

The Fall of Syldarin

# The Fall of Syldarin

By Stephen J Dutton

# **The Fall of Syldarin**

Returning from Oscay aboard the Storm Chaser, Will Beckett and the rest of his group are faced with the task of warning people about the actions of Princess Ammaril and her future plans. However, they not only find themselves faced with doubting nobles but they soon come to realise that Ammaril is not trapped in Oscay as they had hoped.

Ammaril herself is in the process of returning to her homeland of Syldarin, not with the means for Elves to preserve their society from the continued encroachment of human but as its conqueror.

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The Elf sorceress Ammaril of Sylldarin looked at the stone cover to the ruined structure while two of her group pulled at it. Unlike the delicate appearing Elf the other creatures accompanying her had a brutish appearance, with grey skin and heavy builds. All were larger than Ammaril though most were still within the usual limits to be expected of Elves, unsurprising since these creatures that she had named 'Orcs' after her twin brother Orcan had been created by warping the bodies of the other Elves who had accompanied her on her expedition to the mysterious continent of Oscay in search of the lost knowledge of the ancient Oscari. On the other hand the two creatures now in the process of forcing their way into the ancient structure were much larger. Once members of an Ogre tribe that had lived in Oscay, Ammaril had called these creatures 'Trolls' after their chieftain, Trolllog, when she cursed them with the same body warping blood magic that she had used to transform her fellow Elves.

A grinding sound heralded the opening of the structure as the two massive Trolls finally succeeded in dislodging the stone that blocked the entrance and one of them took a step towards the hole leading inside. "No!" Ammaril shouted and both the Trolls turned to look at her, "You are not to enter, only I will go inside." "We should go with you mistress." one of the nearby Orcs said, "You brought us to protect you." Ammaril smiled back at the Orc. Although all knowledge of his life prior to being transformed from an Elf to an Orc had been stripped from his mind by the spell Ammaril had used she still remembered that he had been her cousin who had led the force of Elf troops assigned to support the expedition that she and Orcan had led.

"Ah Tiellan, looking out for me as always." she replied, "But no, none your warriors will accompany me inside. If this place is what I believe it is then entering it would place you in mortal danger."

"But if it is dangerous-" Tiellan began before Ammaril cut him off.

"Dangerous for you and your men, not for me Tiellan. All I need from you is a torch." she said before a nearby Orc handed her a burning torch and she walked towards the opening, peering into the darkness inside the structure.

Just as she had expected Ammaril saw that there was a flight of stone steps leading downwards inside the remains of the ancient Oscari building and she walked to the top of these and looked down them. The steps did not lead very far down, instead appearing to give access to a level just below ground, exactly in keeping with what Ammaril expected to find and she began to descend them. As she reached the bottom of the steps she saw that the walls of the underground chamber she arrived in were covered in writing in the ancient Oscari language but although she was able to read this she did not stop to translate any of the writing, instead she headed towards a doorway several yards ahead of the lowest step and entered the next chamber. Like the previous chamber the walls of this were covered in writing but it was not this that interested Ammaril, she had come here in search of the gemstones that she could see arranged on a carved stone pillar in the centre of the room. This had numerous small openings covering its surface and within most of them sat a small gemstone. These were more than mere gems though and Ammaril was not here to plunder the chamber for treasure, she prized what the gems were over any theoretical material wealth that they might bring and she stood and looked at the gemstones.

"Well?" she said out loud, "Are you going to acknowledge my presence or not?"

A ghostly apparition suddenly appeared in front of the stone and looked towards Ammaril.

"You should not have come here Elf. Now I shall consume you." the apparition said and it reached out towards Ammaril with its ghostly arms as it floated towards her. However, rather than flee Ammaril stood her ground instead.

"I think not. I came prepared." she replied as with one hand she slid a pendant from a pouch on her belt and held it up in front of her so that the glowing runes on the surface became visible and the apparition came to a sudden stop, recoiling away from the pendant, "You know what this is, don't you? It stores magical energy like the energy that you now consist of. Touch this and you will be destroyed."

"You are a sorceress." the apparition said and Ammaril smiled.

"Yes, I bear the gift of the Oscari and I have come here to claim the power that is mine by right." she said.

"By right?" another voice said as a second apparition materialised between Ammaril and the gemstones,

"You are nothing but a pale imitation of us."

"I don't think so. If anything you are nothing but the shadows of what you once were. Thousands of years ago you ruled the world. You shaped life into whatever form you wanted but even you couldn't prevent your own demise. Some of you tried to possess Elves and humans only to become vampires forever cursed to

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hide in the darkness while you are just wraiths, memories of what was and bound to the stones that contain what remains of your essence.” Ammaril said sternly.

“Perhaps, but at least we remember what we were mage.” the second apparition said, “You hold but a fragment of one of us passed from generation to generation and will never be able to master our full power.” “Then how did I manage to break the spell around your Great Library?” Ammaril responded, “The one that kept it frozen in time for thousands of years. Now all the knowledge contained within it is mine to apply as I wish and I have already begun. Outside this ruin you will find proof that I can shape life just as you did, the beginning of an army that will restore this world to the order unseen since the Oscari ruled it. Now though I will be the one to rule.”

“Lies! No mortal could ever undo our work. Whatever you thought you could achieve by coming here you have failed. Now you will die.” the second apparition exclaimed and it suddenly rushed towards Ammaril, holding out its arms towards her.

In response Ammaril held up her pendant again, placing it in the path of the apparition and as the spectral creature came closer to her it suddenly let out a loud screech. At the same time as it produced this sound the apparition began to lose its shape as it appeared dragged towards the pendant, the simple arcane device intended for storing magical energy for a spellcaster to call upon later drawing the energy of the wraith into it until there was nothing left and the apparition was gone. Then Ammaril turned to the other apparition that had remained motionless while the second was destroyed.

“So do I have your full attention now?” she asked.

“You’ve demonstrated that you know enough about us to be able to destroy us Elf, but you haven’t explained what it is that you need from us. If as you say you control our Great Library and have crafted an army to serve you then why come here and seek us out?” the wraith replied.

“I want you to serve me. To search the Great Library alone would take a lifetime and I cannot dedicate all my time to it. I will need guidance to find the knowledge I seek when I need it. I also need more troops for my army. At the moment it is small, just a few hundred strong and it will take time to expand it in size. Until then I need to find troops from other sources.” Ammaril said.

“And what do you offer us in return for our service Elf?” the wraith said.

“Freedom, to a certain extent at least.” Ammaril told it, “I know that your essences are bound to these stones and that the further from them you get the weaker you become. Serve me and I will have your stones moved around the world to wherever they are required. Serve me well enough and I may well allow you some say in where you are taken. Alternatively you may remain here in the dark and permanently bound to this hole in the ground. How many millennia have you waited here so far and how many more will you wait for someone to come along with a better offer?”

“Return here in one day.” the wraith said, “We will consider your offer and have an answer by then.”

“Good.” Ammaril said, “The sooner the better, I have already encountered opposition to my plans and my enemies may be gathering strength even as we speak.”

The crew of the *Storm Chaser* were all on deck as the cog entered the harbour at Teuten where the ship had set out from months earlier. Usually operated by a crew of about two dozen it had been hard work to bring the vessel back home from Oscay with fewer than half that number aboard, especially given that a significant portion were not experienced sailors. Fortunately there had been no significant storms or other events that would have pushed a crew’s ability to operate and maintain their vessel to their limits and the cog had made it safely across the ocean and evaded any patrols from the nation of Hadar that were known for attacking passing ships and the port city of Teuten in Hessenland was in sight. As soon as the ship had reached the safety of the harbour it would be natural to think that the crew’s problems would be over, however Will Beckett, the acting captain of the *Storm Chaser* now that its original captain and owner was dead had the suspicion that their problems would soon multiply.

“So Diera, do you really think that you can just take over where Marcus Quinnus left off?” he asked, looking at the woman standing close to him.

“I should be able to. He may have planned on living forever but he did tell me that he had made plans for what would happen if he was killed.” she replied and then a snort came from the stout Dwarf who stood at the tiller where his strength and endurance had proven useful on the voyage home despite his being an engineer rather than a sailor.

“Something the matter Gromar?” Will said.

“Only that I’d hardly call the magister alive in the first place. He was a damned vampire after all.” Gromar answered, “Now do you want this thing steering anywhere in particular or should I just crash it into the harbour directly ahead?”

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"I think perhaps some experienced hands should carry out the docking." a tall Elf said. Like Gromar, Yilven was not one of the Storm Chaser's original crew. Instead he had been a part of Ammaril's expedition to Oscay but had deserted when it became obvious to him that she intended more than to just seek out knowledge that would protect their homeland of Syldarin from what many Elves saw as an increasing threat from humans. Following his defection he had returned to Teuten with the others to warn the rest of the world about what was happening across the ocean in Oscay.

"Yes, a good idea. This isn't my ship after all." Will said and he beckoned for two of the few surviving sailors to come and take over from Gromar.

"That's something else that we'll need to deal with." Diera said, "I'm sure that a letter from me will help you claim the ship for yourself."

"Then all I'll need is a new crew. After what happened at Oscay I doubt that the survivors will be keen to stay on." Will said.

"Where else would I go?" the nearby Halfling cook commented and Will smiled.

"Thanks Horace. At least I can count on you." he said.

"If you don't mind I'd like to join your crew as well. I don't have anywhere to go either now that Captain Vendril is – is-" a young woman added. Despite being human, Lucia had been a cabin girl aboard one of the Elven ships and had left their expedition with Yilven before joining with Will and his small band.

"Cursed?" Gromar suggested.

"That's as good a word as any I suppose." Yilven agreed.

"Well now that he's been cursed I've nowhere to go and if I try going back to Hadar and finding my family then I could just be sold as a slave again." Lucia said.

"In that case welcome aboard." Will replied, "I'm sure that Horace can find you something to do."

"Just as long as she doesn't start thinking that she runs my kitchen." Horace said.

"What about you two?" Will added and he looked at Gromar and Yilven, "What are your plans now? Both of you seem to have picked up some useful skills during the voyage home and I know you're trustworthy."

"Us Dwarves aren't known for being a nautical people." Gromar replied, "Once we've warned your people about what happened in Oscay I'm going to take the gold I'm owed and head back home. I have plans there."

"Don't worry about your gold. There's plenty aboard in Magister Quinnus' strong boxes." Diera told him.

"You have the key?" Will asked and Diera smiled.

"No but I know how to pick a lock, even one as good as the ones the magister used. He's the one who taught me to pick locks in the first place." she answered.

"I guess that just leaves you Yilven. I think you'd make a good first mate." Will said to the Elf.

"I'm sorry but I must return home to Syldarin as well." Yilven added, "They'll need to know what happened to the expedition and I am sworn to serve the royal court."

Will shrugged.

"Oh well, the offer remains open to the pair of you." he said as the *Storm Chaser* came to a rest at the edge of the dock, "Drop anchor and deploy the boarding plank." Will called out to the crew and upon seeing a trio of men heading along the dock, two of them obviously armed he added, "Now if you could get those strong boxes open promptly Diera, the dock master is going to want paying even more quickly than Gromar here."

Before setting out for Oscay the late Marcus Quinnus had lived in a large house in Teuten. During his many centuries of existence the vampire had accumulated significant wealth and he had not been shy about flaunting it, knowing the influence that it could bring him behind the scenes. Therefore, it was to this house that the group headed after dealing with the dock master and paying off the rest of the *Storm Chaser's* crew. Here Diera told them was all the information that they would need to warn the world about the threat in Oscay. In particular there were details of prominent individuals who Marcus had gained influence over using bribery or blackmail rather than just the desire to be associated with someone so obviously wealthy and it was hoped that these individuals could be exploited to give the group the access they needed.

Rather than walk from the docks to the house, a messenger was sent on ahead to request that a carriage be sent. Given a vampire's inability to move about the city during daylight Marcus had maintained several large carriages that he could make use of and so one was quickly despatched to the docks for the group. It was only when they disembarked from the carriage outside the house that Marcus' absence was noticed by his butler who had been left to watch over the house in his absence.

"Diera, where is the magister?" the man asked as he watched the odd assortment of humans as well as a Dwarf, an Elf and a Halfling exit the carriage with its covered windows.

"He's dead Obadiah." Diera told him.

"Dead? But that's not possible. He's-" Obadiah began before he stopped and looked at the strangers who

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had arrived with Diera. Obadiah had known about Marcus' true nature but he also knew that it was not something to be spoken of freely. Humans were known to react in an extreme fashion to even the rumour of a vampire existing among them and preying on them.

"Were you going to say a vampire?" Yilven suggested, "Because take it from me they aren't unkillable."

"We need the will Obadiah." Diera added, "Then we can set about avenging his death."

"Of course." Obadiah replied, "Come with me." Obadiah led the group into the house to the room that had once served as Marcus Quinnus' office. The door to this was locked but Obadiah had a key and simply unlocked it to let them inside, "Untouched since the day you left." he said as Diera walked past him.

Given Marcus Quinnus' nature as a vampire all of the office windows were covered by thick curtains that would keep out even the slightest amount of direct sunlight and the first thing that Diera did was open these to let light into the room instead of needing to light any of the lamps that were in the room.

"So where is this will?" Gromar asked. Like Diera he had been in this room before when he had been recruited to join Marcus' expedition.

"The centre drawer of his desk." Diera replied as she walked over to the desk and opened the drawer. Inside there were numerous documents but she knew what she was looking for and it took just a few seconds for her to locate the one that she was looking for, a folded document that had been sealed with wax, "This is it." she said.

"Perhaps I should leave." Obadiah suggested.

"No, stay. I want you witness this." Diera replied and then she broke the seal to unfold the document.

"So what does it say?" Will asked.

"I doubt he left you anything Will." Horace joked.

"It's a list of how he wanted his wealth to be divided up. There are allowances for Obadiah and for Thomas as well some of the other servants." Diera said and a smile appeared on Obadiah's face when he heard this.

"Who's Thomas?" Lucia asked.

"The little weasel that worked for the magister." Will told her.

"He acted as a spy with informants throughout the city." Diera added.

"And now he's dead so I guess that his share goes to waste." Horace said.

"What about you? You said that he raised you like a daughter so what did he leave to you?" Will said and Diera smiled.

"Everything else. Just as I knew he would." she answered and then she held out the document to Obadiah,

"Do you agree?" she added and he took the document.

"Yes my lady." he responded.

"You mean that all of this is now yours?" Lucia said as she looked around in amazement. During her life she had lived in a hovel with her family and then aboard a ship after she was sold into slavery so that her family could raise the money they so desperately needed.

"Almost all of it, yes." Diera answered, "Apart from what was set aside for the servants."

"Perhaps I should go and break the news to them." Obadiah suggested.

"Yes, we have work to do." Diera said and Obadiah turned to leave the office, closing the door behind him.

"So you've got money. Now what's the plan?" Gromar said as soon as the group was alone.

"Now we carry on where the late magister left off." Will said.

"I don't understand." Yilven said.

"I mean that we write a bunch of letters to the people that he was bribing and blackmailing, either offering them money or threatening to expose their deeds unless they can get us an audience." Will said.

"An audience with who?" Lucia asked and Will smiled.

"I say we go straight to the top. How about the King of Hessenland himself?" he replied.

"King Gerald? Do you really think that he'd speak to the likes of us?" Horace said.

"Why not? The kings of Hessenland have always fought to maintain their independence from their neighbours. I don't see why old Gerald wouldn't want to stop Ammaril from taking over." Will answered.

"You're probably right Will. Though if we can get an audience then I suggest that you don't call him 'old Gerald' to his face, or even behind his back in his palace." Diera said.

"So what do we tell them in the letter?" Horace asked, "I mean if we start telling tales about magical curses turning Elves into monsters and growing dragons to the size of ships and giving them the power to breathe fire it will sound like a fairy story."

"The Halfling has a point. They could think that we're lunatics." Gromar added, nodding in agreement.

"Then we keep it vague to begin with. We just tell them that we are freshly returned from an expedition in which we encountered a plot that threatens Hessenland." Will said.

"What about him?" Gromar asked, looking at Yilven.

"What about me?" Yilven replied.

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"Put it in the letter than we have a witness from the royal court of the Elves in Syldarin." Gromar explained, "You did say that you were sworn to serve your king, didn't you? Well maybe we can make use of that."

"I'm not an ambassador." Yilven pointed out.

"And we won't say that you are but you were right there in Oscay with us and you saw what happened. By the time the royal court finds out that you're just some servant we'll already be in front of the king." Gromar said.

"What do you think Diera?" Will said.

"I don't know." she replied, "My interactions with members of the nobility were limited to distracting them long enough to drug and rob them or lure them to where Marcus needed them to be."

"Put it in then. We probably only have one chance to make this work so it needs to be good. For good measure you may as well add that another witness is a Dwarven engineer of some renown." Will told her and Gromar smiled.

"At last, the recognition that I deserve." he said.

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Thomas Cooper cowered in the tiny room that was his prison. He had witnessed the terrifying transformation of his Elven and Ogre captors into the grey-skinned monsters that they had become and feared that he would soon suffer the same fate. However, for the time being he was still being kept alive, with food being tossed into the room twice a day along with water. Thomas had lost count of the number of days he had been imprisoned when all of a sudden the door to his prison was opened and a pair of Orcs stormed in, grabbing Thomas by his arms and dragging him outside.

"No!" Thomas screamed, "Don't kill me! Have mercy!"

The Orc guards ignored Thomas' protests though, pulling him through the streets of the ruined Oscari city until they reached the one structure that remained perfectly intact. This was the Great Library of the Oscari that stored all of their knowledge and history from the time they arrived in the world to the last dying days of their empire. This building had remained intact while the rest of the city fell into ruin thanks to a powerful spell placed around it that had frozen it in time entirely. The boundary of this spell could be easily identified by looking at the ground around it where there was an area of pavement where the stone was also undamaged that abruptly ended and the stone became cracked and covered by weeds. As well as preserving the library perfectly, the spell had also made the library impossible to enter until Ammaril had been able to drain away the vast amount of power that it had taken to cast the spell. The guards proceeded to drag Thomas up the steps leading to the library and inside the building itself. This was his first time seeing the inside of the fantastic structure but his fear prevented him from paying much attention to his surroundings as he was taken into a side room where Ammaril was sat at a table and reading. Thomas had not seen Ammaril since she had cast the spell that transformed the other Elves from her expedition as well as the local Ogre tribe into the creatures they now were and he was somewhat startled to see that she was still clearly an Elf.

"The human." one of the Orc guards said as Thomas was dropped to the floor.

"Very good." Ammaril said, turning around and looking down at Thomas, "Tell me your name." she added.

"You're an Elf. You're normal." Thomas said and Ammaril glanced at one of the Orcs who immediately struck Thomas in the face, producing a cry of pain from him.

"I said tell me your name." Ammaril repeated, "I'll know if you're lying and I can always administer more of the truth potion I used the last time we spoke."

"Thomas. Thomas Cooper." Thomas answered. He remembered the potion that Ammaril had dropped into his eye when he was first brought before her and Orcan and also how unwell it had made him feel as the effects wore off. The memory of this made him think that he would be better off answering Ammaril's questions honestly whether she really could sense if he was lying or not.

"And you came here with the vampire to thwart my plans, yes?" Ammaril said.

"I work for Magister Quinnus." Thomas said.

"Your lord and master is no more and the only other survivors from his expedition have fled back across the ocean. You are alone here." Ammaril said, "Now tell me who sent you here."

"I told you, I worked for Magister Quinnus. He organised the expedition and ordered me to come with him." Thomas said.

"But how did he know that we were coming here? Is he a part of a larger effort to interfere in my plans?" Ammaril said.

"I don't even know what your plans are." Thomas responded, "When your ships arrived in Teuten the magister wanted to know what you were doing there. Teuten hardly ever sees Elf ships so five of them loaded with soldiers was obviously unusual. We kidnapped one of your soldiers and that's how the magister found out that you were coming here. Then he announced that we were going to come here as well to stop you getting your hands on this place."

"Then he is not part of a larger group? He is not in league with other vampires?" Ammaril said.

"No, in all the years that I've served him he hasn't met another vampire that I know of and he communicates with them only rarely. He'd done well for himself and didn't want to risk the consequences of getting caught because he was meeting with other vampires who weren't as good as he was at keeping his nature a secret." Thomas told Ammaril and she smiled, relieved that there were no vampires conspiring to oppose her. Unlike the world's wizards and mages who knew nothing about the source of their powers, vampires had retained some knowledge of their origins when the Oscari attempted to take on other bodies and this meant that they knew of the power that lay within the Great Library.

"And what exactly did you do for your late lord, human?" Ammaril asked next.

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"I was his eyes and ears in the city." Thomas said, "I knew which palms to cross with a few coins to get information. That's how we knew that your ships had arrived. One of the dock master's guards was working for me. It was his job to tell me about any interesting activity in the harbour. Expensive cargoes being moved or unusual people visiting the city. Like a few hundred Elves."

"So you were his spy." Ammaril said, "Now I suppose the question is what I should do with you."

"I'll do anything, just don't kill me please." Thomas pleaded.

"Don't worry Thomas Cooper, I had intended to have you killed once I had learned what I needed to know but now I think that you can be of use to me." Ammaril replied.

"Yes, yes of course. Just tell me what you want me to do." Thomas said as he cautiously got to his feet, glancing at the two Orc guards who remained close by to see whether they looked like they were about to hit him again but neither of them moved any closer to him.

"You were a spy for the vampire and I have need of a spy. Especially one who can recognise the members of your expedition that were able to escape. Humans lie to one another so often they frequently believe the truth itself to be a lie so your leaders may not believe anything that they are told about what has happened here. However, there is a small chance that someone will believe them. The risk may be small but any risk, no matter how small that someone could organise resistance to my plans is too great." Ammaril said.

"What are you saying?" Thomas asked.

"Anyone who makes it back from Oscan must be silenced Thomas Cooper. Permanently." Ammaril said.

"By silenced you mean killed." Thomas said.

"Yes, I take it that you have no problem with murder?" Ammaril responded.

"None. Not when my own life depends on it but I'm likely to need help." Thomas pointed out, "I may not be able to get them all on their own and take them by surprise."

"Didn't you just say that you knew which palms to cross with a few coins? How many coins for a death Thomas Cooper?" Ammaril said.

"It depends on who they are. I can get street urchins killed for pennies but someone more prominent will be more expensive. This could get expensive." Thomas answered.

"I will give you gold Thomas Cooper. Your comrades who fled did not have time to loot the bodies of their own dead so my Orcs have recovered everything they had on them, including their purses. In addition to this I can give you some of the gold that my own expedition brought with it. That should be more than sufficient to arrange for the deaths of a few humans, an Elf, a Dwarf and a Halfling. Assuming they all made it back across the ocean."

"An Elf?" Thomas commented. He knew all about Horace, the cook aboard the *Storm Chaser* and Gromar the engineer hired by Marcus but he did not know who the Elf could be.

"Yes, I was betrayed by one of my own people. Yilven had served my family loyally for many years before he turned on me and joined your old comrades. If anything it is most important that he dies before he can return to Syldarin. Humans may lie to one another habitually but Elves are far more trustworthy. If he is able to reach Syldarin then the royal court there will believe him." Ammaril explained.

"Obviously I'm quiet happy to kill them all for you, I don't care whether they're human, Dwarf, Halfling or Elf, but they must have a big head start on me. How quickly can your ships get me back to Teuten?" Thomas asked.

"All of our ships were destroyed, set alight and burned by my enemies." Ammaril told him.

"Well the other ships we saw when we landed aren't going to be any use to you. Most of them were only held together by the seaweed and barnacles that they were covered in. How am I supposed to reach Teuten in time to stop them from warning anyone about you if I have to wait for these things," Thomas began and he pointed at one of the Orcs, "to build us a ship first?"

"Thomas Cooper do you know where you are standing?" Ammaril said, "This is the Great Library of the Oscari, all of their knowledge is stored within these walls and I have access to it all. I don't care how much of a head start my enemies have, I will get you to Teuten within a day."

"A day?" Thomas said, unable to believe what he was hearing, "The fastest ship in the world couldn't get us to Teuten in a week, let alone a day."

"No, but we won't be using a ship Thomas Cooper. The Oscari are said to have been able to travel from one side of the world to the other as easily as you might step through that doorway and very soon I will be able to transport you back to Teuten in the same way." Ammaril replied before she looked at the Orc guards and added, "Take Thomas Cooper to get himself cleaned up and see that he is well taken care of. He has an important job to do for us."

The Orcs then started to guide Thomas back towards the doorway.

"That's better." he said to them now that they were not forcibly dragging him around but at that moment

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Ammaril spoke up again.

"He is still a prisoner though so if he tries to escape then feel free to kill him." she said.

"There, the letter is finished." Diera said and she slid the piece of paper she had been writing on across the desk where Will picked it up to read it.

"If this doesn't work then I'm not sure what will." he said.

"Does it obscure the fact that Marcus Quinnus is dead?" Gromar asked and Will nodded.

"Yes, it explains that the expedition he led to Oscay discovered something dangerous that the king needs to hear about." he said.

"I still don't get why that's so important." Lucia said.

"Because the men we're going to pass copies of this letter to will take it more seriously if they think that it's coming from him rather than us." Will explained.

"How long do you think it will take to get a reply?" Yilven added and Will looked at Diera.

"It's hard to say. In theory a rider can get from Teuten to Hessenstadt in under a day but first we need to convince as many as Marcus' contacts to send messages to the palace as possible." she said.

"And after that we wait for the king and his advisers to make a decision and send a reply. Then we need to travel there ourselves." Gromar added, "In all we may not need to convince anyone about the threat Ammaril poses, she'll arrive here with her Orc army before we get to tell anyone that can do anything about it."

"So who do we deliver the letter to?" Yilven asked.

"There are four people in Teuten that could get messages to the palace in Hessenstadt." Diera said, "They're all distant relatives of the king. Three of them are short enough on money that they can be bought and the fourth needed Marcus' help in covering up an unfortunate incident that could result in his execution if it was ever made public."

"Doesn't it make you feel good that this country is run by such upstanding people?" Will commented.

"At least Hessenland's royal family doesn't have members who went to the other end of the world to create an army of monsters." Gromar commented and he looked at Yilven, however the Elf did not respond.

"Make the copies of the letter," Will said to Diera as he returned the paper to her, "and then we'll get them to messengers as soon as we can."

Thomas was wearing the clothes of a dead man when he was next brought before Ammaril by a pair of Orc guards. The clothing he had been wearing non-stop during his captivity was too dirty for him to continue wearing, especially if he was going to be sent back to Teuten so he had been given access to the clothing recovered from the destroyed campsite of Marcus Quinnus' expedition to chose replacements. Rather than being taken to a reading room in the library this time Thomas had been taken to an Elven tent that had been set up when the Elves first arrived in the city and established their own camp. In here Ammaril was clearly preparing some sort of spell and Thomas nervously remembered the truth potion again.

"Is that how you're going to get me back to Teuten?" he asked as he looked around. As well as the small metal cauldron that Ammaril was mixing something in there were several gemstones arranged in a row on a nearby table.

"Of course not. No mere potion can transport you across the ocean." Ammaril responded, "This is just a little something to make sure that you remain focused on your task."

"Remain focused?" Thomas commented and Ammaril looked up from the cauldron and turned towards him.

"Yes. I am not a fool Thomas Cooper. I am about to send you across the world alone with a small fortune and I have no doubt that you will be tempted to simply ignore your task and keep the money for yourself. This poison will make sure that you don't betray me in that way." she said.

"Wait, poison?" Thomas said and his eyes widened.

"Yes. Now drink this." Ammaril replied and she dipped a cup into the cauldron.

"I'm not drinking poison." Thomas said and he started to back away before the Orc guards grabbed hold of him and prevented him from retreating any further while Ammaril continued to advance on him.

"Open his mouth." she said and one of the Orcs grabbed Thomas by his jaw, tilting his head back and holding his mouth open while Thomas struggled in vain to try and get free, "Don't worry Thomas Cooper, this will soon be over." Ammaril said as she lifted the cup and then began to pour the contents down Thomas' throat.

Thomas began to cough and splutter as some of the liquid poured down his throat went into his lungs rather than his stomach but fortunately Ammaril soon finished pouring out the contents of the cup and she signalled for the Orcs to release their grip on him. As soon as he was free Thomas bent over and began to cough up the liquid that he had inhaled rather than swallowed.

"What have you done to me?" he said, gasping for breath.

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"As I said it is just something to guarantee your continued loyalty to me Thomas Cooper." Ammaril replied, "The poison is harmless on its own but if it is activated then it will kill you. I'd like to say that it would kill you quickly but it won't. You'll die rather slowly and in a great deal of pain."

Thomas stared at Ammaril in horror when he heard this, placing his hands over his stomach.

"You've killed me." he said.

"The poison is harmless as long as you remain loyal Thomas Cooper. Only if you try to cheat me will it be activated." Ammaril replied as she walked across to the table where the gemstones were laid out, "Which brings me to the next part of this process, the means to trigger the poison if it is needed. Tell me Thomas Cooper, do you know what a Wraith is?"

"Yes, Magister Quinnus told us about them. They're the spirits of the dead Oscari that are trapped inside stones by a spell." Thomas began before he suddenly looked at the gemstones and his eyes widened as he made the connection and realised that each of the stones contained a Wraith, "Wait, what are you doing? Those things are killers!" he exclaimed.

"They can kill, yes and that makes them useful to me." Ammaril said as she picked up one of the gemstones and carried it towards Thomas, "Hold him still." she told the Orcs and they grabbed hold of him by the arms.

"What are you doing to me? You don't need to do this." Thomas protested but Ammaril smiled and opened the front of his shirt to expose his chest.

"Don't worry Thomas Cooper, this won't hurt for long." she said and then she drew a small knife from her belt. The blade on this was narrow and came to a sharp point and she used this to make shallow cuts in Thomas' flesh, causing him to wince. Ammaril muttered something as she made the cuts and Thomas began to feel a burning sensation around the cuts. Though not deep the cuts formed a deliberate pattern and as this progressed the blood that was coming from the wounds began to run across Thomas' skin in a way that followed this pattern rather than straight down.

All of a sudden Ammaril stopped her muttering and thrust the gemstone she held against the wounds. This produced a sizzling sound and Thomas let out a scream as he felt his flesh start to melt. However, just as Ammaril had said the pain, though strong was short lived and Ammaril stepped back and smiled.

"Release him." she commanded and the Orcs let go of Thomas' arms and Thomas staggered back, holding his shirt open and looking down at his chest where the gemstone was now embedded in his flesh.

"What is this? What have you done?" he said, looking up at Ammaril.

"You carry a Wraith with you now Thomas Cooper, if necessary it will activate the poison you have swallowed. I suppose you're wondering why I bothered with the poison when the Wraith could just drain your life away? Unfortunately the Wraith cannot attack you in this way while its vessel is a part of your flesh. It would be like you eating your own flesh. However, it is quite capable of bringing your life to an end with the poison without harming itself." she explained.

"But you can't just leave me with this thing in my chest." Thomas said.

"Yes I can Thomas Cooper and you should be grateful for it." Ammaril replied.

"Grateful? Grateful for what?" Thomas said.

"The Wraith will do more than just execute you should you try to betray me Thomas Cooper, if you are attacked then it will defend you and it will allow you to travel from here back to Teuten in an instant, making up for the head start that our enemies have on us." Ammaril answered.

"How?" Thomas asked, his fingers, rubbing the gemstone embedded in his chest.

"Come with me Thomas Cooper and I will show you. It is time that you returned home." Ammaril replied.

Along with several Orcs, Ammaril and Thomas rode on horseback from the ruined city of the Oscari to a place that Thomas had already been. Just outside the city there was a circle of standing stones that were as ancient as the city itself. One of these had been removed under the orders of Ammaril so that she could use it to break the spell that had frozen the Great Library in time but the rest of the stones remained exactly where they had been since the circle was first created.

"So this bunch of stones will let me get back to Teuten?" Thomas asked.

"Exactly." Ammaril responded.

"How?" Thomas added.

"Do you know what ley lines are Thomas Cooper?" Ammaril said and Thomas frowned.

"I've heard of them. It's wizard stuff though." Thomas replied.

"Ley lines carry energy across the world and that energy can be used to transport a person or an object thousands of miles as quickly as lightning strikes the ground in a thunderstorm. The Oscari knew this and constructed a network of stones such as this to take advantage of them. Each circle is built where two or more ley lines intersect and functions as a doorway. Once we open this doorway you will be drawn along the ley lines to the circle closest in the world to where you wish to go. The Oscari used them to move themselves

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and their goods without the need for ships or caravans of wagons. Such mundane means of travel were only needed to travel from the nearest circle to the exact place the Oscari wanted to reach and then back again." Ammaril told him and he frowned.

"So why didn't Magister Quinnus bring us here using a stone circle?" he said, "In fact I've never heard of anyone being able to travel anywhere using a circle like this."

"Probably because the knowledge needed to open the doorway was lost to the vampires when they took on their new host bodies. As for others using the stones to travel you have said it yourself, ley lines are associated with magic and only someone with some level of magical power can use them. Have you never heard stories of people vanishing near stone circles?" Ammaril said.

"One or two, yes but they always sounded like stories meant to frighten children into not going near stone circles." Thomas replied.

"Perhaps some are just that, but I have found information that suggests that some stone circles have been accidentally activated even after the Oscari vanished from the world. Perhaps by young individuals who had yet to realise the power they possessed. Of course they did not know how to navigate the ley lines and simply arrived at some random place in the world, unable to return to where they came from." Ammaril said.

"But I don't know how to use these stones either. What's to stop me from ending up in the middle of a desert or some jungle filled with wild man-eating dragons?" Thomas said.

"I've already told you, the Wraith will guide you just like it will provide the power to open the doorway initially. All you need to do is stand in the centre of the circle and place the palm of your hand on that main stone while thinking of the place you want to go to Thomas Cooper. The Wraith within you will do the rest." Ammaril said.

"But you've removed one of the stones." Thomas pointed out, "Are you sure that this will still work?"

"It will work well enough for my purposes. Now go, once you have gone on your way I have more work to do and cannot wait here all day for you." Ammaril told him.

Thomas just looked at her for a few moments before he sighed and climbed down from his horse. Then he removed the saddlebags that were filled with money and placed them on his shoulder.

"This is stupid." He muttered to himself as he walked into the stone circle, heading for the stone at the very centre.

"I suggest you take the horse Thomas Cooper." Ammaril called out to him, "You will probably not arrive within walking distance of Teuten."

Thomas sighed again as he returned to his horse and put the saddlebags back on it. Then he took the horse by its reins and led it into the circle towards the central stone. Once there he placed his hand flat on the stone, "Now I just think of Teuten then." he added as he closed his eyes.

All of a sudden he felt a shiver run down his spine and he felt as if he was not alone and that someone was laying their own hand on top of his. His eyes promptly snapped open and he pulled his hand back from the stone, spinning around to see who else was present.

"Keep your hand on the stone." a voice said and Thomas looked around for the source only find that he was still alone in the circle. Ammaril and her Orcs had all remained outside when he had dismounted from his horse and entered the circle.

"I know it wasn't you saying that." he said to the horse that he was still holding on to.

"Just do as you are told human." The mysterious voice said again at the same time as Thomas felt a slight jolt in his chest where the gemstone that held the Wraith was embedded and he realised that it was the Wraith within him that was talking to him.

"Nobody said anything about being possessed when I agreed to this." Thomas said as he laid his hand back on the central stone but this time he kept his eyes open as he looked down at the hand as he focused his mind on thoughts of Teuten.

Once again he felt the shiver run down his spine and had the feeling that there was another hand lying on top of his but this time with his eyes open he saw the ghostly outline of another hand around his and he realised once again that this was the Wraith doing what Ammaril had said it would do, activating the stone circle to open a doorway that would let him travel along the world's ley lines.

In an instant the daylight vanished and it began to rain hard. Thomas frowned for a moment at the sudden change in light and weather, wondering if this was what it felt like to travel along a ley line. Then it occurred to him that he was no longer standing in the stone circle in Oscay. Now his hand was resting on a totally different and very wet piece of stone somewhere else. Lifting his hand from the stone he took another look around and saw that he was now alone. He was still holding the reins of the horse he had ridden and the animal itself was still beside him but there was no sign of Ammaril or her Orcs. Although he was still surrounded by standing stones arranged in a circle they were clearly not the same ones that he had been

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standing in the middle of, their shapes were slightly different and they were covered in far more moss than those in Oscan.

"It worked. It actually worked." he shouted out loud even though there was no-one around to hear him. However, he then remembered that he had no idea of where he actually was. Although he had obviously been transported away from the stone circle just outside the ruined Oscari city he could have arrived almost anywhere in the world.

In the distance Thomas could just about make out some lights that he hoped indicated a settlement where he could find out where he had arrived. Climbing back onto his horse he then began to ride towards the lights, wishing given the rain that when he had chosen new clothing from what had been made available to him he had thought to take a hat to keep his head dry.

### 3

Ammaril smiled when Thomas vanished from the stone circle.

"What are your orders now mistress?" the Orc sat on a horse right beside Ammaril asked. Before his transformation this had been Ammaril's cousin Tiellan who had commanded the warriors that had been provided by his father, Ammaril's uncle.

"Now we need to prepare to leave as well my dear cousin." Ammaril answered, "We have turned several tribes of Ogres into Trolls during the past few weeks and recruited the Wraiths to my cause but I cannot conquer the world with just them and fewer than three hundred Orcs. We need to gather more troops. It is time that we also went home Tiellan."

"Yes mistress." Tiellan said before Ammaril and the mounted Orcs turned their horses around and started to ride back into the city.

At the camp the Orcs and Trolls were already preparing for their departure. The Orcs had gathered up their weapons and were ready to march to the stone circle while the Trolls were loading a number of barrels onto crude hand carts that had been built for this purpose. Ammaril saw her transformed brother Orcan among the Orcs and when he noticed her as well he walked towards her horse.

"The potion is almost loaded mistress." he told her.

"Excellent. What about the stone?" Ammaril responded.

"That is still in the library mistress." Orcan answered.

"Well it needs to be given priority. I'll need a lot of power to cast the spell, the potion is useless without it."

Ammaril said, "Make sure that it goes on the next cart."

"Yes mistress." Orcan said and he bowed his head before he turned around and walked away, heading towards the entrance to the nearby Great Library and ordering a pair of Trolls to accompany him.

Ammaril watched from the back of her horse while the Trolls continued to load the carts with barrels containing the potion that she had prepared. This was the culmination of several years of study, beginning with examining the private library belonging to a vampire that she and her twin brother had hunted down and destroyed in their homeland of Sylldarin that in turn had led them here to the Great Library of the Oscari. With this potion she intended to increase the size of her army massively but as she had told Orcan she needed more power than she possessed to do it. Fortunately she had been able to store the magical energy used to freeze the Great Library in time in the standing stone that had been removed from the circle. Now she could use that vast amount of stored power as a source for the spells that would otherwise require more energy than any ordinary spellcaster could provide themselves.

The number of troops and carts that needed to be transported meant that it would take multiple uses of the stone circle and Ammaril could see that there were already enough carts loaded to fill the circle.

"Vendril!" she called out and another Orc who had been overseeing the organisation of the carts came rushing up to her. Prior to his transformation Vendril had been the owner of the ships that had brought the Elves to Oscay.

"Yes mistress?" he asked when he reached her.

"I want the first group of carts moving to the circle now. Assemble ten carts with enough Orcs to protect them. I will lead them through with Tiellan before I return for the next group." Ammaril told him.

"Yes mistress." Vendril responded and he began to issue orders to a number of nearby Trolls. The massive creatures headed for some of the already loaded carts and took hold of the long handles at the front, with two Trolls per cart. The Trolls then began to pull the carts towards Ammaril, forming a single line. At the same time a group of about thirty Orcs joined them. The Orcs were still armed with the swords and bows that they had been armed with prior to their transformation and wore the same chainmail coats but the changes to their bodies meant that the helmets they had worn no longer fit their heads so they had been forced to discard these and they were all bare headed.

"Let's go." Ammaril told Tiellan and they started to ride back towards the stone circle again, this time keeping their horses at a slow trot so that the force they were leading would be able to keep up with them on foot. Behind them the most senior of the Orcs yelled at the others to start moving as well and they began to follow their mounted leaders. In turn behind them the Trolls pulled the hand carts loaded with barrels.

Limited to a walking pace it took significantly longer to reach the stone circle than the ride had previously taken Ammaril and Tiellan to get there and upon reaching the circle Ammaril dismounted.

"Everyone into the circle. It doesn't matter where but everyone needs to be within the stones. The carts as well." she called out as she walked to the central stone and waited while the Orcs and Trolls followed her. There was enough room within the circle of stones for all of the Orcs, Trolls and their carts but they were

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tightly packed. Fortunately they would not need to remain in the circle for long and Ammaril placed her hand on the central stone just as she had instructed Thomas to do before she thought of a particular place in her homeland of Sylldarin.

Just as when Thomas had been transported from the circle the process of transportation was instantaneous and none of the creatures within it were even aware of being transported. Instead their surroundings were simply swapped from the stone circle in Oscay for a different circle on the island of Sylldarin, one of five lands that were home to Elves. Given the difference in time between the two places it was also dark in Sylldarin while it had been late afternoon in Oscay. Elves possessed excellent night vision and this trait had been retained by those who had become Orcs. This meant that they were able to see their surroundings in great detail despite the darkness.

This stone circle was located in a valley that was covered in long grass and there were no signs of civilisation anywhere in sight. However, Ammaril knew exactly where this circle was located and she had selected it for its location. While it was unlikely that anyone would witness their arrival she knew that there were several small settlements within a few miles of the circle that would be ideal targets for the next stage of her plan.

"Your orders?" Tiellan said, looking down at Ammaril from the back of his horse.

"There are woods just over that hill." Ammaril told him and she pointed to one side of the valley, "Take the force there and set up camp. It's important to stay out of sight for now so no fires. I need to return to Oscay for the next group. They'll join you shortly."

"Yes mistress." Tiellan replied and then he looked at the Orcs and Trolls, "Move out, that way." he told them, pointing in the direction that Ammaril had pointed.

Ammaril could not return to Oscay immediately, instead she had to wait while the Orcs and Trolls left the circle or they would have been transported back with her but the moment that the last of them was out of the circle she placed her hand on the central stone once more and thought of the stone circle in Oscay. Then in an instant she found herself back in that circle. Climbing back onto her horse she started to ride back towards the camp in the ruined city, ready to repeat the process of transporting her army to Sylldarin.

The settlement that Thomas had seen from the stone circle turned out to be a town that he guessed probably contained several hundred people. Fortunately the style of the buildings was familiar to Thomas so at the very least he knew he had arrived on the correct continent rather than the far side of the world as Ammaril had suggested was possible for people who did not know how to properly navigate their travel along the ley lines linking the stone circles to one another. As soon as he reached the settlement he searched for and found a tavern that was still open and after tying his horse to a post outside he went in to shelter from the rain and to try to find out exactly where he was. Although his entry into the building did not attract any attention he did notice people staring at him as he walked past them. It was obvious that the settlement received few visitors and as a stranger he stood out.

"What can I get you?" the barman asked when Thomas reached the bar.

"A beer." Thomas replied and the barman placed a wooden mug in front of him.

"Three pence." he said and Thomas placed six coins on the bar beside the mug.

"Do you want another?" the barman said.

"Actually I'd just like some directions." Thomas answered, "I need to get to Teuten."

"Teuten? You're pretty far out of your way. More than fifty miles." the barman said.

"Fifty miles?" Thomas responded, knowing that it could take a day to cover such a distance even on horseback.

"Start now and you could be there by nightfall tomorrow." the barman commented before he added, "Mind you, I wouldn't want to be out in that rain."

"I suppose you have rooms to rent?" Thomas said.

"Of course we do. Clean, warm and dry. One shilling and you'll get breakfast as well." the barman answered.

Thomas reached into his purse and took out several coins that he sorted through until he found a shilling coin and handed it to the barman.

"I'll take one." he said as he tipped the other coins back into the purse, though not before the barman was able to see some of the other coins that he had.

The beer and the food at the tavern were just about passable in quality but it was the first time in weeks that Thomas had had anything other than water or preserved food so they were both a welcome change to him and he gladly indulged in what the tavern had to offer before he made sure his horse was in the stable and retired to his room for the night. There were no luxuries in the room but just as the barman had promised it

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was dry, reasonably well heated and all but the most resistant of stains left behind by previous occupants had been cleaned off.

The door could be locked with a wooden bolt and Thomas used this to secure the door before he set the saddlebags filled with money down beside the bed and he lay down, ready for what he hoped would be his most comfortable night's sleep in a long time. However, his rest was soon interrupted when there was a banging at the door and he sat up in bed, reaching for the knife on his belt.

"Who is it?" he called out.

"The watch. Open the door." a stern sounding voice said from the other side of the door and Thomas looked at the saddlebags.

"Just a moment." he responded before he picked up the saddlebags and quickly hid them beneath the bed. Then he made his way over to the door and undid the bolt.

Almost immediately the door was pushed open from the other side and Thomas jumped back, narrowly avoiding being struck in the face by the door. In the corridor outside stood a pair of men dressed in almost identical green clothing and heavy cloaks that had their hoods down to reveal their faces. Just about visible from beneath their cloaks were swords that the men had their hands on and Thomas moved his hand away from his knife. The way in which the men were armed combined with fact that they were not hiding their features suggested that they were exactly what they said rather than a pair of thieves looking to rob him and Thomas smiled. He suspected that it may be necessary to offer the men a small bribe to leave him in peace but he would wait to see if that was necessary rather than immediately offering them one. Doing so would only make them suspicious of him and increase the amount he would need to pay.

"How may I help you gentlemen?" he asked as the two men entered the bedroom and looked around briefly.

"You can start by telling us who you are and what brings you to our town." one of the watchmen said, from the sound of his voice this was the same one who had ordered him to open the door.

"My name is Robert Black and I'm just passing through on my way to Teuten." Thomas said, seeing no reason to tell the watchmen the truth. It would take days at least for them to be able to verify anything he said and unless they suspected him of some serious crime they would not want the responsibility or trouble of holding him for that long.

"Just passing through? Teuten is more than fifty miles away and from what we've heard you seem to be travelling light. No luggage, just a couple of saddlebags. Where are those by the way?" the watchman asked. "I'm just a messenger." Thomas said, "I ride wherever I'm paid to go and my client has asked me to deliver a letter to his aunt in Teuten."

"So where is this letter? In the saddlebags I suppose." the watchman said.

"The letter is confidential and sealed." Thomas said.

The watchman glanced to his comrade and the second man began to walk around the room, looking more closely at possible hiding places for anything that may be concealed and it suddenly occurred to Thomas that he had not checked the room thoroughly himself to make sure that there was nothing that could have been concealed by a previous occupant and left behind. The more likely problem to arise though was that the watchman would discover the saddlebags in their simple hiding place beneath the bed and examine their contents. Having already lied to the watchmen about his purpose would make convincing them to leave all the more difficult and probably expensive.

"Don't worry about that. It's not as if I can read anyway. All I need to see is the seal on the letter." the watchman told Thomas.

Thomas now regretted not organising some sort of cover story with Ammaril before he came here. He doubted that it would have taken much effort to create a few fake letters with wax seals, the Elves also used such things to communicate with one another but he had not counted on being so far away from Teuten when he travelled through the stone circle.

"Is there some other way that we can handle this without having to go to so much trouble?" Thomas asked, deciding that the time was right to try offering a bribe to the two watchmen and both men looked at him.

"I suppose that since you're just passing through we can say that you're not causing any trouble here." the first watchman replied, "Though that just leaves the matter of exactly how much trouble we're looking to avoid."

Thomas smiled, knowing that this meant the watchmen were happy to accept a bribe. However, at that moment the second man glanced down and noticed the saddlebags beneath the bed.

"Here are the saddlebags." he said, reaching down to pick them up and the moment that he tried he felt how heavy they were, "They're heavy." he said as he picked up the saddlebags and immediately both watchmen heard the sound of coins jingling against one another within them.

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"That's a lot of money to be carrying about for someone who's just a simple messenger." the first watchman said as the second threw the saddlebags onto the bed and one of them came open, spilling out some of the contents.

Curious, the second watchman reached down and picked up one of the gold coins now lying on the bed and he frowned as he looked at it more closely.

"This is Elf gold. Just like the tavern keeper said he saw in his purse." he said when he saw the coin was stamped with an Elven design rather than human and Thomas realised why the watchmen had come to his room. The barman had clearly seen some of the gold he had and informed the watch of his presence.

"All of it?" the first watchman asked and the second began to rummage through the pile of coins. Thomas knew that there were no laws forbidding the possession of Elf currency but it was rare to see outside the Elven lands even in small quantities and here he was with a pair of saddlebags filled with their gold.

"I think so." the second watchman replied, nodding his head and the first glared at Thomas.

"Where did you get all of that then?" he said.

"A merchant in Lerron." Thomas said.

"A likely story. You're a spy for the Elves." the first watchman said and as one hand went for his sword the other reached out for Thomas' chest to push him back. However, as soon as the watchman placed his hand on Thomas' chest he felt the gemstone hidden beneath his shirt, "And what's this?" he added before ripping open Thomas' shirt to expose his chest and he gasped when he saw the scarred flesh along with the gemstone embedded in it, "Witchcraft!" he exclaimed, knowing that there was no natural way that the gemstone could have become a part of Thomas and he started to draw his sword. However, before he could get the weapon out of its scabbard a spectral arm suddenly erupted from the gemstone as the Wraith contained within it decided to act. The arm reached out for the horrified watchman and plunged into his chest. In an instant the watchman froze, his mouth and eyes wide open as the Wraith began to emerge fully from Thomas' chest. Meanwhile Thomas looked on in disgust as the watchman visibly seemed to age right in front of him, his hair becoming white and his skin tightening as the Wraith drained away his life essence into itself like a vampire feeding on a victim. In just a few moments the watchman was dead, his life essence entirely consumed by the now fully emerged Wraith and the spectral creature simply dropped the body to the floor with a 'thud' before it turned towards the second watchman who was still standing beside the bed, obviously terrified.

The second watchman came to his senses just as the Wraith began to move towards him, circling around Thomas and he drew his sword. The Wraith appeared unconcerned about this though and continued to advance on the watchman until he swung his weapon, only to witness the metal blade pass harmlessly through the non-corporeal creature. This threw the watchman off balance slightly and he staggered when the blade carried on moving through the air instead of being stopped by a solid body. In response to this fruitless attack the Wraith struck back, lunging at the watchman and extending both arms towards him to grab hold of him by his shoulders. Just as had happened when the Wraith touched the first watchman the second now began to age before Thomas' eyes until he was little more than a husk that fell to the floor.

"What did you do?" Thomas exclaimed, rushing to the still wide open doorway and closing and bolting it.

"They would have taken the gold." the Wraith responded, "At the very least they would have slowed us down."

"Well what am I supposed to do with these bodies now?" Thomas asked.

"Nothing. It is time to leave, now." the Wraith told him before its shape blurred and the ethereal creature returned to the gemstone embedded in Thomas' chest.

"Leave he tells me." Thomas said to himself as he rushed to the bed to gather up the gold that had been spilled across it, "In the middle of the night and in pouring rain." he added before he looked at the bodies of the two watchmen on the floor of the bedroom, paying special attention to the cloaks that they wore and he smiled.

Exiting the tavern required going down and through the bar where there were still more than a dozen people but Thomas disguised himself simply by taking one of the dead watchmen's cloaks and pulling the hood up over his head then he carried his saddlebags full of gold down the stairs and calmly walked through the bar towards the exit. On his way out Thomas noticed the barman smiling at him.

"So he was up to something was he?" the man called out, thinking that he was addressing one of the watchmen but Thomas made sure to say nothing in reply, knowing that it would give him away and he continued out into the rain. Unlike earlier he at least now had his stolen cloak to protect him from the weather and as soon as he was outside Thomas hurried to the tavern's stable where he quickly found his horse.

Working quickly he put the saddle back on the horse before he mounted it and rode from the stable. Just as he was riding past the entrance to the tavern he thought he heard a scream coming from inside and he

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guessed that someone had just discovered the bodies of the two watchmen on the floor of his room. He promptly dug his heels into the horse to encourage it to go faster and he galloped from the town, not knowing if he was going in the right direction or not.

## 4

Each group of Orcs and Troll transported from Oscay to Syldarin was directed to the new site where they set up their new camp. This was located beside a river that the army could use as a water source and the same tents that had been used in Oscay were now erected here. There was not enough room in the tents for the Trolls that now made up the majority of Ammaril's army so they were instead camped close by in a wooded area where they were constructing crude shelters out of sight from outside the wood. This meant that from a distance the camp appeared to be occupied by an Elven military unit. The illusion would not last if anyone came close enough see any of the Orcs or especially the Trolls so Orcan set sentries in concealed positions to watch in all directions for anyone approaching while Ammaril gathered the leaders of her army together. "When do we attack?" Trollog said as soon as the army leaders were gathered in Ammaril's tent. He was the only Troll included in this meeting while Orcan, Tiellan and Vendril represented the Orcs. Ammaril's tent was larger than most and there was just enough for Trollog to stand up inside but he had to stoop in order to get inside.

"Not yet." Ammaril replied, "Our forces are too few. The army of Syldarin would overwhelm us."

"We could bring the dragons from Oscay." Tiellan suggested. Tiellan had taken a pack of four trained greater dragons to Oscay and Ammaril's spell had also transformed them. Unlike the Elves and Ogres who had been transformed their shape had remained the dragons were still dragons but now they were the size of houses and were able to breathe fire. There were legends that such creatures had once existed, many of which suggested that they lived in Oscay and were the reason why so many expeditions to there had vanished. However, Ammaril's own expedition had not encountered any dragons of unusual size.

"The dragons would be impossible to hide." Orcan pointed out.

"Quite." Ammaril agreed, "We will bring the dragons from Oscay eventually but first I want to increase the size of our army. Let's see the map."

Vendril then unrolled a map of Syldarin and laid it out on the table that they were gathered around.

"This is where we are." he said and he pointed to a point on the map that was relatively far from the major settlements on the island. However, there were several smaller settlements within a few miles of the camp.

"I want parties sending to every settlement within five miles." Ammaril said, "Each party should consist of four Orc warriors and a Troll to carry one of the barrels of potion. They are to move under cover of darkness and locate the wells from which the settlements draw their water then empty a barrel of the potion into it."

"How will you get the blood for the spell mistress?" Tiellan asked and Ammaril smiled. Before she had cast the spell that had transformed the rest of her expedition to Oscay as well as the local Ogre tribes she had taken a small amount of blood from them all, including Tiellan's four dragons to add to the potion. However, to take blood from the more than a million Elves who lived on Syldarin individually would not be practical.

"This potion is different to the one I used in Oscay." Ammaril said, "It is still blood magic but it does not require the blood of the subject before being activated. Instead it needs the blood of what they are to become."

"The Orcs of the raiding parties." Orcan said.

"Yes. Before each barrel of potion is added to the wells the Orcs in the raiding parties all need to cut themselves and let their blood mix with the potion. Only then can it be poured into the well." Ammaril explained.

"How many additional warriors will this gain us mistress?" Orcan said.

"According to our records there are around two thousand Elves in the settlements in this area but only about a third of them are suitable for joining our army. The rest are either too old and will likely die during the transformation, too young or women. The women and those too young to fight must be found other roles to support our army as it grows. We cannot afford to waste anyone." Ammaril said, "Now go and prepare. We will rest during the day but the raiding parties must leave at sundown tomorrow."

Thomas rode his horse all night until he was finally convinced that there was no-one pursuing him and he finally took the time to rest himself and his horse by the side of the road. He had continued to follow a single road all night and still had no idea exactly where he was. However, a short time after the sun had fully risen he heard the sound of a horse-drawn vehicle approaching and he looked towards the source of the sound. He knew that trying to flag down the vehicle would probably fail, the drivers of carts and carriages would be too concerned with the possibility of an ambush by bandits to stop in the middle of nowhere so Thomas just watched as a covered cart pulled by a pair of horses moved past him, its driver ignoring him entirely. However, Thomas was able to get a good look at the driver and he saw that the man wore a jacket in the

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colours of a transport company based in Teuten, known for moving goods over long distances. The company moved goods to and from Teuten but not between other settlements so Thomas knew that this meant the road he was on had to lead to Teuten and since the position of the sun suggested that he was riding north towards the coast he guessed that he was heading in the right direction.

"Okay break's over." he said to the horse as he climbed back into the saddle, "That cart came from Teuten so I need you to start moving again."

The Tower of Sorcery stood just outside the capital city of Sylldarin provided the Elf magic users in the country with a place to live and study. Some lived elsewhere either by choice or because their studies required it but the majority of Sylldarin's spellcasters could be found here, including the supreme sorcerer Ollaris himself and it was just after breakfast that Vayran, a mid level sorcerer who had lived in the tower for just under two decades was summoned to see him. As he always did Vayran had a lesser dragon, a creature about the size of a cat, perched on his shoulder.

"You asked to see me my Lord Ollaris?" Vayran said as he was shown into the supreme sorcerer's office, a room near the top of the tower from where the city was visible from a balcony. The office was large and the floor was decorated with a chart that showed the motion of various constellations of stars as viewed from Sylldarin.

"Yes Vayran." Ollaris responded as he looked up from the book he had been reading, "Our scryers sensed several surges of magical energy last night." he continued, setting the book down on the small table beside his chair and getting to his feet before he walked over to a larger table the side of the room where there was a large map of Sylldarin was laid out. Being a sorcerer's map this marked with all of the ley lines on the island and highlighted areas of magical significance, "They came from this area here at irregular intervals during the night." Ollaris said when Vayran joined him by the table.

Looking at the map Vayran saw that Ollaris was pointing to a point on the map that was a largely rural area where a number of ley lines intersected.

"Do they know what's caused these surges my lord?" Vayran asked.

"No, as far as we know there is no-one in the area that is capable of wielding the power that our scryers observed. What they saw would either take the combined powers of more than a score of our greatest sorcerers or someone tapping directly into the power of the ley lines. As you can see from the map several of them intersect right here. In fact one of the ancient Oscari stone circles can be found here. That should make it easier for you." Ollaris said.

"Easier for me?" Vayran commented and Ollaris nodded.

"Yes. That's why I've summoned you here, I want you to investigate what happened. These surges may have occurred in a more remote area but if they happened in a larger town then the consequences could be disastrous. We need to know where the power came from and what it was used for. Do you understand?" he replied.

"Yes my lord. Has the King been made aware of what our scryers have seen?" Vayran added.

"No, not yet. The King may have been acting as regent for some time but becoming king has still brought him new challenges and in addition to the recent death of his father King Larallus he has also had to face the likelihood that Prince Orcan and Princess Ammaril have been killed in a foolhardy attempt to visit Oscay along with his cousin Tiellan. The loss of so many close family members in such a short space of time would leave a gap that anyone would struggle to fill. I've requested that the captain of the Royal Guard provide you with some warriors and provisions but you should be able to find most of what you need in the area, there are several villages and farms close by the source of the energy surges." Ollaris explained, "There is one more thing that I think I should warn you about though."

"What is that my lord?" Vayran said and Ollaris frowned for a moment.

"It's the way that our scryers described the magical energy they sensed. They said that it felt raw and elemental, not truly focused. It was as if it wasn't coming from a sorcerer at all." he said, "Of course the only thing that I know of that releases power like that is a demon."

"But surely there can't be demons loose on Sylldarin." Vayran said, "We would know."

"Yes, demonologists don't just spring out of nowhere and it has been more than a century since any of our order have shown any inclination to summoning so much as an imp, let alone something that would concern our scryers and if some great disaster had unleashed something new on our land then we would have heard about it by now. Of course there is always the possibility that a demonologist could come here from somewhere else. You must have heard the same stories that I have about some humans consorting with demons, at least until the demon destroys them." Ollaris said.

"Yes my lord, though I never paid them much attention. Bands of humans raiding our coast is one thing but the idea that a demonologist could reach Sylldarin and get that far inland is hard to believe." Vayran replied.

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"Yes it is. Humans are not subtle creatures, if a party of them was able to get ashore then they would have made their presence known almost immediately by attacking the nearest settlement. Unfortunately there is another possibility, it would not be the first time that a vampire has made its presence felt in Sylldarin and if such a creature is at large here then it needs to be dealt with quickly." Ollaris said.

"Yes my lord. What am I to do when I find out the source of the energy my lord?" Vayran asked.

"Inform me of the nature of the surges as soon as possible. Can your little friend be relied upon to carry a message?" Ollaris asked and he looked at the small dragon still perched on Vayran's shoulder.

"I have had much practice in guiding Reyod and using his senses as my own my lord." Vayran said, smiling and reaching up to stroke the creature that responded with a chirp, "I will send a letter to tell you what I find."

"Good. If we are dealing with just one or two individuals then you may arrest them and bring them back here for questioning. Where they were able to obtain such power is something that we need to be aware of but if you face stronger opposition then use caution. I can petition the King to send you reinforcements from the army and more members of our order will join you."

"Of course my lord." Vayran responded and he bowed his head before turning around and exiting the supreme sorcerer's office.

After leaving the supreme sorcerer's office Vayran made his way into the city and to the royal palace itself when he was shown to the captain of the Royal Guard. The captain was located in the palace stables and when Vayran arrived a small force of his men were already preparing their horses. Each of the warriors wore the distinct pale grey uniform of the Royal Guard and Vayran could see that as well as swords they were equipped with bows and long spears suitable for use from horseback.

"Captain my name is Vayran, Lord Ollaris has instructed me to investigate the energies sensed by our scryers." Vayran told him and the captain of the Royal Guard looked him up and down for a moment.

"Sensal, captain of the Royal Guard at your disposal." he responded, "The supreme sorcerer and I have already spoken about this matter. These eight knights will ride out with you and I have provided provisions for four days. Anything beyond that you will have to obtain from the locals."

"Of course. By my reckoning it should take us about two days to get there and I have already arranged to send word to Lord Ollaris of what we find." Vayran said and Sensal nodded in agreement.

"Yes, that's my estimate as well. You have experience riding?" he responded.

"Yes, the supreme sorcerer often sends me on errands to other parts of Sylldarin. I can hardly cross the entire nation on foot, at least not quickly." Vayran said.

"Of course. We've prepared a horse for you as well. Come, it's over here." Sensal told him and he led the sorcerer further into the stable where another horse had had a saddle fitted to its back, "This is her, she'll get you to where you need to be and she's trained well enough that that little dragon of yours won't spook her." the guard captain explained.

"Excellent. I've been told that the King doesn't know about this expedition yet." Vayran said and Sensal smiled for a moment.

"Eight men on horseback? I'd hardly call this little ride an expedition." he said, "But no, the king hasn't been told. He's got more than enough to occupy himself with at the moment. It will be in the regular reports of course, but nothing has been brought to his attention yet."

"So when can I leave?" Vayran asked.

"As soon as you can get into the saddle." Sensal answered.

Will looked down from the deck of the *Storm Chaser* to the dock where Diera stood.

"Good morning." he called out, "Come aboard."

"Thank you captain." Diera responded before she walked up the gang plank and Will met her at the top.

"Captain?" he said, "I take it that you've received a reply to the petition to have the *Storm Chaser* declared my ship then?"

"Yes, a messenger delivered it earlier this morning." Diera said and she reached under her cloak to produce a document that had a broken wax seal on it. Will took this from her and opened it up to read what it said, "It's all pretty simple, no-one has come forwards to lay claim to the *Storm Chaser* so the mayor of Teuten is declaring that ownership of the vessel is to be passed to the most senior of her officers."

"Which would be me. The odd mutiny aside." Will said.

"Yes, that would be you." Diera said and she looked around the deck. There were several sailors at work carrying out the basic tasks needed to keep a cog like the *Storm Chaser* afloat but she did not recognise any of them. It was not surprising that Will would have had to hire some new crew to operate the *Storm Chaser*, there were always a certain number of crew on any ship that would opt to leave between voyages and the *Storm Chaser's* crew had suffered significant losses during the expedition to Oscay but it seemed strange

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that there was no-one other than Will that was familiar with the ship that was currently on deck, "So how is recruitment? I see you have some new crewmen aboard."

Will then looked around at the crewmen at work cleaning and mending.

"Yes, other than Horace all of the old crew decided that they'd rather leave so I've had to replace them all. Unfortunately word of our voyage to Oscay and what happened to the old crew has got around and put a lot of good people off. No-one wants to suddenly find themselves sailing to the far side of the world where certain death awaits." he said.

"Didn't the money the men were paid encourage anyone to sign up?" Diera asked.

"You mean the money that the survivors were paid Diera. Dead men can't brag about their new found wealth. In fact paying all that money to the men I had left probably encouraged some of them to leave. They had enough to cover their food and lodgings for several months so didn't need to worry about finding a place aboard another ship so quickly." Will explained.

"You managed to find some men though. Do you have enough to crew the *Storm Chaser*?" Diera said.

"Just about, yes. All I'm missing is a first mate. It's a real shame that Aldbertus didn't make it back from Oscay, I'd have been glad to have him aboard. Just to get the rest of the crew I did have to offer a bonus for signing up but thanks to you have the money right now to be able to afford it and now that I have this," Will replied and he held up the letter that confirmed that he was now the owner of the *Storm Chaser*, "I can start taking on cargoes. Once our other priority is taken care of, of course."

"Yes, I've received a reply about that as well. Are Horace and Lucia about?"

"Yes, they're both organising things below. Come on, I'll take you to them." Will said and he beckoned for Diera to follow him before he headed for the doorway that would take them below decks.

Horace and Lucia were both in the *Storm Chaser's* galley when Will and Diera found them, standing by a table that was covered in the clay pots that were used to store food preserved in salt for long voyages.

"Hello captain, Lucia and I were just checked our stores." Horace said as Will and Diera entered the room. With four people in the small galley the room was somewhat crowded but there remained enough room as long as none of them wanted to move around too much.

"We've got enough meat preserved to last a full crew for three weeks." Lucia added. Then she smiled and looked at Horace before adding, "Plus I'm sure Horace will be able to come up with fresh supplies en route." Horace was known for supplementing the *Storm Chaser's* provisions by catching rats that came aboard with cargo and then using them for bait to fish with and this had helped raise morale on many voyages since fresh food invariably tasted better than something that had been stored in a jar of salt for a month or more. "I suspect that you're here to talk about more than the state of our rations though." Horace added and Will nodded.

"Yes I am. First I'd just like to let you know that Diera has come through in getting me declared to be the *Storm Chaser's* owner so we'll be able to organise cargoes soon. In addition to that though she's received a response to her other letters." he replied.

"Yes I have." Diera said, reaching under her cloak for a second document. The wax seal on this was broken but when she held it out it was clear to see that it was a royal seal, "The people we urged to contact the royal court because we've been summoned there. Or rather I have, as the representative of Magister Marcus Quinnus and I have been instructed to take with me all witnesses and evidence of what we have seen."

"What evidence do we have?" Lucia asked.

"None apart from our word." Will answered and Diera smiled.

"Gromar said that it was a shame that we didn't just cut the head from one of the Orcs when we had the chance." she said.

"Where are Gromar and Yilven?" Horace asked.

"At the house still. They'll meet us there." Diera replied.

"Does the letter say when we have to be at the palace?" Will said.

"It just says that we should go there as soon as possible." Diera said.

"Then we'll need horses." Will replied.

"That's being arranged now." Diera told him.

"Horses?" Horace commented, "You know I'm not very good with a horse. Neither is Gromar. Couldn't we use your carriage?"

"The carriage would be slower, plus it's not made for travelling long distances." Diera said.

"You'll be fine Horace. We only need to maintain a steady pace, not gallop all the way there." Will added,

"How soon can you be ready to leave?"

"Just let us get these jars put away and we can be ready." Horace said and Will nodded.

"It will probably take us two or three days to get to Hessenstadt. We should start now." he said.

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As Diera had promised horses had been arranged for the group to ride to Hessenstadt and there was one for each of them.

"I still don't like the idea of not taking anything more than a knife each." Gromar said as Will helped him up into the saddle of his horse.

"We're going to the palace of the King of Hessenland Gromar." Will said, "If we turn up at the gates looking like a war party then the guards are likely mistake us for a group of murderers come to kill him and at least arrest us before they hang us."

"But aren't the roads dangerous?" Lucia asked, "I've heard people talking about bandits."

"Sometimes but there are still six of us and we do have knives." Diera pointed out, "Even if we do run into any they'll likely think twice about picking on us."

"I hope so." Lucia replied.

"We'll be fine." Will said as he climbed onto his own horse, "Just stay close together. We'll ride until nightfall and find somewhere to stay until morning. With any luck we'll be in Hessenstadt tomorrow."

When Thomas reached Teuten he headed directly for the harbour, knowing that the *Storm Chaser* would have to dock there. However, rather than risk riding straight onto the docks where he could be seen by anyone aboard one of the ships, he dismounted from his horse close to the harbour and approached the dock master's building, standing where he could observe who was going in and out of it. He had to wait just a short time before he saw a particular individual dressed in the uniform of one of the dock master's guards heading towards the building and he called out to him.

"Gunther!" Thomas called out and the man turned towards him when he heard his name called. The guard recognised Thomas and quickly looked around to see if the dock master or any of his men were watching before he darted towards Thomas.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed, "Let's get out of sight." he added and the two men moved around the side of a nearby building where they would be harder to see, "I thought you weren't going to come here. It's dangerous for us to be seen together. What are you doing here anyway? Didn't you leave on the *Storm Chaser* a couple of months back?"

"It's complicated." Thomas replied, not wanting to discuss how he had returned to Teuten with the guard, "Look, I need to know whether the *Storm Chaser* has made it back yet."

"Yes she's back. She got back a few days ago with hardly any of the crew left and those that were left the ship apart from the first mate and that Halfling cook."

"So they're in the city then?" Thomas asked and the guard shook his head.

"No, I think you just missed them. The ship has a new crew but they said that the first mate and the cook, along with some girl who came back with them all left town in a hurry. The rumour is that they're heading for Hessenstadt, to see the damned King if you can believe that. They went with that woman that worked for your boss as well as a Dwarf and an Elf." he said and Thomas frowned. The guard had given him what sounded like a perfect description of the group he was hunting but if they were already on their way to Hessenstadt then time was short for him to act.

"That complicates matters." he said before he took out his purse and took several coins from it that he handed to the guard, "For your effort. I may be in touch later on." he said.

"What if I hear more?" the guard asked.

"Then go to the usual place. If I'm in town I'll be around there but right now I need to recruit some men who have fast horses."

## 5

Thomas had considerable experience in hiring killers but these tended to be simple thugs who would ambush a single unsuspecting victim whereas now he needed to arrange for the deaths of a group of people who were travelling to Hessenstadt and had a head start. Therefore, instead of the thugs he was used to hiring Thomas knew that he needed to look for someone more specialised. What he needed was a mercenary with their own horses. Thomas guessed that they would be travelling on horseback which in theory meant that they could move quickly but he also knew that neither Dwarves nor Halflings were natural riders so their travel speed would likely be limited and more expert horsemen would stand a chance of catching up with them if they set off quickly enough.

There were several mercenary groups in Teuten and Thomas knew just enough about them to know the taverns that they tended to be found in so he made his way to one of these as quickly as he could. Rather than just approach men he suspected were mercenaries though he went to the bar where the barman was someone that he was familiar with. Like many such places the tavern provided somewhere for patrons to secure horses and when Thomas took his horse here he smiled when he saw that there were already a number of horses secured there.

"Thomas, haven't seen you around in a while." the barman said.

"I been on a trip but I'm back now. For a while at least." Thomas replied.

"So what do you want?" the barman asked.

"To begin with a beer. Then I need a referral." Thomas answered and he placed some coins on the bar.

"A referral for what?" the barman said.

"There are some people that are causing my employer problems. Unfortunately they've already managed to leave town." Thomas said.

"If they've left town then are they still a problem?" the barman said.

"Yes, in fact even more of a problem. I have to stop them from getting where they're going." Thomas told him.

"Ah, sounds like you need someone who can ride as well as fight." the barman said, "How many people are we talking about?"

"Half a dozen. But two are women and one is a Halfling." Thomas said.

"You see the group at the table over there?" the barman said, looking across the room and Thomas turned to see who he was looking at.

In the far corner of the bar he saw a group of five men sat around a table drinking. He noticed that the jackets worn by the men looked thickly padded as if designed to absorb the impact of a blow and one of the men had a helmet immediately in front of him on the table.

"Do they have horses?" Thomas asked and the barman nodded.

"They were complaining about their ride here all the way from Farasia." he said, "Their horses are out back now."

"Yes, I saw them. So what can you tell me about them?" Thomas said.

"Not much, but they have weapons and horses." the barman said and Thomas smiled.

"That will do. I'll go and introduce myself." he said before he turned away from the bar and headed towards the men at the table, "Good morning." he said when he reached the table, smiling at the seated men.

"Who are you?" one of them asked without looking up from his drink, his accent indicating that he came from somewhere to the south of the continent of Entris.

"I understand that you have horses. I have need of reliable fighting men who can catch up with a target that already has a head start." Thomas said.

"Well we don't work for just anyone and you didn't answer my question. Who are you?" the man said and Thomas reached down to the table placing a number of gold coins, one for each of the men at the table on it. Another of the men took one of the coins.

"Gold." he said, "Elf gold."

"I have a lot more for the right people." Thomas said as the other men each took a coin as well.

"Then I don't care who you are." the first of the seated men said, finally looking up at Thomas, "Take a seat and tell us what you need and what's in it for us."

Thomas pulled out a chair and sat down with the men before leaning in closer.

"There's a group of six people heading for Hessenstadt. It is vital that they don't get there." Thomas said.

"So we'd be outnumbered." one of the men said.

"Perhaps. But one of them is a Halfling and two of the others are women. They shouldn't be much of a

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problem. Only one of them is a real warrior I think though the last two can handle themselves in a fight.” Thomas said.

“Do they know that you’re trying to have them killed?” the first man asked and Thomas let out a brief laugh. “They don’t even know I’m alive. They left me for dead.” he said.

“Ah, so this is about revenge.” the man commented.

“Partially yes. Though there are other reasons why this has to be done. That’s why they need to be killed before they can reach Hessenstadt.” Thomas told him.

“And what would those reasons be? We like to know what it is that we’re getting involved in.” another of the men asked.

“Those reasons would be private but you’ve already taken my gold.” Thomas said.

“The gold bought you a seat at the table and our attention.” the first man said, “Our swords will cost more. A lot more.”

“I have more. Are you going to take the job or not?” Thomas asked.

“I’d like to know what we’re getting into as well first.” the first man said.

“You’re getting into a deal worth a lot of money if you just do as you’re told or you’re angering the same person who can throw gold around to have people killed for a lot less than taking some of it from him but not giving anything back in return.” Thomas responded, “Six people dead before they reach Hessenstadt and no questions asked.”

“Very well then, another twenty of these coins and you’ve got a deal.” the first man said, “Payable in advance of course.”

“Twenty it is then.” Thomas replied with a smile and he reached into a pocket and pulled out a small bag from which he counted out twenty of the Elven coins he had in it before spreading them across the table while he put the bag away again, “There you go, twenty gold coins. But just remember one thing, if you cheat me then the price on your heads will be fifty. A hundred if you are all brought back to me alive.”

“Don’t worry. You can count on us.” the first man said as he pulled the coins towards himself rather than letting the other men each take a share. Then he quickly finished his drink and got to his feet, “A Halfling and two women plus three others. All heading towards Hessenstadt?” he said and Thomas nodded.

“Yes. One of the others is a Dwarf and one is an Elf. It should make them easy to recognise.” he said.

“Yes it should. What proof do you need of their deaths?” the man asked.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll know if you succeed or not.” Thomas answered.

The five men paid by Thomas to kill his enemies immediately left the tavern and returned to their horses.

“Lugano do you trust him?” one of them asked their leader, the one that Thomas had paid, as they were loading the bags that held their weapons back onto their horses.

“He hired us to commit murder. Of course I don’t trust him but his gold is good enough for me. Now you heard what he said, they have a head start on us so we need to ride hard towards Hessenstadt.” the leader responded as he climbed up onto the back of his horse.

Will and the others were able to maintain a steady pace on their ride towards Hessenstadt but they were only able to get just over half of the way there before the sun began to set.

“We should make camp for the night.” Yilven suggested.

“But there’s nothing here.” Lucia said.

“Exactly. Before long it will be pitch black and too dark to ride.” Yilven told her, “If we try then one of the horses could fall.”

“Yilven’s right.” Will agreed, “We should find a good spot to spend the night.”

“I don’t like the idea of spending the night out in the open.” Gromar commented.

“Neither do I. There could be wolves in these woods.” Horace added as he looked into the trees either side of the road.”

“We’ll set a fire. It ought to keep animals away as well as keeping us warm.” Will said.

“We should set a watch as well.” Yilven suggested and Will nodded.

“Yes, just like aboard ship. I’ll take the first watch, you can take the second and Gromar the third. I’ve got some candles we can use to measure the length of our watches.” he said.

The five men hired by Thomas could not help but also notice the fading light as they rode along the road running between Teuten and Hessenstadt.

“It’s getting dark Lugano, we should stop.” one of them said.

“We can’t afford to. We don’t know how far ahead of us the targets are.” another added, “We’ve ridden by night before.”

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"But not in this sort of terrain and not without torches." the first to speak pointed out.

"If we light torches we'll give ourselves away and lose any surprise we might get. You know how far light from a flame can carry." a third man said.

"I know," Lugano said as a smile appeared on his face, "and that's how I know that we're getting close. Look." then he pointed further along the road to where there was a faint orange glow in the distance, "I'd say that someone's set a campfire, wouldn't you?"

"You think it's them?" one of his men asked and Lugano nodded.

"Yes Sancto I do. They don't know that we're after them so they aren't hiding where they are That's them, I'm sure of it." he said, "We'll dismount here and continue on foot. If my reckoning is right then we should reach them some time after midnight and with any luck they'll all be sound asleep when we slit their throats."

At Lugano's word the five men all dismounted from their horses but kept hold of their reins as they led them along the road at a cautious pace. The men did not draw their weapons but they kept their free hands close to their hilts just in case they were not the only ones along the road that were planning an ambush. The amount of light continued to decrease as they continued until the sun had fully set and the only light available came from the moon and the stars. Not wanting to reveal their presence the mercenaries did not light any torches though, instead relying on just letting their eyes adjust to the darkness as much as they could while following the far off orange glow that was coming from what they hoped was a campfire set by their targets.

As the sun began to set in Sylldarin eight groups of Orcs assembled in their camp, each one accompanied by a single Troll who carried one of the barrels that had been brought with them from Oscay. Each of the Orcs wore a hooded cloak that enabled them to conceal their features if necessary but

"You have your orders." Orcan called out as he addressed the Orcs assigned to the mission, "You will go quickly and quietly. You will remain unseen as you enter the settlements that you have been told to travel to. Then after mixing your own blood with the potion you carry you will tip it all into the settlements' wells and by this time tomorrow our numbers will have grown into the thousands."

This remark trigger a loud roar of support from the assembled Orcs and Trolls and Orcan snarled.

"All hail Ammaril! Rightful ruler of the world!" one of the Orcs shouted and there was another roar of support.

"Now go. You must be back here before the sun rises again." Orcan ordered and the Orcs along with the Trolls supporting them began to disperse, each group heading in the direction of one of the nearby Elf settlements. The Orcs moved ahead of the Trolls in each group, using their cloaks to disguise themselves just in case there were still any of the inhabitants of the settlements they were heading for active as they approached. Having someone see mysterious cloaked figures may cause someone to raise an alarm that would rouse the entire settlement and force the Orcs to retreat but even the superior vision of an Elf could not see through the fabric of a cloak and at worst they would be able to report strangers wandering the countryside at night rather than monsters. On the other hand the Trolls, whose enormous bulk made them impossible to disguise as anything normally encountered on the island of Sylldarin remained further back and well out of sight until called forwards with the precious barrels they carried.

The closest target settlement was barely two miles from the Orc camp and the group ordered to introduce the potion to its well was soon there. This was a farm that consisted of fewer than a dozen structures that housed the owner's family and the workers as well as providing shelter to some of the farm's animals. The Orcs paused to observe the farm for a short time when it came into sight, checking for any obvious signs of activity but every building appeared dark and they advanced towards it. Their target was the well and it lay in the middle of a courtyard. This made approaching the well risky since the Orcs and Troll had to get very close to the buildings that surrounded it as well as gaining access to the courtyard. Fortunately the gates had not been secured, the farmworkers not believing it necessary and the group opened them as far as necessary and crept through into the courtyard.

The Troll set the barrel down beside the well before one of the Orcs carefully pried the top off to reveal the liquid inside. Each of the Orcs took out a knife and used it to cut open their arms one after another, allowing the blood that flowed out to fall into the barrel and mix with the contents before they bandaged their wounds.

"It's ready." the lead Orc said to the Troll, "Pour it down the well. Quietly."

The Troll just grinned before he picked up the barrel and tipped the contents into the well, letting it pour out until the barrel was empty.

"All gone." the Troll said and the Orc leader glared at him.

"Stay quiet!" he hissed, angry at the Troll speaking in a normal voice instead of keeping it low, "Now let's leave before anyone wakes up."

One of the Orcs then picked up the discarded lid from the barrel while the Troll now carried the empty barrel as the group hurried out of the courtyard, closing the gates as they left to leave no trace that they had ever been there.

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The delivery of the potion to the farm was repeated by the other groups of Orcs as they also reached their targets. Two more of these were farms but the rest were villages that were home to several hundred Elves between them. At each farm and village the barrels were taken to the local wells where Orc blood was mixed with the potion before being emptied into the well itself, after which the groups of Orc retreated before their presence was even noticed.

Yilven stood at the treeline as he kept watch over the rest of the group while they slept. They had found a spot by the road where there was an open area that gave them enough room to secure their horses, lay out beds and build a fire. The campfire was proving effective at keeping animals away from the camp and although Yilven had seen a number of animals moving in the woods none of them had come close to the sleeping group. He glanced for a moment at the candle that had been placed close to the campfire. This had been marked to keep time as it burned down and it had already burned past the first mark where Will had woken Yilven to take his turn on watch.

As well as watching for animals in the woods Yilven also periodically checked the road and when he looked back along it in the direction that the group had come from Teuten he noticed a group of men approaching on foot while leading horses. While it was quite possible that travellers may wish to continue by night and would lead their horses instead of riding them the fact that they were not using any torches to provide illumination was suspicious and Yilven slowly made his way to where Will was sleeping.

"Will, wake up. I think we have company." he said, shaking Will until his eyes opened.

"What?" Will said.

"There's a group of men approaching. They don't have torches so I think that they're trying to avoid being seen." Yilven told him.

"Where?" Will asked and Yilven pointed down the road.

"That way." he said.

"I don't see anything." Will said as he looked into the darkness.

"Trust me, they're there." Yilven replied, knowing that his superior Elven vision meant that he could see in the dark far better than a human could.

"Keep watching them. I'll wake the others." Will said and Yilven nodded. He then stood and watched the approaching men while Will went around the other members of the group one by one to wake them up.

"What's going on? It's not my turn to take watch yet." Gromar said when he woke up and looked at the candle, seeing that it had not burned down to the second mark yet.

"Yilven's spotted a group of men coming towards us from the direction of Teuten who seem to be trying to avoid being seen." Will told him.

"What? Let me see." Gromar said and he got up as quickly as he could and looked down the road. Like Elves, Dwarves were also blessed for their ability to see well in the dark as a result of living underground and he was just about able to make out the approaching group, "He's right. Maybe half a dozen of them."

"I count five." Yilven said.

"Five, six. What's the difference?" Gromar responded.

"One?" Horace said as he was getting out of his bed and overheard this.

"What do we do? All we have are knives." Lucia said.

"Yes, wouldn't it have been nice if we'd brought along some proper weapons? A couple of crossbows perhaps?" Gromar commented and he glanced at Will.

"Will was right, we'd never have been let into the palace if we were armed to the teeth." Diera said.

"Perhaps we should try to hide in the woods. They might go right past us." Lucia suggested.

"I think they already know that we're here. They probably saw our camp fire." Yilven said.

"I suppose that putting it out now wouldn't do any good either." Horace said.

"It might warn them that we know they're coming." Will said, "Frankly I think that Lucia's idea is best, we should hide in the woods. We'll take our horses too so that they're out of the way. I don't want them getting hurt by accident, we need them to get to Hessenstadt. We'll pack our beds with our bags and hope that whoever is coming thinks we're still in them."

"You mean trick them into attacking decoys?" Yilven asked with a smile and Will nodded.

"Exactly." he said before he bent down to pick up his bag.

While Yilven continued to watch the approaching men the rest of the group gathered up their belongings and placed them in their beds before pulling blankets over them. The deception would be easy to spot on close inspection but from further away and especially at night it gave the appearance of them all being asleep in their beds.

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Lugano signalled for his men to halt when they were still several hundred yards short of the camp.

"We leave the horses here." he ordered, "Bring swords and crossbows only."

The mercenaries secured their horses to trees beside the road and unloaded crossbows from them that they loaded before they continued to walk along the road towards the camp ahead of them. As they drew closer they were able to make out the rough shapes of the beds around the fire, simple affairs made of blankets laid out on the ground that would allow someone a basic night's sleep even out in the open like this. The mercenaries were still more than a hundred yards away when they first saw these and Sancto carried out a quick count.

"Six. Just like we were told." he said.

"Maybe, but where are their horses?" Lugano pointed out.

"Maybe they hid them in the woods just in case someone stole them while they were asleep." another of his men suggested.

"What does it matter anyway? Who cares about their horses?" Sancto added.

"I care if they are the wrong people. We've only been paid to kill six and I want to make sure that they are the right six." Lugano said and as he started to creep further forwards he raised his crossbow to his shoulder, ready to fire. As he got even closer something about the shape of the beds began to look odd. Although he could still only make out vague outlines in the firelight the shapes looked wrong and it was impossible to tell at which end of the beds their occupants' were, "Something isn't right here." he said softly as he took aim at the nearest of the beds with his crossbow. Then he squeezed the trigger and released the bolt, sending it flying into the middle of the bed where it struck with a 'thud'. Had there been a person in the bed the bolt would have inflicted a painful injury that would have immediately woken them up, screaming in agony. However, there was only silence as the bolt remained sticking out of the bed.

"They're decoys!" one of his men exclaimed as the mercenaries looked around, searching for the group that they had been sent to kill.

"Quite Ermo!" Lugano hissed, throwing his now unloaded crossbow aside and drawing his sword. He knew that there were two reasons why such decoys could have been set, either the real group was still travelling and this was intended to slow down Lugano and his men or the targets were hiding close by and wanted to draw the mercenaries in before springing an ambush on them. Since it was highly unlikely that the group Lugano's men had been sent to kill could know that they were being followed the latter reason made far more sense, in which case they were being observed at that very moment, "They're here somewhere."

## 6

Within the woods Yilven and Gromar were able to observe the mercenaries clearly while they remained in the darkness of the road but the three humans and Horace could see only vague shapes that were just about recognisable as people.

"I don't think that they're buying the decoys." Gromar said.

"They did for a while though and it's got them this close." Yilven replied.

"They'll need to get closer still if we're going to fight them." Gromar said.

"Never mind that now. At least we know what we're dealing with. These aren't just fellow travellers on the road to Hessenstadt. For whatever reason they came here to kill us." Will said.

"But why would anyone want us dead?" Lucia said.

"They might just be bandits." Diera suggested, "They may not be interested in anything other than our money."

"I'm still not sure I like the thought of that." Horace added before one of the mercenaries suddenly strode towards the campfire.

Lugano had spotted the unlit torch lying on the ground close to the campfire and he went to pick it up before thrusting the end into the flames to ignite it. However, he did not intend to use this as a source of illumination, the flames from the fire itself being enough for him and instead he hurled the burning torch into the treeline where it bounced off the trunk of a tree and then landed on the ground. Luckily the ground was not so dry that the torch would immediately start a forest fire but the torch passed close enough to the horses that Will had had the others bring into the woods to conceal them and they began to whinny as they pulled at the ropes holding them to trees in fear.

"They're in the woods." Lugano said and the mercenaries began to advance towards the treeline, Lugano with his sword in his hand while the others still wielded their crossbows.

"Here they come." Will said.

"They have crossbows." Horace commented.

"Yes I see that, but they won't be able to see very far in the dark." Will replied.

"That's not a problem for me." Gromar said as he reached down and picked up a fist sized rock and looked at Yilven, "Right Elf?" he added and Yilven smiled.

"Right Dwarf." he responded and he also picked up a rock, "Everyone get down." he said.

"What?" Diera said and Will pushed both her and Lucia down while he also ducked.

"Get down." he said before Yilven and Gromar both hurled the rocks that they held at the mercenaries.

The rock thrown by Gromar hit Ermo in the shoulder and as he cried out in pain his grip tightened on his crossbow and the weapon fired its bolt into the air, leaving it empty. On the other hand the rock that Yilven threw struck another of the mercenaries directly in the face and he dropped his crossbow as he staggered back, bringing his hands up to clutch at the bottom half of his face as blood poured from his mouth. Then he spat out a mouthful of blood along with pieces of some of his teeth and drew his sword.

"I'll kill you for that!" he yelled before he charged towards the trees.

"After him!" Lugano shouted, knowing that if the man entered the woods alone he would be vulnerable and the five mercenaries all ran forwards, those still holding crossbows discarding them in favour of their swords.

Will picked up a branch from the ground and lunged at Ermo as he entered the woods, raising the branch to parry the mercenary's sword strike when he swung his weapon. The pain in Ermo's shoulder weakened the strength of his attack and although it knocked the branch out of Will's hand he was unable to continue with his swing that otherwise would have embedded the side of his blade in Will's ribcage. Will quickly stepped forwards, bringing him inside the distance at which Ermo could easily swing his sword at him and when the mercenary tried to retreat Will followed him, reaching out to grab him by his jacket. Once he had a firm grip on Ermo he pulled the mercenary closer and thrust his knife up under his ribs.

Ermo let out a brief gasp, his eyes widening before he suddenly went limp and dropped his sword before he collapsed in a heap at Will's feet. Seeing his opportunity, Will quickly crouched down and scooped up the dead mercenary's sword before he looked around to see how the rest of his group were faring.

Another of the mercenaries entered the woods to find Horace almost right in front of him and the startled Halfling stared up at the much larger mercenary just as he swung his sword at Horace. Regaining his senses just in time, Horace dived out of the path of the sword in time to avoid it and too late for the mercenary to alter the direction of the attack before his blade hit the trunk of the tree that Horace had been using for cover

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with enough force that it became embedded in it and left the mercenary pulling furiously to try and get it free. Without thinking Horace leapt forwards and stabbed the mercenary in the chest, first once and then repeatedly in rapid succession as the mercenary screamed.

Yilven also evaded a sword swing from Sancto before he kicked the mercenary in his knee as hard as he could and there was the sound of shattering bone as he fell to the ground. He was able to keep hold of his sword though and he swung it in the general direction of Yilven, forcing him to leap back out of reach to avoid being cut in half by the blade. Sancto then reached out to a nearby tree and used it to steady himself as he pulled himself back up from the ground, doing his best to balance on one leg now that the other was broken.

In response to this Yilven leapt aside and darted around the tree while Sancto struggled to try and turn around to face him but the Elf moved far too quickly and as Sancto looked around he was just in time to see Yilven appear from behind the tree before he brought his knife up under the mercenary's chin and drove the knife up through his mouth and into his brain.

It was the mercenary that had been struck in the face by the rock that Yilven threw that headed for Gromar. Being much shorter than the human as well as being armed with a knife gave Gromar a far shorter reach than the mercenary but he did not let that concern him and he scooped up a handful of dirt from the forest floor that he hurled into the man's face as soon as he came close enough. In the poor light the mercenary did not realise what Gromar was doing and the handful of debris flew right into his already injured face and into his eyes, blinding him. The mercenary came to a sudden halt and dropped his sword, clutching his face in his hands as he staggered backwards while he rubbed his eyes. It did not take him long to clear the debris and regain his vision but when he opened his eyes again and looked towards Gromar he saw the Dwarf picking up the sword that he had just dropped.

"Not bad for a human forged weapon." Gromar said before he leapt towards the mercenary and thrust the point of the sword out directly ahead of him. Held level at shoulder height for Gromar, the blade impaled the mercenary just beneath his ribcage, passing all the way through and severing his spine before it came out through his back.

Lugano himself noticed both Diera and Lucia standing slightly deeper into the woods than any of the male members of the party. Even the Halfling had placed himself in front of the two women and while his men engaged the rest of the group Lugano moved past them towards the women.

"Lucia get behind me." Diera said as she dropped into a fighting stance and raised the ornate dagger she carried while Lucia backed away.

Diera dodged Lugano's first swing of his sword and she moved try and stab him but the mercenary was prepared for this and he jumped forwards and elbowed her in the face before she could attack him. The strength of the blow stunned Diera and she dropped her dagger but as she staggered back Lugano reached out and grabbed her by the throat to hold her in place. Then he smiled as he thrust his sword blade through her stomach and twisted it before he pulled it back out.

"Diera no!" Lucia cried out when she saw this and after pulling his sword from Diera Lugano turned to face her. In anger Lucia charged at the mercenary and held her knife out in front of her but as soon as she came within reach Lugano lashed out and knocked the small blade from her hand, sending it flying into the darkness. Then he jumped towards Lucia and pushed her to the ground, landing on top of her and holding his sword to her throat. Looking at Lucia he smiled again.

"I was paid to kill you girl." he said quietly, "But if you're nice to me I'll let you live."

Knowing what Lugano meant by this but unable to push the much larger man off her Lucia reached up with one hand and scratched at his face. When she came to his eye she dug her finger in and Lugano screamed, sitting up straight and clamping his hands over his ruined eye.

"That's it! You're going to wish I killed you." he hissed at her as he let go of his face and grabbed Lucia's hands before pinning them to the ground above her head but as he lowered himself towards her again he suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood and fell sideways

Looking up Lucia saw Will standing over her with a sword in his hand that had blood on its blade and when she looked at the corpse of Lugano lying on the ground beside her she saw that there was a large sword wound in his side where Will had stabbed him.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" Will asked, holding out his hand to help Lucia to her feet.

"No, I'll be fine but Diera-" Lucia began.

"I know. Diera's dead." Will interrupted and Lucia suddenly threw her arms around him as the other surviving members of the group all rushed towards them.

"What happened?" Horace asked.

"Diera's dead. I think he killed her." Will answered and he looked down at Lugano's body.

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"He said that he was paid to kill us." Lucia said.

"What's this?" Gromar added as he also looked at the corpse and he bent down to pick something up from beside the corpse, "Gold." he said when he saw that it was a coin but then he frowned.

"What's wrong with it?" Horace asked and Gromar handed the coin to Yilven.

"What do you make of this Yilven?" he said.

"This is Elf gold." Yilven replied as he studied the coin.

"And there's more." Gromar added as he crouched down to search Lugano's body and quickly discovered the gold coins in his purse, "All of them the same."

"Where would he get so much Elf gold from?" Lucia asked.

"If an Elf paid these men to kill us. One Elf in particular." Will said.

"But Ammaril is in Oscan. Her ships were destroyed and there's no way that she could have built more and crossed the ocean in such a short time." Gromar said.

"Yilven, did Ammaril ever say anything about anything in the Oscari library that would enable her to travel around the world so fast?" Will asked but Yilven shook his head.

"No, not to me at least." he said, "What about you?" he added, looking at Lucia as she released her grip on Will.

"No." she said, shaking her head as well, "She told me that there was great knowledge and power contained in the library but she didn't go into detail.

"So what do we do now?" Horace asked.

"First we take care of Diera. I don't like the idea of just leaving her here." Will said, looking at her body, "We'll wrap her up in her blankets and put her on her horse. We can have her buried in Hessenstadt. Then we'll check the bodies of all of these men. Anything they have that could tell us who they were could be useful and we'll take their weapons just in case there are more of them coming for us."

"Finally arming ourselves properly. Like we should have done in the beginning." Gromar said.

"But what about what you said about not taking weapons to the palace?" Lucia asked.

"We'll have to get rid of them before we get there. We'll find somewhere to stay that we can leave them." Will said, "But we do need to get the letter that Diera had to show who we are. Lucia, can you take care of that?"

"Yes, I'll do it." Lucia said before she looked around on the ground, "Wait, my knife. I dropped it. Where is it?"

"Here, take this one. It was Diera's. I'm sure she'd be happy for you to take it." Gromar said when he noticed Diera's dagger on the ground and he picked it up and handed it to Lucia who looked at the ornate blade.

"This looks expensive. There's writing on the blade that I can't read." she said.

"May I see it?" Yilven asked and Lucia nodded and passed the weapon to him.

"Do you know what it says?" Horace asked.

"No I don't. But some of these symbols look like ones I've seen in Ammaril's notes over the years. I think that this blade could be magical. Lucia, you should have it examined by a sorcerer if you can." Yilven said.

"Magical?" Lucia replied, her eyes widening.

"She probably got it from Marcus Quinnus." Will said.

"I'm not sure that I like the sound of that. If a vampire made it then it could be dangerous." Horace said.

"You mean unlike all of those perfectly safe daggers in the world?" Gromar commented.

"I don't think that Diera would have kept it around if she thought that it was dangerous." Will said, "Now let's get to work. We've got a lot to do before the sun comes up."

After taking care of Diera's body and searching those of the mercenaries as well as their horses the group returned to their beds to try and get some more sleep before morning but in light of the attack and the death of Diera this proved elusive before the sun finally came up.

Ammaril sat up in bed when Orcan entered her tent shortly before sunrise.

"They're all back. It's done." he said and Ammaril smiled as she got out of her bed.

"The potion was added to all of the wells?" she said and Orcan nodded.

"Yes mistress, all of them. Will you cast the spell now?" he said.

"Now? No, it's far too soon my dear brother. Many of the people in those settlements won't have had chance to drink from the wells yet. We need to give them the chance to do that or the spell won't work." Ammaril told him.

"When?" Orcan asked.

"At sundown. Everyone needs to drink at some point during the day and their bodies will contain the potion. After that the spell will work and you can send your troops out to gather them together and bring them all back here." Ammaril answered.

"Then I will have more troops by tomorrow?" Orcan said.

"Yes Orcan, you will have more troops by tomorrow. Why are you so impatient?" Ammaril said.

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"I am the general of your army mistress," Orcan replied, "but that army is only numbered in the hundreds. Your spell will give me thousands more. A real army."

"And those thousands will just be the start. After that you will have tens of thousands of troops, then hundreds of thousands and with that army we will conquer the known world." Ammaril told him and he grinned, baring his sharpened teeth.

The city of Hessenstadt was home to almost sixty thousand people and it came into view when it was still several miles distant from the group as they rode towards it. As well as their own horses they led Diera's horse with her body on it as well as the horses that the mercenaries had ridden.

Upon reaching Hessenstadt the group's first priority was to deliver Diera's body for burial after which they located a tavern that offered stabling and rooms for rent that they could store their weapons in. Only once they had made these arrangements did they ride for the royal palace.

The palace of King Gerald was a large fortified building in the centre of the city and the group rode up to the main entrance at the front of the building, a large set of wooden doors that had a smaller door set into it.

"I guess we knock." Gromar said as they all dismounted from their horses and Will walked up to the door and knocked on it.

"Do you think they'll hear?" Lucia asked right before a small hatch opened in the smaller door and the face of a guard peered out.

"Yes?" he said sternly.

"We've been summoned to appear before the court of King Gerald." Will said and he held up the letter than Diera had received.

"Wait here." the guard said as he took the letter and the hatch was closed again.

"Isn't he going to let us in?" Lucia asked.

"He probably needs to find someone to read the letter." Horace answered.

"Horace is right. Even in the palace there will only be so many people who can read." Will added before there was the sound of a bolt being drawn back from the inside of the door and the small door opened inwards.

"Please come in." a courtier said when he appeared in the doorway and then he stepped back to allow the group to enter the palace.

Will stepped through the doorway first and saw that there were several armed guards waiting just inside the palace, obviously there to respond if the group were planning some form of attack. The courtier waited until the entire group had entered the palace and one of the guards closed and bolted the door again before he spoke again.

"Please come with me." he said.

"Are you taking us to see the King?" Lucia asked.

"No, I am taking you to where you can wait for the King to summon you. I have been told that there are others that need to be present for your audience and they need to be summoned as well." the courtier answered.

"It sounds like your king is taking this seriously." Yilven commented as the courtier started to lead the group further into the palace.

"King Gerald takes the security of his kingdom very seriously Elf." the courtier responded sternly.

"I meant no insult." Yilven said.

"Of course not." the courtier said before he stopped outside a door and opened it, "Please wait in here. If you need anything just ring the bell and someone will see to you."

"Thank you." Will said before he entered the room and looked around. The room was a small lounge that was decorated with numerous hanging tapestries, As well as chairs to sit on there was a table at the far end of the room that had several goblets and a pair of jugs on it. Upon inspecting these Will found that one contained water and the other wine. Wanting to be clear headed when they were brought before the King, Will poured himself a cup of water before he sat down.

"Fancy." Gromar said as he opted for a cup of wine instead, "Not quite up to the standard of what Dwarves make but not bad."

It was some time later that the courtier returned to the room where he had left the group, now accompanied by a unit of four guards who wore tabards over their chainmail coats that bore the coat of arms of King Gerald.

"The King is ready for you now." he said.

With two guards ahead of them and two behind the courtier then led the group from the lounge to the throne room itself and the group found themselves in the presence not only of King Gerald but a large number of other men. Among them were men whose style of dress indicated that they were other nobles of Hessenland

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as well as men that all had the royal coat of arms somewhere on their clothing to mark them out as the various courtiers and advisers that were responsible for keeping the kingdom running and implementing the orders of the king. This was not the limit of the crowd though and in addition to the more mundane servants and guards present there were also several other men included in this audience along with both a man and a woman in unmarked robes who were sat close by King Gerald.

"Who are these other people?" Will whispered to the courtier, looking towards the cluster of men who did not appear to be a normal part of the royal court.

"The ambassadors of Lerron, Dannaron and Andara as well as the Crown Sorceress Adela and her deputy Sigismund." the courtier told him and Will's eyes widened for a moment.

"Did you say Dannaron?" he said and the courtier nodded.

"What's wrong with Dannaron?" Lucia asked and Horace smiled.

"Will is from Dannaron." he told her quietly, "He deserted from their navy so he's wanted there."

"Hopefully the ambassador doesn't know who he is then." Gromar added.

"Your majesty." the courtier announced clearly, "May I introduce the representatives of Magister Marcus Quinnus from Teuten? They bring word of a great danger to us."

"You may." King Gerald said, "I will listen to their story."

The courtier then turned to the group and addressed them softly.

"Step forwards, bow or curtsy and then tell him your story. Oh and begin with 'Your majesty'." he said.

The group did as the courtier said, stepping forwards to stand side by side in the centre of the throne room while the King looked at them. Lucia curtsied while the men all bowed and then Will looked at the others.

"Go on Will. You're our captain." Horace whispered.

"Your majesty," Will said as the courtier had told him to begin, "thank you for agreeing to see us. We are the survivors of two expeditions to the continent of Oscay, one organised by Magister Marcus Quinnus of Teuten and the other by Prince Orcan and Princess Ammaril of Syldarin. We have come to warn you of the danger posed by Princess Ammaril. Her expedition took control of the Great Library of the Oscari and she used its contents to curse the members of her expedition as well as a local tribe of Ogres, turning them into an army of monsters loyal to her and now she plans to use them to take over the world."

"How big is this army?" one of the gathered courtiers asked and Will looked at Yilven.

"There were just over three hundred Elves in the expedition and the Ogre tribe had about a hundred members." he said.

"Four hundred? This Elf thinks she can conquer the world with an army of just four hundred?" King Gerald said.

"Your majesty, I believe that the four hundred are just the beginning. She will create more Orcs and Trolls to expand her army." Yilven replied.

"Orcs? Trolls?" King Gerald said.

"The names given to her creations your majesty. The Orcs were once the expedition's Elf warriors and sailors. They seem to be stronger and more resilient than they were as Elves but they are wild and brutish, lacking the intelligence of Elves. I think that the same can be said of the Trolls, stronger even than Ogres but even less intelligent. The spell was also cast on some dragons and it caused them to grow to an enormous size. As well as this, just like the dragons of legend they are able to breathe fire." Will told him and the King frowned before looking at the two nearby spellcasters.

"Does this make sense to you?" he asked.

"In theory blood magic could be used to transform people into something different. The ancient Oscari managed to create the Elves, Dwarves, Halflings and Ogres after all." Adela responded, "I find it hard to believe tales of giant fire-breathing dragons though. Such creatures belong in fairy tales."

"They exist, we've all seen them and it was blood magic that created them. Ammaril gathered blood from the Elves in her expedition, including from her own brother and the dragons that her cousin took with them. She started even before we reached Oscay, she must have known well in advance what she was doing. Luckily I was able to avoid having any of my blood taken or I may have been cursed as well." Yilven said.

"Such feats of magic have not been seen since the Oscari vanished though. The numbers of those species have increased thanks to breeding, not magic." Adela added.

"And how many breeding pairs of these Orcs and Trolls are there?" a courtier said.

"The Ogre tribe consisted of roughly even numbers of male and female but apart from Ammaril herself and Lucia here, there were only male Elves in the expedition." Yilven told him.

"Then what is the problem?" the courtier responded, "Those three hundred Orcs aren't going to breed. Their numbers can only decrease with time and if these Trolls are as stupid as we have been told then they will be no match for a properly trained army, no matter how numerous they become."

"Unless Ammaril is able to cast the spell again. She might make more Orcs." Lucia commented.

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"For which she would surely have to travel from Oscay to somewhere with suitable victims." Adela said.

"How many ships were in this expedition?" the courtier asked.

"Five," Yilven answered, "but we were able to set fire to them."

"Then there is even less danger. It will take time to build new ships." the courtier said.

"We were attacked on the road here. They killed our friend Diera. Ammaril already has some servants here." Gromar said sternly.

"How do you know that that is related to this discussion?" the courtier asked.

"Because they were paid in Elf gold you fool!" Gromar snapped at him and the man flinched and he pulled one of the coins that had been taken from the mercenaries and tossed towards the courtier so that it landed at his feet, "There, take a look at that. Elf gold." he said as the courtier bent down to pick up the coin.

"This proves nothing." the courtier, "How would Ammaril have recruited these agents when she is in Oscay?"

"Her ships docked in Teuten on their way to Oscay. She could have recruited them then." Will said.

"That's true. One of the ships was damaged in a storm." Yilven added, "Most of the expedition came ashore at some point, myself included. There would have been ample opportunity for her to recruit spies then."

It was then that King Gerald leant forwards and looked at the group.

"Supposing we do believe everything you have told us. What exactly would you have us do? I have no intention of sending an army to Oscay. It is well known that ships going there tend never to return." he said.

"Your majesty I would hope that after what we have told you, you would prepare for an attack by Ammaril's forces in whatever form it may take. Not only Hessenland must prepare but the other kingdoms as well. Word should be sent to the empire of Hadar and the kingdoms that neighbour it. They will be the first in the path of any attack from Oscay after all." Will said. Hadar was a large kingdom that occupied a landmass to the west of the main continent of Entris where Hessenland was located. The Hadarians were known for their warlike ways and their empire had expanded by conquering several neighbouring kingdoms and adding them to their own territory.

"After we leave here your majesty, I will be returning home to Syldarin to warn King Larallus." Yilven added and this drew smiles from several members of the court.

"We are not so ignorant of goings on in Syldarin Elf." the courtier who had argued with the group already said, "King Larallus is dead. His son Dellaron sits on the throne as king rather than regent now."

"I did not know. I have been away-" Yilven began.

"Yes of course." the courtier interrupted. Then he turned towards King Gerald, "Your majesty, I believe that we have heard enough." he said to the King.

"Yes indeed. We will discuss what has been said in private and issue our judgement. You are dismissed."

King Gerald announced and the courtier who had escorted the group from the lounge stepped towards them again.

"Please come with me." he said.

"Is that it?" Lucia said, "What happens now?"

"Now we follow him and wait." Will told her.

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The group was led back to the same lounge where they had waited for their audience with King Gerald and Gromar immediately poured himself another drink.

"This may not be up to the standards of Dwarf brew but it will just have to do I suppose." he said.

"What do you think will happen?" Lucia asked and Gromar snorted.

"I think that the fools will decide that we're mad or that there is no real threat to them. Trust me, I've seen this sort of thing before. You warn someone that their construction is weak and is about to fall over but they don't listen. Then they get angry when there is a pile of rubble where their wall used to stand." he said.

"What do we do if they won't listen to us?" Horace added.

"I don't know." Will replied.

"I will still have to return to Sylldarin to warn King Dellaron. Hopefully he will be more receptive." Yilven said.

"Do you think he will?" Lucia said.

"He should. I've served his family loyally for many years. Betraying Ammaril was the first time I refused an order from any of them." Yilven replied, "Also King Dellaron opposed sending the expedition in the first place. Ammaril and Orcan went behind his back to get troops from their uncle and hired ships themselves instead of using naval vessels."

"So he should be far more likely to believe that something could have gone wrong." Will said.

"I hope so." Yilven said.

"Maybe we should try warning others as well." Lucia suggested, "Will, you did tell King Gerald that you wanted him to pass your warning onto others. If he won't do it then that just leaves us."

"Lucia has a point Will." Horace added before the door to the lounge opened again and the courtier who had been escorting them around the palace so far returned.

"That was quick. Too quick to be good news." Gromar said.

"So what did the King say?" Will asked the courtier.

"In his judgement and on the basis of the advice of the royal court His Royal Majesty King Gerald of Hessenland believes that there is no immediate danger to his kingdom or its subjects. Furthermore he has been advised that should any threat appear in the future then there will be sufficient warning from the kingdoms further to the west than here." the courtier answered.

"In other words we've been told to get out." Gromar said.

"You are to leave the palace, yes." the courtier said and Will sighed.

"I suppose that's it then." he said.

Escorted once again by several of the Royal Guards, the group were led to the door that they had entered the palace through and they walked out into the street. Had any of them looked up then they may have seen the face of Adela the court sorceress at one of the windows overlooking them with the man who had been stood beside her in the throne room still beside her and also looking out of the window.

"I think you made a mistake in advising the King to ignore them and send them away." the man said to Adela.

"And I think that you are worrying too much Sigismund. Magic spells to create armies of monsters and giant fire-breathing dragons? It's the sort of thing that peasants tell their children to get them to behave and will do us no good if the public think that we have such power as well. They obviously saw a greater dragon from a distance and misjudged the size. As for these Orcs and Trolls the court was right, if they exist then they're half a world away and will probably die out long before setting foot on this continent. Telling the general population about them isn't going to do any good. Half won't believe you and the other half will think that it's your fault. Do you want to be dragged out into the street and burned by a rampaging mob that thinks you're going to put a curse on them? Because I certainly don't. If there is a problem then let the Hadarians deal with it. They enjoy waging war. Now I have real issues to attend to." she responded before she turned and walked away.

Sigismund remained by the window for a short time, watching Will and the others walking away from the palace. Then he turned around and also walked away from the window until he saw one of the palace serving staff.

"You there boy!" he called out, "I have a message that needs delivering."

Will and the others returned to their lodgings as soon as they left the palace, ordering a meal from the kitchen when they arrived.

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"So what about it Gromar? Are you still with us or are you returning home like you said?" Will asked as the Dwarf took another bite out of the chicken he was eating.

"Do you really think that any other kings will believe us more than Gerald?" he responded.

"Dellaron will, I'm sure of it. Then with him to support us we may be able to convince others." Yilven replied.

"Maybe?" Gromar said, "I don't think that any of these human kings will believe a word of what we say until the first dragon is burning their palace down around them. Maybe I'm better off heading home and trying to warn my own people." he added before he took another bite.

It was then that the tavern door opened and a man entered and looked around. As soon as he saw the group sat around the table he smiled and walked towards them.

"Who's this?" Horace said, noticing the approaching stranger.

"Someone with money from the looks of him." Gromar replied as he looked at the man and saw his obviously expensive clothing.

"he's slim for a rich man. Most of them are fatter." Horace commented.

The man walked right up to the table where the group sat and looked down at them.

"Well unless there is another group in Hessenstadt that includes an Elf, a Dwarf and a Halfling you must be the people I am looking for. My name is Dominic von Garran. May I sit down?" he said.

The group around the table exchanged glances for a few moments before Will spoke up.

"Certainly." he said.

"Thank you." Dominic replied as he pulled up an empty chair and sat down.

"Why were you looking for us?" Lucia asked.

"Are you familiar with a sorcerer called Sigismund Ead? He is the immediate deputy to the court sorceress herself." Dominic answered.

"There was a second wizard with the sorceress during our audience with King Gerald." Yilven said and Dominic nodded.

"Yes, that was him." he said.

"So this has to do with what we told the King?" Will said and Dominic nodded a second time.

"Yes, he was very interested in what you said and thinks it warrants further investigation." he replied.

"Well he didn't say much when we were in the throne room." Gromar commented.

"He couldn't then. The court sorceress is his superior after all and he couldn't publicly oppose her though I assure you that he did support your position during the discussions that followed." Dominic said, "He still failed to sway the court's opinion of course but that is why he asked me to approach you and find out what your plans were now." Dominic said.

"That was what we were just discussing." Will told him, "Yilven is returning to Sylldarin to try and warn King Dellaron and he wants us to go with him. Gromar is undecided about coming but I'll be taking the *Storm Chaser* down the Strait of Lerron. I know the Elves don't like human ships going near their coast but I can take Yilven to one of the nearby countries that the Elves often visit and we can transfer to one of their ships there."

"The *Storm Chaser* is a ship then?" Dominic commented.

"Yes, my ship now." Will told him, "She's the cog that took most of us to Oscay and back."

"Excellent. In that case I would like to join you. If I can bring back word that the King of Sylldarin is preparing for this attack you warned King Gerald of then it will strengthen the position of my superior in court greatly. Perhaps enough to sway the King's mind." Dominic said.

"And what's in it for us exactly?" Gromar said.

"So you are still with us then?" Lucia said and Gromar sighed.

"I suppose I am, yes. I may as well see this through to the end." he said.

"Excellent." Dominic said.

"Gromar does have a point though, what does letting him join us gain us?" Horace asked and Will smiled.

"Because he's a sorcerer. Ammaril used magic to create her army so perhaps the word of a sorcerer will hold more sway over some of the people we need to convince, even if he wasn't there to witness what happened for himself he can still explain that it's all possible and if the worst comes to the worst then maybe he can fight her magic with his own." he said and then he held out his hand towards Dominic, "Welcome aboard." he added before Dominic smiled again and shook it.

The stone that had been removed from the circle in Oscay now stood in the centre of the Orc camp in Sylldarin as the sun set over it. The Orcs and Trolls, knowing that Ammaril planned to cast her spell at around this time had gathered to witness it and they cheered and roared with excitement as she walked from her tent towards the stone.

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Ammaril had used this stone to drain the magical energy of the spell that froze the Great Library of the Oscari in time, trapping that same energy within the stone for her own use. Given the amount of power it had required to cast the original Oscari spell thousands of years previously this gave her access to power unprecedented since the Oscari had vanished from the world. She had had to expend some in order to cast the spell that transformed the Elves of her expedition as well as the Ogre tribes encountered in Oscay but most of the energy stored in the stone still remained there. Even after unleashing the transformation spell again here on Syldarin she would have used only a relatively small part of the stored power.

Walking up to the stone Ammaril paused and turned to look at her gathered army before she cast the spell and an odd hush came over the crowd of Orcs and Trolls.

"Tonight we create more brothers and sisters in arms for you." she said, "Tonight our army expands from the hundreds to the thousands." she added, glancing at Orcan when she said this, "Tonight the Orcs become a species in their own right, able to reproduce naturally to replenish and expand their numbers. Tonight we make history!"

Upon hearing this the gathered Orcs and Trolls let out a loud collective roar and Ammaril chose that moment to turn around and lay the palm of her hand on the magically charged standing stone, drawing some of the power it contained into her. She then thrust her other hand up into the air and there was a brilliant flash of light.

Vayran and his escort of knights had just set up camp for the night when they saw the brilliant flash of light in the sky above their heads and at the same time Vayran staggered, clutching on to one of the knights for support while the small dragon perched on his shoulder leapt off and flew to a nearby tree where it chirped as it looked down at him.

"What's wrong my lord?" the knight asked.

"That flash." Vayran replied, "It was a release of magical energy more powerful than anything I've sensed before and it came from fairly close by. Something is wrong here. Something is very wrong.

The setting of the sun marked the end of the working day for most of the Elves in Syldarin who lived close to the stone circle that Ammaril had used to bring her army to the kingdom. Their jobs tended to mainly focus on manual labour and most required daylight to carry it out effectively even with the superior night vision that Elves possessed. Therefore, sunset saw them returning to their homes after a long day of work. During the day of course they had paused to eat but more significantly they had drunk water from the wells that supplied their settlements. Only infants still being nursed had not and they had consumed milk from their mothers who had.

The moment that any of them drank they were doomed. The potion introduced into the water supply began spreading through their bodies and corrupting them, just waiting for the trigger to begin their transformation and this trigger came from the sudden magical blast that Ammaril unleashed with the setting of the sun. The first sign that something was wrong came when everyone in the settlements suddenly felt a terrible sharp pain across their entire body. No-one who felt this could ignore it and they collapsed, screaming in agony. The pain did not stop, instead it intensified as the physical changes to their bodies began. Their skin began to lose its colour and become grey while their hair began to fall out. Shortly after this their facial features became distorted as their teeth became larger, in particular their lower canine teeth that grew so much that it gave them the appearance of tusks.

For some, the very old and sick, the stress of the transformation was too great and they died in great pain. Young children were spared this fate since their bodies were still growing anyway and thus the transformation was easier on them though it remained incredibly painful. Within a few minutes though several thousand Elves had simply ceased to exist and instead several thousand Orcs now existed in their place.

Such a large amount of magical power flowing through her, even for just a brief period of time was physically tiring and Ammaril had to pause to get her breath back.

"Is it done?" Orcan asked approaching her with both Tiellan and Vendril and Ammaril nodded.

"Yes." she said, still breathing heavily, "It is done. Send your men to bring them back here."

"Yes mistress." Orcan replied before he and Tiellan began to issue orders to the other Orcs.

Once again parties of Orcs headed out from their camp towards the nearby settlements. However, this time there was no need for them to remain out of sight since there were no longer any Elves close enough to be able to raise the alarm. Just as they had done the previous night a small group of Orcs made their way to each farm and village that the potion had been introduced to where the inhabitants had now been transformed into more Orcs. As the units of Orcs sent by Orcan and Tiellan approached each settlement they

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were met by the newly transformed Orcs who came out to meet them, many wielding whatever weapons that they could lay their hands on. In some cases one or two of these new Orcs would try charging the warriors, only to be knocked back before the warriors addressed them. As well as the physical transformation that they had undergone, the spell instilled in all of its victims unswerving loyalty to Ammaril and the warriors used her name to impose order then they had the newly transformed Orcs gather up useful tools and supplies before leading them from their homes to Ammaril's camp, leaving the affected settlements totally deserted.

It was still early morning when Vayran and his escort arrived at the stone circle and they dismounted from their horses to survey the area. Vayran could feel the residual energy of a large magical discharge but apart from the warriors assigned to protect him he could see no-one else around at all. Vayran had been in places that powerful spells had been cast before in time to still be able to sense the residue of the energy that had been used but in most such cases the energy had been focused and the residue had reflected this. However, this time just as Ollaris had told Vayran the nature of the magical energy that he could sense seemed wild and uncontrolled, like a burning forest compared to a hilltop beacon. It also concerned Vayran that he was still able to sense the power so long after the original surges had been sensed. It had taken more than two days to reach the stone circle and unless there had been further releases of magical power then any residue ought to have subsided by now. All of this pointed towards a vast release of energy, far more powerful than anything that Vayran had encountered before.

"We aren't the first ones here recently." Arrathan, the leader of the warriors assigned to protect Vayran said and when the sorcerer turned towards him he saw the Elf knight kneeling down and examining the ground. Vayran looked down as well and he saw that the ground was marked with numerous tracks, mainly footprints but there were also so a number of straight ruts that looked like they had been created when something narrow had been dragged across the ground.

"How many would you say?" he asked.

"A lot." Arrathan answered, "There are so many tracks that it's impossible to say for certain. There are clearly newer sets over the old. What worries me are these footprints here." Arrathan added and he pointed to a specific set of tracks and when Vayran looked at where the knight was pointing he saw that the footprints there were especially large, far larger than those that would be left by an Elf or a human.

"Ogres." Vayran said and Arrathan nodded. The presence of Ogres in Sylldarin was even more troubling than the thought of a human raiding party running about unchecked, even one that was several hundred strong. Although they were primitive and brutish, Ogres were known for their strength and resilience and unless they could all be found and removed from the island quickly they could soon establish a camp in one of its more remote areas and start breeding. After that they would begin to raid Elf settlements regularly, stealing food and taking slaves to work for them. Then it would take a major military operation to dig them out. Even if this was a war party that lacked any females a roving band of Ogres could cause a lot of damage before they were all killed. What Vayran still did not understand though was how Ogres of all creatures could have made it so far from the coast of Sylldarin without their presence being detected by someone before now.

"Yes, they're the only thing that I know of that could make tracks like these. I think that some of them were pulling hand carts of some kind. See these ruts?" he said and Vayran nodded.

"The narrow ones? Yes." he responded.

"Well they seem to be in pairs and they have larger tracks between them." Arrathan told him, "I need to take more of a look around though." he added.

"What for?" Vayran said.

"All these tracks are heading in that direction." Arrathan said and he pointed away from the stone circle, "I'd like to see where they came from."

"Okay, I'm going to take a closer look at the stones themselves. This is definitely where the surges of magical energy we detected came from. Now that we're here I can still sense the aftermath of it." Vayran said.

While Arrathan began to walk around the outside of the stone circle, his focus on the ground at his feet, Vayran entered the circle itself and almost immediately he felt the power all around him. He had seen stone circles before, including this one itself and he knew that all of the circles known to exist had been built at places where two or more ley lines crossed but never before had he sensed anything like what he sensed now. The uncontrolled nature of the energy also felt strange to Vayran, he was used to spells being cast with a specific point of origin but here the power that remained seemed to surround him equally on all side as if somehow the entire circle had been the source of the surge. It was known to sorcerers such as Vayran that the stones used in the construction of circles such as this could be used to store their power, the ancient markings on them being almost identical to those that current day sorcerers used when creating objects that they would later use to store power in and it was believed that the amount of power that they could store was vast, far more than any single Elf sorcerer in history could provide during the lifetime for even one of the tall

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stones, let alone the entire circle of them that Vayran was now standing inside and he had never heard of such stones actually being used to store magical energy in his lifetime. Vayran placed his hand against one of the stones in the circle, feeling for any power that may remain inside it but he found nothing. As far as he could tell despite their markings and the undeniable residual magical around them the stones were just as they had always been, simple lumps of inert rock. This in itself was strange, when whatever event had taken place to cause the release of so much energy Vayran would have expected at least some of it to be absorbed into the stones. However, then another thought occurred to him.

"This is where the power came from. It power came out of the stones." he said to himself.

"Lord Vayran!" Arrathan called out and Vayran turned towards the sound of the knight's voice to see him now walking across the circle towards him.

"Yes? Have you found the direction that these tracks came from?" he asked.

"That's just it my lord. They don't come from anywhere. There are hundreds of tracks leaving the circle but I can't find a single set heading into it." Arrathan told him.

"Could they have come from the same direction that they left in and trampled over their own tracks?" Vayran suggested.

"It's unlikely my lord." Arrathan answered, "Even with hundreds of men marching back in the same direction that they had come from I would have expected at least a handful of the original tracks to have survived where the ground was less well trodden. I know that some of the larger dragons could fly a person somewhere and then drop them to the ground without them having to touch the ground at any point themselves but—"

"But dragons of that size are uncommon and must be carefully trained. Whereas this would have required a flock in the hundreds." Vayran said as the small dragon on his shoulder chirped at the mention of the word 'dragon', "Besides, greater dragons may be able to transport individual Elves or humans but even the biggest would struggle to carry an Ogre, let alone a cart."

"Yes my lord." Arrathan said, "I just don't understand how so many people could have entered the circle without leaving any tracks."

"Unfortunately Arrathan I am starting to think that I do know how it was done." Vayran said.

"Some sort of spell? The source of the magical energy that the sorcerers sensed?" Arrathan said.

"Yes, though what sort of spell could move so many people I don't know. Now do I know where they came from. My initial guess would be from another stone circle but that could mean that they came from almost any inhabited part of the world." Vayran said, "The sorcerers of all five Elven kingdoms have maintained constant contact with one another for centuries and I've never heard of any of them uncovering such powerful magic. They wouldn't bring Ogres here anyway."

"Humans are widely known to use Ogre mercenaries when they can, but are human magic users so powerful?" Arrathan asked.

"Not that I know of. We Elves live much longer than humans do. Three or four times as long typically and that time gives our sorcerers just as long to develop their powers. If a human sorcerer has stumbled across such power then that is a reason for great concern. Greater still if they have been able to pass that knowledge on to others." Vayran said, "However, there is another possibility. One perhaps less worrying than humans gaining such power but still extremely concerning. We could be dealing with a Vampire. We know that they wield considerable magical power, they have lived for thousands of years of course. The magical surges were sensed at night as well, which would fit with the magic user responsible being a Vampire who has to avoid the daylight at all costs. On the other hand I have never heard of a Vampire acting so brazenly. They survive by remaining hidden with society, even within the primitive cultures of the humans. They are known to have small bands of followers and they may hire mercenaries when they need warriors but I find it hard to believe that even the most foolhardy of their kind would dare do something that would attract as much attention as raising an army and leading an invasion of Syldarin."

"What are your orders now my lord?" Arrathan said and Vayran considered what to do next. So far all he knew was that a large number of people, including Ogres had appeared within the stone circle but how this had been achieved, where they had come from or why they were here in Syldarin remained a mystery to him and he did not yet feel that it was time to contact Supreme Sorcerer Ollaris in the Tower of Sorcery.

"I need to see a map of the area." Vayran replied and Arrathan reached into the bag slung at his side, taking out a rolled up map.

"Here my lord." he said, unrolling the map and resting it against the standing stone beside them so that the two Elves could look at it, "This is where we are." he added and he pointed to the spot on the map that represented the stone circle.

Although the map did not show the entire island of Syldarin it did so quite a wide area around it and it included all of the nearby settlements.

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“Here.” Vayran said as he pointed to some of these one at a time, “These settlements are all fairly close by. It’s possible that even if they didn’t notice whatever was causing the surges of magical energy then they may have noticed increased activity in the area from the people that were here and left these tracks at our feet. We should travel to them and ask the inhabitants if they have seen anything strange going on recently. I hate to say it considering that we are within Sylldarin but I don’t think that it would be safe for us to split up. We’ll have stay together and visit all of these places one by one. Starting right here with this village.” Vayran then pointed to the map as well, picking out the closest settlement shown on it and Arrathan nodded.

“Yes my lord. That’s about a mile from here Just over that hill over there.” the Elven knight said and he pointed into the distance where there were several hills.

“Good. Then it shouldn’t take us long to get there.” Vayran replied.

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Even before Vayran and the knights reached the nearby village they could tell that something was wrong. The sun had risen some time earlier but there were no signs of life visible at all other than a handful of animals wandering around unchecked.

"Can anyone see any of the villagers?" Vayran asked as he looked towards the village the moment they came over the top of a hill and saw it beneath them.

"No my lord. The village looks entirely deserted." Arrathan responded.

"We'd better take a look. If something has happened to the villagers then it's too much of a coincidence to be unrelated to the magical energy surges." Vayran told him, "You men should be ready for a fight though. Who knows what could be waiting for us down there?"

The Elves rode into the village, half of the knights held their spears in their hands while the others drew their swords just in case an attacker appeared too close for them to use their swords. Moving through the village on horseback there were no obvious signs of violence, all of the buildings remained intact and there were no bodies or blood trails anywhere. They continued into the centre of the village, an open area surrounded by structures in the traditional Elven style architecture with circular bases and tapering walls before terminating in central spires. Many of these were constructed of wood so it would not have taken much for an invader to raze them to the ground by setting fire to them. However, they remained intact.

"Hello! Is there anybody here?" Vayran called out as he and his escort looked around but there was no response.

"If there is anyone here then they're keeping quiet about it." Arrathan said.

"Then we'll have to search the village one building at a time. Divide your men into pairs to search. I will wait here." Vayran ordered.

The eight knights promptly dismounted and split into pairs to search the village's buildings, starting with those immediately around them. Meanwhile Vayran remained at the centre of the village with their horses and looked around again. There was definitely something about the village other than its total lack of people that felt strange but he could not identify what it was. It felt to Vayran as if there was something magical close by but it seemed to be weak and he could only sense it because it was coming from all around him at once. None of the doors to the village buildings were locked or barred so the Elf knights were able to just walk right into all of them and conduct searches of their interiors. Inside they found that some obvious items had been removed whereas others had been left behind and there did not seem to be any logical pattern to what was gone and was still present. Items that had been removed were basics such as kitchen utensils and blankets whereas items of obvious value were still on open display. Of the occupants of those buildings though, there were no signs at all.

At least until one of the pairs of knights entered a small house and discovered a body.

"Lord Vayran! Lord Vayran!" one of the knights yelled as he rushed back out of the house and Vayran came to investigate why his name was being called.

"What is it?" he responded.

"You should see this my lord. There's a body in here." the knight told him.

"Do you think it's one of the villagers?" Vayran asked.

"I don't know. I'm not even sure that it's an Elf." the knight answered.

Curious about what the knight meant by this Vayran rushed towards him and then followed him inside the house. This was small enough that the interior consisted of just a single room and the body was lying on the floor behind a table in the middle of this space.

Vayran walked around the table and looked down at the body, at which point it became instantly obvious what the knight had meant about not being able to tell whether or not it was of an Elf. The body was curled into a fetal position and at first glance the body could have been said to belong to an Elf of advanced years but there were several clear differences. The once pale skin had become discoloured and taken on a grey hue to it but the most obvious difference was the malformation of the lower jaw that now gave the dead man an obvious under bite.

"What happened to him?" the knight who had remained in the house asked while Vayran studied the corpse closely.

"I don't know for certain. I've never seen anything like this before." Vayran replied, "Nothing natural could cause this though so there must be a magical reason behind it. I want this body wrapped so we can take it back to the tower of sorcery for further study."

"But there is nothing here to wrap the body in." one of the knights pointed out.

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"Then keep searching. If there's nothing at all in the entire village then we'll use one of our blankets but whatever happens, this body must be taken back with us." Vayran said.

The search of the village revealed two more bodies of elderly Elves, both of these female and they were both in a similar condition to the man that had been discovered first. While almost everything of practical use had been removed from the village a handful of damaged sacks were discovered in a barn and these were used to wrap all three bodies before they were loaded onto the back of some of the knight's horses.

"What do you want to do now Lord Vayran? Should we carry on searching or should we head back?" Arrathan asked once the bodies were secure.

"We need to know whether what happened here has happened anywhere else." Vayran replied as another other of the knights started to raise the bucket from the village well that they were gathered around so that he could take a drink, "We'll visit a few more of the nearby settlements but then we need to return to the Tower of Sorcery. I don't want us still to be out here when it gets dark." Vayran continued before he sensed something magical from close by and he turned around just as the knight at the well was dipping a cup into the bucket of water than he had raised, "No! Don't drink that!" Vayran snapped and he lashed out with his hand, knocking the cup from the knight's grip.

"What's wrong my lord?" Arrathan asked, "Do you think that the water could be poisoned?"

"In a sense, yes." Vayran answered, "There is something magical in that water, I can feel its power. I don't think it's so strong that it could cause whatever happened to these people on its own, it would need far more power to do that but I think that it is part of what happened here. Get the bucket down."

"Yes my lord." the knight by the well said and he placed the bucket of water on the ground before Vayran crouched beside it.

"Good, now let's see how it reacts." he said and he lowered one of his hands towards the water in the bucket, one finger pointing out until it was hovering just above the surface of the water but not touching it. Meanwhile the knights all gathered around him, "Here goes." Vayran added and then he released a tiny amount of magical power in the form of a spark that leapt from the tip of his outstretched finger into the water.

Immediately the water in the bucket reacted to this spark with a pattern of lights that spread throughout it. This lasted for just a few moments before the lights faded away again and the water returned to its previous state.

"Is that normal?" Arrathan asked and Vayran shook his head.

"No, no it isn't normal. The power I released should have just disappeared into the water without any sort of reaction but something has obviously been added to this water that reacts to magical energy." he said.

"So when the villagers drank from the well they were drinking whatever that is as well." Arrathan said.

"Exactly. It must have been some kind of potion that was waiting to be triggered and I think that the large flash we saw in the sky last night was that trigger." Vayran said, "After that, whatever the potion was meant to do to the villagers it did it and these three unfortunate souls were unable to survive it."

"That was a large trigger." Arrathan commented and Vayran nodded.

"Yes, much larger than what would be needed even to affect an entire village. That blast could have affected every settlement for miles around here. Let me see that map again." he said.

Arrathan took out the map of the area again and unrolled it so that he and Vayran could study it. While this village was the closest settlement to the stone circle there were numerous others within a few miles of it.

"This river along here will provide water for these two villages and the farms along its banks. So they are probably unaffected by whatever was added to this well." Vayran said, running his finger along the path of a river shown on the map and Arrathan nodded.

"Yes, it's harder to poison running water. Still water in ponds goes stagnant, not the flowing water of rivers." he said.

"Exactly." Vayran agreed, "On the other hand there are still farms and villages that draw their water from wells in this area. We should investigate some of them to see if whatever happened here has been repeated at any of them. Then we'll head for the river and see if the villagers along it have experienced anything strange in the last few days."

"My lord, if we head west for a couple of miles then we get to this farm here." Arrathan said, pointing to a farm that was fairly close to their current location, "Then if we turn north for another couple of miles we reach this second farm. After that continuing for four more miles gets us to this village here at the river crossing."

"How long do you think that ride will take us?" Vayran asked.

"Not long. We can be at the river by nightfall as long as we don't spend too long at either of the farms." Arrathan told him.

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"I don't intend to stay for long, just enough time to inspect their wells and see if they've been tampered with." Vayran replied.

"Even if there are still people there my lord?" Arrathan said and Vayran nodded.

"Yes. If something prevented them from being affected by whatever was added to the water here then we need to know." the sorcerer said before he stepped back from the map. Arrathan then rolled the map up again and put it away.

"You heard the sorcerer men," he then said to the other knights, "we ride west."

The Orc camp had expanded in size massively thanks to the influx of the newly transformed Elves and Orcan made his way between numerous tents towards the one occupied by his sister.

"Mistress I must speak with you." he said from just outside.

"Come in Orcan." Ammaril responded from inside her tent and Orcan pulled back the flap to enter it. Inside Ammaril was studying one of the books that she had taken from the Great Library in Oscay, making notes as she translated the contents, "Yes Orcan, what is it?" she asked as she closed the book and put it aside.

"We have many more warriors mistress." he said.

"Yes, that is what you wanted isn't it?" Ammaril pointed out.

"Yes mistress but warriors need arms and armour. We do not have enough." Orcan said.

"I thought you had put some of our new arrivals to work making weapons and armour." Ammaril commented.

"Yes mistress. Wooden clubs and shields. They will do but they are not true weapons for an army. The shields will splinter without rims and the clubs will break. We need weapons of iron and steel. Swords and spears. We need helmets and mail coats." Orcan said.

Ammaril got up from her seat and approached her transformed brother.

"My dear Orcan you shall have the weapons and armour you desire, along with the forges needed to make more. All thanks to our dear Uncle Tieral." she said.

Tieral was the younger brother of Ammaril and Orcan's late father and the father of Tiellan. He had provided the warriors for their expedition to Oscay out of the large garrison he maintained at his fortress on the southern coast of Syldarin. Unlike King Larallus and now Dellaron, Tieral had regarded humans as a significant threat and their frequent raiding of the Elven coast had prompted him to fortify the area under his control as heavily as he could and he had taken steps to ensure that his forces were well supplied. This included keeping large stocks of additional weapons and armour in his fortress that could be used to equip any levies of troops needed in an emergency.

"We will take the fortress?" Orcan said and Ammaril smiled at him.

"I will take the fortress Orcan." she replied, "There is no way that we can sneak any of your troops inside without the alarm being raised. On the other hand I will be able to enter and move about the fortress more openly. In the meantime you need to plan for your forces to seize the villages in this area that we have yet to transform. Those that get their water from rivers that cannot be used to deliver the potion rather than wells that can. They are virtually undefended and vulnerable so even troops with clubs and wooden shields ought to be able to take them as long as they are properly trained and led and I have every confidence in you and Tiellan to achieve that but it has to be quickly."

"How quickly mistress?" Orcan asked.

"Soon. Within the next day or two at most. We need to take the villages and fortress together and before anyone can raise the alarm about the settlements that we have already transformed." Ammaril answered, "The key to taking the villages is to assault them with an overwhelming force to get them to submit quickly. They must realise that their situation is hopeless and surrender before it becomes necessary to kill too many of them. Every Elven life lost is an Orc lost once the transformation spell is cast."

"Yes mistress." Orcan said, "Give me another day and I will have your army ready to move."

"Excellent. We will arrange a meeting point not far from Uncle Tieral's fortress where the stone will be taken. Your troops will bring the inhabitants of the villages there as well and once enough time has passed for the garrison at the fortress to have all consumed the potion I will cast the spell and transform them all at the same time. Then we will control the fortress and before long all of the land around it as well." Ammaril responded.

Vayran and his knights were able to reach the farm to the west of the deserted village just before midday and it was quickly apparent that something was wrong here as well. Although the farm would have had far fewer inhabitants than the village and some would have been out tending to crops and herds at this time there ought to have been some sign of life around the farm buildings. Instead the farm was silent as the party approached, despite the outward appearance of everything being normal.

"Hello!" Vayran called out just as he had at the village but again there was no response and he looked at the

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knights accompanying him, "Locate the well." he told them and, still on horseback the knights split up to search the area around the farm until one of them located the well. This was little more than a hole in the ground that had wooden doors to prevent objects, animals or people from falling into it accidentally but the presence of a bucket attached to a winch gave away what it was.

"Over here!" the knight shouted as he dismounted and secured his horse before he strode to the doors and opened one, peering down into the well where he saw only darkness below.

"You've found it?" Vayran asked as he and the other knights rode towards the well and then dismounted.

"I think so my lord." the knight replied and he stood up straight as the others gathered around him.

"What do you think my lord?" Arrathan added.

"Bring a bucket of water up from it, then I'll be able to tell." Vayran replied and the knight who had located the well tossed the bucket into it, letting the rope attached to the bucket unravel before there was a 'splash' from below.

"Well there's water down there at least." Arrathan said before the other knight began to winch the bucket back up the well. As soon as the bucket reached the top of the well Vayran could feel a certain level of magical power within it.

"Hold the bucket." He told the knight who had brought it up from the well and as the bucket of water was held out towards him Vayran extended his hand and a finger again, sending a small spark of energy into the water. The reaction to this within the water was exactly the same as it had been with the well water from the deserted village and a pattern of lights spread through the water in the bucket, continuing for a short while before it finally dissipated, "Yes," Vayran said, nodding his head as he spoke, "it's the same as before."

"Should we search for more bodies?" one of the knights asked.

"No, we don't have time. We know that whatever happened at the village probably also happened here and that's enough for me." Vayran answered, "We'll move on to the next farm now."

After closing the well doors again the Elves returned to their horses before riding away from the empty farm, heading north towards the next one that they intended to search.

Tiellan and another Orc were already mounted on a pair of horses when Ammaril emerged from her tent ready to mount a third. As part of the load that each horse carried there was a pair of water skins on each. Rather than water though, these had been filled with more of the potion that Ammaril used to transform her victims.

"It's about a day's ride to Uncle Tial's fortress Orcan." Ammaril said as her brother helped her into the saddle of a third horse, "Once there I'll enter through the main gate and meet Tial by the secret entrance so that he can give me the rest of the potion. Then we'll head for the meeting place. You need to be there with the captives and the stone in two days. Do you understand?"

"Yes, we will be there." Orcan replied before he looked at the two Orcs that would be escorting Ammaril. Both of them wore hooded cloaks so that their appearances could be concealed from a distance and the plan called for neither of them to enter the fortress themselves, "You should have a stronger escort mistress." he added.

"Orcan I am so flattered at your concern for my safety," Ammaril responded, "but too large an escort would draw more attention. I would go alone but I cannot carry enough of the potion on one horse without it looking strange and I need Tiellan to show me the secret entrance to his father's fortress. Do you doubt our cousin's ability to protect me if it becomes necessary?"

Orcan and Tiellan looked at one another and Tiellan grinned at Orcan, revealing his enlarged teeth.

"No. He will keep you safe." Orcan said eventually.

"Yes he will. Now remember Orcan, two days time." Ammaril responded before she and her escort rode away.

The next farm that Vayran and the knights of the Royal Guard repeated the pattern already established at the previous one as well as the deserted village. As Vayran and his knights approached the settlement it appeared perfectly peaceful from a distance and there were no indications of damage to any of the structures. When they entered the farm though there was no-one who responded to the greeting that Vayran called out. The well was quickly located and a bucket of water drawn from it so that it could be tested. Unsurprisingly this reacted in the same way as the previous two lots of well water had done, with a pattern of lights spreading through the water before it eventually faded.

"The same again." Arrathan commented when he saw this.

"Yes. I don't think that there's any doubt now that the disappearance of the people who lived in these places is down to whatever was put in the water." Vayran replied, "Now we'll head for the river crossing. Assuming that everything is as it should be there, that's where we'll spend the night."

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“Good idea. I for one will feel safer sleeping somewhere civilised, even if it is only a small village, than setting up camp by a road.” Arrathan said.

“There’s one last thing to do before we set off though. I need to send word to the supreme sorcerer.” Vayran said as he reached into his bag and produced a sheet of folded paper along with a small stick of charcoal. Using this he wrote a brief note on the paper and folded it up again. Returning the charcoal to his back he took out a smaller leather bag that he then put the note inside before clipping it to the collar of the small dragon that was perched on his shoulder. Then he lifted the creature down and held it in front of his face, staring into its eyes, “Listen to me Reyod.” he said, projecting his thoughts into the dragon’s brain, “Fly to the Tower of Sorcery. This is for the supreme sorcerer. For Ollaris. Do you understand?”

The dragon looked back at Vayran before it chirped and stretched out its wings, flapping them briefly and Vayran smiled at the creature.

“Very good Reyod. Now fly.” he said and the dragon leapt up into the air and flew away, turning in the direction of the capital city and the Tower of Sorcery.

“How long will it take for it to get there my lord?” Arrathan asked.

“Reyod can fly quickly for an extended amount of time but I doubt that he will reach the tower before nightfall.” Vayran answered.

“So assuming that the King is told first thing in the morning a force should be able to be despatched later tomorrow.” Arrathan said.

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The village at the river crossing was only a short horse ride away and even before Vayran and his escort reached it they knew that its inhabitants had not suffered the same fate as those in the previous settlements that they had visited. Before the village even came into view they rode past a pair of Elves who were standing by the bank of the river. From the looks of the baskets they had with them they were fishermen and the two Elves stopped what they were doing as soon as they saw the group on horseback approaching. The sight of eight armed and armoured members of the royal guard on horseback along with someone whose clothing demonstrated that he was a man of privilege was something highly unusual in this area and they looked on curiously as the mounted party rode past them towards the village.

The reaction of the villagers to the unexpected arrival of a unit of cavalry was similar to that of the fishermen and while many looked on while they dismounted someone ran to fetch the village leader.

"We should water the horses my lord." Arrathan suggested, "We've been riding them hard and we haven't been able to give them a drink yet this morning."

"Yes do it. I'll try to find whoever is in charge around here." Vayran replied right before a white haired Elf came walking towards them.

"Greetings and welcome to our village noble sirs. My name is Ollos of Ashin, steward of the village." the man said, "May I ask what brings you to our peaceful corner of the kingdom?"

Before he answered the man Vayran took down the ornately carved staff that he had been carrying on his horse and stood with it in front of him. A sorcerer's staff was effectively his badge of office.

"I am Vayran of Toros, sorcerer of the King. With me are men of the King's Royal Guard. Is there somewhere that you and I can speak in private while my men see to our horses?" he told the man.

"Of course my lord sorcerer. Please come with me to my home, we may speak there." Ollos said.

"Thank you. Lead the way." Vayran said and he followed Ollos towards his house, the villagers parting to let them pass as they went.

The steward's home was roughly central in the village and it was larger than the other houses present, big enough that there was a ring of outer rooms around the outside while a large central room occupied the middle and it was to here that Ollos took Vayran. The room contained a circular table and a number of chairs, giving it the appearance of a dining room and as Ollos sat down he indicated for Vayran to do the same.

There were three jugs on the table as well as several cups and Ollos picked up one of each.

"Please have a seat my lord. I'm afraid that I don't have much wine to offer." he said.

"Water will do fine." Vayran replied and Ollos put down the jug that he held before he slid another across the table towards him. Vayran picked up the jug and smiled when he sensed no magic coming from the contents.

"Is something the matter with the water my lord?" Ollos asked, noticing the expression of Vayran's face.

"No, just the opposite in fact. I assume that you get your water directly from the river?" Vayran said.

"Yes, even in years of drought there has always been enough for our needs and we have never needed to dig any wells. Is that important?" Ollos responded.

"As a matter of fact yes it is steward." Vayran said, "Several nights ago members of my order detected large surges of magical energy in this area and I was sent to find out what caused them. Then last night I sensed another such surge myself, one that was marked by a bright flash in the sky."

"Yes my lord, we saw it ourselves. We thought that it was just lightning." Ollos said and Vayran smiled, understanding how someone without his power could make that mistake.

"Not in this case steward. Have you seen any other lights that you have thought were lightning recently?" he asked.

"No my lord. Last night was the first." Ollos said, "But what is happening? You said that it was connected to the water."

"Yes I think it is. I have visited three other settlements today, another village and a pair of farms. All three are now totally deserted. The common factor between them appears to be that they all got their water from wells and when I examined it I found that it had been magically charged somehow, most likely from something added to the wells and then triggered by the flash that you took to be lightning. We found three bodies at the village that were badly deformed that we're taking back to the Tower of Sorcery to be properly examined. It's a long ride back so we'd like to stay here overnight before we set off tomorrow." Vayran explained.

"Of course you may stay my lord. Do you think we are safe from what is happening?" Ollos asked.

"From the potion I think was added to the wells? Yes. It would be difficult to pour enough of any potion into the river that it could poison you before it simply flowed away and was lost. On the other hand I don't know what the reason for any of this or who is behind it, though I suspect that they have a considerable force at

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their command. We found a large number of tracks that we haven't been able to explain at the stone circle. Just because you haven't been attacked by magic doesn't mean that whoever is responsible won't try a more direct means of attack. Do you have weapons?" Vayran answered.

"Weapons? A few. Mainly farming tools that can be wielded as weapons but there are some bows used for hunting." Ollos said, "How could an invading army be here though? We are far from the coast."

"That I can't say. It looks like they may have used more magic to get here but so far I can't tell you how it was done. Hopefully my order will be able to discover that when I return. I've already sent word back to my order and I expect that King Dellaron will send warriors to hunt this mysterious force down but they won't be here for several days yet. Until then you'll be on your own." Vayran said.

On their way back from Hessenstadt to Teuten the group chose a different spot to stop and make camp, not wanting to sleep near to where they had dumped the bodies of the mercenaries who had attacked them on the way there. Just in case they came under attack again they had recovered the weapons that they concealed outside Hessenstadt and it was agreed that Will, Yilven and Gromar would take turns to keep watch for trouble again. As they set up camp though Dominic was keen to find out as much as he could about the group's exploits in Oscay.

"So the Oscari had cast a spell that froze their library in time?" he said when Yilven and Lucia told him about how they had found the Great Library, "But the power required for something like that would be vast."

"Yes it was." Yilven said, "Ammaril had a standing stone removed from a nearby circle to drain it off. That's how she got the power for the blood magic she used on the rest of the expedition."

"She didn't try to transform you or Lucia though?" Dominic said.

"I was able to avoid giving her my blood." Yilven told him.

"And she didn't ask me for any of mine." Lucia added.

"Okay I'll light the fire now." Horace then announced as he reached for his tinder box.

"Allow me, please." Dominic said and he held out the staff he carried towards the neat pile of wood and dry vegetation so that the head of the staff was just a few inches away from it. Then there was a brief flash of light as he channelled a tiny amount of power through the staff and all of a sudden the wood and debris burst into flames, "It's not how we're taught to use our power but it works." he added as he sat down beside the fire, "Now about this standing stone. You say that Ammaril used it as a store for magical energy?"

"That's right." Yilven said.

"Interesting. Of course it's widely known to sorcerers around the world that they can be used for that but I've never heard of anyone trying it before. Crafting something smaller such as a staff or wand is far easier." Dominic said.

"What about that knife you've got?" Gromar said, looking at Lucia, "Didn't you want to find out what all those markings meant?"

"Knife? What knife?" Dominic said, looking at Gromar and Lucia.

"This belonged to Diera, our friend who was killed on the way to Hessenstadt." Lucia told him as she drew her knife and then she handed it to Dominic, "There are strange markings on it."

"Strange? I see these all the time." Dominic replied as he looked at the markings on the knife's blade, "See?" and he held the knife next to his staff, holding both out towards Lucia and as she leant closer she saw that the markings on the knife also appeared on his staff.

"What do they mean?" she asked.

"They mean that this knife has been crafted to store magical power. It's rare for a knife to be crafted this way." Dominic answered.

"So what was Diera doing with it?" Horace said.

"So she wasn't a spellcaster herself then?" Dominic commented.

"No she wasn't, though apparently her mother was." Will said.

"A family heirloom then perhaps." Dominic suggested.

"Or a gift from the magister." Will said before he looked at Horace and added, "Do you remember the swords and shields that the mercenaries that worked for him carried?"

"Yes." Horace replied, nodding his head, "They were painted."

"With symbols just like those." Will said, pointing to the dagger, "We thought it was some kind of enchantment but obviously we didn't know what they were for."

"We thought casting magic took a lot of time and effort, other than making sparks to light fires of course." Horace said and Dominic smiled.

"Yes, a brief uncontrolled release is quick and easy but achieving more complicated results does take time. On the other hand shortcuts can be taken. This dagger has the runes necessary for its ability etched into it

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for example, but I could paint the same markings on for a similar effect that would be less effective and temporary." he said.

"So how much effort does it take to turn hundreds of Elves into these Orcs?" Gromar asked.

"Now that is a good question. From the sound of what you've already told me then the answer is a lot, backed up by power that no sorcerer in history has been able to wield. Of course if Ammaril is tapping into the power of a spell that persisted for thousands of years then she has access to that sort of power. The question I'm asking myself is just how long it will last her. If she is going to repeat the transformation to expand her army then eventually she's going to run out of power." Dominic said, handing the dagger back to Lucia.

"The question is how much trouble can she cause before she does?" Gromar said.

Reyod flew in a straight line towards Syllda, the capital city of Syldarin but the lesser dragon still did not reach the city before night fell. The Tower of Sorcery was kept well lit though and the creature flew towards an open window, flying straight into the tower and along its hallways until it came across one of the occupants, at which point he landed right beside the startled Elf sorcerer and began to chirp.

The bag around Reyod's neck was obvious and the Elf removed this carefully before opening it to take a look at the contents. Seeing that it was a note addressed to the supreme sorcerer he leapt to his feet and called out to another nearby Elf.

"This is a message for Supreme Sorcerer Ollaris. Make sure that this dragon is taken care of while I take it to him." he said before he rushed along the hallway and up several flights of stairs until he reached the entrance to Ollaris' private chambers and he knocked on the door, "Supreme sorcerer!" he shouted.

There was a short pause while Ollaris made his way to the door and opened it.

"Yes, what's all the fuss about initiate?" he asked, looking at the younger Elf and determining his position within their order from the basic nature of the robes that he wore.

"Supreme sorcerer, this message has just arrived for you. It was carried around the neck of a dragon." the initiate told Ollaris and his eyes widened.

"Vayran." he said, "Come in quickly. Give me that note."

The initiate entered Ollaris' chambers and handed him the note. Ollaris unfolded this and began to read.

"Supreme sorcerer what-" the initiate began but Ollaris held up his hand for him to be quiet.

"I sent Vayran of Toros to investigate the bursts of power that our scryers sensed a few nights ago. He said that he would send word via his dragon when he found out what was happening." he said.

"And what does he say is happening supreme sorcerer?" the initiate asked.

"He isn't sure." Ollaris answered, "However, he has uncovered a number of very disturbing facts. There appears to be an army on the march in Syldarin that should not be here. It simply appeared within a stone circle. The note then says that this army poisoned the water supply to a number of settlements with a magical potion. Some people are dead and horrifically disfigured while most of the inhabitants have simply vanished." he continued.

"Supreme sorcerer, how can any of that be possible?" the initiate asked.

"I don't know and with only a small number of knights from the Royal Guard to support him Vayran isn't in a position to carry out a thorough investigation. Is Vayran's dragon still here?" Ollaris replied and the initiate nodded.

"Yes supreme sorcerer, or at least it was. I asked that it be taken care of." he said.

"Good. Make sure it stays here until I get back." Ollaris said.

"Where are you going supreme sorcerer?" the initiate said.

"To the palace. I need to talk to the King." Ollaris told him.

As supreme sorcerer, Ollaris was shown straight into the palace despite the lateness of the hour. He had to wait while King Dellaron was informed of his presence but it was not long before he was shown into the throne room where Dellaron sat with a pair of major dragons, creatures the size of large dogs, sitting either side of him.

"Supreme sorcerer, this is a surprise," Dellaron said as Ollaris entered the throne room and then bowed to the King, "and if there is one thing that my late father taught me it is that surprises from sorcerers are rarely good things. Heaven knows that my sister's surprises for us weren't. So what brings you into our presence in such a hurry."

"Your majesty I bring you a warning about a potential danger in the heart of Syldarin." Ollaris said.

"And what is this danger supreme sorcerer?" Dellaron asked.

"I am uncertain your majesty, though I know it exists." Ollaris answered and Dellaron sighed.

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"My father also taught me not to expect a straight answer from a sorcerer. My sister was the same, always full of secrets." he said. Then after a moment's pause he added, "Just tell me what is going on."

"A few days ago our sryers sensed large surges of magical energy that could not be explained. I sent one of my sorcerers to investigate these with a small force of men from your Royal Guard and I have just received a message from him reporting what he has found." Ollaris said.

"What has he found supreme sorcerer?" Dellaron said.

"He says that there are signs of an army at large in Syldarin that just appeared from nowhere within one of the ancient Oscari stone circles. Also the inhabitants of several nearby settlements have vanished. A few bodies were found at one but they were massively disfigured. Vayran, my agent believes that someone has used sorcery of some sort to pollute the water supply of those settlements." Ollaris explained.

"Is what your agent says possible supreme sorcerer?" Dellaron asked and Ollaris hesitated for a moment.

"Without further investigation I would have to say that it is beyond the knowledge of my order your majesty." he said, "The disfigurement of the bodies that were found would suggest some sort of blood magic."

"The teaching of blood magic is supposed to be banned supreme sorcerer. Even humans, as uncivilised as they are have realised the dangers in it. I've heard that those suspected of its practice are burned at the stake." Dellaron said.

"Yes your majesty, though I can think of no other way to accomplish what has been described to me. Vayran is on his way back to us now with three bodies for examination. We may be able to tell more but in the meantime I would like to suggest that you send a larger force to search for this army. I will of course put members of my order at your disposal as well." Ollaris said.

"How big a force are we talking about? I have not long assumed the throne and I would rather not become known as a king who started his reign by sending thousands of troops on a fool's errand." Dellaron said.

"Your majesty I can assure you that this is no fool's errand. I consider Vayran to be one of the most reliable and trustworthy members of my order so if he says there is something wrong then I believe that there is." Ollaris said, "As for how many troops to send I can only tell you that the evidence found of this mysterious invading army suggests that it is several hundred strong and includes Ogres in its ranks."

Dellaron let out a brief laugh when he heard this.

"Ogres?" he exclaimed, "How is an army of Ogres supposed to have reached Syldarin?"

"Again, Vayran is not entirely sure your majesty. However, he thinks that someone may have learned to manipulate the Oscari stone circles to magically move from one place to another." Ollaris said and Dellaron frowned.

"Move from one place to another with magic?" he commented.

"Yes your majesty. The exact purpose of the stone circles is unknown to us but perhaps someone somewhere else has managed to determine that they are a means of transport and how to use them. It would certainly explain one or two obscure stories that I have heard relating to them." Ollaris said.

"What do these stories say exactly?" Dellaron said.

"They are tales of random individuals either disappearing after being seen within stone circles or alternatively strangers from far off lands being found wandering confused near to them. I have never known anyone who this happened to but the stories exist in the records of my order." Ollaris said.

"So someone could bring an army to Syldarin without us even knowing about it?" Dellaron responded.

"If that is the answer to our questions, yes your majesty." Ollaris said.

Dellaron paused to consider what he had been told. Despite the amount of unknowns in what he was being told it was clear that there was something happening in his kingdom that needed to be addressed before it got out of hand but with so little information to go on there was the risk that anything he did could just make the situation worse.

"Send for Lord Vellyn." Dellaron told one of the guards who had been stood by the door while he spoke with Ollaris and the guard bowed before he hurried from the room. Dellaron then turned back to Ollaris, "I will have Lord Vellyn assemble a force of men to send to the area where your agent has been operating. I want you to provide at least three of your order to support them. They will leave as soon as possible."

"Yes your majesty. I shall attend to it immediately." Ollaris replied and he bowed his head before he too turned to leave the throne room.

Vayran and the knights accompanying him had been provided with the use of a house while they remained in the village by the river crossing. To ensure that they were not taken by surprise while they slept two of the knights remained awake at a time and it was one of the men on watch that woke Vayran in the early hours of the morning before the sun came up.

"My lord your dragon has returned." he said as Vayran looked up at him.

"When? Where is he?" Vayran asked, getting out of bed as quickly as he could.

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"Just now. He is outside my lord." the knight answered.

"Show me." Vayran told him and the two Elves rushed outside into the night. As soon as they were outside Vayran saw the other knight on watch looking up at the top of the spire of a nearby building where a lesser dragon was perched.

"Reyod! To me." Vayran called out and the dragon obediently swooped down towards the sorcerer, landing on his outstretched arm. The lesser dragon still had the leather bag attached to its collar and Vayran could tell that there was something contained within it. He carefully removed the bag and let the dragon move to its usual perching place on his shoulder before he opened the bag to find a letter inside. It was obvious that this was not the same letter than he had written to Supreme Sorcerer Ollaris though, instead it was written in ink and came from the supreme sorcerer, "It's a response from Supreme Sorcerer Ollaris." Vayran added.

"What does he say my lord?" one of the knights asked.

"He has met with the King. He is sending troops to find the mysterious army and discover what has happened to our people." Vayran answered.

"Does it contain orders for us?" the knight then asked.

"It says that we are expected back in Sylda. The supreme sorcerer wants to examine the bodies we have recovered in person." Vayran told him, "We will leave at first light."

## 10

As the sun came up Orcan had his now expanded force line up for a final inspection before he sent them to launch their attacks. Unlike the small groups sent to contaminate the wells with Ammaril's potion these were significant forces with at least a hundred troops in each. The core of the formations were the original Orc warriors who had been a part of the expedition to Oscan. They were not only the most experienced of Orcan's troops but also the best equipped and he had assigned thirty to each of the five groups. The largest component of each force though were newly transformed Orcs, created from simple villagers and farmers they had been given basic training and equipped with whatever weapons could be fashioned for them. Their strength lay in their numbers, with five of them for every one of the trained warriors. The final part of each force were the Trolls and although there were many of these available Orcan had limited the numbers that would be taking part in these attacks. Although Ogre society was violent and this made Trolls powerful fighters their ability to operate as part of an organised force was highly limited and like the newly transformed Orcs they would need close supervision by the professional troops that would in effect lead each group. Given that the aim of the attacks was not to destroy the settlements that were being targeted Orcan would have left the Trolls out of them altogether but their sheer size was intimidating and he hoped that the very sight of them would scare the Elf villagers into surrendering.

"You know what is wanted of you." Orcan said as he addressed the assembled forces, "Each group will travel to one of the villages along the river and once there you will take the occupants captive so that they can be taken before our queen. Then you will escort them to the meeting place where they will join our ranks, ready to conquer the rest of Syldarin. For those of you who are new to us I tell you to watch and listen. Your leaders will tell you where to go and how to fight. Do as they say and you will be victorious. Ignore them and you will answer to me."

While Orcan was preparing his troops Ammaril and her escort were approaching the fortress belonging to Tiellan's father, Ammaril's uncle. The fortress was visible from a considerable distance away thanks to the traditional Elven spires that tipped each of the fortress's towers. The fortress was built at the top of a hill and the land around the fortress had been cleared so that any besieging army would have to advance uphill and in the open.

"This way mistress." Tiellan said to Ammaril and he pointed towards an area of rocky ground about a quarter of a mile from the fortress.

"That is where the entrance to the secret tunnel is located?" Ammaril asked and Tiellan nodded.

"Yes mistress." he said, "There is a door that is barred and guarded at the other end."

Ammaril had heard of the secret tunnel into the fortress as a child. Again this was intended for use should the fortress come under siege, allowing the defenders to send out a messenger for help or launch counter attacks from behind the enemy lines. However, she had taken little interest in it back then. Now though it was key to her plan, providing her with a route through which she could smuggle enough of the potion to contaminate the wells from which the fortress drew all of its water.

"I will need to go on alone from here. I don't want anyone to see you and wonder why you turned back."

Ammaril said, "Take the potion I'm carrying. I don't want it being discovered." she added and she passed the two water skins from the back of her horse to the Orcs that had escorted her here, "Be waiting close to the door but stay out of sight until I come to meet you." she then ordered before she continued to ride toward the fortress.

Making no effort conceal herself, Ammaril rode directly towards the main gate of the fortress and she could see the guards watching her as she approached. The gates of the fortress were open but there were four guards standing immediately outside and they signalled for her to stop before entering

"I am Princess Ammaril." Ammaril announced and the guards looked at one another. Ammaril had never met any of them before so it was not surprising that they did not know her by sight but being in the service of her uncle they knew her name well enough, "Go and tell my uncle I am here to speak with him."

One of the guards immediately rushed into the fortress to relay Ammaril's message and he reappeared a short time later.

"You may enter your highness. Lord Tial is expecting you." he said and Ammaril smiled before she rode her horse through the fortress gates and into the courtyard on the other side.

Once through the gates she found herself facing a larger number of Elf warriors, all armed with swords and shields while in the centre of them stood Tial himself.

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"Ammaril, it is you." he exclaimed with a wide smile on his face, "You were gone so long that we'd all given up hope of ever seeing any of you again. But what about my son Tiellan and your brother Orcan? Are they back also?"

"Yes uncle they are both back in Syldarin, safe and sound. Tiellan misses you greatly but he was needed elsewhere. May we talk more privately? There is a lot we need to discuss." Ammaril told him and he nodded. "Of course, please come with me my dear. I hope you'll forgive the presence of these guards to greet you but when I heard your name I assumed that it must be some sort of trick." he replied and he led Ammaril from the courtyard inside the fortress.

Once inside Tieral took Ammaril to his private office where they both sat down.

"So tell me about Oscay Ammaril, did you find what you were looking for there?" Tieral asked.

"Oh yes uncle." Ammaril responded with a smile, "I found exactly what I hoped to find. The knowledge of the ancient Oscari survived all these years and now all I need to do is study it fully."

"And when did you get back? Have you been informed about your father yet?" Tieral said and Ammaril hesitated, "Oh I'm so sorry my dear. King Larallus passed about a month after your departure. Your older brother Dellaron now sits on the throne."

"Thank you for telling me uncle. I hadn't had the chance to go to Sylda since we got back." Ammaril said after a few moments of hesitation. She had known that her father had been old and unwell before she had left for Oscay and she knew that while he had been willing to turn a blind eye to her expedition taking place even after Dellaron had refused to support it he would have reacted with fury when he discovered what she was really doing and he would have never survived the transformation into an Orc anyway. In a sense, she thought to herself, her father's death while she was away was a blessing that freed her of any guilt over his fate.

"When did you return to Syldarin? I wasn't notified of your return." Tieral said.

"No you wouldn't have. We returned just a few days ago and I've been anxious to keep a low profile. Uncle Tieral what I've brought back with me will change Syldarin and even the world forever. We need to take great care in how it is handled." Ammaril told him.

"Of course, of course. Now what about my son and the warriors I sent. What of them? You said that Tiellan has returned too but where is he?" Tieral said.

"Tiellan and Orcan are both making preparations for making full use of the knowledge we found in the Oscari library. Your warriors turned out to be invaluable and I wanted to thank you in person for allowing us to take them with us." Ammaril said.

"So there was danger then?" Tieral added.

"Yes, though unfortunately it followed us from Enris rather than being in wait for us in Oscay. A vampire learned of our quest somehow and came after us with a force of human mercenaries. If not for your troops then our expedition would have been doomed and I would not be here with you now." Ammaril explained.

"I am happy that I could help. So what are your plans now?" Tieral said, "If you wish to stay here for a while then you are welcome to. I can have a room made up for you."

"That would be nice Uncle Tieral. I haven't had much of a chance to stop and rest for the past few months. It would be nice to sleep under a proper roof for once rather than in a tent or aboard a ship." Ammaril replied.

"Then it is settled. You may stay as long as you wish." Tieral said with a smile.

The room that Tieral provided for Ammaril was located in one of the towers and well decorated. The windows looked out towards the coast and Ammaril looked through this while one of the servants was finishing the preparations.

"Is everything as you require your highness?" the servant asked and Ammaril looked at her before looking towards the fireplace.

"Actually I'm rather cold. Could you send someone to light the fire?" she said.

"Yes your highness. I'll be right back." the servant replied and then she left the room.

While the servant was gone Ammaril placed the bag that she had brought with her on the bed and began to remove some of the contents. First she removed the talisman that could be used to store magical power before she took out the silver wand that she rarely had call to use but that she thought would be essential for what she had planned. Just as the serving girl had said she soon returned with a male servant who was one of the fortresses fire lighters.

"You wish me to light the fire your highness?" he asked and Ammaril nodded.

"Yes, it's rather cold in here I think." she said and she watched as the man crouched down by the fireplace and proceeded to light the fire. Meanwhile the servant girl remained by the open doorway so that it could never be said that Ammaril was alone in her room with a male member of the serving staff.

## The Fall of Spildarin

"The fire is lit your highness. Will that be all?" the male servant said when the fire ignited and he stood back up.

"No that will be all thank you. You may leave." Ammaril said and the two servants exited the room, leaving her alone.

Ammaril then picked up her wand and walked over to the fire. The temperature of the room had in fact been quite comfortable even without the fire but she needed it lit for another purpose. Looking at the fire she focused her mind on the flames and held out the wand towards them, moving it as close as she could without burning herself. A few moments later some of the flames began to twist into a narrow funnel that extended towards the tip of Ammaril's wand where they were absorbed into it.

With her wand concealed up her sleeve Ammaril made her way down from the tower to the lower levels of the fortress, those below ground level. The almost permanent low temperature here made it suitable for the storage of foodstuffs and there were many shelves packed with provisions as well as the personal wine cellar belonging to Tial. Ammaril had no interest in any of this though, she was more interested in where the fortress's wells were located and following directions given to her by Tiellan she was soon able to locate them, three stone wells in a row that were located close to a set of stairs that led up to the fortress kitchens. Now that she knew where the wells were located Ammaril followed the directions given to her by Tiellan as she searched for the entrance to the secret tunnel that led out of the fortress. The first clue that she was getting near to this was when she heard the sound of voices as the two warriors assigned to guard the fortress end of the tunnel and make sure that no-one was trying to sneak into the fortress that way talked to one another to pass the time.

When Ammaril entered the chamber that contained the entrance to the tunnel she discovered the two guards sat at a small table playing cards and they immediately leapt to their feet and reached for the swords that were propped up against the wall. One of the guards recognised Ammaril though and he lowered his sword.

"Your highness, what are you doing down here?" he asked and Ammaril smiled at him.

"Oh I just need to open that door so that I can bring in a potion that will turn everyone in this place into a creature meant only for war." she said and the guards exchanged confused glances.

"Are you feeling unwell your highness?" the other guard asked.

"I'm fine thank you." Ammaril as she slid her wand from up her sleeves and pointed it towards the guard who had just spoken. Then with a thought she sent a narrow jet of fire from the tip of the wand towards the guard. This struck him in his chest and despite the chainmail armour he wore he was immediately enveloped in flame that consumed him so totally that nothing remained, it was as if he had simply vanished into thin air. The other guard gasped in horror at what had just happened to his comrade but before he could call out a warning to anyone else in the fortress Ammaril released a second narrow jet of flame that immolated him just as totally the first guard had been.

Ammaril's magical assault left no physical trace of either guard and she paused just briefly to make sure that no-one had witnessed it before she walked up to the large reinforced door that they had been protecting. This was the entrance to the tunnel that led from the fortress and she pulled back the bar that prevented it from being opened.

The door itself was heavy and Ammaril strained to move it at first before it eventually swung enough to permit her to enter the tunnel and walk along it. Travelling the full length of the tunnel was reasonably quick and when she reached the other end Ammaril found Tiellan and the second Orc both waiting for her.

"My queen, we have been waiting for you.." Tiellan said.

"I assume that no-one has seen you?" Ammaril responded.

"No my queen. No-one has come near us since you left." Tiellan answered.

"Have you added your blood to the potion?" Ammaril asked.

"Yes my queen. To all the bags." Tiellan said.

"Good. I don't want to risk you entering any part of the fortress just yet so you'll have to wait at the other end of the tunnel but bring the potion. I don't want to have walk all the way back and forth along this tunnel each time." Ammaril ordered as she took one pair of the water skins from the horses. Escorted by the Orcs along with the rest of the water skins Ammaril made her way back down the tunnel into the fortress where they found the door still open and now unguarded, "You wait here. Under no circumstances come through this door. If anyone other than me approaches this door then retreat back down the tunnel." Ammaril ordered the Orcs at this point.

"Yes my queen." Tiellan replied.

Ammaril then carried the water skins that she brought with her from the tunnel to the chamber that contained the fortress's wells and emptied both of them into the first. Then she carried the two empty water skins back to the tunnel where she handed them to the Orcs in exchange for two more full ones. Ammaril repeated this

## The Fall of Sylldarin

process twice, emptying two of the potion-filled water skins into each of the wells before delivering the last of the empty water skins to the Orcs in the tunnel.

"It's done. Return to the other end of the tunnel and wait for me there. I will join you soon." Ammaril told the Orcs before she closed and barred the door leading to the tunnel just as it had been when she had first discovered it. She knew that if anyone came down to this chamber then the absence of the guards would be noticed and an alarm may even be raised to look for intruders in the fortress but she also knew that in the absence of any sorcerers in the fortress no-one would discover what had happened to the guards or the presence of the potion in the water supply.

Rather than return to her room Ammaril now sought out her uncle, finding him in the stables.

"Ammaril, what are you doing down here?" Tieral asked when he saw her.

"I'm sorry uncle but I've remembered that there is something I need to take care of Syllda. It will give me the chance to call on Dellaron as well but it means that I won't be able to stay after all." Ammaril replied.

"Oh that is a shame." Tieral said, "I was hoping that we'd have the chance to catch up in more detail, especially when it comes to when my son will be returning home."

"Don't worry Uncle Tieral, you and Tiellan will be reunited very soon. I promise." Ammaril said and then she kissed Tieral on his cheek, "I'll need my horse preparing."

"Of course. I'll provide you with an escort as well." Tieral said but as he turned towards one of his staff Ammaril placed a hand on his chest.

"No uncle that's alright. I don't need an escort." she said.

"But you do, I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you." Tieral said.

"Oh uncle the roads between here and Syllda are perfectly safe, your men have seen to that around here and there are ample places for me to stay along the way. I got here safely enough on my own didn't I?"

Ammaril said just as the chief of the fortress guard entered with a stern expression on his face.

"Is something wrong captain?" Tieral asked the man when he saw this expression.

"My lord the guards on the tunnel gate are missing, there is no sign of them anywhere." the captain told him and Tieral frowned as well.

"They deserted their post?" he said.

"I don't know my lord. Nobody saw them leave but there are no signs of a struggle and the gate is still barred. I've ordered more guards to replace them but-" the captain began.

"But we may have intruders in the fortress. I want it searched, all of it. Every room, every hallway and every tower. If no-one saw the guards leave then they must still be here somewhere. If they left through the tunnel then someone must have closed it behind them and in that case I want to know who." Tieral interrupted.

"Uncle perhaps I should leave now. It sounds like I'd only be a distraction to you right now." Ammaril said and Tieral nodded.

"Yes, perhaps that would be for the best after all. Are you sure that I can't persuade you to take an escort though? If something has happened to those guards then there could be danger outside the fortress as well." he pointed out.

"Uncle I told you, I'll be fine on my own. I promise you." Ammaril told him and he sighed.

"Oh very well Ammaril, though I don't feel right at all about this." he said, "Something is obviously wrong here."

When she first left her uncle's fortress Ammaril rode along the road that would take her to Syllda if she continued to follow it but once she was far enough away that the lookouts would not see her she turned off the road and rode her horse across country to the rocky ground where the secret tunnel leading to the fortress came out where she found Tiellan and the other Orc waiting for her.

"It's done." Ammaril told the Orcs.

"What are your orders now my queen?" Tiellan asked as he and the other Orc climbed back onto their horses.

"Now we head for the meeting place where Orcan will bring the villagers and the stone. Each of us should get there tomorrow. Then our numbers will swell even further and we will have Tieral's fortress and all the resources within it." Ammaril said.

"Tieral. My father." Tiellan said and Ammaril smiled.

"Yes. Do you remember anything about him Tiellan?" she asked. Although the Orcs had retained the skills that they possessed as Elves and remembered basic information about who they had been their personalities had largely been destroyed by the process of being transformed into Orcs. The information left behind by the Oscari had indicated that some of their early attempts to transform humans into the first Elves had failed because they had retained too much information about who they were before and they had revolted, forcing

the Oscari to destroy them.

"Only his name my queen." Tiellan answered.

"Good, I'm glad of that." Ammaril said.

Given the warning that Vayran had given about the inhabitants of entire settlements disappearing Ollos decided that he would do everything that he could do to protect the Elves that lived in his village and he had them gather what weapons they could after the sorcerer and the knights left for Syllda, still more than a day's ride away. Just as he had explained to Vayran though these were limited in both their number and their effectiveness. There were only three swords in the entire village, two of them family heirlooms that had belonged to warriors who were no longer even alive while only the third belonged to someone had any experience in using it and he was now too old to do so effectively. Instead of swords, the villagers were hurrying to arm themselves with spears since these could be produced far more quickly with the limited resources at hand and the one elderly warrior in the village was used to instruct the villagers how to fight as a unit. How they would hold up if they were attacked though remained a mystery and Ollos hoped that he would not have to find out. The one piece of good news among all the reports of problems that Ollos received though was that the village could field a unit of skilled archers. There were just over a dozen Elves in the village who knew how to use a bow effectively and they could easily be supplied with the weapons and an ample quantity of arrows. It was obvious all of the Elves that if the village did come under attack then this unit of archers would become the cornerstone of their defence and all planning centred on how best to make use of them.

Ollos was in his home with the Elf that had been appointed as the leader of these archers as they tried to determine the best place to position his men when all of a sudden the front door was simply thrown open from the outside and young Elf woman came rushing into the house.

"Steward!" she exclaimed.

"What is it girl?" Ollos responded.

"Steward you need to come quickly. They're here. There are monsters here." the young woman told him.

"Monsters? What are you talking about?" Ollos said.

"Come and see." the woman said and both Ollos and the archer followed her outside the house and to the edge of the village. Once there they looked out across the countryside to where a large group of figures was approaching them.

Even though this force was still more than a quarter of a mile away Ollos could see that the figures were not Elves. All of the approaching creatures had the same humanoid form that was common to the world's intelligent species but all of their facial features were hideously distorted and their skin grey while some of them were significantly larger, resembling Ogres but being just as deformed as the smaller members of the force. Most of the approaching force appeared to be armed with weapons just as improvised as the spears being prepared for the villagers but there was a core of troops that looked to be properly equipped. Overall the size of the approaching force was easily enough to overrun the village no matter how hard the villagers fought.

"Quickly, get everybody together." Ollos ordered, "Put the archers behind that wall and tell them to shoot as soon as these – these things are within range."

The villagers rushed to get organised, though all of them could see how badly outmatched they were.

"Why don't we just run?" one of the Elves asked.

"And go where?" another pointed out, "By the time you've gathered enough food and water to last you to get somewhere safe they'll be on top of us."

All of a sudden the approaching force came to a halt just beyond the effective range of the village's archers and while they waited here one of the better equipped Orcs moved to the front of the force.

"Queen Ammaril claims this village and all those within it." he yelled loud enough for the villagers to hear him, "Give yourselves up now and she has ordered that you be well treated. Resist and you will not be so well treated."

"Ammaril? Could he mean Princess Ammaril?" an Elf standing close by Ollos asked.

"I don't know. I thought that the King's sister was supposed to be dead." Ollos answered, "She went to Oscay and never came back."

"Well maybe she did and she brought these monsters with her." the other Elf commented

"Steward, what do we do?" one of the villagers asked.

"We have to surrender. He said that they'd treat us well." another said,

"Why should we believe him?" a third added.

"Silence!" Ollos shouted, holding up his hand, "I am the steward and I will decide what to do. We have no choice but to surrender and hope that they keep their word."

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"What if they don't?" a nearby Elf asked.

"Then it makes no difference if we surrender or not. At least by trusting them we have a chance of living."

Ollos answered before he turned to the Elf standing closest to him and added, "I'm going to go and tell him that we will surrender. Maybe I can find out what he wants."

Ollos then started to walk towards the leader of the Orc force and as he got closer to him it became more obvious that his clothing and equipment was of Elven make, suggesting that he had taken it all from another Elf.

"That is close enough." the Orc leader said when Ollos was just a few paces away from him and he raised his sword, pointing the blade towards Ollos, "Say your piece."

"My name is Ollos of Ashion, steward of this village. We are willing to lay down our arms on the condition that no-one is harmed." Ollos said.

"Those are the Queen's orders." the Orc replied.

"Is your queen Ammaril, King Dellaron's sister?" Ollos asked.

"She is the Queen. Everyone's queen. She will rule the world. Tell your people to lay down their weapons and you will be taken to meet her. All of you." the Orc told him, "If they don't then my Orcs and Trolls will destroy your village and kill your people. What choice do you have?"

"None it would seem. We will surrender." Ollos replied.

"Good. Now tell your people you put down their weapons and come here. Then we will take you to the Queen." the Orc told him.

## 11

The Elf warriors that Lord Vellyn had assembled were well armed and equipped. Every infantryman carried both a sword and a spear as well as having a bow and ammunition slung across his back and Ollaris could not help but be impressed when he saw them lined up in their hundreds when he arrived with the sorcerers that he had been ordered to provide by King Dellaron. Vellyn had assembled more than just infantry for his force though and there were dozens of cavalymen preparing their horses when Ollaris approached the field just outside the city where the force was mustering. It was impossible to raise such a force without it becoming common knowledge in the city and there were more Elves gathered around watching the warriors, many of them asking why they were being gathered together in the first place. It was regarded as unwise to obstruct a sorcerer though and so when four of them approached the field the crowd parted to let them pass unhindered.

“Lord Vellyn, you have assembled an impressive force I see.” Ollaris said when he reached the  
“Thank you Lord Ollaris.” Vellyn replied, “Six hundred of the finest troops in Syllda as well as a hundred cavalymen. Most of them already have experience in fighting humans. Some have even faced the war machines that those barbarians have started to field. If they think that they can simply fortify a part of our homeland and lay claim to it while abducting our fellow Elves then they are about to learn how mistaken they are. As well as troops I have brought together noblemen who are well versed in how to deploy and manoeuvre troops in the field.”

“We don’t know for certain that humans are responsible Lord Vellyn.” Ollaris pointed out but the military leader just snorted.

“Come now Lord Ollaris, who else could it be? No Elf nation has ever waged war against another and the Dwarves don’t care about anything that happens outside of their mountain tunnels. Who else other than humans could it be?” Vellyn said.

“I admit that I don’t know but I would rather not leap to conclusions Lord Vellyn. The clues that my agent uncovered suggest that whoever is responsible has power that the humans should not have.” Ollaris replied, “However, hopefully these three sorcerers will be of use to you. All three are skilled in combat magic and should serve you well. If the enemy do have war machines or sorcerers of their own then I am sure that their skills will prove invaluable to you.”

Vellyn then looked at the trio of sorcerers who had accompanied Ollaris from the tower of sorcery. Two of them were men while the third was a woman and all three carried the staffs that were traditional to their order.

“Excellent. Thank you Lord Ollaris.” Vellyn said, “I’ll make sure that they are all provided with horses of course.”

“That would be appreciated.” Ollaris replied, “I take it that you have been told everything that my agent was able to discover?”

“I have. My men know that any wells or bodies of still water in the area are likely to have been poisoned and that water should only be taken from running sources. We will also be taking a plentiful supply with us.”

Vellyn answered, “The King’s uncle Lord Tial also has his fortress just two days march away from the area we will be searching. We can send to him for reinforcements if necessary and I think that we can rely on the fortress’ water supply being secure and clean.”

It came as a relief when Teuten came into view and the group knew that they would soon be off the road and less vulnerable. There had been no attempts on their lives on the return journey from Hessenstadt but the memory of the attack on the way there lingered, especially with the death of Diera.

“Once we reach your ship how long will it take to prepare her to sail?” Dominic asked as they rode into Teuten.

“Where exactly are we heading?” Horace said.

“Well since the aim is to get to Sylldarin we’ll head for one of the states just south of the Hadarian Empire.” Will said, “Costria is probably our best choice.”

“Yes, a lot of our trade goes through there.” Yilven said.

“But aren’t they allies of the Hadarians?” Lucia commented.

“I should think so. The Emperor’s cousin Duke Engel sits on the throne there.” Will replied, “Don’t worry though, no-one is going to let them sell you again.” he added in reference to how Lucia had been sold as a slave by her own family in Hadar.

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"Costria is just down the Straight of Lerron. We should have enough provisions aboard the *Storm Chaser* already. No need to load up for a long ocean crossing." Horace said before he glanced at Gromar and added, "I'm sure the hold is full of rats for you as well."

"Joke all you like Halfling but how do you know that you don't like fresh roast rat if you've never tried it?" Gromar responded. Being a people who lived in tunnels beneath mountains Dwarves had only a limited capacity for rearing herd animals and the most common form of meat in their diet was rat, rats being in plentiful supply even underground.

"Then we have a ship and we have supplies. Unless our new crew mates have already mutinied in our absence and either looted the supplies or stolen the ship entirely. In that case things may take a little longer." Will joked.

"Assuming that you still actually have a ship and that she's ready to sail how long will it take to get to Costria?" Dominic asked.

"Just a couple of days. Maybe four if the weather is against us." Will answered.

"The trip from there to Syldarin on an Elf trading vessel will take another day." Yilven added.

"So you'll be home within a week." Will said and Yilven smiled.

"What will the Elves think of us?" Horace asked.

"The ones I met there were nice." Lucia said.

"As long as you mind your manners they will be. Mind you most won't speak your language once we get away from the port." Yilven added.

"I speak some Elven." Dominic commented.

"Then you, Lucia and Yilven will be our translators if we need them." Will said before he frowned for a moment, "Lucia you do speak the right sort of Elven don't you?" he asked when it suddenly occurred to him that Lucia had served as a cabin girl aboard a ship from the southern Elf kingdom where the Elves had much darker skin. The humans in that part of the world had the same dark skin tone, unlike Lucia's pale skin that made her stand out even more than being the only human aboard an Elf ship and they spoke a radically different language to any of the ones common in the northern continent of Entris.

"There is only one Elf language Will." Yilven pointed out, "It doesn't matter which of the Elf lands you go to we all speak the same one. Aside from a handful of local terms but not enough to make any real difference."

"That's a relief. I'd hate to have translators who were fluent in the wrong language." Horace said before Will pointed ahead to where the harbour was now visible along with the ships in it.

"There she is. The *Storm Chaser*." he said.

"If it's all the same to you Will, I left my hammer at Diera's house. I'd like to go and collect it before we set sail." Gromar said and Yilven nodded.

"Yes, I have things there as well." he said.

"Then you two should go and fetch whatever is there. We'll get the *Storm Chaser* ready to leave when you arrive." Will told Gromar and Yilven and while the rest of the group continued to ride towards the harbour the Dwarf and Elf turned away, heading towards the house that had been Diera's.

The crew of the *Storm Chaser* had neither stolen the ship nor abandoned their posts during Will's absence and those on watch waved when they saw him and the rest of the group riding along the harbour.

"Captain!" one called out, "It's good to see you back. Horace even more so. At least he knows how to cook properly."

"It sounds like your position is secure." Will said, glancing at the smiling Halfling.

"I never doubted it captain. Crews will mutiny against a bad cook far faster than they will against a bad captain." Horace responded.

"What do we do with the horses?" Lucia asked as the group dismounted at the bottom of the gang plank that led to the *Storm Chaser*'s deck.

"We'll bring them aboard. We might need them again when we get to Syldarin and I don't want to waste time having to buy replacements when we already have these." Will replied before he walked up the gang plank, "Make sure the horses are brought aboard safely. You have loaded horses before haven't you?" He told a nearby crewman and the man nodded back at him.

"Yes captain." the man replied before he rushed down the gang plank to fetch the horses.

Dominic let Horace and Lucia go up the gang plank before he finally followed them, moving cautiously.

"Is something wrong?" Horace asked when he looked back around to find the sorcerer only half way up the gang plank instead of right behind him.

"I've just never been aboard a ship before." Dominic told him, "The motion is somewhat unsettling."

"Motion? We're still in the harbour and tethered to the dock. If you think that this is unsettling then just you

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wait until we actually set sail." Horace exclaimed, unaware of the figure watching the *Storm Chaser* from the shore.

When they reached the former home of Marcus Quinnus and Diera, Yilven helped Gromar to dismount from his horse.

"Do you think we'll have any trouble getting in?" Yilven asked.

"Do you think that the pair of us could be mistaken for anyone else?" Gromar responded as they walked up to the front door and knocked. Then a few moments later it was opened by Obadiah.

"Ah sirs, you have returned?" he asked.

"We're just here to collect the belongings we left here." Yilven answered.

"Of course. They are in your rooms where you left them. Is Miss Diera not with you?" Obadiah said and Yilven and Gromar looked at one another, "Did I say something wrong?" Obadiah added.

"We were attacked on the road by four well armed men." Gromar told him, "They killed Diera."

"We think that it was an attempt to stop us meeting with the King." Yilven added, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this."

Obadiah hesitated.

"That is sad to hear." he said, "We were never especially close mind you, but I will miss her just as I will miss the magister. I just hope that it doesn't prompt Mister Cooper to appear again. He has always been less pleasant to deal with."

"Cooper? You mean that little weasel Thomas Cooper?" Gromar said when he heard Obadiah say the name 'Cooper'.

"That's right. The man that the magister used as an informant." Obadiah said.

"Thomas Cooper? We left him in Oscay." Yilven said.

"I thought you'd killed him." Gromar added.

"Not personally. I took him captive and handed him over to Orcan and Ammaril before she cast her transformation spell. I thought she'd have killed him after that." Yilven replied.

"Yes well obviously she didn't but the fact remains that he shouldn't be here, should he? He should be on the other side of the ocean." Gromar said.

"Are you certain it was him Obadiah?" Yilven asked.

"Yes sir, it was definitely him. He came to see if the magister had left any money for him. He hadn't of course. The magister may have employed the services of Mister Cooper but that did not mean that he liked or trusted the man and I always agreed with him on that." Obadiah answered, "I sent him away empty handed."

"Did he happen to say how he got back here when we burned every seaworthy ship in Oscay other than the *Storm Chaser*?" Gromar said.

"No, all he cared about was whether there was any money for him. I told him there wasn't and he left. If he does return then he'll get the same answer." Obadiah replied.

"If he does return then I'd recommend slitting his throat." Gromar said and then he looked at Yilven and added, "He must have been the one to send those killers after us with gold that Ammaril gave him."

"Yes and if there is a way for him to get back from Oscay then Ammaril could have come back the same way." Yilven agreed.

"Let's get our things. The others need to hear about this." Gromar responded.

After sending the mercenaries after Ammaril's enemies Thomas found himself without any orders remaining so he returned to how he had spent most of his days before he had travelled to Oscay, drinking and gambling in any establishment that he could find. He had failed to get any money out of Obadiah but he still had a significant amount of the gold that Ammaril had given him left so he had no shortage of funds to support his habits as well as covering his basic living expenses. For a short time he had been concerned about the Wraith in the gemstone that was still embedded in his chest and had proven impossible to remove but the creature had remained silent while he consumed numerous alcoholic beverages.

Feeling a sudden hand on his shoulder, his first instinct was that he was about to be attacked and as he turned around his hand reached for his knife. However, before he could draw the weapon he recognised the man standing there as the harbour master's guard that he paid for information.

"What do you want?" Thomas asked softly, not wanting his voice to be heard across the crowded tavern.

"I have information for you." the guard told him and Thomas looked around to double check that they were not being watched.

"Outside." he said and the two men exited the tavern, "Okay so what do you have for me?" Thomas then asked and the guard held out his hand. Thomas hesitated at first but then took out several coins and handed them over to the guard.

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"Those people you were so interested in, from the *Storm Chaser*. I've got news about them." The guard said. "They're dead, yes I know." Thomas replied, "I don't need to pay you for what I already know."

"William Beckett and that Halfling runt looked alive and well when I saw them earlier today." the guard said and Thomas' eyes widened. If Will and Horace had returned then it was possible that the rest of the group were back as well and that meant that the mercenaries that he had hired had failed. Even if all of the others were dead Will and Horace could have warned any number of others by now, "There was a young woman with them as well. I saw her the last time that they were in the harbour, I think that she's a new member of the ship's crew."

"What did she look like? Describe her to me." Thomas told the guard.

"Short. Dark hair and pale skin. I've not seen her around the harbour before the *Storm Chaser* got back." the guard said.

"It must be that girl who was with the Elves." Thomas said, remembering seeing Lucia when he was being held captive.

"So you know her?" the guard asked.

"No, not really. I've seen her about before but she wasn't supposed to be back here. She was supposed to have been dead like the rest." Thomas said, "Thanks for bringing this to me. I need to go and pass this along."

Without waiting for the guard to respond Thomas turned around and hurried off down the street, heading for the room that he was renting where he rushed inside.

"What do I do now?" he said out loud, "They must have already spoken to people in Hessenstadt."

"Ammaril needs to be told." the voice of the Wraith said, though the creature remained invisible, choosing not to appear even though they were in private.

"But I was supposed to have them killed before they could tell anyone. They must have by now." Thomas said, "She'll kill me, won't she?"

"Perhaps." the Wraith replied.

"What do you mean 'perhaps'? Surely you know. It was Ammaril that put you where you are right now." Thomas said.

"I do not know Ammaril well enough to say. My only function here is to watch you and kill you if you betray Ammaril. Your incompetence is not my problem. I know only that Ammaril needs to be told about your failure." the Wraith told him.

"How am I supposed to do that?" Thomas asked.

"The stones. The stone circle." the Wraith answered, "Return to the stone circle and I can return you to Oscay where we started."

"The stone circle. Right." Thomas said before he remembered the route that he would have to take to get to the nearest stone circle to Teuten, the one that he had arrived at when he travelled from Oscay, "Wait a moment. That means going past that village, the one where you killed those watchmen. What if they recognise me? If they kill me then what happens to you?"

"Nothing will happen to me if you die. I will simply continue to exist, bound to the stone that is currently in your chest. However, if you are concerned about your own safety then I suggest that you do something to disguise yourself. Just as you did when you sneaked out through the tavern bar. I suggest that you do something similar to avoid being recognised on the road." the Wraith said.

"So I'm supposed to risk being hanged just to get to a stone circle that will take me to a woman who could also kill me for failing to kill her enemies? You aren't convincing me that this is a good idea you know."

Thomas said.

"In that case you may wish to consider this, human. On your way to the stone circle the angry villagers might recognise you and kill. When you reach Ammaril she may become so angry that she kills you. Or you could stay here and do nothing to warn her that the enemies she wanted dead are still alive. In that case I would consider that a betrayal of her and I would definitely kill you for that." the Wraith said.

As soon as they had collected their belongings from the house Gromar and Yilven rode back towards the harbour.

"Slow down!" Gromar called out as he struggled to keep up with Yilven. The Elf's many years of experience in riding enabled him to weave in and out between the people in the street while Gromar struggled to keep up.

"Keep up. We have to tell the others about Thomas being here." Yilven responded and Gromar sighed.

"Then go on ahead. I'll get to you as quickly as I can." he told Yilven and the Elf nodded before he rode away as fast as he could, leaving Gromar to follow at his much slower pace.

## The Fall of Spildarin

The streets of Teuten were fairly crowded but Yilven was skilled enough at riding that he was able to reach the harbour in a reasonably short time where he rode right up to the bottom of the gang plank leading to the *Storm Chaser* before jumping down from his horse and running up the plank.

"Where is the captain?" he yelled at the nearest crewman and in response the man pointed to the structure towards the rear of the ship. Yilven then nodded at him, "Thank you." he said and he ran towards the back of the ship.

As soon as he entered the structure Yilven heard voices coming from a nearby room that he knew from the time he had already spent aboard the ship was the captain's personal cabin and he burst through the door. "Yilven, what's the rush?" Will asked as he looked around to see why the door had just been flung open. As well as Will himself Horace, Lucia and Dominic were all in the cabin gathered around a small table on which a map showing the seas around the continent of Entris was laid out so that Will could show the others the route that they would take from Hessenland to Costria.

"Do you remember a man called Thomas Cooper?" Yilven asked and Will and Horace exchanged looks.

"The man who worked for Marcus Quinnus." Horace commented.

"That's the one." Yilven replied.

"What about him? I thought he was dead along with the magister himself." Will added.

"Well it looks like Ammaril must have decided that he was useful to her because he's back here now." Yilven told the others.

"You've seen him?" Will said.

"No but when Gromar and I went to get our belongings the butler, Obadiah, told us that Thomas had been to the house before us." Yilven said.

"Who is this Thomas?" Dominic said.

"One of Magister Marcus Quinnus' employees. He went with us to Oscay and I thought that he'd been killed by the dragons that destroyed their camp." Will answered.

"I caught him before Ammaril had the chance to cast her spell. He was still alive the last time I saw him." Yilven told him.

"But how can he be back here?" Lucia asked.

"That's a good question." Will responded.

"You know that it was probably him that hired those men to have us killed before we reached Hessenstadt." Horace said and Will nodded.

"Which means that he could try again. The sooner we can leave port the better. Where's Gromar?" he said.

"Following me. He isn't exactly a natural horseman and we wanted to get word to you as soon as possible." Yilven said.

"I know how he feels." Horace commented, also having had difficulty when required to ride a horse.

"If Thomas is here then could Ammaril be here as well?" Lucia said.

"I think we'd know about it by now if she was anywhere near Teuten. Unless she came without her Orcs." Will pointed out.

"Could she turn humans into more Orcs as well?" Lucia added and everyone else in the room turned to look at Dominic.

"Well could she?" Will asked the sorcerer.

"I've no idea. From what you've already described to me about the spell it's a form of blood magic and the study of that is forbidden. I've been involved with dealing with a few warlocks who indulged in it but none of them ever did anything as complex as transform entire people into monsters. Most just sent victims mad or gave their minions extra large claws." Dominic explained.

"Do you think that Thomas will try to attack us again?" Horace said.

"Who knows? He may not have the gold to buy more killers but as long as we're in port we're vulnerable. We burned Vendril's ships, Thomas could try to burn the *Storm Chaser* with us aboard." Yilven replied.

"Do you really think he try to burn us to death?" Lucia asked.

"Yes I think he would." Will answered.

As long as there was no real danger to himself. He seemed liked a coward to me." Horace added.

"That's it then." Will said, "As soon as Gromar gets here we set sail for Costria. Ammaril could be more advanced in her planning than we hoped and we aren't going to be safe until we're at sea."

Gromar eventually made it to the harbour as well, though he did not run up the gang plank as Yilven had done. Instead he strode up it purposely while Will watched him from the top of the rear structure from where the ship was steered.

"I take it that Yilven beat me here." Gromar called out.

## The Fall of Sýldarin

“Yes, he’s filled us in on Thomas being in Teuten.” Will replied, “Now that you’re here though we just need to get that horse loaded into the hold with the others and we can cast off.”

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Although the harbour master's guard had always been a reliable informant Thomas did not want to base such an important decision as he faced now on the word of anyone else so he made his way to the harbour to get a look at the *Storm Chaser* for himself. Having spent weeks aboard the ship himself he was familiar enough with it to be able to pick it out from among the other cogs and hulks in the harbour. Watching from a distance he could not see enough detail to be able to identify any of the individuals that he saw on the deck. However, just as he was about to give up he saw a figure on a horse approaching the ship. While Thomas could not see enough detail of the person's face to identify them he could tell that they were not human. Instead from the short height and stocky build he guessed that it was a Dwarf and Thomas realised in an instant who it was.

"Gromar Stonebreaker." he said with a snarl, "So my man was right, you did survive."

"You have your proof. Now it is time to return to the stone circle." the voice of the Wraith said and Thomas nodded.

"Yes, I understand." he said, "I just need a fast horse."

The last time that the *Storm Chaser* had set sail from Teuten it had been in pursuit of Ammaril's expedition. Now there were no other ships to chase but the hurry was every bit as great. When it had been thought that Ammaril and her Orcs were stuck on the other side of a vast ocean there had been plenty of time to try and convince people of the danger they posed, however now that there was evidence that she was able to get people back to Entris the urgency became greater.

The cog moved slowly out of the harbour, with its sail only partially unfurled and three crewmen on the tiller guiding the ship out into open water. As captain Will was on the top of the rear structure to give orders and he was joined by Yilven, Gromar and Dominic while Horace and Lucia remained below decks.

"I see what Horace meant about the movement." Dominic said as he gripped the rail at the side of the ship, "It is stronger at sea than in port."

Will smiled at the sorcerer.

"Yes they are. Just wait until we hit them." he said.

"You mean that the ship is going to move back and forth even more?" Dominic responded.

"On our way along the Straight of Lerron the sea was so rough and the wind so strong that one of our ships damaged its mast. That's why we had to put into port at Teuten, for repairs before we headed back out into open water." Yilven said.

"Do you think we'll hit weather like that Will?" Gromar asked and Will looked up into the sky. Although overcast there were no particularly dark clouds visible now, but there was no telling how the weather could change during the time it would take to get all the way down the Straight of Lerron.

"It's possible that we're in for some rough weather. Nothing we can't handle though." he said before Dominic suddenly leant over the side of the ship to be sick into the ocean.

Ammaril had arranged to meet her army in a valley about five miles from Tieral's fortress and she Tiellan and the other Orc were soon there. On the other hand for the rest of her force, travelling on foot the journey took much longer. First to arrive was the portion of her army that had not been sent to subdue the settlements near to their original camp that drew their water from sources that could not be contaminated so easily. Most of these were the non-combatant element of the Orcs, females and children but there were also numerous Trolls pulling the hand carts that bore the army's supplies. The contents of the carts were all mundane supplies though and what was of most interest to Ammaril was the standing stone that contained her vast reserve of magical power since without it she could not transform any more Elves into Orcs.

"Where is the stone?" she asked the first Troll that she came to and the massive creature pointed towards the back of the column of Orcs and Trolls to where instead of being pulled on a hand cart the large stone was being moved by being rolled on solid sections of tree trunks that would not be crushed under the considerable weight.

"There." he said and Ammaril frowned before she strode along the line of Orcs and Trolls carrying and pulling supplies until she reached the team of Trolls who pushed the stone forwards and repeatedly picked up and moved the tree trunk rollers to in front of it when they came out from behind it.

"I want this stone placing over there." Ammaril said, pointing to a spot at the side of the valley where it sloped upwards, "Make sure that nothing else is set up nearby. We need enough room for the people that will be brought here by Orcan. Do you understand?"

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"Yes mistress." one of the Trolls responded slowly, "This stone goes over there. Nothing else near to it. Lots of room needed."

"That's right. Now do it." Ammaril ordered and the Trolls pushed the stone out of the line and across the valley to where Ammaril had told them to set it up. Just in case Ammaril followed the Trolls across the valley to where she wanted the stone and pointed out exactly where she wanted it. It was as the Trolls were raising the stone into place that the rest of Ammaril's army finally arrived with Orcan at its head.

The Orcs and Trolls brought with them all of the Elves that they had taken from the villages along with anything else deemed useful. Most of the Elves had surrendered when they saw how badly out-matched they were but there was one village that had tried to resist before they were overrun and the inhabitants of this settlement were easily recognisable by being bound together in lines, the ropes being held by Trolls to prevent them from trying to escape.

Seeing Ammaril on the opposite side of the valley Orcan led the force towards her, bringing their captives with them and Ammaril waited calmly for them to get to her.

"The villagers, as ordered." Orcan said when he stood before his twin sister.

"Some of them resisted?" Ammaril replied, looking at the Elves who were bound.

"One village my queen." Orcan answered, "They fought but our side fought better."

"Were any of them killed?" Ammaril asked.

"The leader of the attack said yes, a few. Their deaths made the others give up though and he remembered your orders to take them prisoner rather than wipe them out." Orcan said.

"Excellent. My visit to Uncle Tial's fortress was a complete success. The potion was added to the wells. What about your captives? Was the potion added to their water?" Ammaril said.

"Yes my queen. They drank water with the potion added. We did not." Orcan told her.

"Good, that potion wouldn't have done you much good if you took it again." Ammaril said, "Enough time has passed since I left the fortress so everyone there ought to have drunk from one of the wells." then she looked around to where the standing stone was now positioned, "It's time that I cast the spell. First though I should tell them of the grand role that they have to play. Tell your troops to release the ones who are bound and to back away from them. I just need a few Orcs to protect me."

"But they may try to escape my queen." Orcan pointed out.

"Let them try. Even if they ran now they would still be close enough when I trigger the spell to be transformed." Ammaril replied.

Orcan did as Ammaril ordered, instructing a small group of Orc warriors to cut the ropes binding the Elves who had resisted so that all of the villagers were loose. At the same time the rest of his soldiers backed away to give them room. Some of the Orcs moved towards Ammaril, ready to intervene just in case any of the captives decided to try and attack her. The rest of the Orcs as well as all of the Trolls backed away from Ammaril though, forming a perimeter all around the captives. Ammaril may not have considered any attempts at escape to be an issue but Orcan still wanted to avoid it, regarding the idea of escape as a failure on his part.

"Hear me." Ammaril called out to the gathered Elves. She had stood out among the Orc army as soon as they had seen her and a number of them had realised who she was, word of her identity spreading quickly through the crowd and thanks to her royal status they listened to what she had to say, "Today you will join our ranks and help reshape this world."

The captive Elves looked at one another nervously, not knowing exactly what Ammaril meant. However, as Ammaril then walked towards the standing stone one of the Elves from among the villagers who had initially resisted the Orcs suddenly broke and ran, attempting to slip between the Trolls blocking his escape.

"I won't be a slave!" he screamed as he ran only for a Troll to move to block his path and grab hold of him, lifting him up off the ground. At the mention of being enslaved though several other Elves also started to flee away from Ammaril, attempting to get between the Orcs and Trolls that surrounded them while the rest looked around in confusion. One Elf even picked up a rock from the ground and hurled it towards Ammaril only for it to miss and bounce off the standing stone.

"Bring me that one!" Orcan shouted, pointing to the Elf who had thrown the rock by Ammaril took hold of his arm and lowered it.

"No Orcan. It will alright soon. He'll be loyal, just as loyal as you are." she told him before she let go of his arm and instead placed the palm of her hand against the standing stone. Then moments later there was a brilliant flash in the sky that was visible even in daylight.

In an instant all of the Elf captives collapsed to the ground and began to scream in agony as the process of transformation from Elves to Orcs started. Some of the weaker Elves could not survive this and as their bodies began to change their hearts simply failed, leaving their disfigured corpses lying on the ground.

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The Orcs and Trolls surrounding the captive Elves simply looked on as the transformation happened, not one of them remembering the experience of their own transformations or caring about the obvious suffering of the Elves.

Ammaril herself watched the beginning of the transformation before she turned to Orcan.

"Come and get me when it's over." she said before she turned around and walked away, heading up the slope towards the top of the hills that surrounded the valley.

It was not just the valley that was affected by Ammaril's latest casting of the transformation spell. The flash of light in the sky was seen by the lookouts at Tieral's fortress but before any of them could try to raise the alarm they along with everyone else in the fortress collapsed in agony and the entire fortress was filled with the sound of screaming. An unfortunate few who were stationed on the fortress walls tumbled over the edge of the battlements as they fell and they plummeted to their deaths in the courtyards below, their pain so great that many never even realised that they were falling. These were not the limit of the deaths though and as had happened elsewhere some of the weaker Elves among the fortress' occupants died as their bodies began to change into their new form but by the time the process was complete Tieral's fortress was no longer a key part of the Elven defence of Syldarin, now it was controlled entirely by Orcs.

Ammaril was still stood at the top of the hill looking out over the countryside when Orcan approached her.

"Is it done?" she asked without turning around.

"Yes my queen. It is done." Orcan answered.

"Did we lose many?" Ammaril added.

"A few my queen. The bodies have been given to the Trolls to consume." Orcan said, "Those who survived have been assigned to tasks. New weapons are being made for those who have become warriors but we still require better ones."

"And you will have them Orcan." Ammaril said with a smile, "Tieral's fortress is just a few miles away, close enough that everyone inside will have been affected by my spell. It has an armoury filled with weapons and armour as well as skilled smiths who can produce as many more as are needed. All we need to do is go there and claim it."

Accompanied by Orcan and Tiellan, Ammaril rode right up to the main entrance to Tieral's fortress. Unlike her previous visit, there were no guards outside the main gate that had been left open and the sound of cheering could be heard coming from inside. The trio rode straight through the open gateway and into the courtyard on the other side where they discovered a large crowd of Orcs, most of them wearing the uniforms and chainmail coats of guards while others had obviously been servants prior to their transformation. These Orcs were standing around a pair of Orcs and cheering them on as they fought one another with their bare hands. Some of the Orcs closest to the gate realised that someone had just arrived and they turned around, snarling at the intruders and reaching for the swords that they still carried.

Ammaril brought her horse to a halt and jumped down from it before walking straight at them. As she advanced the rest of the Orcs became aware of her presence and they all turned to look at her, the fight coming to a stop as the combatants also both stopped what they were doing and looked around. The Orc standing right in front of Ammaril then raised his sword and snarled at her but before he could attack he simply froze.

"Do you know who I am?" Ammaril asked.

"You are my queen." the Orc replied after a brief pause and he lowered his weapon.

"Yes that's right. I am your queen. Your creator." Ammaril said, smiling at the Orc and then she looked around, "Behind me are many of your Orc and Troll brothers and sisters." she called out to the crowd of Orcs, "They need weapons and armour to fight with. You must open your armouries to them and provide them with what they need. What is not immediately available must be made so that we can be ready to spread across all of Syldarin. Then once Orcs control this land we will reach out even further to the human lands to the north, adding them to our new empire before we move on to all of the other continents, conquering each of them in turn until this entire world is ours."

Vayran and the knights of the Royal Guard guided their horses off the road when they saw the column of troops marching towards them in a column wide enough to block the entire road. The cavalry were at the head of the column while the infantry were behind them. Finally a number of carts bearing supplies brought up the rear.

"That's a lot of men." Vayran commented.

## The Fall of Syldarin

"And Lord Vellyn himself in charge. The King is obviously serious about finding out what is happening." Arrathan responded.

Vayran's party remained where they were, watching from the side of the road as the army continued to come towards them. The cavalry component of the force was moving at a slow pace to match the marching speed of the infantry. However, when the sorcerers who were riding at the head of the column with Vellyn and his senior commanders the female Elf had her horse increase its speed to a trot so that she could pull ahead of it and approach Vayran, riding off the road to meet him.

"Vayran." she said in greeting.

"Illyana." Vayran replied, smiling at the woman.

"And I see you still have Reyod with you." Illyana added, looking at the lesser dragon perched on Vayran's shoulder.

"Yes, he still puts up with me. So the supreme sorcerer had sent you to deal with the disappearances then?" Vayran said and Illyana nodded.

"Yes. Me, Tugolin and Hassim. We've been told that there is a force at large that appeared as if from nowhere and has been poisoning wells with something magical. Part of our duty is to check anything that the troops eat or drink that they didn't bring from Sylda to make sure that it isn't enchanted in any way." she said.

"That's pretty much what I told the supreme sorcerer in my report. We've warned one of the other villages in the area. They get their water from a river so they ought to be safe from having it poisoned. What does Lord Vellyn think?" Vayran said and Illyana glanced back towards the column that was now almost upon them.

"He's convinced that humans are responsible." she told him, "What do you think?"

"I'm not so sure. Nothing makes sense about this Illyana. There was another surge of magical power while I was out here. Whoever is responsible has access to incredible power." Vayran replied.

"Hassim is also trained as a scryer. We're hoping that he'll be able to help us track the magic that is being used." Illyana told him just as the column drew level with their position by the road and continued to move past, "I should go. It was good to see you again Vayran. We'll talk once I get back to the tower."

Illyana then rode her horse at a trot again to catch up with the front of the column where she rejoined Vellyn and the other two sorcerers.

"Old friend of yours my lord?" Arrathan asked and Vayran nodded.

"Yes, we've known one another for a long time. I just hope that she isn't riding to her death because I missed something." he responded.

Ammaril looked down at the disfigured corpse on the floor of one of the fortress's bedrooms. Tieral himself had failed to survive the process of transforming into an Orc and his facial features were now a mix of the two, the change having stopped at the moment that he died.

"Poor Uncle Tieral I knew he was old but had hoped that he would prove to be strong enough to join us."

Ammaril said while both Orcan and Tiellan stood behind her. Then she turned to face Tiellan and added, "You are the lord of this fortress now." she told him.

"Yes my queen." Tiellan replied, apparently completely unaffected by his father's death, "What are your orders?"

"This fortress needs to be fully secured. Reorganise the garrison to protect it properly. I don't want anyone else just riding right up to the gate without being challenged." Ammaril told him, "Oh and bury Tieral properly. Aunt Hayla's grave is within the grounds so place him beside her. Unfortunately I won't be able to stay for the burial."

"Where are you going?" Orcan asked.

"Back to Oscay." Ammaril answered, "I want to check on how things are proceeding there. Also it is time that we brought the dragons to Syldarin. Soon we will have to face Dellaron's armies in battle and we don't have the numbers of Orcs and Trolls that we need to defeat them. The dragon's will change that."

"We have this fortress my queen. It has never fallen." Tiellan said.

"Not yet, perhaps, but I don't want my army trapped behind thick walls while a dear older brother can move his troops wherever he likes. Orcan I want you to oversee the equipping and training of our army. The defence of this fortress will be Tiellan's responsibility but I need you to expand our control over the land around here. Send out patrols to watch for any signs that Dellaron has sent his warriors after us." Ammaril said.

"When will you return?" Orcan said.

"In a few days at most. There are a few things that I'd like to check in the library and I need to see how Vendril's men are doing, but other than that the dragons are my priority. We need their strength." Ammaril told him.

## The Fall of Sýlldarin

Dominic had been given one of the private cabins aboard the *Storm Chaser* and he was lying in his bed when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." he said with a groan. After two days at sea he remained unwell and he had been doing his best to remain out of the way while the crew worked. The way he saw it, by letting them get on with their job he was letting them get the ship to Costria more quickly and he would be able to feel solid ground beneath his feet once again.

Sitting up in bed he watched as the cabin door opened and Lucia entered with a tray that had a bowl on it along with a piece of bread, a jug and a cup.

"Horace has sent you this." she said, holding up the tray, "You weren't at breakfast and he says that you need to eat."

"It will be a miracle if I can eat it. I expect that I'll end up just bringing it all back up again." Dominic said.

"Well Horace is right, you need to eat something. I've seen people get sick on ships before and starving themselves didn't do any of them any good." Lucia said as she set the tray down, "Anyway this is good. Fish and mushroom soup. Horace catches the fish himself so they're guaranteed to be fresh. The only other fresh meat aboard are the rats that Gromar roasts for himself, even though Horace likes to use them for bait in his fishing."

"At least we should be in Costria soon." Dominic said.

"Oh yes, about that." Lucia commented.

"We won't be there soon?" Dominic said and Lucia shook her head.

"It doesn't look like it, no." she said, "The wind is against us so it's slowing us down. Will thinks that unless it changes soon we'll be at sea for another three days yet."

"Three days." Dominic said with a sigh as he thought about three more days of being aboard a ship that never stopped rocking back and forth and wondering whether he would be ill for the entire journey. Then he looked at the tray and added, "Well thank you for bringing this to me, I'll see how much I can eat of it."

"Good. Hurry up though. It tastes far better while it's still hot." Lucia told him before she turned around and exited the cabin again.

Now alone again, Dominic leant over the bowl of soup and sniffed it. Then he picked up the spoon from the tray and tried a mouthful. Finding that Lucia's description of the taste was correct he smiled and continued to eat.

## 13

As Vellyn's force continued to march the road led to a settlement that was built on both sides of a river where it had been forded, allowing the column including its heavy wagons to cross easily. However, as the Elven warriors approached the village it became clearer that something was wrong. Despite it being late in the morning, a time when the inhabitants of the village ought to have all been busy working there were no signs of life in it at all.

"Is this one of the places your agent told us all the inhabitants of had vanished?" Vellyn said, glancing at Illyana.

"Vayran said that villagers were only taken from places that got their water from wells my lord." Illyana responded, "The wells had something added to them but a river is almost impossible to poison."

"Then what happened here?" Vellyn said and he raised his hand for the column to stop. Then he looked at one of his senior commanders, "Have a company of men fall in then take them into the village. I want every building checked to see if there is anyone hiding here." he ordered.

"Yes my lord." the commander responded before he had his horse circle around to where the column's infantry were lined up and he selected a block of the troops to move forwards. These men moved around the cavalry to deploy in a wider formation in front of them with their shields held up in front of them and their spears held vertically while the commander himself took up a position at the very front of them, "Advance." he said and the company started to move forwards while the rest of the column remained where they were. There was no response at all from within the village as the warriors advanced towards it and when the wide formation reached its edge they were forced to separate into smaller, more manoeuvrable units that could pass between the structures and check through windows and doorways to see whether there was anyone left here at all.

When they reached the river the company commander had half his force stop and line up along the water's edge before setting down their spears and shields in favour of the bows slung across their backs. He knew that crossing the water was when his warriors would be at their most vulnerable so by deploying archers he could at least give his men some cover while he led them across the ford.

Reaching the opposite bank still unopposed the Elves divided up again to complete their search of the village, checking inside every structure for any signs of the inhabitants. However, despite the lack of damage there was not a single living soul, dead body or trail of blood to be found.

When they reached the far side of the village the company commander halted his men and deployed them either side of the road that the column needed to follow before he rode back towards the column. As he passed by the archers deployed on the other river bank he ordered them forwards to join the rest of the company, thus forming a screening force that could protect the column while it crossed the ford.

"My lord, the village is entirely deserted." he told Vellyn.

"Is there anything to suggest what happened to the inhabitants?" Vellyn asked and the company commander shook his head.

"No my lord. We found nothing, no signs of damage, no blood and no bodies. Just empty buildings. It's as if everyone just decided to leave." he said.

"But did they decide to leave of their own free will or were they forced to go?" Tugolin commented.

"Just like what Vayran reported." Illyana added.

"I thought your agent said that the disappearances were limited to settlements that got their water from wells." Vellyn pointed out and Illyana nodded.

"Yes my lord, he did." she replied, "Which means that the villagers from this settlement also vanishing is all the more serious. What was limited to places with wells can now happen anywhere it seems."

"Only until we catch up with those responsible. Then the disappearances will stop." Vellyn said and then he waved the column forwards, "Advance!" he called out.

Thomas had been able to ride past the village where he had sought shelter when he returned from Oscay and the Wraith had killed the two watchmen without being noticed and it was not long after that that he reached the stone circle where he had arrived. Dismounting from his horse just outside the circle he led the animal towards the central stone.

"So I just place my hand on it again and think of Oscay, right?" he said.

"Think of the city itself. There are many such circles in Oscay and if you are not precise enough then we may end up at the wrong one." the Wraith warned him.

## The Fall of Syldarin

"Okay, think of the city." Thomas said and he took a deep breath, "Here goes." he said as he placed the palm of his hand against the stone.

In an instant Thomas found himself standing back in the stone circle in Oscay, easily recognisable by the missing stone. While it had been afternoon when he entered the stone circle in Hessenland here it was only early morning. He climbed back onto his horse and rode in the direction of the ruined city, heading towards the Great Library where Ammaril's expedition had made their camp.

As he got nearer to where he remembered the camp being though things became different to how he remembered them. It was obvious from some distance that the Great Library was no longer surrounded by the ruined structures that it had been and as he continued to ride closer he heard a loud 'crash' and saw a plume of dust travel up into the air. While it was understandable that the ruins would be unstable and would collapse over time there seemed to have been too many collapses in just a few days.

Thomas slowed his horse and continued to ride onwards until he saw where a pair of Orcs appeared to be studying one of the ruins. The moment that they saw him though they snarled and grabbed tools that they had close by. From their clothing Thomas guessed that these two Orcs had once been among the sailors of the Elf fleet. One of them shouted something and a Troll came lumbering around the ruin holding what looked like a large, crude hammer with a stone head and it was then that Thomas realised that what they were doing, they were clearing the ruins around the Great Library. Obviously Ammaril had decided that she did not want her precious library surrounded by ruins that could collapse at any time and she had ordered them brought down in a more controlled fashion.

All of a sudden the two Orcs charged at Thomas and before he could react they grabbed him and pulled him down from the back of the horse and it suddenly occurred to him that they might not have recognised him. "Hey it's me! Thomas Cooper!" he yelled as the Troll was charging towards him as well, "I work for Ammaril. Don't you know about me?" One of the Orcs then shouted something that Thomas did not understand that caused the Troll to come to a stop and both Orcs released their grip on him, "That's better. Now where is Ammaril?" Thomas asked.

"Gone." an Orc told him and he frowned.

"What do you mean 'gone'?" Thomas said.

"The Queen is not here human." the Orc replied.

"Where has she gone?" Thomas asked.

"Syldarin." the Orc said.

"Syldarin? Is she coming back?" Thomas said.

"Yes. She will rule from here." the Orc responded.

"So that's why you're tearing down the ruins. So you can build new buildings, right?" Thomas commented but the Orcs just stared at him, "Okay, whatever you're doing, just keep doing it. Where can I wait?"

"The library is forbidden. Go wherever else you want." the Orc told him before both of them turned around and walked away from Thomas again, heading back towards the ruined building that was next on their list to pull down.

"Why didn't you say anything? I'm lucky they didn't kill me." Thomas said softly.

"But they didn't." the Wraith responded, "Besides whether you live or die now is irrelevant. If those Orcs had killed you then, or if they decide to kill you later on then I can still inform Ammaril of your failure to have her enemies killed."

Ammaril took a small escort of cavalry mounted on horses taken from the fortress stables with her when she headed for the stone circle that her army had arrived in Syldarin at. There was another circle closer to the fortress but this was too close to a major coastal settlement and Ammaril did not want to risk either herself or the Orcs accompanying her being seen by them, especially if there was a witness present when she activated the circle.

On the other hand the original stone circle was in an area now completely depopulated so Ammaril travelled there instead, despite the longer distance. Ammaril dismounted from her horse when she entered the circle while her escort remained mounted and stayed just within the circle while she walked to the central stone, placed her hand upon it and in an instant all of them vanished into thin air.

The three sorcerers accompanying Vellyn's force all gasped simultaneously as they sensed the surge of overwhelming magical power and they struggled to maintain control of their horses.

"What is it?" Vellyn asked.

"Power Lord Vellyn, an incredible surge of magical power. Just like the previous ones." Hassim told him.

"The stone circle is barely a mile ahead now. Did it come from there?" Vellyn asked.

"From that direction, yes." Hassim replied.

## The Fall of Spildarin

Vellyn then turned to one of his mounted commanders.

"Take a dozen cavalymen and investigate. If you find anything don't engage though, get back here and report." he ordered.

"Yes my lord." the other Elf replied and he signalled for a unit of cavalry to accompany him before his horse broke into a gallop and with the other cavalymen right behind him he raced on ahead of the column.

Moving as fast as their horses would carry them the mounted scouting party reached the stone circle in a short time. However, by the time they arrived the circle was empty and at first glance there were no indications of anyone in the area, "Spread out and search the area." their leader ordered and while he moved forwards directly towards the circle his men split into three groups. One followed him while the others headed in opposite directions to move around the outside of the circle, searching the surrounding countryside while their leader investigated the circle itself.

All of the cavalymen were experienced warriors but none of them had any magical ability at all so they were blind to the residual magical energy that surrounded the stones. However, they were able to see tracks in the ground and although those left when Ammaril's army had arrived from Oscay had begun to crumble those left by her and her escort just a short time ago were still fresh and visible to the horsemen.

"Someone was here." one of the men accompanying their leader said when he noticed the hoof prints in the ground and he dismounted to inspect them more closely, "Recently too. These are fresh."

"Yes they dismounted here and walked up to this stone." the unit's leader responded as he followed the footprints that Ammaril had left but then he frowned as they suddenly ended at the stone, "But where did they go? Can anyone see another set of tracks around this stone?"

The other cavalymen with him began to search around the stone for another set of footprints. The most logical solution was that the person who had left them had climbed up onto the stone and then jumped down from it somewhere else. This meant that any tracks leading away from the stone would not necessarily have to begin right next to it but they were unable to find any footprints leading away anywhere near the stone.

"Could a greater dragon have picked them up?" one of the other Elves suggested. The largest breeds of dragons were quite capable of carrying an Elf rider even while in flight, though they were incredibly rare.

"The hoof prints from the horse just vanish as well. Even a greater dragon can't carry something the size of a horse." the Elf who had first noticed these tracks pointed out.

"There are tracks over here." one of the Elves searching around the outside of the circle called out, "It looks like about half a dozen riders on horseback but most of them just stop. One set continues towards you."

"Yes, we've found them. They just stop as well though." the unit's leader responded as he looked around again, desperately trying to figure out where the horses and their riders had disappeared to after entering the stone circle.

"Ride back to the rest of the column and tell them what we've found, tracks that go nowhere before they vanish, maybe one of those sorcerers can figure this out." the group's leader told one of his men.

"Yes sir." the Elf responded before he climbed back onto his horse and rode away.

One of the other Elves then noticed that the group's leader was looking at the ground where the messenger had ridden.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No, just checking that he left tracks, that's all." the leader responded.

The messenger sent to the column galloped along the road towards it.

"News?" Illyana said.

"It looks like it. Hopefully not that the rest of the advance unit has been killed." Vellyn responded as he raised his hand, signalling for the column to stop. He then waited for the approaching rider to reach him.

"My lord, we reached the stone circle as ordered." the rider said.

"And did you find anything there?" Vellyn asked and the rider nodded.

"Yes my lord. There were tracks. Mainly of horses but some footprints as well. The strange thing is that they all just seemed to disappear. They entered the stone circle but didn't leave it again." he answered and Vellyn looked at the sorcerers.

"Isn't that what your agent reported?" he said and Illyana nodded.

"Yes, though he reported tracks that came from nowhere at all rather than ones that led into the circle and then vanished." she said.

"Then we continue to the stone circle for you to investigate. If those tracks are significant then even if seeing where they lead is impossible then we can at least follow them back to where they originated from." Vellyn said.

## The Fall of Syldarin

Upon their arrival in Oscan, Ammaril and her escort headed into the nearby city. Ammaril smiled when she saw the extent of the demolition work being undertaken around the Great Library itself by the Orcs and Trolls that she had left behind. Once enough ground was clear and she had enough skilled artisans to spare she would have work commenced on rebuilding the city to be used as the capital of her empire, an empire greater than the old Trayman Empire that had dominated most of the human parts of Entris and even some of the continent to the south. Her empire would be the greatest that the world had seen since the Oscari themselves walked it. As soon as Ammaril was seen by some of the Orcs overseeing the Trolls that were carrying out the actual demolition itself they rushed towards her and bowed their heads.

"My queen, we are glad to see you back." one of them said.

"Thank you. How is the work going?" Ammaril responded.

"An area stretching out for at least two hundred yards has been cleared around the Great Library my queen. The library itself remains exactly as you left it. None have gone inside." the Orc told her.

"Excellent." Ammaril said.

"My queen there is something." the Orc added, "A human arrived who claimed to be your servant. He has been waiting for your return also."

"A human indeed? Where is he now?" Ammaril asked, knowing that it could only be Thomas.

"He claimed a tent at the edge of our camp mistress. He has stayed there since he arrived this morning." the Orc said and he pointed towards their camp.

While most of the tents that had been brought along with the Elven expedition to Oscan had been taken back to Syldarin, enough had been left for the Elves overseeing the demolition while the Trolls had their own crude shelters. Thomas had taken one of the Elven tents that had been vacant and his horse was tied up outside. Thomas himself emerged from the tent when he heard the sound of horses walking along the road and he waved.

"Ammaril." he said before two of the Orcs accompanying her suddenly leapt down and ran up to him, grabbing him by his arms and forcing him to his knees as they yelled at him in Elven, "Hey! What did I do?" he exclaimed.

"I am your queen Thomas Cooper, remember that when you address me." Ammaril responded, looking down at Thomas from the back of her horse.

"Okay, I'm sorry your majesty." he protested and Ammaril ordered the Orcs to release him before she climbed down from her horse and approached Thomas as he got back to his feet.

"Tell me why you have returned here Thomas Cooper." she said.

"I hired some mercenaries to deal with Will Beckett and his followers before they could tell anyone about you but they failed. Will made it to Hessenstadt before returning to Teuten." Thomas told her.

"They failed or you failed Thomas Cooper? You were the one I instructed to kill my enemies." Ammaril said.

"Okay so maybe I didn't chose the mercenaries very well but I honestly thought that they could do the job. You put this Wraith in my chest, wouldn't it have killed me if was trying to double-cross you?" Thomas pointed out.

"Yes it would, you are right. Now tell me what the humans are doing. Are they preparing for war?" Ammaril asked.

"I don't know. All I can tell you is that when they got back to Teuten, Will and the others all boarded their ship and set sail. I don't know where they were going though, I don't have anyone aboard the ship." Thomas said.

"This is unfortunate." Ammaril said.

"Yes but not my fault so there's no need to do anything drastic." Thomas replied.

"Drastic Thomas Cooper? What were you thinking of?" Ammaril said.

"I was worried that you might kill me, that's all." Thomas told her.

"Kill you? But I still have need of you Thomas Cooper." Ammaril told him.

"You do? What for?" Thomas asked and Ammaril smiled at him.

"I need you to deliver a message Thomas Cooper." she replied, "A very important message to a very important person in the Hadarian Empire."

It was obvious to the three Elven sorcerers that the stone circle was the source of the magical energy surge as they approached it.

"This is definitely the place my lord." Illyana told Vellyn, "The magical energy came from here. If what Vayran told us is correct then it was released by the stones themselves."

"Is there anything still here we should be concerned with?" Vellyn asked.

"No my lord, just echoes. Though strong ones." Hassim answered.

## The Fall of Spildarin

"Whoever was responsible for the release of the energy from the stones may return if you want to wait my lord." Ilyana suggested.

"How long might that be?" Vellyn said.

"Without knowing exactly what happened I'm afraid I can't say my lord. They could return momentarily or maybe never." Ilyana replied.

"Well I can't afford to have this entire force sitting around for a week or more just on the off chance that someone could appear here. We have a physical trail to follow so that's what we'll do. We'll at least find out where whoever was here came from." Vellyn ordered.

## 14

After sending Thomas on his way again Ammaril travelled to see the real reason she had come to Oscay. When her expedition had set out from Syldarin originally her cousin Tiellan had brought along with him four major dragons, creatures about the size of large dogs. In Syldarin he had used them as hunting animals and they were trained to obey his every command. Ammaril had taken blood from each of the four dragons so that the spell she cast to transform the Elves into Orcs and Ogres into Troll would also affect them. However, the effects on the dragons had been rather different to those on the Elves and Ogres.

While they had begun the size of large dogs the dragons were now much larger, each one the size of a house with wingspans greater than the length of a ship. Despite their seemingly impossible size the dragons had retained the ability to fly and in addition they had gained the ability to breathe fire at a target, making them incredibly destructive. Such power was useless to Ammaril though unless she controlled it and so the same spell that had created these monstrous reptiles had also made them as loyal to her as they had been to Tiellan prior to their transformation.

Far too large to be tethered or caged, the dragons had been allowed to fly freely and all four had settled just outside the city where there was a supply of food in the form of local wildlife and as Ammaril rode towards this nesting site one of the massive creatures flew over her before setting down ahead of her and letting out a low growl. The horses ridden by Ammaril and her Orc escort came to a halt at this point, reluctant to approach the dragon but Ammaril did not force the creature onwards and the Orcs remained beside her. Instead Ammaril waited as the other three dragons, all aware of her presence, also landed close by. "Come with me." she announced and she pointed, "To the circle of stones."

The four dragons all then launched themselves into the air and began to circle high overhead. They waited for Ammaril and her escort to start moving as well and then followed them. Despite their size the dragons were capable of moving significantly faster than someone on horseback and so they continued to circle as Ammaril and the Orcs rode to the stone circle. Ammaril and the Orcs all entered the circle and once again Ammaril made her way to the centre while the Orcs remained only just within it. It was then that the four huge dragons all swooped down to the ground, landing outside the stone circle and looking inwards.

The stone circle was large enough to contain all four dragons at once but only if they curled their tails to avoid them extending beyond its perimeter. According to the information that Ammaril had uncovered regarding the operation of the circle any part of an object that extended beyond the stones would not be transported when it was activated. The effect of this on a living entity would be immediate and permanent amputation at the point where the perimeter of the circle was crossed, most likely resulting in death from massive blood loss. Fortunately Ammaril had an answer to that problem that would avoid having to move the dragons one or two at a time and she looked directly at the massive creatures one at a time, establishing a magical link between her mind and theirs. Powers of dominion over animals were typically only used on much smaller creatures, especially when more than one was to be controlled at once but since she wanted all four dragons to carry out the same actions Ammaril was confident that she could control them all simultaneously.

"Enter the circle." she said, focusing on the minds of the dragons and using her powers to implant the instruction directly into their brains.

All four dragons then made their way slowly into the circle, stepping over the stones themselves before they came to a stop, almost completely filling the circle with their massive bodies. As a final move, Ammaril then implanted in them the urge to bend their tails around so that they were entirely within the circle as well. Not wanting to wait a moment longer than necessary just in case she lost control and one or more of the dragons moved out of the circle Ammaril quickly placed her hand on the central stone and concentrated her mind on Syldarin, in particular the stone circle that she had been using to move between the island and Oscay, at which point she, her Orc escort, their horses and the four huge dragons all vanished.

Vellyn and his column were already far enough away from the stone circle when Ammaril returned that the sorcerers did not sense the stone circle's use. Only Hassim was trained to sense magical energies at greater distances he had to be in a meditative state to do so. The force continued to follow the tracks discovered at the circle back to their source, hoping to find out more about the identity of whoever had left them.

Now that signs of their opponents had been detected Vellyn was keen to avoid his force being ambushed and to do this he deployed his cavalry, sending small groups to patrol ahead of and to the flanks of the main body of slower moving infantry and their supply wagons. One of the units moving ahead of the column was

## The Fall of Spildarin

also responsible for following the tracks and reporting back to Vellyn so that the force's commander knew where to direct his troops.

"My lord." the latest messenger from this scouting party said as he rode up to Vellyn and the sorcerers.

"Make your report." Vellyn told him.

"My lord the tracks lead to a road with a hard surface and then disappear. They must have been following the road before they left it to travel across country to the stone circle." the messenger said and Vellyn turned to look at some of the other mounted Elves behind him.

"Who has that map?" he said.

"Here my lord." one of the other Elves on horseback responded and he rode forwards so that he was right beside Vellyn. Then he took a rolled up map from a tube and handed it to him.

"Thank you. Now let's see where we are." Vellyn said as he dismounted from his horse and then unrolled the map, holding it up in front of him while he looked around.

"Can you tell where we are my lord?" Illyana asked as she also dismounted.

"Yes, I think so." Vellyn responded, "Your stone circle was back here and we marched south from there. That puts us about here." Vellyn then pointed to a spot on the map that appeared to be far from any settlements or points of interest, "As you can see there's not much here but a couple of miles further on is this road here, running roughly east to west." then he looked at the messenger and added, "Could you tell which way they had approached from?"

"They looked to have come from the east my lord." the messenger told him.

"I see, east." Vellyn commented while he ran his finger along the line on the map that represented the road ahead of them.

"Is there anything significant to the east?" Illyana said but Vellyn frowned, "Is something wrong my lord?" Illyana added.

"This can't be right." Vellyn said, "Heading east along that road would take you right to the fortress of Lord Tial, the King's uncle."

"Could something have happened at the fortress? Entire settlements have been vanishing after all." Illyana said.

"Lord Tial has made that fortress as impregnable as possible. It couldn't have fallen without us hearing about it." Vellyn said.

"Yet the trail apparently leads us there." Illyana pointed out.

"Which is why that is where we will head. It is most likely that whoever went to the stone circle came from one of the settlements near to the fortress. We can ask Lord Tial if he has seen or heard of anything strange recently. We can also use his troops to reinforce us while we conduct a more thorough search of the area." Vellyn said and he began to roll up the map again.

"The fortress will also likely have somewhere that Hassim can meditate properly in and we can make full use of his ability as a scryer." Illyana added.

"Do you think that he will be able to find who is responsible for what is happening?" Vellyn said.

"Perhaps. That will depend on how much magic they are using and how often." Illyana replied.

"Then in the meantime I'll coordinate with Lord Tial to try and locate them the simple way." Vellyn said.

As soon as Vayran returned to the Tower of Sorcery he made his way to Supreme Sorcerer Ollaris' office and knocked on the door.

"Enter." Ollaris' voice called out from the other side of the door and Vayran opened it before entering the office.

"Supreme sorcerer." he said.

"Ah Vayran, I'm glad you made it back safely." Ollaris said, getting up from behind his desk and walking around it to greet Vayran.

"Thank you supreme sorcerer, I'm glad to have made it back." Vayran replied.

"The force that the King ordered be sent out to investigate the disappearances has already left under the command of Lord Vellyn himself." Ollaris told him and he nodded his head.

"Yes, I met them on my way back and spoke with Illyana. It looked like a strong force." he said.

"Yes, those were my thoughts too. The King obvious took your warning seriously." Ollaris said.

"I'd feel better if I was there with them supreme sorcerer." Vayran said.

"Come now Vayran, you know that Illyana, Tugolin and Hassim are all fine sorcerers and I have every confidence in their ability to take care of themselves." Ollaris responded.

"As do I my lord but-" Vayran began.

"But nothing Vayran. I picked them for this mission myself. Besides, I have need of you and your skills right here." Ollaris interrupted.

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"My skills?" Vayran asked.

"Yes, you were an excellent student Vayran. Give you a problem and you wouldn't rest until you'd solved it, now I have another problem for you to solve." Ollaris explained.

"Of course supreme sorcerer. What is it?" Vayran said.

"It's the stone circles Vayran. There are half a dozen here on Syldarin and hundreds of them around the world. We know that the ancient Oscari built them but we've never known why, at least until now. If they really are a means to move from one place to another in an instant then they need to be guarded. More than that though, learning to be able to use them would benefit us greatly. That's what I want you to do, confirm that they really are a means of transport and then find out how to control them." Ollaris told him.

Vayran frowned as he considered this order.

"Supreme sorcerer, I've studied our library extensively and I have never come across anything other than guesswork regarding the purpose of the stones." Vayran said.

"Yes and if I thought that the answer lay in our library then I'd just go and ask the chief librarian for his help.

The answer obviously lies elsewhere and I want you to find it. There are other repositories of knowledge in the city that you can visit and many of them have texts and artefacts that have resisted identification.

Perhaps some of them will contain the answer. We know how chaotic the world was after the Oscari vanished from it and a lot of knowledge was lost. I'm hoping that information about the stone circles was merely mislaid and is still awaiting rediscovery. Do you think that you can accomplish this task?" Ollaris said.

"Of course supreme sorcerer. If the knowledge exists then I will find it. I will begin immediately." Vayran said.

"Very good. Keep me updated and if you have any difficulty accessing any of the other libraries that you need to then let me know. I'll make sure that you get in one way or another." Ollaris told him.

As Vayran left the Tower of Sorcery he was already considering where else in Sylda there would be libraries of ancient texts that might contain the information that he was looking for. The most obvious places to start were museums and temples that held records going back centuries in some cases but there were other places as well, including the royal palace that contained the royal family's personal library that was believed to hold personal accounts going back as far as the first king of Syldarin who had lived during the time of the fall of the Oscari Empire.

There were also private collections of artefacts in the hands of various noble families across Syldarin but Vayran knew that they were more likely to be so fragmentary that they would be almost useless so concentrating on the larger collections was the best place to start. With this in mind Vayran turned as he left the Tower of Sorcery and headed towards the city museum.

It was getting late in the day when the fortress of Lord Tieral came into view for one of the forward cavalry elements of Vellyn's force.

"There it is." one of the half dozen cavalymen said as the mounted Elves all looked at the structure in the distance, "At least we'll have four solid walls around us when we sleep tonight."

"Why aren't there any flags flying?" another of the Elves commented when he noticed the lack of flags, in particular the main central flagpole that ought to have been displaying the heraldry of Lord Tieral showed no colours.

"You're right. Something's not right here. We should go and get a closer look." the unit's leader said and he began to ride towards the fortress at a sedate pace.

As the group got closer to the fortress they became aware of another group of horsemen nearby who appeared to be watching them. Even with the excellent vision possessed by Elves the scouts from Vellyn's column could not make out these other figures clearly thanks to the hooded cloaks that they wore. However, the style of the saddles and harnesses used on their horses suggested that they too were Elves.

"Who are you?" the leader of the unit of Elves called out to the hooded figures.

"Who are you?" one of them yelled back in a gruff voice unlike any Elven voice that the Elf cavalymen had ever heard even though it was spoken in their language.

"We are riders for Lord Vellyn, now tell us who you are." the Elven unit leader said. However, rather than reply to this request with their identity the hooded figures seemed to talk quietly among themselves for a moment. Then one of them turned and rode away at high speed. Then the remaining figures all drew swords from beneath their cloaks, "Form line!" the Elf leader exclaimed, "Heranas, return to the column and warn Lord Vellyn that there's trouble at the fortress."

"Yes sir." the Elf named Heranas responded and while the other Elves all lined their horses up side by side and levelled their spears he turned and rode away, heading back towards the column as quickly as his horse could manage.

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“Charge!” the leader of the Elves ordered and the remaining Elf cavalrymen also broke into a gallop only they headed directly for the hooded figures who were now riding at them at high speed as well.

The Elves’ spears gave them an advantage of reach when the two groups met and clashed and two of the hooded figures were immediately impaled while a third was knocked from his horse. Three others managed to avoid being struck though, two of them slipping around the spears aimed at them while the third was not targeted and they slashed at the Elves with their swords, cutting one down from his horse while the other two parried the attacks with their shields. The Elves now released their spears to draw their own swords and then struck back at the hooded figures. As one of them swung his sword at an opponent the hood that was hiding their identity slipped down to reveal the facial features of an Orc. Having never seen such a creature before the Elf gasped and recoiled away but this just gave the Orc an opening to attack and he took it, driving the tip of his sword right through the chainmail that the Elf wore and into his chest. The exposed Orc’s victory did not last long though as the Elves’ leader struck him in the back with his sword before using his shield to block the attack of another Orc. The Elf then struck back, the Orc parrying two blows before a third hit his neck and produced a massive spurt of blood as he fell to the ground. This left just one Orc horseman and rather than face three Elves on his own he turned and fled, encouraging his mount to move as quickly as possible.

“After him.” one of the surviving Elves called out.

“No.” their leader ordered, “Let him go. Gather up our bodies and one of these – these things. Lord Vellyn needs to see it and know what we’re facing.”

“My lord!” the Elf cavalryman sent back to warn the column shouted as soon as he saw the Elf force ahead of him and Vellyn brought the column to a halt again.

“It looks like one of your scouts has returned.” Illyana commented before Heranas rode right up to Vellyn.

“My lord there is trouble at the fortress of Lord Tieral.” he said.

“Trouble? What sort of trouble?” Vellyn asked.

“I can’t say for certain my lord but the fortress may have fallen.” Heranas said, “No flags are flying, not even Lord Tieral’s own heraldry. We saw horsemen who drew swords on us and I was sent to report back to you.”

“Who were these horsemen?” Vellyn said.

“I’m sorry but I don’t know my lord. They wore hoods to hide their appearances. They spoke Elven but in a strange way.” Heranas answered.

“Like a human would?” Vellyn suggested.

“Perhaps. I’ve never heard a human try to speak our language before.” Heranas said.

“Lord Vellyn, if the fortress has fallen then what will we do?” Illyana said.

“Take it back of course. I’m still surprised that it could have fallen without us being warned about it. If we’re lucky then whatever damage was caused in the attack won’t have been repaired yet and we can use that to our advantage. Of course I expect that whatever defence has been put in place will be concentrated on any breaches in the walls so I may be asking for your help in clearing them.” Vellyn said.

“Of course my lord, that is why we were sent with your force.” Illyana said, “Though I should point out that we still don’t know anything about the sorcerers that may be supporting our enemy, either their numbers or their abilities. We do know that they can wield great power if needed.”

“Yes, we’ll have to see about that. In the meantime I’m going to gather my force and leave our wagons here. Then we’ll advance in line, each company side by side and cavalry at the fore and to the flanks.” Vellyn said,

“I want a rider to take a report back to the King. He needs to be informed that his uncle’s fortress has fallen.”

During the time it took for the rest of the patrolling cavalry to be recalled to the column Vellyn began to organise his infantry and it was while this was taking place that the other three scouts who had encountered the Orcs returned to the column bearing the bodies of their two fallen comrades as well as one of the Orcs they had killed.

“Lord Vellyn!” the leader of the unit shouted as he and his men galloped towards the column, “Lord Vellyn you need to see this!”

Vellyn and the three sorcerers all rode towards the returning cavalrymen when they heard his shouting and they soon noticed the body of the Orc even in the fading light.

“What is that thing?” Vellyn asked as the leader of the cavalrymen as the Orc’s body was thrown to the ground.

“We fought several creatures such as this my lord. I don’t know what they are.” the cavalryman replied.

“What do you make of this?” Vellyn said, turning to the trio of sorcerers and all three of them dismounted from their horses to inspect the body more closely.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” Illyana replied as they inspected the Orc’s facial features.

“This spoke our language?” Tugolin added, looking up at the cavalryman.

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"Yes my lord. Or at least one of them said a few words. The horses that they rode appeared to be Elf mounts as well. The saddles and harness matched our own." he said.

"Taken from the fortress no doubt." Vellyn commented.

"Wherever they got the horses they are certainly not the humans you believed they were Lord Vellyn." Illyana pointed out.

"Human or otherwise they are most certainly not Elves so have no place on Syldarin." Vellyn responded, "Therefore, it is our responsibility to remove them forcibly."

Vellyn's five companies of infantry were each deployed in two equally sized blocks, one in front of the other. The front block kept their bows slung and were stood side by side to create a solid wall of shields as they advanced, their spears poking out over this wall. Behind the spearmen came a block of archers who could launch arrows in an arc over the heads of their comrades in front of them to attack a closing enemy while also being sheltered by the shield wall.

The cavalry on the flanks ensured that any attempt to ambush the advancing force would not be able to get around the shield walls easily while Vellyn himself led the army from the unit of cavalry riding ahead of the infantry.

Already alerted to the presence of a force of Elves of unknown size in the area, Orcan and Tiellan had not been neglectful in preparing the defences of the fortress though and the battlements were manned. In addition to supplies of arrows for the archers baskets of rocks had also been winched up to the battlements and Trolls had been deployed with each. Elves made only limited use of the war engines that human armies were deploying in ever greater numbers and there were none in the fortress itself, however with their strength considerably enhanced a Troll could fling a reasonably sized rock over a significant distance, especially when it was being thrown from a high up position such as the fortress's battlements.

"A strong force Orcan." Tiellan said as the two Orc leaders looked down from the battlements at the approaching Elves.

"Not strong enough though. We outnumber them and have the advantage of the fortress walls to protect us. You will need to prepare a company to take out through the secret passage. When they pass the entrance you will take your force out and attack them from the rear. Remind them that we want as many prisoners as possible, they may fight against us now but they will join our ranks for the next battle." Orcan replied.

As the Elf force advanced they kept a close watch on the fortress, expecting the occupants to attack at any moment but when that attack came it was not what any of the Elves had had in mind. Instead several large figures appeared on the battlements and raised their arms above their heads before they flung rocks towards the advancing Elves.

"What are they?" Vellyn exclaimed as the rocks landed in front of them.

"I don't know." Illyana responded, "Something else that we haven't seen before. I suggest halting your advance now."

"Now?" Vellyn said and Illyana nodded.

"Yes my lord. It looks like we are still too far away for them to hit us but we can strike at them. We'll need a fire, the larger the better." she said.

Vellyn then held up his hand for the army to stop and the Elves all halted, maintaining their shield wall just in case the fortress's defenders had something with a longer range than the thrown rocks. A party of Elves was then sent to gather firewood and a large bonfire was constructed in front of their army, still beyond the distance at which the thrown rocks continued to land.

"Will this suit your need?" Vellyn asked as the fire was lit and Illyana smiled.

"It will my lord." she said before she and the other sorcerers dismounted from their horses and walked up to the fire.

The three sorcerers looked at one another briefly before they stared into the flames and focused their minds on the fire. Hassim was the first to raise his arms in front of him and as he did so a large ball of fire rose up out of the bonfire and hovered in mid air. Then all of a sudden the ball of fire shot towards the fortress and struck the battlements where one of the Trolls stood hurling rocks at the Elves. Engulfed by the fire the massive Troll plunged from the battlements screaming until it landed in the courtyard below.

The lone Elf on horseback that had been assigned the task of carrying Vellyn's report back to King Dellaron galloped along the road, intent on reaching the capital as quickly as possible. He knew that he would soon have to stop and make camp for the night but he hoped that he would be able to make it as far as one of the deserted settlements first so that he could shelter in one of the abandoned buildings. All of a sudden a huge shadow fell upon him and he brought his horse to a halt as he looked up in horror into the sky. There above

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him were four dragons, though these were unlike any dragon that he had seen before. Lesser and major dragons were relatively common in Syldarin and there were even a number of the larger greater dragons in some of the more remote areas but these four monsters dwarfed even those horse-sized creatures. Then he realised that there was a group of figures in horses riding along the road towards him and he looked towards them. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness enough that he could see the faces of the riders and he saw that all but one were Orcs. Strangely the last rider was an Elf, obviously a woman and after a few moments he realised that he knew who she was. This was Princess Ammaril, the King's younger sister who was believed dead. Whatever was happening here he knew that something was very wrong and he decided not to try challenging Ammaril and the Orcs. Instead he rode his horse off the road and began to move across country.

Ammaril saw the Elf turn off the road though and she turned to her Orc escort.

"Don't let him escape." she told them and the Orcs also steered their horses off the road in pursuit of the fleeing Elf.

Having to try and get around the Orcs meant that the Elf had a far greater distance to cover than they did as they charged directly at him and he quickly realised that he would not be able to evade them. Instead he brought his horse to a stop and checked that his shield was firmly in place before he drew his sword. Then he charged straight at the oncoming Orcs, hoping to be able to fight his way through them.

The Elf swung his sword at the nearest Orc as soon as he came within reach and he sent him flying from his horse. However, a moment later the next Orc swung his own blade, aimed not at the Elf but at his horse and it cut a deep wound in its shoulder. The horse gave a cry of pain and promptly collapsed, throwing the Elf from his saddle and sending him rolling across the ground while the Orcs turned towards him. The Elf was able to pick himself up, still with his sword and shield in his hands as he braced himself for the Orcs' charge. This came quickly and the Elf used his sword to parry the first blow but he was unable to avoid the next Orc's swing and the fast moving sword blade took his head from his shoulders, killing him instantly.

With the Elf dead the Orcs turned back towards Ammaril to see her riding towards them.

"Let's see what he was doing out here all alone shall we?" she said and then she climbed down from her horse to search the body.

It did not take long to find the letter from Vellyn to her brother that explained the situation at Tialar's fortress as well as his intention to attack.

"Is it important my queen?" one of the Orcs asked.

"Yes, it is. Very important." Ammaril answered, "We have been discovered and now the fortress is under attack." she explained before she looked upwards into the sky where the four massive dragons still circled, "Fortunately we may yet be in time to do something about it."

The fortress had a solid stone construction, solid enough that the blasts of flames being directed at the battlements could not do more than scorch the surface but the flames engulfed anyone close by to where one of the fireballs struck and the only option had been to withdraw all of the Orcs and Trolls from that side of them. The attacking force could still be watched from some of the arrow slits built into its walls and towers but the Elves had remained far enough away that they could not be shot at.

"How long will they keep this up?" Tiellan said as he and Orcan watched the sorcerers launching their fireballs at the fortress.

"As long as they need to." Orcan responded, "They are too far away to attack from inside the fortress. We will have to go out to face them."

"They are still beyond the exit of the secret passage. We can't attack from behind." Tiellan pointed out.

"Then we attack from the front but from two different directions." Orcan said, "I will take cavalry out through the main gate while you take your infantry through the secret passage. When their attention turns towards me, that will be your moment to attack. Target their sorcerers with archers. Once they are dead the rest will be vulnerable."

"I will prepare them." Tiellan replied.

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Vellyn continued to watch the three sorcerers send fireballs towards the fortress, each one lighting up the night sky as it flew. While there was still no physical damage being caused to the structure the fireballs were keeping the defenders from hurling any more rocks towards the Elf army. Vellyn knew that he could not keep his army where it was indefinitely though. Sooner or later he had to advance and actually try to take the fortress and he had despatched a small scout force to circle the fortress to seek out weaknesses, hoping that there was damage caused when the fortress had originally fallen that he could exploit. However, when the scouts returned they reported that after having circled the fortress they had seen no signs of any damage anywhere.

"We'll have to break through the gates so I want a ram preparing." Vellyn told his commanders, "It may be necessary to burn through it, in which case we'll need firewood and oil to get it going."

Before he could continue though one of the Elves on the front line of the army called out a warning.

"Cavalry!" he yelled and Vellyn and his commanders all turned towards the fortress in time to see a unit of Orcs on horseback riding out of the fortress gates.

"To your mounts." Vellyn ordered and he and his commanders rushed back to their horses, "I want the forward and right flank cavalry to stand by to charge."

Once the Elf leaders were back on their horses the cavalry positioned to the right flank as well as the front of the army moved forwards to form a long line.

"Ready to charge my lord." one of the other Elf leaders told Vellyn and he nodded and drew his sword, holding it up high before levelling it towards the Orcs who had now formed a line of their own.

"Charge!" Vellyn yelled and the Elf cavalry broke into a charge, galloping forwards towards the Orcs who responded by launching into a charge of their own.

Both sides were armed with spears that they levelled as they charged but it was obvious that the roughly seventy Elves outnumbered the Orcs by about a third and when the two sides smashed into one another it was the Orcs that came off worse.

Orcan himself cut down an Elf knight but he saw that almost half of his force had been either killed or injured while the Elves had lost only a handful of their own men in return. However, he had never envisioned defeating the superior force, all he wanted to do was draw them out.

"Fall back! Fall back!" he yelled and the orc cavalry turned around and began to gallop back towards the still open fortress gates.

"After them." Vellyn ordered and the Elves began to pursue the fleeing Orcs. However, as they did two further groups of Orcs appeared. One was located on the battlements of the fortress above the gateway while the second emerged from the exit of the secret passageway and quickly formed themselves into a line. All of the newly appeared Orcs were armed with bows and they rapidly unleashed volleys of arrows towards the Elves. Those on the battlements aimed for the cavalry led by Vellyn, those being the only Elves within the effective range of their weapons while the Orcs who had emerged from the tunnel fired towards the bonfire where the Elf sorcerers were launching their fireballs.

Vellyn screamed as an arrow hit him in the leg and at the same time the knight closest to him fell from his horse with an arrow in his chest

"My lord we need to retreat." one of the other Elf commanders exclaimed.

"Yes, retreat. Get out of range." Vellyn agreed while he pressed down on his leg to try and limit the bleeding and the Elven cavalry began to retreat.

At the same time as the cavalry were under fire the three sorcerers heard the swarm of arrows heading towards them and they threw themselves to the ground. Behind them the blocks of infantry were protected by their shields that they held up over their heads. On the other hand the sorcerers had no such protection and as the arrows fell Tugolin was hit twice, once in the stomach and once through his throat. Illyana scabbled across the ground towards the injured sorcerer and when she reached him he was coughing up blood.

"Tugolin!" she exclaimed as she tried to stem the bleeding from his neck but after one more cough Tugolin's eyes widened and he lay still.

"Lady Illyana, Lord Hassim, get back!" a nearby infantryman called out and when the two sorcerers looked around they saw him beckoning them towards him as he stood in the block of infantry under their shields. Illyana and Hassim both rushed to get under the shields as well before a second volley of arrows rained down upon them.

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While the Orcs were shooting their bows though the block of infantry behind the spearmen was reforming to face them in just two ranks before they raised their own bows and returned fire. Without waiting to see how effective their volley was the Elven archers released a second one almost immediately and the Orcs were struck by both of them in rapid succession.

Instinctively the Orcs sought what cover they could find as arrows rained down upon them and Tiellan realised that this position could not be held. Already he could see the cavalry deployed on the Elves' left flank organising themselves for a charge that would most likely overrun the Orcs entirely. He could not tell for certain whether any of the Elf sorcerers had been hit by his archers but for the time being at least they had ceased their attack on the fortress and he considered that it was possible that his force had already achieved their objective.

"Back into the tunnel." he ordered and the Orcs ducked out of sight of the Elves and crawled back towards the tunnel before the Elves could realise where they had gone.

Without targets to shoot at the Elven archers ceased fire but remained in their formation in case the Orcs reappeared while Illyana and Hassim remained beneath the infantry's shields.

It was not long before Vellyn and his cavalry returned to the main force of Elves and several of his subordinates rushed to help him down from his horse while a physician was sent for.

"Lord Vellyn, you're injured." Illyana said as she and Hassim rushed from beneath the protection of the shields to where he was now sat on the ground, gripping his wounded leg tightly.

"Archers on the battlements. They must have been waiting for us to get within range. What happened here?" Vellyn replied as he looked around, "Where's Tugolin?"

"Dead." Hassim told him, "More archers appeared over there and fired on us as well."

"That must be where Tiral's secret tunnel comes out. I knew he had one but I didn't know where. I'm surprised that he didn't use it to escape when his fortress was attacked." Vellyn replied.

"What are your orders now Lord Vellyn?" Illyana asked just before another rock was hurled from the fortress battlements and landed in front of the Elf army.

"We continue with my plan. You use your magic against the battlements while a battering ram is prepared for the gates. When we're ready to launch our assault we'll move one of you around to the gate side. Our troops will be heading up hill so they'll need all the protection that you can give them. Until then though we'll continue to attack from this side so that those things will think this is the side we're going to attack from." Vellyn said before he turned to one of the other army commanders, "I'm afraid that you'll have to lead the assault. I won't be on my feet again for some time."

"Yes Lord Vellyn." the other Elf commander replied with a nod, "What about the secret tunnel though? They could launch another attack from there."

"My archers are covering it my lord." the commander of the infantry company on the flank pointed out.

"It needs to be found. Send a small force to locate it and block it. Start a fire. If the tunnel uses wooden supports then try to destroy them but if not just build the biggest fire possible to fill the tunnel with smoke and prevent anyone from using it." Vellyn ordered.

"We achieved nothing." Tiellan said to Orcan when the next fireball struck the fortress and the Trolls retreated before they could be burned, "They still have their sorcerers."

"Perhaps but their leader was seriously injured." Orcan replied.

"How do you know?" Tiellan asked.

"I saw him. Drellan has sent Lord Vellyn himself and one of your archers hit him in the leg. He may be able to direct attacks from out there but when it comes to storming us someone else will have to take command." Orcan answered.

"Then what are your orders now? Eventually Vellyn will receive reinforcements." Tiellan said.

"Perhaps. But not for several days and his army will need to rest eventually. Vellyn needs to try and breach the walls sooner than that so all we need to do is wait." Orcan said.

Vellyn winced as the arrow was drawn out of his leg by the surgeon who had accompanied his force. Then he looked up at the Elf commander who he was delegating command of the assault on the fortress to.

"Go on." he said.

"We have everything ready Lord Vellyn." the other Elf told him, "The tunnel had been found and blocked with fire, no-one will be coming at us from that way and we have a battering ram prepared for our assault on the gates along with suitable fuel for burning through them if that fails."

"Good. What about the second bonfire for the sorcerers?" Vellyn asked.

"Prepared my lord, though not lit yet. Though the ground in the immediate vicinity of the fortress is open there is cover further back and we were able to set the bonfire up where it cannot be seen from the

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battlements or any of the arrow slits, at least until it is ignited." the other Elf answered and Vellyn managed a smile before he winced again as the surgeon poked at his leg while his assistant held a tourniquet tight to limit the bleeding.

"Very good." he said, "Which of the sorcerers will you move to it?"

"I spoke with Lady Illyana and she recommended that she remain at the present fire and Lord Hassim be moved to the new one. She'll keep the enemy distracted until the attack force is in place. Then we'll ignite the second fire so that Lord Hassim can provide protection against their arrows and rocks. If our battering ram fails then he will ignite the fuel we place against the gates." the other Elf said.

"Yes, that all sounds sensible. I wish that I could accompany you but obviously I can't right now." Vellyn responded.

"How serious is your wound my lord?" the Elf commander asked.

"Yes, how is it?" Vellyn asked the surgeon in turn.

"The arrow has caused significant damage but it missed the bone. I am confident that I can stop the bleeding and it will not be necessary to remove the leg." the surgeon replied.

"So I will walk again eventually?" Vellyn said.

"You will my lord." the surgeon told him.

"Then there we are." Vellyn said, turning his attention back to the Elf commander, "You may commence your attack when you are ready without worrying about me."

The Elf commander returned to the front line of the army where Illyana and Hassim were still launching fireballs towards the fortress though as before these had done no physical damage to its walls.

"Lord Hassim, we're about to begin the attack. You need to-" he began before all of a sudden a massive shape passed over their heads.

The startled Elves all looked upwards into the sky to where four giant dragons flew around them.

"What are they?" a nearby Elf exclaimed.

"Dragons, but no dragon is that big." another Elf said.

"Lady Illyana, do you know what they are?" the Elf commander asked.

"As has already been said, they appear to be dragons though they are larger than any dragon recorded. I suggest that your men ready their spears." Illyana answered.

"Raise spears." the Elf commander ordered and behind them the ranks of Elven warriors pointed their spears upwards to create ranks of sharp points intended to prevent the dragons from swooping down at them. Given the size of these creatures it seemed unlikely that spears could have much effect against them but even trained animals would not charge into a wall of spears and risk injuring themselves.

However, these massive dragons were not limited to attacking with teeth and claws and all of a sudden one of them swooped downwards towards the centre of the Elf army before it unleashed a torrent of flame from its mouth. In an instant dozens of Elves were entirely engulfed by fire and killed while the rest of the company broke and scattered, leaving behind them comrades who continued to burn. The rest of the army looked on in horror at what had happened even as the fleeing Elves ran through their lines.

"That's impossible!" Illyana exclaimed before a second dragon descended and exhaled another jet of fire that swept through one of the forward blocks of another company.

"Archers! Fire at that beast! All of you!" the Elf commander shouted, realising that the army was doomed if nothing was done and knowing that attempting to approach the one on the ground would be suicidal.

Despite the shock of the dragons' appearance the remaining Elf archers quickly readied their bows and each remaining company released a volley of arrows towards the landed dragon. Such a large creature made an easy target and dozens of arrows struck it. A handful of these managed to lodge themselves between the dragon's scales but the majority just bounced right off, unable to pierce the creature's hide. Even though they stayed in place it did nothing more than irritate the dragon and it let out a loud roar before it breathed fire over another block of Elven warriors.

"Can you do anything?" the Elf commander asked Illyana and she turned to Hassim.

"Do you think our own fire will work?" she said.

"It might. It's worth a try." Hassim responded and the two sorcerers both focused their minds on the bonfire again while looking towards the landed dragon. However, before either of them could conjure up another fireball one of the dragons still in the air swooped down towards them and exhaled flames of its own that washed over the bonfire, the two sorcerers and the remaining leaders of the Elf army.

With a large portion of their troops dead and all of their leaders gone the remaining Elf warriors' morale collapsed completely and almost simultaneously the survivors broke and fled, riding and running away from the fortress as quickly as they could and abandoning anything that slowed them down such as weapons and shields.

## The Fall of Spildarin

Orcan and Tiellan watched the rout of the Elf army from one of the fortress's arrow slits. The battlements would have provided a much better field of view but they would also have been vulnerable to the fireballs that had been being launched towards them.

"Our queen has sent her dragons just in time." Tiellan said as they watched the giant creatures continue to breathe fire at wherever small groups of Elves tried to band together.

"Yes she has." Orcan agreed, "But now we need see to the survivors. Dead Elves are of no use to us. Live Elves are new recruits."

"True. Though we should hurry. At this rate there will not be any survivors left for much longer." Tiellan pointed out.

The two Orc leaders then hurriedly assembled units of cavalry and opened the fortress gates again, leading them out.

"Find all the survivors." Orcan said sternly, "I want them alive but none must be allowed to escape. If you have to kill them to achieve this then do it."

Ammaril smiled when she saw the Orcs exiting the fortress through the eyes of the dragons she was controlling and she gave the massive creatures an order to land and wait for her arrival before she opened her own eyes.

"Did the dragons succeed my queen?" one of the Orcs with her asked.

"Yes they did." Ammaril answered, getting to her feet and then picking up the blanket that she had been sat on, "Lord Vellyn's army has been routed and my brother is rounding up the survivors. Now we should be on our way. They'll be expecting us at the fortress."

The fleeing Elves abandoned their wagons, knowing that they were too slow and prone to becoming stuck when used across country. Instead those that had horses rode on them while those without simply went by foot. Despite his injury Vellyn was helped into the saddle of his horse before he rode away, escorted by a pair of knights who had survived the massacre at the fortress as well as the surgeon who had treated him. Vellyn and the other Elves who had remained with the wagons had witnessed the dragons' attack with horror, just as unable to believe that such creatures existed as the Eleven warriors who were attacked.

Behind them Vellyn and his party knew that they were being pursued, they could hear the cries of Elves who had not been able to keep up with their pace coming under attack.

"My lord, your leg." the surgeon said and Vellyn glanced down to see that his leg was bleeding again, obviously a consequence of riding a horse so soon after it being stitched.

"It will have to wait." Vellyn replied.

"My lord the longer I delay in examining your leg the worse its condition will get.

"It'll get even worse if we stop and those things catch up with us. We'll find somewhere to take shelter and then you can take a look at my leg." Vellyn responded.

"My lord, ahead of us." one of the knights then said and Vellyn saw a ground of individuals riding horses towards them and after his party came to a halt on the road Vellyn recognised Ammaril among them.

"Princess Ammaril." he said before he realised that the riders accompanying her were all Orcs now that they had lowered their hoods.

"My lord, what's happening?" the knight asked.

"I don't know, but I'm not taking any chances." Vellyn said as he drew his sword and the two knights also drew their weapons.

"My lord you shouldn't be fighting with your injury." the surgeon told him.

"I won't if we can avoid it, but that may not be possible." Vellyn replied before the Orcs accompanying Ammaril all drew their own weapons. The Orcs then charged, urging their horses forwards as fast as they could move. The two Elven knights also urged their horses to break into a gallop, seeking to engage the Orcs before they could reach Vellyn but they were heavily outnumbered and both were cut down the moment they came within reach of the Orcs.

As Vellyn and the surgeon watched the Orcs then split into two groups and rode around them, surrounding them completely before Ammaril joined them, riding her horse between two of the Orcs and looking directly at Vellyn.

"Lord Vellyn, would you be a traitor and use that weapon against your queen?" she said and he frowned.

"My loyalty is to King Dellaron. I don't know what happened to you in Oscay or how you have returned but if these creatures are under your control then it is you that is the traitor." Vellyn replied

"My dear Lord Vellyn, you can't imagine how sorry I am to hear you say that." Ammaril said before she looked at one of the Orcs beside her and nodded at him.

Vayran made his way to the museum again early the next day, Even though he arrived before the building was normally opened to guests he was permitted to enter and shown to the library when he continued to study the books kept there. So far he had only begun to determine the general subjects covered by the texts and he was still drawing up a list of those that might relate in some way to the ancient stone circles when Arrathan was unexpectedly shown into the library by one of the staff.

"Arrathan, what are you doing here?" Vayran asked.

"Captain Sensal asked me to come and speak with you my lord." Arrathan answered, looking around to make sure that the museum staff official had left and that they were alone in the room.

"About what?" Vayran said.

"The supreme sorcerer has told us that he had instructed you find out the exact purpose of the stone circles and he has instructed us to provide you access to the records held in the palace." Arrathan told him and Vayran nodded.

"Yes, Lord Ollaris said that he would arrange for me to have access to the Royal Library. Hopefully if I can't find anything here then some of the early Kings of Syllandin will have written something helpful down." he said.

"No my lord, I mean that you have been given access to the Royal Guard's library." Arrathan said and Vayran frowned for a moment.

"What do you mean the Royal Guard's library?" he said.

"The Royal Guard also maintains a library. It contains texts that are considered too dangerous for places such as this." Arrathan said.

"Why have I never heard of this library before?" Vayran said.

"Because only a few individuals outside the Royal Guard are allowed to know about it my lord. The supreme sorcerer knows about it of course but the only others are the royal family themselves." Arrathan explained.

"Why would the Royal Guard maintain such a secret library though?" Vayran said.

"Because it contains forbidden knowledge. Things such as blood magic, demonology and necromancy. The sorts of things that could be dangerous if someone was to misuse them." Arrathan explained.

"Especially if that person was a sorcerer, which is why only the supreme sorcerer knows about it." Vayran said.

"Exactly. He needs to know just in case the knowledge is ever needed but he cannot access it without the permission of the King." Arrathan said, "Not all of the knowledge is forbidden though, some of it was just obtained along with forbidden texts and all of it was placed in our library together to make sure that nothing forbidden was accidentally released."

"So you've had this secret library all this time and no-one's ever been allowed in?" Vayran said.

"Not quite. A few individuals have been permitted to enter the library to read from it, normally supreme sorcerers in times of crisis." Arrathan said, "Though members of the royal family have also accessed it from time to time. Only one while I've known about it though."

"Really? Who was that?" Vayran said.

"Princess Ammaril." Arrathan replied, "Before she left for Oscay of course. She was part of a group that destroyed a vampire a few years ago and she was able to take his library. There was nothing dangerous in it but she wanted to access additional texts from our library that were mentioned in hers."

"How soon can you show me this library?" Vayran said.

"Right now if you'd like. Though you won't be allowed to remove anything." Arrathan answered.

"Just give me a moment to clean up here." Vayran replied excitedly as he began to close the books that he had laid out in front of him on the table. He then returned these to the shelves, intending to return and continue his research here later on. However, the idea of a secret library existing in the city was too much for him to ignore for a moment longer than necessary.

As soon as Vayran had finished clearing away the books Arrathan took him back to the royal palace, though he did not show him to any of the areas used by the royal family themselves. Instead he escorted the sorcerer to the barracks of the Royal Guard that joined onto the palace itself and from there down into the basement. At first this appeared to be a normal basement filled with food, kept fresh in the cool air but as the two men went further into it they came to a thick wooden door that was locked by a sturdy looking padlock.

"I assume that you have the key?" Vayran commented and Arrathan smiled as he took the key from beneath his coat.

"Captain Sensal gave it to me before I came to fetch you my lord." he said and then he used it to open the door.

Beyond the door lay a large chamber that was lit by numerous lanterns, making it easy for Vayran to see the rows of shelves that were filled with books and similar objects.

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"How big is this place?" he asked as he stepped through the door and looked around in amazement.

"I've been told that it's about two hundred yards square. The plans are in here somewhere though I couldn't tell you where exactly. Apparently it used to be much smaller but was expanded as the collection grew bigger." Arrathan said.

"And are these lanterns kept burning all the time?" Vayran said as he pointed to one of the lanterns.

"I believe so my lord, it helps keep everything dry. They are magical so they never go out unless broken." Arrathan said and Vayran smiled.

"So if someone is clumsy enough to break one then they won't burn down the entire palace." he commented.

"I think that was the idea, yes." Arrathan said, "Of course having everlasting lanterns to light up the chamber also means that we don't have to let people in here to keep them fuelled."

"Which also means fewer chances for people to steal anything." Vayran said as he began to walk along the nearest shelf and examining the books. Some of these were properly bound books while others were little more than bundles of paper. Amongst them were also a number of tubes that held scrolls and even a handful of clay tablets that suggested they were especially ancient, such things having long been surpassed as a means of maintaining written information, "So where did all of this come from? As a sorcerer I know that forbidden texts don't just appear by magic. They would be especially dangerous if they did."

"The Royal Guard has been called to deal with many threats over the centuries since the Oscari disappeared and we were left to our own devices Lord Vayran. The army may be able to maintain general order but there are threats that go further and that is where successive kings have called upon us, frequently with the assistance of your order. Vampires, renegade warlocks turned to the practice of demonology or necromancy or just cursing enemies through blood magic. There have even been a handful of human spellcasters who have made it to Syldarin with evil intentions. All of these objects were seized from those monsters and placed here my lord." Arrathan explained.

"Interesting. Very interesting." Vayran said as he continued to walk along the shelves with Arrathan just a few steps behind and the sorcerer wondered whether the Royal Guardsman was keeping close not only to be able to answer his questions easily but also to monitor what he was looking at and to ensure that he did not remove anything.

Walking past one of the lanterns Vayran sensed the magical energy that surrounded it. Despite what Arrathan had said about the lanterns never going out, Vayran knew that eventually they too would become depleted but that would take many centuries. However, as they proceeded further into the library he sensed another source of magical power close by and when he reached the end of the shelf beside him he turned towards it.

"Are there many magical artefacts other than the books in here Arrathan?" he asked.

"I couldn't say my lord. I understand that most of the artefacts themselves tend to be destroyed unless they also hold some sort of knowledge." Arrathan answered.

"Interesting." Vayran said as he came to a stop beside a shelf that contained only books, yet was giving off significant amounts of magical power, suggesting this it held more than just books, "I take it that no-one is allowed to remove anything from in here?"

"No my lord. The first king of Syldarin made it punishable by death to try." Arrathan replied before Vayran reached out his hand to touch a row of books in front of him, only for it to pass right through them as he touched them and he turned to Arrathan.

"That's impossible. No-one is allowed to remove anything from this place." he exclaimed as he too reached out only for his hand to pass through the row of books as well.

"How often are these shelves checked to see if anything is missing?" Vayran said.

"Not often. No-one is allowed in unobserved so there is no opportunity for anyone to steal anything." Arrathan said.

"But people are allowed in occasionally which means that there is the possibility that something could be taken, especially when the thief is a spellcaster who can cast a persistent illusion like this." Vayran said while he felt around on the empty shelf to try and find the object that had to be the centre of the illusion, however he could find nothing, "There isn't anything back here that could create this illusion either so the enchantment must be marked on the shelf itself." he added.

"Captain Sensal needs to be informed of this immediately." Arrathan said and Vayran nodded in agreement.

"Yes he does. This entire place needs to be checked to see whether anything else is missing." he said.

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Thomas stood outside a large tent waiting and doing his best to avoid making eye contact with either of the two soldiers standing at attention outside. Both were large men with stern expressions on their faces and Thomas suspected that they have taken great pleasure in inflicting harm on anyone that their superiors ordered them to. A third soldier, this one wearing a prominent chain around his neck that marked him out as one of the army's leaders the emerged from the tent and walked up to Thomas.

"Okay Count Aernd will see you now." he said and he held out his hand.

"Thank you." Thomas replied and he placed a small bag of gold coins in the soldier's outstretched hand before he went into the tent.

The interior of the tent was furnished as well as it was possible to do and this included a wooden desk behind which sat a man wearing clothing similar to the other soldiers in the camp except this his were in better condition and he was not wearing any chainmail.

"Mister Thomas Cooper to see you your lordship." the soldier that Thomas had bribed said, having followed him back into the tent.

"Sit." Count Aernd said and Thomas sat down opposite him.

"Thank you for seeing me your lordship." Thomas said.

"My time is valuable. Just get to the point." Count Aernd replied.

"Of course, right to the point. I need an introduction and you are the perfect person to introduce me." Thomas told him and he frowned.

"Why would I introduce you to anyone? I don't know you." he said and Thomas reached into the bag he carried over his shoulder and removed a large leather pouch that he set down on the desk between the two men. The sound that this made as it landed on the desk indicated that it was filled with coins and this was proven when Thomas opened it and tipped the gold that it contained out onto the desk.

"I think that you'll be able to get to know me rather quickly though." Thomas replied.

"That's a lot of money for an introduction." Count Aernd commented, leaning forwards to pick up one of the coins so that he could verify that it really was gold.

"Not really. I'm asking for a very special introduction your lordship." Thomas said.

About a third of the army led by Lord Vellyn had been killed during the attack on the fortress and about fifty more had suffered injuries that had been too severe for them to survive the effects of the transformation spell and become Orcs but this still left more than three hundred who were added to the growing ranks of Ammaril's army. This included a number of the army's leaders and between her original expedition, the garrison at the fortress and now Vellyn's army Ammaril had a significant number of Orcs who were capable as acting as commanders in the field even without her personal presence. The one thing that her army lacked was sorcerers. It was unlikely that any sorcerer would inadvertently consume the potion necessary for the transformation spell to work and if it was forcibly poured down their throats then Ammaril was not confident that they would retain their powers once they became Orcs. However, that was a matter that she intended to address later on.

"The time has come for us to strike openly." she told the Orc leaders that she had gathered together in the main dining hall of the fortress while a large map of Sylldarin had been laid out on the table, "The most important things to accomplish are to remove the enemy's ability to resist us and to prevent any escape. As many Elves as possible must be transformed if Orc civilisation is to flourish in the world and every Elf that escapes is one less Orc to join our great cause."

"But how do we achieve this my queen? Once we move openly word will spread and the Elves will flee." one of the more recently transformed Orc commanders said.

"We use our dragons." Ammaril responded before she turned to Vendril, "Vendril is it true that there are only three harbours in Sylldarin where ocean going ships can be found?"

"Yes my queen. There is a harbour just outside Syllda to the north, Neesol to the east and Lammar to the south." Vendril replied and Ammaril smiled.

"Then the harbours at Syllda and Neesol will be attacked by our dragons to burn the ships in them while Lammar will be taken at low tide so that any ships there may be seized for our own use. It is the closest to us and can be reached quickly on foot or by horse. At the same time I will attack two targets in Syllda that will destroy any chance of organised resistance to us. I will destroy the Tower of Sorcery and I will kill King Dellaron himself." she said.

"How will you get to King Dellaron my queen?" another of the Orc leaders asked, "The Royal Guard protects

him.”

“I am the King’s beloved sister. Of course I will be permitted to see him,” Ammaril replied, “and if that doesn’t work then the same dragon that destroys the Tower of Sorcery can burn the royal palace to the ground as well. I will rule from Oscay and my new palace will be built there beside the Great Library itself. There is nothing in the palace that I care about any longer. With all their leaders destroyed and no way to escape every remaining Elf in Sylldarin will either become one of us or die.”

“Stolen?” Sensal exclaimed when Vayran and Arrathan informed him of the books that were missing from the Royal Guard’s library in private. Even though the theft of the books was a serious matter the existence of the library needed to remain a secret,

“I’m afraid so. I sensed the magic from the illusion, of course any of your men who had visually inspected the contents would not.” Vayran said.

“I don’t understand how anyone could have entered the library though. There is only one door and only this one key for the lock.” Arrathan said.

“They entered because they were allowed in.” Vayran said.

“No-one is allowed into the library.” Sensal replied.

“That’s not what Arrathan told me.” Vayran commented, “He said that the library has had visitors. Other than whoever you use to actually put the books and other items in there when you obtain them.”

“It has been more than a century since the previous supreme sorcerer needed to access the library.” Sensal said.

“Actually it wasn’t the supreme sorcerer I was thinking of, Ollaris or his predecessors.” Vayran said.

“Then who?” Sensal asked.

“Princess Ammaril.” Arrathan responded.

“Exactly. The princess was a skilled spellcaster so she could easily have cast the illusion. Would she have been watched while she was in the library?” Vayran said.

“Of course not. No member of the royal family would ever remove something from the forbidden library.” Sensal said.

“I’m afraid that all the evidence suggests that she did captain.” Vayran said.

“Evidence? What evidence?” Sensal responded.

“Firstly it had to be someone that was allowed into the library. Secondly they had to be able to cast the illusion that concealed their theft, an illusion that Ammaril should have been able to sense herself and yet she obviously never reported it or you would have already know about the theft.” Vayran explained.

“You are accusing a member of the royal family of being a thief.” Sensal said sternly, “You will need more evidence than a few theories”

“Actually I’m accusing Ammaril of a lot more than stealing books from a library, even if they are full of forbidden lore. I’m accusing her of being the one responsible for the disappearance of all those farms and villages. I think that she created the potion that was introduced to the wells and I think that she is somehow responsible for the surges of magical energy that were sensed.” Vayran said and Sensal glared at him.

“Do you have any idea how serious those accusations are Lord Vayran?” he said.

“Yes I do and if I’m right then things are going to become even more serious.” Vayran responded.

After days of travel the *Storm Chaser* finally approached the harbour on the southern coast of Costria. This was part of one of the small nation’s largest cities, with only the capital being larger though when compared to Teuten it was a somewhat smaller port that was capable of handling only around two-thirds the number of ships.

Will, Gromar and Yilven all made sure to be on deck as the *Storm Chaser* approached the harbour, sailing past another cog that was anchored just outside it. This vessel had fortified structures at both ends of the ship and a ballista mounted on the forward one, indicating that it was a warship there to protect the harbour though there was no indication of what it was protecting the harbour from.

“So we’re finally there.” Gromar commented as he looked around at the harbour, seeing that there were plenty of spaces for a ship to dock. The he looked at Yilven

“All of these vessels are human built.” Yilven replied, noting that none of the ships had the construction style associated with Elven vessels. It was not entirely unknown for Elves to purchase human-built ships but it was uncommon, “Any of them sailing to Sylldarin would be stopped.”

“So have we come to the wrong place then?” Gromar said, “I don’t think that sorcerer will be happy about spending even longer at sea, even though he can at least stand up without being sick now.”

“No, there ought to be Elf vessels visiting this port fairly regularly.” Yilven said, “There may not be a great deal of trade between Sylldarin and the human nations along this coast but there is some.”

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"Luckily for me." Lucia said as she emerged from below deck and climbed the steps to the stop of the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure, "If there wasn't then Captain Vendril couldn't have bought me and who knows where I would have ended up?"

"Well I for one am glad to have you here. Have you ever visited this port before?" Will replied and Lucia nodded.

"Yes a few times, though I didn't go ashore much." she said.

"On the other hand Captain Atwood made regular runs down the Lerron Straight so I've been here plenty of times. I may not have had anything to do with any of the Elves I saw but I did notice which inns and taverns they tended to spend their time and pay in." Will said, "Once we dock you, Yilven and I will go ashore to ask around. I'm sure that the innkeepers will have been keen to know when their regular customers would be returning."

Once the *Storm Chaser* was docked and the harbour master paid Will took Yilven and Lucia ashore just as he had said he would. Together the trio went to one of the taverns that Will had seen Elven sailors in during one of his previous visits to the port. Unsurprisingly given the lack of Elven vessels in the harbour though on this occasion there were only humans in the tavern.

"What can I get you?" the barman asked when the trio approached him.

"Just three ciders." Will replied, placing several coins on the bar, "Also we're interested in getting to Sylldarin. Do you know if there will be any Elf vessels coming here soon that could take us?"

"You've just missed one actually, took a cargo of cloth there just yesterday." the barman answered as he poured out the three drinks and placed them on the bar. Then he looked at Yilven and added, "So you're trying to get home then?"

"That's right. I'm hoping to be able to book passage on one of the ships heading there." Yilven said, "Do you know when another Elf ship is likely to dock?"

"Oh I'd say about five or six days. We rarely go a week without seeing at least one, though whether it'll be going to Sylldarin or maybe up north is another matter." the barman told him, "Do you need somewhere to stay because I have beds in a common room or a couple of private rooms if you'd rather. They cost more of course."

"We have accommodation." Yilven said.

"Yes although one of my passengers may appreciate being able to sleep ashore." Will commented, "I'll tell him that he can come here if he needs to."

"A passenger? So you're the captain of your ship? I can make it worth your while if you can send people this way regularly." the barman said.

"I'll keep that in mind, though I don't know how often the *Storm Chaser* will be coming this way." Will responded as he and the others picked up their drinks and headed for one of the tables.

"A week? Can we wait that long?" Lucia asked when they sat down.

"Well? Can we?" Will added, looking at Yilven, "If Ammaril is back from Oscay then time could be of the essence."

"Yes, though I don't see that we have much choice Will. If you take the *Storm Chaser* towards Sylldarin then she may be mistaken for a raider and half your crew could have been killed before we can convince the navy of who we are. Taking an Elven ship is a far safer option." Yilven replied.

"What if we can't find an Elf captain that will take all of us though?" Lucia added, "I remember Captain Vendril turning down transporting humans because he didn't trust them to be aboard his ships."

"He kept you aboard one for long enough." Will pointed out.

"That was different. He practically raised me. I lived aboard his ship for longer than I lived with my parents before they sold me." Lucia said.

"And we're all glad that he did." Will commented before Lucia smiled at him.

Ollaris looked at Vayran sternly as the younger sorcerer explained to the head of his order what he had discovered in the library maintained by the Royal Guard.

"And you openly accused Princess Ammaril of being a traitor?" Ollaris said when Vayran was finished.

"Yes supreme sorcerer. It is the only explanation that makes any sense." Vayran replied.

"It makes very little sense at all. Why would Princess Ammaril do any of the things you have suggested?" Ollaris asked.

"I don't know supreme sorcerer but I am certain that I am correct. Only Princess Ammaril could have removed those books from the Royal Guard's library. Perhaps something in the library she obtained from the vampire that she destroyed led her to something in them." Vayran answered.

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"But what Vayran? Captain Sensal will no doubt report your accusations to the King though I doubt that he will believe them." Ollaris said and Vayran thought for a few moments.

"Blood magic." he said and Ollaris frowned.

"What?" he said.

"When I was told about the Royal Guard's library I was told that it contained forbidden lore including blood magic. Now why would you put something into a well?" Vayran said.

"To make someone drink it." Ollaris said.

"Yes, so that it would get into their blood." Vayran said.

"Vayran as the head of our order I am allowed more leeway than most in the study of forbidden lore. While I am as forbidden from practising it as anyone I have studied enough to be able to recognise the signs of it and so I know the limitations of blood magic. It targets individuals or sometimes family groups, not entire settlements spread over a wide area." Ollaris said.

"The deformed corpses are a sure sign of blood magic though, something that came from within." Vayran pointed out.

"Yes, but as you said there were only a handful of these. Whoever was responsible could have targeted them individually." Ollaris said, "Our conclusion so far is that whatever was added to the well was intended to incapacitate the missing villagers so that they could be more easily removed from their homes."

"Lord Ollaris what if the bodies were the result of the spell failing, not the intended effect?" Vayran suggested.

"What do you mean Vayran?" Ollaris asked.

"My lord Elves have their origins in blood magic. Our ancestors were human until the Oscari transformed them through blood magic." Vayran answered.

"Yes but thankfully that sort of power was lost when the Oscari disappeared." Ollaris said.

"Perhaps. What if it still existed somewhere waiting to be rediscovered? In Oscay perhaps?" Vayran said and Ollaris' eyes widened.

"Where Prince Orcan and Princess Ammaril led an expedition to." he said.

"Exactly." Vayran said.

"Vayran if you are right in this then we are facing an army of monsters led by someone who doesn't care about unleashing forbidden dark magic on the world." Ollaris said.

"Yes my lord, I realise that. That is why I think that we should go and see King Dellaron in person. I saw the force that Lord Vellyn had under his command but if all of the missing villagers have been transformed into something else then he is going to be badly outnumbered and the King needs to prepare the army for war." Vayran said.

Now that she had her transformed dragons available to her Ammaril did not need to concern herself with riding a horse from one end of Sylldarin to the other to reach Silyda. Instead she had one of the giant creatures carry both her and Orcan to a point just outside the city where it could land without being seen before she and her brother simply walked the rest of the way. Ammaril did not make any attempt to hide her face, not caring whether or not she was recognised by any of the Elves she happened to encounter in the street. On the other hand Orcan concealed his features beneath a hood and gauntlets so that no-one would see his transformation. Ammaril had brought two of her dragons with her but for now these remained away from the city, ready to be summoned by her magical link to them at the exact moment that they were needed. Thanks to this link Ammaril knew that the other harbour cities were already under attack, with ships burning in Neesol while another dragon simply circled Lammar while it was taken by the Orc army, ready to destroy any ship that tried to escape.

Ammaril and Orcan made their way through the city's streets until they came to the gates of the royal palace that were protected by guards in chainmail identical to the type that Orcan wore beneath his cloak.

"Halt!" one of the guards called out as the pair walked towards the gate but then he frowned as he looked at Ammaril.

"Is something the matter?" she asked, smiling at the guard.

"No your highness, but you are supposed to be dead." he responded.

"Well as you can see I am very much alive. Now if you don't mind I need to speak with my brother King Dellaron." Ammaril said before she glanced at Orcan and added, "Come along Orcan, it's time for a family reunion."

Ammaril and Orcan then strode through the palace gateway, walking through the ornate gardens that surrounded the palace while the startled guards behind them just watched. When they came to the front door of the palace itself it was protected by two more of the Palace Guard but they remained still. Instead one of

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the palace servants rushed to meet them at the front door, only to gasp when they saw that it was Ammaril who was walking towards them.

"Your highness. We all thought that-" the servant said.

"From what I have heard not a lot of thought has gone on since I left for Oscan." Ammaril interrupted, "I take it that my brother Dellaron is in the throne room?"

"The King is in his throne room, yes. Shall I announce you?" the servant asked.

"No that won't be necessary. I know the way and I can show myself in." Ammaril answered as she and Orcan simply walked past the servant and along the hallway in the direction of the throne room.

Dellaron listened to Sensal repeat what Vayran had said about Ammaril being responsible for the removal of books from the library of forbidden lore that the Palace guard maintained. It was obvious that the captain of the Palace Guard did not believe that the accusations were credible, however Dellaron himself remembered how obsessed his sister had become with her books and how his younger brother had supported everything she had done, her desire to gather more knowledge meshing with his belief that humans presented a grave threat to Syldarin and only by unlocking the secrets of the ancient Oscari could the kingdom's safety be guaranteed.

All of a sudden the door to the throne room opened and a courtier rushed in.

"Your majesty!" he cried out.

"Yes, what is it?" Dellaron asked.

"It's your sister Ammaril. She's here." the courtier said and the room fell silent.

"My sister is dead." Dellaron said.

"No your majesty." the courtier responded before he realised that he had just directly contradicted the King to his face, "I mean I'm sorry your majesty but-"

"But as I told the guards at the gate the stories about my death are just that, stories." Ammaril said as she and Orcan walked past the courtier into the throne room.

"Ammaril!" Dellaron exclaimed as he leapt up from his throne and walked towards his sister, "I'd given up all hope of ever seeing you again." Before he reached Ammaril though he suddenly remembered what Sensal had been telling him and he stopped, "How did you get back to Syldarin? I haven't received any word about your ships being sighted."

"Our expedition was a total success your majesty." Ammaril said, "Congratulations on your new position by the way. Father would have been so proud to see how you are conducting yourself. Such a shame that you so strongly opposed me and Orcan going to Oscan. If we'd listened to you then I wouldn't have made such wonderful discoveries."

"What sort of discoveries? And where is Orcan, has he returned as well?" Dellaron asked and as he backed away slowly the two large dragons that always accompanied him both raised themselves up from where they had been lying beside the throne while Ammaril smiled at him.

"What, don't you recognise your own brother?" she said and then she looked at Orcan who promptly lowered his hood to reveal his altered features, drawing gasps from around the room.

"That *thing* is Orcan?" Dellaron said as he backed away from Ammaril and Orcan. At the same time Sensal drew his sword and rushed forwards to protect his king. Following this example the other guards present all drew their weapons as well and Ammaril and Orcan found themselves surrounded.

"He is an Orc, among the first of an entirely new species named in his honour." Ammaril said, "The Orcs will be my army, an army that will unite this entire world under a single ruler for the first time since the ancient Oscari died out and spread their power among a chosen few. Myself included."

"Ammaril you are insane." Dellaron said, "I should have realised that years ago and had father lock you away. Now I'm going to correct that mistake. Guards, seize her and whatever that thing is that she calls my brother."

While Sensal remained beside Dellaron the other guards in the room began to close in on Ammaril and Orcan, tightening the ring around them and in response Orcan released his cloak so that it fell to the floor before he drew his own sword. Rather than launch into an attack though Orcan calmly got down on one knee while Ammaril looked around.

"Phyan-sa!" she suddenly exclaimed at the same moment that she thrust her arms out to each side and she unleashed a powerful magical blast that passed over Orcan while he knelt beside her but struck everyone and everything else in the throne room with a strong enough blow that they were pushed backwards, the windows shattering as they were hit by flying objects. Even the trained greater dragons that guarded Dellaron were picked up and hurled with enough force that there was a 'crack' as one landed and broke its neck while the second was knocked unconscious when its head struck the throne as it flew past. The throne itself was heavy enough that it remained standing but the other furniture as well as all of the Elves were knocked down

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by the blast and Orcan immediately leapt to his feet while the guards were helpless and he struck at the closest two before they even had the chance to realise what was happening, thrusting his sword into their chests with enough force to pierce their chainmail coats and killing both of them instantly.

Sensal was quick to recover his senses and he picked up his sword from where it had landed and charged towards Orcan, however before he could reach him Ammaril intervened, sliding her wand from beneath her sleeve and releasing a narrow jet of flame that struck the captain of the Royal Guard and he dropped his sword, screaming for a moment before his entire body was consumed by the magical fire and he vanished. The other guards were also getting back to their feet by this point and they charged towards Orcan and Ammaril.

“Phyan-sa!” Ammaril yelled again as she released another magical blast, this one more focused than the last and it picked up the guards closing from the direction of the door and sent them flying through the air into the wall behind them before they dropped to the floor and lay still, many of them bleeding.

Three of the guards had been approaching from other directions though and Orcan darted to intercept them before they could reach Ammaril, impaling the first on his sword through his stomach before he turned his attention to the final two. One of these raised his shield as he charged, using it to block another swing of Orcan’s sword and while he was distracted the second guard lunged at him with his sword held out in front of him. However, Orcan was experienced enough to be expecting the guards to attack him in rapid succession like this and he leapt back out of the way of the other Elf. Then as soon as the guardsman passed in front of him Orcan brought his sword down upon him as well.

The final guard stepped back, keeping his shield up to block Orcan while holding his sword ready as well and Orcan stared at him, snarling. Then all of a sudden Orcan lowered his sword to where the helmet of his previous victim now rested on the floor and used the tip to lift it off the floor before flinging towards the guardsman. Instinctively the guardsman moved his shield to deflect the flying helmet but Orcan was ready and the moment that the shield was out of the way he lunged forwards again and stabbed the guardsman through his chest.

“Ammaril what do you think that you can achieve with this? No-one will bow before a mad queen and a handful of deformed freaks. The people of Syldarin will rise up against you.” Dellaron said as he got to his feet.

“I don’t think so Dellaron.” Ammaril responded, “You see I don’t need the people’s love or respect, unlike you I have real power at my disposal.”

“You think that your magical powers will let you rule a kingdom? Well there are more than two hundred sorcerers in the Tower of Sorcery and I’m willing to bet that you can’t fight them all.” Dellaron said and he pointed out of the throne room windows towards the Tower of Sorcery that was visible just beyond the edge of the city.

“No you’re quite right. The combined power of the entire order would probably be too much for me to overcome. Fortunately I have a solution to that.” Ammaril replied and she too looked out of the window and focused her mind, “Now.” she said softly.

A shadow fell over the Tower of Sorcery just as Vayran and Ollaris were leaving it and the two Elven sorcerers looked up into the sky to see what was causing it only to see a pair of massive dragons flying above them. Both of these were far larger than any such creature that either of them had seen before and while one continued over the city, heading for the coast the other stopped and hovered close to the top of the tower. From both of these creatures there was a stream of magical energy heading away from them that the two sorcerers were able to sense, indicating that they were both under the control of a spellcaster of some sort.

“Impossible.” Ollaris exclaimed.

“Blood magic. It must be. There’s no other explanation for how a dragon could get so big and yet still be able to fly.” Vayran added before all of a sudden the dragon hovering above them opened its mouth wide and exhaled a massive blast of flames that engulfed the top floors of the Tower of Sorcery, “Get down!” Vayran then yelled and he pushed Ollaris to the ground before diving for cover himself, an act that prompted Reyod to fly from his shoulder.

The extreme heat of the dragon’s fire blasted the top off the Tower of Sorcery and pieces of debris were hurled over a wide area but the dragon was not done yet and it unleashed a second blast of flames that struck what remained of the already burning tower before it flew back up into the sky.

Looking up Vayran saw the Tower of Sorcery burning and he could hear the sound of screaming from inside as the occupants were roasted alive. Then he looked down at Ollaris and reached to help him up but then he saw the blood that was coming from the supreme sorcerer’s head where he had been struck by a piece of falling debris.

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“Supreme sorcerer.” he said, rolling Ollaris over but the supreme sorcerer just stared up at him through dead eyes.

Knowing that there was nothing that he could do to help either Ollaris or any of the other sorcerers trapped within the burning tower Vayran broke into a run, eager to get as far away from the Tower of Sorcery before the impossibly large fire-breathing dragon could come back to finish off any survivors.

While the first dragon was destroying the Tower of Sorcery the second flew over the city and a panic broke out at the sight of the huge winged creature. The dragon paid no attention to this panic though, instead flying over the city to the harbour that was located just on the other side of it where the beast swooped down towards the ships that were docked there and as it passed over them it exhaled fire down upon them. Made from wood and other flammable materials the ships immediately caught fire and panicked sailors leapt overboard into the water as their ships burned around them. The dragon made several passes over the harbour, making sure that every ship was struck by its fire before it moved out to sea where there were a handful of vessels already out of the harbour. Unable to move fast enough to outrun the dragon, each of these was destroyed by another blast of fire from the creature’s mouth, leaving no ships in the harbour for Elves to flee on and no witnesses to carry word to other lands of what they had seen. Then with its work done and the water filled with the remains of burned out ships the dragon turned back towards land.

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Ammaril smiled as she turned back towards Dellaron.

"As you can see my dear brother, Orcs are not the only weapon I have at my disposal. Those four dragons that cousin Tiellan brought with him to Oscay have already proven their worth." she said.

"This can't be." Dellaron said as he staggered back and steadied himself on his throne before he took a deep breath and yelled, "Guards!"

"I think it's time that we left Orcan." Ammaril said.

"What about him?" Orcan asked, looking at Dellaron and Ammaril turned towards him as well.

"Kill him." she said and Orcan charged at his older brother.

In response Dellaron dived for where Sensal's sword had landed and scooped it up. Like his brother Orcan, Dellaron had been taught to use a sword by the finest instructors available. However, unlike his younger brother Dellaron had had little cause to ever put this skill to practical use. As the direct heir to the throne he had only occasionally been sent to lead warriors in battle and since becoming regent due his father's failing health he had never picked up a sword in anger. This difference in experience gave Orcan the edge and although Dellaron was able to parry the first few blows that Orcan attempted to make he suddenly found his sword knocked from his grip by a blow to his arm.

As Dellaron looked in surprise at the sword as it flew away from him Orcan delivered a kick to his leg that brought him to his knees before he stood behind Dellaron and held his sword to his older brother's throat.

"Ammaril you don't have to-" Dellaron began.

"Finish him, we have to go." Ammaril told Orcan as she heard the sound of footfalls from outside the throne room that heralded the arrival of reinforcements from the Royal Guard.

"Yes my queen." Orcan replied before he calmly slit Dellaron's throat and pushed him to the floor. Then he and Ammaril hurried through the broken windows and out into the palace ground just as the door to the throne room was thrown open by the guards, led by Arrathan, who had been attracted by Dellaron's call for help.

Ammaril and Orcan ran through the palace grounds while around them they heard shouts of alarm and orders to seal the gates in the wall surrounding the palace. However, Ammaril's escape plan did not involve going back out through the gates. Instead as she and Orcan ran through the grounds the dragon that had destroyed the Tower of Sorcery swooped down and landed ahead of them. The dragon then lowered its head so that Ammaril and Orcan could climb up onto its back where a harness allowed them to hold on as the dragon then took off again and soared into the sky.

While Ammaril and Orcan were being carried away from the palace the second dragon, the one that had attacked the nearby harbour now flew back over the city and began to attack many of the larger buildings, breathing fire on them from above while the Elves who inhabited the city fled in panic.

Vayran made his way through the streets of Sylda. They were crowded with Elves carrying as many of their possessions as they could and he had to push through these crowds as he headed for the palace. The crowds were all fleeing the city though after the attack by the dragons so they were heading away from the centre where the palace was located and the crowds thinned out the further into the city Vayran got. The biggest obstacle to his progress then became the fires that were now burning across the city. The dragon had been able to set so many large fires that there was no way for the Elves to extinguish them before they fled and now these were spreading to neighbouring buildings, turning large portions of the city into infernos that Vayran had to find a way around.

The dragon had also attacked the palace itself but this was one place that had not simply been abandoned to the flames and although part of the building had been destroyed most of it remained intact. Unusually though there were no guards on the gate when Vayran arrived and he was able to enter the grounds unchecked, making it all the way into the palace itself before he saw anyone.

"You!" he called out as soon as he saw one of the palace staff and the young Elf woman stopped and looked at him, recognising him a sorcerer instantly.

"Yes my lord?" she asked.

"I need to speak to the King, is he in his throne room?" Vayran responded but the servant just stared at him,

"Well where is he?" Vayran added.

"Vayran, over here." a familiar voice called out and Vayran turned to see Arrathan hurrying down the hallway towards him.

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"Arrathan, it's good to see you. King Dellaron needs to know that this may only be the beginning. He needs to-" Vayran began.

"Vayran, King Dellaron is dead." Arrathan interrupted and Vayran's jaw dropped.

"The dragon?" he said but Arrathan shook his head.

"No, it was Princess Ammaril. She was here just like you said and she had a creature with her that resembled the bodies that we found only he was alive and well and the courtiers who managed to survive said that she referred to it as being Prince Orcan. She's named the creatures Orcs after him." he said, "She claimed to have created those dragons as well. Lord Tiellan took some with him and she turned them into those things."

"If King Dellaron is dead then who is charge right now?" Vayran asked.

"Nobody seems to know. Captain Sensal and most of the Royal Guard are dead, Lord Vellyn is off with his army and King Dellaron's son is just a child." Arrathan answered.

"Well someone has to take charge. The population are fleeing the city and it's only a matter of time before Ammaril brings her army here to finish what she started. If there's no-one else to organise any form of defence then we're going to have to do it ourselves." Vayran told him.

The dragon carrying Ammaril and Orcan landed close to a large group of Orcs and Trolls led by Tiellan. This force was marching towards Syllda and at their current rate of advance would reach the city the next day. As was usual for an army of this size there were numerous carts that were being pulled by either animals or Trolls that carried the army's supplies but there were also carts that had cages on them, each of which contained Elves from settlements that the army had passed on its way here. Ammaril's orders remained the same as they had been ever since she returned to Sylldarin, although some losses were acceptable as many of the population were to be spared as possible so that they could be transformed into Orcs and to facilitate this the water that the captives were being given was laced with the potion that would carry out the transformation when Ammaril triggered it.

"Syllda is ripe for the taking." Ammaril told Tiellan when he halted his horse in front of her, "The Tower of Sorcery is destroyed and King Dellaron is dead. There is only chaos in the city now and the people are fleeing. Are your hunters prepared?"

"Yes my queen. None will escape." Tiellan responded.

"Excellent." Ammaril said before she turned to look at the captives in the cages, "I see you have more recruits for our army as well."

"Yes my queen. More than a thousand from every town and village along the road." Tiellan said.

"And have they been properly prepared?" Ammaril asked.

"They have. All have been cared for properly and given water. None have gone without." Tiellan answered.

"In that case there is no point in delaying. Bring me the stone and I will begin their transformation." Ammaril told him.

As night fell the fires in Syllda continued to burn, forcing even more of the city's inhabitants to flee.

"At this rate there won't be much of a city left to save." Arrathan said to Vayran as the pair looked out over the city from the walls of the palace. As one of the few major buildings to remain relatively intact the palace had proven to be a useful place at which survivors could be gathered together in relative safety and small groups of guards had been despatched to patrol the city, looking for anyone else left alive so that they could be directed here. Vayran had also made use of Reyod several times, sending out the tiny dragon to scout the city from the air and looking through its eyes. The patrols also took note of what resources remained in the city in terms of food and other vital supplies that could be brought to the palace and handed out as they were needed.

"At least this place is safe enough for now," Vayran replied, "but we need to be ready to move quickly. If those dragons come back then we're an easy target."

"But if we spread out too much then the smaller groups will be easier to pick off one by one." Arrathan pointed out.

"At least it may be possible to run away and hide from these Orcs. Once one of those dragons sees someone then they're dead." Vayran said.

"So you don't think that the ballistas will kill them?" Arrathan asked. Although Elves did not rely heavily on war machines they did have some and several ballistas had survived the dragon's assault on the city. These were now set up on the palace walls and when Arrathan looked around he saw them and their crews watching the skies for any signs of the monstrous dragons returning.

"Perhaps, but frankly nothing is certain about those monsters." Vayran answered, "The big question is how will we conceal everyone? Outside people are vulnerable to attack by the dragons and there are few

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buildings left for everyone to shelter inside without it being obvious.”

“Perhaps those who have already fled the city are right. Perhaps we should leave the city as well Vayran.” Arrathan suggested.

“And go where?” Vayran asked, “We can’t stay out in the open.”

“North, to the coast. If we leave at sunrise then we can be there mid-morning.” Arrathan said, “Even if the reports are true and every ship in the harbour has been destroyed there are still plenty of places to hide. I’m sure that some cellars would remain intact even if buildings above ground have been destroyed. Then there are caves along the shoreline if nothing else.”

“Yes, you’re right. We should spread the word. We leave for the coast at first light.” Vayran replied.

Word of the plan to head for the coast soon spread among the Elves sheltering at the palace but it did not find universal favour among them and Vayran and Arrathan found themselves approached by a man who had been a courtier to King Dellaron but fortunate enough to have not been present when Ammaril and Orcan murdered their brother.

“Lord Vayran!” the man called out while Vayran was discussing the transportation of supplies with several other Elves.

“Yes Lord-?” Vayran began before he realised that if he had been told the man’s name then he could not remember it.

“Lord Inallam.” the other Elf said.

“Of course, Lord Inallam. What can I do for you?” Vayran asked, not recalling the name at all.

“You can remember your place sorcerer. You and Sergeant Arrathan. Neither of you have the authority to order anyone to leave the safety of the palace, let alone King Dellasin.” Inallam responded and Vayran frowned.

“King Dellasin is seven years old. He needs to be ordered to go to bed and sit up straight at the table.” he said.

“Nevertheless Lord Vayran, he is the king and until he comes of age it is for his court to issue orders in his name.” Inallam said and Vayran realised what the courtier was doing. As one of the very few court officials who was uninjured, placing authority with the court meant putting him in charge.

“In other words you’re upset that we didn’t ask you first.” Vayran said, “Well if that’s the way you want to play things then perhaps I should mention that with the death of everyone else in my order I am entitled to declare myself the supreme sorcerer and the royal court can’t give me an order, it may only make requests.

Therefore, as supreme sorcerer I will be taking as many people who will volunteer to come with me to the coast at first light. That includes both you and our new king if you want to come along as well.”

“Is everything alright here?” Arrathan’s voice called out as he and another pair of men from the Royal Guard approached.

“Lord Inallam here was just reminding me that the rules of the court say that he gets to give the orders in the palace and I was just reminding him that the rules of my order say that I am now supreme sorcerer and I can leave any time that I want.” Vayran said.

“Then I must insist that you do just that immediately.” Inallam replied and then he looked at Arrathan and added, “Sergeant, I want you and your men to remove the supreme sorcerer from the palace grounds now.” Vayran and Arrathan looked at one another and Arrathan smiled.

“Supreme sorcerer, the men are prepared to move out at first light. It will mean abandoning the ballistas but their weight would just slow us down.” he said.

“Is everyone coming?” Vayran asked.

“Most. A few don’t want to leave the city and are going to stay behind, including half a dozen of the Royal Guard. They’re been told that young Dellasin is staying so they are too.” Arrathan told him and Vayran nodded.

“Well that’s their choice to make. At least they’ll have the ballistas to defend themselves with. Who knows, maybe they will work after all.” he said.

“This is intolerable!” Inallam exclaimed before he turned around and strode away.

“Do you think he’ll cause us any trouble?” Arrathan asked Vayran.

“I doubt it. He’ll be glad to see us go probably because it make it easier for him to give orders without them being challenged. The one thing that I’m not happy with is that young King Dellasin is staying behind because of him. Talk to those guardsmen who are staying to protect him would you? See if they can talk him into coming with us.” Vayran replied.

“I’ll see what I can do. They’re all good men and I think they know that Dellasin is being manipulated.” Arrathan said.

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The next morning as the sun came up most of the Elves in the palace gathered together in the grounds, just over a hundred of them in all while about a third of that number had opted to remain. There were a handful of horses available to carry loads or the injured who could not walk on their own but the vast majority of the Elves would be walking and each of them was given a bag of provisions to carry. Although most of the Elves were civilians there were a number of warriors among them, both Royal Guard and regular army troops and these men were spread out to make sure that everyone remained with the rest. Before they set off Vayran turned around to take one last look at the palace where through a broken window he could see Inallam looking out with disgust at the Elves who were leaving.

"Everybody's here that's coming Vayran." Arrathan told him and the sorcerer nodded.

"Then we should get going." he said, "It's a shame that Dellasin couldn't be convinced to come with us."

"Yes but there was nothing we could do. Inallam had his claws in too deep. The guardsmen staying to look after him will do a good job though believe me. They'll find a way of getting him out somehow." Arrathan said before he waved towards the gate and the guards standing there opened the wooden gates so that the Elves could leave the palace grounds.

Even though the palace had been heavily damaged it was nothing compared to what awaited the Elves when they left its grounds. The fires started by the dragon had swept over most of the city and it appeared that nowhere beyond the palace had escaped damage of some sort. About half the buildings had been completely destroyed, some no now more than piles of ash and charred wood whereas there was enough left of some that it was possible to make out what sorts of building they had been before the fires reached them.

The streets were largely empty now, blocked occasionally by debris or an abandoned wagon but the group of Elves was able to bypass these with ease on their way towards the harbour. Although not within the city itself the harbour was located very close to it and the amount of traffic that normally made its way between the two places had justified the construction of a well-maintained road that had survived the previous day's attacks.

The journey from Sylda to the harbour was almost entirely downhill though and that meant that meant that as soon as they left the city the Elves had a clear view of the harbour and it was immediately obvious that it too had been attacked. Although the buildings of the town that surrounded it remained intact the ships in the harbour had all been destroyed. All that remained of them now were burned wrecks and debris floating in the water, the nature of the damage giving away the cause of the damage as being another of Ammaril's dragons.

"Looks like Ammaril sent one of her pets here as well." Arrathan said to Vayran.

"Yes, though at least it left most of the buildings alone, that means that there will likely be more survivors." Vayran replied.

"More shelter at least. Though I doubt that will do us much good when Ammaril's army finally makes it this far." Arrathan said.

When the Elves reached the harbour town they were greeted by terrified looks. Although the dragon's attack on the town had been highly localised and damage limited to the ships in the harbour there had still been many deaths from fire or drowning and the townsfolk feared that the dragon could soon return.

"We saw the fire. What happened?" one of the crowd called out as the Elves from Sylda arrived.

"Has the monster destroyed the city?" another asked.

"Did you sorcerers do this?" a third yelled at Vayran, his clothing and staff making it obvious that he was a sorcerer.

"He has a dragon too!" someone else shouted, pointing at Reyod as the small dragon continued to rest on Vayran's shoulder and then one of the crowd rushed forwards with a rock in his hand, heading straight for Vayran.

"Stay back!" Arrathan yelled as he drew his sword and used the hilt to smash the charging Elf in his face, stopping him instantly.

"Yes the city has been badly damaged and most people have left as we have but the sorcerers were not to blame. Our tower was the first building to be destroyed. Whoever sent the dragon must have thought that we were a threat to them. Vayran announced clearly, hoping to be able to calm the crowd down before anyone else got hurt.

"We need shelter." Arrathan added, "Then we need a plan to defend this place when the next attack comes."

There had not been enough time to spread the word to people in Sylda about Ammaril's army of Orcs and so the refugees that had fled into the countryside outside the city were totally unprepared when the first units of Orcs appeared. Initially the Elves who saw them approaching mistook them for Elven cavalry given the chainmail they wore and the shields that they carried but it did not take long for them to realise that these riders were no longer Elves and they panicked and began to flee. However, they could not hope to outrun

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Orcs on horseback and the cavalry soon caught up with them, surrounding them and blocking their escape. Some Elves tried to slip between the Orcs and make it to terrain where horses would have more difficulty in moving but the Orcs cut them down before they could get far. The remaining Elves within the circle of Orcs feared that they would be next to die and they began to beg for their lives before they became aware of the Trolls following the cavalry and they stared at them, even more afraid of these giant figures than of the Orcs. More ominous than the Trolls though were the carts that they pulled, all of which had cages mounted on their backs. The Trolls halted just outside the circle of mounted Orcs and opened up the cages. Then they strode into the circle and began to simply grab hold of the Elves, ignoring their screams as they were lifted off the ground before carrying them to the cages and unceremoniously forcing them inside.

This scene was repeated numerous times as the scattered groups of Elves from the city were suddenly surrounded and taken captive. A few tried to fight back but even fewer of them had any real weapons and they were swiftly overwhelmed. The Orcs and Trolls did not slaughter indiscriminately though, they knew that their primary aim was to take as many Elves alive as possible so that is what they did. However, wherever they encountered resistance they did not hesitate to kill.

"The way to the city is open." Orcan told Ammaril as they sat on horseback with Vendril watching the line of cages on carts being pulled past them.

"Vendril I want you to take care of these prisoners." Ammaril said, "Make sure that they all have adequate water. I will see to them later but for now the city must be taken. There are things there that I want. If they have survived that is."

"Yes my queen. The prisoners will be taken care of." Vendril replied.

"What do you want from the city?" Orcan asked.

"Something kept below the Tower of Sorcery. The tower itself had to be destroyed to prevent the sorcerers from opposing us but they had something that interests me. Hopefully it remains there." Ammaril told him, "While you take whatever remains of the palace I will take a unit of Trolls to the Tower of Sorcery."

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While Orcan was leading a large force of Orcs and Trolls into the now largely ruined city Ammaril took a handful of Orcs and a larger unit of Trolls to where the Tower of Sorcery had stood until the previous day. All that remained of the tower now was a pile of blackened rubble and charred wood, the dragon fire having destroyed it totally.

"Clear this rubble. I need to know whether the underground levels survived." Ammaril told the Trolls and the large figures began to drag the rubble away to clear the ground beneath. While they did this Ammaril turned to the Orcs, "Keep watch, it's possible that some sorcerers may have survived and they could be close by. We can't afford to have them take us by surprise." she ordered and the Orcs started to spread out, setting up to keep watch for anyone approaching the ruins of the tower.

Despite the incredible physical strength of the Trolls, greater even than the Ogres they had been prior to their transformation, the sheer quantity of rubble created by the collapse of the Tower of Sorcery meant that clearing it was a considerable task and Ammaril waited patiently while the Trolls worked.

"There are stairs here." one of the Trolls called out when a large area of rubble at what had been the centre of the tower had been cleared and Ammaril rushed to look for herself. Sure enough there were several stone steps visible that led down into an underground level.

"This is where to dig. Concentrate here." she told the Trolls, "I want access to the lower levels."

"Yes my queen." the Troll responded and he waved for more of the Trolls to join him, forming a chain to pass debris from one to another as it was lifted out of the hole to reveal yet more steps.

Ammaril stood close by, watching as the Trolls continued to clear the stairs before they finally reached the end of it and the stairs became clear from then on. At the same time a voice was heard coming from below.

"Hey! I'm down here!" it called out before other voices also called out for attention and Ammaril smiled at this proof that there were survivors from the collapse of the tower.

"Orcs to me." she called out and the Orc warriors that had been standing watch all rushed towards her.

"You called us my queen." one of them said and Ammaril nodded.

"Yes. We're going down there. I need you all to accompany me just in case." she said. Then she looked at the nearest Troll and added, "You as well. The others can wait here and keep watch."

Ammaril then led the Orcs down the stairs into the darkness below. Before too long it became too dark even for an Elf's excellent low light vision to allow for. Fortunately the torches that had lit these stairs were still present, despite having been blown out when the Tower of Sorcery fell and Ammaril removed one of these from its mounting on the wall beside her. Then she held a fingertip to the end of the torch and released a tiny spark of magical energy. This was enough to relight the torch and she then used this to light more of the torches as she passed them to illuminate her way as she continued down the stairs.

The stairs continued for some considerable distance underground without any doors leading off them, indicating that there was a considerable thickness of solid rock between the surface and the underground levels of the Tower of Sorcery. This was not a surprise to Ammaril, who knew what was kept down here and why the sorcerers of Syldarin wanted to make it as difficult to reach as possible. When she finally reached the bottom of the stairs she found herself in a short hallway, the walls of which were marked with numerous arcane symbols similar to those used on objects intended to store magical energy. However, while those objects stored energy for later use these were designed to simply channel it away and dissipate it, effectively making these walls immune to magical assault.

"Over here!" a voice called out and Ammaril saw an arm waving at her through a barred window set into a door that was marked with symbols the same as those on the walls. There was a hatch to cover this window but it had fallen open when the tower above collapsed. Meanwhile there were several other doors that still had their hatches closed and from behind several of these came the sound of banging as the occupants of the rooms on the other side tried to attract attention.

"These doors need breaking down." Ammaril told the Troll before turning to the leader of the Orcs, "Once the cells are open I want all of the occupants brought to the surface, I will speak to them there." she told him.

"Yes my queen." he responded and Ammaril began to head back up the stairs. However, after just a few steps she turned around and addressed him again.

"Be watchful of them though." She said loudly enough that the occupants of the cells would be able to hear her even through the doors, "If any of them look like they are trying to escape or cast any sort of spell then kill them before they can."

"Yes my queen." the Orc said again and Ammaril continued to climb back up the stairs while from behind her there was the sound of splintering wood as the Troll smashed its way through the cell doors one by one.

## The Fall of Sylldarin

Ammaril waited on the surface, sitting on a piece of debris from the tower until the Orcs brought the Elves who had been locked in the cells to her, all of them protesting against being manhandled as they were brought up the stairs from the hidden prison below. There were five Elves in total, the other cells having been empty and four were male while the fifth was female. One of them was obviously not from Sylldarin either, his skin having a slightly tanned tone to it and his features indicated that he hailed from the Elf land of Nhillan in the far east.

Each of the Elves was then forced to their knees in a line in front of where Ammaril sat.

"I assume that we have you to thank for our freedom." a youngish looking male Elf said, "Though was it really necessary for these things to drag us up here?"

"Of course it was." Ammaril replied, "Do you think that I'm ignorant of what those cells are there for? I don't think that any of you accidentally locked yourselves in when I destroyed the tower?"

"You destroyed the Tower of Sorcery?" a much older looking Elf with long white hair asked.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Ammaril replied, "I created the creatures that destroyed the tower in the same way that I created the Orcs and Trolls that you see around you."

"A blood magic transformation?" the female Elf asked and Ammaril smiled.

"Yes, that's right." she answered.

"Then you are no different to any of us." the older Elf said.

"On the contrary I am significantly different. For one thing I didn't get caught practising forbidden arts and locked away in a cell for the rest of my life or awaiting execution. On the other hand each of you took gold to curse people, tried to manipulate the barriers between life and death or otherwise used your powers to commit theft or murder or even treason and got caught doing it." Ammaril replied.

"But you still need us, that much is obvious. Otherwise you'd have just left us buried alive until we died of thirst." the youngest looking of the male Elves said.

"Need isn't really the word that I'd use. I would like you to join me but if you refuse then there will be other options." Ammaril said.

"What do you want?" the eastern looking Elf said.

"Straight to the point. Good." Ammaril responded, "As I have told you I have created the Orcs and Trolls by using blood magic to transform them from Elves and Ogres. Along with other alliances I have made or intend to make I will conquer the entire world, uniting for the first time since the days of the Oscari. I have no desire to rule over a world where I am the last of my kind though and that is why I am offering each of you a place in it. Join me and you will become kings and queens in your own right, answerable only to me."

"And what gives you the right to rule us?" the female Elf asked.

"Do you know anything about our powers? Any of you?" Ammaril responded, looking at each of the five Elves in turn.

"I have them and most don't. That is all that matters to me." the youngest of the other Elves said.

"The Oscari knew that they were dying." Ammaril said, "The world that they came from was different somehow and after many centuries here they could neither leave nor remain here and survive as they were. Their solution was to take over the bodies of humans and Elves, transferring their essence into forms that could continue to live here. They knew that they could not transfer all of their power but they resolved to retain as much as they could. Many of the first attempts were total failures, with the Oscari and their new host bodies being destroyed. However, some did succeed after a fashion and they found themselves in new bodies that were made immortal by their presence but they found that they had not only lost a significant amount of knowledge and power during the process but their new bodies were now cursed to forever avoid sunlight while feeding off the life essence of others to feed their own."

"You're talking about Vampires." the first of the other Elves to have spoken said.

"Yes, Vampires. It was from one of those creatures that I gained the knowledge that I have used to acquire the power that I now possess. The Oscari's attempts at survival did not end there though." Ammaril said, "Other Oscari tried to transfer just part of their power into new bodies and they were partially successful. The memories of the Oscari were lost during the transfer but they were still able to transfer magical power into Elf and human bodies, power that could then be passed on through generations and that is how sorcerers such as ourselves came to be."

"Okay, so we were made by the Oscari trying to preserve themselves somehow. You still haven't answered my question about what gives you the right to rule us though." the female Elf said.

"Perhaps because I am royalty while you are not. Perhaps because I am the one who destroyed the Vampire that had managed to collect the knowledge of our origins in his library and uncover it for myself. Perhaps because I led the expedition to Oscay to find the Great Library of the Oscari and claimed it for myself. Or perhaps because I am the one with an army loyal to me whereas the five of you don't have a single follower between you." Ammaril said.

## The Fall of Spildarin

"I had followers before I was arrested. They will follow me again when they find out that I am free." the older Elf replied.

"Your followers are probably Orcs already. They are my followers now, not yours." Ammaril told him before the youngest of the five Elves from the cells got to his feet, glancing at the two Orcs who still stood beside him though they just snarled as he stood up and made no attempt to force him back to his knees.

"Well I've heard your speech your highness and although I am very grateful for you digging me out of that hole in the ground I have never been the sort to take orders from anybody. If you find the body of my old teacher under any of these rocks then I'm sure that he'll agree with that. Therefore, I'm going to respectfully decline your invitation and go my own way." he said before he turned around and started to walk away. One of the Orcs close to him stepped to block his path but Ammaril shook her head and he stepped back again, allowing the Elf warlock to leave. However, as he was walking away Ammaril walked up to a nearby Troll and spoke to him softly. Then when she started to return to where she had been sat the Troll picked up a large piece of rubble with both hands and raised it above his head before hurling it at the departing warlock. The Troll's aim was good and the rock struck the warlock between his shoulders, knocking him forwards and crushing his chest beneath its weight.

"Unfortunately I cannot afford to have any magic users who are not loyal to me at large, they could present a threat. I destroyed the Tower of Sorcery for that exact reason and killing you as well won't make much difference. On the other hand you can join me and live your life in luxury, the first generation of a new ruling cast for the entire world." Ammaril said.

"So you plan on there being others to join us?" the other younger male Elf said.

"Of course. Up until now I have been focusing on building my army but from here on things will be different. When I take the other Elf lands my army will be strong enough that they will be able to take sorcerers as captives rather than having to kill them before they can challenge us. Then those that appear more co-operative can be given the same offer that I am giving each of you now, join me and rule or oppose me and die."

"What make you think that we won't betray you as soon as we can?" the female Elf asked and Ammaril smiled.

"Would you really like to try and find out what the consequences of that would be?" she responded.

"Ruler of a kingdom you say?" the older Elf commented.

"That is correct. Beyond the Elf lands there are many human kingdoms that shall be brought to their knees. Each of you will have a share of those lands, their people to rule as you see fit in my name." Ammaril told him and he smiled.

"Before I was imprisoned I had almost fifty followers who would give me whatever I demanded of them. I think having fifty thousand or more is a much better idea, even if I am still answerable to you." he said.

"What about the humans though? After you've conquered them do you propose to reshape them as you have done the Elves and Ogres who now make up your army?" the eastern appearing Elf asked.

"No. For the time being at least I cannot. When the Oscari took humans to reshape into the other sentient species of the world they did something to them that made their bodies malleable through magic and my transformations spells require that in their subjects. The remaining humans lack this quality and their forms are locked. The same goes for the dragons that I changed. The Oscari took lesser dragons and used some of them to create the major and greater varieties as well as some of the legendary form that I have recreated. In time I may be able recreate whatever the Oscari did to permit this but for now even my knowledge and power has its limits. To be sure that they cannot threaten us I intend to wipe out every trace of magical power among them but otherwise the humans will remain as they are. The same goes for the Dwarves in their tunnels and the Halflings that live among the humans. I see no need to change them yet." Ammaril explained.

"I rather like the sound of being royalty." the younger Elf said, "I will join you as well."

"It's better than being crushed by a thrown rock." the female Elf added, "My name is Shimmandra by the way."

"Dorsos." the older Elf added.

"And I'm Graysil." the younger Elf said.

"That just leaves you." Ammaril said as they all turned to look at the eastern looking Elf.

"My name is Hiros of Nhillan," he said as he got to his feet, "and if it means that I get the chance to personally removed the head of the high sorcerer of Nhillan then I am with you as well."

"Excellent. Now come with me, there is a lot of work to be done." Ammaril told the Elves.

Although Horace was more than capable of preparing every meal for the crew and passengers of the *Storm Chaser* they often made use of the numerous inns and taverns around the harbour, Horace included and it

## The Fall of Sylldarin

was when Will, Horace, Lucia, Yilven, Gromar and Dominic were all seated in one of the taverns that they were approached by one of the waitresses.

"Excuse me but are you the group wanting to head to Sylldarin?" she asked.

"That's right." Yilven responded.

"Has an Elf ship arrived in port?" Will added.

"No I'm afraid not but I heard that you were planning on travelling there and I've been hearing rumours about strange things going on there." the waitress told him.

"What sort of rumours?" Dominic said.

"A ship from Hadar docked this morning. Apparently they sailed past Sylldarin and saw something strange there before they encountered an abandoned ship." the waitress said.

"Sounds like the usual sort of ghost stories I've heard sailors telling ever since I first set foot aboard the *Storm Chaser*." Gromar said.

"The Elves that I sailed with told similar stories." Lucia agreed.

"Maybe but it seems like a co-incidence that there are rumours about Sylldarin just as we want to go there." Will said.

"You think there could be something in them then?" Horace said.

"If there is then we need to know." Yilven said and Will nodded as he took out a coin.

"Is anyone from that ship here now?" he asked the waitress, handing her the coin and she looked around.

"The bald man at the bar now." she said and everyone at the table looked towards the bar where a bald, middle aged man with a short beard sat drinking from a mug.

"Ask him to come over here." Will said and he gave her two more coins, "Bring him another drink and a meal too."

"Yes sir." the waitress replied before she hurried back to the bar and as the group around the table watched she approached the man and pointed them out to him. Then he looked back them and downed the rest of his drink before he got up and approached the table where they all sat.

"I've been told that you want to speak to me." he said.

"Yes, please take a seat. Did the waitress tell you that she'd bring you another drink and some food?" Will replied.

"That's why I'm here. Free food and drink is the best kind." the man said as he sat down in the empty seat between Gromar and Horace, "So what do you want to know?"

"We've been told that you sailed close to Sylldarin and saw something strange there." Yilven said, "We are trying to obtain passage to go there."

The bald man paused while the waitress arrived with another mug and placed it in front of him.

"Your food will be ready soon." she said before she walked away from the table again and the bald man gulped down a mouthful of his drink before setting it down again.

"Well you might want to rethink that because there's something going on there that doesn't look good." he said.

"You got close enough to the coast to be able to see what was happening?" Will commented.

"I thought the Elves of Sylldarin turned non-Elf ships away." Lucia added.

"Unless the ship has special permission to land they do." Yilven replied.

"And how would anyone get permission if they can't go there to ask?" Gromar asked.

"Write a letter and have an Elven ship take it." Yilven answered.

"How close did you get?" Will then asked the bald man.

"No closer than normal," he responded, "but what we saw showed up clearly in the dark. It looked like part of the island was on fire, ablaze big enough to be seen as far out to sea as we were sailing to avoid the Elf patrols. The sky was lit up."

"That's a big fire." Horace said.

"Yes and we know someone who has creatures that could start massive fires." Will added.

"You mean those fantastical dragons?" Dominic said.

"That's right." Will replied.

"Dragons breathing fire?" the Hadarian sailor said, "I don't know about that, I'm not telling some monster story, I'm just telling you what I saw with my own two eyes and the fire on the shore at night wasn't the end of it."

"We were told that you found a drifting ship the next day." Gromar said and the man nodded.

"That's right. An Elf ship drifting and totally empty. It might have been worth putting a crew aboard and bringing her into port if she wasn't a burnt out wreck."

"Burnt out?" Horace said.

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"That's right, completely gutted. Most of the mast and all of the sail and rigging were gone. Everything had been burned. The men that went aboard didn't find any bodies though and the captain guessed that the ship was set alight by whatever started the fire ashore just as it was leaving port. Then the crew just jumped over the side." the bald man said.

"So the island was burning and a ship trying to escape destroyed by fire as well." Gromar said, looking around the table, "Does anyone else get the feeling that we're going to be waiting a long time for an Elf ship to arrive here?"

"Which means that we'll have to try going there ourselves." Will said and he looked at Yilven, "I know where the ports are in Syldarin, every experienced seaman around here does, but which do you think is the best one to try?"

"The northern sea port is just outside Syllda. That's where we left from and if we want to get to the palace then that's where we should head for." Yilven replied.

"You want to go and see the king of the Elves?" the bald sailor said when he heard this, a grin appearing on his face, "You're mad."

"We'll have an Elf aboard, with luck he'll be able to get us past any Elf naval patrols." Will said.

"If what he's told us is true then there may not be any patrols." Horace added, looking at the bald man.

"But how could Ammaril have done so much damage already? Surely the king of Syldarin has an army that could defeat a few hundred Orcs and Trolls." Lucia said.

"You're forgetting those giant dragons she has. They could easily burn a ship and all they might be able to burn a city too." Gromar said.

"Even so I would expect the Elves to put up a fight. I've communicated with some of their sorcerers over the years and they seemed very intelligent." Dominic pointed out just as the waitress arrived with a plate of food for the bald sailor.

"I'll eat it at the bar." he told her, looking around the table, "I've told you what I know and I don't want any part of anything that involves trying to get to Syldarin. Especially when you're talking about giant fire-breathing dragons."

The sailor then got to his feet, picking up his drink before he returned to the bar with the waitress and his food.

"We can probably get to the port in Syldarin in two days." Will said.

"I suggest timing our arrival so that we arrive during daylight as well." Yilven suggested, "It will make us look a lot less like pirates come to raid the coast."

"That sounds like a sensible approach." Dominic said and Will nodded.

"Okay then, we'll leave as soon as we get back to the ship and head for the port near Syllda on the north coast. We'll stay out at sea for most of the run and turn to port at the last moment as long as it's still light. If not then we'll circle until it gets light and then we'll change course." he said.

"We shouldn't stay too far away from Syldarin's coast." Yilven said, "There are a lot of smaller towns and villages along the north coast and at night any fires lit ought to make them visible. If we can't see them then we'll know that something isn't right."

"If the Elves are still patrolling the sea then won't they see us as well though?" Gromar said, "We'll be showing lights as well after all. You humans don't see very well in the dark at all."

"That's a good point. If Ammaril has taken over Syldarin already then wouldn't we be warning her that we're coming?" Horace added.

"Maybe but I think that Yilven's right and it's a risk worth taking." Will said and Gromar smiled.

"I'll remind you of that while we're clinging to scorched driftwood Will." he said.

It was late in the afternoon that the *Storm Chaser* set sail from Costria for Syldarin and Yilven stood on deck with Will as the cog left the harbour.

"Not exactly the homecoming you'd wanted then?" Will commented when he saw the Elf staring out to sea.

"No, though the original purpose of Ammaril and Orcan's expedition was supposed to be to unlock some secret of the Oscari that would prevent exactly what we are hoping to do now and reach Syldarin without permission." Yilven responded.

"Then let's hope that Ammaril didn't find anything like that after we left." Will said.

"Yes, it would be a shame to die within sight of home." Yilven said.

"I'd rather not die anywhere for a long time yet." Will said and then after a brief pause he added, "When we approach Syldarin I'm going to issue weapons to the crew. I don't want us caught by surprise and overrun by a horde of Orcs and Trolls just because our weapons were still in the armoury."

The *Storm Chaser* had a small room below deck that was used to contain weapons for the crew. There were numerous tools aboard an ocean-going vessel like the *Storm Chaser* could use as weapons if the need

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arose but the ship's previous captain had insisted on maintaining a stock of swords and crossbows so that the crew could properly defend themselves against pirates if they came under attack. The *Storm Chaser* had never actually come under attack though and the first time the weapons held in the armoury were put to real use was when Will himself had staged a mutiny along with Horace, Gromar and a few other members of the *Storm Chaser's* crew against its previous captain and the Vampire that he had committed the crew to working for.

"A good idea Will." Yilven said, nodding his head, "I hope that when we reach Syldarin everything turns out to be fine and the story told by that Hadarian sailor is nothing but another piece of fiction from men with overactive imaginations but I fear that we are already too late. Ammaril has found a way back from Oscay ahead of us and somehow has overthrown Syldarin."

"Then let's hope that that Hadarian was full of-" Will began before there was the sound of someone being ill and he smiled, "Ah, I see that our sorcerer has decided to come up on deck for some fresh air."

Will and Yilven both remained on deck as the *Storm Chaser* sailed south from Costria, directly towards Syldarin. As soon as the Elven island came into view on the horizon though Will ordered the ship to be turned to the west, following the coast of the island without getting any nearer to it. Meanwhile Yilven stood at the side of the ship continually staring at the distant coastline. Even with his superior Elven vision he could not make out any significant details such as the location of settlements during daylight but he was hoping that that would change once it got dark when he would be able to pick out the distant pinpricks of light that represented fires that were lit for heating or light. However, as the light began to fade there were no signs of any torches being lit ashore.

"See anything?" Gromar asked as he walked up to the Elf.

"No, nothing yet. I would need to check a map to see exactly where we are in relation to the settlements along the coast but I would expect to be able to make out something, even if we aren't passing right by a fishing village. What brings you on deck anyway?" Yilven replied.

"Have you forgotten that we Dwarves spend most of our lives underground? We have pretty good eyesight in the dark as well, certainly better than a human does so I thought that you might want some company and an extra pair of eyes to keep watch." Gromar said.

"Thank you, that is very thoughtful." Yilven said and Gromar smiled.

"Plus my cabin is right next to that sorcerer Dominic's and I can hear him groaning through the wall." he said and Yilven smiled as well before his face fell, "What's wrong?" Gromar asked and Yilven pointed towards the distant coast.

"Do you see that light?" he asked.

"Yes, yes I do." Gromar answered, "That's too spread out to just be a few torches. It would take hundreds to light up the sky like that."

"Yes, or perhaps one massive blaze." Yilven added.

The sorcerers recruited by Ammaril were all sat in one of the royal palace's more luxurious dining rooms eating when Ammaril entered and looked around. The palace's occupants had put up a brief struggle when the Orcs launched their assault but even the use of a ballista that was capable of firing bolts that could cut through several ranks of Orc warriors had been insufficient to hold back the tide, particularly when the Orcs had brought forward Trolls to hurl rubble at the weapon and its crew. After that the palace had fallen quickly and although the young King Dellasin had been spirited away by a pair of guards Ammaril was still satisfied with how the attack had gone.

There were other Elves in the room in addition to the sorcerers when Ammaril entered it but all of them had blank expressions on their faces and most had visible injuries of some form that had been crudely stitched and dressed.

"It didn't take you long to get back into your old habits I see." Ammaril said to Hiros and he smiled.

"We needed staff to serve us." he said, "Your Orcs are busy administering your army so I thought I'd create some servants from the bodies of the people that your Orcs had to kill. I would have preferred fresher corpses, the fresher a corpse is the more it will remember from life but these were the best I could do."

"At least they can still fetch, carry and stand up straight." Dorsos added.

"Even if Hiros is the only one whose orders they will follow." Shimmandra commented.

"Once the empire is expanded into the human kingdoms there will be more than enough servants to go around." Ammaril said as she sat down and looked at Hiros, "Now your zombies may serve me." she said and he bowed his head briefly in response.

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Two of the zombies then moved towards the table and picked up some of the many trays of food that were laid out on it while Ammaril herself reached for the jug of wine that was right in front of her, pouring it into a goblet.

"So is everything going according to plan then?" Graysil asked while the two zombies served, "I can see that Syllda itself is in our hands now but what about the rest of Sylldarin?"

"There are still pockets of resistance but they are reducing in size by the hour. Every additional Elf that we capture swells our numbers while theirs continue to dwindle. Within a few days we will control Sylldarin entirely and then we can turn our attention to the humans to the north."

"The Hadarian Empire?" Dorsos said.

"They have a large army and they'll fight." Graysil said.

"Actually I am hoping that I can remove them as a threat entirely without having to fight a single battle." Ammaril responded before she took another sip of her wine.

Thomas looked around the bedroom that he had been left alone in. The bed had heavy covers for warmth while most of the stone walls were covered by tapestries for better insulation to keep the heat of the fire that had already been lit within the room. The bag that contained his belongings had simply been placed on the bed without being unpacked and its utilitarian nature looked distinctly out of place among the room's décor, as did Thomas himself.

"Now this is what I call luxury." he said as he walked over to the table where food had been left for him along with a jug of wine and he poured himself a drink into a goblet.

"You are easily impressed." the voice of the wraith said though the spectral creature did not reveal itself, "The palaces of our empire would make this look like a mere hovel."

"You forget," Thomas said as he sipped at the wine he had poured for himself, "I've seen what your empire has been reduced to. Draughty tombs and ruined palaces that are currently being demolished by things that used to be Ogres. Hardly a glorious end now is it? Now admit it, this is far better than any of the other places we've stayed in, isn't it?"

"The lower quality of your previous lodgings does not change my opinion of your civilisation." the wraith responded.

"Then maybe you ought to leave all the talking to me. From what I've heard about this guy he isn't one to tolerate criticism of anything he does, including his décor and Ammaril sounded really keen to impress him." Thomas said.

"He is beneath her." the wraith said.

"Aren't we all supposed to be? After all she's the great sorceress that beat your little spell and claimed your library for herself. On the other hand I'm just a messenger and you're just an echo of someone that died thousands of years ago." Thomas said.

"Be careful human. I can easily make it so that you join me in death only I expect that you will not be able to live on beyond it as I have done." the wraith said.

"If you call being a spirit tied to a polished stone living." Thomas said as he looked at the food that had been laid out and picked up an apple, "It's been a while since I had fruit." he commented before he took a bite, "Oh that does taste good." he added before there was a knock at the door, "Now remember, stay quiet." Thomas whispered before in a louder voice he announced, "Come in."

The door opened and a smartly dressed man entered.

"The Emperor will see you now Mister Cooper." he said.

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While Ammaril ate Orcan walked through the grounds of the royal palace, making his way to what remained of the Royal Guard's barracks. This had been the location of the palace armoury where all of the weapons and armour for the guard were kept. As a member of the royal family though he knew that there were more than just mundane swords, spears and bows kept there. At the far end of the armoury as Orcan entered it there was an ornate metal door that bore an image of an Elf warrior clad in chainmail and wearing a helmet that had a built-in crown. Despite his transformation from an Elf into an Orc he still retained a great deal of the knowledge he had gained before it, including how to access some of the royal family's most valuable treasures. Orcan first tried the handle to see if the door was still locked and when the handle refused to move he looked at the design on the door. The warrior in this image carried a shield that had three stars on it and it was these that Orcan looked at closely. The stars were arranged in a diagonal line and Orcan reached out to grab the highest of them, turning it to the left and listening to the mechanical 'clunks' as he did so. After counting off four of these sounds he moved on to the middle star and turned this one to the right, counting five of the sounds before he turned the final star to the left again until he heard just the second sound. Reaching for the handle again Orcan applied pressure and this time it shifted, allowing him to pull the heavy metal door open and revealing what was on the other side.

In centuries past when the Elves had gone to war they had sometimes been led by their king and to help him in battle Elf sorcerers had crafted several magical artefacts for him to carry into battle. When not required each of these priceless artefacts was kept securely in this vault within the Royal Guard's armoury and now they lay before Orcan. He had been shown the artefacts before on occasion and even learned how to access them but they had always been intended for Dellaron rather than Orcan. Fortunately with Dellaron's death before he could open the vault the magical items had remained safely locked away while the palace's occupants fled.

The most obvious of the magical items was a longsword that Orcan picked up and drew from its scabbard, revealing its blade to be marked along the entire length with mystical symbols. Despite the weapon's size it felt incredibly light when Orcan picked it up, part of the enchantment making it easier to wield. To test the blade Orcan walked away from the vault a short distance to where a number of other swords were held in a rack and he swung the magical blade at them. Had he been using a more mundane weapon we would have expected the swords to fly off the rack when they were struck but instead his sword simply sliced through them and Orcan grinned.

Returning to the vault Orcan put the sword back into its scabbard before he turned his attention to the other items inside it. The helmet with its integral crown from the design on the vault door was also present and Orcan knew that this was enchanted to provide additional protection. However, not only was the helmet only supposed to be worn by a monarch and Orcan now served his sister, the size and shape of it were designed specifically for an Elf's head rather than an Orc's so it would be of little use to him. On the other hand the chainmail coat would still fit and so he picked this up instead. Like the helmet this was enchanted to provide additional protection, projecting a magical field that would slow down any incoming attack and also deflect arrows aside so that they were less likely to penetrate the many holes in the armour. To create this field had required each of the thousands of individual links of chainmail to be individually enchanted and on close inspection Orcan could see the markings on all of them. Among the artefacts in the vault this was by far the most complex and valuable. The one drawback to the armoured coat was that the enchantment had also made it impervious to tarnishing and so the metal links still gleamed brightly as if they had just been polished. This would make Orcan easy to see but he considered this a worthwhile trade-off for the added protection that it would provide.

The final item in the vault was a shield with a design that largely matched that of the carved image on the door except that there were yet more mystical symbols on the shield that were missing from the image that were worked into the pattern on the front. As with the sword and chainmail coat these symbols were etched into the surface of the shield rather than merely painted on so that they would not wear off. More symbols were etched into the reverse side of the shield and these covered most of the available area. Just like the symbols on the sword and chainmail coat these were designed to increase the level of protection that the shield offered, including being able to dissipate the energy of magical attacks while also reducing its weight. Orcan grinned as he studied the arcane items that had been kept here by his family for generation after generation before he stopped and removed his own, more mundane sword from his waist and then took off his chainmail so that he could replace them with the magical weapon and armour that he now considered his by right. Then he picked up the magic shield and walked out of the armoury with his new possessions.

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By the time the sun had come up there had been no sightings of lights along the coast of Syldarin and Yilven finally went below decks to get some rest while Will checked his charts, estimating how long they had until they needed to alter course to take them into the Elven port.

"Debris in the water!" a voice called out and Will looked up from the chart to see one of his crew pointing over the side of the ship towards Syldarin. Will quickly rolled up the chart and returned it to the leather tube it was normally stored in before he hurried from the top of the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure and down onto the main deck, barely avoiding running into Horace as the Halfling came up onto the deck himself to throw some kitchen waste overboard.

"What's going on?" he exclaimed.

"There's something in the water." Will replied and Horace's eyes widened.

"A sea monster?" he said.

"Debris." Will told him.

"Oh. Right." Horace said before he set down the bucket he was carrying and hurried after Will to where the crewman who had spotted the floating objects was stood.

"Right there captain." the crewman said, pointing again and both Will and Horace looked overboard for themselves.

The debris that the crewman had spotted was a cluster of pieces of wood all being carried along together by the tide. Several large pieces were visible but Will knew that it was likely that there could be more smaller ones accompanying them that were too small to see from this distance.

"The last time we saw something like this it was the remains of a Hadarian warship." Horace commented.

"Yes and given how far out to sea we are these must have come from a ship under sail as well." Will said before he called out, "Take in the sail and put a boat in the water. I want to take a look at that debris."

The *Storm Chaser's* crew worked quickly to roll up the ship's sail and reducing the vessel to drifting through the water along with the debris and it was while this was being done Yilven, Gromar and Lucia all came hurrying onto the deck.

"I heard the shouting. What's going on?" Lucia asked.

"We've spotted debris in the water. I'm sending a boat to collect some." Will said as the crew then began to prepare one of the *Storm Chaser's* two rowing boats, lowering it over the side. Two crewmen equipped with ropes and long pole-mounted hooks then climbed down to the boat and deployed its oars just as Dominic also came up to the deck.

"Is something happening? I heard a lot of noise." he said.

"Looks like we may have found the remains of a ship like the one that that Hadarian told us about." Gromar told him.

"Except that there are just pieces left of this one." Horace added.

"Keep the line to the ship tied." Will told the crewmen in the boat before they cast off, "If you find anything too big to bring back with you then attach the line to it and we'll pull it back aboard."

"Yes captain." one of them replied before they pushed away from the side of the *Storm Chaser* and began to row towards the floating field of debris, trailing a rope behind them that another crewman slowly let out as they rowed further away.

"Those are brave men to be out in that little boat. There aren't any sharks in these waters are there?"

Dominic said, watching the boat get further away.

"Some probably. Though I'm not that worried about them." Will replied.

"Really?" Dominic asked.

"Of course not." Gromar responded, "If those two men get eaten by sharks we can use the rope to pull the boat back here."

It did not take long for the two men to reach the nearest pieces of debris and using their hooks they began to pull them close enough to the boat to be brought aboard if they looked interesting.

There was one especially large piece of debris that was almost the size of the rowing boat itself and as they had been instructed one of the two crewmen untied the rope that tethered their boat to the *Storm Chaser* and instead tied it to the large piece of debris.

"Okay try that." he then shouted out.

"I'll lend a hand with this." Gromar said and he walked to where several crewmen were now preparing to pull on the rope that had been tied to the rowing boat, "Get ready when I give the word." he said as he watched the other men prepare, "Okay, now pull." he then told them and they all pulled on the rope.

The rope tightened as it was pulled and when it was fully taught the debris began to move towards the *Storm Chaser* rather than just drifting with the tide. As it did so though a body that had been caught underneath it came free and suddenly floated to the surface, its dead expression glaring upwards at the men in the boat.

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Startled by this the man who had tied the rope to the debris and was still standing up instinctively tried to back away, only for the rowing boat to rock enough that he then tumbled into the water with a yell and there was a loud 'splash' as he hit the surface.

"Is he okay?" Lucia said.

"Can he swim?" Dominic added.

"Of course he can swim." Will replied, "As long as he wasn't knocked out he should be fine."

Sure enough the man returned to the surface almost immediately, grabbing hold of the side of the boat before hauling himself back into it, "What happened?" Will called out.

"There's a body here." the now soaking wet sailor responded and the group on the *Storm Chaser's* deck looked at one another before Will responded.

"Get it aboard." he shouted, "Then get back here right away with what you've got."

"Yes captain." the sailor replied before he and the second man in the boat dragged the body into the rowing boat. Then they both deployed their oars again and began to row back towards the *Storm Chaser*, passing by the large piece of debris that was being pulled towards the cog as well.

A rope was lowered down to the rowing boat when it reached the *Storm Chaser* and the sailors in it tied this around the body so that it could be hauled up to the deck where it was laid out flat.

"He's definitely an Elf." Horace commented when he saw the distinctive pointed ears that all Elves possessed.

"Yes and he's been burned." Yilven added as he crouched down beside the body and turned the dead Elf's head to expose the other side where the skin was now a dark red and peeling. In addition to the marks on the body the clothing worn by the dead Elf also looked tattered and burned, far different from the stereotypical image of Elves wearing fine robes without a speck of dirt on them.

"Did the debris look burned?" Will asked, looking at the two sailors who had been in the rowing boat, one of whom was now wrapped in a blanket to warm him up after falling into the water.

"Yes captain." the dry man answered, "We've got a few pieces in the boat and everything looked burned. The ship that this poor fellow was on must have caught fire and then broken up."

"So he could have been dead before he went into the water." Dominic commented. Despite his seasickness the sorcerer had still come close to the body to get a look at it for himself.

"Hey Will! Where do you want this?" Gromar then called out as he and the crewmen with him finished dragging the large piece of debris aboard the ship.

This was clearly a piece of a ship, taken from very close to the prow and just as the crewman who had helped recover it had said parts of it were blackened and split where it had caught fire before being completely immersed in seawater. Significantly there was writing on part of the debris that was painted on in white Elven characters.

"*Glorious Sunrise.*" Yilven said as he read this out loud.

"The name of the ship I take it." Will said.

"It looks like it, yes." Yilven answered.

"Then I don't think that we're going to be encountering any warships." Will said and then he turned to look at the body, "Wrap that up and store it below then get rid of the debris. I want us to get underway again as soon as possible."

"Time to hand out the weapons?" Gromar asked and Will nodded.

"Yes. Horace and Lucia, I want you two to come with me to the armoury. We'll grab the weapons and start handing them out. From now I want at least two men with crossbows at the prow. Gromar and I will take two more and stay by the tiller at the back. Yilven if you want to grab your bow then you can position yourself wherever you think best."

"Your lookout post at the top of your mast will give me the best vantage point. Especially if you don't mind me taking a lit torch up there. A couple of flaming arrows fired into a sail can make a mess of a ship." Yilven said and Will nodded.

"Yes, I saw it when I was still in the Dannaronian Navy." he said, "Okay, you have the lookout post."

"What about me?" Dominic asked.

"Can you stand long enough to cast a spell?" Will responded.

"I'll be fine. If I'm on deck then at least I'm well placed to be sick over the side." Dominic said.

"In that case you can stand aft with me and Gromar." Will told him.

The *Storm Chaser* sailed directly towards the nearest port at Syldarin and as the ship drew closer to the coast the outline of the city of Sylda came into view before the port itself given the capital's position on higher ground.

"Will!" Yilven called out from the lookout post at the top of the ship's mast.

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"Do you see more debris?" Will responded. A number of additional pieces of debris had been sighted as the ship got closer to the port, obviously the remains of other vessels that had been sailing away from the island. "No, it's the city. Syllda itself. I can see the outline of some of the buildings from here but the Tower of Sorcery is missing." Yilven said and Will frowned.

"The Tower of Sorcery is home to the order of sorcerers that live in Sylldarin." Dominic told him, "It's their equivalent of some of the colleges of magic in human kingdoms."

"That much was pretty obvious." Gromar commented.

"What do you mean by 'missing'?" Will shouted up to Yilven.

"I mean it isn't there. Will, the Tower of Sorcery is the tallest structure in all of Sylldarin and I ought to be able to see it from here but I can't." Yilven explained.

"Ammaril, it must have been her." Gromar said, "No doubt wanting to rid herself of the sorcerers who would have opposed her."

"Will the best estimates we have of how many sorcerers lived in the tower is just over a hundred. I'm sure that many magic users would be a threat to any one person, no matter how much power they'd managed to acquire." Dominic said.

"Yes, I'm sure they would." Will said, "The question now has to be did any of them get out before the tower was destroyed and can we find them?"

The *Storm Chaser* carried on towards Sylldarin without any signs of the Elven warships that normally patrolled the waters to keep uninvited vessels away from their shores and before too long the harbour came into view clearly enough for the human crew to be able to see it and what they saw was deeply concerning. While the buildings around it were largely intact the harbour itself was filled with the burned remains of ships. A handful of tiny boats appeared to have survived intact but every ship that looked sturdy enough to survive sailing on the high seas was now nothing more than burned wood. Yilven climbed down from the lookout post as the *Storm Chaser* neared the entrance to the harbour and rushed up the steps to the top of the rear structure where Will and Gromar were.

"There are no ships left in the harbour that haven't been burned." he told Will.

"Is the water clear enough for us to dock?" Will asked in reply.

"I don't know, even I couldn't tell." Yilven replied.

"Will I don't like the idea of us being holed by a wreck that we didn't see and having to make repairs before we can set sail again." Gromar added.

"Neither do I." Will agreed as he looked towards the harbour ahead. Then he looked at Yilven, "Do you think we could moor against the outside of the harbour wall?" he asked.

"Possibly. I'm not sure. My duties for the royal family didn't focus much on the harbour." Yilven replied.

"Lucia might know Will. She's the only one aboard who's been aboard ships going into and out of that harbour regularly." Gromar pointed out and Will nodded.

"Very well. I want our anchor dropped a hundred yards outside the harbour for now. I'm going below to talk to Lucia. I'm not going to risk the ship by taking it into the harbour if we stand a good chance of colliding with a wreck." he said before he made his way down the steps leading to the deck and then through the doorway that took him below deck.

Will found both Lucia and Horace in the *Storm Chaser's* galley wrapping food in small sheets of cloth.

"Ah Will," Horace said when he entered the compartment, "we were just preparing some rations for when we go ashore. I assume that we will be going ashore, won't we?"

"Some of us will, yes but it looks like things in Sylldarin are as bad as we'd feared." Will replied.

"What do you mean?" Lucia asked.

"The debris we found was just the start. Every ship in the harbour has been destroyed by fire it looks like." Will said.

"Ammaril's dragons?" Horace said and Will nodded.

"That would be my guess, yes." he answered, "The problem is that the wrecks make it too dangerous to take the *Storm Chaser* inside the harbour, if we hit sunken debris then we could put a hole in the hull and be stuck here until we can fix it. We could row ashore but that would take time getting there and back so I'd like to moor the ship on the outside of the harbour wall instead. Lucia do you know if that's possible?"

Lucia considered this for a short time. While she had been serving with Captain Vendril his ships had visited Sylldarin fairly regularly, however they had always docked within the harbour to load and unload their cargoes and she had not paid much attention to other vessels.

"I'm sorry Will, I don't know." she told him.

"That's okay. I'll take a small party to the wall in a rowing boat and take a look at it myself. If it looks like we can dock to the outside of the wall then we will, otherwise we'll have no choice but to use our boats. Make

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sure that you're ready either way. Both of you." Will said.

"We're going ashore too?" Horace said nervously and Will nodded.

"Of course. I want everyone who's seen what Ammaril's up to ashore just in case we can find someone in authority that we can talk to. Plus Lucia speaks fluent Elvish and that's bound to be useful no matter how important any Elves we run into are." he explained before he turned to leave.

"Will there's one thing you're overlooking." Horace said after him and he turned back around.

"What's that Horace?" he asked.

"What if there's nobody left? Nobody except Orcs that is. We may be too late." Horace said.

"In that case we need to get back to human lands and hope that this time we can convince them that something's wrong because you can bet that once Ammaril is finished with Syldarin she'll be coming after them next." Will told him.

Will took Yilven and four other crewmen in the rowing boat with him to the harbour, filling it to capacity before they left the *Storm Chaser* anchored close and rowed through the harbour gates.

"This reminds me of all those ships we found at Oscay." Will said as they entered the harbour and he saw the burned wreckage of the Elven ships inside. The water around them was littered with burned debris and here and there were the bodies of Elf sailors who had failed to get to safety before their ships were destroyed by fire. The harbour was large enough to hold several dozen ships at once and from the amount of wreckage that was present it looked as though it had been about half full when the ships there were destroyed. It was quite possible that more ships than that had been here at the time but any others had sunk entirely beneath the water, with no recognisable part of them still visible. Those were what really concerned Will about the idea of bringing the *Storm Chaser* into the harbour, the ones that would not be seen before their wreckage tore through the cog's hull.

"From what I recall those ships were more intact. They still floated at least." Yilven pointed out, remembering seeing the same ships himself when he accompanied Will back to the *Storm Chaser*. Those ships had been a collection of ancient vessels, some hundreds of years old that had made it to Oscay only for their crews to perish there.

The rowing boat was steered towards a small floating jetty that had several other such craft already moored to it and one of the *Storm Chaser's* crew secured their own boat beside them. Despite being made of wood and relatively lightweight compared to the ships that had been in the harbour this jetty and the boats had escaped any damage, being too small and insignificant to be targeted.

"Captain, maybe we should consider taking some of these boats. They may come in useful." he suggested, looking at the Elven rowing boats. These were almost identical to the boat from the *Storm Chaser*, except for their decoration which was obviously Elven in origin.

Will was about to agree when he instead glanced at Yilven, not wanting to appear as if he was exploiting the obvious tragedy that had befallen the Elves for his own advantage.

"It's a good idea Will." Yilven said, "We have no idea of what we may face going forwards and the more resources we have, the better. I doubt that the owners of these boats will be returning for them."

"Okay, we'll recover as much as we can and get it aboard the *Storm Chaser* but I want to take a look at that harbour wall first." Will added and he looked at the ladder that led up from the jetty to the main dock.

Yilven went up the ladder first, followed by Will and then the other crewmen from the boat. Yilven had brought his bow along with him while the humans all carried crossbows and they pointed these around them as they searched for any indications that they were not alone. However, the area around the harbour seemed entirely lifeless and so the party made its way towards the harbour wall.

This wall was similar to every other harbour wall that Will had seen, constructed from large blocks of stone to form a barrier against the worst conditions that the ocean had to offer, providing a place for ships to shelter between voyages. The wall had stood for centuries, well maintained by the Elves to the extent that when Ammaril's dragon had destroyed the ships in the harbour it had remained intact even though it had clearly been struck by some of the fire as demonstrated by the scorch marks on some of the stones and some of the metal statues that had decorated the top of the wall having been partially melted.

It was these statues that Will was particularly interested in as he and the rest of the party made their way along the wall. They would not have survived long here unless they were well secured, one powerful wave striking the wall would have knocked them off otherwise and this meant that they offered a means by which the *Storm Chaser* could be secured in place. The deck of the *Storm Chaser* and even the top of its rear structure would be well below the level of the wall but Will was confident that this could be overcome by using ladders rather than a more conventional gang plank.

"These look strong enough to secure the ship to." Will said as he pushed against one of the partially melted statues and found it to still be firmly embedded in the wall. Then he looked around at his crewmen and

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added, "We'll need ladders to reach down to the ship though. I want you to search through the buildings over there and see what you can find." Will then pointed to a row of nearby buildings that had entrances large enough to take carts, thus giving them the appearance of warehouses despite sharing the typical Elven architecture of most of the other structures that were visible.

"Yes captain." one of the men responded before all four started to run towards the closest of the warehouses, leaving just Will and Yilven on the harbour wall.

Will then looked out to sea where the *Storm Chaser* was anchored close by and he waved both arms in the air, still holding his crossbow in one hand. This was the signal for the crew still aboard the ship to weigh the anchor and bring the ship in close to the harbour wall, steering directly towards where Will was standing. Manoeuvring the ship to bring it alongside the wall required careful work, deploying only part of the sail to limit its speed until the ship was close enough that the crew were able to hurl ropes to Will and Yilven who caught them as the sail was being taken in again.

"Okay tie these to the statues. Then the crew can pull themselves to the wall." Will told Yilven before they both secured their ropes to a pair of the melted statues. Then just as Will had said the crew aboard the *Storm Chaser* pulled on the ropes to bring the ship up against the wall slowly enough that the impact between the two did not damage it.

"All secure captain." one of the crew shouted up from the deck as the ropes were tied to the ship.

"Hey Will!" Gromar then yelled from the top of the rear structure that was still several yards beneath the level of the top of the harbour wall, "Did your plan go as far as finding us a way to get up there from down here?" Will then looked towards the nearby warehouses and saw his crewmen returning with a pair of long ladders held between them before he looked back down at Gromar and smiled at him.

"Don't worry Gromar, I have it all in hand." he told him.

With the ladders in place more of the *Storm Chaser's* crew were able come ashore, climbing up onto the harbour wall and this included Gromar, Horace, Lucia and Dominic while a skeleton crew remained aboard to take care of the ship.

"We need to search this entire town." Will said looking at the people around him, barely twenty of them in total, "We'll start with the harbour area itself. The warehouses have been checked briefly but they need searching fully. I want two of you to stay by the water and secure all the rowing boats and anything else that looks useful. Get everything aboard the ship. Gromar, Yilven, Horace, Lucia and Dominic will come with me, everyone else should split into two groups and start searching. I don't want anyone wandering off on their own, we don't have any idea of what could be waiting for us around here. If you come across any Elves then try to get them to follow you and come and find my group. Yilven and Lucia are the only real Elven speakers we have. If they do happen to understand you then I want to speak to them anyway so still bring them to me."

"Captain what do we do with anything we find that looks valuable?" one of the crewmen asked and Will hesitated before he replied.

"We aren't here to plunder the dead. I want items of use rather than riches but if you find something that you think is worth keeping then by all means go ahead." he said prompting smiles from the crew before they split up to carry out their search, the two larger groups heading for the larger buildings close by.

"So where do we look Will?" Gromar asked and Will looked at Yilven.

"Yes, where do we look Yilven?" he said, "Is there somewhere here that officials would retreat to?"

"If they went anywhere then it would be to the city." Yilven replied and he looked towards where Syllda was visible on the higher ground inland.

"What if the city fell first?" Dominic said and Yilven looked at the destroyed ships in the harbour.

"If Syllda fell then I suspect that people would try to flee." he said.

"Which is possibly why Ammaril destroyed all these ships. Come on, let's see if we can find the harbour master's office. I take it that there would have been a harbour master." Will said and Yilven nodded in reply.

"Yes, there would have been an equivalent to one of your harbour masters." he said.

"Good and I also take it that he would have kept a log of ships that passed through this harbour, including the times and dates of their arrivals and departures." Will continued.

"He would, yes." Yilven said.

"Then if we can find those then maybe we can figure out how long ago all of this happened." Will said.

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The harbour master's office was not difficult to find. It was a small structure located not far from the sea wall. The traditional rooftop spire of Elf built buildings was wide enough to contain a small room at the top that could function as a lookout post for someone looking out to sea for approaching ships. Inside the building turned out to be part office and part place of residence, indicating that the harbour master received a home as part of his job.

It also appeared that the harbour master and his family had departed in a hurry. Numerous cupboards had been left open while their contents had been removed. On the other hand the records kept of visiting ships appeared to still be present and there was a large open book on a desk that had several columns of information written on each page.

"This is what you wanted Will." Yilven said as he read the page that the book was open to. On this there were only about a dozen lines of writing while those that came before it were filled, "This lists ship names and captains along with times of arrival and departure and the fee paid to stay in the harbour. It looks like the last entries were while we were in Costria."

"So not long ago." Gromar said.

"With better weather we would have made that last ship out of Costria and sailed right into whatever happened here." Horace pointed out, "Perhaps we should consider leaving before anyone finds out that we're here. If Ammaril could destroy every ship in the harbour then the *Storm Chaser* isn't going to last long." Will was about to answer when all of a sudden Yilven spun around to look towards the door.

"Outside!" he snapped before rushing to the doorway and looking out to see a solitary Orc now running away from them, heading inland.

"He must have seen the ship. We can't let him tell anyone that we're here." Will said and Yilven nodded.

"I've got him." he said as he unslung his bow and took an arrow from his quiver. He aimed carefully at the fleeing Orc before he released the arrow and it flew straight towards its target, striking the Orc in his back and bringing him down instantly. The Orc was not quite dead yet though and it let out a pain filled squeal as it tried to crawl onwards before it slumped face down on the ground.

"Do you think any other Orcs heard that?" Lucia asked.

"I wouldn't bet against it." Gromar responded.

"Then we should get going." Will said, "We'll get back to the ship and leave."

"Wait Will, I need to take a look at that Orc first." Yilven said and he suddenly broke into a run towards the body of the Orc.

"Actually I'd like to see it as well. If we took it back with us then that would prove that they exist." Dominic pointed out.

"I did say to stick together." Will commented and then the rest of the party ran after Yilven, with Horace and Gromar trailing behind the humans and when they reached the dead Orc they all gathered around it while Yilven flipped it over.

"Incredible. Just like you described." Dominic said as he looked down at the corpse.

"Ugly aren't they?" Gromar said.

"Will look at how this Orc is dressed." Yilven said and everyone looked at the rather tattered clothing that the Orc was wearing.

"What about it?" Dominic asked, "Those are Elf clothes aren't they? You said that these Orcs used to be Elves."

"Yes but the Elves that Ammaril created in Oscay came from the warriors that she and her brother brought with them and the crews of Captain Vendril's ships." Lucia told him, "The warriors wore uniform tabards and chainmail coats while Captain Vendril's men wore clothing from their homeland."

"Exactly. Look at this crest here." Yilven added and he pointed to a crest that was embroidered onto the dead Orc's jacket, "It belongs to a merchant house here in Sylda. This is proof that Ammaril has been creating more Orcs."

"Then she could have turned every Elf on the island into an Orc. How many is that?" Horace said.

"More than a million at least." Dominic replied.

"Too many for us to fight. Come on, let's go. Gromar give me a hand with this body. Like Yilven and Dominic have pointed out, it's the proof we need that we aren't all mad." Will said and then he and Gromar slung their crossbows over their shoulders before they picked up the dead Orc between them.

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"So can we leave now?" Horace asked.

"Not just yet, we need to get the others. I don't want to leave anyone behind. Yilven, please lead the way." Will replied.

Carrying the dead Orc, the group headed towards the buildings where the other crewmen from the Storm Chaser had headed to search and as they neared one of the harbour buildings Yilven heard the sound of movement coming from inside.

"Will, I think that there's someone in here." he said.

"One of us?" Will asked.

"I don't know-" Yilven began before he noticed a human moving near a window inside, "Yes, I see one now. It looks like Olaf."

"Hey Olaf!" Will shouted and the sailor then appeared at the window.

"Yes captain?" he asked.

"We're leaving. Get everyone in your group back to the ship." Will told him.

"Yes captain." Olaf replied before his eyes widened and he added, "What the hell is that thing?"

"It's a body, now get everyone back to the ship." Will said.

"No captain. That." Olaf said and he pointed past Will and the others who promptly turned around to see a Troll at the end of the street before a number of Orcs began to come around the corner with it.

"We're in trouble." Horace said.

Vayran looked at the Elves tightly packed into the building as they ate. The Elves were a mixture of old and young, male and female who had so far been able to avoid being captured by Ammaril's forces. Among the Elves in hiding was young King Dellasin himself, who had been spirited away from the palace when it had been overrun by Orcs but he was too young to assume a real leadership role and that had instead fallen to Vayran. There were several other groups like this one hiding close by and for now they had adequate provisions but he knew that eventually these would run out and then the Elves would likely starve, assuming that they were not rounded up to become more Orcs first.

"Vayran." Arrathan's voice called out and Vayran turned to see Arrathan hurrying down the hallway towards him.

"What is it Arrathan?" he asked.

"Our scouts have spotted a large group of Orcs moving towards the harbour. About a hundred of them with half a dozen Trolls as well." Arrathan told him.

"There's nothing left there though. Unless the Orcs have decided to start plundering the abandoned buildings." Vayran replied.

"There's a ship just outside the harbour wall. The Orcs probably want to take it." Arrathan said and Vayran's eyes widened.

"A ship outside the wall. So hiding?" he said.

"Possibly. Or maybe they just didn't want to steer around the wrecks in the harbour." Arrathan said.

"Either way we can't let the Orcs destroy it or take it. That ship could be our way away from Sylldarin."

Vayran said.

"There's a problem with that Vayran. It's a human ship." Arrathan told him.

"Humans? What are humans doing here?" Vayran said in surprise.

"I don't know, but our scout said that he saw several of them going from building to building at the harbour." Arrathan said.

"Humans or not, this ship is still our only hope for escape. Get everyone that can hold a weapon and have them assemble We're going to the harbour to help these humans." Vayran ordered.

"Take cover." Will said as a volley of arrows flew through the air towards his group and he and Gromar dropped the body that they were carrying before the entire group ran into a nearby building to escape the arrows.

"We'll never make it back to the ship with them behind us." Gromar said.

"Dominic, is there anything you can do? A spell?" Will said, looking at the sorcerer.

"Perhaps, yes." Dominic said and he peered out of the window and up into the sky, "The conditions aren't the best but I can give it a go. I need to get to the roof for this to work best."

"I'll go with him." Yilven said and Will nodded.

"Okay, we'll stay here and make sure that no-one comes up after you." he said as he loaded a bolt into his crossbow.

While Yilven and Dominic headed for the building's roof, Will and Gromar fired their crossbows through the windows at the approaching mass of Orcs. This now filled the street ahead of them and consisted of well

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over a hundred of the creatures. Only a handful appeared to be warriors in chainmail, and Will and Gromar targeted these individuals, guessing that they would be the leaders. Although chainmail could be useful in stopping a swipe of a blade it was not very effective at all against arrows or crossbow bolts that could simply pass through the many holes in the interlinked metal rings and both bolts fired by Will and Gromar embedded themselves into the chest of Orcs that promptly collapsed.

"They're still coming." Lucia said as she watched the Orcs continue to advance even as more crossbow bolts were fired from the buildings occupied by the other groups from the Storm Chaser.

"Then we need to keep shooting." Gromar responded as he and Will started to reload their crossbows.

Yilven and Dominic emerged onto the building's roof through a door set into the base of the central spire. The roof sloped slightly towards the edge, allowing rainwater to drain off easily but the two men could easily maintain their balance as they looked at the approaching Orcs and Trolls.

"Is this good enough for you?" Yilven asked.

"I think so, yes." Dominic replied as he took several steps forwards, "You may want to stand back."

Yilven stood beside the open doorway, already knowing what to expect to happen and watched as Dominic looked up and raised his staff above his head, holding it vertically towards the clouds and all of a sudden there was a brilliant flash of lightning that struck the top of the staff. Rather than flowing down into Dominic and burning him though the lightning seemed to wrap itself around the top of the staff while Dominic looked down at the Orcs before he unleashed the stored power in the form of another bolt of lightning that erupted from his staff. This forked as it flew, spreading out to strike a larger number of the Orcs as well as a pair of Trolls within the approaching force and they all screamed briefly as they were burned and fell to the ground but even with these deaths the force continued to advance.

"Get down!" Yilven yelled and he rushed forwards to pull Dominic down just before another volley of arrows flew through the air from the Orcs and landed around the pair.

"Thank you." Dominic said as he peered over the edge of the roof again, "Unfortunately I don't appear to have done as much good as I'd hoped."

"You brought down some at least. How long until you can try that again?" Yilven asked.

"Give me a moment or two to collect my thoughts." Dominic answered and Yilven nodded.

"I'll see how much time I can give you." he said as he pulled an arrow from his quiver and fired into the mass of Orcs.

Although the lightning bolt had startled both Will and Gromar they quickly recovered their senses enough to be able to fire another pair of crossbow bolts at the Orcs, still trying to pick off leaders in the hope that this would create panic in the mob but they continued to advance and reached one of the other buildings where some of the *Storm Chaser's* crew were shooting at them from. As soon as they reached this building some of the Orcs broke away from the main body of the force and forced their way into the building, battering down the doors that the crewmen had attempted to bar from the inside and once inside they fell upon the outnumbered humans, hacking at them with the swords they had been armed with and blocking any counter attacks with shields that the humans lacked. The sounds of the men screaming as they died carried all the way to the building where Will and the others had taken shelter.

"We should get upstairs." Will said as he looked around, taking note of how many windows there were around them, "That way they'll only be able to come at us up the stairs."

"Good idea." Horace replied and he turned around and ran towards the stairs that led up to the next floor.

"I think I'm ready." Dominic said before he started to rise up off the roof to make another magical lightning strike but before he could fully stand up several more arrows flew past him and he ducked back down again, "Or maybe that wouldn't be such a good idea after all." he added.

"If you can't cast another spell then we should get back inside where there's more cover." Yilven suggested before he fired another arrow.

The two men then scabbled back through the doorway, keeping low while even more arrows flew past them before Yilven slammed the door shut behind them and they hurried down the stairs, meeting the rest of the group on the upper floor of the main part of the building.

"The roof is too dangerous. The Orcs have archers among them." Yilven said, "Though they don't appear especially accurate."

"And if we go downstairs they'll overrun us just like they've already done to one of the other groups." Will added, "This is the best place for us to make a stand."

"Can't you blast them with some more lightning bolts?" Horace asked Dominic.

"I can channel lightning, I can't just create it out of nothing and if I try to draw it down in here then it will

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probably set light to the building.” the sorcerer explained, “I do know some other spells that may come in useful though.”

“Good because we’re going to need every advantage we’ve got and right now having a sorcerer among us seems to be our only one.” Will said as he looked out of a nearby window while reloading his crossbow again.

“How many would you say are left?” Gromar asked him as he and Yilven joined Will.

“Maybe seventy or eighty.” Yilven said.

“Seventy or eighty?” Lucia exclaimed, “Even with the entire crew of the *Storm Chaser* here they’d still outnumber us by about three to one.”

“Have I let you down yet?” Will said.

“No but-“ Lucia began.

“So you and Horace find something to block the top of the stairs while the rest of us deal with these Orcs.” Will interrupted and he shot his crossbow out of the window.

The Orcs continued to advance though, approaching the building where the second search team from the *Storm Chaser* was located and a group of Orcs with swords and shields began to move in on the door at the front. However, before they could storm this building as well there was a volley of arrows that flew not from the Orcs but towards them from a side street.

“What just happened? Where did they come from?” Gromar said as the others also gathered close to the window but Will pulled Lucia aside to limit how visible she was.

“There’s someone else out there.” he said before an invisible wave of force appeared to strike the Orcs and several of them were hurled aside.

“And there is a sorcerer with them.” Dominic said, sensing the sudden magical blast.

“Elves. They must be.” Yilven said with a smile as he realised that at least some of his fellow Elves were still free from Ammaril’s clutches.

The Orcs suddenly halted their advance and as they turned to face this new threat Dominic saw an opportunity.

“The roof.” he said before he ran back towards the stairs that led up to the roof, rushing up them and out onto the roof again.

Now that the Orcs were distracted by the as yet unseen Elves they did not notice Dominic as he raised his staff again until the moment that he drew down another lightning bolt from the clouds and as some of them were turning around to target him again he unleashed a second magical lightning attack on them, just as powerful as the first. This was aimed right into the centre of the Orc force where they were most densely packed and more of them along with another of the remaining Trolls fell to the ground, their bodies blackened and smouldering where the lightning hit them.

More than half of the original Orc force was now dead and when yet another volley of arrows struck the survivors it was enough to break them entirely and they turned to flee, dropping shields as they ran. The leaders who were identifiable by their chainmail armour attempted to impose some sort of order on this retreat but the bulk of the Orcs were not fully trained warriors and their withdrawal quickly became a complete rout.

The Elves cheered as they saw the Orcs retreat in total disarray. This was the first time that any of them had seen an Orc force flee and it raised their spirits greatly.

“We should go after them. Kill them before they can warn others.” one of the Elves close by Vayran said. The Elf was fairly young and inexperienced but he was one of the few real warriors that remained among the Elves so he was part of Arrathan’s core force of troops. The bulk of the Elves that had accompanied Vayran were civilians armed with a mix of axes and other tools in place of genuine weapons but their numbers had been enough to see off the Orcs.

“No.” Vayran responded, “We aren’t here to destroy the Orcs, more will be coming regardless. We need to find the humans and convince them to take us away from here. Follow me and be careful, I am obviously not the only sorcerer around here.”

The Elves moved forwards behind Vayran, Arrathan and the other warriors until they reached the corner where the Orc force had come under attack from two directions at the same time and as they came around it they saw a small group of individuals exiting a building ahead of them. This group was an unusual sight, counting among their number humans, a Dwarf, a Halfling and also an Elf.

“Lord Vayran, I know that Elf.” Arrathan told Vayran when he saw Yilven, “He worked at the palace. He was believed lost with Princess Ammaril’s expedition to Oscay.”

“Would he know you?” Vayran asked.

“I doubt it.” Arrathan answered.

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"What is his name?" Vayran said.

"Yilven. Yilven of Agalla." Arrathan replied and Vayran came to a stop, prompting the other Elves to halt also.

"Yilven of Agalla." Vayran called out loudly.

"Do you know that guy Yilven? The one with the dragon perched on his shoulder?" Will asked when he heard Yilven's name called out.

"No I don't. Though I can see some of the warriors standing close to him are wearing the uniform of the Royal Guard. Perhaps one of them recognised me." Yilven replied.

"I hope that's a good thing. The last they would have heard of you is when you went off to Oscay with the princess who's behind all of this trouble. They may think that you're working with her." Gromar pointed out.

"We can all vouch for him though." Lucia said.

"As long as they are willing to let us speak, yes." Gromar replied.

"There's only one way to find out. Let's go and say 'hello'." Will said, "Tell him that we're friendly, alright Yilven?"

Yilven then nodded.

"I am Yilven of Agalla." he called out in the Elf language, "Who are you?"

"My name is Vayran of Toros. We need to talk and I'd rather not just shout at one another from opposite ends of this street." Vayran shouted back at him.

"Well?" Will asked, looking at Yilven.

"As you said, time to go and say 'hello'." he said.

The group then walked straight towards where Vayran stood at the front of the large group of Elves, though they looked to be less numerous than the Orcs that between them they had just driven off.

"I am Vayran of Agalla." Vayran said again when the group stood right in front of them only this time he spoke in the language of Hadar.

"You speak Hadarian." Will commented.

"I do. I have not limited my studies to what happens within Sylldarin." Vayran responded.

"What happened here sorcerer?" Yilven added and Vayran looked around for a moment.

"I suspect that you already know the answer to that. Arrathan here tells me that you worked for the royal family and that you accompanied Prince Orcan and Princess Ammaril on their expedition to Oscay. Now the princess is back at the head of an army of monsters that she is turning more of our people into." he said, "What can you tell me about that?"

"Ammaril found the Great Library of the Oscari and gained access to its secrets. She used those and a blood magic spell to create her army of Orcs and Troll made from the tribe of Ogres we discovered there." Yilven explained and Vayran and Arrathan looked at one another briefly.

"That is largely what I had surmised." Vayran said, "Now we need to escape from Sylldarin. There are Orcs everywhere and every one of us that is caught will become another foot soldier in Ammaril's army. Did you arrive in that ship we have seen at the harbour wall?"

"That's my ship." Will said as he looked at the gathered force of Elves, "There should easily be enough room for all of you if you want to come with us."

"Yes we do. Though there are more of us than just the fifty or so that you see here. There are women, children and the elderly and infirm as well. Just over two hundred in total and we have very little gold to pay you with." Vayran said.

"Two hundred people? That's going to be pretty crowded Will." Horace pointed out.

"The *Storm Chaser* can take it though, just about but she'll stay afloat." Will replied before he turned his attention back to Vayran, "Okay you've got a deal. I can take you and your people to Costria, that's where we're heading next. We've been trying to warn people about Ammaril but so far all we've been able to convince are a couple of sorcerers that can't do anything. If you come with us then I expect you to tell people what happened here. Ammaril doesn't plan to stop with just overthrowing your kingdom."

"Her aim is to rule the entire world." Yilven added.

"Which means that the kingdoms just to the north are most likely to be next on her list." Will said.

"Agreed. You get us off this island and we will all tell anyone who will listen what happened. The danger Ammaril presents cannot be understated." Vayran said, "But we must hurry. Those Orcs who escaped will undoubtedly warn others and Ammaril has many forces at her disposal. I take it that you have seen what became of the ships in the harbour?"

Will nodded.

"Yes, we've seen what Ammaril's dragons can do. Now send someone for the rest of your people and bring them all to the harbour wall. We have to be ready to leave before any more Orcs show up." he said.

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Runners were sent to each of the hiding places being used by the Elves, telling them to come to the harbour. Since this had been Vayran's plan all along the Elves had already packed the few belongings that they still had, including all of their provisions and they were already prepared to leave as soon as the runners told them to make their way to the harbour.

"Two ladders?" Vayran commented when the Elves he had led against the Orcs reached the harbour with Will and his group and they saw how the *Storm Chaser* was moored with ladders leading down to it from the top of the harbour wall, "It will take too long for everyone to board using just two ladders and there are some that cannot climb."

"There's an intact jetty in the harbour. Send anyone who can't climb there and we'll pick them up using our rowing boats. We took some more from the harbour so we've got plenty of them. That should speed things up." Will said.

"Of course." Vayran replied, "I should also mention that one of the passengers will be our king."

"King Dellaron survived? Why wasn't he leading you when you attacked the Orcs?" Yilven said.

"No King Dellaron has not survived." Vayran said.

"He was murdered by the thing that used to be his brother Prince Orcan on Princess Ammaril's orders." Arrathan added.

"His son Dellasin is the King now and he is among us. He must be protected at all costs." Vayran said and Will nodded.

"Okay. We have several spare cabins for paying passengers. Most of your people will have to sit in the hold or on the deck while we sail but King Dellasin and some of his guards can have the largest cabin to themselves. But when we get to Costria I'd keep quiet about who he is if I were you. Some people could try to take advantage of who he is." he said.

"Yes, I understand." Vayran replied before there was the sound of an approaching group of people and everyone looked around to see whether it was another force of Orcs heading towards them. However, much to their relief the group was made up entirely of Elves.

"Is this it? I was expecting more." Gromar commented, noticing that although there were several dozen Elves in the group it was a far cry from the well over a hundred others that Vayran had spoken about.

"For safety we divided our numbers between different hiding places. These are just those from the closest of them." Vayran said.

"Then let's see how many we can get aboard before the next group arrives. Maybe having them arrive in groups can work for us." Will said, "But someone needs to keep watch for more Orcs coming. I don't want to be caught by surprise while we're trying to load passengers."

"Will, what if Ammaril sends one of her dragons to attack us?" Horace asked.

"Then we just have to hope that we're already too far out to sea for it to find us by the time it gets here." Will answered.

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The *Storm Chaser* had been built to carry cargo rather than a large number of passengers but that cargo space could easily be used for carrying people. The level of comfort they would enjoy varied greatly though. There were a few spare cabins that were now being shared by several Elves each whereas the other passengers had to make do with far more basic conditions. Fortunately for some of them the additional hammocks that had been brought aboard by the mercenaries that the ship had carried to Oscay had been kept aboard so there were an additional thirty beds available in the hold. The rest of the Elves though had to make do with whatever bedding they had brought aboard with them, which consisted of one or two simple blankets. The Elves considered to be more vulnerable, women, children the elderly and otherwise infirm were given space in the hold where they would be protected from the elements while most of the warriors instead had to sleep on the ship's deck. Another concern other than finding enough suitable space for all of the Elves was supplying them with food and water. Fortunately the *Storm Chaser* was only going to be at sea for just over a day and in theory most of them would be able to do without any food or water. Will wanted to avoid this though and so he had Horace determine exactly what was available, taking stock of what the Elves had brought aboard as well as what supplies had already been on the *Storm Chaser*.

A knock at the door of his cabin made Will look up from the chart he was studying while doing his best to keep out of the way while the Elves were being brought aboard and given places to stay.

"Come in." he said and Yilven opened the door.

"The last of the survivors are aboard." he said, "Your crew are releasing our moorings now."

"Excellent. I'll come up to the deck now and we can set a course directly for Costria." Will replied.

"Will, why are we heading for Costria? Tarran is closer." Yilven said.

"I know but of all the countries between Syldarin and Hadar, I think that Costria is our best bet for building opposition to Ammaril. Costria itself may not be very significant but it's ruled by the Emperor of Hadar's cousin. If we warn him then word will be passed back to the Emperor pretty quickly and we're going to need the Hadarians with us if we're going to stop Ammaril. They have a large army and a navy."

"An army and navy that they have a history of using to invade their neighbours." Yilven pointed out.

"I'm not saying that I like the idea either but if you've got a better idea then I'd like to hear it. We can't exactly carry all these people all the way up to Raysalgard to recruit the northern Elves to our cause." Will responded, "I wouldn't be surprised if we need more than just the Hadarian Empire and their neighbours but we have to start somewhere."

The last mooring ropes securing the *Storm Chaser* to the harbour wall were released just as Will and Yilven arrived on deck and climbed the steps to the top of the rear structure. The direction of the tide was heading out to sea and the ship immediately began to drift away from the wall.

"Unfurl the sail and steer to port." Will ordered and the *Storm Chaser* began to build up speed as it headed further from the shore. It was then that he noticed Yilven had made his way to the back of the ship and was looking back towards the coast of Syldarin, "Not exactly the homecoming you wanted was it?" he added, "I'm sorry we couldn't get here in time to stop Ammaril from taking over. Two hundred survivors out of a million people isn't exactly a good outcome."

"You did your best Will," Yilven responded, "and those two hundred are better than nothing. At least something of Syldarin will survive because of you and this ship."

Yilven continued to look towards his homeland's coast until it finally vanished over the horizon and he turned to return back below deck again. As he was descending the steps towards the deck though he encountered Dominic and Vayran just emerging from below decks.

"Is the captain up there?" Dominic asked, pointing towards the top of the ship's rear structure and Yilven nodded.

"Yes he's making sure that we're on the right course for Costria." he said.

"Good, we have information that he needs to hear. You may want to hear it as well." Dominic said and Yilven went back up the stairs, followed by the two sorcerers.

"Changed your mind about going below Yilven?" Will commented when he noticed Yilven and when he saw Dominic he added, "Finally got your sea legs Dominic?"

"Yes thank you, though I'm here for more than exercise. Since Vayran of Toros has been sharing my cabin we decided to discuss what we know about Ammaril. Of course I could only tell him what you and the others who have been to Oscay told me but he had some very interesting things to say, particularly about how she could have returned from there so quickly when you made sure to destroy all of her ships." Dominic replied.

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"Magic of some sort no doubt." Will commented.

"Yes captain, very powerful magic." Vayran said, "Are you familiar with the circles of stones that the Oscari constructed across the world?"

"Yes, I'm aware of them. There was one close to the city where their library is located." Will replied.

"Yes and I think that that is significant." Vayran said, "I'm convinced that the Oscari used the circles to travel around the world."

"And now that knowledge is in the hands of Ammaril." Yilven said.

"Precisely. The circles are all placed at the junctions of ley lines and from that I have come to the conclusion that it is possible to move directly from one to another along these lines. Travelling with the magical power that flows along them." Vayran said.

"It's all very interesting, you see the transit would be self-powering and require next to no effort at all from the sorcerer controlling it." Dominic added, "All they need to do is trigger the circle somehow. There have been stories over the centuries about people disappearing or even appearing in stone circles and this may offer an explanation for why."

"It would also explain how Thomas could have got back to Hessenland so quickly." Will said.

"Yes, there are at least two such stone circles in Hessenland that my order knows of." Dominic replied.

"How long would travelling like this take? Does it take longer to move between two that are further apart?"

Will asked and the two sorcerers looked at one another for a moment, "You don't know, do you?"

"No, unfortunately not." Vayran responded, shaking his head, "My conclusions are drawn from examining a single circle at one end of Ammaril's travel only. I don't know exactly which other circle she came from or how long it took for her to travel. I can't even tell you what that travel would be like. Objects and people may not experience the movement, just disappearing from one place and then reappearing in another or there may be some sort of road that they have to travel along just like travelling on an ordinary road."

"In which case the distance travelled would definitely affect the journey time." Dominic added, "You see what I mean about this being very interesting indeed."

Will and Yilven then looked at one another again, neither of them sharing Dominic's obvious enthusiasm for learning about the use of the ancient stone circles as a method of transport.

"If Ammaril can travel using these circles then she could attack anywhere in the world faster than we can warn them about her and the Orcs." Will said as he considered the implications of Ammaril being able to travel from one stone circle to another.

"Yes, though I suspect that there are some limitations that must be overcome." Vayran said.

"You mean like the locations of the stone circles being fixed and known?" Yilven asked and Vayran nodded.

"Yes, the circles could be guarded. Also there may be limits on how many troops can be moved in one go. Before they were all killed, the scryers of my order sensed several large surges of magical power that I was sent to investigate. These suggest that if there is a limit on how often a circle can be used for travel then the rest period required between uses is not very long but there may still be a limit." he said.

"What about destroying them?" Will asked.

"Removing one stone doesn't seem to stop a circle from working. Ammaril took one from the circle in Oscay so that she could use it to power her magic." Yilven pointed out.

"Yes, it may be possible to removed one or two stones without affecting the circle, at least not too much but I expect that removing too many would prevent it from working. On the other hand Ammaril may have had to find a different circle in Oscay to be able to travel back here." Vayran said.

"Or the stones could just be physical markers of some kind and travel along the ley lines doesn't need them at all." Dominic added.

"There is also the question of how the circles are activated." Vayran continued, "If anyone could activate them then I would have expected there to be a lot more instances of people doing so by accident so I suspect that it requires someone with some magical ability to get them to work."

"Which means Ammaril herself. If she wants her Orcs to move using the stone circles then she would have to activate them herself and if she wants them to come back the same way then she has to go with them to activate the circle at the other end. Unless it is possible to keep the circles active like holding open a door for someone." Yilven said.

"So unless she's willing to go everywhere her Orcs attack in person she has to make use of more mundane means of travel." Will said.

"Yes, that's right. An invasion is far more likely to come by ship than through the circles." Vayran said, "Though that may change if Ammaril is able to find other magic users that are willing to work with her."

The stone circle that Ammaril took Shimmandra, Hiros, Graysil and Dorsos to see was not the same one that she had used as her arrival point in Sylldarin when she returned from Oscay. With that one being two days

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ride from Syllda it was too far away and instead she took them to another such circle that was close enough to Syllda that the city was visible in the distance from within it.

"So you can use these to travel to anywhere in the world?" Graysil asked, looking at Ammaril after studying one of the standing stones.

"I used one as a place of sacrifice." Dorsos commented.

"And you are lucky that you didn't accidentally activate it. Otherwise you and your little cult could have ended up on the other side of the world." Ammaril replied before she looked at Graysil and added, "Anywhere in this case means to any other similar stone circle that has been placed at the convergence of two or more ley lines."

"So how do they work?" Shimmandra asked and Ammaril looked at the circle's central stone.

"That." she said and she walked towards the stone before she held her hand slightly above it, "All you need to do is place your hand against the stone, or any other part of your body for that matter and while you concentrate on your destination you project some of your power into the stone. Be careful though, if your concentration is broken then you will end up at a random point."

"And what happens then?" Hiros said.

"Then you have to activate the circle you arrive at and repeat the process, only this time you should do it right." Ammaril said.

"How precise do we have to be?" Shimmandra said and she looked at Hiros, "I've never been to Nhilan but he has. Will that make a difference if we both think of there?"

"You should think of the exact place you want to go, whether you've already been there or not." Ammaril answered, "The circles will get you as close as possible. If you chose an entire country as your destination then you could arrive at any stone circle within it. Fortunately I knew enough about the different circles here in Sylldarin to know exactly which one I needed to arrive at."

"Is that why you haven't shared any information about where you went in Oscay?" Dorsos said, "There is obviously a stone circle near there and if we knew where it was then we could travel there of our own accord and take a look at the Great Library for ourselves."

"I will share the knowledge of the Great Library of the Oscari as I see fit, for example by teaching you how to use the stone circles but the library itself will forever remain my exclusive domain." Ammaril answered.

"Is there anything that can prevent a circle from working?" Graysil said.

"If too many of the stones are removed then the circle effectively ceases to exist." Ammaril said and then she looked down at the central stone beside her, "The central stone is the key though. From my studies so far I have learned that each of them was created to be the focal point of the power that the circle channels and without it the circle cannot be used at all, whether as the start or end point. The stones around the edge are less important."

"So does that mean that we can take some of the stones and use them as our personal power reservoirs like you have with that one you are using to power all the blood magic that has created your Orc and Troll army?" Graysil added and Ammaril smiled.

"If you wish. Though you will need to find a source of power to put in them. I doubt that any of you could fill even a fraction of what one of these stones can hold if you spent your entire lives trying." she told him.

"So what will happen when all of the power is gone from your stone?" Dorsos asked.

"For the time being that is not a problem. There is more than enough power in there to last until this world is under my control, control that will be executed through individuals such as yourself of course but after that I intend to learn where the Oscari gained the power they used to freeze the Great Library in time and tap it myself. I do not believe that even they, as great at wielding magic as they were could have cast that spell using only their own power." Ammaril explained before a pair of Orcs rode towards the stone circle on horseback and Ammaril turned towards them, "Yes, what is it?" she asked them.

"My queen forgive this intrusion." one of the Orcs said as he dismounted from his horse at the edge of the stone circle, "A messenger has arrived with word from the harbour. The Elves that were hiding there have left aboard a ship."

"A ship? That's impossible." Ammaril replied, "My dragon destroyed every ship in the harbour and all those that were close by."

"Yes my queen. This ship was a human one. Our warriors near the harbour saw it when it arrived and were on their way to attack it when they were ambushed. The surviving Elves joined with the humans and together they were too strong for our warriors to beat. They fled and when more were sent to destroy the humans and their ship they were all gone, both human and Elf." the Orc explained.

"One ship? One ship of Elves is nothing compared to what we have achieved here." Ammaril said.

"They'll warn others." Hiros pointed out.

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"It is already too late. Hundreds of thousands of Orcs are loyal to me already and soon we will be the only Elves left in Syldarin at all. Then we will spread across the ocean to the human kingdoms and add them to my empire. I don't care about a handful of escaped Elves now. Return to your duties." Ammaril replied. "Yes my queen." the Orc said and he bowed his head before he climbed back onto his horse and both Orcs rode away.

"Now come with me back to the palace. My things ought to have been unpacked by now and I have something for each of you." Ammaril told the other sorcerers.

"What?" Dorsos asked.

"You want to share in what I found in Oscay? Well I'm about to give you some of what I found." Ammaril told him.

Since her return to the royal palace Ammaril had simply taken up residence in her old chambers. Despite the belief in the palace being that she had likely perished in Oscay these had been left untouched given the lack of any other use for them. The items that Ammaril had brought back with her from Oscay had of course been taken here and when she showed the other sorcerers in she took them to a small chest that had been placed on the dining table.

"Jewellery?" Dorsos commented and Ammaril smiled.

"Of a sort. Thought these are more than just mere gemstones." she said as she opened the box and began to take out some of the stones that it contained, laying four out in a row, "I will give each of you one of these stones. You may keep it loose or mount it as you see fit though I encourage you to keep it close at all times. In time they will become your badges of office but their real value lies in what they contain."

"And what is that?" Shimmandra asked.

"I'll let them tell you themselves." Ammaril said and she backed away from the table, "Reveal yourselves." she added out loud and all of a sudden from each of the four gemstones laid out on the table the spectral form of a Wraith appeared.

"What is this? Some kind of illusion?" Hiros said.

"We are no illusion Elf." the Wraith floating directly in front of Hiros responded, "We are Oscari."

"The Oscari are gone, dead, all of them. So dead that even I can't bring them back." Hiros said.

"Yet here they stand before you." Ammaril said, "I told you how some of the Oscari tried to move to the bodies of Elves and humans, first creating the Vampires and then sorcerers like us. Well more of them focused on preserving their consciousness over their physical forms and they bound themselves to these specially crafted gemstones."

"I can sense magic from them." Graysil said.

"Yes they are magical in nature, though their ability to channel magical energy is extremely limited. They can activate the stones circles and perform a few minor tricks but that is about it." Ammaril said.

"We can kill as well. Each death grants us more power for a time." another of the Wraiths said.

"A short time only." Ammaril added, "The Wraiths can drain the life from a victim in the same manner as a Vampire, though the energy they derive from it is rapidly lost. Also unlike a Vampire they have no need to feed, they can exist forever without killing. The main weakness they have is that they are tied to these stones that contain their essence. The further from it they get, the weaker they become."

"So they are to be our bodyguards?" Graysil asked.

"Partially, yes. Though you will find them to be a useful resource of information as well. Like Vampires not all of their memories survived the transfer from their physical bodies into their stones but they still have some knowledge that they can impart and I encourage you to make use of them as much as you can." Ammaril answered.

Although they had faced no challenges on their voyage from Syldarin, Will was relieved when the *Storm Chaser* sailed into the harbour in Costria. He was not used to carrying so many passengers aboard his ship and he was keen to be able to offload them. On the other hand now he had the task of trying to convince the authorities of the threat posed by Ammaril and her Orc army.

The Elves knew that the ship was coming in to port and they had begun to assemble on deck, something that did not go unnoticed on the shore and as the *Storm Chaser* entered the harbour Will saw a group of harbour guards gathering at the end of the dock.

As the ship was being moored Will went down the steps to the main deck where he found Yilven standing with Vayran and Arrathan.

"It looks like we've attracted some attention." he told them, "I think I ought to go ashore first to explain what's happening."

"Yes of course." Vayran replied, "The last thing I want is for anyone to think that we're an invading army."

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"You better tell your people that they have to stay aboard a while longer." Will said and Vayran nodded.

"Perhaps I should come with you." Yilven suggested.

"Good idea." Will replied as he watched the gangplank being put in place between the *Storm Chaser's* deck and the dock.

Will and Yilven walked down the gangplank and towards the gathered group of guards. These men were accompanied by the harbour master himself, a man that Will recognised from their previous visit to the port and he hoped that the harbour master would also remember him.

"Who are all these people?" the harbour master demanded as soon as Will and Yilven were standing in front of him.

"Survivors from Syldarin." Will told him.

"They'll be heading north to the northern Elf kingdom." Yilven added.

"Well they're here now. How many are there?" the harbour master asked as he opened the book he carried.

"Two hundred and nine." Yilven answered and the harbour master glared at him for a few moments before he wrote this down.

"Two gold crowns per day." he said, "Coinage or convertible goods."

"Two? It was one just a few days ago." Will said.

"A few days ago your ship wasn't filled to the brim with Elves." the harbour master pointed out and he held out his hand.

By the time that Will and Yilven returned to the *Storm Chaser*, Gromar, Horace, Lucia and Dominic had all come onto the deck, joining Vayran and Arrathan in waiting for the pair at the top of the gangplank.

"So how did it go?" Gromar asked.

"The harbour master will be eating well tonight." Will said, "In fact every night that we're here. I doubt that he'll be declaring the extra gold coins we'll be paying him for our passengers in his ledger."

"What about telling someone about Ammaril? Who do we need to speak to?" Horace added.

"The local mayor seems like a good place to start to me." Will replied.

"Can't the harbour master help with that? Surely he is in touch with the mayor." Vayran suggested.

"I'm sure he is but given that I suspect that the harbour master is skimming money off the fees he's paid I don't think that he is the best person to ask about speaking to anyone above him. He may get the wrong impression and think that we're going to complain about him and have him dismissed. That would only provoke him to start warning people not to believe us." Will said.

"That Hadarian sailor didn't take anything we had to say seriously to begin with." Lucia commented,

"Hopefully we'll have more luck now that we can provide witnesses. Two hundred of them." Yilven responded.

"Vayran should come with us while we try to find the local mayor. I don't think that having two hundred Elves turning up on his doorstep would impress him. On the other when sorcerers say something people tend to listen and we have two of them." Will said.

"What about all these Elves Will?" Gromar said, looking around at the crowd still standing on the deck of the *Storm Chaser*.

"Arrathan can go ashore and try to find somewhere for them to stay." Vayran said.

"Should I also ask if there are ships heading north?" Arrathan added.

"Yes that's a good idea. There aren't any Elf ships here but the further north we can get our people the better." Vayran replied.

"It might be a good idea to mention what happened at Syldarin." Will added, "Ships need to be warned to stay as far away from the island as possible. I'll send a couple of my crew with you as well, otherwise there are bound to be some people who think you're just an Elf trying to trick them."

"Thank you captain." Arrathan said.

"Yes and thank you for getting us here. You may have saved our people entirely." Vayran added.

"Now we just need to save the world." Gromar muttered.

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The bay was not very far from Syllda and was relatively well sheltered so it made a good place to bring the ships that had been taken from the port of Lammar to be brought. More than sixty ocean-going ships had been captured at Lammar and with their crews largely transformed into Orcs they could be sailed around to the north of Sylldarin. There was a mix of different types of vessel, most were either cogs or hulks but there were a handful of smaller longships. Ammaril looked down at these ships from the high ground overlooking the bay and she immediately noticed that not all of the ships present were of Elven construction. Curious about this she turned to Vendril who had been in charge of bringing the ships here and now accompanied Ammaril as she inspected the fleet.

"Vendril, why are there human vessels here?" she asked, "Were they taken at Lammar as well?"

"No my queen." Vendril responded, "As we sailed we encountered a number of other ships at sea. Eight of these were human while three were Elven. Two of those were from here in Sylldarin while the third came from the south." He continued. Vendril and the crews of his ships had come from the southern Elf kingdom, their skin as dark as the humans' who inhabited the mainland of the southern continent. Now though Vendril's skin was only a slightly darker shade of grey than that of the Orcs who had come from Sylldarin, "I had our ships block their path so that we could board them and take control of them. We were far too strong for their crews and now their ships have been added to our fleet." he then explained.

"Very good Vendril." Ammaril said, smiling as she nodded her head. While new ships could be built it would take around a year to build a cog and she had no intention of waiting that long to expand her conquest. Adding more ships by taking them at sea meant that more troops and supplies could be moved more quickly, "What did you do with the crews?"

"We took as many of the Elves prisoner as we could my queen. The humans we killed and threw into the sea." Vendril answered and Ammaril nodded again. Taking the Elves captive meant that she could transform them into more Orcs for her army while unlike their vessels, the humans were of no importance.

"How many troops can we transport aboard these ships at once?" Ammaril asked.

"Just over eight thousand my queen." Vendril answered and Ammaril frowned.

"That doesn't seem many for all these ships." she said, "We are not going on a long voyage and my troops should be able to tolerate cramped conditions for a short time."

"I have spoken with Orcan my queen, he wants to take a lot of cavalry with us and their horses will take up a great deal of space. Also the Trolls are larger than Orcs and Orcan wants to take many of them as well." Vendril explained.

"Of course. My brother is a skilled leader of warriors and knows what he is doing. I will defer to his expertise of what we should take with us." Ammaril said, "How long before we can set sail?"

"We must build jetties so that we can get our troops, horses and supplies aboard the ships. We can do that in two days. Then it will take another day to load the ships. We can put to sea as soon as we are loaded."

Ammaril thought about this. The crews of the ships themselves would be able to construct the jetties needed to load them in the absence of a proper harbour and that would allow time for the army that Ammaril intended to take with her to gather at the bay. If they were able to make it there within the two days that the construction was likely to take then the fleet could set sail in three days.

"What about when we land? How long will it take to disembark?" she said.

"Not long at all my queen." Vendril replied, "We will beach our ships at low tide so that our troops can disembark and wade ashore. It should only take a short time. Then we can refloat our ships when the tide comes in."

"Why not load them the same way?" Ammaril asked, "If our troops can wade ashore then surely they can wade out to the ships as well."

"Our ships are empty now my queen. That means that they are high in the water. If we beach them now then once they are full they may not refloat when the tide comes in." Vendril explained.

"I see." Ammaril said, glad that the transformation into an Orc had not robbed Vendril of any of his expertise as a sailor, "Very well Vendril, have your men begin construction of the jetties. I will go and organise bringing our warriors here."

"Yes my queen. We shall begin at once." Vendril replied before Ammaril got back on her horse again to return to the palace.

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It was not difficult to locate the mayor's office and the presence of a pair of sorcerers, both of whom wore clothing of a standard usually reserved for some the wealthier members of society prompted the mayor to agree to see the group immediately.

"Please all have a seat." the mayor said when the party was shown into his office and he pointed out the seats that had been hastily gathered to provide enough places for them all to sit.

"Thank you mayor. I'm Captain William Beckett of the *Storm Chaser*, a cog that is currently docked in your harbour." Will said as they all sat down and Yilven set down the bag he was carrying, "currently aboard are roughly two hundred Elves that we were able to save from Syldarin."

"Save? What do you mean save?" the mayor asked.

"The kingdom of Syldarin has fallen." Yilven told him and the mayor looked at the two sorcerers.

"My lords, is this true?" he said.

"Sadly yes, I'm afraid it is. We saw a totally deserted town when we landed." Dominic said, "At least until we encountered Lord Vayran of Toros and his band of survivors." and he looked at Vayran.

"My people have been cursed." Vayran added, "Most turned into monsters and most of the rest killed. Barely two hundred out of the entire population managed to escape and that was thanks to Captain Beckett's arrival."

"What were you doing in Syldarin captain?" the mayor said, looking at Will.

"We went there to try and warn the Elves about the danger." he replied.

"A sorceress called Ammaril who was a member of the royal family journeyed to Oscay and has returned with some of the power of the ancient Oscari. She has used blood magic to create an army that she intends to use to conquer the world." Yilven added and the mayor frowned.

"This all sounds rather far-fetched." He said before he turned back towards the two sorcerers, "My lords, surely there is a more reasonable explanation. A plague perhaps."

"You better hope it's not a plague." Gromar said, "Because if it is then a shipload of people just arrived who could spread it to your city."

The mayor's eyes widened as he considered this. An outbreak of a plague in his city would be disastrous.

"It's not a plague I can assure you. What happened in Syldarin is entirely magical in its cause." Vayran said.

"But to say that one sorcerer could be responsible for the downfall of an entire kingdom is incredible." the mayor said and he looked at Vayran, "Couldn't your order have done something to stop her?" he added.

"Unfortunately my order was wiped out by another of Ammaril's creations, a dragon that she caused to grow to the size of the beasts of legend." Vayran replied and the mayor got to his feet.

"I think I've listened to enough of this nonsense." he said and Gromar frowned.

"Oh enough of this." he said and she got up as well and grabbed the bag that Yilven had been carrying when they had entered the mayor's office and tossing it onto the desk. Then he opened it and reached inside, "We brought proof for you mayor." Gromar added and then he pulled the severed head of an Orc from inside the bag.

"What is that thing?" the mayor exclaimed.

"One of the creatures we told you about." Will said, "It's called an Orc and it used to be an Elf. This one was killed before we left Syldarin and we brought along the head to prove that we aren't crazy."

"What do you expect me to do?" the mayor asked.

"You need to send word to Duke Engel. He needs to prepare to face an invasion and send word to all the other countries around here to prepare as well." Will said, "If Ammaril sends even a tenth of her army here then it's going to take every country this side of the Straight of Lerron together to stop them."

There were five jetties extending from the beach out into the sea. These were spaced out over a distance of more than a mile in total so that all five could be used simultaneously to load the ships waiting in the bay and they were all wide enough that five Orcs could walk along them side-by-side, ensuring that there was also enough room for horses and Trolls. Shimmandra now wore a chain around her neck that had the gemstone that contained a Wraith hanging from it while Hiros wore his in a talisman attached to his chest. On the other hand neither Graysil nor Dorsos had finished the staffs that they intended to mount their Wraith gemstones in.

Ammaril watched the army being loaded aboard the ships from the high ground along with her sorcerers, Orcan, Vendril, Tiellan and the former Ogre chieftain Trollog.

"Seven thousand Orc footsoldiers." Orcan said, "Eight hundred cavalrymen and five hundred Trolls."

"We will destroy our enemies." Trollog added.

"Not with just this force." Tiellan said, "We will need far more."

"And we will have them Tiellan." Ammaril said, "What about the next wave of the army? Are they in position?"

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"They are my queen. Twenty thousand more Orcs and a thousand Trolls are camped at the stone circle." Tiellan replied.

"Excellent. When we have taken a circle we will begin to transport them." Ammaril said, "In the meantime we will make do with the numbers we have here."

Ammaril and the other leaders of the army boarded the last ship to be loaded so that they did not need to wait while any others took on passengers or cargo. This ship was one of the warships that had been captured in the harbour at Lammar. A large cog, it had fortified structures at the front and rear of the vessel that allowed archers to shoot out from the inside while a ballista was also mounted on the top of the forward structure

"Deploy the sail!" Vendril ordered as he took his place near the tiller at the back of the ship and he looked up to see the ship's sail unfurled, "Steer north." he added, "We are heading for Tarran."

The ship began to move away from the shore, sailing between the other ships of fleet that were now loaded with Orcs and Trolls as it headed out to sea. These other ships raised their anchors as the warship sailed past them and turned to follow it until the entire fleet was sailing directly north, a course that would take them to the nearest human kingdom in the shortest amount of time.

There was more to the invasion force than just the soldiers carried aboard the ships though and as the fleet got further from the shore four massive shadows fell over them as the four dragons flew over them.

Like many other places low tide in Tarran brought out people to collect shellfish, carrying their baskets down to the shore before they either pried them loose from rocks or dug them out of the mud before the sea level rose enough again to cover them. This was a pattern that had been followed for as long as humans had lived along the coast here and the local inhabitants were able to predict to within a very short window when the best time each day would be to go out and gather their crop. The work was not limited to men and both men and women, young and old all walked from their villages

On this day though as the local collectors gathered along one particular stretch of the shore they could not help but notice the large number of ships visible on the horizon. Initially they paid no attention to these, after all they had only a limited amount of time in which to collect their crop. However, as time went on it became clear that the fleet of ships was heading straight for them and some began to point this out, prompting the others to stop and look as well.

"They're Elves." someone called out when they noticed the design of the ships and their sails.

"What would Elves be coming here for?" another said before four large shapes appeared in the sky above the approaching fleet of ships.

"What are they?" one of the crowd now looking out to sea shouted.

"Dragons." someone responded.

"They're too big to be dragons. Even the biggest dragon-" another began before the first of the dragons flew over the beach and the gathered crowd gasped.

The lead ship then came to an abrupt halt as it ran aground in the shallow water and a net was thrown over the side that the Orcs aboard the ship used to climb down from the deck. There were also several Trolls aboard the vessel who simply leapt over the side, landing in water that came up to their knees before they started to wade towards the beach and the sight of these armoured giants finally made the gathered humans realise what was going on.

"Those aren't Elves, they're monsters!" one shouted.

"It's an invasion!" someone else cried out.

"Run for your lives!" a third added and the humans who had come to the shore just to collect shellfish all dropped or threw down their baskets, no longer caring about the valuable contents when their survival was at stake.

However, although they could outrun the Orc and Trolls that were wading towards them the fleeing humans could not outrun the dragons in the sky above them and one of the giant beasts swooped down towards a cluster of terrified people and scooped some of them up in its claws. The dragon then headed directly up into the sky while its victims screamed in terror before letting go of them and simply allowing them to plummet to their deaths below.

A second ship then grounded itself and more Orcs began to disembark but in addition this vessel had a number of archers standing at the front of the deck and as soon as the vessel had come to a stop they raised their bows and unleashed a volley of arrows towards the fleeing human fishermen, cutting down several more of them.

The fleeing humans were heading towards a nearby village, following their instinct to reach the supposed safety of home as well as to warn the few villagers who had not gone to the shore to join in the gathering of

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shellfish. Before they could reach the village though they saw another dragon descend ahead of them towards their village and as it flew downwards it opened its mouth wide to unleash a sustained stream of fire that washed over several structures. Made from lightweight and highly combustible materials, these buildings immediately caught fire while anyone even close by was also caught in the path of the flames and burned. After the dragon had finished its pass over the fishing village, leaving a large portion of it burning, a second one of the giant winged creatures swooped down from a different direction and also unleashed a torrent of flames that set light to most of the remaining buildings. The fleeing humans now came to a halt, watching in horror as their homes burned in front of them. A few then rushed onwards, hoping to be able to save loved ones that they could hear screaming as they burned but most of them now just scattered into small groups as they attempted to escape the dragons above them as well as the Orcs and Trolls behind them. By this time the first wave of Orcs and Trolls had made it to the shore and they were beginning to spread out, searching for any humans nearby.

Some of the fleeing humans opted to try and hide, hoping that this invading army would pass them by and they would be able to slip away quietly but the Orcs were thorough in their searching, having inherited many of the superior senses that they had possessed prior to their transformations and the humans were dragged from their hiding places and butchered. A few were still able to escape, slipping away quietly while their former neighbours were being slaughtered behind them but in a very short time the village that had stood in the same place for centuries had effectively ceased to exist, its buildings burned and almost every one of its inhabitants killed. This left the way clear for the army of Orcs and Trolls to continue their landing and more and more ships ran themselves aground along the sandy beach before disgorging more of the monstrous warriors.

Although the warship that carried Ammaril and the other leaders of her army had been at the head of the fleet as it crossed the stretch of ocean between Sylldarin and Tarran it was one of the last to make landfall. No organised opposition was anticipated but there was always the possibility that somehow the army of Tarran would have soldiers nearby, especially considering how a human ship had managed to carry some Elves away from Sylldarin. If they had followed the most direct route to the nearest port then they would have arrived more than a week earlier to warn the human authorities of what was happening just across the ocean and that would give enough time for a force to be mobilised to oppose any invasion. There would have been no way to predict exactly where that invasion might take place but poor luck could easily have placed an army of several thousand human soldiers along with ballistas and trebuchets just over the hills. Ammaril still enjoyed a close view of the initial invasion though, witnessing the destruction of the village and its inhabitants through the eyes of the four dragons overhead thanks to the magical control link that she was maintaining with them.

"Very efficient. Your troops have performed admirably once again Orcan." she said as she observed the Orcs killing the villagers that had escaped being burned by the dragons.

"The humans here are just a rabble my queen. They have nothing with which to offer any real resistance."

Orcan replied, having watched the fishermen flee from the beach.

"Nevertheless your Orcs carried out their duty very efficiently." Ammaril said, "And your Trolls as well of course Trollog." she added when she heard the Troll chieftain growl, "Now I think that it's time that we went ashore as well. The few surviving human villagers have scattered and there are no forces waiting to spring a trap nearby."

"Yes my queen." Vendril said before he waved to some of the warship's crew, directing them to steer the ship directly towards the shore.

Rather than climb down nets or ropes thrown over the side of the ship when it ran aground though Ammaril and the Orc leaders were rowed the last few yards to the shore in a dingy so that they could reach dry land without having to wade through water to get there. Only Trollog climbed down the side of the ship and waded ashore with the other Trolls.

As soon as the leaders of the army were ashore an Orc came rushing up to Vendril and Ammaril looked at them.

"Is there a problem Captain?" she asked.

"No my queen." Vendril replied, "Two of our ships have been damaged when they struck rocks in the shallow water as they ran aground but that was to be expected. They can probably be repaired in time."

"Good. Now that we are here the ships are less important but I don't want to simply abandon them. We may have need of them again later. Assign crews to carry out repairs." Ammaril said and Vendril nodded.

"Certainly my queen." he said.

"And while Vendril is seeing to the ships we should make camp." Ammaril said, "I suspect that close to the village ought to be a suitable place. The locals must have had good reason to live there after all."

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Ammaril then started to walk towards the burning village. Plumes of smoke could be seen rising up into the sky from it but the village was no longer the inferno that it had been briefly. Although Ammaril had used the dragons to attack military camps and ships in harbour this was the first time that she had used them to wipe out an entire settlement and she paused to assess the damage.

"Very impressive." Dorsos commented as the other sorcerers also looked at the burning remains of the village, "Total destruction."

"Yes, I'd hate to be on the receiving end of that dragon fire." Graysil added, "Though I suspect that one look at it would convince many people to simply surrender. Is that your plan? Make an example out of some to scare others into submission?"

"Perhaps later on." Ammaril said, "But I have other ideas for my dragons. I'm sure that you are right that it would be terrifying to witness my dragons using their fire or even just seeing them flying overhead and I want to make use of that fear itself against much larger settlements. Towns with enough people in them that their collective deaths would be significant."

"Demons. You're talking about creating demons." Shimmandra said and Ammaril smiled.

"Yes, demons." she said, "The collected emotions of so many people dying at once will undoubtedly bring forth demons and I want to be able to harness them for my army."

"Queen Ammaril," Hiros began, "speaking as someone who has raised the dead and used them as puppets I know how difficult it can be to establish control over such beings and they are just corpses with no free will. Demons are more than that though, more than dead bodies or animals that can be dominated. A Demon will resist and attempt to escape any effort made to bind it. How will you control an army of them?"

"By binding them at the very moment of their creation." Ammaril said, "Many demonologists made the mistake of trying to summon and control powerful demons that had grown stronger over the course of centuries since their birth and the paid with their own lives. Such things are possible for a short time with sufficient study of the demon in question but I cannot spare the time to go down that route. On the other hand the more successful demonologists in history have deliberately created demons to be controlled, preparing the binding rituals before carrying out the needed sacrifices. What they lacked of course was the means to cause enough strong emotions quickly. They could only burn, drown or dismember so many sacrifices at once. On the other hand with my dragons and the rest of my army I can have thousands put to death in moments, creating whatever kind of demon I wish at the exact time that I am ready to bind it. The humans of the continent of Oscathan to the south of Oscay do such things as part of their religious worship, though they do not exploit the demons they create as much as they could, dismissing them relatively quickly instead of binding them to their temples permanently."

Ammaril then started to continue to walk past the remains of the village that her dragons had destroyed and Hiros and Shimmandra hurried after while Dorsos and Graysil remained where they were.

"Do you think that she can really pull that off? Creating an army of demons at her control?" Graysil asked the older Elf sorcerer.

"Possibly. After all she has created an army of Orcs and dragons the size of those only seen in legends, all of which follow her every command. Perhaps she can do the same for demons. Whether she succeeds or not we win anyway." Dorsos replied and Graysil frowned.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that if Ammaril really can control demons as well then her army will become even more powerful and her conquest of the world will take place faster, meaning that we becomes kings in our own right that much faster too. On the other hand maybe she will be ripped apart by the very same demons that she intends to create. In which case control of her army is likely to fall to us." Dorsos answered.

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Vayran watched the trio of ships carrying most of the surviving Elves sail out of the harbour at Costria. As human vessels they were not travelling all the way to the northern Elf kingdom of Raysalgard but they would at least get the Elves to the northern human kingdoms from where it would be easier to reach Raysalgard itself. Vayran and most of the Elf warriors who had managed to escape Sylldarin had opted to remain behind in Costria to help defend it when the expected invasion finally came. There were barely fifty of them in total, not many in the wider scheme of things but even this small company of troops may be enough to turn the tide at the right moment, especially when they could call upon the powers of Vayran himself.

"At least the King is safe now." Yilven's voice said from behind Vayran and the sorcerer turned around, surprised that he had not noticed the approach of the other Elf. Dellasin was among the Elves aboard the ships, though his identity had been kept from the human crews just as Will had suggested and rather than remain with the other warriors the two Royal Guards who had smuggled him out of the palace at the last minute had gone with him to make sure that he was protected.

"Yes there is that I suppose. So is there any news from the duke?" Vayran responded.

"Yes, a messenger arrived a short time ago. Whatever the mayor said in his letter to Duke Engel was enough to convince him of the need to do something and he's gathering his forces. Costria has largely depended on its friendship with the Hadarians for protection so the duke only has about five thousand soldiers in his army but orders are being given for militias to be formed to expand that. Thanks to those crossbows the humans are becoming so fond of they should be able to form new regiments as quickly as they can supply them with weapons and armour. No need to spend years teaching anyone to string and pull a bow properly.

Messengers have also been sent to all of the other countries close by. Tarran and Wesmar to the west and the Hadarian Empire to the north. In the meantime we've been told to head north." Yilven said.

"North? When the threat is to the south?" Vayran said.

"To the south west to be precise." Yilven pointed out, "Tarran is closer to Sylldarin than Costria is so everyone expects the invasion to come from there. The capital of Tarran is just across the border and the best road to it is north of here. That's why we're being sent north. The duke intends to send his army along that road. Something about their war wagons not moving quickly enough over softer ground."

"War wagons? You mean like the chariots that the Elves of Errania use?" Vayran said, naming the near eastern Elf kingdom that was considered insular even by other Elves.

"No, these are something different. More like an armoured cart that can be positioned to act like some kind of fortification. They aren't mobile in battle like a chariot." Yilven said.

"How ingenious." Vayran commented.

"Yes the humans have proven themselves very ingenious when it comes down to killing one another but if it weren't for the ingenuity that has led humans to develop things like crossbows and war wagons to provide them with instant soldiers and fortifications then Orcan may never have gone along with his sister's idea of going to Oscan to begin with." Yilven said.

"What are the others doing?" Vayran asked.

"Preparing to leave as well. Horace has been stocking up on whatever spices he can find. He thinks that he and Lucia will be able to make a lot of money by cooking for soldiers who want something more than just hard bread and salted meat." Yilven told him, "Arrathan has prepared his troops of course. I don't know how they'll be fitting in with the human armies but I'm sure that a role will be found for them and they're all keen to get revenge on Ammaril."

"I was taught that a wise man once cautioned against seeking revenge, warning anyone who planned on it to dig an additional grave for themselves. In this case though I think that the desire is entirely understandable." Vayran replied.

Ammaril was about to sit down to eat when Tiellan called out to her from outside her tent.

"Queen Ammaril, I bring news." he said.

"Enter." she responded and Tiellan entered the tent, "Have your scouts returned?" Ammaril asked.

"Yes my queen. They say that the stone circle is exactly where you believed it would be, less than twenty miles to the north." Tiellan told her and she smiled.

"Excellent. Are all of the stones present?" she said.

"Yes my queen, including the central stone." Tiellan answered.

"And what about the humans? Are there any of them nearby?" Ammaril said.

"No my queen. Our scouts found no signs of humans anywhere around the circle. It appears to have been

ignored by them.” Tiellan said and Ammaril breathed a sigh of relief. While no-one had been able to reliably operate the stone circles since the Oscari had disappeared from the world a number of minor religions had adopted them into their practices over the centuries and for a while they had been used as places of worship and sacrifice, becoming the focal points for some communities even after those beliefs were abandoned. “Where are Graysil and Shimmandra?” Ammaril said as she got up and made her way towards the exit from her tent.

“All of the sorcerers are by the river my queen. They have tools and are working.” Tiellan answered. “Very well. Let’s go and see them.” Ammaril told him before she walked past him and out of the tent.

A sorcerer’s staff or wand could be made from almost any material with wood and metal being the most popular types though there were some rarer examples that had been cut from stone or even grown as long, slender crystals. Whatever they were made out of though the process was highly involved and each sorcerer would have to create their own to guarantee a good connection between the object and its wielder. The staffs and wand belonging to the four renegade Elf warlocks had of course been taken from them when they were captured and imprisoned and then destroyed so all four required replacements for these. The Orc sailors had been able to provide them all with suitable lengths of plain wood to begin with but from there the four had had to carve the final shapes out and cut the necessary mystic symbols in them themselves. A key part of this process was pouring enchanted water over the symbols as they were carved so a ready supply was a necessity and that was what had prompted them to work by the river. All three of the warlocks were crafting full sized staffs for themselves while for the time being at least Shimmandra was settling for a smaller wand instead.

“Graysil! Shimmandra!” Ammaril called out as she and Tiellan approached the place along the river where the warlocks were working and all four of them stopped what they were doing to look at her.

“Ammaril, what is it?” Graysil asked.

“I have work for you and Shimmandra.” Ammaril replied, “You will need to complete your staff and wand later on.”

“What do you need us to do?” Shimmandra asked.

“Tiellan’s scouts had located the stone circle I believed to be near here. I need the pair of you to use it to travel back to Syldarin and start bringing more of the army here.”

“How far is it?” Graysil asked.

“Just under twenty miles.” Ammaril told him.

“Too far to make it there before dark.” Shimmandra commented.

“Nightfall does not concern me. I want those Orc warriors bringing here as soon as possible. It is only a matter of time before the humans send their own warriors to attack us and I want our forces to be as strong as possible.” Ammaril said sternly.

When news of the invasion first reached the court of the King of Tarran it was dismissed as too fantastic but when the same tale was repeated by other survivors from the village King Lupold gathered his court to discuss it.

“They have landed here your majesty. We don’t have exact number for them but there could be as many as ten thousand.” one of the gathered nobles said and he pointed to the point on a map of the country that had been laid out on a large table representing the place where the invasion force had come ashore.

“We have six thousand soldiers in the city and I can pick up another thousand on the way.” another of the noblemen added, “That’s not counting militia.”

“How many militia can we count on?” the King asked.

“From the city probably another four thousand by morning and at least that many en route. I’d send cavalry ahead to organise them. That way I can have troops raised from the towns not on my direct route but close enough to join up with my force before we set up camp about here.” the nobleman replied and then he pointed to another point of the map where a town was located on the banks of a river, “The enemy won’t need to cross the river to get to the capital but they will most likely come through that town.”

“What about these monstrous dragons that the survivors were babbling about?” the King said and he looked at a sorcerer who was also in attendance.

“Your majesty I am still unconvinced that these exist. It is more likely that they are some sort of illusion.” the sorcerer said, “On the other hand if they are real then I would suggest shooting at them with volleys of crossbow fire or ballistas. Even if it is not enough to kill them it may drive them off. I will also accompany the army with two more members of my order to add our powers to its strength.”

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"So we will meet their army of ten thousand with one of fifteen thousand? Those sound like good odds to me." the King said with a smile and then he turned to the nobleman who had explained his plan, "Baron Frederick, you may continue." he said.

At about the same time as Baron Frederick was setting out from the capital of Tarran another force was setting out for that city from the capital of Costria that was led by Duke Engel himself. Although this was a relatively small force of about three thousand Costrians it still represented more than half of that country's permanent standing army. They were joined by the surviving Elf warriors as well as the senior crew from the *Storm Chaser* and this group rode near the front of the column just behind Duke Engels himself and his military commanders.

"So how long will it take us to get to the capital of Tarran?" Gromar asked, uncomfortable at being on horseback yet again.

"About five days." Will replied.

"You mean I have to sit in this saddle for five damned days?" Gromar responded.

"We have to travel at the same rate as the infantry." Will pointed out.

"You could always try walking yourself Gromar." Yilven suggested, knowing that the Dwarf's walking speed was slower than that of either the human or Elf footsoldiers and Gromar just glared back at him.

"What about one of the carts? I'm sure they'd let you ride in one if you asked." Lucia suggested but Gromar snorted.

"Ride in a cart? Do I look like luggage to you?" he said, "Besides, I've tried driving a human made cart and the ride was even worse than this horse."

"What happens when we get to Tarran anyway Will?" Horace asked, "What's the plan?"

"We join with Tarran's army. Hopefully word will reach Wesmar and Hadar in time and they'll send their armies to help us as well. We're going to need a unified front to defeat Ammaril." Will explained, "Or at least most of us will join with them. You and Lucia will stay in the capital where it's safer. The Hadarians will probably head there and you can tell them everything we know."

"The Hadarians?" Lucia said.

"Don't worry Lucia, they aren't going to sell you as a slave. We'll all be fighting on the same side after all." Will said

The army that Baron Frederick had been able to amass gathered on several hills to the south of the town on the river that the invading army would have to come through to reach the capital. Each settlement that he had passed through or close by on his way here had been required to provide more able bodied men to reinforce his army and now he had a force of just over fifteen thousand troops in total. This included infantry, cavalry and more than thirty ballistas. The Baron deployed these powerful bolt throwers on high ground, hoping that this would make it easier to target the giant dragons that the invaders had with them. These were protected by a line of war wagons set up in a line to create a defensible wall between them and the enemy manned by several hundred crossbowmen. More crossbowmen were positioned further down the hill while ranks of infantry with swords, axes and spears were deployed at the bottom of the hill to form a solid defensive block. Among the units of soldiers a number of pennants had been hung. These were more than just indications of where particular troops were located though. The runes that had been daubed on the pennants were intended to draw in and absorb magical energies, meaning that magical attacks launched against the army would likely be diverted into them and rendered harmless. The pennants would only be able to absorb two or three strong attacks at most but they would cause enemy sorcerers to waste their energy. A more elaborate carved metal rod about fifteen feet tall had been embedded into the ground near to where Baron Frederick commanded the army from. As a nobleman and the commander of the army he was important enough to justify the effort required to create such an artefact but his army would not be entirely defenceless against magical attacks. The Baron's force also included a large contingent of cavalry and while some of these had been sent forwards in small groups to patrol the land to the south of the army to locate the enemy army.

However, when one of these patrols returned with word that they had sighted the enemy the news was not good.

"We saw them about here my lord." one of the scouts told Baron Frederick, "They are heading this way just as you expected them to but their numbers are far greater than thought. There were too many to get an accurate count but I suspect that they could outnumber us by two to one."

"Two to one?" Baron Fredrick said with a sigh and then he picked up a piece of paper and held it up to the knight, "This arrived while you were away. It is a copy of a warning from Duke Engel sent to every nation in this land. It says that the Elf Princess Ammaril of Sylldarin has overthrown her homeland and cursed its

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people, turning them into monsters. It also says that she has transformed a number of dragons into creatures the size of the beasts of legend, confirming the reports from the survivors of the invasion. There is also a warning to watch the ancient stone circles that sit on ley lines because they may be used to transport troops magically somehow. I've spoken with the sorcerers who accompanied us and they tell me that there is such a circle less than twenty miles from where the enemy landed."

"What are your orders my lord?" the knight asked.

"My orders remain the same, we will hold this position. The Elves, or whatever they may be now will have to attack us uphill against walls of shields and our war wagons and we have siege weapons to defend ourselves with too. Hopefully if these giant dragons do exist then they will be easy targets for a bolt from a ballista. On paper two to one odds may seem overwhelming but I have faith that our lines can hold long enough for the enemy to realise that even beating us here will cost them too much on the long run." the baron told him as he set down the note that he had received and began to write one of his own, "That being said the King needs to know what we are facing. I want you to take this to him personally. If the enemy attack then we will hold them here. If they delay then reinforcements need to be sent to us as quickly as possible."

Ammaril rode at the head of her army with Orcan, Tiellan, Dorsos and Hiros beside her. Just like the human leaders they had to ride at a relaxed pace so that their warriors on foot could keep up with them and they halted as soon as the human army came into view on the hill ahead of them.

"It appears that word of our invasion was able to reach the human king." Dorsos said, sneering at the sight of the human soldiers who were now hurrying to take up positions now that their opponents had begun to appear.

"They appear well prepared for us." Hiros added but Orcan snorted.

"Weaklings We have greater numbers and strength." he said before he looked over his shoulder and yelled, "Archers!"

Immediately around two hundred Orcs rushed forwards and formed a line standing side by side.

"If they are in range then aren't we also in range?" Hiros commented.

"The are waiting to see what we do. Plus it is hard to hit a few individuals at this range. Shooting at a company of soldiers is much easier." Tiellan told him.

The line of Orc archers all took arrows from their quivers and raised their bows, pulling back the strings as far as they would go but not yet releasing any arrows.

"Fire!" Orcan yelled and almost in unison the archers fired their arrows into the air.

The human soldiers saw these coming towards them but were not intimidated by the swarm of projectiles. Instead they lifted shields above them to form a barrier above their heads as the arrows descended and the entire swarm either missed their targets entirely or simply embedded themselves in these shields. In response to this some of the humans armed with crossbows fired back at the Elves only for most of their bolts to fall short and only a small handful of Orcs fell.

"Perhaps some literal fire is called for." Dorsos suggested but Ammaril shook her head.

"No." she said and she pointed to one of the pennants that was flying above the human ranks, "Those banners will draw magic away from their warriors long enough to exhaust your powers and those ballistas may threaten my dragons if they get lucky."

"Then what do we do now?" Hiros asked and Orcan drew his sword.

"We attack." he said and Ammaril smiled.

"Yes, we attack. We face them head on." she agreed.

Baron Frederick watched the initial ineffective exchange of missile fire. The Orcs were too far away for him to tell whether or not any of them had been killed by his men but he knew that no more than a handful could have been hit since the line of archers was still visible to him. He was curious to see whether Ammaril would unleash any of her more unconventional means of attack against his troops, he knew that she was a sorceress and the report he had received suggested that she could unleash four giant fire-breathing dragons against his force. He was prepared for both of these though and he had issued orders for the ballistas to hold their fire just in case the giant beasts appeared.

What happened next though was far more mundane. Instead of unleashing some magical assault or attacking from the air, Ammaril's army began to advance with blocks of Orcs forming their own shield lines to protect themselves while ahead of them the initial line of archers now moved in small groups and shot arrows towards the human lines while doing their best to keep out of sight of the human crossbowmen. Behind the advancing Orc infantry came both cavalry and Trolls, ready to exploit any break in the human defences.

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None of these surprised Baron Frederick, it was exactly how he would have organised his forces to go on the attack but he knew that this organisation would not last. As the Orcs got closer they would set up larger blocks of archers to fire in arcs over their advancing troops while the cavalry would charge forwards and try to break up his shield lines either by smashing a way through or by feigning a retreat to try and draw his men into a pursuit. Every part of this was exactly what Baron Frederick would do in the Orcs' place.

The Trolls that were visible behind the front lines of Orcs remained something of an unknown quantity to the baron though. The report that he had received stated that they had been created from Ogres but so far they had not been behaving like them. Ogres were known for being strong but of limited intellect and although they were dangerous in combat between small groups, larger forces of well-disciplined troops could quite easily defeat their uncoordinated tribes. Had these Trolls have acted the same way as Ogres then they would have rushed ahead of the main force where they would have been vulnerable to the baron's crossbow troops.

As the enemy force came closer Baron Frederick noticed that many of the Trolls appeared to be carrying hand carts and he frowned for a moment.

"What do you suppose those carts are for my lord?" one of his subordinates who was stood close by as they surveyed the battlefield asked.

"I don't know. I can't tell what's in them from here." Baron Frederick responded as he focused on some of the carts.

"They're too small to be war wagons." another subordinate commented.

"Elves don't use them anyway." a third pointed out.

"Could it be some sort of weapon?" another of his subordinates suggested.

"What sort of weapon would require pulling around on a cart though?" the first subordinate responded.

"I've heard that in the east they are experimenting with burning powders that can launch projectiles high up into the air. Perhaps those carts are carrying them." the second said.

"That has the same issue as them being war wagons. Those flame propelled projectiles are human weapons, not Elves. I don't think that the Elves have ever invented anything of their own." the third subordinate said.

"Wait. Something's happening." Baron Frederick said, having been keeping his attention focused on the Orc force that had now come to a halt less than a hundred yards from his own front line and both armies were now exchanging missile fire that was having little to no effect against the efficient walls of shields on either side. Behind the Orcs' front lines though the baron could see that the Trolls had also stopped and were gathering around the carts that some of them had been pulling. All of a sudden one of the Trolls turned around and Baron Frederick saw it raise its arms above its head, holding in them a lump of rock that it promptly hurled over the heads of the ranks of Orcs in front of it and towards the human lines.

The thrown boulder smashed directly into the shield wall of a unit of human soldiers. Unlike the arrows that could embed themselves in the wood of the shields but had difficulty penetrating all the way through. The sheer mass of the boulder simply smashed its way straight through, splintering shields and striking the men behind them. Stone throwing weapons had existed in warfare for many centuries but they were normally used to attack fortifications rather than infantry nevertheless the soldiers from the unit struck by the thrown boulder started to reform their shield wall. However, during the period in which they were still reforming the Orc archers fired on them, cutting down more while they were exposed.

More boulders followed the first, flying over the Orc front lines and smashing into the humans'. The effect each time was the same, breaking through the humans' shields and scattering the men behind them. These were then followed by more volleys of arrows from the Orc archers to further whittle down the numbers of human troops and it was here that the difference between the baron's troops was revealed. The professional soldiers largely held their ground despite the casualties they were suffering but some of the militia ignored the orders being shouted at them to hold their ground and they broke and ran.

"My lord what do we do?" one of the baron's subordinates exclaimed when he saw a company of militia break and scatter. For the time being the human line was holding but if many more units of troops were broken then it would inevitably collapse.

It was obvious that the Trolls would have to be killed at range, there were too many Orc warriors between them and the human troops to be able to reach them. However, those same Orcs would also shield the Trolls from attacks made by the human crossbowmen and since any magical attacks launched would be drawn off target by the humans' own defences against magical attack that left only one other choice available.

"Take word to our ballistas. I want half of them to train their fire on these creatures." Baron Frederick ordered.

"Half my lord?" the subordinate he had just given the order to responded.

"Yes half. We need to keep the rest ready just in case these giant dragons appear." The baron told the man.

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"Yes my lord." He replied before he quickly climbed onto the back of a nearby horse and rode towards where the army's ballistas were deployed.

While Baron Frederick had been watching the battle with an increasing level of concern Ammaril was growing ever more satisfied. Although the human lines were holding for now they had been weakened by the Trolls' assault and their collapse was only a matter of time.

"Some of the humans seem more reliable than others." Hiros commented, seeing how only one company of human troops had so far fled.

"They are militia." Orcan replied, "They lack discipline."

"We have rather a lot of militia in our own force too." Hiros pointed out, "In fact only a small part were professional warriors before they were transformed were they not?"

"That is irrelevant." Ammaril replied, "The spells binds their loyalty to me. No Orc will disobey my wishes."

"And supposing something was to happen to you?" Dorsos commented but Ammaril did not reply.

It was at this point that a bolt fired from one of the human ballistas struck the front rank of Orcs. The steel tipped projectile was powerful enough to penetrate not only the shields held in front of the Orcs but also to cut through the bodies of the eight ranks of chainmail clad warriors standing behind it before it came out of the other side of the block of troops and struck one of the Trolls in his thigh. This hit was not instantly fatal but the Troll did collapse, screaming in pain as blood flowed from where the massive bolt was now passing right through his leg.

A second bolt passed just over another unit of Orcs and struck a Troll directly as he turned to throw another boulder and impaling him against the high sides of the cart behind him.

"The humans are turning their war engines on us." Tiellan said as more bolts struck the Orc lines and the Trolls behind them.

"They are out of range of our archers." Orcan added.

"Yes but in using their ballistas against our infantry they have opened themselves up to attack from other directions." Ammaril said and she closed her eyes for a moment, sending a message along the magical link that she had already established to the four dragons and moments later all four of the massive beasts flew over the battlefield.

Baron Frederick and his subordinates looked up into the sky with a mix of amazement and fear when the dragons appeared. There had long been stories about beasts such as these but they had always been regarded as fairy tales. There were no proven historical accounts of dragons of this size having ever existed. "Look at them!" a voice called out from close by and the baron turned to see one of the sorcerers that had accompanied his army.

"Yes, I can see them." Baron Frederick responded.

Instinctively many of the human crossbowmen raised their weapons and fired up into the sky. Some of the bolts hit the dragons but they were little more than pinpricks against the dragons' scaly hides that provoked roars from them. At the same time as the crossbowmen were firing their weapons into the air the crews of the ballistas that had held their fire while the others targeted the Trolls now also pointed their weapons skywards. The ballistas were not designed for firing at airborne targets but they fired with a relatively flat trajectory and the dragons were large, slow-moving targets that could be aimed at directly.

The first of the giant steel tipped bolts that was fired flew past a dragon without the creature even noticing it whereas a second, aimed at the same dragon struck one of its wings and passed straight through. This wound was not enough to bring the dragon down out of the sky but it did provoke another roar of pain.

"They're working! The ballistas can hurt them!" one of Baron Frederick's subordinates exclaimed before the injured dragon released a blast of flames from its mouth that struck the hillside and engulfed the crews of three of the ballistas and the baron and his subordinates all gasped in horror at the sight of this.

The flames did coming from the dragon's mouth did not last long though as a third bolt from a ballista struck the creature's long neck and pierced its thick, scaly hide. The bolt passed all the way through the dragon's neck, erupting from the opposite side before coming to a stop while still partially lodged in its flesh. Unlike the injury to its wing this was not a minor flesh wound that the dragon could ignore and the creature suddenly plummeted from the sky before crashing into the hillside, smashing its way through the line of war wagons as it hit the ground less than fifty yards away from where the human army's leaders were gathered.

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Ammaril let out a gasp as she felt the death of the dragon through the magical link she had to the dragon and at that moment her connection to the other three waned. Still coming under fire from the human crossbowmen below the dragons responded in kind, with two of them breathing fire down at the humans while the third swooped low over a company of cavalry and picked a pair of the mounted knights up in its claws. The dragon then carried the terrified men up into the sky before dropping them back to the ground. This dragon was then hit by another large bolt fired into the air, the steel tipped projectile just clipping its body near the shoulder and lodging there with the tail end sticking out. The pain of this caused the dragon to abruptly turn away and fly from the battlefield, leaving only two of the giant creatures left.

"Are you injured my queen?" Orcan asked when he saw his sister sway in her saddle.

"I'm fine Orcan." she responded as she re-established her link with the remaining dragons, "Now let's destroy these humans who would dare to oppose us."

Directed by Ammaril, the two remaining dragons unleashed more blasts of flame towards the ballistas positioned high up on the hillside while the crews were hurrying to try and reload their weapons. Several more bolts were still shot into the air but none of these managed to hit either of the dragons before all of the weapons were destroyed, their crews burned to death or fleeing before the flames could reach them.

At the same time as the dragons were attacking from the air the Trolls in Ammaril's army were continuing to pound the blocks of human soldiers with thrown boulders while Orc archers fired at the troops who lost the protection of their shield walls and this combined assault proved too great for two more companies of human militia, causing them to break and scatter.

"There's a gap in their lines." Orcan said as he watched the latest human troops fleeing and Ammaril nodded.

"Then it is time for you to lead our troops Orcan." she told him.

Baron Frederick also saw the gap opening up in his lines as more of his militia fled. Some of the regular commanders positioned close by attempted to order them back into position but all of these instructions were ignored by the terrified militiamen who now only cared about their own survival. Killing one dragon and apparently driving a second off had proven a momentary boost to his army's morale but it was quickly lost as more boulders were hurled into the human lines and the dragons loomed overhead.

"We need to fill that hole quickly." he said, "Order the companies to either side to close in."

"My lord, look!" one of his subordinates exclaimed as he pointed towards the Orc army where a large group of Orcs on horseback was moving towards the front line.

"They're about to charge." Baron Frederick said, "We have to face them head on."

Orcan held his sword up high as a signal for his cavalry, more than eight hundred mounted Orcs in total including Tiellan to charge and in unison they spurred their horses forwards at a gallop. They headed towards the narrow gap that had opened up in the human lines where two adjoining companies of militia had fled. To either side of this gap were other companies of infantry that had held their ground even while they were having boulders hurled at them. This bombardment stopped now that the Orc cavalry was heading towards them and the human soldiers levelled spears from between their shields to keep the enemy away. At the same time crossbowmen fired their weapons through the gap ahead of them towards the charging Orcs and here and there one of them fell from his horse. A fluke crossbow bolt even flew towards Orcan himself but rather than impaling him this tumbled when it struck the magical field that surrounded his chainmail coat and it bounced off rather than piercing it and hitting Orcan himself. These losses were minor though and the Orcs on horseback continued their charge, racing between the human companies on their front line and scattering the crossbowmen behind it.

Now in the open area of ground behind the human front line the Orcs were free to attack the human infantry companies from behind but to counter this Baron Frederick had ordered his own cavalry to intervene and the Orcs found themselves being charged at from either side by human knights. Unlike the infantry that had had their numbers bolstered by militia gathered along the way though, all of the cavalry that Baron Frederick had at his disposal had been brought with him from the capital and they were heavily outnumbered by the Orcs.

"I'll take the left. You go to the right. Destroy the human cavalry and the rest will be defenceless." Orcan told Tiellan and the two Orc leaders turned away from one another, each leading a large force of Orcs towards the oncoming human cavalry while the rear ranks of infantry were being turned to protect them from attacks from behind.

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Leading his cavalry personally, Baron Frederick impaled the first Orc to come within reach with his spear before letting go of the weapon and drawing his sword to slash at the next, knocking him from his horse. After dealing with these two Orcs he saw another coming towards him armed with a sword rather than the spears that most of the cavalry carried. While his helmet appeared the same as the other Orcs the chainmail that this Orc wore had a different look to it, appearing brighter and the blade of the sword that he carried shared this look. The baron had no way of identifying Orcan specifically but he could tell that he was facing one of the Orcs' leaders and he charged straight at him.

Dressed in chainmail almost identical to the rest of his knights, it was harder for Orcan to pick out the baron among the humans on horseback but after seeing how easily he had despatched two Orcs in rapid succession indicated that he was an experienced fighter, one worthy of Orcan dealing with in person. "That one is mine." Orcan told the Orcs close to him and he charged towards Baron Frederick with his sword held out in front of him.

The two leaders on horseback struck they raced past each other and their swords clashed, the end of Baron Frederick's blade hitting Orcan's about half way along and the Orc leader's enchanted blade cut right through the baron's. Baron Frederick gasped as he saw the end of his sword blade sliced off while having felt very little of the impact as he held it. While the baron was momentarily distracted Orcan swung his sword again, this time striking at the baron's horse and the animal gave a cry of pain as it collapsed and Baron Frederick fell from his saddle.

It did not take long for the baron to pick himself up while Orcan circled around and he stood with his broken sword in one hand and his shield in another facing the Orc leader as he charged at him. The baron instinctively brought up his shield to protect himself as Orcan brought his sword down but the thick wooden shield proved no more able to stop the enchanted blade than his sword had been and it splintered into pieces before the sword blade came down on his shoulder.

Baron Frederick was not killed outright by this blow but as he fell to the ground he knew that his wound was fatal and before darkness finally claimed him he saw more human knights falling from their horses all around him as they were overwhelmed by the Orcs.

After his force had broken through the human cavalry Tiellan found himself not far from the line of war wagons, wagons with tall and thick wooden sides and open tops so that they could be used like miniature fortifications. Behind this line stood the tall metal pole that protected the area around it from magical attack, marking out the location as on critical to the human army. The war wagons would have formed a formidable barrier to Tiellan's cavalry but a large gap had been smashed in the line of wagons by the dead dragon crashing into them, its body now lying beyond this and Tiellan rode towards the gap with his knights following him.

The line of wagons was still manned by human soldiers armed with crossbows and they fired at the Orc cavalry from behind their mobile fortification but they hit no more than a handful of them before they charged through the gap. Beyond the war wagons were numerous tents belonging to the army's leaders and while most of these had gone to join the fighting like Baron Frederick himself there were still some troops left behind to guard them as well the pair of sorcerers that had accompanied the army.

Warned about the approach of the Orc cavalry by the men in the war wagons, the troops protecting the ground behind them had quickly formed up into a fighting block with a wall of shields to their front while men with crossbows pointed these over the shoulders of the first rank. Meanwhile the two sorcerers stood right at the back with their staves in their hands.

The crossbowmen held their fire as the Orc cavalry charged towards them and instead the two sorcerers raised their staves.

"Illuminus!" both sorcerers yelled and the tips of their staves suddenly produced brilliant light that dazzled the Orcs while the humans in front of them and on the war wagons fired their crossbows at them again.

Tiellan's horse reared up, refusing to charge onwards blindly until Tiellan dug his spurs into the animal's side and it galloped onwards while Tiellan shielded his face. His horse charged straight into the line of shields and the animal toppled forwards as it struck the barrier and Tiellan was thrown from his saddle as it fell.

The size and weight of the horse crushed several of the human soldiers while Tiellan landed on several others that served to break his fall. The collapse of the soldiers also caused the sorcerers to end the effects of their spells and as soon as the blinding light from their staves ceased the rest of the Orc cavalry were able to quickly reorganise themselves and they charged towards the humans who were still trying to reorganise themselves.

One of the human soldiers ran towards where Tiellan had landed and raised his sword while the Orc was getting back to his feet in the hope of striking him down while he was still disorientated. However, Tiellan recovered faster than the human soldier expected and he lunged at the man before he could use his sword,

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punching the man in his face and breaking his nose. The human soldier immediately dropped both his sword and shield, staggering backwards with his hands over his face. Tiellan quickly picked up the sword and swung it towards the soldier, striking his shoulder. The blade failed to cut through the chainmail that the soldier wore over a padded jacket but the force of the blow was enough to break his shoulder and he screamed in pain. Tiellan then simply shoved the injured man out of his way as he turned his attention towards what he saw as the primary threat, that of the two sorcerers who were now both turning towards him and brandishing their staffs.

Tiellan knew that a sorcerer could cast certain spells very quickly, especially if they had had the chance to prepare them previously. He had no way of knowing for certain whether they had been able to prepare any particular spells so he had to act quickly and with just his stolen sword in his hand he charged at them. The younger of the two men stepped forwards and levelled his staff as if to unleash some of his power but before he could do this Tiellan stabbed him in the stomach, twisting the sword blade before pulling it back out and the sorcerer spat out a mouthful of blood as he collapsed.

"Phyan-sa!" the older sorcerer yelled as he then unleashed a magical blast from his staff. Fortunately for Tiellan the man had cast the spell in a hurry and it had only just enough power in it to knock him off his feet again but then the sorcerer loomed over him, ready to strike again.

Before the sorcerer could either cast another spell or attack Tiellan directly though the rest of the Orc cavalry unit charged into the remaining humans, smashing their soldiers aside and the sorcerer turned back towards them just in time to be impaled through the chest by a spear.

From their vantage point Ammaril and the two warlocks with her watched the battle unfolding. Now leaderless and coming under constant bombardment from Trolls to the front while Orc cavalry attacked from behind, the commanders of individual human companies were struggling to maintain order, even among the professional troops but for the time being they were still holding their positions.

"The time has come to end this." Ammaril said and she began to ride towards the front of her army. The Orcs watched as she rode between them until she reached the very front of the infantry and she raised a hand in the air, "Forwards!" she ordered and either side of her the companies of Orc troops started to march forwards while maintaining their shield walls in front of them despite the crossbow fire from the humans having diminished to almost nothing by this point. The Trolls that had been hurling boulders at the humans now stopped doing this and they joined the Orc infantry in advancing instead, their longer strides allowing them to draw ahead of the Orcs

The sight of thousands of Orcs and Trolls now marching towards them was too much for the already shaky morale of many of the human militia and several companies immediately panicked and fled, further depleting the ranks of the human army before all of a sudden the Trolls broke into a sprint, roaring as they charged towards the human shield walls. The human troops extended spears from behind their shields and stabbed at the Trolls before they could get close enough to make use of the crude clubs and axes that they carried. In this manner the well trained human soldiers were able to force the Trolls back at several places along their frontline but in others there were too many of them and they forced their way past the spear tips to get close enough to swing their weapons at the shield walls, striking them with such force that the shields broke and the men behind them were cut down.

Behind the Trolls the much larger number of Orcs followed and they also broke into a charge when they came close. Once again the humans used their spears to try and keep the Orcs back but the sheer number of them made it impossible to keep them all back, especially in places along the front line where Trolls had already broken through and inevitably many of them got close enough to attack with their swords and axes. In response the human troops also abandoned their spears and swapped to their own hand weapons but for every Orc they were able to cut down there was another waiting to step forwards while with every human casualty suffered the human troops were being forced steadily back.

Sir Albero Vogt, one of Baron Frederick's subordinates hacked at an Orc cavalryman. His sword blade was unable to cut through the Orc's chainmail but the repeated blows knocked him from his horse and gave the human knight enough time to look around and assess the battlefield. Everywhere human troops were being pushed backwards and many companies had either been wiped out entirely or just fled the field. On the other hand the massive Orc army was pushing forwards in an unstoppable wave and it was obvious to Sir Albero that the day was lost. Now the only option was to save as many of the surviving human soldiers as possible. Unfortunately with Orc cavalry already behind the human lines an orderly retreat was out of the question and individual companies or even soldiers were going to have to fend for themselves.

"Hornsman!" he shouted as he looked towards another mounted human soldier who had a carved horn slung over his shoulder he saw that the man was battling another Orc on horseback. Sir Albero charged his horse

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towards this Orc and swung his sword, taking the Orc by surprise and hitting him in his neck where neither his chainmail coat nor his helmet protected him and there was a spurt of blood as the Orc fell dead, "Sound the retreat. We have to leave. Everyone has to leave or they're going to die." Sir Albero then told the other knight and he nodded as he raised his horn to his lips and then blew it, letting out a single continuous tone. This sound carried across the battlefield even over the sound of fighting and the commanders of every human company knew what it meant. The battle was lost and the time had come to flee. In an instant every human soldier, whether on foot or horseback who could turned to escape the battlefield, running or riding as fast as they could. Those engaged in battle backed away from their opponents, trying to open enough room for them to turn around without being immediately struck down from behind.

The result of this was thousands of soldiers fleeing in a disorderly manner, with different groups fleeing in different directions rather than all of them trying to fall back to a pre-arranged position and the Orcs took full advantage of this, cutting off the retreat of as many human units as they could and isolating them from one another before they could be overrun by the mass of Orcs and Trolls that continued to advance in a more orderly fashion. The battle may have been over but the killing still continued. The remnants of the human cavalry, including Sir Albero himself were the ones most spared from this slaughter. Their horses allowed them to move fast enough to outrun any efforts to encircle them and most were able to escape the field. On the other hand the infantry were not so lucky and many units were caught between the Orc cavalry that had got behind them and the infantry advancing towards their front ranks. Some were still able to slip passed the cavalry that could only block the passage of so many at a time and escape but many more were killed before they could escape.

The ground was strewn with the dead from both sides as Ammaril and Orcan met and every so often there was a cry as another injured human soldier was found and killed. Some noblemen were among them and tried to bribe their way to freedom but all such pleas were ignored by the Orcs who cared about nothing but serving Ammaril.

"Victory my queen." Orcan said simply and Ammaril smiled back at him.

"Yes Orcan. Victory," she replied, "once again our warriors have proven themselves in battle but this is just the beginning. Tarran will fall now, that is certain and the other kingdoms on this land will soon follow. Only the Hadarian Empire is strong enough to resist and if all goes to plan then that threat has either already been neutralised or soon will be. Our focus for the time being needs to be to finish taking control of Tarran and that means taking the capital. Some of those who fled from here will inevitably head there and tell them what they saw here, including how they were able to kill one of our dragons."

"Let me take some cavalry and hunt them down. They will die before they carry our secrets to their kin." Orcan said with a snarl.

"Oh my dear brother, the knowledge of how to kill a dragon is unimportant in the long run. I may have only created four so far but I never intended for them to be the only ones of their kind and I will create more when I can before allowing them to increase their numbers naturally. What matters is the other news that they will take back with them." Ammaril said.

"What news is that my queen?" Orcan asked.

"Why the news of our strength and how crushing our victory was of course." Ammaril told him, "All it takes is one survivor to tell others how strong our army is and how despite their best plans the humans here were routed. Yes, they will tell people about our dragons but the message that they will get is that they are real and how terrifying they are. That will spread panic among the population and that panic will only strengthen our position."

The capital of Tarran, called Tarranberg, had begun its existence as a trading post on the border between the territories of two human tribes and as civilisation had expanded it had grown in importance to the point where it became the capital of a nation. The city's location on what would be the main route for an army invading from Costria had encouraged successive kings to fortify it and now it was surrounded by high walls and defensive towers that mounted ballistas and trebuchets.

"I don't think that I've ever seen a castle this big." Lucia said when the city came into view from the front of the column of troops marching from Costria, thinking about the more limited fortifications that she had seen looming over various harbours around the world rather than surrounding entire cities.

"Then you should try visiting one of the Dwarf kingdoms." Gromar commented, "Mile after mile of tunnels linking our underground cities with one another."

"The engineering of Dwarf cities may be impressive but from what I've heard they aren't much to look at from the outside." Will added.

"Ah but on the inside they are the most elaborately carved structures in the world." Gromar replied.

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As the column led by Duke Engel drew closer to the gates to Tarranberg it became clear that they were closed.

"There are crossbowmen on the walls aiming at us." Yilven said, noticing the presence of armed men on the battlements above the gatehouse that were pointing their weapons towards the leaders of the approaching column.

"Halt! Who goes there?" one of the soldiers called out from the top of the wall and Duke Engel raised his hand for the column to come to a stop.

"I am Duke Engel of Costria." he shouted towards the gatehouse, "Tell King Lupold that I have brought my army to help defend his kingdom. We stand together or we all fall as individuals."

There was a short pause before all of a sudden the gates to Tarranberg began to open.

"You may enter our city in friendship Duke Engel." the soldier shouted from the battlements, "Welcome to Tarranberg."

"Forwards." Duke Engel ordered and the column began to move again, advancing through the gates into Tarranberg where they were met by a local soldier on horseback.

"Your grace." the man said, bowing his head to Duke Engel, "If you would like to accompany me then I will take you to King Lupold. My men will find quarters for your soldiers."

"Thank you, though there are some others that also come with us to see King Lupold. He should be able to hear what they have to say in person." the duke said and he pointed to Will and the rest of his party, "They have returned from Syldarin and have seen what we are facing."

"Of course your grace." the soldier replied, "Please come with me, all of you."

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The palace at Tarrenberg was a tower located near the centre of the walled city and the soldier led Duke Engel, Will and the rest of the group here where they were shown straight inside and escorted to King Lupold's throne room.

"Your majesty. Thank you for receiving us." Duke Engel said, bowing his head.

"We received your warning Duke Engel. You and your soldiers are welcome in my kingdom. Especially given the news that we have since received from Baron Frederick who has taken my army to fight the invaders." King Lupold said.

"What is this news Your Majesty?" Duke Engel asked.

"Our original estimates of the enemy numbers were no more than ten thousand that Baron Frederick would have faced with his army of fifteen thousand but when the enemy were sighted they numbered closer to thirty thousand." King Lupold said, "Since then we have heard nothing and many of my advisors are concerned that the baron's army has been defeated. I have barely a thousand soldiers left here in the city plus whatever militia can be raised so the arrival of you and your men is most welcome."

"It is my honour Your Majesty." Duke Engel said and then he indicated where Vayran was standing with Will and the others behind him, "Though I should also credit Vayran of Toros who has come here with fifty survivors of Sylldarin to help defend this city."

"Vayran of Toros, you and your men are also welcome in my kingdom. Though perhaps you can tell us more about what happened to Sylldarin so that we might be able to avoid a similar fate ourselves." King Lupold said to the Elf sorcerer.

Five knights still rode with Sir Albero by the time that they reached the gates of Tarranberg and found them closed.

"I am Sir Albero and I bring word from the army of Baron Frederick. Open the gates." he called out to the soldiers on duty and the gates were promptly opened for the knights to ride through. As soon as they entered the city though they saw that there were troops inside it who were clearly not from Tarran, their livery matching that worn by soldiers from neighbouring Costria instead, "What are these soldiers doing here?" Sir Albero asked one of the native Tarran soldiers.

"Duke Engel arrived with a column of troops to help defend us sire." the soldier told him, "Some of them are Elves from Sylldarin."

"Elves here in the city?" Sir Albero said and the soldier nodded.

"Yes sire. Only a handful but they are in the city." he responded.

"And what of the duke himself?" Sir Albero said.

"He has gone to speak to King Lupold. There are rumours that more soldiers from Hadar could be on their way as well." the soldier said.

"Very good. Then I can deliver my news to them all together." Sir Albero said before he rode off in the direction of the palace, accompanied by the other knights who had entered the city with him.

By the time Sir Albero and the other knights reached the palace the meeting between King Lupold, Duke Engel and the others had been relocated to a dining room where a large meal was laid out on several trays and Horace and Gromar in particular were digging in to the food. The dragon Reyod still perched on Vayran's shoulder and chirped every so often, prompting the Elf sorcerer to pass it a small morsel of meat that it eagerly gobbled up before chirping for more.

"Your Majesty, Sir Albero Vogt to see you with a report from Baron Frederick." a servant announced and King Lupold looked at him.

"Ah very good. Show him in." he ordered and the servant bowed before he left the room for a moment. When he re-entered the room he was accompanied by Sir Albero who was still wearing his blood and mud splattered chainmail and everyone present looked at him.

"Your Majesty." He said, bowing to the King.

"Sir Albero, you bring news from Baron Frederick?" King Lupold asked.

"I am afraid to say that I bring word of Baron Frederick Your Majesty, not from him." Sir Albero answered.

"The baron has fallen?" the King said.

"Regrettably yes Your Majesty. He was cut down by one of the beasts known as Orcs according to the message we received from you. As you may have heard the invaders that we faced had far greater numbers than had been anticipated. The baron tried to hold our ground anyway but much of the army was killed along

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with him while the rest fled. Only five others made it back here with me I cannot say what happened to any others." Sir Albero said.

"Only five? Out of an army of how many?" Dominic commented.

"The baron took to the field with around fifteen thousand men under arms." Sir Albero said.

"Fifteen thousand men killed?" Lucia exclaimed.

"Some fled before the battle was over. Others may have been able to scatter and find places to hide but I suspect that the majority are now either dead or captive." Sir Albero said.

"But the end result is the same. Ammaril's army will be spreading out and sooner or later they are going to come here." Will said.

"What can we expect of this army Sir Albero?" Duke Engel asked.

"Yes, what did you see?" King Lupold added, leaning forwards in his chair.

"It was a massive horde of monsters Your Majesty. Their skin was grey like stone with crude, brutish aspects to them." Sir Albero said.

"They were Elves once." Yilven commented, "Until Ammaril transformed them."

"Perhaps but they aren't any more." Sir Albero replied, "Some stood more than twice the height of a man but they weren't the worst." Sir Albero.

"The worst?" Horace commented.

"He must mean the dragons." Gromar said and Sir Albero nodded.

"Yes, the dragons. They were like something out of a children's story. They were huge, far bigger than any living creature that I've seen before. Our crossbowmen tried firing up into the air at them as they flew over us but their hides were too thick. The baron planned to use our ballistas against them. They were positioned on high ground so had the best fields of fire possible. The dragons did not appear until the enemy's Trolls had begun hurling rocks at our lines and we were forced to use some of our ballistas against them instead. The dragons then struck while our weapons were being used for another purpose." he explained.

"So your Baron's plan failed?" Vayran said.

"Not entirely. He made sure that some of the ballistas were held in reserve, something the enemy may not have counted on and when the dragons appeared they were fired at them. Most of the shots missed but some hit the beasts and were able pierce their scales. One of them was killed and another fled for some reason but the final two must have killed hundreds of men before they retreated as well. That's when the enemy cavalry charged us, moving through the gap that the dragons opened in our lines." Sir Albero said.

"So they got behind you and surrounded your men." Duke Engels said.

"Unfortunately, yes your grace." Sir Albero replied.

"Thank you Sir Albero." King Lupold said, "You are dismissed. Get yourself cleaned up and rest. We will discuss what you have told us." He then waited until the knight had left the room before he looked around at the others sat at the table, "So the baron's message was accurate. There are far more of these creatures than the original estimate based off the number of ships that were sighted. I take it that the rest must have come using these stone circles you mentioned."

"Yes Your Majesty? Are you aware of where such a circle may be in your kingdom?" Vayran asked.

"I don't have any idea about them. Who cares about them after all? I know that sorcerers such as yourself sometimes study them, something to do with the magic that flows under them I was told once." King Lupold replied, "Now just how many of these Orcs can be brought here with them?"

"I'm afraid that that is what has me confused Your Majesty. I had thought that the stone circles would have to be activated using magic but if that is the case then only Ammaril would be able to control them."

"Are you sure all the other sorcerers in Sylldarin are dead?" Horace asked.

"No member of my order would help her." Vayran responded.

"Maybe Ammaril turned some into Orcs and now they just do whatever she says." Gromar suggested.

"What about the warlocks held beneath the Tower of Sorcery? If any of them survived the tower's destruction then maybe they'd work with her. As Elves or Orcs." Yilven added.

"In that case there is no telling how many could be brought here using the stone circles." Vayran said.

"So the force that landed by boat would just be the first wave." Will said, "Used to find the stone circle so that more could join them here."

"Before we left Sylldarin it seemed like the Orcs were everywhere. Ammaril was well on her way to transforming the entire population." Vayran said.

"And now all of them could be here." Lucia said.

"Almost two million of them." Dominic added.

Just as King Lupold had gathered with his military leaders to discuss how to respond to the invasion of their kingdom now he stood around the same table with Duke Engel, Sir Albero and the group that had

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accompanied him, the strange mix of individuals who knew more about the Orcs and their leader than anyone else. King Lupold did not like the idea of trusting the defence of his kingdom to such people but right now he did not see that he had a choice.

Unlike when he had met with his own military leaders the map that they were gathered around showed only Tarranberg and the land for a few miles around it, an area that included more than a dozen towns and smaller villages.

"In light of the death of Baron Frederick, Sir Albero Vogt will be assisting me in commanding my army from now on." King Lupold announced, "He is familiar with the defences of Tarranberg aren't you Sir Albero?"

"Yes Your Majesty and my plan draws on some elements of the one used by Baron Frederick." Sir Albero replied.

"Which parts?" Will asked.

"Using ballistas against dragons. I see no reason why they would not be effective again and we have more of them than were available to the baron. Tarranberg is one of the most heavily fortified cities in the known world. Its walls are tall and thick, thick enough that hurling a few small rocks at them won't cause any significant damage while the battlements will offer plenty of opportunity to fire at any attackers. The two thousand men that remained in the city would have to spread fairly thin in order to man all of the wall weapons as well as the wall itself but with the additional forces from Costria as well as the Elf company we should be able to manage this as well as Maintaining enough reserves to be able to try and break any protracted siege by destroying siege engines or making a break in the enemy lines so that extra provisions can be brought in." Sir Albero replied, "We are filling as many storehouses as possible right now and encouraging people to abandon the towns and village close to the city by warning them that soldiers will not be sent to protect them and that once the gates are closed and barred no-one will be allowed to enter the city."

"How long do you suppose that we have until the enemy get here?" Dominic asked.

"It took us four days to reach the town where we engaged the enemy with infantry and two for me to return on horseback. If Orcs march at the same speed as humans then that would put them two days from here now." Sir Albero answered.

"If we have two days then we have time to rest tonight." King Lupold said and there were nods of agreement from around the table, "Excellent then it is agreed. Chambers will be arranged for you all in the palace and we can take this up again in the morning."

The sun had already set as another lone horseman galloped towards Tarranberg. This hooded individual did not approach along the road that led east across the border into Costria though, instead he came from the north, riding up to one of the smaller gates in the city walls. Just like the large gate that Duke Engel's force had entered through this was closed because of the threat of attack and the hooded figure dismounted outside it to knock. At first there was no response from the other side of the gate and he raised his fist to knock again but before he could a small hatch opened and a guard stared through from the other side of the gate, holding up a lantern to try and see the figure outside more clearly.

"The King has ordered the city gates sealed. Who are you? What do you want?" he said and the figure held out a rolled up sheet of paper towards the hatch without speaking. The guard took the paper and unrolled it. Like most people of his station he was illiterate but he could tell that the paper was important thanks to the wax seal fixed to the bottom of it, a seal that bore the coat of arms of the Emperor of Hadar, "Go and fetch the watch captain." the guard told another man who was standing nearby and in turn he hurried away only to reappear a short time later with another guard, this one wearing a brightly coloured vest that marked him out as a watch captain.

"What is it?" the captain asked the guard at the gate.

"He has this sir." the guard replied and he handed the paper to him, "It has the seal of the Hadarian Emperor on it."

"Let me see." the watch captain replied as he took the sheet and looked at it, "This is a letter of introduction." he continued after a few moments, "He's an ambassador from the Emperor of Hadar. We'd better let him in." The guards promptly unbarred the gate as quickly as they could while the figure outside got back onto his horse and rode through the open gateway at a slow pace, pausing only to take the letter of introduction back from the guard captain before riding off into the city in the direction of the palace.

Members of the palace staff showed everyone to the rooms that had been prepared for them. Rather than give everyone rooms together though they were spread throughout the palace depending on the apparent social status of the group and this resulted in Dominic and Vayran, who thanks to being sorcerers were both

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seen as members of the nobility, being given luxurious rooms in the section of the palace reserved for nobles while the other were all led down to the servants quarters in the basement.

"Nice to know how we're regarded." Gromar commented when they saw the row of small rooms that had been allotted to them.

"I'd have thought that as a Dwarf you'd prefer to sleep underground." Yilven commented.

"There's a difference between a Dwarf hall and a mine." Gromar replied.

"As long as they are dry and have a bed I'll be happy." Will said before he looked into his room and saw that although it was rather spartan it was clean, dry and furnished, "Well, see you in the morning." he added before he went inside and closed the door behind him.

The other members of the group also entered the quarters provided for them to retire for the night. Lucia found herself lying in bed awake though, unable to get to sleep and she was still awake when she heard the sound of a door opening nearby and someone walking along the stone floor of the hallway outside her room. Finding this odd she got out of bed and hurried to the door to open it, her hand on her dagger just in case but rather than an assassin coming to kill any members of the group she instead found Horace walking past her door.

"Hey! It's just me." he exclaimed and Lucia realised that she had drawn her knife.

"Oh I'm sorry, I just didn't expect anyone else to still be up." she said as she put her knife back in its sheath.

"I was just going to the kitchen. I thought that maybe there'd be some leftovers from dinner there that I could take. It ought to be good for a day or two." Horace said.

"That sounds like a good idea. Mind if I come with you?" Lucia asked.

"Of course not. Two of us can carry twice as much." Horace replied.

The pair then made their way to the kitchen in search of any food that was left over from dinner but they found nothing and Horace sighed.

"Damn it. They've cleared it all away already." he said, "The kitchen staff probably took what was left."

"Where would the staff take it though? Don't they live here? Unless they ate the leftover food the it would have to be around here somewhere." Lucia said before a smile appeared on her face, "Or maybe it's still in the dining room." she suggested.

"That's a good point. It was covered any the staff might just leave food there for anyone that wanted a snack during the night. Let's go and find out." Horace said.

Duke Engel was still awake and writing out orders for his men when there was a knock on the door of the luxurious bedchamber that he had been given by King Lupold's staff.

"Yes?" he said, looking towards the door from his chair and frowning at being disturbed at such a late hour.

The door then opened to admit a member of the palace staff.

"Excuse my intrusion your grace but there is a visitor here to see you." the servant said.

"A visitor for me?" the duke responded.

"Yes your grace. He is an ambassador for your cousin the Emperor of Hadar and he wishes to speak with you before meeting with King Lupold." the servant said.

"The Emperor?" Duke Engel said. Although he was left largely to his own devices when it came to the ruling of Costria the duke knew that he owed his position entirely to his older cousin who had installed him on the throne and every so often he would receive instructions regarding actions that he was to take but these were never so important that they had to be discussed in the middle of the night.

"Yes your grace. The ambassador is waiting downstairs." the servant said.

"Very well then, take me to him." Duke Engel said as he got out of his chair. The servant then led the duke down to a small office on the ground floor of the palace located beside the dining room that the duke had eaten dinner in with the others and the Hadarian ambassador was waiting inside this, sat behind a simple desk. As soon as he entered the room the duke saw the letter of introduction lying on the desk between him and the ambassador and he picked it up, studying the wax seal at the bottom. Then he looked at the servant, "Leave us." he ordered.

"Yes your grace." the servant said, bowing his head before he left the office and Duke Engel waited for the door to close before he turned to address the ambassador.

"This is clearly real," he said, holding up the letter, "the seal looks genuine and I recognise my cousin's handwriting but I don't recognise you at all. Who are you?"

"I'm exactly who that letter says I am your grace." Thomas said with a smile, "I'm an ambassador from your cousin and I'm here to tell you what he wants you and your army to do."

Horace and Lucia walked past the servant heading away from the office near the dining room without doing anything to draw his attention and then turned the corner into the hallway where the room was located.

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"Here we go." Horace said as he started to walk towards the door to the dining room but as he did so he passed right by the door to the office where Duke Engel was talking to Thomas and he came to a sudden stop.

"What's wrong?" Lucia asked.

"Shush." Horace whispered as he leant up against the door with his ear pressed against it, "There's someone in here talking."

So what?" Lucia said.

"I think I recognise the voice from somewhere." Horace said as he continued to listen, "One of them is Duke Engels but I know the other one from somewhere too."

Lucia also leant down beside Horace but although she could make out the sound of voices on the other side of the door she could not tell what was being said.

"Thirty thousand troops?" Duke Engel said and Thomas nodded.

"That's right. The Emperor has ordered a first wave of thirty thousand to come here and they'll likely get here some time tomorrow and you need to make sure that you're ready to take control of the walls by then. The Emperor will bring a company of troops here to take control of the palace and seize King Lupold. With both the walls and the palace in our hands we'll control the city." he said

"I can manage that. I have more men than Lupold has, even including those Elves." Duke Engel replied.

"Elves?" Thomas said.

"Yes, the ship that warned me that your Elf queen had Elves aboard who had escaped from Sylldarin. Most of them got on another ship to head north but their warriors and a sorcerer stayed behind to fight her. Don't worry though there aren't enough of them to make a difference to us, just a few dozen."

Horace suddenly stood up and backed away from the door.

"It's Thomas!" he hissed, "Thomas is here and telling Duke Engel to betray us."

"But he's promised to fight Ammaril with us." Lucia said.

"Well he's not going to keep that promise. It sounds like the Emperor of Hadar has done a deal with Ammaril and he's bringing an army here to invade the city." Horace replied.

"Then we have to warn the others." Lucia said and she took a step backwards. However, in doing so she accidentally knocked a table that had a decorative vase on it and this fell to the floor and broke.

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Duke Engel and Thomas both looked towards the door

"There's someone outside." the duke exclaimed and the two men rushed to the door and opened it just in time to see Horace and Lucia disappearing around a corner.

"It's that Halfling and the young woman." Duke Engel said, "If they warn anyone-

"We'll have to move now." Thomas interrupted, "You go and tell your men to take over the city walls. I'll deal with them."

The duke started to run down the hallway, heading towards the nearest exit from the palace while Thomas instead headed after Horace and Lucia. He pursued them past the kitchen and finally caught up with them just as they reached the door at the top of the stairs leading down to the servants' quarters.

"Going somewhere?" he said sternly as he grabbed hold of Horace and pulled him away from the door before he could open it.

Horace lashed out at Thomas but the larger man just laughed at him before shoving him aside and he crashed into a small table, knocking it over and breaking it in the process and Thomas laughed.

"Let us go." Lucia said sternly, drawing her knife and glaring at Thomas as she held it out in front of her.

"That's a pretty knife little girl." Thomas replied with a grin, "Now how about you hand it over to me?" he then reached out his hand towards Lucia only for her to swipe her knife across it, failing to cut very deeply but still drawing blood and Thomas gasped, clutching at his hand as he leapt backwards out of Lucia's reach.

"I said let us go." Lucia said and Thomas snarled.

"Oh little girl you have no idea of the trouble that you're in." he said before he reached to his shirt and opened it to reveal the stone that was embedded in his chest. Before Lucia could speak the Wraith within the stone emerged and its spectral form floated between her and Thomas before its arms reached out ahead of it and it rushed towards Lucia.

Instinctively Lucia held out her knife towards the Wraith and as it came towards her the tip of the blade made contact with its ethereal body. The instant that this happened the markings etched into the blade began to glow as it started to absorb the magical energy of the Wraith. Realising what was happening, the Wraith attempted to retreat but by this point it was too late and the creature was snared by the enchantment in the knife that enabled it to store magical energy. The Wraith let out a sudden high pitched screeching sound as its energy was drawn into the blade while Lucia looked on with wide eyes, not quite grasping what was happening. Although she knew from what Dominic had told her the knife had magical properties she knew nothing about Wraiths and the way she had held her knife towards it had been out of desperation rather than a definitive plan to destroy the creature.

It took only a short time for enough of the Wraith's energy to be drawn into the knife for the creature to then suddenly evaporate and Thomas gasped when he realised the consequences of this. Technically without the Wraith he was free from the risk of being abruptly killed for failing Ammaril but at the same time he had also lost his powerful protector and his eyes turned towards the knife that Lucia held again. Now though he realised where it had come from.

"That was Magister Quinnus' knife." he said, "Where did you get it from?"

"From Diera after the assassins you paid to kill us all murdered her." Lucia hissed.

"Oh well, I'm sure it will look good on my belt when I take it from your corpse." Thomas responded as he drew his own knife, a far more basic weapon than the one Lucia held though he had plenty of experience in using it.

Before Thomas could attack Lucia though he was unexpectedly struck from behind as Horace recovered his senses enough to realise what was going on and he picked up a table leg that had broken from the table that he had fallen into and swung it at the back of Thomas' head, striking him at the base of his skull. The blow was not powerful enough to knock Thomas out but it hurt enough that he bent over in pain as he dropped his knife to the floor and grasped the back of his head. Horace then struck again, delivering a second blow to Thomas' head now that it was easier for the diminutive Halfling to reach and this time the blow was enough to render him unconscious.

"Are you okay?" Horace asked Lucia and she nodded.

"Yes and you?" she responded.

"I'll be fine. Better than him anyway." Horace said and he looked down at the unconscious Thomas.

"What was that creature that came out of him and why did it just die when it touched my knife?" Lucia said, looking at the weapon in her hand.

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"It looked like one of the creatures that we saw in Oscay. Magister Quinnus painted spells on his soldiers' shields to protect them. Your dagger must work the same way as them. Now let's go and warn the others before this idiot wakes up." Horace said and leaving Thomas bleeding on the floor they opened the door leading to the servants' quarters and rushed down the stairs to wake the others who were down there.

While Thomas was attempting to stop Horace and Lucia from getting away Duke Engel had made his way to the palace stable where he went to one of the horses that was always kept saddled just in case it was needed quickly. There was a single stable hand present to keep watch over the horses during the night and he tried to find out what the duke wanted but as he approached Duke Engel the nobleman simply punched him, knocking him to the straw covered floor before he climbed up onto the back of the saddled horse and rode it from the palace.

Thomas came to only to find himself alone in the hallway with the door leading to the servants' quarters now wide open. Sitting up he lifted his hand to his head where Horace had struck him the second time and winced as he touched the spot, feeling the dampness of blood among his hair.

"Attack me would you?" he said to himself as he got to his feet and he quickly grabbed hold of a chair before he closed the door at the top of the stairs leading down to the servants' quarters and wedged it up against the door at an angle just beneath the handle. Thomas knew that this would not hold for long but he hoped that by the time his enemies were able to escape from the servants' quarters and raise the alarm he would be impossible to find in the palace.

Horace and Lucia quickly woke their companions sleeping in the servants' quarters and explained what they had overheard.

"Duke Engel is working for Ammaril." Horace said, "Or at least he's been ordered to by his cousin."

"The Emperor is sending an army here to invade the city, not defend it." Lucia added, "What do we do?"

"Wake everyone else and I mean everyone. Dominic and Vayran first but then we need to alert King Lupold. If we act quickly enough then maybe we can stop the duke from mobilising his soldiers and taking over the city." Will replied. The group then headed up the stairs to where they encountered the closed door at the top and Will reached out to open it, only to find it jammed, "It's stuck." he said, shoving the door.

"We left that door open when we came down the stairs." Lucia told him.

"Thomas. He must have woken up and wedged it." Horace added.

"Out of my way, let me handle this." Gromar said and Will backed down the stairs to let the Dwarf past him. Once at the top of the stairs Gromar gave the door a brief shove.

"Will already tried that." Yilven pointed out.

"I know. Be quiet." Gromar responded before he pressed his ear to the door and tried to push it once more. Then he smiled and added, "There's something jammed against the other side."

"So how do we move it?" Horace asked.

"Stand back." Gromar said and he took a step back down the stairs before he raised the large hammer he carried and swung it towards the handle on this side of the door.

Although the door was well made from hardwood Gromar's hammer blow splintered the wood at the point where he struck it, smashing the handle off and punching a large hole in the door. On the other side the other handle was torn free and the chair that had been wedged in place was thrown free. No longer jammed shut the door then flew open and the group on the stairs all raced through it.

"Thomas is gone." Lucia said, looking the small patch of blood on the floor where Thomas had been lying though now this blood was the only hint that he had been there although the broken table remained as proof of the struggle.

"I mustn't have hit him hard enough." Horace added, "Do you think he's gone to summon help? What if he tells the palace guards that we're the ones plotting with Ammaril?"

"Ignore Thomas for now. We need to find Dominic and Vayran. They'll be upstairs somewhere." Will replied.

The group then located more stairs that led further up into the palace and headed up them in search of the bedrooms provided to Dominic and Vayran. With all the doors looking the same from the outside they had to get one of the palace staff who was still on duty through the night to show them to these rooms and as soon as they reached them they knocked to wake the occupants.

"What is all this fuss about? Ammaril isn't here with her army already is she?" Dominic said as he opened the door to his bedroom to find the others standing in the hallway outside. Then Vayran opened the door to his room and peered out also.

"Duke Engel's betrayed us. His cousin has joined with Ammaril and the Hadarian Empire troops intend to take control of the city." Will said then he glanced at Horace and Lucia and added, "Horace and Lucia

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overheard the duke talking to Thomas.”

“Thomas?” Vayran commented.

“A human that initially worked for the vampire Marcus Quinnus but now appears to be in the employ of Ammaril.” Dominic told him and Lucia nodded.

“He had a stone embedded in the middle of his chest.” she said, pointing to the middle of her own chest roughly where the stone was embedded in Thomas, “Some sort of creature came out of it, a ghost. But when it touched my knife it just screamed and was destroyed.”

“The enchanted knife that can store magical energy?” Dominic asked and Lucia nodded again.

“Yes, that’s right. Diera’s knife.” she answered.

“Then I’m not surprised. Any ethereal creature is essentially made from magical energy instead of being solid so if it comes into contact with an object meant to collect and store such energy then it will be destroyed by it.” Dominic said.

“This is all very interesting,” Will said, “but we have a bigger problem at hand. The Hadarians are on their way and Duke Engel already has thousands of soldiers here in the city. We need to tell King Lupold right away.”

Duke Engel knew that he needed to act immediately. He had more soldiers in Tarranberg than King Lupold did after the recent military disaster his army had suffered but if the city’s inhabitants were able to organise themselves then it was still possible that they could overwhelm his men if they were caught unprepared.

Therefore, he rode as quickly as he could through the darkened city streets towards the buildings that were now being used as barracks for his men. These were a row of warehouses located close to the city walls. A large portion of the three thousand strong force that he had brought to the city had been deployed to the walls but there were still more than a thousand soldiers crowded into these buildings.

There were two sentries standing outside one of the warehouses as the duke rode up them and they raised their shields and drew their swords to protect themselves before they recognised him and lowered their shields and returned their swords to their scabbards again.

“My lord.” the two sentries said simultaneously as Duke Engel dismounted from his horse.

“Where is Sir Bakker?” the duke demanded.

“Inside on the top floor with all the other noblemen my lord.” one of the sentries responded.

“Good. Wake everyone up. We have to move quickly.” Duke Engel ordered before he rushed inside and headed up the stairs to the top floor of the warehouse.

King Lupold was woken by the sound of raised voices coming from outside his bedroom.

“What’s going on?” his wife asked from beside him as she too was woken up.

“I don’t know my dear.” Lupold answered.

“Then why don’t you go and find out so that we can both get back to sleep?” the Queen suggested and Lupold got out of bed, put on a robe and his slippers before heading for the door to the hallway. Opening this he found the guards that normally stood outside now blocking his way while one of his more senior servants was standing beyond them, arguing with Will and the rest of his group.

“The King cannot be disturbed.” the servant said sternly, “You must return to your own quarters immediately.

“The King has already been disturbed.” Lupold said, “Now would someone like to tell me why?”

“Your Majesty this – err- gentleman has some idea about Duke Engel being in league with the Emperor of Hadar and Ammaril to destroy us.”

“It’s true.” Lucia exclaimed, “Horace and I overheard the duke talking to the man who tried to have us killed before and tried to kill us again here in the palace.”

Lupold looked at the servant.

“I was attempting to tell them that you are not to be disturbed at this time Your Majesty.” the man said to him.

“Well I have been disturbed. Now what is all this about Duke Engel? Where is the duke?” King Lupold said.

“I’m sorry Your Majesty but I don’t know.” the servant replied.

“Then why don’t you go and find out? I also want to know about this other person that the duke is supposed to have spoken to. Who is he?” King Lupold said.

“Of course Your Majesty.” the servant said before he hurried away to check on where Duke Engel was.

“Thomas, that’s the man who has tried to kill us, is probably already gone from the palace Your Majesty.” Will said.

“Yes, he tried to slow us down by jamming the door to the servants’ quarters.” Gromar added.

“Your Majesty, Duke Engel has betrayed us all.” Vayran said, “Given the number of soldiers he already has in the city he could attempt to overthrow you before his cousin’s forces arrive.”

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"You arrived here with the duke, all of you." King Lupold pointed out, "If he is a part of the invasion my kingdom has suffered then why should I believe that you aren't all a part of it too?"

"Why would we be warning you if we were traitors too?" Gromar said.

"Your Majesty we can only ask you to trust us when we tell you that the city is in great danger." Dominic said before the servant suddenly reappeared, now rushing back down the hallway towards them.

"Your Majesty!" he called out, "Duke Engel is gone. He attacked a stable hand and took a horse. Apparently an ambassador from Hadar arrived to speak with him prior to this and now he has vanished as well."

"That was Thomas." Horace said, "You'll find some of his blood on the floor near the servants' quarters."

"Duke Engel will be heading for his troops." Yilven said, "We won't be able to stop him in time."

"Maybe not, but I can send Reyod to find out what his men are doing. We know where they are quartered." Vayran said.

"In the meantime we need to gather as many troops as possible." Will said and King Lupold looked at the servant.

"Other than the troops needed to protect the city gates I want everyone who is capable of wielding a sword to come to the palace. Get whatever soldiers we have left and every watchman that can be found. We don't have time to start calling up a militia." King Lupold ordered.

"The Elves are guarding the gates we came through right now." Yilven said.

"They'll need to be warned but they're probably best being left there. The gates will need to be held." Will said.

While messengers on horseback were despatched around Tarranberg to alert what of King Lupold's forces remained in the city preparations were made to reinforce the palace itself. Fortunately the palace was sturdily built and was designed to withstand attack and the doors could be easily barred.

Vayran excused himself from these preparations though, heading back to the bedroom that he had been assigned along with Lucia and once there he opened the window and took Reyod down from his shoulder.

"Now this requires concentration," he told Lucia as he walked over to a nearby chair, "so be careful not to disturb me"

"Yes Ammaril explained this to me. Marcus Quinnus tried to use swarms of bats to spy on her expedition in Oscay." Lucia responded as Vayran sat down in the chair.

"So you're familiar with the basics, good. When I find the duke I'll tell you where he is and what he's up to. Then you go and pass that on to Will and the others." he said as he looked into Reyod's face and focused, establishing a connection between them. Then he let go of the dragon and the creature chirped before it flew out through the open window into the night.

Part of the palace's defences were made up of narrow slots in the exterior walls that bows and crossbows could be fired through. Normally these were shuttered to prevent cold winds blowing through them and reducing the temperature inside the palace. Now that the palace was prepared to be attacked though guards with crossbows took up positions beside these and opened the shutters, ready to fire out at any enemy force that approached.

One such guard was ordered to a slot located in a hallway that was seeing frequent use at that time and after the first few instances of palace servants rushing past he took to ignoring their presence as they passed by him. However, this also meant that he did not turn around as he heard footsteps approaching him from behind, instead continuing to look out through the narrow slot right up until a knife blade was pressed to his throat. Only then did he try to turn around but by then it was too late and the knife cut deep into his flesh. Thomas smiled as he looked down at the body of the guard and then looked around to double check that his crime had not been observed by anyone. Then once he was satisfied that there would not shortly be another dozen guards charging towards him he dragged the body out of sight.

Reyod flew high over the city. Although there was a small number of lesser dragons living wild in the city as well as a smaller number of domesticated ones they were active during the day rather than at night and so Reyod was the only such creature in the air at that time. Vayran did not know the exact location of the warehouses where the soldiers from Costria were quartered but he did know roughly where they were so he was able to have Reyod fly in the general direction, searching for any large buildings that showed signs of the presence of soldiers.

With Vayran's concentration focused on what Reyod was seeing though he did not notice as the door to his bedroom opened slowly. On the other hand Lucia did hear the soft creaking sound and she turned around to see a man wearing a chainmail coat and helmet entering with a crossbow in his hands.

"Vayran is still-" she began before she suddenly recognised the face beneath the helmet worn by the man

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who had just entered the room and she gasped, "It's Thomas!" she shouted and this broke Vayran's concentration, causing him to leap to his feet and turn towards the doorway just as Thomas was levelling his crossbow.

Realising the danger he was in Vayran reached for his nearby staff but before he could take hold of it Thomas fired his crossbow and the bolt struck the Elf sorcerer in his chest. Lucia then screamed as she saw Vayran fall to the floor and Thomas knew that this would attract too much attention and so rather than use valuable time on killing Lucia as well he simply dropped his crossbow and fled from the room.

Lucia ran to where Vayran had fallen and knelt beside him but the crossbow bolt had pierced his heart and he was already dead.

"What's happening?" a voice said from the doorway and Lucia looked up to see two more men in chainmail standing just outside the room. It took a moment for her to realise that neither of these men was Thomas and when she did she pointed in the direction that she had seen him run.

"He went that way. He killed Vayran. He's dressed as a guard but it was definitely Thomas." she told them and both guards turned and ran in the direction that she had pointed. Although neither guard knew what Thomas looked like they were familiar with the other members of the palace guard so would be able to recognise an intruder based on their appearance. Lucia then got back to her feet and also ran from the room, heading downstairs to the throne room where the defence of the city was being planned. The door was guarded but the guards had been instructed to let her pass, she being expected to report whatever Vayran was able to observe, "Vayran's dead!" she exclaimed as she burst into the room and everyone turned towards her.

"What do you mean he's dead girl?" King Lupold said.

"It was Thomas. He was disguised as a guard and he shot Vayran." Lucia explained.

"Lord von Garran," King Lupold said, looking at Dominic, "can you take over from Lord Vayran? Use his dragon to find Duke Engel?"

"Not now that his dragon has already flown away from the palace, no. I could try taking control of say an owl or maybe a bat if any could be found but it would take time." Dominic responded.

"Time is something that we may not have." Yilven pointed out.

"Which means that we may just have to wait for Duke Engel to make the first move." Will added.

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Duke Engel gathered his senior commanders together in front of a map of the city. Each of them was now dressed and prepared for battle and all that they needed was to be briefed on how their objectives had been altered.

"The plan has changed." he told them, "Instead of reinforcing the city against Princess Ammaril and her Orc army we're going to be taking it for Hadar. We were supposed to wait for the Emperor's troops to arrive before we made our move but the courier who brought me the information was careless and King Lupold will know what we're planning by now."

A few of the men in front of him exchanged glances. Duke Engel knew that there were many in the Costrian nobility who did not like the idea of always doing exactly as Hadar wanted and would rather put what they saw as Costria's best interests ahead of those of the Hadarian Empire. However, despite this desire for greater autonomy and the duke's relationship to the Hadarian Emperor the overwhelming majority of the country's nobility remained loyal to him and would follow whatever orders he gave.

"We outnumber the Tarrans." one of the gathered men commented after a short pause.

"Their standing forces, yes, but what if they raise a militia? There are thousands of people in the city who could stand against us." a second man pointed out.

"That's why we need to move quickly. Peasants care little for who their lords are so if we are fast enough then we can push Lupold off the throne before the Emperor's soldiers get here." Duke Engel said.

"For that we'll need to take the palace. Either that or burn it to the ground." one of the duke's commanders said.

"Yes and we also need to take at least one of the city gates." Duke Engel added, "We can't afford to wait for the Emperor's troops to force their way into the city. If we hold the gates then we can just let them inside ourselves. The column will be approaching from the north so that's the gate that we should try to take."

"That shouldn't be too hard. Lupold's remaining troops in the city are spread too thinly to defend everywhere they need to be. A hundred men could take the gatehouse from the inside and with another hundred I can hold it against a mob of a thousand or more." one of his commanders replied.

"Taking two hundred men from our strength hardly reduces our strength for attacking the palace." another commander added.

"The palace is well fortified. Gaining access won't be easy." Duke Engel said, "Fortunately I was able to take a brief look around so I know some of its defences. We'll need siege ladders and mantlets but we should be able to overwhelm the palace's defenders before morning."

There then came the sound of raised voices coming from downstairs and among them Duke Engel heard one that he recognised.

"Get off me! I'm on your side!" Thomas' voice yelled and the duke remembered it from the conversation that they had had in the King's palace.

Duke Engel walked over to the stairs and looked down to see a pair of his own men wrestling with Thomas to try and prevent him from coming up the stairs. The reason why his own men were attempting to restrain Thomas was obvious though, unlike the last time the duke had seen him Thomas was now wearing a chainmail coat and the colours of King Lupold's own guard though he was no longer wearing the helmet that he had stolen with the rest of his disguise.

"Let him go." Duke Engel ordered and the Costrian soldiers looked up at him before they let go of Thomas and stepped back from him, "Come up here and join us." the duke then added to Thomas and in turn he smiled at the two soldiers before he hurried up the stairs to join Duke Engel and his commanders, "This is Thomas Cooper, ambassador from the Emperor." the duke told the other men.

"He doesn't look much like an ambassador to me." one of them commented and Thomas smiled.

"I do more than just deliver messages and your emperor is who I take my orders from." he said.

"Enough about that. Can you shed any further light on the palace defences? Other than there being at least one guard less given what you are wearing." Duke Engel said.

"They tried using an Elf sorcerer to spy on you. He sent his dragon to find out what you're up to and it probably would have worked if I hadn't put a crossbow bolt into his chest." Thomas said.

"Then Vayran is dead?" Duke Engel asked.

"He looked pretty dead to me." Thomas answered.

"What about the other sorcerers?" the duke added.

"They hadn't brought their own sorcerers to the palace yet and that human one you told me was with Will Beckett's little band was with the rest of them where I couldn't get to him. Luckily the only person with Vayran

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was that young woman. She may have a magic knife but I didn't think she was much of a threat." Thomas said.

"Then you left her alive?" Duke Engel said.

"She'd already screamed for help. Killing her could have made the difference between being caught and being able to get out of the palace to let you know what's going on." Thomas responded.

"And what about the palace's other defences? Or their plans for the rest of the city?" one of the duke's commanders said.

"I didn't get to hear what they were planning but I do know that they were sending out messengers to warn the soldiers deployed to the walls and to summon every other fighting man they can get their hands on to the palace." Thomas said.

"They know about our plan." another of the commanders said and Duke Engel glared at him.

"All they know is that we have to take the palace and at least one of the city gates to allow the Emperor's troops into the city." he said, "Though if Lupold is gathering his troops then we need to move quickly."

While a smaller force was sent to seize control of the city's north gate Duke Engel himself led the bulk of his force not already deployed to the city walls towards the palace. Thomas also accompanied the force, riding alongside the duke himself. Unexpectedly all of the buildings surrounding this were darkened, with no light showing at all and combined with the palace's shutters being closed the area surrounding it was totally dark and Duke Engel raised his hand for the force to come to a stop.

"What are we waiting for?" Thomas asked, "If your men just extinguish their torches then no-one will see you coming."

"Mister Cooper you may be a useful messenger but you are obviously not a warrior. Vayran was not the only Elf with Will Beckett's party. There was the hunter, Yilven as well. That darkness may not be as concealing as it appears." Duke Engel told him.

"Then what do we do?" Thomas asked.

"An Elf may be able to see in the dark but he can only be in one place at a time and I have more than a thousand men here. We will surround the palace and then launch our attack from all sides at once." the duke answered.

"They're here! The duke's men are here!" a voice called out inside the palace when the first torches of the advancing Costrian soldiers were spotted and in the throne room King Lupold looked at Sir Albero. The king and the commander of his forces were still discussing the deployment of their troops in the city with several other senior soldiers while Will and his group had all gone up to the palace roof so that Yilven and Gromar could keep watch in the darkness where their eyes still worked.

"Are your men prepared?" King Lupold asked and Sir Albero nodded.

"As ready as we can be Your Majesty. We have just over two hundred men in the palace now. Mostly your own guards but there are a few dozen watchmen who were close enough to join us when word was sent out." he said.

"Can we expect reinforcement?" King Lupold said.

"That is unlikely now Your Majesty. It would take someone to organise a force outside the palace. There are still hundreds of other soldiers and watchmen in the city but without direction they can't get to us. The Costrians would easily drive off or kill any small groups that tried to make it to us." Sir Albero explained before the door to the throne room opened and Horace rushed in.

"Yilven says that there are about a thousand or so soldiers surrounding the palace and they have ladders and other siege equipment." he said.

"That's just what we expected Your Majesty." Sir Albero said. Then he looked at Horace and added, "What about Lord Von Garran?"

Horace hesitated for a moment, still unused to hearing Dominic referred to in such a formal manner.

"Oh Dominic." he said, "He's on the roof with the others and ready to light up his fire whenever you give the go ahead."

"It will need to be done at just the right time Your Majesty. Too soon and he may only strike a few of the enemy. Leave it too late and they will be too close for him to act safely. Driving off the duke's men won't count for anything if we start a fire that burns down the palace with us inside." Sir Albero told King Lupold and the monarch sighed.

"I just wish that there had been time to get our own sorcerers and few more men here. Asking Lord Von Garran to do this alone when we are outnumbered more than four to one seems like too much." he said.

"We have the forces that we have. We should use them Your Majesty." Sir Albero said and King Lupold nodded.

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"Of course." he said and then he looked at Horace and added, "You may tell Lord Von Garran to attack as soon as the enemy are in position."

Without saying a word Horace rushed from the throne room and returned to the roof where the rest of the group were waiting along with about a dozen soldiers. Most of them were crouched below the level of the battlements while Yilven and Gromar peered over the top, watching as the Costrian troops under Duke Engel spread out to surround the palace. Like the area surrounding the palace the roof was in darkness though there were several braziers around it that were meant to provide soldiers on duty there with warmth and light these were all currently extinguished to maintain the darkness. The Halfling was out of breath when he reached the roof and he stopped briefly to get it back.

"What did the King say Horace?" Will asked.

"He said that Dominic should begin whenever he's ready. He and Sir Albero were keen that he shouldn't burn down the palace though." Horace answered.

"How far away are they?" Dominic asked, looking between Yilven and Gromar who were positioned in opposite corners of the roof so that they could see on all four sides as the Costrian troops who had now fully surrounded the palace began to advance.

"About seventy yards or so to the south and west." Yilven replied.

"The same to the north and east." Gromar added and Dominic took a deep breath.

"Then it's time to get this started." he said.

Although the Costrian soldiers had come to Tarranberg with the intention of helping to defend the city they had still brought along the equipment needed for conducting an assault on a fortress and they now planned to make use of this. Two groups of soldiers advanced from each side of the palace. One group on each side was equipped with mantlets, thick wooden barriers the height of a man and twice as wide as one. These were propped up in the streets leading towards the palace so that pairs of crossbowmen could take cover behind them, firing around them if targets presented themselves. The rest of the Costrian soldiers continued to advance though, carrying with them tall ladders meant for scaling tall walls. Meant as a place of residence for King Lupold and his family rather than just a fortress there were numerous windows in the external walls of the palace that could in theory be used to gain entry to the building these had been covered on the inside with thick wooden shutters, meaning that to get through them would require first breaking the glass of the window and then breaking through the shutter, a time consuming and onerous task for a soldier half way up a ladder and needing to use one hand to hold onto it. Therefore, the intent of the ladders would be to get men all the way up to the roof of the palace for them to attack from there and move down through the building.

The first reaction from the palace came in the form of crossbow bolts fired from the firing slots in the walls. Although it was far too dark for the crossbowmen to pick out individual targets the sizes of the clusters of troops were big enough that bolts could be shot generally into the area they occupied and a handful of soldiers fell before the others lifted their shields to protect themselves from further shots.

"Now. Light them up." Dominic shouted and the soldiers on the roof quickly began to light the braziers that had been prepared with fuel to burn. Dominic ran to the closest just as it was lit and stood with it between him and the edge of the roof, facing directly towards one of the oncoming groups of soldiers. Then he levelled his staff and released some of his power through the end, aiming it into the flames coming from the brazier. This caused a narrow column of fire to shoot up into the air several yards before it angled away from the palace and plunged down to strike the ground among the advancing soldiers in the street below. The flames spread as they struck the ground and soldiers screamed as their clothing caught fire, dropping what they were holding and fleeing as they burned.

The result of this was panic and disorder among the advancing troops as those who had avoided the flames sought to try and extinguish their burning comrades but while only a handful of men were killed by the fire and several more by crossbowmen in the palace who now had illuminated targets to shoot at the advance was brought to a temporary halt and Dominic moved on to another brazier on another side of the palace, repeating the process of sending a jet of flames towards the soldiers approaching the palace from that direction.

These flaming attacks were clearly visible from all sides of the palace as the columns of fire rose up into the air initially and the leaders of the Costrian soldiers on the ground urged their men onwards, knowing that the sorcerer casting his spells against them could not use them once they reached the walls of the palace itself for fear of the flames spreading to the building. The ladder bearing soldiers on the fourth side of the palace managed to reach it before Dominic could direct any fire at them and they leant their tall ladders up against the wall and began to scale them.

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One of the ladders had been placed so that it passed over one of the palace's firing slots that was manned and as the first Costrian climbed past it the soldier inside fired his weapon and put a bolt into the face of the man outside, causing him to plummet to the ground below. Realising their mistake the Costrians behind him stopped climbing and began to descend back down the ladder so that it could be repositioned. However, while the use of this ladder was prevented at least temporarily Costrian soldiers continued to climb up the others towards the roof.

The obvious countermeasure to the use of such ladders was for someone on the roof to push them away from the wall, ideally while there were people climbing them so that they would be injured or possibly even killed when they fell. However, as the palace's defenders moved to dislodge the ladders they came under fire from the crossbowmen on the ground behind their mantlets and two of the palace's guards were hit by a volley of crossbow bolts fired from below when they tried this.

"Keep back from the edge!" Will shouted, "Wait for them to reach the top."

Just then the head of a Costrian soldier appeared over the battlements and he began to climb onto the roof of the palace. However, before he could manage this an arrow suddenly embedded itself in his chest and he fell back over the side. Looking around Will saw Yilven taking another arrow from the quiver on his back.

"I've got this one Will," he said before shooting an arrow into the next Costrian to reach the top of the ladder. More of the palace's defenders rushed to that side of the roof, holding their shields in front of them and stabbing their swords at the soldiers who appeared at the top of the ladders. The crossbowmen on the ground tried firing a few bolts at them but they simply retreated away from the edge of the roof until more Costrian soldiers reached the top of the ladders and blocked the line of fire from the ground.

More ladders then appeared on another wall and Will rushed to it with his cross bow, holding it over the side of the battlements pointing down one of the ladders and firing it. The bolt struck the first man climbing the ladder and he fell, knocking the second man who had only just begun to climb from the ladder as well and both landed in a heap.

"Phyan-sa!" Dominic exclaimed as he held his staff out in front of him, using some of the power still left in it after launching his flaming attacks to unleash a magical blast that hit the top of the ladder and pushed it away from the wall. As the ladder fell towards the ground the soldiers below them quickly moved out of the way but when it landed with a 'crash' it broke apart.

"They keep coming." Lucia exclaimed from where she was crouched.

"You and Horace should go and get help. We need more men up here." Will responded.

"You don't need to tell me twice." Horace said and he grabbed Lucia by the arm, "Come on let's get off this roof." he told her and the pair of them rushed down the nearby stairs leading from the roof into the palace. The palace's defenders on the roof continued to strike at Costrians as they made it to the top of the ladders but as more ladders were placed against the walls the number of attacking soldiers that could get to the roof at once increased while the number of defending soldiers was slowly being reduced as Costrians managed to get in lucky first strikes.

"Fall back!" Will ordered as he fired a crossbow bolt into another Costrian soldier just as he was climbing over the battlements. Around him he could see the Costrians able to get onto the roof organising themselves into groups so that they could attack the palace's defenders with superior numbers. One advantage that the defending soldiers had though was that they were armed with spears in addition to the swords and axes they carried as hand weapons and this allowed them hold back their Costrian opponents though they were still being pushed back from the edge of the roof and forming a ring around the access to the stairs.

Yilven pulled another arrow from his quiver and quickly fired it at a Costrian soldier before drawing another arrow, this one his last.

"I've got just one more arrow left." Yilven said, glancing at Will.

"Then make it count." Will responded as he slung his now empty crossbow over his back and drew his sword. However, before the increasing number of Costrian soldiers on the roof of the palace could charge at the remaining defenders there was the sound of heavy footsteps from the stairs and a moment later heavily armed soldiers began to swarm out onto the roof with their swords drawn. Needing to move quickly through the palace meant that these reinforcements did not have the spears that would have proven cumbersome while inside but they now provided the defenders with the sheer numbers that they needed, "Form a wall! Push out and advance!" Will ordered and the newly arrived soldiers joined with those already on the roof, standing side-by-side with them so that their shields formed a wall all around the access to the stairs. As more soldiers joined this wall it expanded outwards and the attacking Costrians could see that if this continued they would be pushed right back to the edge of the roof.

"Attack!" the most senior Costrian, a heavily scarred soldier that had clearly fought in many battles already yelled and the other Costrians charged forwards at the shield wall only for the initial wave to be beaten back quickly, some impaled by the spears that the soldiers who had been guarding the roof at the start of the

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attack still carried while more were cut down by sword blows from behind the seemingly impenetrable shield wall.

The Costrian veteran urged his men into another assault as more climbed onto the roof and he led this one himself. However, as he raised his sword up high and ran forwards he felt a sudden blow strike him head on as Dominic held his staff between two of the palace guards in the shield wall and unleashed a quick blast of magical energy. This was enough to knock the Costrian veteran and those around him off their feet though none of them were seriously injured. However, as they were picking themselves up again Dominic held his staff over his head and cast another spell.

“Pyros!” he shouted as he released more magical energy through his staff and all of the braziers around the roof suddenly flared, producing blasts of flame that spread out around them for several yards. These flames had largely dissipated by the time they reached the shield wall of the defending soldiers on the roof and they were able to duck behind their shields to protect themselves, however the attacking Costrians bore the full brunt of the fire and they screamed as they felt the extreme heat from the flames wash over them. The worst affected though were the men still climbing the ladders as those who had just reached the top were thrown backwards, losing their grips and falling to the ground in one massive wave. Meanwhile those below saw that the top section of their ladders were now burning, preventing them from reaching the roof.

“Finish them!” Will shouted, seeing how disorientated the surviving Costrians now were and seeing the opportunity for his numerically superior force to retake full control of the palace roof.

The soldiers defending the palace did not need any further prompting and they charged forwards into the Costrian troops before they could recover. Already reeling from the flames unleashed by Dominic they were isolated and disorganised, unable to defend themselves adequately and those who were able to attempted to retreat to their ladders. Most of these were still burning though and as they retreated the Costrians instead found themselves trapped against the inside of the battlements.

“This is just too easy.” Gromar exclaimed as his hammer split the helmet of a Costrian wide open.

“Just don’t get too close to the edge. Remember the crossbows below.” Will reminded him, though with Costrian soldiers on the roof the crossbowmen behind their mantlets on the ground were reluctant to use their weapons for fear of hitting their own men.

It had been impossible for Duke Engel to make out exactly what was happening on the roof of the palace but he had seen the multiple bursts of flame as Dominic unleashed his magic before his men started to storm the roof. However, what appeared to have been a successful attack was brought to an abrupt halt when there was a much larger blast of fire that from where the duke sat on his horse appeared to engulf the entire roof of the palace and shortly after this one of his knights came riding towards him.

“Your grace the assault on the palace roof has failed. They’ve burned the ladders and we can’t get any more men up there.” the knight told Duke Engel and he snarled.

“Have our men pull back from the palace, back behind our mantlets. We may not be able to get in right now but they can’t get out either and when the Emperor’s men arrive we will control every part of this city beyond the palace itself. Then they will have no choice but to surrender.” he said.

While the bulk of Duke Engel’s forces were surrounding the palace a smaller force consisting entirely of cavalymen rode through the streets of Tarranberg towards the north gate. Despite their efforts to reach the gate ahead of the messenger from the palace they found the gatehouse shuttered and locked when they arrived and the knight in command of the force brought his men to a stop not far from the building.

“Dismount.” he ordered and the other cavalymen all climbed down from their horses, “Bring an axe and break down the doors. The duke wants this gatehouse taken quickly.”

There were several access points to the gatehouse from inside the city. Two were at street level, one either side of the gate that was now also blocked by a large metal portcullis while two more were higher up, allowing someone on the battlements of the city walls to enter the building without needing to come down from the walls. With two hundred men at his command the knight in charge had a sizeable force available to him, easily outnumbering the fewer than thirty soldiers inside the gatehouse and even splitting his men between every way inside allowed him to outnumber the defenders everywhere.

The Costrian cavalymen approached the four locked wooden doors at the same time, holding up their shields to block the crossbow bolts fired through slits in the walls. This was not a perfect defence though and one of the men approaching a door on the city walls screamed as a bolt was able to penetrate the wood of his shield and embedded itself through his arm. Staggering back he then lost his footing and fell to the ground below. This did not deter the other soldiers from advancing right up to the gatehouse though and while several at each door held their shields next to one another to form a barrier against further crossbow bolts fired from inside pairs of dismounted cavalymen began to strike at the doors using two-handed axes.

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Inside the gatehouse there was little that the defenders could do to prevent the Costrians from breaking in eventually but while they were being held up by the doors that had been built to resist being attacked the most senior of the men inside directed his troops to render the gate useless to the Costrians.

“Smash the chains,” he ordered, referring to the thick chains used to lift the portcullis. With these broken the metal barrier would remain in place across the gate, denying its use to anyone until a way could be found to move it.

The gatehouse was equipped with several large axes and hammers intended specifically for disabling the mechanism of the portcullis and while a small group took these tools and began to attack the chains the rest of the soldiers inside the gatehouse divided into groups and positioned themselves just inside the four doorways, hoping to delay the Costrians long enough for the gate to be rendered useless.

The first door splintered and broke with a ‘crash’ as the Costrian axemen outside broke through it and they rushed inside the gatehouse, now swinging their axes at the defending soldiers while their comrades followed close behind them. The other doors rapidly broke as well and the Costrians stormed the gatehouse from all four directions at once. The defending soldiers did their best to hold back their attackers but the vastly superior numbers of Costrians meant that for every one they killed there was another to take their place and the fight could only go one way. The last of the gatehouse’s defenders to survive were the men trying to disable the portcullis but the thick chains needed to support the weight of the heavy metal barrier remained intact.

“Open the gates,” the Costrian knight ordered, “and send word to the duke, tell him that the way is open for the Emperor’s army to enter the city.”

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By the time the sun was starting to rise there had been a handful of other skirmishes in the city when small groups of local soldiers attempted to either retake the north gate or break through to the palace but without the organised leadership needed to muster a larger number of men all of these failed in their efforts, meaning that the palace was still surrounded when the first rays of sunlight could be seen from the roof.

"Your Majesty we cannot hold the palace another day." Sir Albero told King Lupold when the King once again gathered his advisers together in his throne room, this time also including Will and the rest of his group.

"If we can't stay then we have to find a way to escape." Will said.

"Duke Engel has a thousand of his men surrounding the palace." King Lupold pointed out.

"I'd say that there are a fair few less than that now." Gromar commented, "We must have killed a hundred or more tonight."

"The palace guards counted more than sixty bodies on the roof, I heard them talking about it while they were checking them for valuables." Horace added.

"And those were just the ones who had the good manners to die on the roof. What about the ones that fell off or who Dominic roasted for us?" Gromar said.

"The duke still outnumbers our men." Sir Albero said.

"But Duke Engel has to keep his men spread out all around us to prevent us from sneaking out in the dark."

Will said, "If we send everyone we have at one point in his line then we might be able to create a gap that we can force our way through before the rest can stop us."

"Aren't there any secret ways out of the palace? A tunnel leading to somewhere else in the city?" Lucia said but Sir Albero shook his head.

"No, we have nothing like that young lady." he said, "We will have to fight our way through the enemy to escape."

"But where would we go once we broke through?" King Lupold asked.

"We have to get you and your family out of the city Your Majesty." Sir Albero answered.

"And we need to get back to the *Storm Chaser*." Will added, "We need to get across the Straight of Lerron and warn other kingdoms about what's happened here."

"Do you think it will work now Will?" Horace asked.

"We managed to convince Duke Engel before he turned on us." Will reminded him, "Hopefully others will now see the danger to themselves as well."

"I cannot be seen to be fleeing my kingdom." King Lupold said.

"There are other cities we can go to Your Majesty." Sir Albero said, "Perhaps in one of those we'll be able to hold out long enough for other kingdoms to come to our aide."

"With this alliance between Ammaril and the Hadarian Empire every kingdom this side of the Straight of Lerron is likely to be conquered quickly." Yilven said, "Their combined size will give them the most powerful army that the world has ever seen."

"Nevertheless I shall be remaining in Tarran." King Lupold said.

"If that is your wish Your Majesty, though the question remains of how we are supposed to escape the palace." Dominic said, "There are more than three hundred people here including servants and fewer than fifty horses in the stables."

"The servants should be fine to stay. Duke Engel has nothing to gain from harming them other than to enrage the people of the city." Sir Albero said, "We just need to open a gap in the enemy line long enough for anyone who is fleeing on foot to be able to get through and hide themselves in the city. For those of us on horseback though there is still the issue of getting out of the city."

"We should head for the south gate." Yilven said, "It leads to the road that will take us back to Costria and it is guarded by the Elves. I doubt that the duke's men will have been able to dislodge them yet, they have too much of an advantage at night."

Will then looked at Dominic.

"We have somewhere to go," he said, "do you have a way to make sure that we get there and will give everyone fleeing on foot the best chance of escaping?"

Dominic paused and looked at the map laid out on the table that they were all gathered around.

"So you need me to either come up with a way to smash through their lines or alternatively a way to distract the duke's men long enough for us to slip away. Yes?" he said.

"That sounds right my lord." Sir Albero replied.

"Can you do it?" Lucia asked.

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"It's hard to say." Dominic said, "If I had a day or two to prepare then it would be straight forwards enough but time is not on our side here. I'm sure that the army being sent by the Hadarian Emperor will include a number of sorcerers so that's another reason to be gone before they get here. How much damage to the city is acceptable?"

"I would rather not be known as a king who killed his own people just to save himself Lord Von Garran. It would make me look like a coward." King Lupold said.

"Of course, I understand fully Your Majesty. In that case misdirection of some kind is probably what I should use. If I can lure some of the duke's men away then there will be fewer left to stop us." Dominic said.

"So what will get them out of our way?" Gromar said.

"What if they thought that we were going a different way?" Horace suggested, "Wouldn't they go that way and let us go in the other?"

"That does sound like a good idea. Can you do it?" Will asked and Dominic considered this for a moment.

"Possibly, yes." he said, "Though to be sure I'd want to use an attack spell first to make it look like we needed to create a gap in their organisation that we could get through. Then I'd need to create an illusion that makes it appear that we are escaping in that direction. There is a problem though."

"What sort of problem?" Gromar asked.

"When we do start to move he will have to end the illusion and the duke's men will realise that they've been tricked." Yilven said and Dominic smiled at him.

"Very insightful." he said.

"I witnessed Ammaril practising her magic for many years. She went through a phase of using illusions to play tricks on her brothers." Yilven said.

"A pity she didn't stick to the practical jokes." Gromar commented.

"What will you need to cast these spells Lord Von Garran?" Sir Albero asked.

"Fire." Dominic replied.

"I thought the idea is not to burn down my city." King Lupold said.

"It is Your Majesty but I need something to scatter the enemy troops before I create the illusion. I won't need much though. Just a single brazier will be enough. I'll use the same columns of flame that I used when Duke Engel's men first attacked us. It will be controllable enough I will also need the smoke from the fire to create my illusion. After that it is a question of how quickly I can run from the roof down to the stables." Dominic explained.

Evacuating the palace was going to require every horse available and the stables were packed with servants fitting them with saddles and the lucky individuals chosen to ride them. In order to maximise the number of people who could flee on horseback it had been decided that two would ride on every horse. This would not be good for the horses in the long term so in most cases it would only be done for a short time, getting the riders just outside the city before the excess riders dismounted. In the case of Will and his group the smaller riders, Lucia, Gromar and Horace would be paired up with Will, Yilven and Dominic to try and spread the load more lightly though they still planned to ride individually once they escaped the city and could swap horses. Even doing this though meant that more than a hundred people would be trying to flee the palace on foot while most of the servants would be left behind where it was hoped that Duke Engel and his men would simply either let them go or have them continue in their roles under whoever was installed to rule over the city in the Hadarian Emperor's name.

"Give me your hand." Will said to Lucia after he had climbed onto his horse and he helped her up after him. Lucia sat behind Will in the saddle and wrapped her arms tightly around him.

"Looks like you got the better end of this arrangement Will." Yilven commented from the back of his horse when he saw this.

"Oh quit your complaining and help me up." Gromar responded, reaching up his arm so that Yilven could assist him in getting onto the horse's back as well.

"It's just until we're outside the city. Then you'll get your own horse again Gromar." Will said.

"Not that that will be much better. Though I suppose it beats having to walk all the way back to the Storm Chaser." Gromar replied.

"Do you really think that we'll be able to just ride back through Costria and leave in the Storm Chaser Will?" Horace asked. Unlike the others he was not mounting a horse yet. Horace was going to be sharing a mount with Dominic and the sorcerer was not in the stables, instead he would arrive after he had cast his spells to draw the Costrians outside the palace away by making it appear that the palace's occupants were fleeing in a different direction.

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"I don't see why not." Will answered, "I doubt that the duke has sent any messengers back to Costria telling anyone to stop us and even when he and his men find out what we're doing they won't know where we plan to go afterwards."

"Besides, given how large the combined armies of Ammaril and the Hadarian Emperor are I don't think that anywhere else west of the Straight of Lerron will be any safer than Costria." Yilven added.

All of the braziers on the palace roof were still lit when Dominic made his way up there and looked around. There were no longer any guards on the roof, all of them having gone down to the ground floor of the palace in preparation for the planned escape. On the other hand Dominic had no choice but to be here. Cautiously he made his way to the edge of the roof and peered over it, ready to duck out of sight if any of the Costrian crossbowmen fired at him.

Although the sun was now rising the available light was still poor but Dominic was able to make out the mantlets behind which crossbowmen were hiding while further back he could just about make out spearmen and cavalry ready to cut off the escape of anyone who tried to get out of the palace, no matter which direction they chose to flee in.

Dominic then stood back and held his staff between him and a nearby brazier. Though the power he had stored in his staff before the battle was now partially depleted there was still a significant amount stored in it meaning that he could use that power for the two spells he needed to cast without needing to draw on his own personal magical power and risk tiring himself out before he needed to make the rapid dash down the stairs from the palace roof to the stable. Just as he had done when the Costrians initially launched their attack on the palace he drew flames up out of the brazier in a column, first sending it up into the sky before directing down at the ground where a group of Costrian soldiers was gathered.

The soldiers saw the flames as they arced towards them and scattered in time avoid being burned and Dominic followed up this attack with a second, pushing the soldiers further out of position and creating the gap that Dominic was waiting for. Instead of the flames from the wood being burned in the brazier Dominic now focused his mind on the smoke and in front of him some of this began to coalesce into a dense sphere. Dominic then pictured an image of figures on horseback in his mind and the sphere began to take on this appearance, dozens of hooded individuals riding galloping horses. The image of smoke moved away from Dominic, hovering in the air just over the edge of the palace battlements before it suddenly dropped towards the ground and the moment that it landed it suddenly expanded in size to that of genuine people on horseback that appeared solid rather than made of smoke. Dominic had chosen hooded figures since this removed the need to magically craft the faces of the riders, making the illusion spell faster and easier to cast. The illusory riders then galloped away from the palace, seemingly making for the gap created in the Costrian line by Dominic's flame spell, racing past the mantlets before the few crossbowmen still present could react. Duke Engel's attention had been drawn to that section of the line thanks to Dominic's flame spell and although he did not notice the small figures of smoke that descended from the palace roof he did see the life size versions as they appeared to gallop through where until recently a company of his men had been deployed. He could see that the figures on horseback did not appear to be wielding weapons, Dominic had considered this detail unnecessary when he created the illusion so it was obviously not an attack. However, as they appeared to ride through the gap he came to the exact conclusion that the occupants of the palace wanted him to.

"They're getting away!" he exclaimed, "King Lupold must be with them. Everyone after them."

"Your Grace, what about the palace?" one of his subordinates asked.

"Forget about the palace for now." Duke Engel told him, "I want them stopped before they can escape."

The Costrian cavalry began to give chase to the hooded riders as soon as the duke's order reached them, initially this was just those close to where the gap in their line had been created but more of them joined the chase to form a broader front that would reduce the ability of their targets to escape by splitting up or changing direction and behind them the infantry began to follow as well, responding to Duke Engel's order to ignore the palace and leaving the way open to leave in the opposite direction. Unaffected by natural laws though the hooded riders managed to remain ahead of their pursuers, maintaining enough of a lead that Dominic was able to take them around a corner where they could not be seen and then cease the spell. This promptly turned the figures back into what they really were, clouds of smoke that rapidly dispersed before any of the Costrians could witness it. Unaware that the riders they thought they had been chasing no longer existed the Costrians continued away from the palace, trying to locate them.

As soon as he had dispelled his illusion Dominic turned and ran towards the stairs leading down from the roof. Though there were still servants in the palace they were all either in the stable helping to prepare the horses or had returned to their quarters so there was no-one to get in Dominic's way as he ran.

"It's done!" he exclaimed as he burst into the stables, "The duke's men are going in the other direction."

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"Then we need to go now." Sir Albero said, "Open the gates."

As several servants rushed to open the palace gates Dominic climbed onto his horse and then helped Horace up after him. By the time the Halfling was perched behind Dominic the palace gate was wide open and King Lupold, who rode with his wife on the same horse along with an escort of knights were already galloping out through them.

"Here we go." Will said before he dug his heels into his horse and it sped through the gates as well. Although most of the Costrian soldiers had been drawn into the pursuit of the phantom riders created by Dominic there were still a handful scattered around the palace armed with crossbows. There were too few of them to stand a realistic hope of preventing the escape of the palace's occupants but they did fire their weapons at the fleeing riders and called out warnings to their comrades, alerting them to turn around. The speed at which the horses were moving, even with two riders on each was too much for the crossbowmen to be able to accurately aim at them and only a handful of crossbow bolt struck any of the riders but the Costrians still hurried to try and reload their weapons for a second volley. Before most could achieve this though the second wave coming from the palace, those soldiers who were escaping on foot reached them and cut them down, completely overrunning their positions before scattering to hide among the city streets.

Duke Engel brought his own horse to a halt when he heard one of his men calling out to warn him about the group fleeing in the other direction.

"Everyone turn around and get after them." he ordered.

"But your grace what about the riders ahead of us?" a nearby knight asked.

"They don't exist you fool. It's all been a trick by that sorcerer to get us looking this way while they escape in the other direction." the duke responded angrily as he turned his horse around.

The Costrians all then reversed direction, heading back towards the now largely empty palace and rushing straight past it in pursuit of the fleeing horsemen. Although the occupants of the palace had been able to gain a significant head start over the Costrians, the pursuers' horses were not overburdened by each having to carry a second rider and the gap began to close significantly.

The gatehouse to the south of Tarranberg was still guarded by Arrathan and the other surviving Elf warriors. Although word had reached them of the betrayal by the Costrians under Duke Engel the Elves had remained at their post, knowing that they were too few to be able to take on the Costrians directly. When they heard the sound of approaching horses though they all readied their bows from the roof and inside of the gatehouse.

"Stand by to fire on my word." Arrathan shouted before the first of the approaching riders came into view and he immediately saw that there were two people on the horse instead of a single rider. More horses then appeared, the majority of them also carrying two people, "Hold." he told the other Elves before moments later he saw Will and Lucia on the back of the one of the horses, "It's okay. They're from the palace." he said before he rushed down to one of the exits from the gatehouse to meet the approaching riders.

"Arrathan I'm glad to see that you're still alright." Will said as he halted his horse close to the Elf warrior and Yilven and Dominic rode theirs up to him as well.

"Where is Vayran?" Arrathan asked as he looked at the other riders coming to the gatehouse.

"Dead. Thomas murdered him." Lucia told him and the Elf's jaw dropped.

"It's true." Will added before he looked at the city gate, "Now we need this gate opening. The duke's men aren't far behind and we need to get as far ahead as possible."

"Open the gates!" Arrathan called out loudly and several more Elves rushed out of the gatehouse to open the gates. Then he looked up at Will again and added, "Now go. We'll hold them off as long as we can."

"You should come too." Yilven said from his horse as others began to ride through the open gateway.

"That's right." Gromar added, peering around Yilven, "I don't fancy your chances of escaping unharmed now that the Costrians and Hadarians are working with Ammaril. They'll probably hand you all over to her to be turned into more Orcs."

"Don't worry about us Dwarf, we'll be just fine. Now go all of you." Arrathan responded and the group joined the others from the palace in riding out of the city.

As Duke Engel and his men rode up to the city gates they found them closed but not barred.

"Where are the guards?" a nearby knight commented.

"This gate was guarded by Elves." Duke Engel pointed out, "They must have fled as well."

"What are your orders Your Grace?" the knight then asked.

"We go after them. I want King Lupold or at least his head to present to the Emperor and I'm sure that Princess Ammaril will be grateful if we can hand over more Elves to her." the duke answered.

## The Fall of Spildarin

In response to the duke's order several Costrians dismounted from their horses, ran up to the gate and pulled it open, stepping aside as the first group of cavalymen then quickly rode out of the city. However, the moment that the horsemen passed through the gateway a volley of arrows was suddenly fired at them by the Elves who had concealed themselves in the surrounding countryside.

Trapped in the narrow confines of the gateway the Costrian horsemen could not even attempt to evade and they were all struck by multiple arrows each. These easily pierced their chainmail coats and while some were killed instantly and simply fell from their horses others had the chance to cry out first. The now riderless horses panicked and rode onwards, some of them also with arrows sticking out of them and this cleared the way for the next rank of riders to try to get through the gateway. These horsemen urged their mounts to go faster and held up their shields in front of them as they passed but they too were met by a hail of arrows from all sides that they could not block entirely with their shields or evade and they too were cut down.

The usual way to respond to such an attack would be to use crossbowmen positioned on the city walls to shoot back at the areas where the arrows were coming from but Duke Engel had only cavalymen armed with spears and hand weapons with him, his troops armed with crossbows following a significant distance behind on foot.

"Close the gates." Duke Engel ordered, scowling as he realised that trying to force a way out of the city without crossbowmen was doomed to failure.

The dismounted soldiers who had opened the gates now pushed them closed again and as they did so there was another volley of arrows that embedded themselves in the thick wooden gates as they were being pushed closed.

With the gates to Tarranberg now closed once more and no signs of men on the battlements Arrathan and the Elves cautiously emerged from their hiding places and retreated, leaving the city behind them under Duke Engel's control.

About a mile away from Tarranberg the occupants of the palace halted on a hill so that the additional riders on the horses could dismount and the horses themselves rest.

"Looks like we got out just in time." Gromar commented as he and the rest of the group looked back towards Tarranberg that could be clearly seen in the morning light as well as not one but two armies in the distance. To the north they could see the forces of the Hadarian Empire approaching while to the west Ammaril's Orc and Troll army marched towards the city as well.

"What do you think will happen to the people of the city? Will Ammaril turn them all into Orcs?" Lucia asked.

"Perhaps. Or maybe something similar. I don't know enough about the spell she used." Dominic replied.

"Even without turning them into Orcs she now has control of her own army plus that of the Hadarian Empire." Yilven pointed out.

"Do you think that we'll be able to stop them?" Horace asked.

"Maybe." Will replied, "But it will require an alliance unlike anything the world has seen before and if we're going to make that happen we need to get back across the Straight of Lerron. It's time that we left."