room was empty and the only thing of interest was the flight of stone steps that led up to the next one, made obvious by the limited daylight coming down from above.

"There are stairs." he said softly as the other mercenaries and the sailor entered the tower behind him.

The patrol leader then pointed to another of the mercenaries and then to the stairs, indicating that he was to go up first. The man nodded in response and then advanced towards the stairs, peering up them when he reached the bottom before he started to climb them. With the next floor being far better lit than the one he had started on the mercenary was able to rapidly take in the contents as soon as he got high enough on the stairs to see around.

"You should see this. There's something here." he announced with a smile when he saw the chest at the side of the room and he hurried up the last few steps.

"What is it?" the patrol leader asked as he followed the mercenary up the stairs, stopping at the top and also grinning at the sight of the chest, "Now this is more like it. All this time on this continent and finally we may have found something worthwhile." he added as he and then the rest of the patrol rushed into the room and all looked at the chest.

"Do you think it's still locked?" the sailor asked.

"Well if it is we'll just have to smash it open." a mercenary answered with a smile.

"Let's start by taking a look shall we?" the patrol leader added, returning his sword to its scabbard as he walked across the room to the chest. Then he leant his shield up against the wall beside the chest and knelt down in front of it. Looking at the obvious lock he could not tell whether or not it was secure so instead he just spread his arms out to grasp the lid of the chest at either side before lifting it. As soon as the lid began to move there was a soft 'click' and almost immediately a spread of darts burst from the holes in the rim and flew across the room. With the patrol leader so close a significant number of these struck him in his torso, most of them piercing the chainmail coat he wore and he fell backwards without a sound.

There were still more darts though and as these flew across the room they struck the other members of the patrol, one of them hitting the sailor in his thigh while the others struck the remaining mercenaries. One of the armoured men was lucky enough that the darts heading for him all struck his shield and although some of the wood on the back splintered away he remained unharmed. On the other hand the remaining two mercenaries were both struck directly by darts, though by fewer than had hit their leader. One of these men was hit in the neck by one of the darts that hit him and he dropped his sword and shield as he collapsed clutching at his throat while blood spurted from the wound. The final mercenary was hit by two of the darts, both of them just clipping his shield arm near his shoulder and he cried out in pain as he dropped to his knees and dropped his sword to clamp his hand over the wounds.

While Horace sat inspecting several eggs that he had come across in the woods to try and determine whether they would be suitable for the mutineers' next meal the others kept watch from the windows. The moment that the mercenaries emerged from the trees though they took cover and all of them waited silently as they listened to the sound of the patrol entering the tower and climbing the stairs, clutching their weapons impatiently. The sound of the trap triggering did not carry up the stairs to them but they did hear the cries of pain as the cloud of darts struck the members of the patrol.

"Now!" William snapped and they all rushed down the stairs, eager to take as much advantage of the shock of the trap as they could.

The mercenary with the injured shoulder was closest to the stairs and he turned to face them as soon as he heard William's voice from above. Rather than run all the way down and face him directly though Gromar leapt over the side of the stairs and landed beside the mercenary. Then as he turned to face the Dwarf Gromar swung his warhammer at him and sent him flying into the side of the stairs before he landed in a heap on the floor.

At the same time the uninjured mercenary charged towards the stairs just as William reached the bottom and both men swung their swords at one another, the two blades meeting and locking together as they both pushed against one another. While William and the mercenary had their attention focused on one another Horace rushed up and thrust his knife at the mercenary only for the small blade to be turned aside by the man's chainmail coat. However, although Horace's attack failed to injure the mercenary this distraction was enough to allow William to withdraw his sword before striking again and this time he impaled the mercenary just below his ribcage, giving him the chance to cry out just before he died.

Meanwhile the injured sailor was able to get back to his feet and he held out his sword in front of him in one hand while he kept the other clamped over his still bleeding leg wound.

"Put it down." William told him, "You're outnumbered four to one and you're hurt."

"You'd like it if I just gave up wouldn't you Mister Beckett?" the sailor responded with a snarl, "That way everything in that chest would be yours. Well I've seen what happens to anyone who crosses the magister and I think I'll take my chances."

Rather than attack the sailor William hesitated, reluctant to kill the man he had sailed with for a number of years and Horace also held back. On the other hand neither Gromar or Aldbertus had any such qualms about a man they barely knew and they began to advance, circling around either side of him so that he faced William ahead of him and them to his sides.

All of a sudden the sailor lunged towards Gromar, hoping that his longer reach would give him an advantage but the Dwarf reacted in time to block the blow with his warhammer. At the same time Aldbertus saw his opportunity and he leapt forwards and swung his axe at the sailor from behind. The blade embedded itself in the sailor's spine and he spat a mouthful of blood as he fell dead instantly.

"Did you have to axe him in the back like that?" Horace asked as he stared at the body of the sailor.

"What did you expect me to do?" Aldbertus responded.

"He was trying to kill me at the time." Gromar added.

"Aldbertus and Gromar are right Horace. He wasn't going to surrender." William said.

"Even if he did what would we do with him? There are only four of us Will, we can't keep an eye on prisoners all day and night." Gromar pointed out.

"Gromar's right. Just because some of these men used to be your crew doesn't mean that we can go soft on them." Aldbertus said and William nodded.

"Of course you're right. From now on I'll just attack." he replied.

"What do we do now then?" Horace said and William looked at the chest then at Gromar.

"Is that still dangerous now that the trap has been triggered?" he asked.

"I doubt it. The springs will probably need to be reset and these darts reloaded." the Dwarf engineer answered.

"In that case as well as taking a look at these shields I'd like to find out what the Oscari wanted to keep locked away enough that they set a lethal trap to guard it." William said.

Even though he had managed to keep in a straight line Thomas felt like he had been wandering through the woods at random for hours before he noticed the light from the clearing where the tower stood and he headed towards it. Stepping from the woods into the clearing that contained the tower and the ruins he paused and looked up at the top of the tower. Lowering his gaze he saw the opening at the base and he started to walk towards it. However, before he had got more than a few paces he heard the screams of men from inside and he came to a sudden halt, raising his sword nervously. For a few seconds there was just silence from inside the tower before Thomas heard another scream and it became obvious that the members of the patrol were under attack.

Thomas was not the sort of person to rush into a potentially dangerous situation just to help people that he barely knew and instead he started to back away from the tower towards the treeline behind him. Then when he reached the trees he turned and started to run through the woods, heading back towards the campsite.

Of the four shields that the mercenaries had brought to the tower only three remained intact, the fourth having been damaged by darts from the trap. This still gave the mutineers the other three to inspect though and the shields were laid out beside one another. The side by side arrangement made it easy to see that although there were minor differences that suggested that they had been made by hand the general pattern

marked on each of them was the same.

"None of this makes any sense to me." Aldbertus said.

"What about you Gromar? Do you recognise anything?" William asked, looking at Gromar but he shook his head.

"No, nothing," he answered.

"It's a spell of some sort isn't it?" Horace added and William nodded.

"I think so. The magister must have created all of them himself," he said.

"I don't know much about magic but I thought that spell casting was supposed to take a lot of time and effort." Aldbertus commented.

"I did too." William said in agreement.

"Maybe it's different for vampires." Horace suggested, "How old is he after all? He must have had a lot of practice at this sort of thing."

"It's possible I suppose, or maybe there's something about these shields that we're missing." Gromar said.

"Not just the shields either. These swords have markings on them that look the same as well." William added as he picked up one of the mercenaries' swords and looked at the blade. Although its size and shape meant that the layout of the markings had to be different to those on the shields he could see that the symbols used were the same on both.

"So what do you want to do with them?" Aldbertus said.

"We take them." William replied, "The swords and the shields. We'll go through everything these men were carrying and take anything that looks useful. First though I'd like to see inside this chest."

The four mutineers gathered around the chest with Gromar kneeling down in front of it ready to lift the lid but he hesitated before he did.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked.

"You're the one who said it was safe." Horace pointed out and William smiled.

"You did Gromar," he added.

"Just get on with it." Aldbertus said.

"Here goes then." Gromar said and he lifted the lid of the chest.

Just as Gromar had thought nothing happened when the chest was opened and Horace breathed a sigh of relief.

"So what's in it?" he asked, trying to peer into the now open chest.

Inside the chest there were numerous cloth bags that were sealed with cords. Although the exact nature of the contents could not be determined by their roughly cylindrical shape it appeared that they contained similar objects.

"Bags of something." Gromar replied and he reached in to take one, "They're heavy," he added, smiling.

"What's so good about that?" Horace said when he noticed this.

"Heavy often means expensive." Gromar told him while he untied the cord around the bag he had picked up before reaching inside and removing the contents.

"What is that?" Aldbertus asked when he saw the strips of metal that were all connected together by rings that pierced them along their longer edges. This arrangement had enabled them to be rolled up inside the bag and Gromar unrolled them to reveal the markings that were etched on one side.

"It looks like some kind of writing." Gromar said.

"Some of those symbols are on the swords and shields." William added.

"So it could be something to do with casting spells." Aldbertus suggested.

"Whatever it is, it's gold." Gromar said, scratching at the surface of the metal.

"Gold? Are you sure?" Aldbertus asked and Gromar nodded.

"Of course I'm sure. If there's one thing that a Dwarf can recognise then it's gold. It's not solid, it's too stiff and not heavy enough for that but you can tell by the way that the surface isn't tarnished. Gold doesn't rust or decay so that's what gives it away." he explained before he passed the linked metal strips to Aldbertus and then reached into the chest to take out a second bag. While Aldbertus inspected the strips for himself Gromar unwrapped a second almost identical set, distinguishable from the first only by some obvious differences in the carvings but identical in construction and finish. Then something in the chest that had been concealed beneath the two bags caught Gromar's eye, "Now what do we have here?" he commented as he set the second set of linked metal strips down on the floor beside him and then he reached into the chest again. The bag he picked out was smaller than the previous two and it had an irregular shape. Then when he shook the bag he heard a familiar sound, that of coins in a purse. Sure enough when he undid the bag and tipped it up he was able to pour several coins made of various metals into his hand.

## The Eternal Library

"Oscari coins." William said.

"Yes and each one worth at least twenty times the usual amount of the metal." Gromar added, pouring the coins back into the bag, "Let's see if there are any more in here."

Gromar then began to rummage through the chest, removing the cylindrical bags as he hunted for more purses but all that remained were several dozen more of the cylinders.

"Looks like we found a wizard's library." Aldbertus commented.

"Possibly." William replied.

"So what should we do with all this stuff?" Gromar asked.

"If it's gold then won't it be heavy to carry?" Horace added.

"One or two of these bags each shouldn't cause us any trouble." Gromar told him, "More than that though and added to everything else we need to carry will probably start to slow us down."

"Then that's what we take. We'll leave the rest here." William said. Then he glanced at Gromar and added, "I take it that you're fine with the purse?"

"Of course." he responded and he tucked the purse into his jacket.

Thomas ran through the woods back to the campsite, covering the ground much quicker than he had managed when he walked through them to the tower and he was out of breath by the time he emerged from the trees. Then he ran directly towards Marcus' tent and rushed into the outer room.

"Lord!" he called out, barely able to get even that word out thanks to how short of breath he was.

"Enter." Marcus responded from beyond the inner tent flap and Thomas dashed into the main room where Marcus now sat alone studying his maps of Oscay, "So Thomas, what brings you back so soon?" he asked.

"The tower my lord, I think there are more wraiths inside. They killed the other men." Thomas gasped.

"You saw the wraiths?" Marcus said, looking up from the map at him.

"No, but I heard screams." Thomas answered.

"Where were you when you heard the screams Thomas?" Marcus said.

"I was still outside the tower my lord. It took longer than I thought to reach the tower and by the time I arrived the patrol had already gone inside."

"And when you heard screams you came back here rather than investigate." Marcus commented and Thomas hesitated, worried that by admitting to fleeing from the tower rather than investigating further had angered the vampire.

"I didn't think I could-" he began.

"Of course there was nothing you could do Thomas." Marcus interrupted, "Anything that could kill a patrol that included four well trained warriors would be a formidable opponent and you would likely have been killed as well. Returning here was the right thing to do."

Thomas breathed a sigh of relief when he heard this.

"Will you send more men to investigate my lord?" he asked.

"No." Marcus answered, "The loss of the men is regrettable but we cannot risk more unnecessarily. If there was time to spare then I would lead a unit myself but we have only limited darkness to reach the Elves and that must be our priority."

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Lucia was about to call out to Ammaril to tell her that she had brought a meal for the Elf sorceress but before she could she heard Ammaril call out herself and reveal her position inside the library.

"That's it!" she exclaimed and Lucia headed towards the sound of her voice with the tray of food and jug of water.

"Your highness I have your meal." Lucia said as she entered the row between shelves where Ammaril was sat on the floor surrounded by ancient tomes of knowledge. One of the books lay open in front of her while she flipped through another.

"Yes, just put it down and I'll get to it later." Ammaril responded without looking up.

"Of course your highness. You sounded excited." Lucia commented as she walked up to where the floor was strewn with books and set down the meal she had brought with her.

"Excited?" Ammaril said, looking up from her book.

"Forgive me your highness. I heard you from near the entrance when you called out. Have you found what you were looking for?" Lucia explained and Ammaril smiled at her.

"Yes Lucia I think I have. If my interpretation of these texts is correct then I have uncovered the greatest secret the Oscari had and with that I can become as powerful as they were in their prime." she replied, "Then no-one will dare oppose me."

The determination in Ammaril's voice when she said this unnerved Lucia and she decided that it would be better if she left and tried to find Yilven.

"No your highness." she said before she turned and hurried towards the entrance, making her way past the now glowing standing stone that had been brought inside and placed by one of the dragon skulls. Hurrying out of the library she made her way down the steps, watched by a group of Ogres that had been placed on guard outside the building by Trollog. As soon as she reached the bottom of the steps she looked around, hoping that Yilven would have returned. Lucia was certain that he would want to know about Ammaril getting closer to unlocking the secrets of the Oscari and perhaps her attitude would be enough for Yilven to take to Orcan and convince him to put a stop to what she was doing. However, Lucia could not see Yilven among any of the Elves who were deployed nearby so she headed for the nearby ruin that had a tent erected within it where she knew that Orcan had set up his command post and went inside, hoping that he may be there instead. Here she found Orcan, Tiellan and Vendril gathered around a hand drawn map of the area surrounding the library and extending to the harbour where their ships were docked but there was no sign of Yilven. Marked on the map were the defensive positions that the Elves had set up to protect this territory from attack and the trio of Elf leaders were in the midst of discussing how they would respond to attacks from various directions. As ever the main concern appeared to be how the Ogre tribe would be used. Ammaril was the only Elf who spoke their language and her time was fully occupied with her research so was not available to pass on orders.

Noticing that Lucia had entered their command post Vendril turned and looked at her.

"Yes Lucia, is there a problem?" he asked as the other two Elven leaders also turned towards her.

"No captain. I have just given Princess Ammaril her meal and I was wondering whether Yilven is back yet." she replied, not wanting to say anything about her concerns regarding Ammaril's activities in the library.

"Yilven is still surveying the land around the city. He will not be back for a day or so at least." Orcan told her, "What do you need him for?"

Lucia had not prepared herself to answer this question, knowing that the Elves would not listen to her concerns about Ammaril but she thought up a response that she hoped would sound convincing quickly.

"I noticed that he was absent during meals and was worried that he may have been hurt." she replied and Orcan smiled. Luckily he knew that Yilven and Lucia had spent a significant amount of time together on the sea voyage

"Yilven is quite capable of looking after himself." he said.

"There you go girl. No need to worry." Vendril added.

"Yes captain. Thank you." Lucia replied before she exited the command post.

As she left the ruin she saw Ammaril suddenly burst from the library across the street with a book in her hand and she looked around.

"Lucia come here. I need your assistance." she called out.

"Yes your highness." Lucia replied and she started to make her way towards Ammaril. Meanwhile the Elf sorceress continued to look around, "Where is Yilven?" she asked.

"He is still exploring the land around the city your highness. I just spoke to Prince Orcan about him myself."



Lucia answered.

"In that case I need to find Trollog. Have you seen him?" Ammaril responded, still looking around.

"I'm sorry but I don't know where he is either your highness." Lucia said and Ammaril immediately turned towards the Ogres guarding the library.

"Where is your chieftain?" she said in their language and one of them pointed towards the shelter used by Trollog.

"In there." he said and Ammaril grabbed hold of Lucia by her arm and started to pull her towards it.

"Come along. If Yilven isn't here then maybe Trollog or one of his Ogres can help us instead." she told her, "Trollog!" she then called out as they neared his shelter, "Trollog I need you help."

"What do you want?" Trollog responded and Ammaril held out the book she had been reading to show him a page that featured an illustration of a plant with smaller drawings picking out the specific details of the leaves and flowers.

"I need some of these plants. I need the roots, stems, leaves and flowers. Do you know where they can be found?" she asked.

The Ogre chieftain looked at the book and frowned.

"I don't know about flowers." he said.

"Someone must." Ammaril said and Trollog looked around.

"Where is Sangal?" he called out and moments later a female Ogre stepped from one of their shelters and waved towards Trollog.

"Here chief." she responded.

"Come here and take a look at this book." Trollog told her and she walked towards him.

"A book? I don't anything about reading." she said as she approached.

"You don't need to, there are pictures. Just take a look at them and say whether you've seen any of the flowers that are in them." Trollog said.

The female Ogre stopped beside Trollog and looked down at the book where Ammaril held it open, looking at the illustrations on the page. After just a few moments she then smiled.

"Of I've seen them. They grow down by the river, right along the bank." she said.

"Is this the right time of year for them?" Ammaril asked and Sangal thought for a moment.

"Maybe a little late. The flowers won't be open very wide." she answered.

"That doesn't matter I just need the plants to grind for ingredients." Ammaril said.

"Ingredients? Are you making a potion?" Trollog said.

"Yes Trollog I am. A potion that will make you strong, stronger than any other Ogre." Ammaril told him and he grinned before looking at Sangal again.

"Make sure she gets what she needs." he told her.

"Yes chief." the female Ogre replied.

"Trollog there is one more thing I will need." Ammaril added and the Ogre chieftain turned back towards her.

"What? Tell me and it's yours." he said.

"I need some blood." Ammaril told him and Lucia suddenly turned her head towards the Elf sorceress when she heard this, remembering the warning that Yilven had given her about Ammaril making requests for blood from her, "It doesn't have to be yours. Blood from any Ogre will do."

"How much do you need?" Trollog asked.

"Oh not much. A cup full should be more than enough." Ammaril said and Trollog nodded.

"It'll be ready when you get back." he replied.

Ammaril then turned to Lucia.

"Come on Lucia. My brother needs to know that we are heading for the river." she said.

With the sun getting visibly lower in the sky Yilven was looking out for somewhere to bed down for the night as well as observing the terrain around the city. He could hear the sound of running water from close by and he decided that he would investigate this. If nothing else a source of fresh water would allow him to replenish his supply. He was cautious in his approach to the river, as he had been cautious in all his movement while on his own. Lacking any support from other Elves he could not afford to be taken by surprise by an enemy or even a predatory animal. So far though he had encountered nothing larger than one of the many lesser dragons that seemed to nest in the city in large numbers.

As he got closer to the river Yilven heard the sound of something large wading through the water and he quickly took cover in the ruins of a small structure. Whatever was moving about in the river was much bigger than an Elf and Yilven hoped that it would show itself before he had to move any closer. However, he could still hear the movement in the water when he saw a pair of Elf warriors appear around another ruin not far away. The warriors were moving calmly and looking at their surroundings carefully, though they failed to

notice Yilven watching them from his hiding place. This indicated to Yilven that they were sentries and that the noise coming from the river was nothing to worry about.

"Hey there." he called out as he emerged from the ruin and both Elf warriors instantly spun around towards him, raising their shields in front of them and pointing their swords ahead of them. However, they quickly recognised Yilven and relaxed, "What are you doing out here?" Yilven asked them.

"Prince Orcan has detailed us to guard the princess." one of the warriors told him.

"Princess Ammaril is here?" Yilven commented while still walking towards the Elf warriors, "How many of you are there?"

"Eight in all." the same warrior answered, "Plus that human cabin girl and one of the Ogres."

This made a lot of sense to Yilven. The sound of wading obviously came from the Ogre, though why Ammaril would have come out here was still a mystery to him.

"What are they here for?" Yilven said.

"I don't know exactly. All I know is that they came looking for some flowers." the warrior said.

"Very good. Carry on." Yilven told the warriors before he stepped around them and headed towards the source of the noise.

The river possessed sloping banks that meant Yilven walked downhill as he approached it and he could see that while a female Ogre was moving about in the water Ammaril and Lucia watched her from the bank and four Elf warriors stood close to them in turn.

"You highness." Yilven called out and the group below him all looked up the slope towards him.

"Ah Yilven, I am glad to see you are safe. Have you found anything interesting out here?" Ammaril asked as he continued to approach her.

"Not really your highness." Yilven replied as glanced towards the ruins, "So far this place is exactly what it seems to be, long deserted. Apart from them of course." and he looked towards the female Ogre that he could now see climbing out of the river, "What about you? Have you found something?"

Ammaril smiled at Yilven before she answered.

"As a matter of fact, yes. The Great Library of the Oscari contains many wondrous things and one of those has led us here." she said before the Ogre called out and waved to her, "Now if you don't mind I need to go and check that she has led us to what I want."

Ammaril then turned away from Yilven and headed for the Ogre who in turn opened the bag that she had slung over her shoulder. Meanwhile Lucia started to approach Yilven and when he noticed this he walked towards her as well.

"Hello Lucia." he said in greeting.

"Hello Yilven, I'm happy to see you're okay." Lucia replied.

"Likewise. Is everything okay in the city?" Yilven asked.

"I don't know." Lucia answered, "Did Ammaril tell you what she's looking for here?"

"Not exactly, no." Yilven said, shaking his head, "She just said that it was something she found in the library that brought you here."

"She's looking for a type of flower. She tried finding you first to see if you had found any but then she went to the Ogres instead." Lucia explained.

"Did she say what this flower was for?" Yilven said.

"It's an ingredient for some sort of spell. I don't know what it does though." Lucia told him before she paused for a moment before adding, "There's something else as well Yilven."

"What?" he responded.

"After we went to see Prince Orcan to get the warriors Ammaril wanted for protection the Ogre Trollog approached her again and gave her something. I'm pretty sure that it was a cup of blood. You said that-" Lucia began.

"Blood?" Yilven interrupted and Lucia nodded.

"Yes, I don't know where it came from but I think it was probably from an Ogre." she said.

"I don't like the sound of that." Yilven commented.

"No, I didn't think you would. Can we do anything about it?" Lucia replied and Yilven paused to think.

"I don't know Lucia." he replied eventually, "I've already tried talking to Prince Orcan but that didn't work.

Maybe now that she has Ogre blood as well he'll at least be willing to ask her for answers himself but that is going to have to wait."

"Wait? Why?" Lucia asked.

"Because I still need to finish my survey of the ground outside the city and that's likely to take at least another three days. Until then you just need to keep an eye on Ammaril. We'll talk again when I return to the library." Yilven told her.

Once they had taken what they wanted from the bodies of the patrol the four mutineers left the tower and concealed themselves in the woods on the far side of the ruins from the direction that any further mercenaries would approach from. Both William and Aldbertus now wore chainmail coats taken from two of the mercenaries and also carried two of their teardrop shaped shields with their strange markings. By leaving the shelter of the tower they awarded themselves more options if they found themselves faced by a much larger force. Outside they would be able to retreat rather than being trapped in the tower where they could easily be surrounded. However, by the time that the sun set they had not seen any indication that there would be another attack at all.

"It looks like they're giving up." Gromar commented.

"Why do you say that? Horace asked, "It's just getting dark. That vampire could be getting ready to lead an attack on us in person."

"The magister cares more about the Elves than he does about us Horace." William pointed out, "Every hour of darkness he spends coming after us is one that he can't spend marching towards them. When the mercenaries break camp he'll have them continue towards the Elves. "

"Sometimes it pays to be unimportant." Aldbertus added.

"Plus he may not even know that we're here." Gromar pointed out, "They might think that their patrol was killed by more of those ghosts that we saw attack the others."

"So what do you want to do now Will?" Aldbertus asked and William thought about this for a moment.

"I think that we should check out the campsite and make sure that they're gone. If they are then we'll come back here for the night. We can shelter in the tower until morning. Then we'll go after them again."

Orcan was waiting for Ammaril when her small group returned to the camp by the Oscari library and she walked towards him.

"So how did your search go Ammaril?" he asked as she approached.

"Sangal was right Orcan. The flowers I need were growing along the bank of the river and she has collected a bag full." she answered.

"Is that enough?" Orcan added.

"I believe so, yes. At least enough for the time being. If we need more later then we should be able to obtain them. According to Sangal they are common in this region." Ammaril told him.

"So what will you do now?" Orcan said.

"According to the text I found the flowers need to be prepared before I can use them. Then I will begin work on the spell itself." Ammaril replied.

"Are you going to tell me what this spell will do?"

"I'm sorry Orcan but I need time to find out exactly what is possible. Hopefully I will be able to tell you before whoever has been spying on us makes it here. If not then I will need you to hold them off. I may not be able to interrupt my work to help you." Ammaril responded.

Orcan frowned when he heard this.

"Ammaril we know that there is a spellcaster of some sort among whoever is out there. What if they use magic against us?" he pointed out.

"You know that using magic is draining Orcan, I am sure that you and Tiellan's men will be capable of dealing with a wizard who makes the mistake of revealing themselves to you." Ammaril replied before she glanced up into the sky, "However, I will check each night to make sure that we are not being spied upon."

Yilven continued his exploration of the outskirts of the ancient city but he found nothing but ruins. Some of these still contained the remains of statues and sealed chests that may have contained the belongings of an Oscari but he did not investigate any of these. He was less concerned about ancient treasure than he was about possible avenues of attack and although there were many routes into the city most of these were too narrow and difficult for a force large enough to challenge the Elves to easily make use of. This meant that if a force was on its way it would most likely use one of these and before Yilven returned to the library he decided to return to each of these first to see if there were any signs of activity.

One of these main approach routes was an ancient road that passed close to the stone circle Ammaril had taken one of the standing stones from and the ground was still flattened where it had been taken away on the tree trunks. Yilven was inspecting this when out of the corner of his eye he noticed movement from where the road led into the nearby woods and he quickly took cover behind one of the remaining standing stones. Watching the road he saw a small group of armed and armoured humans appear and come to a halt when they saw the stone circle. This gave Yilven the chance to study them closely and he took note of their identical clothing and more significantly the markings that were on the teardrop shaped shields they carried. Yilven remained perfectly still, knowing that the humans were probably too far away to have seen him

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already but if he moved then they were far more likely to discover him. He saw one of the humans point towards the stone circle and for a moment Yilven thought that he had been seen. However, none of the humans readied a weapon, instead they just continued to look at the stone circle for a short time before they turned and headed back into the woods, disappearing from sight.

Yilven remained in his hiding place for a short time, suspecting that the humans were a scouting unit for a much larger force and waiting to see whether that would reveal itself but when no such force appeared he came out from behind the stone he was using for cover and after taking one last look around he headed back into the city, knowing that he needed to report what he had seen to Orcan.

## 27

"Magister!" Alphonse's voice called out from outside Marcus' tent.

"Come in." he responded and a moment later the mercenary leader entered the main room along with Everad, Thomas and another of the mercenaries, "So what is so important that you all burst in here with such urgency?" Marcus added as he looked at the men.

"Magister this is Sergeant Bayard, he led the patrol we sent to scout the road ahead." Alphonse said, indicating the other mercenary.

"I see and what did you find sergeant?" Marcus asked.

"A circle of standing stones magister." the sergeant told him, "It was just outside the remains of a city."

"Ah so we have finally reached the city." Marcus said, "Tell me about this circle though sergeant."

"There were a number of standing stones arranged in a circle. Each of them was at least ten feet tall." the sergeant explained.

"Now that is interesting." Marcus commented.

"Are they significant my lord? What do they mean?" Thomas asked.

"They are interesting." Marcus answered, "They are places where the Oscari cast certain powerful spells, using the stones themselves as a means to store power. Tell me sergeant, did it look as if the Elves had already been there?"

"I'm sorry magister, we didn't investigate the circle closely. We-" the sergeant began before he hesitated.

"You were afraid that there could be wraiths in the circle." Marcus said when the mercenary did not finish his sentence.

"Yes magister I-" the sergeant began but Marcus held up a hand for silence.

"It doesn't matter sergeant. Now tell me how far away is this circle?" he said.

"About two miles magister. The city is just beyond it." the sergeant said.

"Excellent." Marcus said with a smile, "Then we will be able to get there quickly when we break camp."

"Magister are there any dangers that we should know about? If there is magic there-" Everad said.

"Don't worry, if there is any residual magic left in the circle I will be able to sense it." Marcus interrupted,

"However, I think that the time has come to prepare the ballista for use. Whether or not the Elves have been to the circle they are in the city and they do outnumber us. If they attack we must be ready to defend ourselves."

"Yes magister. Will we make camp by the stone circle or enter the city?" Alphonse said.

"The city I think. It will offer us more cover. Stone circles are often on open ground where the Elves will be able to make greater use of their cavalry. Even the best warhorse is of little use inside what's left of a building." Marcus replied.

Lucia was cooking over a small fire when she saw Yilven approaching down the street and she smiled.

"Yilven, I'm glad you're back at last." she said.

"Thank you but I'm afraid that I'm the bearer of bad news. There are human warriors approaching the city. I saw a few of them at the stone circle but there are bound to be more behind them." Yilven responded, "How have things been here?"

"I think Ammaril is mixing some kind of potion in the library. She comes out for ingredients every now and again but other than that I only see her when I take her food." Lucia answered.

"Well maybe she'll show herself now that our enemies have arrived." Yilven said, "Which I need to tell Prince Orcan about. If we do come under attack then you should just find somewhere to hide. I don't want you getting hurt and I doubt that the shape of your ears will protect you."

Lucia smiled at Yilven as he turned and headed for the command post where Orcan, Tiellan and Vendril were all sat eating and Orcan smiled when Yilven entered.

"Yilven, welcome back. How did your expedition go?" he said.

"Your highness there are human troops just outside the city. They are approaching from the direction of the stone circle." Yilven told him and both Orcan and Tiellan got to their feet.

"How many did you see?" Tiellan asked.

"Just a handful but they appeared to be scouts for a larger force. They were wearing uniforms and carried well made swords and shields that were marked with crude enchantments. They observed the stone circle from the woods but then retreated." Yilven answered.

"Did they see you?" Vendril added.

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"You don't know Yilven if you think he could have been seen by mere humans Captain Vendril." Orcan responded. Then he turned to Tiellan and added, "I think we should prepare our cavalry Tiellan. If they're going to do any good they need to engage the enemy outside the city in the open."

Tiellan nodded in response.

"I'll see to it now." he said, "I'll lead them personally."

"Good. I'm going to go and let Ammaril know what's happening. If she's going to do something to help us then she needs to do it fast. Plus we need her to tell the Ogres to get ready." Orcan replied.

Orcan ran from the command post to the library and rushed inside.

"Ammaril!" he called out, "Ammaril where are you?"

Ammaril did not respond to his call and Orcan hurried through the library until he found her sat at a desk consulting a book as she measured out specific quantities of various ingredients that she had gathered.

"Orcan I requested not to be disturbed." she commented without looking up from her work.

"Tell that to the humans who are on their way." Orcan told her and she looked up.

"Humans. Interesting." she said.

"Interesting? Were you expecting someone else?" Orcan asked.

"I wasn't sure. For there to be a spellcaster among them there had to be at least one human or Elf, though their exact nature is still open to question. However, I had considered that maybe they would be served by some of the species created by the Oscari. Trollog and his tribe were able to survive here for all this time and I thought that perhaps some Elves or possibly even Dwarves may have also survived here also." Ammaril explained.

"Yilven was quite clear. He said that they were uniformed humans. He also said that they carried shields that were enchanted somehow." Orcan said.

"Enchanted shields? That is even more interesting." Ammaril replied, "Consider how many weapons or shields are enchanted among our people Orcan. Even our sorcerers produce just a handful. For ordinary soldiers to carry such artefacts is troubling. It suggests that we are facing a spellcaster of significant power."

"Too powerful for you to defeat?" Orcan said.

"Possibly. Though I have the advantage of the standing stone we took from the circle. It contains the power used to lock this library in time. I have plans for some of that power but I expect that there will still be plenty for me to draw on. If it comes down to reserves of power then I have nothing to be afraid of." Ammaril told him.

"What about all this? Can any of it help us?" Orcan added and he looked at the materials laid out on the desk.

"If I have time, yes. I have almost prepared the ingredients that I need and all that remains is to mix them together correctly." Ammaril said.

"Can you at least spare enough time to talk to the Ogres and get them to support us properly?" Orcan added and Ammaril smiled at him.

"Yes, I will talk to them." she said.

The four mutineers had followed Marcus and his forces every day, remaining just far enough to remain undetected when they caught up to them. By the time this happened the mercenaries and sailors were typically preparing to pack up their camp and spend another night marching but on this occasion it was obvious that something was different. While the mercenaries were mustering as they did every night the sailors were not dismantling their camp as they had done on previous days.

"Now this is different." Gromar commented as they observed the camp from a nearby hill, "Does it look to anyone else like they're getting ready to attack someone?"

"Yes it does." William replied, nodding his head.

"Do you think that this means they've found the Elves?" Horace asked.

"Either that or there is someone else on this continent that is in their way." Aldbertus responded.

"We need to know what's going on." William said, "If we circle around the camp then we can follow the mercenaries when they start to move out. Maybe whoever they're planning on attacking will be someone that we can do a deal with."

"What sort of deal are you thinking about Will?" Gromar said.

"Information about Marcus in exchange for help in getting back home sounds good to me. I don't like the idea of us being stuck here on this continent for the rest of my life." William told him.

Marcus stepped from his tent with Diera beside him once the sun had set and looked around. On previous nights when he had emerged the rest of the camp had already been dismantled and packed onto hand carts

but this time the other tents remained set up while the mercenaries were assembled close by. In addition to the usual weapons they carried a number of them carried components for their ballista while the others each carried a pair of the large bolts the powerful weapon used for ammunition. In addition to the soldiers both Thomas and Edwin waited for the vampire.

"The men are ready to move out magister." Alphonse told him.

"Very good." Marcus replied before Thomas stepped forwards.

"My lord I am not a soldier. Perhaps I should remain in camp to keep an eye on the sailors." Thomas suggested.

"My men don't need watching." Edwin commented, glaring at the other man.

"No, I may have need of you tonight Thomas." Marcus replied, "You will accompany us."

"Of course my lord." Thomas said, clearly disappointed with the response. The idea that Marcus would have need of him made Thomas nervous. In Teuten his assignments typically required him to act alone and he did not like the idea of being alone in an area that was probably held by a hostile force. Then Marcus turned to Alphonse and Everad.

"Shall we be going? I would like to see this stone circle." he said.

"Yes magister." Everad responded before he in turn looked at the ranks of soldiers, "Move out!" he called out and the mercenaries turned and began to march along the road towards the stone circle.

While the mercenaries were marching Marcus looked at Edwin one last time.

"We'll be back before sunrise." he told the sea captain, "Just make sure that everything here remains in order."

"Yes magister. You can count on us." Edwin replied before Marcus started to follow the mercenaries with Diera and Thomas beside him.

It took less than an hour of marching to reach the area of open ground in which the stone circle stood and Marcus smiled when it came into view.

"Incredible. It's totally intact." he said before he frowned, "No wait."

"Is something wrong?" Diera asked.

"Yes there is. One of the stones has been removed." Marcus said.

"Removed? But those things are huge. They must weigh tons." Thomas said, pointing to the stones.

"Nevertheless, one has been removed from its place Thomas." Marcus told him. Then he looked at Alphonse and added, "Deploy your men to defend this area. I will need four of them to act as a guard though. I need to examine the stones."

"Yes magister." Alphonse replied before he started yelling orders to the mercenaries.

Marcus then started to walk across the open ground towards the circle of standing stones. Diera and Thomas both accompanied the vampire as he made his way across the open ground between them and the stone circle while four of the mercenaries also followed them. Meanwhile the rest of the mercenaries began to spread out in small groups to explore the area.

The burning torches carried by the mercenaries made it easy to follow them from enough of a distance that the four mutineers were not seen in return. Thanks to the superior low light vision of Gromar and Horace they did not need to make use of artificial light sources and instead they led the way while William and Aldbertus followed close behind them.

"Are they spreading out?" Aldbertus asked when he noticed the orderly line of lights from the torches start to disperse.

"Yes, I think they're out of the woods." Gromar replied.

"Wait, does it look like someone's been cutting down trees ahead of us?" Horace added, suddenly coming to a stop when he noticed a cluster of tree stumps ahead of them and he pointed towards them.

"Yes, I think you're right." Gromar said as he looked in the direction that Horace was pointing.

"Can you tell if it was done recently?" William asked.

"Not from here, no. But if we can get to them I might be able to tell you." Gromar answered.

"Then we should go. If there's someone else around here we need to know about them." William replied and the four mutineers started to move towards the tree stumps. As they got closer though it became obvious that the trees had been removed from the edge of the forest.

"Wait." Aldbertus said when he saw that there were no more trees beyond the stumps, "If we keep going won't they see us?"

"That's a point." William responded, "Even if it's too dark for those mercenaries to spot us then that vampire will probably only have to look in our direction to see us."

"I'll go alone then." Gromar said, "I can keep low and maybe I'll be able to avoid being seen."

"But what if you are seen?" Horace said.

"Then we'll just have to cover him while he retreats." William said and Aldbertus nodded his head in agreement.

"Yes, carrying a torch may let you see better in the dark but it also makes you a much easier target." he said. "Thanks." Gromar said as he began to set down his belongings so that he would not be encumbered as he moved. Then while he continued towards the edge of the forest where the trees had been felled William and Aldbertus set down their swords and shields, swapping them for the crossbows they still had slung across their backs.

When Gromar reached what was now the edge of the forest he stopped to look around, searching for Marcus among the mercenaries but he could not make out the vampire. Instead he got down onto his hands and knees and began to crawl across the ground the short distance to the closest of the tree stumps. This enabled him to see that the ground all around the stumps was covered in debris from the trees in the form of branches that had been severed, presumably when they were chopped down. Once at the stump he began by inspecting the top of the stump itself, searching for signs that it had begun to sprout again but he found nothing, indicating that the tree had been cut down recently. Then he turned his attention to the debris on the ground and picked up one of the smaller pieces, examining the cut surfaces.

After he was done with this he looked at the ground again, this time focusing on the ground itself rather than the debris and he saw a number of tracks all around him. Many of these appeared similar to human footprints and Gromar guessed that these came from the Elves that Marcus was pursuing, however among them there were also other tracks that appeared to come from a humanoid creature but were much larger than those that would be left by an Elf.

Gromar then turned around and started to crawl back towards where the other mutineers were waiting for him.

"Well?" William asked.

"Well I'd say that the trees were cut down a few days ago Will." Gromar told him, "The stumps aren't sprouting again yet and the fragments left on the ground have had time to dry. There's something else though."

"What?" Aldbertus said.

"There are tracks all around the trees. Most of them look like they were left by Elves but there are some others as well and I'm pretty sure that they came from Ogres." Gromar said.

"Ogres?" Horace exclaimed, "What would Ogres be doing here?"

"Maybe they were part of one of the expeditions that came here before us and they avoided being killed with everyone else or maybe they've been here since the Oscari created them." William replied. Then he looked at Gromar again and added, "Do you think that they were working with the Elves?"

"Probably, yes. I didn't see any signs of a fight so either they were working together or they were here at different times and the tracks looked like they were made at the same time as one another." Gromar said.

"Well that is interesting." Aldbertus commented. Looking at William and he nodded in return.

"Yes it is. Especially since Marcus Quinnus may not know about them. If there are more than just a handful of Ogres in addition to the Elves then he's going to have problems fighting them."

When Marcus reached the stone circle he walked up to the nearest stone and placed the palm of his hand against it.

"Do you feel anything?" Diera asked.

"What do you mean?" Thomas added.

"Look at the markings on the surface Thomas. These stones are meant for storing magical energy." Diera told him and Marcus smiled.

"Quite right. Unfortunately the answer to your question is no, these stones are devoid of energy." he said, pulling his hand back from the stone before he turned to the empty spot in the circle where the ground had been excavated and then flattened in the direction that the city lay in.

"How could the Elves have taken away a stone the size of these though my lord?" Thomas asked, "They're far too heavy to drag."

"Look at the ground Thomas." Marcus told him, "See the area that has been flattened? It is far too wide to be from just the missing stone itself. The Elves used tree trunks beneath the stone as it was taken away. Plus they had other help. Remember the tribe of Ogres that the bats I sent to find the Elves saw? Obviously they are fully co-operating with the Elves, acting as labourers for them."

"If they are co-operating will they fight alongside the Elves against us?" Thomas asked nervously.

"I expect so. At least until the Ogres see an advantage in turning on the Elves." Marcus answered, "We are going to need more information about them though Thomas and that is why I asked you to accompany us. I could use more animals to spy on the Elves but they have already demonstrated that they can counter that



## The Eternal Library

strategy. Instead I want you to enter the city and find out what the Elves and their Ogre allies are doing. Find their positions and watch for any patrols they send out. Stay far enough away to remain out of sight but find them. If you keep travelling west then you should find the library that they were gathered around when the bats located them. It is the only fully intact building left in the city so you shouldn't have any trouble in identifying it."

This was exactly what Thomas had been afraid of, being sent into the city alone. On the other hand at least his assignment was limited to surveillance rather than having to acquire anything from the Elves.

"Yes my lord." Thomas replied, "When do you want me to begin?"

"There is no time like the present Thomas. The longer we delay the more likely the Elves are to discover our presence here." Marcus said.

"Of course my lord. I'll begin immediately." Thomas replied before he turned to leave, heading towards the nearby ruined city.

As he was leaving Diera looked at the ground where the missing stone had until recently stood.

"What do you think the Elves wanted with the stone?" she said.

"It can store a vast amount of magical energy Diera. The Great Library of the ancient Oscari was protected by a powerful spell but that could be drained by one of the stones. Hopefully that is all they wanted it for."

Marcus said.

"Hopefully?" Diera commented.

"Yes. Otherwise it also means that they may have a vast reserve of magical power to draw on." Marcus replied.

"Magister." Alphonse called out and both Marcus and Diera turned to see the mercenary walking towards them.

"Yes? Have you decided where best to deploy your men?" Marcus replied.

"Almost magister. I just wanted some additional information from you first." Alphonse told him, "This circle seems to be the most important feature of the area so I'd like to use it as our strong point. We can fortify it using wood cut from the forest and deploy within it."

"Will the circle's magic make that dangerous?" Diera asked but Marcus shook his head.

"No. The stones are drained of all magic. I'd be able to sense it if there was still any power within them. Without that they are just stone so yes Mister Gerrard, you may place your men within it." he answered.

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The Elven cavalry gathered outside the library as they prepared to attack the humans outside the city, waiting while Tiellan's horse could be brought from the Torsol where it had remained while he had advanced on foot. Although the horses did not have night vision as sensitive as their Elven riders it was still good enough for them to be able to see in the available level of light and they would not be in danger of tripping on unseen obstacles just walking along. This meant that there was no need to wait until sunrise to launch their attack.

"I'll take the cavalry close to the edge of the city and then halt." Tiellan told Orcan as the pair walked towards where his horse was being held by its reins for him.

"Are you going to send scouts ahead?" Orcan asked and Tiellan nodded.

"Yes, I'll just send a couple of men forward to see if the humans have occupied the stone circle and how they are deployed. If they have then I'll decide on how to attack." he replied as he took the horse's reins from the Elf who was holding them.

"That sounds sensible but don't take risks Tiellan." Orcan said while Tiellan climbed onto his horse, "We don't know how many humans there are at the circle. If your scouts come back and report that the humans outnumber you significantly then just fall back and we'll either attack in greater force or wait here for them to attack us. We know that they know that we're here."

Tiellan smiled back at Orcan.

"Don't worry, we'll be careful." he said before he glanced in the direction of his dragons, "It would be nice to take them with us too but it's not easy directing dragons while riding a horse into battle. Look after them while I'm gone."

"I will." Orcan replied with a nod and then he stepped back from Tiellan's horse.

"Cavalry, advance. Two columns behind me." Tiellan ordered and as the cavalry started to move they formed themselves into two columns with him at the front by himself. Despite the darkness the Elven riders made no use of artificial illumination, instead relying on their innate night vision. Torches would have allowed them to see further that with just this natural sight but they would also give away their position from a considerable distance and Tiellan wanted to maintain the advantage of surprise for as long as possible.

Tiellan continued to lead the Elves until they were just a few hundred yards away from the edge of the city where he held up his hand for them to halt, at which point he dismounted and signalled to the first two Elves in the left hand column.

"Dismount." he told them and they both climbed down from their mounts, handing the reins to the Elves beside them so that their horses would be secure before approaching Tiellan.

"Yes lord." one of them said.

"I want you two to proceed on foot. Move carefully until you can see the stone circle and see what's going on there. I want to know how many humans there are and what they are doing. Under no circumstances are you to let them see you. Then return here and report what you've found." Tiellan ordered and the two Elves nodded before they headed off on foot.

The two dismounted Elves moved cautiously through the ruined city streets, staying close to the remains of buildings so that they would have somewhere to hide should they unexpectedly encounter any of the humans they were seeking out. As they got closer to the edge of the city they saw the light from numerous torches in the distance and they knew that they had found the humans they were seeking.

"How many do you think?" one of the Elves asked the other.

"Maybe a dozen torches." his comrade answered, "Though there could be more humans than that. We need to get closer." and the first Elf nodded in agreement.

"I think if we go over there we'll get a better view." he said, pointing through the ruins.

The two Elves crept closer to the lights they could see moving about in the darkness until they got close enough that they could see the standing stones themselves, at which point they concealed themselves while they observed the area. From their hiding place the two Elves could see that the mercenaries had chosen to position themselves within the stone circle itself and they were in the process of fortifying their position. The main component of these fortifications consisted of large wooden stakes hammered into the ground all around the circle at an angle so they pointed outwards, after which the ends were sharpened to crude points to create a barrier that could be walked through with ease if moving slowly enough but that would likely impale anyone who tried to charge it. Looking beyond the circle the Elves saw that the wood for these stakes was being cut from the nearby forest and that the humans were still at work cutting more wood.

"They look about half finished." the first Elf said as he studied the ring of stakes more closely and saw that while there were stakes hammered into the ground on the side of the stone circle that faced the city the humans were still at work on the side facing the forest beyond it.

"Then we've still got time to get back to Lord Tiellan and let him know what we've found and launch the attack before they finish." the second replied before he noticed something else going on within the stone circle, "Are they building something?" he added.

Both Elves then turned their attention to what was going on within the circle of stones and the large wooden stakes being used to reinforce it. Here a small group of humans was obviously erecting something and as the Elves watched they saw them lift what looked like an oversized crossbow onto the mounting that they had set up.

"They've got a ballista." the first Elf commented. While personal crossbows were not used by the Elves they did sometimes make use of larger ballistas so they were aware of the weapons and their capabilities.

"We'll still outnumber them when we attack. It will take too long to reload that thing for it to make much difference." the second Elf responded.

"Lord Tiellan will still need to know. We should get back to him now before the humans can finish off their fortifications." the first said and the two Elves got up, remaining low as they made their way back through the ruins using them as well as the darkness for cover.

While the mercenaries worked to fortify the stone circle Marcus continued to study the stones themselves, examining the ancient carvings that could still be made out on their surfaces.

"What are you looking for?" Diera asked.

"I'm attempting to refresh my knowledge of how these stones work my dear." Marcus answered as he ran his fingers across some of the carvings, "I know that the power of this circle could prove most useful but the process of transferring to this body took away everything I knew about how to harness it. With luck there will be something carved into the stones that will tell me."

"Like a set of instructions?" Diera commented and Marcus smiled.

"Yes, like a set of instructions. Of course they could have been carved into the missing stone, which could be why the Elves took that one in particular or they could have just picked one at random." he said before he noticed movement in the darkness nearby. During the time that his men had been at the circle several of the mercenaries had headed away for a brief time to relieve their bodily functions before returning but this time the figures that he could see moving in the shadows were heading further away from the stone circle rather than returning to it and he quickly realised that they were Elves rather than humans.

"What's wrong?" Diera said when she saw him staring into the darkness.

"The Elves have found us." Marcus said calmly, not wanting to alert the two Elves to the fact that they had been seen and Diera turned her head to look in the same direction that he was. However, she lacked the night vision of the vampire and she could see only blackness in the ruins.

"Where?" she said.

"Retreating, just two of them for now though I suspect that they will soon return with a larger force." Marcus said, still remaining calm. Then once he was satisfied that the Elves were no longer able to see what was happening within the stone circle he called out to the mercenary leaders, "Alphonse. Everad." he said and both men walked towards him.

"Yes magister?" Everad said when they arrived together.

"The Elves have discovered us." Marcus told them.

"Where?" Alphonse responded, reaching for his sword and looking around for any signs of the Elves.

"They have gone now. I waited until they had before I summoned you." Marcus told him and Alphonse frowned.

"But why?" he asked.

"Because this way they will return to the others and tell them that we do not know that they have found us and when they launch their attack they will be expecting us to be unprepared." Marcus explained.

"They'll have seen that our defences aren't finished. That means they'll be trying to get around behind the circle where we don't have stakes." Everad said, glancing at Alphonse and the other mercenary nodded in agreement.

"Yes, we'll have to try and keep them away from it." he said.

"Diera I want you to return to the camp where it is safe." Marcus told Diera.

"What about you?" she asked in response.

"I can do more good here. I expect the Elves will try to attack before sunrise to try and take advantage of their ability to see in the dark. Plus they will not want to give us the chance to complete our defences. Now go before the Elves return. Tell Captain Atwood what is happening but have him keep his men where they

are. Do you understand?" Marcus said and Diera nodded.

"Yes master. I understand." she replied before she turned around and started to walk away.

Still standing beside his horse while holding onto its reins, Tiellan watched as the two Elves he had sent to scout the human position returned to the column of cavalry.

"Did you find them?" he asked as they walked up to him.

"Yes my lord." the first replied, "As expected they are located by the stone circle, about two dozen of them." Tiellan smiled when he heard this. If the estimate of the humans' numbers was accurate then that meant that his column outnumbered them two to one.

"They're fortifying the stones with stakes but they haven't finished yet. Plus they have set up a ballista." the second added.

"How complete are their defences?" Tiellan said.

"Just over half way." the second Elf told him, "They have stakes embedded facing the city but have not closed the perimeter towards the forest on the other side."

"So if we go quickly then we'll still be able to get around them and into the circle without having to dismount." Tiellan said, "Mount up. We're going now." he added and the three of them all climbed back onto their horses.

Once Tiellan was back in his saddle he turned his horse to face the Elven cavalry behind him so that he could address them before they set off, "The enemy is in the process of setting up defences." he told them, "Our aim is to get to them before they are finished and outflank them. They have a siege engine so we will have to move quickly but I know that that is something you can all do well. Now let's go." he continued before he turned his horse around again and started to ride towards the stone circle.

Even keeping the pace of their horses to a trot the Elves were soon within sight of the circle and Tiellan had them spread out so that they could all strike together rather than just presenting a few targets at a time. As the Elves on horseback lined up beside one another Tiellan drew his sword and raised it above his head before looking either side of him to see that the rest of his cavalry were in position with their lances lowered into position to be used. Then with the Elves on horseback all lined up and ready he suddenly brought his sword down and in unison the cavalymen all rushed forwards at a gallop.

Marcus was the first to hear the pounding of hooves while he continued to study one of the standing stones and he spun around towards the source of the sound moments before the human mercenaries also became aware of the charging cavalry. The Elves were still far enough away that the humans' torches did not illuminate them clearly but they were still large enough to be visible even in the darkness.

"To you posts!" Alphonse yelled and the mercenaries who were working on the fortifications for the stone circle dropped their tools and drew their weapons while they rushed towards the circle. At the same time two mercenaries who had already been inside the circle rushed to the ballista and hurriedly began to prepare it for use.

Marcus himself stood at the edge of the stone circle staring at the Elven cavalry as they charged across the open ground towards it. It was easy to see that this force outnumbered his own but Marcus had expected this and by all charging at the same time they gave him the opportunity to strike at them as one instead of tipping his hand to those who came later. Around him the mercenaries did nothing, instead standing in a line with their shields held in front of them and their swords in their hands. The Elves showed no signs of having any missile weapons and Marcus did not intend to let them get close enough to attack with their lances before he did anything. Once it was clear that the Elves were committed to their attack and were all out in the open he held out his arms either side of him.

"Get down." he told the nearby mercenaries and the human soldiers all knelt down and looked at the ground as Marcus clenched his fists. Then he looked up at the sky and opened his hands again, "Solari!" he shouted and two lightning bolts appeared to erupt from the palms of his hands and shoot upwards before there was a massive burst of light that lit up the entire area in an instant.

The sudden burst of light caught the Elves unprepared and both they and their mounts were dazzled by it. The effect of this was instant and dramatic, startled by the intense light the horses came to a rapid halt rather than continue on blindly and this combined with the instinct of the Elven riders to try and shield their eyes from the light led to a number of them being thrown or falling from their mounts while most of the rest dropped their lances as they struggled to remain mounted.

Everard had watched this from the woods with about half of the mercenaries, placed there at Marcus' command with their crossbows in anticipation of this moment.

"Open fire!" he ordered and the mercenary crossbowmen all fired their crossbows in rapid succession, sending a dozen bolts into the Elven cavalry that took more of them off their horses. The ballista fired seconds after the crossbows and this struck another Elf with enough force to knock him from his horse and

strike Tiellan as he fell, knocking the Elf lord to the ground as well. He was fortunate enough to not be injured by this but he was still stunned and he just lay on the ground.

"My lord are you injured?" a nearby Elf called out to Tiellan as the remaining Elves tried to reform, drawing swords to replace their lost lances.

"I'll be fine." Tiellan replied as he regained his senses and got back to his feet, aware that although the rate of fire of crossbows was much lower than the bows used by Elven archers it would not be long before another volley of bolts was fired at them, "Did anyone see where those crossbowmen are?"

"Hidden in the trees my lord." the Elf still on horseback responded, "What are your orders?"

Tiellan thought quickly. If the Elves were to overcome the human troops they would have to act quickly and this meant getting close enough to strike in hand to hand combat as fast as they could. The spellcaster present in the stone circle complicated matters but Tiellan did not consider their situation helpless just yet.

"Dismount. We advance on foot." he ordered. The Elves still on horseback promptly dismounted from their horses and all of them gathered into a tight formation so that they could place their shields as close to one another as possible to form a sturdy wall against further missile fire from the humans' crossbows, "Towards the stones." Tiellan added and the Elves started to advance as a block towards the stone circle, some holding their shields up ahead of them while others angled theirs to the side facing the woods instead and they were just in time to block another volley of bolts fired at them. Of these only one slipped past the row of shields and struck an Elf while the rest just embedded themselves in the wood of the shields.

The Elves were not dissuaded by this fire though and they continued their advance towards the stone circle while within the circle the human mercenaries were forming up in a similar close formation of their own.

Although the stakes hammered into the ground around the circle were reasonably effective against cavalry slower moving infantry could weave in between them far more easily. However, first the Elves had to get that far and before they did a second large bolt was fired by the ballista. Against the densely packed Elves this weapon was particularly deadly and the bolt smashed through the row of shields in front of them before impaling three Elves behind it.

"Keep going." Tiellan said, aware that he had now lost about a third of his force while having inflicted no losses at all on the humans. Thankfully though the ballista especially took time to reload and Tiellan believed that his remaining men could make it to the stone circle before it could be reloaded and fired for a third time. Within the stone circle Alphonse had come to the same conclusion and while the men operating the ballista were preparing it to be fired again he waved to them.

"Forget that. Just get over here with the rest of us and prepare to fight." he told them, "When they get within ten paces of the perimeter we move through to engage them."

"No." Marcus told the mercenary leader, "Hold this position."

"But magister if they come through the stakes they'll have the advantage of momentum and they outnumber us." Alphonse protested.

"There is no need for panic Mister Gerrard. I have a plan of my own." Marcus said before he stepped forwards, moving between the stakes hammered into the ground in front of them and standing in the open right in the path of the advancing Elves.

Tiellan recognised Marcus as the spellcaster who had unleashed the blinding light on his men immediately and he braced himself for another magical strike. Sure enough he watched as Marcus cupped his hands in front of him, lifting them to his mouth before he blew across his palms and suddenly spread his hands wide as his exhaled breath became a powerful wind storm that blasted the Elves. In response to this the Elves ducked behind their shields to protect them from the cloud of debris that was thrown up into the air by the magical wind. Largely this was splinters of wood cut from the stakes but there were also clumps of dirt and some smaller pieces of stone as well. The wind did not subside quickly though, instead it grew in strength and the increasing pressure on the Elves' shields was enough to bring their advance to a rapid halt before they were all thrown off their feet.

"Now! Charge!" Marcus yelled and he and the mercenaries within the stone circle surged forwards between the stakes they had hammered into the ground.

The Elves were still in the process of getting back to their feet when the mercenaries reached them and the first mercenary to get within arms' reach cut down a startled Elf with a single swing of his sword. Unable to get into a formation before the humans reached them the Elves instead concentrated on just defending themselves and although Tiellan had dropped his shield he was just about able to thrust his sword forwards to impale one of the mercenaries through his chest before he could be struck. However, Marcus stood right behind the man that Tiellan killed and just as the Elf lord withdrew his sword from the corpse Marcus tossed the dead man aside to face him in person. Tiellan reacted quickly to this by lashing out with his sword again and he stabbed Marcus in his stomach. However, while this would have stopped an ordinary human in his tracks Marcus remained standing and smiled at Tiellan and the Elf's eyes widened in horror as he realised

the nature of the man he was facing. Marcus then swung a fist at Tiellan and punched him in the face hard enough for him to stagger backwards, letting go of his sword in the process. This allowed Marcus to reach down and pulled the weapon from his stomach and held it by its grip, swinging it at another nearby Elf and cutting him down.

Tiellan expected Marcus to then advance on him and finish him off but before the vampire could take a single step another Elf warrior blocked his path and attempted to hit him with his sword. Marcus was quick enough to parry this though and he launched an attack of his own that the Elf in turn blocked with his shield.

"My lord we need to withdraw." Tiellan heard one of his men tell him and he felt a hand grab his arm. Turning to look at the source of the voice and he saw a bloodied Elf staring at him, "My lord can you hear me?" the warrior added and Tiellan nodded. Then he looked around and saw that there were only a few of his original force remaining, "My lord?:" the Elf warrior said again, uncertain of whether or not Tiellan had heard and understood what he had just told him.

"Yes, I heard." Tiellan responded, nodding his head before in a raised voice he called out, "Disengage. Fall back to the city."

The surviving Elves immediately began to try and pull back from the human soldiers attacking them. In some cases this just left them more exposed to attack and as the warrior desperately trying to fend off Marcus' blows tried to turn away the vampire stabbed him with the sword he had taken from Tiellan, the strength of the thrust being enough to penetrate the chainmail coat he wore and he toppled forwards.

"Hurry my lord." the Elf warrior beside Tiellan exclaimed when he heard the scream from behind them and looked around just in time to see the dead Elf hit the ground.

"Fall back! To me! To me!" Tiellan yelled but the Elven retreat had quickly turned into a rout with each warrior just running as fast as they could towards the supposed safety of the ruins.

Initially the human mercenaries began to pursue the Elves and another of them was cut down from behind but then Marcus called out to them.

"Stop!" he shouted, "They're beaten, don't let them draw you into the ruins and separate you."

Upon hearing this the mercenaries quickly ground to a halt and abandoned their pursuit of the fleeing Elves, though as the gap between them widened the crossbowmen in the woods unleashed another volley of bolts that hit several Elves as they ran, including the warrior right beside Tiellan and the Elf lord instinctively paused when he felt him fall. However, when he looked down at the Elf now lying face down on the ground he saw the crossbow bolt sticking out from between his shoulder blades, having easily pierced the chainmail that the warrior wore and it was obvious that he was beyond any help so Tiellan continued to run instead. He knew that the warrior behind him was not the only casualty from the latest volley of crossbow bolts but there was no time to take account of them while he was still out in the open and he rushed towards the closest ruins, reaching them before another volley of bolts could be fired at him and his remaining men. Several other Elves also managed to reach the ruins at about the same time as Tiellan but as he finally took a head count he found that his original force had been devastated. Out of the fifty cavalymen who had left the camp by the Great Library under his command only eight of them were still alive, the rest having succumbed to the mercenaries. Peering out from their hiding place Tiellan saw that those mercenaries were now making their way from one Elven body to the next, finishing off the wounded and searching the bodies.

"My lord what now?" one of the other survivors asked and Tiellan turned to him, responding without hesitation.

"Now we retreat to the camp. Prince Orcan needs to know of our defeat." he said.

Marcus watched while the Elves retreated into the city, waiting until they were out of sight even to him before he turned his attention to the mercenaries who were now in the process of clearing the battlefield. They had no instructions to take prisoners so any injured Elves were quickly killed and the bodies looted. There was also the issue of the horses that the Elves had ridden to deal with. A handful of these had been killed and many more had fled in panic once they lost their riders but a few still lingered around the battlefield and the mercenaries were doing their best to gather these, well aware of their value.

"Magister." he heard Alphonse's voice say and he turned to see him and Everard approaching him.

"Yes?" Marcus replied.

"Magister what are your orders now?" Alphonse asked.

"How long will it take to take care of these bodies?" Marcus responded and he pointed to the mercenaries searching the dead Elves. In addition to taking anything of value or use that they carried Marcus knew that the mercenaries would either construct a pyre to burn the bodies or bury them in a mass grave. This was not out of any sense of respect for the dead but because they knew that in addition to being unpleasant to be around rotting bodies could cause disease to spread.

"We should be done by dawn magister." Everard told him.

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“Good.” Marcus said, “The Elf who attempted to kill me survived the battle uninjured. No doubt he will be informing the others of this and they will deduce my true nature. That means that they will likely avoid attacking us during the hours of darkness.”

“Will you be returning to camp before dawn magister?” Alphonse said and Marcus looked towards the woods where Everard and his crossbowmen had fired at the Elves from.

“No. The woods here are dense enough that I can remain close by without being exposed to direct sunlight but I will not be able to leave them. You may wish to withdraw your men from the stone circle to the woods as well.” Marcus explained.

“Of course magister.” Alphonse said and then he smiled before adding, “A few more engagements like this one and the Elves will be beaten.”

“True, though I would not celebrate our success too soon.” Marcus said, “This time we were able to take the Elves by surprise. Next time I suspect that they will be much better prepared.”

## 29

The sounds of battle attracted the small band of mutineers towards the stone circle but Gromar brought them to a halt when he saw the mercenary crossbowmen ahead of them in the forest.

"Wait." he said, "I can see some of the mercenaries right ahead of us."

"Have they seen us?" Horace asked nervously as he strained to see the mercenaries through the woodland as well but they were too far away for his own night vision to be able to make them out.

"It doesn't look like it. They seemed to be focused on what's going on past them." Gromar answered.

"The Elves you think?" Aldbertus commented.

"Probably. Unless there's something else around here as well." William replied.

"You mean like those ghosts?" Gromar said.

"Yes, though from the sound of things I'd say that they were fighting something rather more solid than a phantom." William said, "Do you think that you can guide us around so we can see for ourselves?"

"Of course I can. What sort of Dwarf would I be if I couldn't get around humans in the dark?" Gromar said, "Now come on. Stay behind me and keep quiet. I can keep us far enough away from them that they won't see us but I can't do anything about any noise that you make."

With Gromar in the lead the four mutineers continued to make their way through the woods. Rather than just follow the sounds of fighting as they had been doing though, Gromar now led them on a path that kept them far enough away from the group of mercenary crossbowmen that they would not be seen even if one of them turned his attention away from the battlefield. By travelling this longer path rather than heading straight for the edge of the forest it meant that the fighting ended before they were in position to see the battlefield itself and the mercenaries that they had been avoiding began to leave the cover of the forest themselves, leaving only about half their original number in place.

"Sounds like it's over." William commented.

"That's good isn't it? I'd rather not end up in the middle of a battle." Horace added.

"That depends on who won." Aldbertus said.

"The magister and his men won this one I'd say." Gromar said as he paused and looked towards the mercenaries again and saw some of them calmly moving out of the woods.

"Does this mean that we're too late?" Horace said.

"Let's wait until we've seen the battlefield Horace." William responded, "Somehow I doubt that the Elves have been wiped out already. It's far more likely that a scouting force or patrol just got ambushed."

The mutineers started to move again, continuing to stay away from the mercenaries that had remained in the woods while the others left. However, Gromar brought them to a halt again before they reached the edge of the forest.

"Down!" he hissed and all four of them ducked down into the undergrowth.

"Gromar what's wrong?" William asked while Gromar looked ahead of them.

"The magister." Gromar responded, "He's out there. I don't think he's seen us yet but if we get too close then he will."

"That's not a surprise. That flash of light probably came from him." Aldbertus said, remembering the brief burst of light that had lit up even the forest for a few seconds.

"Can you see anything else out there Gromar?" William said and the Dwarf nodded his head.

"Yes, I can see the bodies of Elves, quiet a few of them. I'd say that there are at least two or three dozen of them. Also there's a ring of standing stones out there and it looks like Marcus Quinnus was keen to protect it. There are stakes in the ground and the mercenaries have set up their ballista inside it."

"So maybe the Elves don't have everything they came for." Horace said.

"Which means they'll probably be back to try and take it again." William added, "Three dozen dead still means that there are well over two hundred of them left."

"Still think that we should try to join up with them Will?" Aldbertus said and William nodded.

"Yes. A vampire can't be trusted with the secrets of the Oscari and we can't stop him without their help." he said, "Of course we need to find out where they are first."

Thomas found navigating the city difficult with the unfamiliar layout of the ruined streets being compounded by the darkness and his progress was slow. Lighting a torch was out of the question, the flame would make him visible from much further away than he would be able to see so he had to make use of his limited ability to see by starlight. This obviously put him at a disadvantage in an encounter with an Elf since they had superior low light vision but luckily for him the Elves that he came across were more concerned with getting



back to their camp than in searching their surroundings and when he heard the sound of footsteps approaching from behind him he quickly took cover and waited for the Elves to appear.

What Thomas had expected to be a well organised patrol though turned out to be the survivors of Tiellan's failed attack returning to their camp in disarray. Although the Elves had made sure to remain as a single group they had not adopted a formation that allowed them to keep aware of all their surroundings and they failed to notice Thomas as they passed by him. He was close enough that he could tell that some of the Elves were injured. He could not make out their wounds specifically but some were relying on others for support as they made their way through the ruined streets.

Seeing an opportunity to locate the Elven camp more easily than wandering around in the dark until he came across it Thomas waited for the Elves to have passed him by fully and when they were nothing more than vague shadowy shapes he emerged from his hiding place and began to follow them. He found that he was able to move faster than the injured Elves and this allowed him to move from one ruin to another, using the remains for cover just in case any of the Elves happened to turn around and look behind them.

"Who goes there?" the voice of an Elf sentry called out when Tiellan and the surviving cavalymen approached the camp in the darkness. The sentry heard them coming before he saw them and he was ready with his sword as the retreating Elves appeared.

"Lord Tiellan." Tiellan responded and the sentry frowned as he looked at the survivors, taking note of the small number of them that had returned as well as the fact they were now on foot rather than mounted on horseback as they had been when they set off.

"My lord are you all that survived?" he asked in disbelief and Tiellan nodded.

"Yes, it was a trap. Where is Prince Orcan?" he said.

"Asleep in his tent my lord." the sentry told him, "Are the humans coming after you?"

"No, we saw no signs of them after we withdrew from the field but stay alert. Just because they aren't coming after us in large numbers doesn't mean that they won't try something less obvious." Tiellan said before he carried on past the sentry, heading towards the tent that had been set up for Orcan's personal use.

"Tiellan." Orcan said, looking up from where he sat on his bed when his cousin entered the tent.

"Orcan." Tiellan responded, "I have bad news."

"The attack didn't go well?" Orcan asked and Tiellan shook his head.

"Orcan it was a disaster." Tiellan answered, "The humans and their master were expecting an attack. Barely a handful of us survived and we lost all the horses."

"Their master?" Orcan commented.

"Yes. Orcan the humans are working for a vampire. I was lucky to escape with my life. I wouldn't have if one of my men hadn't sacrificed himself for me." Tiellan told him.

"Are you sure about that Tiellan? Vampires are incredibly rare." Orcan said.

"Of course I'm sure Orcan. I ran that creature through with my own sword and it did nothing. I missed the heart and it just stood there right in front of me." Tiellan explained.

"Ammaril and I have faced a vampire before and beaten it. How many servants does it have?" Orcan said.

"I don't know. I saw maybe a dozen soldiers but there were more of them hidden in the woods by the stone circle with crossbows. Plus they have a ballista. If they can set that up close by then they could fire through any wall we position our men behind."

"A dozen?" Orcan said, "Plus say that many again? As long as they aren't able to isolate any of our troops we should be able to handle them comfortably. I'd still like more information though. If the humans you faced were just the first wave then we could be in trouble."

"Yilven?" Tiellan said and Orcan nodded.

"If anyone can get close enough to the humans to find their true strength and evade a vampire at the same time then it's him." he said.

Thomas had not been close enough to see the Elf sentry when Tiellan and the other survivors encountered him but luckily he was being cautious enough that he saw the warrior before he was seen himself and he took cover among the ruins. The sentry appeared to be alone but Thomas suspected that there would be more Elves close by who would be alerted if anything happened to the sentry. Turning his attention to the other ruined buildings in the area he tried to locate these other Elves but it was too dark for him to make out much of anything. One thing that he could see though was the Great Library itself, its outline clear among the ruined structures that surrounded it and he knew that

"Behind you." a voice said unexpectedly and Thomas jumped as he spun around to find Yilven standing barely six feet from him with his sword held out in front of him and as Thomas gasped Yilven placed the tip of

his blade beneath the human's chin, "Looking for someone in particular? Or were you just sent to find our camp?"

"Just your camp." Thomas replied and Yilven smiled at him.

"Then let's go and take a closer look at it should we?" he said, "Turn around again and start walking. I'm sure that Prince Orcan will be keen to talk to you. Now move." he added, lowering the sword and gently jabbing the point against Thomas' chest lightly enough that it did not pierce his skin.

"Okay there's no need to be pushy. I'm not causing you any trouble." Thomas said before he turned around again and started to walk with Yilven following right behind him.

As soon as Thomas stepped from the ruins the Elf sentry saw him and raised his sword.

"Halt!" he yelled before Yilven appeared behind Thomas.

"It's alright. He's my prisoner. I'm taking him to see Prince Orcan." he told the sentry and the warrior nodded before stepping aside.

Yilven directed Thomas to the command post where he knew that Orcan would be discussing the human force with Ammaril, Tiellan and Vendril. Shoving Thomas past the two guards standing outside and into the tent Yilven entered right behind him. In turn the two guards also followed him, not wanting to let the human out of their sight.

"That was quick Yilven." Orcan commented.

"Who is this?" Ammaril added, looking at Thomas.

"I found him just outside the camp. My guess is that he followed Lord Tiellan back here." Yilven replied.

"Come to spy on us ahead of a human attack no doubt." Vendril said.

"Was he among the humans you fought Tiellan?" Ammaril asked.

"No. At least I don't recognise his face and he doesn't wear the uniform that the human warriors wore. He could have been among the crossbowmen in the forest though." Tiellan answered.

"That's not important right now." Orcan said and he stared at Thomas, "What is important is what this man can tell us about our enemy."

"Yes. To start with what is his name?" Ammaril said in the human language rather than Elven.

"His name? What bearing does that have?" Tiellan said in Elven again.

"The library Orcan and I took from the vampire we fought contained the names of a number of the creatures, along with details of their knowledge and power. If the creature this man serves was one of those then it could give us an idea of his capability." Ammaril explained in Elven before she switched back to the human language, "Tell us your master's name." she ordered but Thomas just glared at her without saying anything.

"Yilven get back to your mission." Orcan said, looking past Thomas to Yilven, "I want to know what the humans are doing whether this individual tells us or not."

"Yes your highness." Yilven responded, bowing his head before leaving the tent.

"Ammaril, do you think that you can get some information out of this human or should I let my men beat answers out of him?" Tiellan then asked, looking at Ammaril.

"I think I can come up with something a little less uncivilised Tiellan. I just need your men to hold him still." she replied and she reached into her coat, removing a small vial of liquid.

Tiellan simply nodded at the warriors standing behind Thomas and they grabbed hold of him by his arms and shoulders before forcing him to his knees.

"What are you doing?" Thomas exclaimed as he was pushed and held down.

"I'm just going to make you a little more co-operative." Ammaril said as she approached him and removed the top from the vial.

"What is that?" Vendril asked and Orcan smiled.

"Exactly what she said it is. Something that will make him do what she asks. Anything she asks in fact." he said.

"Wait no." Thomas said when Ammaril stood in front of him and held up the open vial but before he could say anything else one of the warriors holding him grabbed him by the jaw and forced his mouth open for Ammaril to pour the liquid that the vial contained into it. Then the warrior pushed Thomas' mouth closed again and held it until he swallowed the liquid. Thomas gasped when the warrior released his grip on his head and Ammaril smiled.

"So what now?" Vendril said.

"Now we wait a few moments for the potion to be absorbed. Then I'll activate it." Ammaril said.

"What did you give me?" Thomas snapped, "I'm not-" he continued before Ammaril suddenly reached out and placed a finger on his forehead. As she did so energy arced from her fingertip to Thomas' head and he abruptly stopped speaking.

"There we go. That's much better." Ammaril said, looking down at Thomas, "Now tell me the name of your master."

"Magister Marcus Quinnus." Thomas responded without hesitation and then there was a look of surprise on his face, unable to understand why he had just answered the question, let alone answered it truthfully.

"Does that name mean anything to you Ammaril?" Orcan asked.

"Yes, yes it does." Ammaril answered in a serious tone.

"Why do I get a bad feeling about this?" Vendril commented.

"Because captain, the self styled 'Magister' Marcus Quinnus is a very dangerous creature indeed." Ammaril said, "Of course he is just as old as all the others of his kind but he started using that name during the days of the Trayman Empire about nine hundred years ago."

"I don't recall hearing that the Traymans were particularly fond of vampires Ammaril. In fact I think they used to crucify them if they managed to catch one. Then they waited and watched them burn as the sun rose." Orcan pointed out.

"Yes but somehow Marcus Quinnus was able to ingratiate himself with one of their emperors and he was able to live openly among them. Their official history never mentioned his true nature of course, but there were others of his kind who recognised him for what he was. After the empire fell he faded into obscurity though he obviously survived." Ammaril said.

"What makes him so dangerous though? Any more than any other vampire I mean." Vendril added.

"His relative invulnerability combined with his powerful magical abilities made him deadly on the battlefield and he frequently accompanied Trayman armies on their campaigns, initially as an advisor but later on he commanded armies in person and his legion gained a reputation for mass slaughter even after an enemy had capitulated. At least some of that could be explained by his need to feed but not all. In addition he had the resources of the empire to draw on for his studies and he was able to acquire magical knowledge from much of the world." Ammaril explained.

"So we're dealing with an enemy who has more experience leading armies than even we do and one who has the combined magical power of an entire empire at his fingertips." Tiellan said solemnly.

"Yes and given his nature he can call upon that power almost at will. He doesn't need to carry out the same preparations as a mortal spellcaster." Ammaril replied.

"We need to know their numbers." Orcan said and Ammaril turned to Thomas again.

"How many men does your master have?" she asked.

"About two dozen mercenaries plus about that many sailors from the ship that brought us here from Teuten." Thomas answered.

"And what are his plans to attack us?" Ammaril added.

"I don't know. He sent me to find out where you were and how your troops were deployed. He hasn't let me in on his plans." Thomas said.

"He has fewer than fifty men?" Vendril said, "How can he be a threat?"

"With only half that number he defeated my cavalry captain." Tiellan pointed out.

"I doubt that he'll come at us directly." Orcan added.

"No, you all need to be alert for anything strange happening." Ammaril said.

"Us? What about you your highness?" Vendril asked.

"I just need a little more time to complete my work captain. After that a few dozen humans will pose no threat to us, not even when led by a vampire." Ammaril answered.

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Moving far enough around the stone circle to avoid being noticed by Marcus took the four mutineers some time but there was no other option available to them. However, although they were able to avoid the vampire they found that some of the mercenaries had also strayed further away from the stones to collect some of the horses that the Elves had ridden. Looking out from the woods just as the sky was starting to lighten though the sun was not yet above the horizon they could see two of the mercenaries, one of them was stood holding the reins of three horses while his comrade advanced cautiously on a fourth to try and avoid panicking the creature and causing it to run further away.

"There are just the two of them and having a horse to ride would make travelling easier." Aldbertus said as a smile spread across his face.

"You do know that Dwarves aren't exactly natural horsemen don't you?" Gromar said and then he glanced at Horace and added, "And I doubt that Halflings fare much better on them either."

"No but I do know a couple of good recipes for cooking horse meat if it comes down to it." Horace responded. "Who knows, maybe the Elves will appreciate it if we can return some of their horses to them as well."

William added, "Think you can hit that guy holding all those reins Aldbertus?"

"He's standing still and in the open. I doubt I'll get a better shot." Aldbertus answered.

"Then he's yours. Wait until I fire at the other one." William said as he unslung his crossbow and then loaded it.

Both William and Aldbertus set themselves up to have clear shots at their targets and Aldbertus indicated when he was satisfied with his aim. Meanwhile William waited a few more seconds until the mercenary he was aiming at turned to walk directly away from him before he fired without needing to worry about how much the mercenary would move during the time that the bolt took to reach him. The bolt embedded itself in the man's back and he collapsed, writhing in agony as he coughed up blood. Seeing this the second mercenary suddenly let go of the reins he was holding and reached for his sword at the same time as he threw himself to the ground just in time to avoid the shot from Aldbertus crossbow.

"Damn it!" Aldbertus exclaimed when he saw the crossbow bolt fly over the man and he quickly reached for another.

"No time for that." Gromar told him as he leapt up and charged out of the woods with his warhammer held high.

"Oh great." William said, watching as the Dwarf ran headlong towards the mercenary.

Seeing Gromar heading towards him the mercenary got back to his feet and gripped his sword with both hands. Taking advantage of his greater reach the mercenary swung his sword before Gromar was in a position to strike. This was something that Dwarves were used to though and Gromar positioned his warhammer in front of himself to parry this strike. Gromar did not stop when the two weapons clashed though and instead he barged into the mercenary, using his momentum to knock the man backwards. This was the moment that he struck, swinging his warhammer at the mercenary and it struck the man in his shoulder, producing a 'crunch' sound as bones shattered and the mercenary screamed in pain before Gromar delivered a second blow to his head that killed him outright.

Turning around, Gromar leant on his hammer as he watched the other three mutineers emerge from the forest and walk towards him.

"Well you can catch your horses now." he said.

By the time Yilven reached the edge of the city the sun was starting to appear over the horizon and he knew that this meant that the vampire would be forced to seek shelter. Unsurprisingly without a powerful and nearly immortal spellcaster to support them the human mercenaries had also retreated and Yilven could see them moving within the forest. He suspected that this was part of a plan to set up a defensive position and this meant that advancing directly across the open ground between the ruins and the edge of the forest would be inviting the humans to shoot at him with their crossbows so instead he started to move along the perimeter of the ruins, making sure to keep some of them between him and the crossbow armed humans. His intention was to move beyond the humans' line of sight before entering the forest where he would be able to get closer to them and observe their actions. However, as he walked further he heard voices from close by and he ducked out of sight before peering around the ruins.

Ahead of him Yilven saw the four mutineers with horses that he could tell had belonged to the Elven cavalry. It was obvious that only two of them were human but initially Yilven still thought that this strange foursome were part of Marcus' force. However, when he noticed the bodies of the two mercenaries lying on the ground

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he reconsidered this assumption. He could make out the crossbow bolt sticking out of one of the bodies and he saw that both human mutineers had such weapons slung across their backs. He decided that these four individuals were worthy of further investigation but he did not want to reveal himself to them just yet. Just because it appeared likely that they had killed a pair of Marcus' troops did not necessarily mean that they could be considered allies of the Elves and Yilven wanted to be certain of their motivations before he took any risks.

Rather than return to the library to continue her work, Ammaril now had a workspace set up in her tent and when Lucia brought the Elf woman her breakfast she was curious to find out why.

"Your highness why aren't you working inside today?" she asked, looking around at the equipment that had been set up. In addition to the grinding and mixing tools Ammaril had used in the library there was a small burner that featured a metal bowl filled with fuel to create the flames needed to heat the contents of the second bowl mounted above it.

"Because the time has come to start work on the spell I need to cast." Ammaril answered without looking up from the table set up at the side, "For that I need heat and I have no intention of risking burning down the Great Library accidentally."

"Of course your highness. Where would you like your breakfast?" Lucia said.

"Oh you can leave it on the table beside you before you leave." Ammaril told her and Lucia set the tray down.

"Yes your highness." she said. Then just before she turned to leave she watched as Ammaril picked up a knife and used it to slice open the palm of her hand before letting the blood flow into a small bowl in front of her.

Lucia remained calm as she left the tent but as soon as she was outside she hurried back to the small tent that had been given over to her and she began to gather the few belongings that she had brought with her from the Torsol in preparation to leave. Yilven's warning about blood magic was clear in her memory and the thought that Ammaril would soon complete her work now filled her with fear. Ammaril had not made any mention of what her spell would actually do but Lucia did not want to be around when she cast it.

The problem was that Lucia had nowhere to go. She knew nothing about the continent of Oscan and she had never had to survive alone in the wilderness. She knew that Yilven could help her with this but he had left the camp to spy on the human troops. However, she also knew that the humans were located close to the stone circle that Ammaril had visited to acquire the large stone that now stood outside the entrance to the library.

This limited knowledge at least gave her a chance. If she could find Yilven then either they could flee together or perhaps he would be able to do something to stop Ammaril before she did something terrible.

Picking up the small bag that contained her belongings she left her tent and started to walk in the direction of the stone circle. This soon brought her to the perimeter of the camp where an Elf warrior stopped her.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded and Lucia pointed along the ruined road.

"I need to go and look for mushrooms." she said, "I was told that there are some down there. You can check with Princess Ammaril if you want. She told me to go and fetch them for her potion."

The warrior hesitated. It was well known that Ammaril did not like being interrupted in her work and he did not want to risk making her angry so instead he just nodded.

"Very well, off you go. But be careful, we've already caught one enemy spy out there and there could be more of them. Make sure that you're back before dark as well, I've heard that the enemy are led by a vampire and it's well known that they hunt by night."

"Of course, thank you. I'll be back well before then." she said, smiling at the sentry before she walked past him and headed down the road. Lucia saw no need to hide from the sentry who watched her as she walked away from him so she remained in the open, fighting the urge to just run until she reached a point where she could turn into a side street and get out of his line of sight. As soon as Lucia could no longer see the Elf warrior she broke into a run, wanting to get away from the camp and find Yilven as fast as she could.

The Elves' warhorses were trained well enough that shooting at the mercenaries and then charging at them did not scare them off once released. Instead all four had remained in the area, enabling the mutineers to quickly gather them up.

"Okay Horace I'll give you a lift up." William said, looking at the Halfling while standing beside one of the horses.

"Err, okay then Will." Horace replied and he walked up to the horse. Although he was less than four feet tall Horace was just about able to reach up to the saddle and grip it while William grabbed him by the waist and lifted him up enough that he could sit on the horse's back.

"Okay?" William asked and Horace nodded.

"Fine Will, but what about my feet?" he said looking at how his feet were far above the level of the stirrups connected to the saddle he was sat on.

"Hold on, I'll adjust them." William said as he crouched down to change the height of the stirrups.

"Trust me Will, I'm not letting go." Horace commented.

The stirrups were straight forward to adjust and Horace's feet were soon in them, at which point William stepped back and turned towards Gromar.

"So which one is mine then?" Gromar asked as William looked at him.

"Any you want." William answered and Gromar looked at the horses Aldbertus was holding.

"What do I know about horses?" he said before he picked one at random, "I suppose that one will do."

William then helped Gromar into the saddle of his chosen horse just as he had done for Horace. The Dwarf was heavier than the Halfling but he was also stronger, enabling him to pull himself up more easily while William lifted him before adjusting the stirrups to fit his shorter legs. William himself then climbed onto another of the horses while Aldbertus got onto the final animal.

"We won't be going too fast will we Will?" Horace asked nervously and William smiled.

"Don't worry Horace. We'll go nice and slow. These horses are just to save us having to walk everywhere."

William replied then he gently dug his ankles into his horse's side to get it moving, turning it towards the ruined city.

"Don't go getting too far ahead there Will." Gromar called out after him before he copied what he had seen to start his horse moving as well.

"Off you go Horace. I'll follow you to make sure you don't get left behind." Aldbertus told Horace and then the Halfling nervously set his horse into motion.

What none of the mutineers suspected was that they were being observed from within the ruins by Yilven. Initially the Elven scout had been concerned when he saw them getting onto their newly acquired horses that they would move away so swiftly that he would be unable to keep up with them so when he saw them ride into the ruins at a trot rather than a gallop he felt a sense of relief before he began to follow them.

Feeling out of breath after running through the ruined streets Lucia stopped to rest. Sitting down on the remains of a fallen wall she looked around for a short while before she decided to carry on. Even though it was only just after noon she was genuinely concerned about still being alone by the time the sun set and the vampire leading the humans was able to move about freely again.

This time she moved at a walking pace rather than running, hoping to be able to get to the edge of the city without having to stop to rest again. Lucia carried on like this until she heard the sound of horses' hooves ahead of her and she came to a sudden stop. She did not know whether the troops under Marcus' command included any cavalry but even if the horses currently approaching her were ridden by Elves who had been able to survive the attack on the stone circle she did not want to have to explain to them what she was doing so far from the camp alone.

Moving from the road into a nearby ruined building she watched from behind a wall as the horses and their riders appeared ahead of her. The first rider was obviously a human wearing a chainmail coat and initially she suspected that he was one of the mercenaries serving the vampire. However, the next two riders were clearly not human, the first being a Dwarf while the other was a Halfling. Only the final rider out of the four was also a human and all but the Halfling looked well armed. Lucia thought that they looked like a very odd group for soldiers and for a moment she wondered whether they might be bandits. However, she could not imagine a reason why there would be any bandits in Oscay where there was no-one to rob.

All of a sudden Lucia felt her foot slip from the stone she had been standing on and she fell backwards. Reaching out with her hands she was able to break her fall and land unhurt but she instinctively cried out as she fell the four riders could not help but hear this.

"Woah!" William said as all of them brought their horses to a halt and he climbed down from the saddle.

"What was that? Who's out there?" Horace asked.

"I don't know." William replied as he unslung his crossbow and then began to advance on the building where the cry had come from. As he did so Aldbertus also dismounted from his horse and unslung his crossbow while Gromar struggled to descend from his saddle. On the other hand Horace remained mounted, not wanting to dismount when he would require help to get back on his horse.

Lucia took a quick look over the wall when she got back to her feet and saw the trio advancing on her. She then looked around for a way to escape but now she realised that the only easy exit from the ruins she had chosen as a hiding place was towards them.

"We know you're in there. Come on out." William called out.

"It'll be easier on you if you do." Gromar added and Lucia nervously stepped out into the open.

"Please don't hurt me. I'm not armed. I'm just trying to find my friend." she said, looking at the crossbows that were pointed straight at her.

"A girl?" Gromar commented, "A human one at that."

"What's a human doing among Elves?" Aldbertus asked.

"I'm the cabin girl for Captain Vendril of Samman. I came here aboard his ship." Lucia answered.

"A human working for Elves?" Aldbertus commented

"Gromar and I work for humans." Horace pointed out.

"Okay so you work for the Elves. How come you're out here alone?" William added.

"Like I said, I'm looking for my friend. He's out here somewhere." Lucia told him.

"And who would your friend be exactly?" Gromar said sternly.

"Her friend, Dwarf, would be me and I'd advise you all to stop pointing your weapons at her." Yilven suddenly called out from behind the mutineers and all four spun around to face towards him. Yilven stood at the end of the street with his bow in his hands, the string pulled back and an arrow notched and ready to fire.

"Learn to count Elf." Gromar called out to him, "There are four of us against just you and this child."

"I'm not a child." Lucia responded.

"You're also unarmed. You count for nothing." Gromar said sternly.

"Four against one is it? Only two of you have crossbows and I guarantee that I can drop both of them before you shoot me." Yilven replied.

"Lower your crossbow." William said to Aldbertus as he relaxed and pointed his own crossbow at the ground.

"What?" Aldbertus responded, clearly confused.

"Just do it. We're trying to make contact with the Elves after all." William reminded Aldbertus and he also lowered his weapon.

"What are you two doing?" Gromar said.

"Taking a leap of faith Dwarf." Yilven said as he lowered his bow and returned the arrow he held to his quiver. Then he looked at Lucia and added, "Are you okay?"

"Yes Yilven, I'm fine." she said, nodding her head as Yilven began to walk down the road towards the others.

"So tell me human," he said, looking at William, "who are you and why would you want to make contact with us?"

"My name is William Beckett." Will told him, "With me are Aldbertus de Wit, Horace Bramble and Gromar Stonebreaker. Until recently I was first mate aboard the cog *Storm Chaser*. Horace was our cook and Gromar a passenger. Aldbertus is a survivor of a Hadarian warship that I believe was sunk by your ships." at the mention of his previous ship being sunk by the Elves Aldbertus snarled for a moment while William continued to speak, "The man who charted our ship goes by the title Magister Marcus Quinnus and though he looks human he isn't."

"He's a vampire." Yilven said and William stared at him.

"How do you know that?" Gromar asked,

"What do you think Dwarf? That we Elves ignore the world around us? I've already caught one of the beast's spies. I'd think that you could be four more if I hadn't seen the men you'd killed." Yilven answered.

"How long have you been following us?" William said.

"Since you first entered the city." Yilven replied.

"Well since you know that we aren't spies for Marcus Quinnus will you accept our help in defeating him? I don't know exactly what it is that he wants here on this continent but I suspect that it would be a very bad thing for him to gain control of it." William said.

"I can't make that decision. I can take you to Prince Orcan and Princess Ammaril though. They can decide-" Yilven began.

"No." Lucia interrupted and the others all turned to look at her.

"What do you mean 'no'?" Yilven asked.

"I mean we can't go to Princess Ammaril. When I left she was starting to mix the ingredients for the spell she's been working on all this time. Yilven, she cut her palm to collect the blood." Lucia said.

"So what?" Gromar said, "Mages are an odd lot."

"But very few of them indulge in blood magic Dwarf." Yilven said and Gromar glared at him.

"I have a name you know." he said, "You asked Will who we were and he told you so you should at least have the manners to address us all properly. Unless you'd like me to teach you some manners Elf."

"It sounds like letting this Princess Ammaril get control of whatever it is that's here isn't any better than letting Magister Quinnus have it." Horace said, "What is it that everyone is so keen to get hold of anyway?"

"All the knowledge and power of the Oscari." Yilven told him, "Their great library is still intact and Princess Ammaril has already spent days looking through the contents. I don't know exactly what it is that she's

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hoping to achieve but she's been gathering the ingredients for blood magic since before we even landed. Whatever she's planning, she's been planning it a long time."

"If we can't let this library fall into the hands of the Elves or Marcus Quinnus then what are we supposed to do?" Horace said and William took a deep breath.

"How easy do you think it would be to burn this library down?" he said, looking at Yilven.

"Burn it down? You'd destroy something as ancient and unique as the Great Library of the Oscari?" Yilven responded.

"To stop it falling into the hands of a mad sorceress or a vampire? Yes, in a heartbeat. The world has managed for thousands of years without it after all." William answered.

"Will has a point there." Gromar said.

"Unless you'd rather gamble on being able to kill them both." William added.

"If I help burn down the Great Library I'll never be able to return to Syldarin again." Yilven said and William smiled.

"I get the feeling that none of us are going to be leaving this continent again anyway." he said.

"Do you have a better idea?" Aldbertus asked.

"Yes, if you have a better plan then why don't you share it with us?" Gromar added.

"Look whatever we're going to do could someone please help me down from this horse?" Horace said.



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Marcus was stood as close to the edge of the forest as he dared, looking towards the ruined city when Alphonse and Everard approached him.

"Magister we are going to need orders soon." Alphonse said, "Are we going to advance or will we wait here for the Elves to attack again?"

Rather than respond to the question though Marcus continued to look towards the city.

"Magister." Everard commented.

"I heard you." Marcus replied at last, "Thomas should have been back by now. Evidently I overestimated his abilities to spy on our enemies."

"Do you want to send a rescue party magister?" Everard asked.

"No. However, we must assume that the Elves were able to take him alive and that he has been bribed or coerced into revealing everything he knows about us." Marcus said.

"Then they'll be organising to attack. We should relocate to a different position." Alphonse said.

"I do not intend to give them the chance to attack." Marcus said, "Now that they know my true nature they will not risk an attack at night. Instead we will launch our attack as soon as the sun goes down."

"Ammaril may I come in?" Orcan asked as he leant into her tent and she looked around and nodded at him.

"Of course Orcan." she responded and her brother entered the tent. Looking towards the centre he saw the burner and the pan above the flame as well as the liquid inside it.

"So is that it?" he said, "The reason you brought us all here?"

"It will be, yes." Ammaril replied with a smile.

"It doesn't look like much. What is it? You still haven't explained it to me." Orcan said.

"It will continue the work of the Oscari." Ammaril answered and Orcan snorted.

"That answer was as vague as ever Ammaril." he said, "When will it be ready and what do you need to do with it?"

"For now I just need to wait for nightfall. The final step is to charge the potion by moonlight. After that it can be mixed into some wine and distributed to the men. All of them, including Trollog and his Ogres." Ammaril told him.

"A potion of strength? I thought you could already make those." Orcan commented.

"If this were an ordinary potion of strength then you would be right Orcan, but this is so much more. The effects of this potion will last a lifetime. Those who drink it will become stronger and more durable. The perfect warrior. I also want to add some to the food given to Tiellan's dragons. I have crafted this potion to affect them as well as Elves and Ogres, the effect on the dragons should be even more impressive." Ammaril said, "For the time being this just needs to be left above the fire. Where is Lucia? She can watch this for me until the sun goes down."

Orcan frowned.

"A sentry told me that you sent her for ingredients." he said.

"When?"

"She left the camp this morning, shortly after helping to serve breakfast." Orcan said, "Didn't you send her?"

"No, I have everything I need right here." Ammaril answered and Orcan pointed to the potion.

"Did she know about this?" he asked and Ammaril nodded.

"Yes, she asked what I was doing and I told her." she replied.

"She's human. She could be going to warn the other humans. We should never have trusted her." Orcan said.

"Perhaps Vendril can be of help. He knows her better than us." Ammaril suggested and Orcan nodded.

"I'll go and find him. You stay here and watch your potion. I'll make sure that there are warriors outside to guard you." he said before he hurried from the tent.

Outside he looked around and called out to a group of four warriors he saw nearby.

"You! Come over here and guard this tent. Princess Ammaril requires protection. Under no circumstances is she to be left unguarded." he told them.

"Yes your highness." one of the warriors responded as all four of them dashed towards the tent and positioned themselves right outside. Meanwhile Orcan hurried towards the tents occupied by Vendril and the Elf sailors who had accompanied the warriors from their ships. As he neared them he heard the sound of voices from inside the closest and he recognised one of them as Vendril's.

"Vendril!" he shouted as he burst into the tent and found the captain along with several sailors eating.

"Yes your highness?" Vendril asked, setting down his meal and getting to his feet.

"That cabin girl of yours has run off. She may be going to tell the enemy what Ammaril is doing." Orcan told him and his eyes widened.

"Lucia? Impossible." he said.

"Have you seen her today?" Orcan said.

"Not since breakfast, no." Vendril answered.

"That's because she left the camp and hasn't returned, a sentry challenged her and she lied about why she was leaving." Orcan said.

"Perhaps she is hurt your highness. Let me take some men and look for her." Vendril said.

"She lied to the sentry Vendril, why would she do that if her reason for leaving was innocent? Face it, your pet human has gone to warn her own people." Orcan said sternly, "Right now our best hope is that Yilven will see her and stop her before she can make contact with them."

Sitting within a ruined building the four mutineers were joined by Yilven and Lucia to discuss their plans. While this was taking place Horace also lit a small fire that he and Lucia then used to cook a pair of rabbits that Yilven had shot with his bow for them.

"Can't you see yet that there is no other way?" Gromar said to Yilven as plates of food were being passed around, "That damned library has to be burned to the ground. Ideally with that witch inside it."

"What you're talking about is treason for me. Killing a member of the royal family? A crime like that is unthinkable." Yilven pointed out.

"Gromar's right Yilven. We don't have a choice. Surely you can see the threat that this Ammaril poses is just like I can see the threat from Marcus Quinnus." William said.

"He's right Yilven." Lucia added, "Ammaril has read books from the library and she's preparing a potion. Even if we destroy every book and scroll from the library she'll still know what was in some of them."

"The sun will be down soon." Aldbertus commented, glancing towards the sky, "As soon as that happens that vampire will be able to move around freely. He may try to take the library tonight so we have to come to a decision quickly."

"If you're worried about killing one of your own royal family then-" William began.

"Three." Yilven interrupted, "There are three members of the Sylldarin Royal Family here. To get to Ammaril we will probably have to go through Prince Orcan and their cousin Tiellan first."

"No matter how many there are, if you don't want to kill them then we can do it. You just need to not get in our way." William continued and Gromar frowned.

"So what will the lazy Elf be doing while we're taking all the risks?" he asked.

"Why doesn't he kill Marcus? We kill the leaders of his expedition and he can kill the leader of ours." Horace suggested.

"Isn't that just like a Halfling? Thinking everything can be solved with a friendly discussion." Gromar said, "I doubt that any of us are going to be taking out this Princess Ammaril or Marcus Quinnus on our own, you saw how powerful the magister is aboard the *Storm Chaser*." then he looked at William and added, "Will we're going to need his help to deal with the witch if she's as well protected as he says she is."

"I will help." Yilven said before William could speak, "But the library has to be our priority."

"Why?" Aldbertus asked.

"Because that's the one common factor for both Princess Ammaril's and Magister Quinnus' intentions of gaining control of the power of the Oscari." William said, "If we destroy that then Marcus can't get control of any of it and hopefully it will at least slow Ammaril down."

"Would that mean we don't need to kill Marcus?" Horace said but William shook his head.

"I doubt it. I get the feeling that when he finds out that we've destroyed the library before he could take it for himself he'll want revenge on us." he said.

"I'm sure that he's holding a grudge against us after the mutiny anyway." Gromar added.

"Yilven, can you get us to the library unnoticed?" William asked, looking at the Elf and Yilven thought about this for a few moments.

"I don't think so. Tiellan has two hundred warriors and he's set up a good perimeter. I could distract a sentry or two but there are warriors positioned close to the library so they can protect it. Too many for us to sneak past unseen." he said, "It might be possible to disguise you and Aldbertus as Elves but that's it."

"Just three of us against a small army?" Aldbertus said, "I'd say that we need a better plan."

"What if we wait until Marcus and his mercenaries attack the Elves themselves? Would that be enough of a distraction to let us all get to the library?" Horace suggested and Gromar laughed.

"And here I was thinking Halflings couldn't think strategically." he said.

"So it'll work?" Horace asked.

"It could." Yilven replied, "An attack will draw the bulk of our warriors towards it. From what I know of Ogres all of them will rush to fight as well. There is one issue though."

"What's that?" Lucia asked.

"We need Marcus to launch his attack quickly. You've told us that Princess Ammaril is already getting ready to cast her spell and whatever it's intended to do it can't be good." William pointed out.

"Then the success of our plan lies in the hands of our foe." Yilven said.

The mercenaries lined up outside the forest once the sun had set and Alphonse walked up to Marcus.

"The men are ready magister." he said and Marcus looked at the soldiers. In addition to their usual weapons and armour each man also carried a bundle of firewood that had been collected from the forest while some of them also carried torches to light their way in the darkness.

"Very good." he said.

"Magister are you certain about this?" Alphonse asked, "In defending this position we defeated an Elven force more than twice our size but now they will have the advantage of prepared positions as well as outnumbering us by ten to one or more once the Ogres you saw are taken into account."

"Yes, I am aware of that." Marcus replied, turning towards the ruined city instead of looking at Alphonse while he spoke to the man, "There is no need for concern though. I have fought and won with far worse odds than this before now."

"When?" Alphonse said and Marcus smiled.

"Long, long ago." he said, "Now it is time to go, we cannot afford to waste one moment of the darkness."

"Yes magister." Alphonse replied before he walked back towards the mercenaries and joined Everard in front of them, "Company move out." he said clearly and the mercenaries all began to advance towards the city.

Marcus led the mercenaries through the empty streets of the city, heading towards where he knew the Great Library to be located. He could not remember enough of his existence before becoming a vampire in a human body to recall the layout of the streets but he had seen enough through the eyes of the bats that he was able to guide his troops. They continued until the outline of the library was visible amongst the ruins and then Marcus came to a stop.

"Here." he said, "I want a bonfire building right here."

"Magister, the Elves will see the light. They'll know our exact position." Everard said.

"I know that Mister Dorrall. In fact I want them to know that we are here. I want them to see me in particular as I bring fire down upon them." Marcus replied.

"You heard the magister, men." Alphonse said to his troops, "Let's get this fire going."

The mercenaries quickly began to build the bonfire that Marcus wanted, beginning by constructing a ring of stones that would keep the fire in place before placing all of the wood that they had brought from the forest inside it. In addition to the wood, one of the mercenaries also had a bagful of dried leaves that he tipped among the firewood as kindling. A single spark from a tinderbox ignited these leaves and the fire quickly spread to the wood, producing a large fire that lit up the area.

"Now get clear and take cover." Marcus said as he stood so that the fire was between him and the library, "The Elves will have already seen the flames. Now it is time for them to feel the heat."

Marcus waited while flames grew until the entire pile of wood was ablaze, at which point he held his arms out in front of him and quickly flipped his hand upwards. At this gesture a ball of flame rose upwards from the fire and hovered in the air about twenty feet above the ground. The Marcus pulled back one hand before suddenly thrusting it forwards again and the hovering ball of fire shot towards the Elf camp.

The mercenaries around Marcus watched in a mix of amazement and horror as the fireball flew through the air. Initially the fireball rose as it flew until the moment it reached the point that Marcus wanted it to and then it suddenly plunged down to the ground.

"Prince Orcan! Lord Tiellan! Come quickly!" the voice of an Elf warrior called out from outside the tent that the two Elf leaders were inside and they both emerged almost immediately.

"What's wrong?" Tiellan asked and the warrior pointed through the ruins to where the light from a bonfire could be seen in the distance.

"A fire my lord. It must be the humans." the warrior said.

"What are they playing at?" Tiellan said, "They must know that we can see them."

"The vampire. He's up to something." Orcan responded right before they saw the fireball rise up into the sky and then come hurtling towards them, "Everyone take cover!" he yelled, realising immediately what was about to happen but before the Elves could find safety the fireball came down among a ruin that had several warriors positioned in it. As it hit the ground the flames spread out, flowing over the ruins and enveloping the

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nearby Elves. Each of them screamed briefly as they caught fire before they were completely incinerated, "Tiellan get everyone under cover. I'm going to go and get Ammaril. The vampire must be using his magic against us and I doubt that he is done yet." Orcan said and Tiellan nodded.

"Of course." he replied before the two Elves hurried in different directions, Tiellan heading for where their warriors were positioned while Orcan went to get his sister.

"Ammaril!" Orcan exclaimed as he burst into her tent to find her standing over the potion she had been preparing all day.

"Orcan what's going on out there?" she asked, looking up from her work, "I heard screams."

"It's that vampire. He's hurling fire at us." Orcan told her, "How long until that is ready?"

"It just needs empowering and then it can be mixed." Ammaril answered and she picked the bowl containing the potion up in both hands, "I need to get it to the stone. It holds the power required to complete the spell."

"Will it take long?" Orcan asked as Ammaril came towards him.

"A few minutes, but I must not be interrupted." Ammaril responded.

"Okay, come with me. We'll go together." Orcan told her and then the siblings rushed from the tent together.

"What the hell is that?" Aldbertus exclaimed when he and the rest of the group saw the fireball fly through the air and the horses secured nearby all reacted with fear, pulling at the reins that were wrapped around part of the ruin that the group had taken shelter in while they waited.

"I'm guessing that Marcus has begun his attack." William responded.

"Then we should make our move." Gromar said, "Something like that is bound to grab the attention of anyone in its path."

"Lord Tiellan's men are well disciplined." Yilven said, "They will not panic easily but this will distract them and I expect that they will take cover. That will make it easier to approach the library."

"Then let's go." William said as he got to his feet and picked up his shield, "Yilven how long do you think it will take us to get to the library?"

"We're not that far away. Less than an hour even given the slower pace of some of our group." Yilven said and Gromar frowned.

"I'll keep up, don't worry." he said.

"I'm sure you will. I was actually more concerned about our human comrades." Yilven responded, "Using torches will give our presence away so if we don't keep our pace down they're liable to trip over their own feet in the dark."

"Then it's a good job that we've got you to guide us isn't it?" William said.

"What do we do about the horses?" Lucia asked.

"Leave them for now. We can't take them with us but we can come back for them once we're done." William told her.

"I just hope that we all survive to come back for them." Horace added.

In the camp where the crew of the *Storm Chaser* waited to hear from Marcus, Diera stood looking up into the sky in the direction of the ruined city as it was lit up by the fireball.

"What was that?" Edwin's voice said from behind her and she smiled.

"The magister has started his attack captain." she replied and she smiled, "This will be over soon."

"And then we can plunder the city? The men are getting impatient to see some benefit to being here." Edwin said.

"Yes captain, you and your men are all going to get what you deserve." Diera answered.

"Nine hundred years ago the king of a tribe called the Drothar organised resistance to the expansion of the Trayman empire. A legion of more than five thousand men proved unable to breach their fortified settlements while their mages spread chaos among loyal citizens. Then the Emperor himself ordered me to bring them to heel." Marcus said out loud while watching the bonfire continue to burn in front of him, "One by one I unleash hellfire on each rebellious town and village, burning them to the ground along with their inhabitants. Then I fed on the few survivors to complete their extermination and restore order to that region of the Empire. Now the Drothar are all but forgotten, a footnote in a few ancient documents and soon the same will be the case for these Elves."

Marcus then raised his arms in front of him again and caused a second fireball to rise from the flames and then sent it racing towards the Elf camp, this time directing it to a different spot than the one the first fireball had hit. Marcus was careful to avoid the Great Library itself though, not wanting to destroy the priceless knowledge that it contained by accident. However, this still left a large area that he could rain down destruction upon.

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"Magister, won't this just force the Elves to launch an attack?" Everard asked from behind Marcus.

"I certainly hope so." the vampire replied, "That will mean them rushing headlong towards our position rather than the other way around. I suspect that they will take shelter initially though so I want you to take a small patrol forwards. Advance until you locate any Elves and attack with your crossbows, then fall back as soon as you encounter any organised resistance. If the Elves pursue you then come back here but if not find another point on their position that you can attack. It doesn't matter if you kill many of them, just try to get their attention."

"Yes magister." Everard replied and he quickly began to pick out a unit of men to advance with. Meanwhile Marcus turned his attention to the flames once more as he felt his power build up enough to launch another large fireball towards the Elf camp.

"Here we are. So what now?" Orcan said when he and Ammaril reached the magically charged stone that now stood outside the Great Library.

"I need to take power from the stone and put it into the potion." Ammaril replied just before the second fireball landed close by and the blast caused the already unsteady remains of the building it struck to collapse.

Fortunately there were no Elves or Ogres inside it but the noise it made caused those nearby to scatter, "You go and do whatever you can to steady our warriors. This bombardment is not over yet."

Orcan nodded but before he could leave Trollog called out.

"Princess Ammaril!" he yelled and both Elves turned to see the Ogre chieftain striding towards them with a group of half a dozen Ogres, all of them brandishing large but crudely made weapons, "What is going on?"

"We're under attack by our enemies Trollog." Ammaril told him, "I need you and your fighters to stay here to protect me while I finish this spell. Do you understand?"

"Yes, we'll keep you safe." Trollog said and Ammaril turned to her brother again.

"Go, I'll be safe here with them." she told him.

"Look! There goes another one." Lucia exclaimed as the second fireball flew through the sky above the group now moving cautiously towards the Elf camp.

"I wonder how many of those the magister can launch before he runs out of power?" Aldbertus said.

"A vampire? Their power is much greater than any human or Elf spellcaster." Gromar replied.

"It's a result of their Oscari heritage." Yilven added, "I don't think that we should count on him having to rest any time soon."

"I hate to say it but that works in our favour. If we're going to sneak past Elf sentries then we need them to be distracted by something." William said before Yilven suddenly came to a stop.

"This is it." he said as the others halted behind him, "There should be a sentry just up ahead and another warrior watching him."

"Can you get us past them?" Horace asked.

"I should be able to, yes. Just wait here while I get them out of the way." Yilven answered before he moved forwards again, searching for the sentry that he expected to be guarding this approach to the camp.

However, not only did no-one call out a challenge to him he could not see any lookouts in the nearby ruins.

"What's he waiting for?" Gromar whispered as the rest of the group watched Yilven.

"Maybe something's happened to the sentry." Horace suggested.

"Like what?" Lucia asked.

"I don't know. Just something. Maybe they ran off because of the fireball." Horace responded.

"They're gone." Yilven announced as he returned to the others, "No sentry and no lookouts. They must have fallen back to a safer location."

"So what does that mean for us?" Aldbertus said.

"It means we need to go that way." Yilven replied and he pointed in a direction that did would take them past the Great Library if they followed it indefinitely, "I've explored this entire area and the buildings over there are far less stable than those elsewhere, I doubt that anyone will be taking shelter in any of them. We'll have to circle around the library for a while but we'll be able to get fairly close to it and decide on the best way to get inside."

"Okay, lead the way." William said before the sky lit up again as another fireball flew overhead.

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Everard and his men advanced cautiously through the ruins. The darkness held the double danger of injury from any of the ruins collapsing if the mercenaries accidentally disturbed them as well as the potential for attack by the Elves who had far superior night vision to humans. To limit the risk his small force advanced in two smaller groups, with half of them watching for any signs of activity and ready to fire their crossbows while the other group moved forwards a short distance. The groups would then swap roles, alternating moving with keeping watch. They continued in this manner until a fireball passed overhead and illuminated the ground around them, revealing for just a moment a group of Elf warriors taking cover in a nearby ruin and Everard signalled for his men to halt.

"There, right ahead of us." he told his men quietly, "They'll wait for us to fire before they make a move so we'll go in teams again. First team take aim. Second be ready to fire the moment the Elves expose themselves. This will probably only work once so let's make it count."

The mercenaries quickly deployed and aimed their crossbows towards the Elves' position before Everard signalled for them to fire. Rather than all of the mercenaries shooting at once though, only half of them used their crossbows while the rest waited. Shooting in the dark at targets who were largely concealed, the initial volley of crossbow bolts failed to hit any of the Elves in the building. However, it did let them know that they were under attack and their leader gave the order to respond.

"Archers ready!" he ordered and the Elves got to their feet and pulled back their bow strings with arrows in position. However, this was exactly what the mercenaries had been waiting for and as soon as the Elves got to their feet and revealed themselves the mercenaries who had not already fired their crossbows now did so. Unlike the previous volley that had failed to hit any of the Elves, this second volley of bolts proved significantly more accurate and three of the Elven archers were hit before they could fire their own arrows and all three fell to the ground. The remaining Elves panicked when they saw their comrades fall and rather than fire their arrows they all took cover once more.

"Good work, looks like we dropped a trio of them but like I said, I don't think that that trick will work on them for a second time so let's fall back and see what they do." Everard told his men and the mercenaries began to retreat. However, any hope that the Elves might decide to come out of hiding and follow them was dashed when yet another large fireball came down from the sky and struck the ground just beyond the Elves' position, convincing them that it was in their best interests to remain where they were.

"They aren't coming." one of the mercenaries said, "What now?"

"Now we find more Elves and see if we can get them to take the bait instead." Everard answered.

"Your highness the humans are here!" an Elf warrior exclaimed as he burst into the command tent where Orcan, Tiellan and Vendril were doing their best to plan for the defence of the library.

"How many of them?" Orcan asked as all three looked at the warrior.

"Perhaps a dozen your highness, at least that's all that have been seen. A runner just came from the perimeter. He says that his group have taken losses." the warrior told him.

"I thought your scout Yilven was supposed to warn us before the humans could do something like this." Vendril said, looking straight at Orcan.

"And I thought that your cabin girl was supposed to be totally loyal to you." Tiellan commented.

"Captain Vendril is right Tiellan." Orcan said, "Yilven ought to have given us warning of this attack. If we'd known it was coming we could have had a force ready to flank them. Unfortunately I think he may finally have met his match in this Marcus Quinnus. We can't count on him to deal with this."

"So what do we do?" Tiellan asked.

"For now nothing. We hold our positions. This could just be a trap to lure us out into the open." Orcan replied before he turned to look at the warrior who had brought the news, "Spread the word, keep an eye out for human troops but under no circumstances is anyone to pursue them."

"Yes your highness." the warrior replied with a nod and then he turned to hurry from the tent.

"So that's your big plan? Just have everyone sit tight and wait while this vampire and his human lackeys attack at will?" Vendril asked.

"That vampire will have to retreat at sunrise captain," Orcan pointed out, "and hopefully by then Ammaril will have completed her spell."

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After leading the mutineers through the ruins to get around the Elven positions Yilven came to a stop when the library building was just a short distance away, close enough that even the humans in the group could make out some of the details in the darkness.

"Here it is, the Great Library of the Oscari." Yilven said.

"I don't see a door." Horace commented.

"No, as far as I can tell there is only one way in or out and that's on the other side." Yilven replied, "There could be hidden ways in but I haven't had the chance to check for them."

"So we'll just have to go in through the front door then." William said but Yilven shook his head and placed a hand on William's shoulder before he could move.

"Not so fast Will." he said, "There's another problem. The tribe of Ogres that lives here have set up their camp right over there." he explained and he took his hand from William's shoulder to point beside the library, "Going straight for the door means going right through them."

"Ogres are stupid. Surely you can talk your way past them?" Gromar said and Yilven smiled.

"I might be able to if I could speak their language Dwarf." he replied, "Unfortunately Princess Ammaril is the only one who does and that makes them answerable only to her."

"So what now then?" Aldbertus said.

"Now I suppose we have to find a way to break in." William said.

"Burglary isn't an honourable profession for a Dwarf." Gromar commented, "On the other hand the place does seem to have quite a lot of windows and glass breaks."

"It also makes noise that would give us away." Yilven pointed out, "If we can't find one that is unlocked then I'd suggest that we try to pry one of them open instead."

Everard and his men heard the sound of screaming from close by as another fireball struck a ruin being used for shelter by the Elves.

"Stop here and prepare to attack." he told his men and they quickly positioned themselves to shoot towards the flames they could see burning.

Just as Everard had expected he saw several figures rush towards the flames as some of the nearby Elves attempted to rescue any survivors from the burning ruin but as soon as he saw them Everard signalled to his men to shoot. In response to this the Elves simply took cover, disappearing into the shadows rather than trying to fight back.

"Do you think that they know what we're trying to do?" one of Everard's men asked, frustrated that after their first attempt to provoke the Elves into pursuing them they had failed to get any response at all. Instead the Elves did their best to remain hidden.

"Possibly, but we have to keep trying." Everard replied before another of his men tapped him to attract his attention.

"Look over there. I can see a light." he said and when Everard turned his head he saw that another ruined building about a hundred yards away was indeed showing a light. This did not look like the aftermath of the fireball strikes that the mercenaries had seen though, instead it looked like the light was coming from a much smaller flame.

"Ogres." he said, smiling, "The magister said that there were Ogres here as well as Elves."

"Should we fall back? There aren't enough of us to fight Ogres." one of his men said but Everard shook his head.

"No, this could be our chance." he said, "The Elves may be disciplined enough to follow orders to stay where they are when they're attacked but Ogres aren't known for that."

"We're going to try and provoke Ogres?" another mercenary commented.

"Yes, that's exactly what we're going to do." Everard replied, "Now move."

The mercenaries moved towards the building that was showing a light and as they got closer they saw large figures moving about inside. At this point Everard signalled for them to stop and they quickly took up positions from where they could target the Ogres. In addition to the fire they had lit illuminated their position, the Ogres' larger size made them easier to target than the Elves and this time when the first group of mercenaries fired their crossbows they scored several hits. None of these were enough to bring down any of the Ogres but the impact of the bolts still made them roar in pain and anger and all of them inside the ruin came rushing out with torches in their hands to try and find whoever was shooting at them. As soon as they emerged from the building the second half of the mercenaries fired their crossbows and again they scored a number of hits, this time downing one of the Ogres as the others roared.

"Now! Fall back." Everard ordered when he saw one of the Ogres point towards them and as the mercenaries started to withdraw the Ogres charged after them.

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Yilven signalled for the rest of the group to stop as they crept closer to the library when he saw several Elves moving close by. The Elves were all crewmen from Vendril's ships and they were working in pairs to move barrels that were labelled as containing wine. From where he stood Yilven could see that these barrels all appeared to still be sealed which meant that they still contained the wine they were labelled as holding

"What is it?" William asked and Yilven frowned.

"They're moving wine." he replied.

"Wine? Who would be moving wine at a time like this?" Lucia asked.

"Someone who was stealing it and wanted to avoid being found out." Aldbertus suggested.

"Just like we're using all the commotion to avoid being seen?" Horace added and Aldbertus nodded.

"Exactly." he said.

"Well if they're stealing it then I'd say that they're heading in the wrong direction." Gromar commented,

"They're heading towards the library. Isn't that the place that everyone is so keen to get their hands on?"

"Yes it is. The wine must be for another purpose." Yilven answered.

"Part of that spell your princess is working on maybe?" William said.

"If she wanted everyone to drink whatever she's making then she could mix it with wine I suppose, though I'm not a sorcerer." Yilven said.

"If they're getting ready to start dishing it out then she must be nearly done. We need to find a way into that library quickly." William said.

Ammaril watched as the four wine barrels were lined up in front of her and one by one the tops of them were removed.

"The wine you requested your highness." one of the sailors said.

"What's this for? Are we celebrating something?" Trollog asked.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Ammaril replied, "We are celebrating the power that you are about to receive."

Ammaril then carried the pan containing the potion she had mixed to the first of the barrels. Now that the potion had been charged by the magical energy bound within the standing stone it was emitting a pale blue glow and when she tipped some of the potion into the open wine barrel she watched as it spread out within the wine. The magical liquid bonded with the wine and in just a few seconds the pale blue streaks vanished, replaced by a soft red glow coming from the wine itself and once this happened Ammaril moved on to the second barrel to repeat the process.

It did not take long for enough of the potion to be mixed into all four wine barrels that they were all glowing with magical energy and Ammaril turned to the sailors.

"Did you bring the meat as well?" she asked.

"Yes your highness." one of the sailors answered and he stepped forwards with a paper packet that he opened to reveal the raw meat that was contained inside it. Ammaril then gently poured a small quantity of the remaining potion over this and it began to glow with magical energy as well.

"Now take the meat to my cousin Tiellan. Tell him that it is to be fed to the dragons. Also tell him that he should remove their collars, they may disrupt the magic." Ammaril told the sailor holding the meat.

"Yes your highness." he said again before he turned and hurried away, heading towards the command tent where he knew that the expedition leaders waited. Meanwhile Ammaril turned towards Trollog.

"Now mighty Trollog you and your men may become the first to drink." she said and she picked up a nearby goblet that she had kept at hand just for this moment, dipping it into the closest barrel and then holding it out towards the Ogre chieftain.

Trollog walked forwards and took the goblet without hesitation and looked at the contents.

"What will this do?" he said.

"I have already told you. It will make you the most powerful Ogre in the world." Ammaril answered and Trollog immediately lifted the goblet to his mouth and gulped down the contents in one go. Then he snarled and tossed the goblet back to Ammaril.

"It has done nothing! You lied!" he yelled and the other Ogres behind him all raised their weapons.

"Mighty Trollog the potion does not act immediately. Your body needs time to absorb it. Then you'll feel the power flow through you, I promise. Now your men need to drink as well." Ammaril said.

"How long?" Trollog said.

"Not long, before morning but your men need to drink as well. Everyone does." Ammaril said and she crouched down to pick up the goblet before refilling it.

"Drink." Trollog ordered the other Ogres and one by one each of them downed a goblet of the magically energised wine.



## The Eternal Library

After the Ogres had each drunk some of the wine Ammaril turned her attention to the Elven sailors still standing close by.

"Now all of you." she told them, "Each of you must drink a goblet of wine and after that it must be distributed to all of the others."

Everard and his small force of mercenaries ran as fast as they could in the darkness back towards the rest of the force. The light cast by the bonfire that Marcus was drawing on for his magical attacks against the Elves guided them towards him and as soon as they saw the flame themselves with the vampire standing behind them Everard called out to him.

"Magister!" he shouted, "There are Ogres behind us!"

"This way, quickly," Marcus responded, "and when I tell you to get down do it immediately."

The mercenaries continued to run along the ruined road towards the bonfire while Marcus watched. He was not as interested in the mercenaries as he was in what was behind them though and he waited until the large forms of the Ogres came into view before he acted.

"Now! Get down!" he shouted as without waiting for the mercenaries to take cover he suddenly thrust his arms forwards.

Instead of a column of flame rising up from the bonfire to form a fireball this gesture created a flat sheet of fire that shot down the road about three feet above the ground. Reacting to the order to get down Everard and all of his men threw themselves to the ground immediately and the flames rushed right over their heads without harming them. On the other hand the charging Ogres right behind them were struck head on and completely enveloped by the flames. All of the Ogres screamed in pain as they burned and thrashed about wildly for a few seconds before they collapsed to the ground.

"Are they all that followed you?" Marcus asked as Everard and his men walked towards him.

"Yes magister." Everard responded, "We tried luring out the Elves but they wouldn't follow. The best we could do was shoot a handful in our first attempt but after that they didn't reveal themselves when we fired at them or when some responded to your fireballs."

"Then my attacks are having an effect?" Marcus asked.

"The Elves have taken cover magister. We didn't see many of them." Everard replied.

"They are waiting for daylight again." Marcus said, "They will remain hidden until they think that I will have my actions impeded by my need to seek shelter."

"So what do we do?" Everard asked.

"We let them do just that." Marcus answered, "They will have to come here and we will use that to our advantage. Mister Gerrard has already identified locations from where this spot can be targeted and you will deploy to them. The Elves will learn that daylight is not enough to save them."

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The last hundred yards or so to the library were critical. There were groups of Elves and Ogres in many of the nearby buildings that would need to be avoided and the mutineers studied this ground carefully to avoid all of them, knowing that they would probably have just one chance at getting to the library. The route that was required was not a direct one though, heading straight towards the building would require crossing ground that would be in full view of some of the nearby Elves so instead they had to make their way from one ruined building to another until they could get into a position where they could make one final rush to the library without being seen. However, when they were almost in position to make this last rush Yilven signalled to them.

"Down!" he hissed, "Elves coming this way."

The mutineers all ducked, taking cover within the ruined building they were currently in.

"Do you think they've seen us?" William asked but Yilven shook his head,

"No, they're some of the sailors we saw earlier with the barrels of wine." he said. Then when he saw the sailors take the barrel to one of the buildings he knew was occupied by a group of Elves he added, "I think they're distributing it."

"Then we're too late." Horace said.

"Not if we destroy as much of whatever was made as possible." William said.

"If we attack them we risk giving ourselves away." Yilven pointed out.

"I don't think we have a choice." William said.

"Will's right. We have to attack." Gromar added.

"What if we split up? Some of us deal with that barrel and the rest of us just go straight for the library?"

Aldbertus suggested.

"It could work." Yilven replied and he undid his cloak from around his neck, "Lucia we'll need your cloak as well."

"Of course. What for?" Lucia said as she undid her cloak as well.

"I think he means to disguise us. Me and Aldbertus." William said and Yilven nodded.

"Exactly. Our cloaks have an Elven weave. It should let us get close before anyone notices that you two are only human." he said as he handed his cloak to William.

"Only?" Aldbertus commented but Yilven ignored him.

"You'll have to leave your crossbows behind though. No Elf carries such a weapon." he said.

"This is a little short on me." Aldbertus said as he wrapped Lucia's cloak around him.

"It will have to do. Just remember to keep the hood up and don't look anyone directly in the face or they'll realise that you're not who you're pretending to be. I'll do all the talking." Yilven said.

"Probably best if you do. I don't know much Elven." William replied.

"And I don't know any." Aldbertus added.

The two men passed their crossbows and ammunition to Gromar and Horace.

"You just go for the library. We'll join you later." William said to them and Gromar nodded.

"We'll be waiting." he replied.

With William and Aldbertus following close behind him Yilven walked out of the ruined building and headed towards the two sailors. As he got closer to them he recognised them as members of the Torsol's crew that he had seen regularly on the journey from Syldarin. The two sailors looked towards Yilven as he and the two crudely disguised humans came towards them and they came to a stop.

"Yilven?" one of them said and Yilven nodded.

"Yes." he replied simply.

"We thought you were dead. You were supposed to have returned before nightfall." the sailor told him.

"As you can see I'm quite alive." Yilven said and then he looked at the barrel, "What are you doing with that?" he asked.

"Orders from Princess Ammaril. Everyone is to get a drink." the sailor answered, "She has enchanted it. If you haven't had any yet then you need to."

"Enchanted? What does it do?" Yilven said and the second Elf sailor snorted.

"Nothing." he replied, "We've given this to dozens of warriors and not one of them has reacted in any way. Apart from complaining about the taste."

"Here, I'll get you a cup." the first sailor added and he lifted the top of the barrel to reveal the glowing drink inside. Having already distributed it to many other Elves there was less than a third left and the sailor had to reach far down to dip a cup into what remained. While this sailor was distracted Yilven suddenly punched the

other in the face as hard as he could, striking his nose and breaking it. The injured sailor screamed as he staggered backwards with his hands covering his bloody face and the other dropped his cup as he stood up straight and look in amazement at Yilven, "What-" he began as Yilven drew his sword. As soon as they saw this William and Aldbertus also drew their own weapons and the sailor realised that neither of them were Elves, "Humans!" he had time to exclaim before Yilven stabbed him, thrusting his sword all the way through his chest.

William then stepped forwards and swung his sword at the barrel, smashing it open and letting the contents spill out over the ground.

"It was nearly empty." Aldbertus said when he saw how much wine came out of the barrel but before Yilven could respond several Elves emerged from the building that the sailors had just left and they immediately saw Yilven standing over the body of the dead sailor.

"I think they know that we did that." William said before the Elf warriors charged towards them.

"Fall back." Yilven said as he saw that they were facing more than twice their own number, "We can't fight them all."

"What about the potion?" Aldbertus asked as they turned and ran, the Elf warriors in pursuit.

"The sailors told me it didn't do anything. Princess Ammaril mustn't have finished her spell yet. If we can get to her before she can then maybe we can stop her." Yilven responded.

"Great. First though we need to get away from these Elves." William responded before he heard the sound of someone right behind him and he turned just in time to be able to parry a blow from an Elf's sword.

Yilven quickly intervened to run the Elf through with his sword while Aldbertus dodged a blow from another by throwing himself to the ground. However, he then found himself on the ground looking up at an Elf warrior who was poised to strike again. Before the Elf could bring his sword down on Aldbertus though a crossbow bolt suddenly hit him in the side of his throat and he dropped his weapon as he clutched at it, choking in his own blood.

This shot was followed by a second crossbow bolt that hit another Elf warrior in his shoulder and looking towards the source of the attack the remaining warriors saw Gromar and Horace. Gromar had now dropped his crossbow and was advancing towards them while brandishing his warhammer while Horace was instead trying to reload his crossbow for another shot.

This momentary distraction was all that Yilven needed to strike down another of the warriors while William helped Aldbertus back to his feet and the three stood side by side to face the other Elf warriors. It was then that Gromar let out a roar and charged at the Elves with his warhammer held high. The Elves braced themselves to face either Gromar's charge or any attack from the other three mutineers. One of them leapt forwards as Gromar neared them, hoping to steal the initiative and strike the first blow. However, the Dwarf was prepared for this and he swung his warhammer ahead of him, sending the Elf's sword flying from his grip while the warrior winced and recoiled in pain moments before Gromar swung his warhammer back in the other direction and smashed it into the Elf's ribcage.

Seeing yet another of their comrades fall the surviving Elves began to back away, holding their shields up in front of them to form a barrier against further crossbow attacks even though Horace was still struggling with his weapon. Then all of a sudden the Elves turned and ran

"Do we follow?" Aldbertus asked.

"Of course we do." Gromar responded as he watched the fleeing Elves.

"No, we don't have time. We need to destroy the library." William pointed out.

"Why didn't you follow the plan?" Yilven asked, "You were supposed to get into the library while we dealt with the barrel. Now Prince Orcan will be alerted and you've achieved nothing."

"It was my fault Yilven." Lucia said, "I heard one of the sailors call out a warning and was afraid that it would bring more Elves than you could fight."

"Never mind who's to blame for now. We need to get into the library." William said, "We can worry about fighting our way clear once we've started the fire going."

Orcan, Tiellan and Vendril all looked at the goblets in their hands that Ammaril had filled with her potion.

"So this is it?" Tiellan asked, "This has been distributed to everyone? It's the same as what was in the meat given to my dragons?"

"Yes, exactly the same. The only difference is that this has been mixed with wine. It won't make any difference to the effect though and you three are the last." Ammaril replied, nodding, "Now drink it."

"Here goes then." Orcan said and he gulped down the drink as quickly as he could before glaring at his twin and adding, "I doubt it was a particularly fine vintage before but you potion did nothing to enhance the flavour."

"You try finding enough good wine to supply the crew of five ships at a reasonable price." Vendril commented before he too began to drink and Ammaril looked at Tiellan.

"That just leaves you Tiellan." she told her cousin.

Tiellan first looked at Orcan and Vendril for any indication of what drinking the potion might be but since neither of them were displaying any ill effects he raised the goblet towards Ammaril.

"To your good health cousin." he said before he drank the contents as well and Ammaril smiled.

"And yours too Tiellan. Very good health indeed." she said before an Elf warrior burst into the tent.

"Your highness!" he exclaimed, "It's Yilven, he's betrayed us!"

"Yilven a traitor? Impossible!" Ammaril snapped back at him.

"Explain yourself. Yilven has served my family loyally since before we were born." Orcan added, staring at the warrior.

"It's true your highness, I swear it." the warrior said, "He was accompanied by two humans and he attacked us."

Orcan then turned to Ammaril.

"Could he have been corrupted by the vampire?" he asked.

"All the information that I've come across suggests that the process of enthralling someone takes a prolonged period of time. If Marcus Quinnus is able to cut the time to just a few hours then his powers are great indeed. Especially if he can corrupt someone as strong willed as Yilven."

"That's all very well, but what do you intend to do about him?" Vendril said.

"I'll deal with him." Tiellan said sternly.

"No Tiellan, I'll do it." Orcan told him, "Yilven served our household for decades, I'm the one that he answers to and I'm the one who will deal with him now." then he turned to the warrior who had brought the news and added, "Where is he?"

"Near the library your highness." the warrior told him.

"Orcan we have to protect the library at all costs. There is still a lifetime of knowledge to be gained from studying it." Ammaril said before there was the sound of a fireball striking the ground close by.

"We also need to do something about that." Vendril commented.

"First Yilven." Orcan said and he started towards the exit from the tent.

"Orcan I'm coming too." Ammaril said as he walked past her.

"No, I can't risk you." he replied.

"Orcan I have to go. There is one last thing to be done to complete my spell and I need the standing stone for that. At least if I go now I'll have you to protect me." she pointed out and he nodded.

"Very well, come with me." he said.

It did not take long for the mutineers to find a window that was located low enough for them to be able to reach it but the presence of a nearby group of Elf sailors made them take cover and watch for a while, wanting to make sure that they would not be seen before they had the chance to get inside.

"What if they don't move?" Horace asked.

"There are about half a dozen of them. We might be able to overpower them." Yilven said, "Though if they know that I'm helping you then I won't be able to just walk right up to them and take them by surprise."

"How would they know?" Lucia said, "Everyone seems to be hiding from those fireballs."

"Lucia makes a good point." William added, "If you just walk up to them then maybe you could tell them that they're wanted somewhere else. Then we can break into the library before they find out."

Yilven nodded.

"I'll give it a go." he replied and then he returned his sword to its scabbard before he calmly left the ruin they were sheltering in and headed for the one occupied by the group of sailors.

Like most of the other Elves this group of sailors had abandoned their tent while the camp was under attack by magical fire. None of them wanted to die trapped in a burning fabric shelter so they instead opted for what they considered the relative safety of the open air. Outside they could more easily evacuate the ruined building they were sheltering in if it was struck by a fireball than they could escape a tent. Being outside also gave them more awareness of their surroundings and they soon noticed Yilven walking towards them. At first the sailors grabbed weapons, unsure of who it was that was coming towards them but they relaxed when they saw that it was an Elf.

"What are you doing wandering around?" the most senior of the sailors called out to Yilven, not knowing exactly who he was.

"Looking for you." Yilven replied, "Captain Vendril wants you to head back to your ship and gather more provisions. Food and fresh water. We're expecting a human assault soon and we need as many supplies as possible. We can't afford to run short."

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"Of course." the senior sailor said, beckoning for the others to accompany him before they all emerged from the ruin and hurried towards the harbour where the Elven ships were docked. Yilven watched as the sailors ran off into the night before he turned and waved the other mutineers towards him.

"Well done." William said, smiling as he rushed up to Yilven.

"It was a good idea." Yilven replied.

"If we can stop congratulating ourselves, how about we find a way into this library?" Gromar commented.

Orcan and Ammaril were accompanied by a small detachment of warriors as they made their way to the library. This included the warrior who had brought the news of Yilven's betrayal to guide them to where the scout had last been seen. When the entrance to the building came into sight the standing stone was still in place outside and Ammaril rushed up to it.

"Has it been damaged?" Orcan asked.

"What?" Ammaril commented before she registered what her brother had said, "No, I don't think that Yilven could do anything to it anyway. Marcus Quinnus could perhaps drain the power it contains but even that would take time."

"I'll leave two men with you while I find Yilven and his new friends." Orcan said before he saw several figures heading towards them. The direction they were heading in gave the impression that they had decided to flee but Orcan needed to be certain, "What are they doing?" he added to himself before he called out to them,

"You there! Where are you going?"

"We were ordered to collect supplies your highness." the senior sailor answered and Orcan frowned.

"Who gave that order?" he asked.

"We were told that it was Captain Vendril." the sailor told him.

"Vendril gave no such order. I've just come from there he is. Who told you that he did?" Orcan said and the sailor looked confused.

"It was your scout your highness. Is Yilven his name?" the sailor said and Orcan scowled.

"Yilven has been corrupted by the enemy. If he wanted you to leave where you were then he must want something that is there. Where were you?" he said and the lead sailor pointed back towards the building that his group had been sheltering in.

"That way your highness. At the far end of the library." he said.

"Remain here with Princess Ammaril." Orcan told the sailors, "We will deal with Yilven."

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The window that the mutineers selected as an entry point to the library was about five feet above the ground and this still put it beyond easy reach for Gromar and Horace. Therefore, while Yilven kept watch William, Aldbertus and Lucia attempted to get through it. They had few tools available to them so they had to resort to using knives to try and pry the window open, however the window remained stuck fast.

"Are you sure that this window is even supposed to open?" Lucia said, "I mean I know that the frame looks like it should but maybe it's been nailed shut on the inside."

"I've had enough of this. There's no-one around to hear, just let me at it." Gromar said and he strode towards the window with his warhammer in his hands.

"We may as well." Aldbertus said and the three humans all stepped aside to let Gromar through.

Lifting his warhammer Gromar then swung it at the window, striking it almost dead centre. However, whereas the blow ought to have shattered the glass into hundreds of pieces there was instead a flash of light and Gromar made a surprised grunt as the motion of his warhammer was brought to a sudden halt and the force of the impact instead reflected back at him, causing him to drop his weapon to the ground.

"What happened?" Horace exclaimed when he saw this.

"There's no glass in the world that could have resisted that." Gromar said as he flexed his fingers, "The Oscari must have placed some sort of enchantment on the building. The windows at least."

"If we can't break a window then how are we supposed to get inside?" Lucia asked but before anyone could answer Yilven saw a group of Elves heading towards them.

"We've got company," he said and the mutineers all drew what weapons they had and turned to face the approaching group, "Orcan." Yilven then added when he realised that the group was led by the prince himself.

"What?" William said as he turned to face the approaching Elves as well, however for the time being they appeared to him as nothing more than vague shapes in the darkness.

"He means his leader Will." Gromar added. Unlike the humans with their limited night vision he was also able to see the approaching Elves clearly.

"I know that, but what's he doing here now?" William said but before either Yilven or Gromar could respond Orcan called out in Elvish.

"Yilven I didn't want to believe that you could turn on us but now I see that it's true." he said before he glanced at Lucia and added, "And the cabin girl too. Well I suppose at least she's human anyway. Why have you done this Yilven?"

"Do you know what your sister is meddling with Orcan?" Yilven responded, "Blood magic. Did you know that?"

"Are we back to this again Yilven? Ammaril knows what she is doing. Thanks to the library we recovered from the vampire we destroyed and now the Great Library of the Oscari themselves she is the most powerful spellcaster in the world." Orcan responded.

"If she knew what she was doing then she wouldn't be carrying out blood rituals Orcan, any magic user can tell you that they corrupt the soul. She has to be stopped." Yilven said and Orcan frowned.

"So it is treason then. I still held out hope that you might be under some sort of spell yourself. Why else would you be working with these humans, a Dwarf and a Halfling?" he said and Yilven nodded.

"Yes your highness, I'm doing what I want of my own free will and I'm doing it for the same reason as these others are. We don't think that Princess Ammaril or Magister Marcus Quinnus can be trusted with what's in this library and if we have to destroy it to keep it away from them both then that's what we'll do." he replied.

"Then it's about time I put an end to your treason." Orcan said and he suddenly raised his sword and charged towards the mutineers, heading for Yilven in particular. In response Yilven rushed towards Orcan with his own sword in his hand and the two Elves swung their weapons at one another, the blades colliding between them.

Moments after Orcan charged the other Elf warriors also broke into a run and William, Aldbertus and Gromar also rushed to support Yilven while Horace and Lucia stayed back, both holding knives in their hands but unsure of what to do. Gromar roared as he ran and he swung his warhammer the moment he judged the Elves to be within reach. The powerful swing struck two of the warriors and both were hurled sideways by the impact. Meanwhile William was able to leap aside just in time to avoid being run through by another of the warriors and instead the Elf stumbled as he realised that he had misjudged his attack. William was too close and had too little time to be able to bring the blade of his sword around to counter attack so instead he just

used the pommel to strike the side of the Elf's head, knocking his helmet off in the process and the Elf dropped his sword and shield as he staggered away, dazed by the blow.

While William had dodged the attack aimed at him Aldbertus parried the sword that came towards him and he and his Elf opponent glared at one another while their blades were locked together and they hid behind their shields. However, there were more Elf warriors close by and Aldbertus suddenly heard Horace call out a warning.

"Aldbertus! To your left!" the Halfling shouted but the warning came too late and as Aldbertus looked to his left another Elf warrior stabbed him through his stomach, "No!" Horace exclaimed and without thinking he charged towards the Elves as well, brandishing his knife.

"Aldbertus!" Lucia exclaimed when she saw the Hadarian sailor fall and she started to move towards him. "Stay back girl!" Gromar shouted as he took another swing of his warhammer at an Elf warrior who leapt aside at the last moment to avoid it.

The Elves did not consider a Halfling much of a threat though and they instead focused their attention on William and Gromar, leaving Orcan to deal with Yilven himself. There were still five warriors remaining and this left William and Gromar outnumbered, forcing them to concentrate more on dodging blows aimed at them rather than making attacks of their own. William made extensive use of his shield to block one attack after another while Gromar swung his hammer at any Elf who approached him to prevent them from getting into position to strike at him while he backed away from them.

Horace did not charge headlong into the group of Elf warriors though, instead he headed for where Yilven and Orcan continued to duel one another, hoping to be able to attack Orcan while his attention was focused on Yilven instead. Both of the duelling Elves had decades of sword fighting experience and they were familiar enough with one another's fighting styles that as soon as one of them began an attack the other recognised what they were doing and immediately moved to counter it. Thus for all the blows struck, not one had yet been landed on an opponent instead of being parried. Horace's charge upset this though and as he ran towards Orcan the Elf prince turned towards him for just a moment, taking his gaze off Yilven. Seeing this brief moment of distraction, Yilven struck as quickly as he could. His sword was not well placed to deliver a killing blow to Orcan but he was still able to strike him in his arm just below the shoulder before he could step back out of reach. Horace attempted to follow this up with his knife but before he could get within reach of Orcan the Elf kicked him in the stomach and he was thrown backwards by the force of the blow. In the brief moment that Orcan made this attack Yilven saw another opportunity to strike and he thrust his sword forwards again. Once again he was unable to deliver a killing blow but this time he struck Orcan in the thigh and he collapsed in a heap.

Ammaril placed her hand against the standing stone and focused her mind. It took some time to achieve but after a while she was able to sense the location of every Elf, Ogre and dragon that had consumed the potion that she had prepared, including the sailors still present aboard the ships that had brought them all here. Being able to sense where each of them was meant that the potion had had long enough to bond to them properly, becoming a part of their bodies and making them ready for the next and final stage of Ammaril's spell. This would require a massive amount of magical energy and that was why she had come to the standing stone again, intending once more to draw on the power that it now contained so that she could complete the final activation of the potion. Fortunately this power did not need to flow into Ammaril herself, there were physical limits to the amount of power her body could channel and even attempting to channel a fraction of what was needed would have burned her to a crisp. Instead she simply released a tiny portion of the power held by the stone, still a massive amount in itself and let it loose to find those whose bodies were now primed to receive it. The release of energy appeared as a brief pulse of green light and Ammaril gasped and staggered back, her senses overwhelmed by the magical power that she had just unleashed. Being stood close to the standing stone meant that the group Elf sailors were the first affected and all of them at first dropped to their knees and screamed in agony, their eyes glowing green from the magical power now at work within their bodies. After this they fell to the ground fully and began to convulse and their screams continued. On the other hand Ammaril, who had not consumed any of her own potion looked at the sailors and began to laugh.

Seeing their prince fall made the Elf warriors facing the mutineers change their strategy. No longer could they afford to keep driving back William and Gromar, instead protecting Orcan became their priority and all of them backed away from the pair of mutineers while still facing them so that they could not simply be cut down as they turned. Two of the warriors split off from the others though, waiting until they were out of reach of William and Gromar before they turned and ran towards Orcan before Yilven could deliver a killing blow.

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As intended this forced Yilven to face them instead of attacking Orcan again and Horace rather optimistically stood beside him with his knife in his hand.

"Stay back." Yilven told Horace before he suddenly leapt forwards to attack the two warriors but his sword blow was blocked by the Elf's shield. Yilven then stepped back again in anticipation of a counter attack but it never came.

Instead the sky was suddenly lit up by a brief flash of green light and Yilven saw the eyes of the Elf warriors glow with the same shade of green before all of them collapsed and began to scream in pain. Hearing more screams from behind them Yilven and Horace both turned to see that Orcan also appeared to have been affected by whatever had happened to the other Elf warriors.

"What's happening to them?" Lucia said as she watched in horror from where she still stood.

"It must be Ammaril's spell." Yilven responded.

"Whatever it is let's take this chance to finish them off." Gromar said, striding towards the Elf warriors and raising his warhammer.

"No!" Yilven called out, raising his hand towards the Dwarf and Gromar stopped.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Look at their eyes." Yilven replied as he stared into Orcan's eyes and saw the green light coming from within them, "There's magic inside them. Who knows what could happen if we try to interfere?"

"But what is that magic doing to them?" William said and Yilven's eyes widened.

"It's changing them. Look." he said, pointing to Orcan's face and the other mutineers gathered around to see for themselves.

Marcus was just about to unleash another fireball when he saw the flash in the sky caused by Ammaril's spell and at the same time he sensed the sheer amount of power that it had required. This made him stagger and both Alphonse and Everard moved towards him.

"Magister are you alright?" Everard asked.

"If you need to rest-" Alphonse added but Marcus held up his hand.

"I am fine." he interrupted, "Have no fear about my strength failing me. Unfortunately it appears that Princess Ammaril has just chosen to employ some of the power of the library, it was that that I sensed but I'm fine now."

"What did she do magister?" Everard said.

"I don't know but I have a feeling that we'll find out soon enough." Marcus replied as he stood up straight again and summoned another column of flame from the fire.



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Ammaril crouched beside one of the sailors to watch his transformation for herself. She could hear the cries of Elves and Ogres from multiple directions as well as the screeches of the four dragons but she ignored them while she watched the sailor. The dark colour of his skin was visibly losing its colour and becoming grey instead while clumps of his hair were starting to fall out. More significantly though was the change taking place to the shape of his face as his teeth became larger, pushing his jaw further out as well as his skull where his upper teeth were located. The most prominent of the teeth to grow were the sailor's lower canine teeth that extended well beyond the length of the others to become more like small tusks that protruded from the sailor's mouth. The physical changes to the Elves' bodies were not limited to their heads though and their muscles began to increase in size, giving them a bulkier appearance.

"Perfect." Ammaril said, smiling despite the obvious agony that the sailor she was studying was in, "Once this is over you'll be just perfect."

"I don't like this." Horace said as he watched the Elves' transformation.

"Neither do I." William added in agreement and he turned to Yilven, "What's Ammaril doing?"

"I don't know Will." Yilven replied, "She and Orcan were afraid of the growing power of you humans so they came here to try and find something that would offset that and protect the Elven nations. I thought there was something here that Ammaril could use as a weapon. I knew that she was messing with blood magic but I've no idea what this is."

"Whatever it is she's obviously completed her spell so what do we do now?" Gromar asked.

"We can't allow Ammaril to leave Oscay. If she takes this power back to Sylldarin or anywhere else she could become unstoppable." Yilven said.

"I suppose just killing her is out of the question?" Horace commented.

"I doubt we'll get near her." Yilven responded.

"So how do we make sure that she never leaves here?" William asked.

"The ships are in the harbour. We can destroy them." Yilven said.

"How?" Lucia said.

"Fire." Gromar said and he looked at the convulsing Elves with a disgusted look on his face as he saw how their bodies were changing, "Right now I don't think that any of them will be able to put the fire out."

"But that will trap us here with them as well won't it?" Lucia pointed out but William shook his head.

"There's still the Storm Chaser." he said, "The ship that brought us here. It'll be difficult but between us we should be able to just about operate her long enough to get us to at least Hadar."

"Hadar?" Lucia commented.

"Is that a problem?" William asked her.

"Lucia was sold as a slave in Hadar." Yilven told him.

"If I go back I could be sold again." Lucia added.

"Don't worry Lucia, we'll make sure that you're okay." William reassured her.

"We should move quickly. We don't know how long it will be before these unfortunates complete their transformation into whatever Ammaril is turning them into." Yilven said.

"Lead the way." William replied.

The mutineers began to hurry through the streets of the ruined city, led by Yilven in the direction of the harbour. All around them they could hear the screams of both Elves and Ogres as they underwent their grisly transformation and Lucia clamped her hands over her ears to try and keep the sound out without success. There was another sound that they heard only as they neared the building where Tiellan had been keeping his dragons, a much more animalistic shrieking sound and the mutineers came to a halt behind Yilven.

"What's that sound?" Horace said.

"Lord Tiellan brought four trained dragons with him." Yilven said, "I saw Ammaril taking blood from them during the voyage. Her spell must have been designed to affect them as well."

"But if Elves are being turned into something else then what effect will it have on dragons?" William asked.

"We should take a look." Gromar suggested, "Better to have some idea now rather than wait until the princess sends them after us."

"He's right. We need to know." William agreed.

The mutineers then moved towards the ruined building to try and see what it contained and in the darkness it was Yilven, Gromar and Horace that saw what lay within first.

"What the hell?" Gromar exclaimed as he looked at the dragons. Just as Yilven had said there were four of

the large reptiles within the ruin but they too were undergoing a transformation. Like the Elves that the mutineers had seen begin to change these dragons had lost their colour, the gold of their scales had turned a dull grey but the more significant change that they were undergoing was in their size. Originally the size of large dogs they were already twice the size of horses and they showed no sign of ceasing this growth.

"They're huge." Lucia said.

"And still growing." William added.

"Perhaps we should get going. I'd rather not be around when they finish growing." Horace said and Yilven nodded.

"Yes, I suspect that they'll be rather hungry." he said before he beckoned for the others to follow him, "Come on, the harbour isn't far now."

The mutineers hurried onwards, Horace and Lucia both looking nervously over their shoulders just in case the massive dragons were coming after her. Just as Yilven had said the harbour where the five Elven ships were docked was only a short distance away and they soon came into sight, at which point the mutineers came to a halt again.

"So now we burn them?" Gromar said.

"That's right." Yilven said as he took five arrows from his quiver, "I'll need some fabric and a light." he added.

"I have my tinder box. I'll get you a flame." Horace said as he set his bag down on the ground and began to go through it.

"We can cut some material from these cloaks." William added as he took off the Elven cloak he was still wearing and took out his knife.

While Horace started a small fire William cut five lengths of material and handed each of them to Yilven. In turn the Elf wrapped these around the arrows he intended to shoot at the five ships. Then when all five arrows were ready he held one out with the tip towards Horace.

"Light it." Yilven said and Horace smiled as he held a burning stick to the fabric and it too began to burn.

Yilven then quickly notched the arrow into his bow and drew back the string as he took aim at the nearest ship. Yilven released the burning arrow and the mutineers watched as it flew high into the air. Rather than aiming for the deck he had aimed the arrow up to where the sail was rolled up, knowing that this would catch fire more easily than the timbers of the deck and hull.

The arrow struck the rolled up sail, tearing through the outer layers before getting caught up in it and this allowed the fire to spread from the strip of cloth wrapped around the arrow to the sail.

"You hit it." Lucia said, smiling as she watched the flames spread across the sail.

"Next one." Yilven said as he held out another arrow towards Horace and the diminutive cook lit it.

Targeting the next nearest Elf ship Yilven fired this second arrow into its sail as well before moving on to the next ship. In turn he fired all five arrows into the sails of the five ships and soon all of them were burning.

"Won't the crew put the fires out?" Horace asked.

The same screaming that the mutineers had heard from the ruins on the way to the harbour could also be heard from aboard the five ships and as of yet no-one had appeared from below deck to fight the fires on any of them.

"I don't think that they're in any shape to do anything. We need to go, get back to the horses and then ride for all we're worth to the *Storm Chaser*." William told him.

The screaming from the sailors in front of Ammaril as well as all of the other Elves and Ogres in the ruins around her ceased almost in unison and for a moment all that Ammaril heard was the sound of heavy breathing from the creatures at her feet. Then one of them sat up suddenly and looked at her, baring its now enlarged teeth at her.

"Get up. All of you get up." she said and the transformed sailors all got to their feet and looked at her. This made her smile, "So you can understand me? Good." she added.

"Yes." one of the former sailors replied a much deeper voice than he had had before his transformation.

Concentrating, Ammaril could still sense the other transformed Elves and Ogres as well as the four dragons and she focused her mind on them.

"Come to me, all of you." she said out loud and she immediately sensed them all started to move, instinctively knowing which way to go to reach her.

Throughout the ruins the now transformed Elf warriors and sailors as well as the Ogres all converged on Ammaril's location and formed a mob all around her while behind them four huge dragons, each one now larger than a house stood and looked down towards her. The Ogres had also seen some growth, increasing their size by about fifty percent but the four dragons still overshadowed the rest of the gathered horde.

The facial features of every Elf and Ogre affected by the spell had been distorted beyond recognition during the process of transformation but from the way they were dressed Ammaril was able to pick out her brother

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and cousin among the crowd as well as Trollog from the totems he carried and she called out to them. "Orcan my brother, Tiellan and Trollog come closer." she said and she smiled again when they recognised their names and moved closer to her, standing in a line in front of her while the rest of the crowd watched.

The mutineers heard the screaming stop shortly after they had left the harbour and they stopped to listen.

"Is it over?" Lucia said.

"It sounds like it, yes." Yilven replied.

"The question is what are all those Elves going to do now? Never mind those dragons." William added.

"Perhaps we should just get away from here so we don't have to find out?" Horace suggested and he took another step forwards.

"Wait." Yilven told, "I hear movement."

"Take cover." William said and the mutineers hurried into a nearby empty ruin and waited as several figures walked past them. From their clothing the figures were a mix of the Elf sailors and warriors but none of them looked like Elves any longer. Now they had a brutish appearance and grey skin as well as looking bulkier and more muscular than they had been prior to the spell being cast.

"What happened to them?" Lucia said when she saw the end result of the spell.

"Blood magic. Magic that directly manipulates the body." Yilven said, "Normally it's used to kill someone. Obviously Ammaril found a new use for it."

"Look there are more of them over there." Gromar commented when he saw another group of figures near the limit of his night vision, "Looks like they're heading the same way as the first lot."

"We should follow them." William said, "If they're all going to the same place then we may be able to get some more answers about what's going on if we go there as well."

"What happened to just getting away?" Horace said nervously.

"As long as you all, stay quiet and out of sight I'll get us around them without us being caught, don't worry."

Yilven responded as he looked around to see if there were any more of the altered figures heading towards them. Then when he saw that there were none in sight he stood up, "Come on, follow me." he said.

"You are all but the first of my army and the first new intelligent species to appear on this world since the Oscari." Ammaril said loud enough that the entire crowd could hear her clearly, "The knowledge of the Oscari allowed me to transform you into what you are now, stronger and more resilient than you were before. No longer are you Elves or Ogres, you are something new entirely and I shall name you after the individuals who are the generals of this army, my brother Orcan and the mighty chieftain Trollog. From this day forth you shall bear their names instead. You shall be Orcs and you shall be Trolls, names that shall inspire both fear and dread to all who hear them. Mark my words we shall spread across this world and I will create more more of you both until we are strong enough to conquer every nation and every people. Our destiny is rule this entire world."

At this point the crowd of transformed Elves and Ogres let out a roar and Ammaril stood and looked around at her new army, watching as they waved their weapons in the air. Seeing this she could not help but be impressed at her work, unaware that they were all being watched from fairly close by.

"An army?" Gromar commented, "Yilven that princess of yours is insane."

"Did you have any idea that she was planning something like this?" William added but Yilven shook his head.

"No, none." he replied, "She was always different to people her age but that was just put down to her magical powers. Sorcerers are often somewhat eccentric after all but she never showed any signs of megalomania."

"But there are just a few hundred of them. Surely they can't conquer the entire world. Even those dragons-" Horace began.

"Those will just be the start." Gromar interrupted, "You heard what she said, she'll create more of them until her army is large enough."

"Then we have to warn people." Lucia said and William nodded.

"Yes we do, which means getting back to the *Storm Chaser* and getting away from here." he said.

"I think he means that we need to move." Gromar commented.

"Ideally without being seen." Horace added before the mutineers began to move again. Horace himself hesitated for a few moments though, staring at the four dragons that towered over the ruins around them.

Despite the burst of magical energy that had disorientated him for a few moments Marcus continued to send fireballs towards the area surrounding the Great Library, still taking care not to hit the building itself. As he watched another fireball head towards the Elf camp though something ominous appeared. Four massive shapes took to the air from close to the library and started to head towards him. These had a familiar shape

but they were far too large to be any type of dragon that Marcus had seen, at least during the centuries since he became the creature he was now.

"She can't have." he said to himself before he turned his head to look at the mercenaries behind him, some of whom had also seen the massive dark shapes in the sky and were staring at them, "Get the ballista ready!" he shouted and when the mercenaries did not respond immediately he added, "Now!"

The mercenaries then began to rush to get the ballista ready for use while Alphonse and Everard ran towards Marcus.

"Magister what's happening? What are those things?" Alphonse asked.

"Princess Ammaril has unlocked some of the power of the Great Library of the Oscari." Marcus told them, "Those things as you put it are dragons. Probably the ones that were brought along by her expedition, now transformed by the spell I sensed being cast." he continued before he unleashed another fireball. However, this time instead of aiming it towards the Elf camp Marcus sent it flying towards the dragons now heading towards him. Despite their size though the dragons were still quite agile in the air and as the fireball headed towards them they divided into two pairs, letting the fireball pass harmlessly between them.

"Magister the ballista is ready." a mercenary then called out.

"Then what are you waiting for? Shoot them." Marcus ordered and he pointed at the dragons, "Crossbows as well. Shoot everything!"

The ballista had the range to fire one of its large bolts a considerable distance but the dragons were still so far away when it was fired that the projectile fell short, starting to drop back down towards the ground well before it reached any of the beasts.

"Reload! But let them get closer." Everard ordered the crew as they frantically worked to get the weapon ready to fire once more. Meanwhile Alphonse was organising the other mercenaries into two ranks, all of them armed with their crossbows. These weapons had a much shorter range than the ballista though and given the size of the dragons Alphonse intended to have them all fire at once at a single target, hoping that the sheer number of bolts would make up for any inaccuracy or the lack of killing power against a target so large.

The dragons had covered about half the distance to the mercenaries before the crew of the ballista were able to fire another shot and they fired at the closest of them, attempting to aim for the creature's head. The bolt narrowly missed this though and instead struck the dragon where its wing joined its body where it embedded itself. The dragon let out a screech at this and suddenly began to drop from the sky, unable to stay aloft with its wing injured.

The ballista crew began to reload their weapon but Everard stopped them.

"No, there's no time." he said, "Just grab your crossbows and join the others."

The mercenaries picked up their crossbows and hurried to join their comrades. Their last shot with the ballista had proven that despite their size the dragons were not invulnerable but the crossbows that the mercenaries were armed with lacked the power of the larger weapon.

Before the mercenaries could use their crossbows though Marcus had one last card left to play and he suddenly spread his arms out wide and the bonfire in front of him, both the flames and the fuel were thrown up into the air by an invisible magical force. The cloud of burning debris was hurled straight into the path of the three remaining dragons but they were largely unconcerned by it, each changing direction slightly so that they did not hit the cloud head on. Instead the debris and flames struck their thick hides along their sides where it was no more than a brief irritation to them before they turned back towards the mercenaries.

"Open fire!" Alphonse yelled when the first dragon swooped down towards the human soldiers and they all fired their crossbows together. Most of the volley of crossbow bolts struck the dragon as it descended but not one of them was able to pierce its thick scaled hide and it flew low over the ranks of men, scooping two of them up in its claws as it did so. The two men screamed in terror as they were swiftly carried high up into the air before the dragon released them and they plummeted to their deaths below.

"Scatter!" Alphonse shouted, knowing that by remaining in a single large cluster the mercenaries were only making themselves an easy target.

"Get into the trees." Everard added, knowing that the dragons would not be able to fly through such densely wooded terrain. However, as a group of six of the mercenaries rushed back in the direction of the forest together another dragon descended towards them but rather than attacking with its teeth or claws the beast attacked while still above the height of the ruins. Opening its mouth wide the dragon took in a deep breath before it exhaled and with this release of breath came a blast of flame that enveloped all six men.

Marcus staggered again as the dragon breathed fire, sensing the magic behind it. It was obvious that no creature as big as these dragons could fly or breathe fire without some magical reasoning behind it but Marcus was still caught off guard by this. Then he saw something else in the darkness though and he realised that the dragons were not alone in their attack on his small force. Approaching from the direction of

the ruined city there was what appeared to be the Elves' entire remaining force, along with their Ogre allies. As this force came closer though Marcus saw that they did not look like Elves or Ogres, the only trace of their ancient human origins that remained was the way that they walked upright. Now their facial features were far more animalistic and as they came closer Marcus could hear them growl and hiss. Despite the magical power that Marcus wielded he knew that he could not win against such odds and he decided that the time had come to withdraw and regroup with whatever remained of his mercenaries, however as he looked around he saw that these men were now scattered and fleeing in all directions.

One of the dragons landed, cutting off several more men led by Everard as they ran back towards the forest and it turned its head towards Everard himself before bringing it down to swallow the mercenary whole, briefly throwing back its head to better get him down its throat. The presence of this dragon served to dissuade the remaining mercenaries from trying to flee out of the ruined city and instead they began to retreat into the ruined buildings themselves, hoping to find some small space where they could hide from the huge creatures. However, all this did was bring them into the path of Ammaril's advancing force.

"Elves!" Alphonse shouted when he saw the figures coming towards them out of the darkness, his eyesight insufficient to enable him to see the changes that had come over the Elves and Ogres.

The mercenaries drew their swords to face the charging horde. Some slung their unloaded crossbows before they did this but most just tossed them to the ground as they switched weapons. Despite having seen what the dragons could do to closely packed groups the mercenaries also gathered into several small groups so that they could support one another, knowing that once they were engaged in hand-to-hand combat the dragons would be unable to breathe fire on them without roasting their own troops as well.

The horde charged straight towards the mercenaries while the dragons circled overhead and roared and soon after they had grouped themselves together the human soldiers saw the true nature of what was coming at them.

"What are they?" one exclaimed.

"Does it matter?" Alphonse responded, "Just fight, your lives depend on it."

The lead units of the horde smashed into the human lines with fury, leaping at them and biting into their flesh as well as attacking with their Elven weapons. The shock of their appearance slowed the humans' reactions and about a third of them were cut down before they could even attempt to defend themselves. Alphonse and the rest of his men were more able to keep their composure though and they parried or dodged the attacks aimed at them before counter attacking. Several of them were able to wound their opponents but for most of them whereas the wounds inflicted would have incapacitated an opponent instantly the Orcs roared in a mix of anger and pain but continued to fight on.

In addition to the Orcs, the horde also included the newly created Trolls and they shoved their way through the Orcs to reach the humans, swinging massive weapons that smashed through several men at once.

"Back! Fall back!" Alphonse shouted to the few surviving mercenaries but as he turned to run the Orc that Orcan himself had become lunged at him and impaled him with his sword.

Marcus just watched as his troops were slaughtered by the horde, not wanting to risk running away just in case it attracted the attention of the dragons circling overhead. After they had finished off the mercenaries the Orcs and Trolls then headed towards him and he readied his magic, preparing to unleash a powerful blast that he hoped would panic the horde and allow him to escape.

"Halt!" a voice called out from within the horde before Marcus could unleash his spell though and the trio of dragons landed behind him, cutting off his retreat.

The horde then parted to allow Ammaril to pass through to the front where she could stand face to face with the vampire.

"Princess Ammaril I presume." Marcus said, staring directly at her, "I see that you have not undergone the same transformation that your followers have."

"No, I needed an army that would be a match for any in the world and unquestioningly loyal to me.

Unfortunately that meant limiting their intellectual capability and as much as the increased strength and resilience that my troops have gained would benefit me as well it is more important to me to be able to continue studying the library that your people left for me." Ammaril replied and Marcus snarled.

"For you?" he exclaimed, "That knowledge was meant for the Oscari."

Ammaril smiled back at the vampire.

"Magister Marcus Quinnus, you know that the Oscari themselves are gone. Something about this world meant that they could not survive here in their own bodies and I am as much their heir as you are." she said and Marcus' mouth opened in surprise, "What? Does it surprise you that I know about the Oscari's plans for survival? You represent a failure, damned to cower from the sunlight for all eternity. You may have more power than I do but with the help of the library I will rectify that deficiency."

“Not if I have anything to say about it! Pyras!” Marcus snapped and he unleashed the energy he had been storing up as a jet of fire that he directed at Ammaril. However, the Elf sorceress simply waved her hand and the flames diverted over her head into the air instead of enveloping her as Marcus had intended.

“What did you think that you could spend all night bombarding us with fire and I wouldn’t look into a means of defending myself?” Ammaril said. Then she glanced at some of the nearby Orcs and added, “Seize him.”

Before Marcus could react several members of the horde charged at him and grabbed hold of him by his arms. Despite his strength the vampire could not break their combined grip as Ammaril advanced on him with Orcan beside her, “Allow me to introduce my brother Orcan, my Orc army are named in his honour. While I have spent my life studying he has spent his leading our warriors into battle. Several years ago we even encountered another creature such as yourself.” Ammaril continued before she looked at Orcan and added, “Orcan show Marcus Quinnus what you did then.”

Orcan grinned, exposing his enlarged teeth before he walked around Marcus with his sword in his hand while the vampire turned his head as far as he could to try and see what was happening.

“What are-” he began to say before Orcan suddenly stabbed him in the back, driving the blade of his sword right through Marcus and piercing his heart.

Marcus’ eyes widened for a moment before the colour faded from his skin as he appeared to age rapidly before his body crumbled into dust and Ammaril smiled again.

“Some of his troops escaped into the forest.” she said out loud, “They will be heading for their camp. Find it and kill everyone there.”

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Yilven took the horse that Aldbertus had used and then reached down to pull Lucia up as well. "Just hold onto me." he told her. Then he looked at William and added, "Will, where is your ship?" "Several days ride. We won't be able to push the horses too hard." William replied. "Riding is still better than walking I suppose." Horace added. "What are we going to do about those mercenaries?" Gromar asked, "We're going to have to go through their camp unless you plan on us taking a detour through the woods. Those dragons probably wiped out most of them but there's still the rest of the *Storm Chaser's* crew to worry about." "We should investigate the camp. If Marcus Quinnus has been sent running back there with his tail between his legs then it's going to be pretty obvious that there isn't going to be a lot of loot to go around. We might be able to convince a few of them to come with us. The more of us there are the easier it will be to sail the ship." William replied. "I haven't been as far as the camp." Yilven said, "This time you'll have to lead the way."

Edwin emerged from his tent when he heard the commotion outside. "What's going on?" he demanded, grabbing hold of one of his crew as the man ran past him. "The Elves have turned into monsters and they have dragons the size of houses." the crewman exclaimed and Edwin frowned. "Monsters? Giant dragons? What foolishness is this?" he said. "It's the truth captain I swear. They saw everything." the crewman said and he pointed to where three mercenaries were rummaging through a supply cart and filling sacks with rations. Edwin let go of the crewman and strode towards the mercenaries. "You there!" he called out, "What do you think you're doing?" "Taking what's rightfully ours. Then we're getting out of here." one of them responded without looking at Edwin. "You are not. Until the magister-" Edwin began before one of the mercenaries suddenly turned towards him. "The magister is dead you fool!" he snapped. "Dead? How can he be dead?" Edwin said. "He ordered everyone to run when he saw the things that the Elves turned into coming towards us. We're the only ones who made it to the woods. The rest were either killed by the dragons or they were caught by whatever the Elves are now. If the magister was still alive then he'd be here too telling you to run." Edwin was about to restate his disbelief when three massive shapes appeared in the sky from beyond the forest and he gasped, raising his hand to point at them. "Wh-What-?" he stammered and the mercenaries all turned to look. "Run!" one of them yelled. The three dragons swooped over the camp and one of them unleashed a blast of flame from its mouth, incinerating a small cluster of tents and sending panicked sailors fleeing for their lives. "Captain what do we do?" a sailor exclaimed, running up to Edwin but the captain just stared at him in shock and after waiting a few seconds the sailor turned and ran off. One of the dragons swooped down low over the camp, lashing out with its clawed feet and ripping up the tents it flew over as well as slicing open a number of screaming sailors. Hearing the commotion, Diera emerged from her tent just in time to see the third dragon land in front of several fleeing sailors and almost immediately bite one in half before swallowing the half of the body that was in its mouth. "Captain Atwood! Captain Atwood!" she shouted at Edwin as she ran towards him but he was still unresponsive, "Captain!" she yelled again, grabbing him by his shoulders and shaking him as hard as she could, "Where is Magister Quinnus?" Edwin finally came back to his senses. "I don't know. Dead they said." he replied and Diera's eyes widened. "No, he can't be." she said, looking around until she saw one of the mercenaries who had escaped the slaughter of the others in the city and she ran towards him, hoping to find out more about the fate of Marcus. However, before she could reach him one of the dragons flew over him low enough to be able to pick him up in its claws and carry him up into the air before letting go of the man. The mercenary screamed in terror as he fell before being silenced when he hit the ground.

Diera looked around again just in time to see Edwin roasted by another blast of flame from one of the dragons. Everywhere she looked fleeing men were being clawed, burned or lifted into the air and it became obvious to Diera that attempting to flee would be futile so instead she looked for somewhere to hide, hoping that she would be able to escape the dragons' attention.

"Dragons." Gromar said when he saw the three giant winged creatures in the sky above the campsite just before they all turned and flew back towards the ruined city, "At least they're going the other way."

"Then we're too late. Everyone will be dead." Horace added.

"We can't know that." Lucia said.

"No we can't." William agreed, "Someone may have survived and we need to find out. If nothing else we could use the extra crew."

"We can't afford to take too long about it though." Yilven said, glancing back over his shoulder when he heard a distant yell, "The dragons may be gone but it sounds like Ammaril is sending her Orcs to make sure that the job is finished."

"Time to pick up the pace then." William replied and he dug his heels into his horse to get it to go faster.

Yilven then copied this, the horse he shared with Lucia hurrying after William.

"Hey wait!" Gromar called out as he and Horace did their best to get their horses to go faster as well, "Some of us can't go so fast on these things."

When William and Yilven galloped into the campsite they were greeted by a scene of destruction. Every tent had been ripped up, including the larger one that had been used by Marcus while small fires were still burning all around.

"It looks like those dragons were thorough." William said as he and Yilven rode slowly through the camp.

"Lord Tiellan trained them well." Yilven commented.

"If they can remember their training do you think that the Orcs and Trolls can remember what they were?"

Lucia asked.

"I wouldn't think so." Yilven answered, "It could cause problems."

"Yes, I can imagine that at least some of them would rebel against Ammaril for cursing them." William added before there was the sound of a woman's scream and when he looked around he saw Diera running at him wielding an axe.

"You! I'll kill you!" she yelled at him as she ran.

William quickly dismounted from his horse and drew his sword to meet Diera's charge and as he used his greater reach to strike before she could. However, he did not aim for Diera herself, instead he deliberately swung his sword towards the handle of the axe she held and the force of the impact knocked the weapon from her hands.

"Maybe now we can talk without-" William began as he returned his sword to its scabbard but Diera just drew the knife that Marcus had given her and lunged at him. William was able to grab Diera by the wrist, holding the tip of the blade just inches from his face but Diera did not give up, "A little help here Yilven?" William said and Yilven also climbed down from his horse. Diera ignored the Elf as he strode towards her, focusing all her effort on trying to stab William before Yilven grabbed her from behind and pulled her back. This gave William the chance to rip the knife from her grip and while Diera screamed and kicked in a vain attempt to get free of Yilven's grip he looked at the blade, "Well this is interesting. Where did you get this?"

"It was a gift from Magister Quinnus you traitor!" Diera snapped, "He's dead and you helped kill him by selling us out to the Elves."

"I had nothing to do with it." William replied.

"Why should I believe you?" Diera responded.

"Because it's the truth." Yilven said from behind her, "Will and the others never spoke with Orcan or Ammaril. I'm the only Elf that they're working with. Our only aim is to get away from this continent and warn the rest of the world about what's happening here."

"What do you mean?" Diera said.

"The Elf witch wants to rule the world and this new army of hers is how she's going to do it." Gromar told her.

"And you expect me to believe that you want to stop her?" Diera said.

"Believe it don't, it's your choice, but if you want to get out of here alive then your only real chance of doing it is to come with us." Gromar told her.

"And when we get home, what then?" Diera asked.

"Then we can go our separate ways." William answered.

"No." Diera said, "If you're going to try and stop the Elf witch's plans then I want in. I want to take that knife in your hand and put it through her heart for what she did to Magister Quinnus."

"Why was he so important to you anyway?" Horace said.



"He was my father." Diera said and the mutineers exchanged surprised glances.

"Vampires don't have children." Yilven pointed out.

"Maybe not but he was the closest thing I had. He took care of my mother and he raised me after she died. Even when I didn't have the ability to use magic that my mother did he still made sure I was looked after. That's why I'll avenge his death." Diera explained.

"Do we trust her?" Lucia said.

"I think so." William replied while still looking at Diera and Yilven let go of his grip on her, "She can ride with me." then he looked around before he looked back at Diera again, "Did anyone else survive this?" he asked her but she shook her head.

"No, everyone else was killed by those giant dragons." she said.

"So it will just be us crewing the ship." Horace commented.

"Captain Atwood left four crewmen aboard your ship to look after it while we were gone." Diera said, "Plus there are the other crewmen who joined your mutiny. The magister fed off one but the others were kept alive for later."

Gromar snorted.

"And that is the man you see as a father figure?" he said and Diera glared at him.

Before she could speak though Yilven heard the sound of voices coming from the trail that led towards the ruined city.

"We don't have any more time to discuss this. Ammaril's Orcs are almost here. It's time for us to go." he said.

"Agreed." William added as he handed Diera's knife back to her and climbed back onto his horse. Then he held out his hand to Diera, "Come on." he said.

The room that Ammaril stood in had originally been a reading room but she had had the existing furniture removed so that she could turn it into her private chambers, allowing her to live entirely within the Great Library while she continued to explore the knowledge it contained. For now it had to be furnished with the basic furnishings that had been inside her tent but she intended to have it all replaced with something more appropriate for someone of her station.

"My queen." a voice said from behind her as she watched the temporary furniture being brought into the room and she turned around. Standing in front of her was Captain Vendril in his new Orc form.

"Yes captain? Have you been able to review the damage to our ships?" she replied.

"Yes my queen. The fire spread too far while the crew were changing." Vendril told her.

"How long to repair them?" Ammaril said.

"They cannot be repaired. We can build more but it will take time." Vendril answered and Ammaril sighed.

"Oh well. Ships would be useful but there is another way for us to reach Sylldarin." she said before she saw Orcan approaching as well, "Ah Orcan, is the human camp destroyed?"

"It is. There is no-one left alive there now." he responded and Ammaril smiled.

"Then all our enemies here are dead." she said.

"Maybe not. Other than the one human that was killed outside this building I have not seen the bodies of Yilven, the cabin girl or the others they were with when I fought them. Also there were tracks of horses leading away from the camp when we got there. I think they have escaped." Orcan told her. Ammaril scowled for a moment when she heard this, knowing that Yilven was skilled enough to evade any pursuit, "Do you want me to send warriors after them?" Orcan asked.

"No, let them go. What harm can they do us now?" Ammaril answered.

Operating the *Storm Chaser* with just a dozen people was hard work but was still possible. Having taken command of the ship, William was standing watch when the shore of Oscay disappeared over the horizon.

"It looks like we've made it." Yilven said as he joined William at the rear of the ship.

"Unless those dragons can fly this far out to sea, yes." William replied, nodding in agreement.

"It wouldn't surprise me if they could get this far but there are only three of them. The chances of them finding us this far from the city are slim. Plus if Ammaril was sending them after us then I think that they'd have caught up with us long before we reached your ship. I'd say that we're safe now. Barring the usual hazards of ocean sailing anyway." Yilven said, "So Will, do you know what you're going to tell your people when we get back to Teuten?"

"Not yet Yilven, no. Armies of monsters and dragons that are only supposed to exist in children's stories aren't the sort of thing that are easy to convince people of. We may just get dismissed as madmen. What about you?" William said.

### *The Eternal Library*

“I’m not sure either. Orcan and Ammaril’s older brother may have been sceptical about their expedition but he was more concerned about them being killed than he was about Ammaril cursing her entire force. He may think that I have gone mad as well.” Yilven answered and William smiled.  
“Then let’s just hope that there are enough other madmen who believe us.” he said.