

The Shattered Stone

By Stephen J Dutton

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Thanks to her alliance with the Hadrian Empire the kingdom of Tarran fell easily and Ammaril controls the most powerful army that the world has ever seen. Now she eyes up the kingdoms to the east of the Straight of Lerron as the next territories she intends to add to her growing empire. In response to this both men and Elves prepare to resist her invasion but there are many doubts about whether any power can stop Ammaril's army of monsters. While some leaders begin to waver others vow to fight on in the hope that some way can be found to end Ammaril's campaign of conquest once and for all.

1

The *Storm Chaser* was far from the only ship leaving port in Costria. Everyone who had the means to escape the nation was now doing so ahead of the impending takeover by the Hadarian Empire. It was not the Hadarians that the Costrians really feared though, their nation had been run as an extension of the Empire for many years by one of the Emperor's relatives. What they feared were the Hadarians' new allies, the Orcs. The Orcs were a species that had not existed in the world until just a few weeks previously when the Elf sorceress Princess Ammaril had cursed almost all of her fellow Elves on the island of Sylldarin and turned them into brutish monsters utterly loyal to her. Supported by giant fire-breathing dragons and tribes of Ogres who had been similarly cursed into becoming creatures called Trolls this army was now expanding from Sylldarin and efforts to stop them had failed when the Hadarians joined with Ammaril instead of joining the fight against her army. Now any vessel that could put to sea was leaving Costria and setting sail towards the Straight of Lerron, the crews hoping to get across that and put the straight itself between themselves and the advancing armies. Some like the *Storm Chaser* were larger ocean-going vessels capable of carrying significant amounts of cargo or passengers while others were much smaller craft that normally operated in more coastal waters that were now being used as a means of escape for the families of the desperate owners.

Six figures, three of whom were human stood at the front of the structure to the rear of the *Storm Chaser*, either looking at the other vessels fleeing the port or down at the deck that was now filled with people desperate to escape before the Orcs arrived. William Beckett was the new captain of the *Storm Chaser*, a position he had taken over after the death of the previous captain while serving a vampire who had tried to prevent Ammaril from creating her army. Beside him stood Dominic von Garran, a wizard who had been sent by his order to determine the truth of whether the army of Orcs really existed and what threat they might pose. Then on the other side stood the only woman among the group, Lucia, who had been a cabin girl on an Elf vessel that had taken Ammaril to the continent of Oscan where she had discovered the knowledge and power to create the Orcs and Trolls. Now Lucia served aboard the *Storm Chaser* instead. The remaining three were an Elf, a Dwarf and a Halfling. Of the three the Halfling, Horace Bramble, had been aboard the *Storm Chaser* the longest apart from Will himself and served as the ship's cook. The Dwarf, Gromar Stonebreaker was an engineer who had been hired by the same vampire who had previously chartered the *Storm Chaser*. This left just the Elf, Yilven of Agalla. Yilven had served Ammaril's family for several decades but become suspicious of her motives in journeying to Oscan and among the Elves of the expedition he was the only one to have escaped her curse.

"As much as I hate the idea of fleeing I can't say that I blame these people for wanting to escape. I've done more than my fair share of running away from Ammaril's Orcs" Gromar commented.

"I wonder how many people will be left in the city when the Hadarians arrive?" Horace added.

"We've managed to squeeze just under two hundred aboard. Multiply that by the number of ships and I'm pretty sure that you'll have a large portion of the city's population." Dominic said and Horace frowned.

"I'm not that good with numbers. I'm just a cook." he replied.

"It comes to a lot." Gromar said, "Like the wizard says, a fair portion of the population of a human city."

"You're assuming that the *Storm Chaser* is an average ship. A cog has better carrying capacity than a lot of these other ships." Will commented as he studied the various hulks and longships also setting out to sea before he became aware of a man climbing the stairs from the deck to the structure where the group stood. Will immediately recognised this man as one of the ship's passengers fleeing Costria. Unlike those who were now crammed into every spare bit of space both above and below deck this man had purchased the use of the main guest cabin for himself and his family for the voyage across the Straight of Lerron.

"Captain Beckett I need a word with you." The man said with a frown as he reached the top of the stairs.

"Mister Bailey, how may I help you?" Will asked reluctantly. During his time as the *Storm Chaser*'s first officer the ship's previous captain had often had him deal with complaints from disgruntled passengers and it was never a task he had enjoyed.

"You can explain to me why you think you can cheat me out of a considerable sum of money." the man said angrily, "I paid you well to get myself and my family aboard this vessel and now I find out that all of these, these people," he continued and he waved at the deck where many of the other passengers were huddled together, doing their best to keep out of the crew's way, "have been let aboard for free! What is the meaning of this."

Will sighed.

"Mister Bailey you paid for exclusive use of the main guest cabin, which is exactly what you and your family have got. Also you have paid for meals provided by our very own cook, Horace," he replied and he pointed to Horace, "as well as additional cold food and wine from our kitchen. On the other hand these people have none of that. I have squeezed as many of them as I can into the crew's quarters, the hold and the deck in front of you. Lucia has even given up her own cabin for three of the more infirm among them. We have a limited amount of fresh water for them all and if they want to eat then they had better have brought it onboard with them."

"Nonetheless captain I think that a renegotiation is due." the angry passenger said and now it was Will's turn to scowl.

"Very well Mister Bailey, how about I refund all of your money?" he asked and the other man smiled.

"That would be excellent captain. I knew that at heart you had to be a reasonable-" he began.

"Of course in that situation I would expect you and your family to vacate your cabin and move up here on deck so that it can be used for some of the more vulnerable among our passengers." Will interrupted.

"Captain I-" the man said as he tried to continue but Will continued to speak over him.

"Of course your access to our kitchen will also be cut off so you'll have to limit yourself to eating just what you brought aboard with you. Don't worry if you didn't bring anything though, Lerron is only a couple of days away so you should be able to last without food until then." he said as the other man's face started to redden with anger.

"That is preposterous!" he snapped.

"You paid for the comforts you will enjoy on your voyage Mister Bailey whereas these people will have none, If you aren't happy with that then you are free to travel on the same terms as everyone else. Alternately I can keep your money as payment for one of the ship's boats. You and your family may have to abandon a few possessions to fit in it but you could always try rowing to one of the other ships you can see all around us and see if any of them are more to your liking than mine." Will said.

"Never in my life I have I been spoken to like this." the man said, "Perhaps my money would be better spent offering your crew a bonus to start taking orders from me." Will and Gromar looked at one another and smiled when they heard this, "What is so amusing?" the irate man asked when he saw this.

"Mister Bailey, while money can buy influence aboard a ship there are more things to consider before organising a mutiny." Will replied and Gromar nodded.

"He has experience in these sorts of things." he added.

"One thing you might want to consider is exactly what you'd be asking my crew to do. Do you want them to turn around and put back into port so the other passengers can be removed from the ship while the Hadarian and Orc armies get ever closer? Or would you rather have them try to throw more than a hundred people overboard just so you don't have to say 'excuse me' every so often if you want to get past? In either case I don't think that my crew are going to be very receptive to your offer. Now I suggest that you turn around, head back below decks and remain in your cabin where you won't be disturbed for the rest of the voyage." Will added, glaring at the man.

"Well I never!" he exclaimed before turning around and storming back down the stairs to the deck.

"What exactly did you mean about Will having experience in mutinies Gromar?" Dominic then asked.

"He, Will and Horace tried to stage one." Yilven told him.

"Horace doesn't seem like a natural mutineer to me." Dominic said, looking down at the Halfling.

"It was pretty much where we're standing now." Horace said, "We tried to get the crew see sense when we'd figured out what Magister Quinnus really was."

"Unfortunately in that case the crew was swayed by the offer of more money." Will added.

"Luckily for Yilven and myself. If the mutiny had been successful then Will would have turned the *Storm Chaser* around and we'd have never met." Lucia pointed out before she smiled at Will.

"Yes that is a stroke of luck I suppose." Will replied, smiling back at her.

"What are your plans after we reach Lerron, Will?" Dominic asked.

"Well I don't think that we need to worry about people not believing that Ammaril poses a significant threat. Even the most obtuse king can hardly ignore thousands of people suddenly arriving on their doorstep." Will replied, "Why, do you have somewhere to get to? As long as it isn't Dannaron we can get you there."

"Why not Dannaron?" Dominic said.

"Because that's where Will's from. He deserted from their navy." Horace told him.

"Oh of course, I see why going back there could be a problem for you." Dominic said, "But no, I don't need to go to Dannaron. I'd like to get back to Hessenland, so I can report to my order. I was sent to determine the truth of your claims and assess the danger and I think that it's safe to say that I've achieved that."

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"Aye, you could say that. So what do you think your fellow wizards will do when you tell them?" Gromar said. "Advise the king to prepare for war. Does anyone here think that Ammaril and the Hadarians will stay on this side of the Straight of Lerron for long?" Dominic answered.

"Not a chance." Will said, "In fact Ammaril could have already sent some of her troops across the water using the stone circles."

"She sent that little weasel Thomas to try and kill us." Horace commented.

"Perhaps Arrathan will be able to slow them down. His force may be small but he might be able to rally humans to him." Yilven suggested.

"He might be able to prove himself a thorn in Ammaril's side but I doubt that he'll be able to do much to stop her now that she's got the Hadarians as allies." Will said.

"Perhaps not. Though I choose to at least have hope." Yilven said, "Hope in Arrathan and hope in King Dellasin."

"That boy? Isn't he about eight? What do you think that he can do?" Gromar exclaimed.

"As long as he reaches Raysalgard there's a chance that the Northern Elves could send help." Yilven replied,

"This isn't just a disagreement between the human kingdoms after all. Ammaril has already effectively wiped out the population of Syldarin."

"But if the Elves get involved won't Ammaril just turn them into even more Orcs?" Lucia asked.

"That's why they have to fight." Yilven answered, "If they don't then Ammaril will curse them as well anyway."

"Better to go down fighting you mean?" Gromar said.

"Yes, much better than to lose everything we are." Yilven responded.

"Then it's settled. After we get to Lerron and our passengers can disembark safely we'll head north for Hessenland. News about Ammaril might reach them before we get there, I doubt that the ship carrying the survivors we rescued from Syldarin kept quiet about what happened but they'll probably have been in a hurry to reach Raysalgard." Will said. Then he looked at Yilven and Gromar, "I'd like you two to take watches tonight. You can both see in the dark so you might be able to prevent us from crashing into anyone else out here. The sea could be quite crowded and I don't know whether everyone out here knows how to navigate on open water."

Ammaril had walked the hallways of the royal palace in Sylda for many years and she knew every last detail of it by heart. This time though things were different, no matter what time of day or night it had been previously there would always have been someone else around as well, whether they were other members of the royal household or just servants cleaning while their masters slept. However, now the hallways were deserted, every one of the palace's occupants having been caught or killed. Here and there she also saw signs of damage from the fighting, although their struggle had been hopeless from the start the palace guard had not simply abandoned their posts. It irked Ammaril that some of the palace's occupants including her young nephew Dellasin, son of her late brother Dellaron had been spirited away by some of the palace guards who had also been able to escape but she knew that there was no credible fighting force left in Syldarin that could rally around him to stage a counter attack. Sooner or later he would be found and then there would be the question of what to do with him.

Upon reaching the large set of double doors that led to the room Ammaril wanted to access she paused, placing one hand on each of them before she then pushed them open and looked into the room on the other side. In front of her were shelves filled with books that described the history of the Elves of Syldarin over the thousands of years since the ancient Oscari created them. This history was not entirely complete of course, as with any civilisation that stretched back so far some knowledge would become lost with records destroyed by war, simple misfortune or even occasionally in a deliberate effort to hide inconvenient details about the past. Despite having brought about the end of the Elves on Syldarin though, Ammaril was not here to destroy these records. Instead she intended to make sure that they were safely preserved. The amount of knowledge in this library paled into insignificance when compared to the Great Library of the Oscari that had allowed her to create her army but there was knowledge here that was not present within the Great Library simply because it referred to events that had happened long after the Oscari vanished and their library was frozen in time.

Ammaril was still in the process of determining which books should be given priority in being moved when she heard footsteps from behind her and she turned around quickly, aware that despite the best efforts of her army to secure the palace it was not impossible that one or two Elves could have escaped and attempt to assassinate her. However, rather than murderers come to kill her the two Elves that she saw entering the library were loyal to her. One was an older man called Dorsos who had once been the leader of a cult that had been proscribed while beside him stood a younger female Elf called Shimmandra. Both of these Elves were magic users like Ammaril and they had been imprisoned in the dungeons beneath the Tower of Sorcery

in Syllda for their misuse of their power along with two others, Hiros and Graysil. Ammaril had known that the greatest threat to her would come from the Elf magic users so she had commanded one of her dragons to destroy the tower at the start of her attack on the city. This had wiped out the threat but the prisoners in the dungeon had merely been buried alive, allowing Ammaril to have them dug out so that she could offer them their lives in exchange for their loyalty.

"Yes, what are you doing here?" Ammaril asked.

"There is news from Orcan and the Hadarians your majesty." Dorsos responded, "Your armies are now in almost full control of Tarran." Dorsos answered.

"Almost?" Ammaril commented.

"There are few pockets of resistance from handfuls of warriors who managed to escape but they are not a serious threat. Little more of a nuisance than the usual peasant revolts that occur from time to time in human lands." Dorsos explained.

"I want them dealt with as quickly as possible. We cannot afford to have our forces divided between the conquest of new territories and hunting for rebels in lands we supposedly already control." Ammaril said.

Then she turned to Shimmandra and added, "And what about you? What news do you bring?"

"Word is already starting to reach the other kingdoms neighbouring Tarran and Hadar about our alliance your majesty. Messengers have requested meetings between you and their leaders. They want to negotiate deals like the one made with the Hadarians." Shimmandra told her.

"They're afraid." Dorsos commented.

"And so they should be." Ammaril said, "Any kingdom that does not fall into line will be destroyed."

"Then you will meet with them?" Shimmandra asked.

"No, I have no interest in meeting with human kings, no matter how important they think they might be. Where is Thomas? Has he returned to us yet?" Ammaril replied.

"I haven't seen him, no." Shimmandra said.

"Neither have I. I know he made it to Duke Engels to tell him of our alliance with his cousin the Hadarian Emperor but after that we haven't seen him." Dorsos said.

"Then find him. He can deliver our offers to the other human kings and they can either accept them and join us or reject them and be destroyed by us. They are nothing but a source of labour and resources to me. My greater concern is Raysalgard." Ammaril said.

"Raysalgard? I assumed that you would be wanting to transform the population into more Orcs for your army." Dorsos replied.

"Most yes, though it has never been my intention to totally destroy the Elven people. I did what I did here in Sylldarin because I needed troops loyal to me. My brother Orcan knew that to survive our people needed to change but he would not have had the nerve to do what I knew was necessary. I will bring down the old order of the Elf nations and replace it with my own kingdom, one where those Elves I deem worthy will be allowed to survive and all others transformed into its defenders while the humans, Dwarves, Halflings and any Ogres that I do not transform into Trolls will work to support that kingdom that I shall rule from Oscay where the Oscari themselves once ruled from." Ammaril explained before adding, "Now what about the dragons?"

"The dragons?" Dorsos said.

"I gave orders that as many greater and major dragons were to be gathered as possible. While Tiellan's pets have proven formidable I want more than just those few to support my armies. I intend to alter more in the same way." Ammaril said.

"I believe that the hunters have returned with some your majesty." Shimmandra responded, "Though I don't know how many exactly. Do you want me to find out?"

"No. As long as there are some I can work with that is good enough for now. For now though I need to assess which material in this library is most important to me. You two can return to your assigned duties until I need you." Ammaril replied and without waiting for the other two Elves to leave she turned away from them and walked towards a nearby bookshelf, plucking a heavy volume off and starting to flip through the pages. Dorsos and Shimmandra exchanged glances briefly before they also turned around and walked out of the library, leaving the doors open just as they had found them as they headed along the hallway outside. Dorsos continued to glance back over his shoulder as they walked, looking back towards the entrance to the library.

"What are you looking at?" Shimmandra asked when she noticed this and Dorsos came to a halt, causing her to also stop in the hallway.

"Just making sure that we're out of earshot before we talk." Dorsos replied softly and Shimmandra frowned.

"Talk about what?" she said, now also keeping her voice low to avoid being overheard.

"You're not wearing that pendant are you? The one with the Wraith stone set into it?" Dorsos asked, looking at Shimmandra's neck. All of the Elf spell casters who had joined with Ammaril had been given gemstones

that were the repository for Wraith's, the magically preserved essence of ancient Oscari. These creatures could drain the life out of living beings in a similar manner to a Vampire while being invulnerable to physical damage in return, making them potent adversaries to most opponents. Only those with some sort of magical defence themselves could hope to survive an encounter with one. Dorsos had mounted his stone in the head of a staff that he had constructed for himself as a reservoir for additional magical power while Shimmandra had used the gem as the centrepiece of a pendant. Dorsos was not carrying his staff and he searched to see whether Shimmandra was wearing her pendant.

"No. I left it by my bed. I doubt that any assassins are going to be leaping out at us here. Why, what is so important that we can't talk about it if I'm wearing my pendant?" Shimmandra said.

"I want to talk about Ammaril's plans for the world and in particular for us and I'd rather we weren't overheard by anything that might report back to her." Dorsos told her.

"We know her plans. We'll rule our territories in her name." Shimmandra replied.

"Will we? Plus, how big do you suppose those territories will be?" Dorsos said, "She's just told us that she'll be recruiting more Elves to her cause so what's she going to offer them? There were always going to be more like us but now she's adding any nobles that agree to sign on in exchange for the right to rule a piece of her new world, not to mention all these human kings she seems so willing to make deals with. What's going to be left for us once she's divided everything up between them all? I signed on expecting a significant portion of the world to rule, not just a small kingdom."

"What are you suggesting Dorsos?" Shimmandra said.

"Just that if anything happened to Ammaril then control of her army would fall to us instead." Dorsos replied.

"The Orcs and Trolls only take orders from her and we don't have anything like the power she does."

Shimmandra said and Dorsos smiled.

"I've not seen anything to suggest that she has any more power than either of us have." he said.

"But the spells she casts, the transformation of Elves in Orcs or Ogres into Trolls and creating giant fire-breathing dragons. We can't do that." Shimmandra said.

"Only because we haven't read the right books in the Great Library of the Oscari. Ammaril didn't come up with any of this magic on her own. Alright the amount of raw magical power it takes to cast the transformation spells is vast but remember that every time she casts them she has to be drawing power directly from that stone she used to drain away the power used by the Oscari to freeze their library in time. Without that she's no more powerful than either of us." Dorsos pointed out.

"You can't be suggesting that we just turn around and kill her now." Shimmandra said.

"No of course not. It would be obvious to everyone what we'd done and as you've pointed out the Orcs and Trolls are totally loyal to her. If Orcan and Tiellan discover what we've done then I'm sure that they'll take great delight in making us suffer before they finally let us die." Dorsos said, "However, she's already told us that she'll be heading back to Oscay and she'll be more vulnerable there."

"How so? Oscay is going to be her new seat of power." Shimmandra said.

"Exactly, it's going to be her seat of power but it isn't yet. For the time being there are just Trolls there to build her new capital and probably a few bodyguards but the bulk of her army will be here in the continent of Entris subjugating the humans. Ammaril will be more vulnerable in Oscay than anywhere else in the world. All we need to do is pick the right moment to make our move. Then we can make up any story we like to tell Orcan about how-" Dorsos began before he suddenly stopped speaking when a figure wearing the uniform of a palace guard appeared at the end of the hallway and came shambling towards the two Elf spellcasters. Although this figure wore the uniform of a palace guard it was not a survivor of the assault on the palace, instead this Elf had been killed defending the walls against Ammaril's forces before his intact corpse had been recovered by Hiros. The Elf sorcerer from the East had been imprisoned for his practice of necromancy and following his release by Ammaril had returned to his old ways, creating reanimated servants to carry out his every whim.

"It's just one of Hiros' zombies." Shimmandra said when she looked at the figure for herself.

"Exactly How are we supposed to know that he isn't watching us through its eyes? Those things can't speak so how else is he supposed to know whether they've carried out the tasks he gives them?" Dorsos said.

"You think he'd betray us to Ammaril?" Shimmandra asked.

"Why not? Getting rid of the pair of us would increase his share of the spoils." Dorsos answered, "We should wait until we can be more certain of our privacy to discuss these things."

"I agree." Shimmandra replied as she raised her hand to the stone and she nodded her head as the zombie walked past them.

"For now let's just carry on as we have been doing. I'm going to return to the army in Tarran. You find Thomas and bring him back here. Understood?" Dorsos said and Shimmandra nodded again.

"Yes I understand. I'll keep my eyes and ears open for any opportunities." she said.

2

Arrathan had served in the Palace Guard of Sylldarin for most of his adult life and he had seen battle on many occasions, nearly always facing human raiders who thought they could plunder the lands of the Elves before fleeing back to their own kingdoms. Now though Arrathan found himself in the position of attempting to find allies among the humans of Tarran. He and the small number of other palace guards who had escaped first Sylldarin when Ammaril attacked and then Tarranberg when the Costrians betrayed them were now camped in a wood some distance from the capital city where they had been joined by a number of local humans. Some of these were part of the general populace who had fled their homes when they saw the monstrous Orcs and Trolls advancing across the countryside while others were surviving Tarran soldiers who had also run when confronted by Ammaril's army and been fortunate enough not to have been hunted down and killed. In total there were a little under two hundred warriors hiding in the wood and Arrathan could only sit and listen as several of the humans sat around a fire and argued about which of them was in command. He was not fluent in the humans' language but he understood enough of it to determine that there were three contenders for the role, one of them an overweight man who from what Arrathan could gather was either a merchant or a town mayor or possibly both and was arguing that he was the nearest thing that the group had to an actual civic leader. On the other hand the other two men were both survivors of Tarran's army, lesser nobles whose names had enabled them to achieve rank even without experience. All three now believed that they were best suited to take command of this small force of men.

His attention then moved towards a small group consisting of two humans and two Elves as they approached the campsite. He knew that when they had left they had been in the company of four humans rather than just two so he got to his feet to meet them and find out what had happened to the others. If they had been discovered by the enemy then there was a chance that they could be tracked to the camp and it would have to be moved.

"What did you find out there?" he asked one of the Elves.

"The Orcs are establishing a camp just outside the town to the east." he responded.

"What about the inhabitants of the town?" Arrathan added.

"They're staying there for now though they are avoiding the Orcs. The other two humans remained behind to keep watch on things. Before you ask, yes I trust them not to betray us, both are experienced soldiers." the other Elf told him.

"Good. We have no idea what they are going to be like as an occupying army or what Ammaril's plans are for the locals." Arrathan said and the other Elf looked at the men gathered around the campfire arguing.

"What about here? Is there any sign of peace breaking out among these so-called allies." he asked.

"Not yet, no. I suspect that they will tire themselves out from talking soon. Though whether that will encourage them to come to some agreement or if they will simply resume arguing after they wake up again in the morning I cannot say." Arrathan said.

"Have you decided what we will do now?" the other Elf added and Arrathan sighed.

"I do not have much confidence in any of these three humans to organise a fighting force against such a superior foe." he answered. Then he looked at one of the two humans who had just returned and addressed them in a broken form of the Tarran language, something he knew just enough of to get by, "What do you think of those three?"

Both humans glanced at the men around the fire and one of them let out a snort.

"The smartest thing Captain Spinner ever did was run away from the Orcs." he said, "I doubt that Captain Hout is any better and I certainly don't trust that self-important merchant."

Arrathan considered this for a short time, thinking carefully about the meaning of the man's words given his own limited ability with the language.

"We are going. None of these three is suitable to lead a force so we will do what we can ourselves. Tell the others." he told the Elves then he looked at the humans and added, "I am taking my men and going. You may come if you wish."

The two humans then looked at one another and smiled before they looked back at the Elf.

"Just us, or is that offer open to everyone?" one of them asked.

"Anyone who will follow my orders may come with us." Arrathan responded.

"We'll tell the others." the second human said before both of them turned and walked away, heading for one of the huddled groups of human soldiers.

It did not take long for the Elves to gather their weapons and other belongings, they had had few in the first place and they formed two columns as they started to walk away from the camp. It became apparent very

quickly that they were not alone though, behind them a group of about a dozen humans followed, a mix of soldiers and locals and this group began to grow as more of the humans joined it.

"Where are you going? Get back here at once!" the merchant yelled as he leapt to his feet when he and the two military officers noticed that a large number of the people at the campsite were now getting up and leaving.

All three men who considered themselves the rightful leader of the force at the campsite then ran after the departing column and rushed to its head where Arrathan was leading his men.

"Stop right there!" one of the soldier snapped, "What do you think you are doing?"

"Leaving." Arrathan replied simply and he continued to walk away.

"This is mutiny." the other human military officer said and Arrathan held up his hand for the column to come to a stop before he looked at the man.

"You have no authority over me. My men and I will fight against any force allied to Ammaril but we will not fight for you," he began before he looked back down the column to where more humans were joining it at the rear, "and it looks like many of your own people will not fight for you either."

"Surely you know that we are stronger together." the merchant said, "Strength in numbers."

"Yes I know that." Arrathan replied, "That is why I am happy for humans to accompany my men and I will treat them no differently. You are also welcome to join us as long as you agree to follow my orders."

"This is preposterous. What have the Elves ever done for us that this man now gets your loyalty?" the merchant called out, looking towards the humans at the rear of the column, "I am Jehan Mercier. My family has brought wealth to this region for generations."

"And kept it to themselves!" someone else called out from the rear of the column.

"Who said that? Who dares to defame my family?" the merchant shouted.

"He's right Jehan. No-one here trusts you," one of the human officers said, "and it looks like most don't trust either myself or Hout as well. Arrathan should lead us."

"I agree." Captain Hout added, "We've not been able to agree on which of the three of us would be suitable but it looks like our men have decided."

"Ridiculous. Follow an Elf? We're supposed to be fighting against some Elf witch." Jehan responded and he jabbed his finger towards the two officers, "An Elf witch that he once served if I'm not mistaken."

"I was part of the palace guard before Ammaril destroyed Syldarin, yes. I've lost as much as the rest of you." Arrathan commented.

"This is preposterous. Follow the Elf if you want but I'm leaving." Jehan said angrily and he turned to where the servants who had accompanied him to the camp stood, "Come on, gather my things and let's be going." he told them but initially they did not move, "Well? What are you waiting for?" he yelled, "Get a move on or are you going to take your chances follow an Elf as well?"

For a moment none of the servants moved or spoke but then one of them, a man wearing a chainmail shirt under his tabard embroidered with the heraldry of Jehan's company and carrying a sword at his side stepped forwards.

"I'll follow you wherever you go sir." he said and then he glared at the other servants, "What about you? Where's your loyalty to the man who pays your wages?" he added, resting his hand on his sword and after a few moments hesitation two of the group moved to start picking up as much as they could carry from among Jehan's possession.

The trio then made their way towards Jehan while he glared at the rest of his servants with a furious expression.

"Don't think you won't regret this. I'll remember this betrayal, mark my words." he said sternly before he and what remained of his retinue turned and started to walk away through the woods.

"It looks like we are going nowhere for the time being." Arrathan told the other Elves.

"Do you have a plan?" Captain Hout then asked him.

"Not yet. There are men watching the Orcs at nearby settlement and we need more like them to find out where the enemy is located and which of the locals we can trust." Arrathan replied. Then he looked to where Jehan and his small party was still walking away, "Also I'm going to send four of my men after Jehan Mercier to observe what he does now. I am concerned that in his anger he may do something rather unwise that could put us in danger."

Gromar and Yilven shared the duty of keeping watch on the *Storm Chaser's* deck after the sun went down, the pair standing at the prow of the ship and looking out across the ocean ahead while a handful of human sailors kept the ship on course for Lerron. Both Elves and Dwarves had far superior night vision to humans so they were able to spot objects in the water much more easily than any of the ship's regular crew could.

Behind them the ship's deck remained crowded with people though most of them were now sleeping and Gromar looked at them briefly.

"What do you think will happen to them when we get to Lerron?" he said.

"I suspect that life will not be easy for them. They have lost almost everything," Yilven replied.

"Aye, apart from that fool Bailey. I'm sure that he's brought along enough gold to make sure that he and his family can set up somewhere nice. Well him anyway, I don't know how attached he is to his family." Gromar added before Yilven suddenly moved to the side of the ship and stared down into the water, "What is it?"

Gromar said as he rushed to join the Elf.

"There's something in the water. Over there." Yilven replied and he pointed to where he could make out an object floating in the water.

Gromar looked in the direction that Yilven was pointing in and he too saw a dark shape bobbing up and down.

"Looks like a barrel." he said. Then he noticed a second object and pointed towards it, "Maybe that's another one."

"Maybe but that isn't a barrel." Yilven said when he saw yet another object in the water, this one much larger than either of the first two. The size and shape meant that it could be only one thing, an upturned boat.

"Stay here and look out for anything else. I'm going to go and fetch Will." Gromar said and he turned and hurried towards the back of the ship, taking care as he passed between the sleeping humans that he did not trip over any of them. Proceeding below deck he passed by the large guest cabin and headed for one of the smaller ones before knocking on the door, "Will, it's Gromar. Yilven and I have spotted something that you need to see."

"Hold on." Will's voice responded and then Gromar heard him saying something else to someone inside his cabin. Then there was a brief pause before there was the sound of a bolt being pulled back and Will opened the door wearing only a pair of trousers. Behind him Gromar could see that Lucia was sitting up in Will's bed, holding a blanket across her chest.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you-" Gromar began.

"Just tell me what it is Gromar." Will said.

"Looks like someone's capsized out there. There's the hull of a boat floating about upside down and at least two barrels in the water." Gromar told him.

"You're right, I need to check this out. I'll be right there." Will responded before he closed the door again.

Without waiting for Will, Gromar hurried back up on deck and to the front of the ship where Yilven had now been joined by one of the human crewmen with a lantern and a long boat hook, ready to try and drag debris aboard if necessary.

"Where's Will?" Yilven asked.

"He's on his way but he was busy when I knocked. I doubt he'll be in a good mood." Gromar replied.

"Good mood or not, this could be important." Yilven said.

"Have you found anything else?" Gromar said.

"Only part of a sail. I wasn't sure what it was so I had a hook brought up so we could inspect it closer but a boat couldn't drift this far out to sea if its mooring came loose. There must have been a crew." Yilven said and Gromar nodded in agreement.

"And maybe a deck full of passengers to go with them." he said, looking at the people sleeping on the *Strom Chaser's* deck again and as he did so he saw Will emerging from below decks, "Ah, here's Will." he added.

"Where is this boat?" Will asked as he reached the front of the ship to join Yilven and Gromar.

"Right there." Yilven told him, pointing and as Will looked for himself he could just about make out the shape of the upturned boat's hull.

"It looks too small for a longship or a knarr. I think it's a fishing boat." he said.

"A coastal vessel then?" Yilven said and Will nodded his head.

"Yes, not the sort of thing I'd want to be aboard more than a couple of miles from land. The crew must have been desperate to get away from Costria." he said.

"Everyone was desperate." Gromar pointed out.

"So you think that the boat simply capsized because of the conditions out here Will?" Yilven asked.

"Possibly, yes. A small boat that may well have been overloaded." Will replied before he turned to the nearby crewman, "Hand me that lantern."

"Yes captain." the man responded and he handed his lantern to Will who then held it up as he looked towards the drifting vessel.

"What is it Will?" Gromar asked.

"Looks like damage to the hull but I can't tell if something hit the outside or if something inside smashed through it." Will answered.

"What difference does that make?" Gromar added.

"There isn't generally a lot out on the ocean to collide with that can put a hole in a hull other than other vessels. Most debris tends to just bounce off if you hit it." Will pointed out.

"So it could have been hit by another ship?" Gromar said.

"Possibly, yes and it might not have been an accident." Will replied and Gromar frowned.

"You mean that someone did it deliberately?" he said.

"Yes. Think about it, these waters are suddenly full of boats heading across the Strait of Lerron to escape Costria. What better target for pirates?" Will said.

"But most of the people fleeing will have next to nothing of value. Surely not enough to interest a crew of pirates. What profit would there be in it?" Gromar said.

"That depends on the pirates' interests. Ships at sea can be useful sources of slaves too. You wouldn't be able to sell them easily anywhere in Entris but if you took them south there are plenty of markets where questions won't be asked just as long as a slave is strong enough to carry out the work that is assigned to it." Will explained.

"That would make us a very tempting target too." Yilven pointed out.

"Yes it would, though you'd need a ship with a large crew to take the *Storm Chaser* but there are ships out there with large enough crews to do it. We'd better keep an eye out for any other vessels, no matter how large or small and try to make sure that we don't get within about a hundred yards of any of them." Will said.

"Are you going to arm the crew?" Gromar asked but Will shook his head.

"No, that might just upset our passengers. It's hard to sneak up on a ship at sea, especially when some of the crew can see in the dark so we'll get plenty of warning of any approaching ships. If we see some one heading right for us then we'll start issuing weapons.

We should at least set up a brazier here Will." Yilven suggested, "A few burning arrows from my bow might help convince any pirates to keep out of range."

"Okay we'll get it done. A simple brazier shouldn't cause too much concern." Will replied and he turned to the nearby crewman, "See to it immediately." he said.

"Yes captain." The crewman responded and as he was walking away Will turned back to Yilven and Gromar.

"And I'm going back to bed." he said, prompting a smile from Gromar.

"Apologise to Lucia for me for the interruption, won't you?" he said.

Despite its strong walls the city of Tarranberg, capital of Tarran had fallen in a single night. The army of Tarran itself had been severely weakened by its defeat at the hands of an Orc army that was supported by fire-breathing dragons but a relief force from the neighbouring nation of Costria had arrived to help defend the city. Unfortunately for the Tarrans this force had been led by the cousin of the Hadarian Emperor and when he entered into an alliance with Ammaril so did Costria and Tarranberg found itself with the enemy already within its gates. When Shimmandra entered the city after sundown on horseback with a small party of Orcs as bodyguards she was greeted by several of these Costrian troops and she noticed that they avoided eye contact with her or her bodyguards as much as possible. Orcs with their characteristic grey skin and permanently snarling expressions were new to the world and few people knew what to expect from them. This led most people to judge them by their appearances and whether or not it had been Ammaril's intention for them to look monstrous that was the impression they now gave off to people who saw them. Shimmandra considered that it was possible that these humans thought she might be Ammaril herself, the likenesses of Elven princesses were not common knowledge anywhere beyond their own lands. This did not really matter to Shimmandra though. She had the authority speak on Ammaril's behalf and from her point of view the more afraid of her the humans were, the better.

That King Lupold had managed to slip away with the help of a small force of Elves that had already escaped Syldarin as well as an unusual party of individuals that included humans, an Elf, a Dwarf and a Halfling was an annoyance but only a minor one. From what Shimmandra had heard this party that included former servants of hers had been a problem to Ammaril from the very start and she had tried to have them eliminated once before, a task that had fallen to the man that Shimmandra now sought out in Tarranberg.

"Where is your commander?" Shimmandra said to one of the Costrians.

"In the gatehouse my lady." The man responded.

"Well go and fetch him then." Shimmandra ordered and the man turned around and sprinted towards the gatehouse, obviously terrified of the consequences of any delay. It was just a few seconds before the man reappeared, this time in the company of another Costrian soldier, though the uniform worn by this one was somewhat more ornate.

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"My lady, how can I assist you?" this second soldier asked Ammaril.

"Where do people go to drink in this city?" Shimmandra responded.

"There are many fine places my lady," the soldier answered.

"I am looking for a man who is a criminal. He will head for the low places where his kind congregate. Where are they?" Shimmandra said.

"I've heard that there are places in that direction, about a quarter of a mile from here," the soldier said and he pointed into the city, "If the man you are looking for is looking for somewhere to mix with other criminals then he may have headed there, but there are still several places he could be."

"Wherever he is I will find him," Shimmandra said and she started to ride off, the Orcs following close behind her.

Thomas Cooper had drunk in many different inns and taverns such as the one he was currently in over the years and he knew to watch his money closely. Sometimes staff would attempt to swindle unwary customers, especially those who were not local and there was always the danger of pickpockets who saw drunks as easy marks. He was especially familiar with this second danger since he had stolen so many coin purses himself from drunks over the years. On this occasion though he had no need to steal, in fact he was carrying far more money than he ever had until recently. His previous employer, the vampire Marcus Quinnus had never seen fit to pay him a large wage and he had been forced to supplement his income with money from other, often illegal sources. This appeared true of his current employer, the Elf sorceress Ammaril also but his most recent assignment of delivering messages to noblemen had put him in a position to steal more money than usual. Despite his good fortune and success in carrying out Ammaril's instructions though Thomas was concerned about the reception he would receive when he next saw her and he was wondering whether there was anywhere that he could hide himself from someone who could send hundreds of monstrous warriors across the world in an instant. When Ammaril had taken him into her service she had given him the ability to travel using the stone circles left behind by the ancient Oscari as well. She had done this by fusing a gemstone that held the consciousness of a Wraith into the flesh of his chest. Using its power he could activate the stone circles and the Wraith was also supposed to be able to protect him. However, the Wraith was now gone though the gemstone remained embedded in his chest while the creature it had contained had been destroyed. To make matters worse the ancient creature that had survived the destruction of its civilisation thousands of years ago and waited in an underground chamber since then had been destroyed by a young woman assisted only by a Halfling.

An odd hush suddenly fell over the inside of the tavern, conversations abruptly stopped mid-sentence while the pair of musicians in the corner suddenly stopped playing as everyone looked towards the entrance.

Thomas also turned around to see what had disturbed everyone so much and as soon as he saw the three figures who had just entered the tavern he understood the reaction by those already present. Standing in the middle of the trio was Shimmandra, her fine Elven clothing standing out massively against the far more well-worn apparel of the locals filling the tavern while either side of her stood an Orc warrior in a long chainmail coat that was also of Elven manufacture and with their hands resting on long Elven swords at their waists.

Thomas understood immediately why the atmosphere in the tavern had changed so drastically and then for a moment he wondered whether these Orcs had been warriors in their previous lives before their transformations before he realised that they and Shimmandra could only be here looking for him. There was nowhere for Thomas to run to and he knew that he could not fight his way past Shimmandra and her bodyguards so he instead opted to simply wait where he was, sipping at his drink and forcing the Elf sorceress to come to him.

Shimmandra looked around the bar and as her gaze turned towards people they all averted their eyes, not wanting to risk antagonising her. None of the people in the tavern apart from Thomas himself knew who Shimmandra was and this was the first time than any of them were seeing Orcs in person but they had heard enough stories about the monstrous warriors that they did not want to risk the wrath of anyone who could command their loyalty. Spotting Thomas sitting at the bar Shimmandra started to walk towards him and the Orcs followed. The crowd parted without Shimmandra needing to say a single word and the Orcs snarled at people as they passed.

All of a sudden a man lunged forwards out of the crowd with his arm raised high with a small blade in his hand.

"Elf bitch!" he yelled, his words slightly slurred from the effects of drink.

Shimmandra turned in time to see the man getting nearer and she stepped back, stumbling as she lost her balance and despite the number of people nearby no-one attempted to catch her before she landed on the floor.

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The man now loomed over Shimmandra and for a moment she felt a surge of power coming from her pendant as the Wraith prepared to emerge but before either the could make use of his knife or the ethereal creature carried inside the gemstone could manifest itself both Orcs blocked his path and swung their swords. The weapons' lengths made their use within the tavern somewhat indiscriminate and there were screams as the blades cut through innocent bystanders before reaching the drunk wielding the knife and penetrating deep into his chest. The man let out no cry but as he collapsed he coughed up a mouthful of blood. At the sound of the screaming the door to the tavern burst open and another half a dozen Orcs rushed inside with their weapons drawn and people inside did their best to retreat away from them, forming a tightly packed group closer to the bar and squeezing around Thomas.

"We don't want any trouble. He attacked you of his own accord and he's paid for it." a bald man standing behind the bar called out. Shimmandra got back to her feet, none of the humans daring to approach to offer her a hand and she looked around glaring at the crowd.

"Of course he has." she said before she turned towards where Thomas sat, peering through the crowd at him, "Thomas Cooper I can see you there. You're a harder man to find than you ought to be. Come on outside now." she said to him sternly.

Reluctantly Thomas got to his feet and made his way through the crowd towards the Elf woman and then the pair of them headed for the exit. The Orcs also began to retreat, with all but the original two to have entered leaving ahead of Shimmandra and Thomas. Thomas was the next to leave and he looked around, expecting Shimmandra to follow but instead it was her two Orc bodyguards that came through the doorway.

Shimmandra instead remained just inside the tavern and she looked down at a lit candle that was providing some of the illumination in the room, "Now the rest of you can pay along with your friend." she said and she waved her hand towards the candle. Immediately the tiny flame produced a massive sheet of fire that headed towards the crowd of terrified people in the tavern and as Shimmandra dashed out of the now burning building the sound of their screams filled the air, "Make sure no-one gets out. If they don't stay inside and burn then cut off their arms and legs and leave them to bleed to death." she told one of the nearby Orcs and the warrior growled as he nodded.

"Yes mistress." he responded.

"You're killing them all? But your guards already killed the man who attacked you." Thomas said as Shimmandra turned towards him.

"And not one of them did a thing to either stop him or warn me so they can all pay as well. This way maybe people will think twice before fighting us. I just wish I'd been able to find out who his family were so I could have them killed as well. That would be an even better deterrent to anyone who might harbour thoughts of rebellion. You didn't try to warn me either did you Thomas? You should consider yourself lucky that I don't-" Shimmandra began before she stopped talking and frowned.

"What?" he asked as she reached for the gemstone around her neck, a gemstone he recognised as being identical to the one embedded in his chest.

"The Wraith you carry. Where is it? I can't feel its power even standing right in front of you. I tried using it to locate you but I couldn't sense it." Shimmandra said.

"Ah, yes. It's gone." Thomas replied.

"Gone how?" Shimmandra demanded.

"As in dead, or rather destroyed. I suppose it had been dead for thousands of years." Thomas said and Shimmandra glared at him angrily.

"Tell me how it happened." she told him sternly but before he could reply the door to the tavern opened and a man rushed out, his clothing on fire. Immediately an Orc lunged towards him and he roared as he thrust his sword forwards into the man's abdomen with enough force to send it straight through him before the Orc twisted the blade and pulled it back, leaving the man to collapse on the ground with blood pouring from the wounds to his front and back. The flames had come to the attention of others nearby and there were people emerging from other buildings to see what was going on. However, when they saw the Orcs and the man lying dead on the ground they retreated back inside, not wanting to risk the wrath of the Orcs by getting involved. Instead they peered out through windows to see what was going on as well as to keep an eye on the flames just in case they spread to other buildings.

"I saw that little runt Horace from the *Storm Chaser* in the palace and he was with that woman, the human serving girl that was working for Ammaril in Oscay." Thomas said.

"A halfling and a serving girl destroyed a Wraith?" Shimmandra commented.

"The woman had a knife, one that I've seen before. It used to belong to my old master Marcus Quinnus. He must have given it to Diera before he died and then after she died the other woman must have taken it." Thomas said.

"What's so special about this knife?" Shimmandra asked.

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"Marcus Quinnus was a vampire, a magic user like you. He crafted that knife as a means to store additional magical energy. He did something similar to the shields of the mercenaries he hired to go with us to Oscay but they were only temporary, that knife was more permanent. If a Wraith touched the shields or this knife then-" Thomas began.

"Then since they exist purely as ethereal creatures the power that sustains them would be drained away and they would be destroyed." Shimmandra interrupted.

"And that's exactly what happened. The Wraith was destroyed though I still have that damned stone in my chest, look." Thomas said and he opened his shirt to show the gemstone fused to his chest at the centre of his ribcage, the skin around it appearing melted as if it had been burned. The stone itself was now much darker than the one that Shimmandra carried around her neck, the internal magic that gave it most of its shine having been drained away.

"Come with me." Shimmandra said.

"Where are we going?" Thomas said.

"To Sylda to see Ammaril. She has orders for you. I would have simply sent you there yourself but clearly you can't operate the stone circles now." Shimmandra said and then she turned to one of her Orc bodyguards and added, "Bring him but do not harm him. Ammaril may still have a use for him. The rest of you stay here and make sure that no-one gets out of that building alive."

3

Jehan had been complaining for most of the night about supposedly being ejected from the camp and continually telling his bodyguard and servant to try to keep up with him even though they were both laden down with his possessions. Previously these as well as the many more that had been left behind had been loaded on a small cart belonging to a farmer who had also fled his home as the Orcs advanced.

Unfortunately for Jehan the farmer had remained at the camp and refused to sell his cart to the merchant, seeing more use in keeping the cart than having a full purse for the immediate future.

"Come on, it will be light soon." Jehan told the other two men, "I'd like to be in town by breakfast."

"We're going into town sire? Is that safe?" his bodyguard asked.

"You're the one who ought to know what's safe and what isn't. That's what I pay you for after all." Jehan replied.

"But the word was that the Orcs were advancing on the town sire." the servant pointed out.

"Exactly. King Lupold has apparently fled the country and that lot back in the woods aren't going to get it back for him by following an Elf. That means that the Orcs and their allies are the rulers here from now on and we need to accept it. Considering how many Hadarian troops are coming into the country I expect that they'll be the ones who will end up ruling Tarran and what's the difference between King Lupold and the Hadarian Emperor to us? If we're going to continue to prosper then we need to make sure that the Hadarians don't see us as enemies but as friends."

"How do you intend to do that sire?" his bodyguard asked.

"That's easy. I'll simply tell the Orcs about the band of outlaws plotting against them in the woods. We know where their campsite is and I'm sure that that information will have some value to the Orcs." Jehan explained.

"Just last night he was trying to get the people in the woods to follow him. Now he's going to sell them out to the Orcs?" the servant whispered to the bodyguard.

"Don't worry about it. I've seen him turn on former associates before when it suited him. It's nothing personal against those people, most of them at least, it's just business." the bodyguard responded.

Unknown to Jehan and his servants Four Elves followed them from a distance where they could see them but the darkness prevented the Elves themselves from being seen by the humans with their inferior night vision. The only risk of being detected came from any sound they made so the four Elves moved cautiously, helped by the limited rate at which Jehan's bodyguard and servant could travel while weighed down by his belongings. Meanwhile they were able to hear every word that Jehan said as he ranted while he walked and the group's leader understood every word.

"This could be a problem." he told the others.

"What's wrong?" a second asked.

"The chief fool, Jehan, is planning to betray our camp to the Orcs." the leader said.

"But why? The Orcs are his enemy too." a third commented.

"He seems to think that they will leave him alone if he gives them us." the leader said.

"Are there any humans who are capable of keeping their word?" the fourth Elf added, "The Hadarians joined with Ammaril so the Costrians copied them and turned on the Tarrans. Now this man is planning to turn on his own people."

"We have to stop him. Arrathan needs to know." the second Elf said.

"There isn't time to send word back to him. By the time anyone could get back here Jehan might have found the Orcs and told them about the camp." the leader said.

"Then we have to kill him. The two who followed him as well." the fourth Elf said and after a brief hesitation the leader nodded.

"Yes we do. Quickly, before they can find the Orcs." he said as he reached for an arrow from the quiver on his back and the other three copied him before they stood up straight and took aim, "Jehan first." he said and then after a moment's pause he added, "Now." and all four Elves released their arrows.

Of the four arrows fired two sailed past Jehan but had no time to react as the other two arrows found their mark and struck him in his back. One punctured his lung and he was unable to scream as he fell, gasping for breath.

"Down!" the bodyguard yelled and both he and Jehan's servant dropped what they were carrying and threw themselves to the ground where its uneven nature allowed them to take cover.

"What's happening? Are Orcs shooting at us?" the servant asked.

"Those arrows look Elven to me." The bodyguard replied as he studied the arrows sticking out of Jehan's back.

"The Orcs used to be Elves didn't they? So they'd be using Elven arrows wouldn't they?" the servant pointed out.

"Maybe but they were fired at us from behind and I didn't see any Orcs as we were walking, did you?" the bodyguard replied.

"No, no I didn't." the servant said.

"Then they must have been fired by someone who followed us after we left the camp. There are Elves out there, following us in the dark. There are two arrows in Jehan's back and at least one other missed so there must be at least three Elves around. I wouldn't be surprised if they heard every word that Jehan said about going to the Orcs." the bodyguard said.

"Well Jehan's dead now, or at least he will be soon. Maybe we can tell the Elves that we were planned to stop him talking to the Orcs." the servant suggested.

"They might not believe us. They might not even understand us. They could have just been sent to kill us anyway rather than reacting to what Jehan said." the bodyguard said.

"Then what do we do?" the servant asked.

"Stay down. Elves can see in the dark but they can't aim at something they can't see and firing arrows into the air needs hundreds to be effective. Eventually they'll either leave or come closer." the bodyguard answered.

"What if they come closer? What do we do then?" the servant asked.

"We wait for them to get as close as possible. Too close for them to use their bows." the bodyguard told him.

"And then what?" the servant added and the bodyguard carefully drew his sword.

"You've got a knife haven't you? Use it." he said. Nervously the servant drew his knife from the sheath on his belt while the bodyguard lifted his head just enough that he could look around, searching for signs of the Elves he knew had to be close by. He could just about make out the outline of a pair of figures some distance away and he ducked back down just before another pair of arrows sailed over his head. This was followed by more arrows fired singly and aimed at the rough location of the two men, "They're coming." the bodyguard added.

"How do you know?" the servant asked.

"Because these arrows are meant to stop us running." the bodyguard told him.

"So what do we do?"

"Keep watching. Especially when the arrows stop. They won't want to risk shooting their own men." the bodyguard replied right as the arrows stopped, "This is it, they're here." he said, raising his head just in time to see a pair of Elves charging towards the two men from the side with their swords drawn, "Up! Now!" he snapped, knowing that he and the servant had to get to their feet to stand any chance of defending themselves.

The bodyguard was just able to raise his sword in time to parry a swing from the first of the charging Elves and he lunged forwards in an attempt to strike back quickly only for the Elf easily sidestep the hastily executed attack. On the other hand the servant lacked a weapon larger than the small knife he carried and when the other Elf struck he was unprepared to defend himself. The Elf's sword impaled the servant just below his ribcage and he let out a startled gasp as he died. The bodyguard saw this but carried on fighting, making several rapid attacks against his opponent that while failing to connect with the Elf warrior at least forced him onto the defensive and prevented him from attacking again. However, with the servant dead the other Elf was able to support his comrade and as the bodyguard extended his arm again to thrust his sword towards the first Elf he felt the impact of a sword blade against his side. The chainmail he wore prevented him from being split wide open by the blow but it was enough to make him stumble and at that moment the first Elf swung his sword again. This blow struck bodyguard in the side of his head and there was a 'crack' sound as his skull shattered under the force of the blow and he fell sideways before landing in a heap.

"It's done." the leader of the Elves told his men as he returned his sword to its scabbard.

"What next?" the Elf standing close to him asked as the other two were making their way towards them with their bows still in their hands and the leader looked at the bodies of the bodyguard and the servant before looking at Jehan and noticing him twitch.

"He's still alive. We need to finish him off." he said and he strode towards where Jehan lay helpless. He crouched down and rolled Jehan over onto his back, snapping the arrows sticking out of him in the process and he reached down to cover the already dying man's nose and mouth with his hand, intending to speed up his death by smothering him. However, as he waited for Jehan to die he heard the sound of a distant scream that made him look up.

"What was that?" another of the Elves said.

"It came from the settlement." a third added and the leader got to his feet, leaving Jehan to die in his own time.

"There are Orcs at the settlement. We should investigate." he said.

The four Elves then continued towards the nearby human settlement and took cover when it came into view. The settlement was a small town of numerous well-built wood and stone structures, enough to house just over a thousand people and as the Elves watched they saw these people in a crowd being herded towards a single large wooden building on the outer edge of the town. The townsfolk and Orcs were all on foot but there were also three other figures observing this from horseback close by and it was clear that they were neither human nor Orc. They were Elves.

Dorsos watched the Orcs forcing the human townsfolk into the building from the back of his horse. To one side of him sat the younger Elf spellcaster Graysil while to the other sat Hiros of Nhillan, the noted spellcaster from one of the eastern Elf lands who had been imprisoned for his indulgences with necromancy. Both these men had been imprisoned with Dorsos and Shimmandra in the Tower of Sorcery in Syllda before its destruction and they too now served Ammaril.

"Do you think they'll fit in there?" Hiros commented as he watched the Orcs shoving people into the building. "They'll fit. It won't be comfortable but they'll all go in one way or another." Dorsos said and then he smiled and added, "Plus it will add to the panic."

"I've never seen anything like this done before." Graysil added.

"Then pay close attention because Ammaril might ask you to carry out something like this yourself." Dorsos told him as the last of the townsfolk were being forced into the building and then the Orcs slammed the doors shut before bracing them to prevent them from being opened again. Cries of distress could be heard coming from inside the building, along with the sound of people banging on the inside as they pleaded to be let out.

"So you've done this before then?" Hiros asked, looking at Dorsos.

"Yes several times, though nothing quite as big as this. The odd kidnapped traveller or disobedient cult member could be made a subject easily enough but wiping out a town would have required a force I didn't have access to until now. I never had more than a few dozen followers that I could call on." he replied.

"I wager that they were still impressed though." Hiros said.

"Yes they were. None of them understood how relatively simple what I was doing was though." Dorsos said as an Orc marched up to the three spellcasters on horseback.

"The humans are imprisoned. Two were killed moving them." he said and Dorsos nodded his head.

"Good. Have you found what we need in the town?" he asked.

"Yes. The salt and the nails." the Orc answered.

"Then take the salt and pour it around the building. It should make a fully closed path all around it at least as wide as your hand and with no gaps. Do you understand?" Dorsos told the Orc and he nodded.

"Yes. I understand. One path, this wide." he said and he held up his hand.

"Exactly. After that drive nails into the ground covered by the salt. Again I want them all around the building, as many as you can. Then stand back at least twenty paces from the salt and hurry, the humans may be able to force their way out before too long and then all our effort will have been wasted." Dorsos ordered.

"I will see to it." the Orc said before turning around and walking away.

The trio of Elven magic users then watched as the Orcs poured out salt from sacks all around the building to create an unbroken ring all around it. Then once this was complete more Orcs approached with hammers and nails, driving the nails through the salt into the ground beneath. After this the Orcs retreated while Dorsos turned to Graysil.

"Now watch and pay attention." he said before he dismounted from his horse and with his staff in his hand walked to where a small fire had been lit close by and raised his hand. The two other warlocks still on horseback then felt a brief surge in magical energy as Dorsos gathered the power for his spell. The spell was a relatively simple one so did not require a great deal of power or time and after just a few seconds he released the energy, using it to create a long, thin jet of flame that erupted from the fire at his feet. This he directed straight towards the building in which the townsfolk were being imprisoned and it flew as far as the ring of salt and iron nails before all of a sudden the focused jet was dispersed as if it had just struck a stone wall. This produced a ball of flame that spread in all directions rather than the targeted jet. This dispersed fairly rapidly and did not damage the magical barrier created by the salt and iron nails but some of the fire reached the wooden wall of the structure and instantly ignited it before the flames began to spread, "Now we just wait." Dorsos added as he returned to his horse and climbed back into the saddle to watch the building burn.

The townsfolk trapped inside the building noticed the flames almost immediately and their cries to be released increased along with the hammering on the inside as they attempted not only to break down the

door that continued to hold firm against them but also to smash their way out through any part of the wall that looked weak enough for them to break without tools. The building had been constructed to last though, the Elves had made sure of that when selecting a suitable building for their purpose and no matter how hard they tried the townsfolk were unable to break out.

Panic set in rapidly and the captives began to fight among themselves, desperately trying to get away from the flames before they could be burned to death and outside a hint of a smile appeared on Hiros' face.

"It's started," he said.

"No, I feel it too," Dorsos added.

"You mean that magical power? Where's it coming from?" Graysil asked.

"Not our world. Maybe the world that the Oscari came from or maybe somewhere that isn't in any world, but it's coming, drawn in by the terror and panic of those people at the thought of their imminent deaths." Dorsos replied.

The flames had reached the building's roof by this point and they spread across it rapidly thanks to the tar used to make it waterproof and the fire soon engulfed the entire building. The screams from inside reached their loudest at this point before all of a sudden there was an almighty 'crash' as the roof collapsed and instantly crushed everyone inside with burning debris.

"There!" Hiros exclaimed.

"Yes, that's it. It's there now," Dorsos added.

"I can feel it. It's watching us," Grasyil said.

"Yes, it can sense our power the same way we can sense its. Normally it would have fled as soon as it came into being but it can't get past the barrier of salt and iron. Come on, we should go and greet it," Dorsos responded.

The three Elf warlocks rode their horses towards the ruins of the burning building before dismounting when they reached the ring of Orcs surrounding it and then advancing on foot as far as the ring of salt.

"Now what?" Graysil asked.

"Reveal yourself demon!" Dorsos shouted, looking into the flames but nothing happened, "I said reveal yourself demon or spend eternity trapped here," Dorsos added sternly and all of a sudden the shape of some of the flames changed and began to extend towards the magical barrier where the three Elves now stood. These flames initially hovering in a ball just beyond the barrier before they altered their shape to a roughly humanoid one that stood about seven feet tall with limbs that looked too long for the figure's size.

"Release me," the demon said in the Elf language.

"No," Dorsos replied simply.

"Who are you to hold me here?" the demon responded and Dorsos smiled.

"I am Dorsos of Manay and I gave you your existence," he said.

"No. Those who died within gave me my existence with their pain, their suffering and their fear of death. So it is with all my kind," the demon responded.

"No. I gave you your existence demon. I had the people placed in the building and I set the flames myself as these men with me will bear witness. I am Dorsos of Manay and I name you-" Dorsos began.

"No!" the demon yelled but Dorsos continued to speak.

"Askur. I name you Askur and with this name you are bound," Dorsos said.

The demon let out a sudden roar, furious at being bound in service to a mortal creature.

"Very well Dorsos of Manay, you have named me Askur and I will follow you. Though be warned, any who speak that name may command me now and there are already two others that know it," the demon said.

"Three actually. The third is the one that we serve, the one who told me the name to give to you. She is Ammaril and she is your queen," Dorsos replied.

The four Elf warriors watched in horror as the building burned with what appeared to be the entire population of the town trapped inside. None of them had any magical ability at all but it was obvious that the ring of salt and nails had to have some sort of magical purpose to it. The horror at what they were witnessing grew worse when they saw the flames taking humanoid form within the ring and though they were too far away to hear anything that was being said they immediately knew what had transpired.

"They summoned a demon," one of them said.

"Yes and I doubt that it will be the last. Ammaril has her Orcs, Trolls and dragons as well as her human allies but now it looks like she's trying to reinforce her armies with demons as well," the group's leader said.

"How many do you think they can create?" another Elf asked.

"How many towns and villages are there that can be burned? Or drowned, buried alive, strangled, or have their throats cut? That is how many they can make. Arrathan has to be told. We need to find a way to get word to the rest of the world about this," the group's leader answered.

The Shattered Stone

The four Elves then began to move back, keeping low initially until they were far enough away that they could stand up straight without risking being seen and they broke into a run as they headed back towards their campsite.

Arrathan listened carefully to the four Elf warriors that he had sent after Jehan and the two subordinates who had remained loyal to him as they recounted the tale of what they had witnessed in grisly detail, from the townsfolk being herded together into a single building and being burned to death to the manifestation of the fire demon in response to the terror experienced by the townsfolk as they died together.

"First blood magic and now demonology? Are there any limits which Ammaril won't cross?" Arrathan said.

"None of the three Elves were Ammaril, though they commanded Orcs and at least one of them must have been another spellcaster," the leader of the four Elves replied.

"Nevertheless, I doubt that these renegades weren't following the orders of Ammaril to the letter," Arrathan said.

"Can you tell us what's going on?" Captain Hout asked, having listened to the Elves speaking with one another in their own language but not understanding a word of it.

"The Orcs have slaughtered everyone in the town nearby," Arrathan said out loud and there were gasps from several of the gathered humans.

"My sister was there, what about her?" one called out.

"Dead now, all of them sacrificed so that a demon could be summoned, a demon that has now probably been bound to Ammaril's service," Arrathan responded.

"Fire-breathing dragons, Orcs, human traitors and now demons? How are we supposed to fight all of these?" Hout said.

"We are not, I think that is the idea. Indeed we cannot fight them, not this group alone. However, if we can get word of what is happening here across the Straight of Lerron then perhaps the kingdoms there can find a way to stop them," Arrathan said.

"So how do we get word across an ocean?" someone in the crowd said.

"We must find a boat that is leaving for anywhere on the other side of the Straight of Lerron, most likely Lerron itself and we must get them to take a message with them," Arrathan said and then he looked at Captain Hout, "Will you write a letter in your language if I write one in mine. We will both say the same thing so that anyone reading them both will see that they match."

"Why send two letters? Isn't one enough?" the human captain replied.

"Perhaps but even though not many humans speak the Elven language two letters in different languages increases the chance that whoever receives them will understand them. Plus I would like there to be a chance that my letter could then find its way north to Raysalgard to warn what is left of the Elves in Entris," Arrathan explained.

"I'll write a letter but where do we find a boat around here?" Captain Hout said.

"A river craft would not survive an ocean journey so we will have to travel south to the coast to where we might be able to find a suitable vessel. Unfortunately I am not familiar enough with your country to know where such a vessel might be found," Arrathan said.

"There's a small port at Tarhoven. Mainly fishing boats but some ships running cargo dock there. If any of them are left then maybe we can get them to carry your letters across the sea," someone suggested and Arrathan turned to look at the man, one of the ordinary people of Tarran who had fled their homes to escape the Orcs.

"What's your name?" Arrathan said.

"Karl," the man told him.

"Do you know the route there Karl?" Arrathan asked and the man nodded.

"Yes, I used to drive a wagon between there and Tarranstadt. There was a man there who could be relied on to bring things into the city that would normally be difficult to acquire. Banned or taxed heavily. He could get around the laws and the taxes," he said.

"I know the sort," Arrathan said, thinking back to his days in the palace guard when he had occasionally been called upon to help deal with bands of smugglers, "A wagon though? What about a horse? Can you ride one?"

"Yes, I can ride," the man responded.

"Good. Then take one of our horses and some of the gold. Paying to get the letters to Lerron may be easier than finding someone willing to help out of charity," Arrathan told him.

4

As the sun rose over the ocean in the Straight of Lerron the coast of Lerron itself came into view and Will stood on the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure looking towards it and consulting a chart.

"How far to go now?" Horace shouted up from the deck as he emerged from below decks and saw Will above him.

"Not far, about another twenty-five to thirty miles or so I'd say." Will responded.

"So we'll be there some time this afternoon?" Horace said and Will looked up at the ship's sail before he nodded.

"If this wind holds up then yes, we should reach the coast around mid-afternoon. We'll put in at the port of Sayal. It's a city that should easily be able to accommodate all the people we have aboard." he said.

"Ship hoy!" a sailor then called out from where he was on watch at the front of the ship and when Will looked up he saw the unmistakable shapes of ships in the distance.

"Pirates?" Horace asked.

"I don't know. Go and fetch Yilven, he might be able to make out more." Will replied and Horace nodded before hurrying back below deck. Just as he was passing through the door from the deck though he encountered Lucia and Dominic hurrying the other way.

"Did someone just call out that they saw a ship?" Dominic asked and Horace nodded again.

"Yes, Will wants me to get Yilven to see if they're pirates." he said.

"Then we won't delay you." Dominic replied and both he and Lucia stepped aside to let the Halfling pass before they rushed out onto the deck and up the stairs towards where Will stood looking ahead.

"We heard there were ships." Lucia said and Will nodded and pointed.

"You can just about make them out. I count three of them though if they are pirates then they have an odd way of going about catching prey." he said and Lucia frowned.

"Why?" she said.

"Because they don't seem to have their sails deployed." Dominic said.

"Some ships use oars." Lucia pointed out.

"Yes but with our sail deployed they must have seen us by now and they haven't moved. To get to Sayal directly we'll have to go right past them which would give them the chance to ambush us but we could easily change course." Will explained.

"So who would just be sitting out on the ocean like that? Aren't those ships too big to be fishing boats?" Lucia said and Will nodded.

"Yes they are. From their size they are ocean going ships and to have them just anchored there isn't usual." He said before Yilven emerged from below deck with Horace and Gromar.

"Will I've brought Yilven." Horace announced.

"Thank you. Yilven can you see if you can tell who those ships belong to?" Will said and he pointed towards the mysterious vessels again.

"I'll try but tiredness doesn't do much for my vision Will." Yilven replied before he darted to the front of the ship while Horace and Gromar instead climbed the stairs to join Will, Lucia and Dominic.

"You've been a sailor for years Will. So who do you think they are?" Gromar asked.

"I don't know. They aren't acting like pirates, though it could be some sort of trick I suppose. I just hope that they aren't anchored there because there's no room for them in the port. We've got more than a hundred people to offload and doing it with our rowing boats will take too long." Will answered.

"If they do turn out to be hostile then I have a few tricks up my sleeve Will." Dominic said, "Well, not tricks exactly but a blast of magical flames can cause a lot of damage to a wooden ship at close range."

"But how many times can you use that spell before you need to rest. Ammaril has a magical stone that holds most of the power she draws on." Lucia said.

"Ah now that is the issue. To create enough magical flame to destroy a ship in a single blast using only the small sources that would be available to me aboard the *Storm Chaser*? Once, maybe twice if I can really focus." Dominic said.

"Which still leaves us to deal with the others." Gromar commented.

"At least there would be one less." Will pointed out. Then he looked down at the deck where the people on it were starting to get agitated. Some had already moved to the side of the ship to try and get a look at the other vessels themselves while mothers were trying to keep their children close, "I'm more worried about panic. Horace, Lucia, would you see if you can calm these people down before someone gets hurt or falls overboard?"

"What should we tell them?" Lucia responded

"That we don't think that they're pirates but if we can't be certain of who we are then we'll sail around them rather than through them." Will told her.

"I'll try. Though I might need someone to calm me down." Horace added before he and Lucia headed for the stairs leading down to the crowded deck.

"Will I see them!" Yilven then called out from the front of the ship.

"What do you see?" Will responded.

"I can see five ships. Two trying to hide behind the other three. The front three are cogs and the two behind are longships. Two of the cogs and the longships are all flying the flag of Lerron. The last cog is flying a Dannaron flag. I think they're warships." Yilven said and Will winced.

"A warship from Dannaron. It would have to be." he said.

"Would you rather it was pirates Will?" Dominic commented and Will hesitated.

"Probably not. Hopefully no-one aboard that Dannaron ship will even know who I am after all these years." he said.

"You're a sailor, what do you think they're doing there Will?" Gromar added.

"It's a blockade. The cogs are there to block the approach to the harbour and if anyone tries to break through or go around the longships will go after them. The authorities in Lerron may have already been warned about Ammaril and they've deployed their warships to protect the city harbour. That ship from Dannaron probably just happened to be in port at the time and has joined with them. Lerron and Dannaron aren't exactly allies but the captain of that ship must be smart enough to know that Ammaril poses a threat to everyone." Will said. Then he turned to the men behind him who were manning the ship's rudder, "Stay on course, take us between those ships." he ordered.

"Do you think ships would stand a chance against Ammaril's dragons." Dominic asked as the *Storm Chaser* sailed onwards, "Even if the dragons themselves can't fly all the way across the straight then they could be carried by a large enough ship until they got closer."

"It depends on how well armed the ships are." Will replied, "Ordinary archers are unlikely to bring down a dragon unless it has weaknesses we don't know about yet and a stone hurled by a catapult may be enough to kill one while it's on the ground but I doubt that it would be accurate enough to hit one while it's flying other than by pure luck. On the other hand a ballista might put a nice hole in a dragon's hide."

"Then let's hope that that's what they have." Dominic said.

The knowledge that the ships ahead were naval vessels rather than pirates gave the people on the *Storm Chaser's* deck a sense of relief and they were now confident that their journey would soon be safely over and this allowed Horace and Lucia to return to the rear structure with Will and Gromar. Meanwhile the *Storm Chaser's* crew did exactly as they were told and sailed onwards, heading between the small force of warships and as they drew closer the differences between the *Storm Chaser* and the other cogs became more apparent. Whereas the *Storm Chaser* had a single structure to the rear the warships all had another to the front. Both of these looked well-fortified and had narrow slit windows spaced about a yard apart going all the way around so that crossbowmen could fire bolts through them in safety either at other vessels or hostile boarders if they reached the decks that were themselves fortified with walls running around them that were tall enough to provide cover to the crew but low enough that more massed crossbowmen could fire from them. Most significantly each of the three cogs mounted a ballista, a larger crossbow operated by a crew on the tops of their forward structures while one of the pair from Lerron also mounted such a weapon on its rear structure. Between their armament and fortified structures the three cogs had the appearance of being small fortresses floating on the sea. On the other hand the two long ships lurking behind the cogs had much flatter designs, lacking the fortified structures at each end while their decks were also more open so that crewmen could easily disembark to conduct a boarding action though they still mounted ballistas towards the prow giving them the appearance of ships meant more for attack than defence.

As well as the general design and construction of the warships the *Storm Chaser* came close enough that it was possible to read the names of the warships where they were painted on the vessels' sides and Will suddenly turned his back on the vessel from Dannaron.

"Will what's wrong?" Lucia asked when he did this.

"That ship, the *Splendid Spirit*, that's the ship I served on." Will replied.

"You mean the one you deserted from?" Horace commented.

"Yes I do mean the one I deserted from." Will said.

"Do you think any of the crew would remember you?" Lucia asked.

"And would they call you out if they did?" Gromar added as he and the others all looked at the *Splendid Spirit*.

"That depends. The captain and first mate probably would but they might not be aboard any more." Will said before a voice called out from the Dannaron warship.

"Hoy, *Storm Chaser*!" it said.

"What do we do now?" Horace asked.

"Reply, what else?" Gromar answered.

"But they might realise that Will is one of them." Horace pointed out.

"Perhaps Dominic should reply then." Lucia suggested.

"Hoy, *Storm Chaser*! What are you doing in these waters?" the voice from the warship then called out.

"Tell them." Will said to Dominic.

"Tell them what?" Dominic asked.

"Can't we just tell them the truth?" Lucia said.

"Yes we can." Will replied.

"Very well, here goes." Dominic said and he turned to face the *Splendid Spirit* directly, "We have come from Costria. We are carrying passengers fleeing the Orcs." he shouted towards the other ship.

There was a brief pause and Dominic saw the man who had been calling out to him turn his head to speak to someone who was not in sight. Then another man appeared whose relatively clean clothing indicated that he was one of the ship's more senior crewmen.

"How many do you carry?" this man called out and Will's jaw dropped.

"That's John Castle. He was the first mate when I was aboard." he said.

"How many should I say?" Dominic asked.

"Did anyone make a proper count?" Horace added.

"No, we just waved them aboard. Tell him between one and two hundred." Will said.

"We have more than a hundred. Maybe two." Dominic shouted towards the other ship.

"That's a good number. I hope they're willing to work because the Mayor of Sayal expects as many of the new arrivals to help build defences for when the Orcs try crossing the straight." John responded and Dominic smiled and waved to him.

"Thank you." he said.

"I thought you said he was a terrible person. He seemed quite nice to me." Horace commented as the *Storm Chaser* continued to sail between the warships.

"Probably because of the Lerron warships watching too. Mark my words, if it had been up to him or my old captain we'd have had to pay a fee for each person we were carrying before they'd let us into the harbour or something similar. They expected payoffs from pretty much everyone, the crews of ships and boats we encountered or even their own men. Just to line their own pockets and I know they weren't the only ones doing it either." Will replied.

"At least it sounds like they're taking the threat from Ammaril seriously." Gromar said.

"Just as long as they let us leave again so I can return to Hessenland." Dominic said before looking at Gromar and adding, "What about you Gromar? If Lerron is building defences then that could mean good work for an engineer such as yourself."

"It would be tempting if they made me an offer but I think I should stick with the rest of you for now and head north to Hessenland. I saw what happened in Syldarin and Tarran. You might need me to help convince everyone of what we saw." Gromar replied.

"And then you'll return home." Horace commented and Gromar nodded slowly.

"And then I'll return home, yes. As I've already said, I have plans there and my people need to know about what's happening as well. If things go badly then we could be next in Ammaril's list of kingdoms to conquer. Mind you I expect her Orcs and Trolls will have a lot more trouble trying to invade a Dwarf mountain city than the human and Elf ones they've taken on so far." he said.

"Do you think the Dwarves would send help?" Lucia asked.

"That depends. Most Dwarf kings prefer to ignore the outside world until it reaches their door." Dominic answered, "There are few Dwarves like Gromar here that travel far from their mountain homes."

"Once we've docked we need to get all these people off the ship." Will said, looking down at the deck, "I expect that Mister Bailey will expect the crew to carry his belongings off ahead of everyone else but that was never a part of our agreement. The crew can carry his luggage for free after all the passengers have disembarked or if he wants he can pay some of these people to carry them as they are leaving us."

"Gives them chance to earn some money. I like it." Gromar commented.

"Horace I want you to handle restocking our provisions. We're only heading up the straight to Teuten but I'd like to be fully stocked just in case." Will added.

"The crew will want paying." Horace pointed out and Will nodded.

"Yes, I'll take care of that. We might lose a few in port so if anyone comes looking for a position have them wait until the rest of us get back." he said.

"Get back? Where are you going?" Horace asked.

"I want to speak with someone in authority in the city." Will told him, "We've actually witnessed what Ammaril is capable of and that information needs to be known."

"The stone circles." Dominic said.

"Exactly." Will replied, "Everyone knows that Orcs or Hadarians could cross the sea by ship just like anyone else but we need to be certain that people know about the risk posed by the circles."

Even though they had been gone from the world for thousands of years, the ancient Oscari had left behind them evidence of their presence in the form of ruined structures scattered on every continent that the other intelligent species had visited. Most of these were in Oscay itself where they had lived and there were entire ruined cities located there but the mostly widely recognised structures were the great stone circles scattered around the world. Each circle consisted of a single central stone block that was surrounded by numerous vertical standing stones whose exact number varied but that were all arranged in a circle with the lower single block at the very centre. In the millennia since the Oscari had vanished from the world these stone circles had been put to a variety of uses. Various religions had used them as places of worship or sacrifice and mystics had sought meaning from their locations at the intersection of ley lines while in some parts of the world they had been used as meeting places, neutral ground where rival tribes would meet or leaders would address their subordinates, however the true purpose of these had remained a mystery until Ammaril was able to unlock their secret and employ them to move her Orc army from Oscay to Sillyda and then to Tarran in an instant.

It was to one of these circles that Shimmandra took Thomas. The journey from Tarranberg took several hours on horseback and it was approaching midday by the time they got there. Given how vital the circles were to transporting Ammaril's army from place to place Thomas was not surprised to see a group of around fifty Orcs guarding the circle, their tents set up close by but not actually within the stones to prevent them from being transported away along with anything else. Shimmandra and Thomas dismounted from their horses at the edge of the ring and led them by their reins as they walked towards the central stone.

"So where is she?" Thomas asked.

"Syllda. We'll go to the closest circle and ride from there to the palace." Shimmandra said.

"The Royal Palace of Sylldarin? So Ammaril's taken over her family home then?" Thomas commented.

"Only for the time being. She'll rule from Oscay when her new palace is done." Shimmandra told him as they reached the stone and she placed her hand on its surface, "Since you've lost your wraith I'll do this." she said and Thomas snorted. The stone circles drew the vast amounts of magical power they needed to function from the ley lines the Oscari had built them on but they also required a small amount of magical power to be expended by the user in order to trigger their activation. As someone who had no magical ability himself, Thomas had had to rely on the Wraith that was bound to the gemstone embedded in his chest for this power while all he had to do himself was picture his destination in his mind.

"Be my guest." he said, standing back from the stone as Shimmandra turned away from him.

In an instant Thomas and Shimmandra went from standing in the middle of a stone circle in Tarran to standing in a similar circle of standing stones in Sylldarin with the city of Syllda visible in the distance.

"Now get back on your horse. Ammaril is waiting for us." Shimmandra told Thomas.

Despite the Orc invasion and the capture of most of its population to be transformed into Orcs, Syllda remained largely intact. Of course some buildings had been damaged or destroyed in the fighting but the most significant destruction had occurred on the edge of the city where the much-vaunted Tower of Sorcery had stood. Ammaril had recognised that the greatest threat to her came from other magic users so she had sent one of her dragons to destroy the tower as the first part of her attack and now all that remained of it was rubble. Shimmandra and the other renegade Elf spellcasters now serving Ammaril owed their freedom to this destruction, the cells in which they had been held having been in the cellar of the Tower of Sorcery and when it collapsed they had been protected, though it had been necessary to dig out the rubble from the collapsed stairway in order to free them.

The streets of the city were eerily quiet as Thomas and Shimmandra rode through them towards the palace. Following their transformation into Orcs, the population had been moved out of it and either conscripted into Ammaril's growing army or put to work providing the material that the army required. The city in Oscay where the Oscari had built their Great Library had also been largely deserted but most of that had laid in ruins when Thomas had been there so it had not seemed unusual. On the other hand the buildings that lined the streets in Syllda were still standing and Thomas could not help but expect people to emerge from them at any moment. However, the only signs of life in the city were either animals wandering the streets at random, the

chirping of minor dragons on rooftops or the occasional group of Orcs or Trolls as they went through the city in search of any survivors who may have escaped the invasion and gone into hiding or anything that looked like it could be of use. Upon reaching the palace located at the heart of the city Shimmandra and Thomas simply rode in through the open gates and right up to the palace itself, watched by several Orcs as they went.

"Where is Ammaril? Is she still in the library?" Shimmandra asked one of the Orcs guarding the main entrance to the palace as she dismounted her horse.

"Yes, the queen is inside." the Orc responded and Shimmandra glanced at Thomas.

"Come on then, follow me." she told him before leading him inside the palace and then towards the library. Along the way they walked down a hallway that was lined with portraits of Elf rulers stretching back many generations. Thomas had no idea who any of them were from their appearances and although their names were carved into the frames of the portraits these were all written in the Elven language and although he had been able to learn a few words of the spoken language Thomas was unable to read it. On the other hand when they reached the end of the hallway there was a larger portrait that showed several Elves together and Thomas immediately recognised two of them. One was Ammaril while the other was her twin brother Orcan sometime prior to his transformation into an Orc while Thomas guessed that the others in the picture were their older brother, Dellaron and father Larallus who he knew only by their names.

"Such a happy family." Thomas commented as they walked past the portrait but Shimmandra ignored him and just carried on walking until she reached the large double doors to the library. A compact hand cart was now outside these doors and several wooden boxes had already been loaded onto it. As Shimmandra approached a large brutish figure emerged from the library carrying another box. Looking like an oversized Orc this was a Troll, formerly an Ogre who had been transformed by the same spell that Ammaril used to create the Orcs. While Ogres were already known for being strong but of limited intellect the spell had amplified both of these qualities and Trolls possessed great strength but very little intelligence, useful for tasks that required brute force but no reasoning. The Troll set this box onto the cart and then walked around to the front and picked up the handles. A cart such of this was usually pulled by a pair of Elves, one holding each handle but the Troll just stood between them and on his own raised them before pulling the cart and its cargo of books along the hallway past Shimmandra and then Thomas.

Entering the library Shimmandra and Thomas found more Trolls loading books from piles on the floor into boxes. Unlike the last time Shimmandra had been in here there were numerous large gaps in the shelves where books had obviously been removed as Ammaril decided what knowledge she wanted to preserve in Oscay.

"Where is Ammaril?" Shimmandra asked the closest and as the Troll pointed Ammaril's voice also called out from that direction.

"I am here Shimmandra." she said, stepping out from behind a bookshelf with a book in her hand, "Do you have Thomas?"

"He's right here." Shimmandra responded and she looked at Thomas as he moved to where Ammaril could see him as well.

"Excellent. I have work for you Thomas Work that you have already shown that you are adept at." Ammaril said, walking towards Shimmandra and Thomas while still holding the book.

"Of course." Thomas replied.

"Several of the human kings in the nations bordering Hadar and Tarran have sent word that they want to discuss an alliance. Of course this just means that they are afraid of being conquered rather than them having any specific loyalty to my cause but if it speeds up the conquest then so be it." Ammaril said.

"I thought that you promised the Hadarian Emperor dominion over this land." Thomas commented, remembering his trip to Hadar so that he could negotiate the alliance between Ammaril and their Emperor.

"And he will. These kings will answer to him rather than him placing various distant relatives of his own on their thrones as he did with Costria." Ammaril replied, "Those are the terms that you are to deliver to them."

"And if they refuse them?" Thomas asked.

"Then their kingdoms will fall as rapidly as Tarran fell and the Hadarian Emperor will have more thrones to hand out to his favoured kin." Ammaril said, "Graysil is writing the terms down for you to deliver and bring back their response. He will tell you where each of them is to be taken." all of a sudden Ammaril frowned and reached out towards Thomas' chest with the palm held towards him and her fingers spread out, "The Wraith. It is gone. How?" she asked.

"It was that little bitch Lucia. The one who was your serving girl in Oscay." Thomas answered.

"Lucia was nothing more than a serving girl. She had no magical power with which to destroy a Wraith." Ammaril said.

"Maybe not, but the knife she'd got from Magister Quinnus had the power." Thomas said.

"She did not meet the Vampire." Ammaril pointed out.

"No but she didn't get it directly from him. Apparently she took it from Diera when she was killed by the assassins I hired." Thomas said.

"The assassins who failed to kill the rest of the group that has opposed me since Oscan?" Ammaril said, "Tell me exactly what happened Thomas. Now."

Thomas glanced at Shimmandra before looking back at Ammaril and beginning his explanation.

"I came across Lucia and that Halfling cook from the *Storm Chaser* in Tarran. The Wraith was going to deal with them when Lucia pulled that knife and the Wraith just drained away to nothing, like what happened in Oscan when the Wraiths struck the shields that Magister Quinnus had enchanted. Then that Halfling blind-sided me and hit me." he said.

"I see. How many people have you killed over the years Thomas Cooper? Personally I mean, not simply hiring someone else to do your dirty work or placed in a position where someone else will kill them for you? How many times has the knife been yours alone?" Ammaril asked and Thomas shrugged.

"I don't know exactly." he said, "Eight. Maybe ten."

"So at least eight then and how many of them were women or Halflings?" Ammaril added.

"One was a woman but I've never killed a Halfling." Thomas told her.

"So you have killed a woman and between seven and nine men. Grown men I'm going to assume." Ammaril said, "Yet you stand here and tell me that a woman and a Halfling were able to overcome you and that they then left you alive?"

"I doubt either of them has killed anyone before. They-" Thomas began.

"Be silent!" Ammaril snapped at him, yelling loud enough that both he and Shimmandra flinched.

"You are a fool and a coward Thomas Cooper but luckily for you I still have need of your services. If I didn't then you may rest assured that I would kill you where you stand. Your mission to Hadar and Tarran were a success and you delivered Hadar, Tarran and Costria to us. Now I need you to take messages to more of the kingdoms that neighbour those three. If they want to avoid destruction then they need to surrender themselves to my authority entirely. In this case of course the Hadarian Emperor will be ruling over them in my name but it amounts to the same thing."

"So is she coming with me to work the stone circles? Or am I going by horse?" Thomas replied.

"You will operate the stone circles with the assistance of a Wraith just as before Thomas." Ammaril told him and he frowned for a moment.

"So you're going to rip this stone out of me and put in a new one?" he asked.

"No. Removing the stone would kill you before another could be put in its place and trying to implant a second would likely also kill you. No, what is needed is an alternative means to allow you to transport a Wraith that you cannot escape if you decide to turn on me." Ammaril said and then she waved her hand,

"Take him away and keep him somewhere secure. Someone will come to deal with him later." she added and Shimmandra grabbed Thomas by his arm.

"The palace dungeons are this way." she said to him.

Will, Yilven, Gromar, Lucia and Dominic all waited outside the mayor's office in Sayal. Most port cities tended to be crowded and busy but Sayal seemed even more of a hive of activity than others that Will had visited. Most of the ships arriving were coming from just across the Straight of Lerron bringing people fleeing Ammaril's armies. For many years the landmass across the straight had been known for the Hadarian Empire's wars of conquest as it swallowed up its smaller neighbours or subverted their governments but that had been purely a matter for the countries on that landmass rather than the continent of Entris as a whole. Of course all that had changed now and stories were spreading about the alliance between the Hadarians and Ammaril's Orcs that threatened to spread their conflict across the ocean. Evidence of the threat that this was though to pose was clearly visible in the city with fortifications being constructed around the port and troops from more inland regions of Lerron reinforcing the city's own garrison. With so much happening the mayor of Sayal was equally busy and the group from the *Storm Chaser* had had to wait for a significant time before his secretary approached them.

"The mayor will see you now." he said in the language of Hessenland but heavily accented and he held the door open for them to enter.

"Thank you." Will responded as he led the others through the open doorway into the mayor's office where he sat behind a large desk, "Mayor Alondza, thank you for seeing us."

"When a group as unusual as yours requests a meeting I take an interest Captain Beckett, but my time is valuable so I would be grateful if we could keep this brief." the mayor replied.

"Then to be blunt mayor all those fortifications that you're building to defend against an invasion from the sea might be useless." Will told him and he frowned.

"How else would the Hadarians or these Orcs cross the ocean?" he asked.

"Mayor my name is Dominic von Garran, a wizard from the court of Hessenland and I have learned that the former Princess Ammaril of Sylldarin has a magical means to move her warriors across the world in an instant. Using that her forces could appear elsewhere inland, behind your defences." Dominic said.

"Forgive but even for a wizard that sounds fantastical. I've seen wizards casting their spells and they can only cast a handful before they need to rest and recoup their power." Alondza said.

"They use the stone circles left behind by the Oscari," Yilven said, "those provide all the power that is needed. That's how Ammaril was able to get her initial army of Orcs back to Sildaryn from Oscay even after we burned all their ships."

"There aren't any of those circles within fifty miles of here though." Alondza pointed out.

"Then you'd better move quickly to watch it mayor." Gromar said, "Only a few hundred can be moved through them at a time so if you have a big enough force on hand you might be able to wipe out anyone trying to attack through one piecemeal. A few stone throwers and a company or so of crossbowmen set up close by ought to do the trick nicely."

"It sounds like we would be better off destroying the circles." Alondza commented.

"Can that be done?" Lucia said, looking at Dominic.

"I don't know." he responded, "I don't know exactly how the circles work."

"Then it looks like guarding them is your best option. Thinking you've destroyed them when you haven't would be as bad as doing nothing at all." Will said.

"I see. Of course I can only give orders within the limits of Sayal but I will send word to the court of Queen Isabel. Are you staying here in the city?" Alondza said.

"No, Dominic needs to get back to Hessenland and Yilven will be travelling to Raysalgard so we need to set sail as soon as the *Storm Chaser* is prepared. Probably early tomorrow." Will said and Alondza nodded.

"Of course." he said.

"I wouldn't abandon those defences you're building altogether though." Gromar added, "Just because Ammaril can send her Orcs through the old stone circles doesn't mean that more of her army won't come by ship. Getting the entire Hadarian army through the circles would take too long."

"It seems we must be watchful everywhere. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, hopefully it is not too late to act upon it." Alondza responded, "My secretary will show you out."

"Do you think that telling him that will do any good?" Lucia asked as the group left the building in which the mayor's office was located, "He has to send word to his queen before anything will get done."

"Maybe, but at least the wheels are in motion now. A far better situation than when we tried to convince King Gerald that Ammaril was a danger." Yilven replied.

"Hopefully we'll find him more receptive the next time we speak to him." Will said, "Say three days along the Strait of Lerron and then another two on horseback from Teuten to Hessenstadt."

"So we could be telling the king I told you so in five days." Gromar added.

"He'll listen this time." Dominic said, "Even if he hasn't already about the fall of Sylldarin and Tarran then my master will convince him that what we're saying is true."

After being locked in one of the cells beneath the Royal Palace Thomas was just left alone, Shimmandra apparently confident that he would not be able to escape. Even if he had have been able to get out of the locked cell though there was nowhere for him to go. He was not familiar with the island of Sylldarin and as far as he knew he was the only human being here, everyone else being either an Orc or one of the handful of remaining Elves in Ammaril's service. This meant that getting out of the cell would actually be the easy part before having to survive on his own while evading bands of Orcs. Surviving in the wilderness on his own was not something that appealed to Thomas even without being hunted so he made no attempt to get out of the cell and instead waited for someone to come and get him although he feared what might happen when they finally did.

Thomas had no idea exactly how long he waited before someone came but he leapt to his feet and rushed to the door, peering out through the small barred opening as soon as heard the sound of footsteps.

"Hey! I was starting to think that you'd forgotten about me in here." he called out before a group of four Orcs came into view. The Orcs did not respond to Thomas, instead just unlocking the cell door and he stepped back before it was thrown open and the Orcs stormed into the cell. None of them said a word to Thomas as they grabbed him roughly and started to drag him from the cell, "Hey! Where are we going? There's no need to drag me like this." he protested but the Orcs gave no indication of caring about what he had to say.

The Shattered Stone

Instead they just continued to drag him from the palace dungeons and outside the building while he continued to protest against his rough handling.

The Orc guards took Thomas to the palace stables where another Orc waited with Shimmandra. Unlike the Orcs who had brought Thomas here the one standing beside Shimmandra wore more mundane working clothes that included a thick leather apron and it was obvious that this Orc was a blacksmith. Beside him was a burning brazier and a metal anvil.

"What is this? What's going on?" Thomas demanded and Shimmandra smiled at him.

"Don't worry Thomas. This won't take long." she said as the Orcs holding Thomas forced him to his knees.

"What are you doing?" Thomas asked but Shimmandra now just watched as the Orc blacksmith produced a large circular copper band that was hinged to allow it to open. Although he could not make out what it said Thomas saw that there was writing of some kind etched into the inside of the ring and in addition this band had a stone identical to the one already embedded in Thomas' chest mounted in it. From the size of the band Thomas could tell that it was intended to go around his neck. Sure enough the blacksmith placed the open ring around Thomas' neck and closed it before the Orcs holding him pushed him down over the anvil, "I want to speak to Ammaril." Thomas said.

"Ammaril has other matters to attend to." Shimmandra told him.

The blacksmith then picked up a thick metal pin in a set on tongues and held in the flames from the brazier to heat it before he pushed it through the holes at each end of the ring to link them together. With the head of the pin resting on the anvil the blacksmith then took a hammer and struck the other end forcefully several times, flattening it out and widening it so that it and in turn the ring around Thomas' neck could not be removed.

"Release him." Shimmandra told the Orcs holding Thomas and they promptly let go of their grip on him. Immediately Thomas got to his feet and reached for the ring now fixed around his neck. There was enough room for him to get his fingers underneath so there was no danger of it choking him but it was far too tight to be able to be lifted off over his head, "It won't come off if that's what you're wondering Thomas. The Wraith in the stone within the ring will watch you in the same way as the previous one that inhabited the stone in your chest and thanks to the enchantment of the ring it can speak to you directly and provide the magical energy necessary to operate the stone circles. Of course it will also act to prevent any betrayal by you, including any attempt to remove the ring by force."

"So I'm just supposed to wear this damned ring around my neck for the rest of my life?" Thomas asked.

"Of course." Shimmandra answered simply.

"And what if I need to try and blend into a crowd? This thing marks me as an agent of Ammaril." Thomas pointed out.

"Then if you ever find yourself in such a situation I suggest that you obtain a coat that will cover it. Or perhaps a scarf." Shimmandra suggested, "However, for now being clearly marked as an agent of Ammaril will have its advantages. I will give you a list of countries that you are to visit. In each one you will deliver in person a document that lays out the terms by which Ammaril will permit the rulers of that country to keep their thrones and their lives."

"While I have to trust that they won't just cut my head off and send you this ring back, Wraith or no Wraith. These kings are bound to have their own mages and wizards to deal with magical threats." Thomas said.

"The rulers you will be visiting have already made requests for mercy from Ammaril, they are obviously fearful of her wrath but if they do kill you then at least will die with the knowledge that despite the worthless nature of your life it will be avenged. Now come with me, I will give you the letters and the list of rulers to whom they are to be delivered." Shimmandra told him and Thomas frowned, not confident in his best protection against death being an ethereal creature and the threat of retaliation.

5

Ammaril watched as Trolls unloaded the crude wooden cages containing dragons from the wagons and set them out on the ground. The dragons were a mix of the major dragons that were the size of large dogs and the horse sized greater dragons. Both of these species had been created by the Oscari long ago by manipulating the smaller lesser dragons that were far more common in the same way that they had altered humans to create Elves, Dwarves, Halflings and Ogres. It was this existing manipulation that allowed Ammaril to further modify these species using the magic she had learned from the Oscari's Great Library. For the time being Ammaril could not modify species that the Oscari had not already changed themselves, some other process that she had yet to uncover being necessary to make them more malleable but she was confident that eventually she would discover this secret also and then she would have the power to shape any species in the world into any other form she desired. There were almost fifty cages in total, more than the initial number that Ammaril had been given but that did not affect the spell that she was about to cast. The more dragons of legendary size she could create, the better as far as she was concerned.

"Space the cages out more. The dragons must have room between them to grow." Ammaril called out to the Trolls who were unloading the wagons. Then she turned to a nearby Orc. This Orc had once been the sea captain, Vendril, whose ships had taken the expedition from Sylldarwin to Oscay. He and his crew had come from the southern Elf land and while their skin had been much darker than those from the lands in Entris it was now the same shade of grey as the other Orcs, "Have they been given the potion?" she asked.

"Yes my queen. One cupful added to the meat they were fed after being caught in our nets." Vendril responded.

"Excellent, then it should have had time to take effect on them." she said before she walked to the nearby standing stone that had also been brought here. This stone had been taken from one of the circles created as a means of instantaneous travel by the Oscari and been used by Ammaril to drain the magical power that had kept the Great Library frozen in time. That power had flowed into the stone where Ammaril could now draw on it as vast reserve and despite the amount of power she had already used in casting her transformation spells she had taken only a small fraction of what had been required to freeze time, "Stand ready by the cages." she called out and Trolls with axes rushed to take up positions among the cages while the dragons held inside them snapped at them through the wooden bars.

Ammaril then placed a hand on the magic filled stone and extended the other out towards the cages as she focused her thoughts. Then there was a sudden flash of green light and the eyes of all of the caged dragons also briefly glowed with this same shade of green. Immediately all of the dragons let out roars of pain and collapsed in their cages, writhing in pain. This was the cue for the Trolls to swing their axes at the cages and smash them open before rushing away. The cages had been built to hold creatures no more than the size of a horse so there was not enough room for them to grow to the size of a large house inside.

The dragons' growth began quickly as their limbs, tails and wings began to lengthen. Then their bodies and heads did the same as they became much larger versions of what they had been. Unlike the effect of the spell on the Elves and Ogres who had been transformed into Orcs and Trolls there was no significant effect on the dragons' overall shapes, they retained the same shape that was shared by all three existing species of dragon while just increasing massively in size. The process of transformation was gruelling to the dragons and there were three of them that were too weak to survive it, all dying in agony with their limbs and other extremities all grown to various disproportionate sizes. For those that survived the transformation process regardless of how big the dragons had been beforehand, whether the size of a large dog or a horse, the transformation spell was designed to grow them to the same general size. As well as being altered physically the transformation spell also affected the dragon's minds, imposing on them a loyalty to Ammaril and those in her service so even though they were now uncaged and unchained the dragons simply looked down at the various Orcs and Trolls around them as well as Ammaril herself.

"The transformation is complete my queen." Vendril said, looking at the field full of giant reptiles the size of a house.

"They will need feeding." Ammaril responded, knowing that the energy used to grow the dragons' size would need to be replaced and that despite their mental conditioning starvation could still make them dangerous to any living thing nearby.

"Yes my queen." Vendril said, bowing his head.

"And inform Orcan and Tiellan that they are ready. Three dragons like this were a force to be reckoned with. Fifty will be invincible." Ammaril said.

"Yes my queen." Vendril said once again and he bowed his head again.

"I want the stone loaded back aboard the wagon and moved to the circle. I will be returning to Oscay to see how matters are progressing there. Orcan will be in command until I return." Ammaril added.

Although it was straight forwards enough to set up the conditions for the creation and binding of fire demons, water based entities posed greater issues for the Elf warlocks. It was easy enough to drown large numbers of people in any open body of water but the trick was to do so in a small space of time while maintaining a suitable barrier of salt and iron to prevent the creature that this would bring forth from escaping. The solution was to create an artificial body water from a large hole that the sacrificial subjects would be thrown bound and weighted down into before it was flooded. This could be surrounded by the salt and iron perimeter before water was allowed to flow in using a trough that was supported above the perimeter to avoid creating any gaps. Then when enough water had filled the hole the flow was cut off and the trough removed.

"The key is moving quickly." Dorsos told Graysil after he had completed the binding of a water demon, "When they enter the world demons have no sense of self."

"So that's how you can name them?" Graysil commented and Dorsos nodded.

"Exactly. Given enough time a demon will name itself and then controlling it is almost impossible. It's the use of the name that gives us power over them. Without it we're just confronting an uncontrollable killer. Sometimes the names of demons have been recorded or can be deduced but no demon will ever willingly reveal its own true name. If it knows the name of other demons it might be convinced to reveal them for the right price though." he replied.

"What sort of price? Demons don't have any need for gold or riches." Graysil said.

"No but sometimes they require magical items crafting and that's something they can't do. All they can do is manipulate whatever force led to their creation. Of course they'll try to get whatever they want for free by threatening a wizard but that is one area where we have the advantage." Dorsos said before he saw Shimmandra approaching on horseback, "Ah Shimmandra. Out for an early morning ride?" he said when she halted nearby and dismounted from the back of her horse.

"I'm here to tell you that Ammaril has gone back to Oscay. She's taken the books she wanted from the palace library and that stone." Shimmandra told him and he smiled.

"Leaving us to our own devices." he said.

"Leaving us to her freak brother's whims." Shimmandra responded, "She's left Orcan in charge to plan the invasion and we're just supposed to do what he tells us."

"What about the human traitor?" Graysil asked.

"He's already been sent to deliver Ammaril's terms to the human kings who are desperate enough to want to negotiate with her." Shimmandra answered.

"If they're desperate then surely that won't take long. They'll agree to whatever terms are put before them" Graysil commented and Dorsos smirked.

"Don't underestimate human arrogance Graysil." he said, "Those kings may still think that they can negotiate better terms than simply becoming vassals in their own kingdoms."

"Well if they do then they're in for a nasty shock. Ammaril's just cast that transformation spell again." Shimmandra said.

"I thought she couldn't use it on humans or anything else that the Oscari hadn't already altered themselves." Graysil pointed out.

"She can't and she didn't use it on humans." Shimmandra responded.

"She used it on dragons didn't she?" Dorsos commented and Shimmandra nodded.

"She's got about fifty of those fire-breathing beasts now." She said before she looked towards the pool of water behind Dorsos and Graysil, "What about the demons?"

"We've got more than two dozen of them now. Most are fire demons but we did slit the throats of one village to make a blood demon and this was the second water demon we've created. None are especially powerful just yet of course but in a pack they'll prove useful on the battlefield." Dorsos explained, "Graysil has probably seen the process enough by now that he can carry out the binding himself so that will enable us to double the rate at which the pair of us can create and bind them."

"What about Hiros? Where is he?" Shimmandra said, looking around for any signs of the Elf from the east.

"There was another village a couple of miles up the river that had tried to put up a fight. The Orcs overran it of course, the villagers just didn't have the numbers or the fortifications they needed to hold them back so they were slaughtered. They took some of the Orcs with them of course but to Hiros a corpse is a corpse, no matter what species it comes from and when we left him there he was in the process of bringing back as many of the relatively undamaged ones as he could. I don't know how effective a hoard of zombies would be as an army in battle but they can fetch and carry without complaint so they'll have their uses one way or another." Dorsos explained.

"Well he needs to know as well. I'm sure that Orcan will have need of us to move a large part of his army across the Straight of Lerron. Especially Ammaril's pet dragons. I don't think there are any sailors who'd want to share a ship with one of them." Shimmandra said before she looked at Graysil and added, "Perhaps you should go and tell Hiros. I have more questions for Dorsos about the demons he has been summoning."

"Of course." Graysil said and he started to walk towards where his and Dorsos' horses were tied to a tree. When he reached them though he looked around and saw something that appeared odd to him. Dorsos had lent his staff against a rock and as Graysil watched Shimmandra removed the pendant from around her neck that contained the Wraith in its stone and placed it down on the rock beside Dorsos' staff. Then the pair of them started to walk away from the rock, leaving their possessions behind and heading in a direction that took them away from not only Graysil but also the Orcs that the Elf warlocks currently commanded. Graysil watched as the pair vanished behind a human dwelling before he untied his horse and climbed into the saddle.

"So our oh-so beloved queen is heading for Oscay already. This is sooner than I'd thought." Dorsos said when he was satisfied that he and Shimmandra were out of earshot of anyone else.

"When did you think she'd leave?" Shimmandra asked.

"I thought she'd stay at least until the other kings on this side of the straight had been fully brought to heel. Of course that was before she created all those dragons. With them we should be able to bring them under control quite easily. After that there's just the matter of crossing the straight to invade the rest of Entris." Dorsos answered.

"Which Orcan will be in charge of it seems. I wonder whether he was any less of a brute before Ammaril turned him into an Orc?" Shimmandra commented.

"From what I've heard his main concern was keeping the humans away from our lands. He thought they were getting too powerful to ignore." Dorsos replied.

"Do you think that he'll pose a problem for us once Ammaril is out of the way?" Shimmandra said.

"I doubt it. He may try to challenge us for leadership but he doesn't have the sort of power available to him that we have to us. Hopefully by the time anyone finds out that Ammaril is dead we'll have had the chance to go through her notes and we'll be able to command the loyalty of the Orcs, Trolls and dragons the same way that she can. Just to be on the safe side when Graysil starts summoning demons himself I'm going to start creating some that aren't bound to anyone but myself. I'd like to have some troops that we can rely on as well." Dorsos responded.

"What about me? If you've got these demons then what do I have?" Shimmandra said.

"I can include you as well. I'll make sure I give you the names of the demons answerable to just the two of us." Dorsos told her.

"So when do we make our move?" Shimmandra said and Dorsos considered this for a while.

"Not until after the invasion starts." he said eventually, "Right now there are too many Orcs around. On the other hand when they've been committed to the invasion there will be fewer available to protect Ammaril and in the fighting we ought to be able to slip away to the nearest stone circle and travel to Oscay. We just need to think about the circle nearest to the Great Library."

"And then we kill her?" Shimmandra said and Dorsos smiled.

"Yes and then we kill her." he replied.

With the help of a handful of Orcs Hiros had organised the corpses from the fighting into those that could be reanimated and those that could not. The process of creating a zombie was not simple and Hiros did not intend to try to do it out here among the remains of a deserted human town. Instead the bodies that were of use to him were being loaded onto carts so that they could be taken back to the workshop he had set up in Syllda. Those of no use to him in his necromancy would simply be cremated right here.

"Someone approaches my lord." one of the Orcs said, pointing past Hiros and he turned to see Graysil approaching.

"Graysil what are you doing back here?" he called out before Graysil brought his horse to a halt and dismounted from it.

"Shimmandra arrived to tell us that Ammaril is returning to Oscay and leaving Orcan in charge of the invasion." Graysil told him.

"Ah then I expect that we'll be needed to operate the stone circles." Hiros said before he looked at the bodies being loaded onto the wagons, "I just hope that there's enough time for me to take a look at some of these, I hate to see good material go to waste."

"As far as I know nothing has been planned yet. Ammaril has only just left and the human Thomas has been sent to present terms to kings on this side of the straight who want to make a deal rather than be invaded."

The Shattered Stone

You should have time to do your work yet. There's something else that I wanted to discuss with you. It concerns Dorsos and Shimmandra." Graysil said.

Hiros frowned for a moment at the mention of the other two warlocks who had been rescued from the dungeons under Syllda's Tower of Sorcery.

"What about them?" he asked.

"They went off to talk in private. They obviously didn't want to be overheard by anyone at all." Graysil answered.

"When did this happen Graysil?" Hiros added.

"When Shimmandra told me to come to you. I saw them heading off together as I was leaving." Graysil told him.

"Are you suggesting that they have a romantic relationship? Dorsos is considerably older than Shimmandra but I suppose it's possible." Hiros responded.

"No, I don't think it's like that at all Hiros. I think they're plotting something. Dorsos left his staff behind and Shimmandra left her pendant." Graysil said.

"So they didn't want the Wraiths to know what they were doing either." Hiros commented, "You're right Graysil, this does seem unusual. I think we need to keep a close eye on those two, though without making it obvious that that is what we're doing."

"What do you think they're doing Hiros?" Graysil said.

"I'm not sure exactly but the only reason to avoid being overheard even by Wraiths is if they're doing something that they don't want either us or Ammaril to know about." Hiros said.

"Perhaps we should we tell Ammaril." Graysil suggested.

"Tell her what? Maybe those two have just become close and I don't want to risk alienating them over something so trivial. I doubt that Ammaril would appreciate having her time wasted over it either." Hiros explained.

"So we're going to going to do nothing?" Graysil commented.

"No, as I said we'll watch what they do and then decide on how to respond later." Hiros said.

"Watch them how?" Graysil said and Hiros smiled as he looked at the wagon filled with corpses.

"Not all of my creations are so obvious." he replied.

When Ammaril appeared in the stone circle in Oscay it was early morning and the sun was still low in the sky to the east. She was not alone when she arrived, instead she was accompanied by more than twenty Trolls, each of them pulling a cart that would normally have been pulled by a horse. However, given the incredible strength that the transformation spell had granted to Trolls they were more than capable of pulling the wagons themselves. This also had the advantage that whereas horses needed skilled horsemen to guide them, Trolls could understand instructions as long as they were kept relatively simple. Most of the wagons contained piles of books taken from the library of the royal palace in Syllda but one of them instead contained the stone that Ammaril used as a reservoir for the vast amounts of power she required for many of the spells she was casting. This stone had originally come from the outside of the circle in which she and the Trolls had appeared and there was still a noticeable indentation in the ground where it had been taken from. The loss of a small number of the standing stones from the outer ring of the circles did not prevent them from functioning normally, just as long as the central stone remained intact.

The stone circle was located outside what had been the capital city of the Oscari's empire in ancient times and it was a considerable walk to the city which was why Ammaril had also brought along a horse to ride and she climbed into the saddle before looking around at the waiting Trolls.

"Follow me." she ordered them simply and she began to ride in the direction of the city, the Trolls parting to allow her room to pass. Then once she had cleared the crowd of Trolls and left the stone circle itself they picked up the handles of their carts and began to walk behind her, following her towards the ancient city. During the thousands of years that the city had lain empty its buildings had begun to collapse and many were nothing but piles of rubble partially obscured by the various plants that had grown between the pieces of debris where dirt had collected. The one exception to this was the Great Library of the Oscari where they had placed all of their knowledge before using a spell to freeze the building in time, preserving the building and everything inside perfectly even over the thousands of years since the Oscari had disappeared and become the source of Vampires, Wraiths and human and Elf spellcasters. The energy required to maintain the spell had been vast and Ammaril had drained this into the standing stone that she now used to power her spells.

Being both large and perfectly intact the Great Library stood out among the ruins of the ancient city and made it easy to locate, not that Ammaril needed any such help given that she had been there several times before. As she and the Trolls got nearer to the library they saw that as well as the Great Library there were a

number of tents standing. This had also been the case when Ammaril's expedition had first arrived in the city and discovered a tribe of Ogres living there, considering the library itself to be something to be worshipped given its survival along with the fact that it was impossible to approach before being stopped by the invisible barrier created by the time freezing spell. The Ogre tribe had become the first of the Trolls, later joined by other such tribes that Ammaril's forces were able to locate and most of the tents still present in the area were now occupied by Trolls. However, there were also a number of Orcs present in the city, sent here by Ammaril to begin the work of turning it into her new capital. The first stage of this was to clear enough ground for what was to become her new palace, a large building that would be constructed adjacent to the Great Library and connecting to it so that Ammaril could always remain close to the collected knowledge that it held. For the time being she had barely scratched the surface of the knowledge it contained and when her position ruling the world was secure she intended to spend the rest of her days going through everything that remained, unlocking every secret she could find. The demolition of already partially ruined buildings and the clearing of rubble was simple physical work to which Trolls were ideally suited and they had already removed the remains of several buildings from the area around the Great Library when Ammaril arrived and small posts had been hammered into the ground in places to indicate where the construction would begin.

As she halted her horse at the edge of the cleared area Ammaril was approached by a trio of the Orcs who were also present. Unlike most of the Orcs in Ammaril's army who wore long chainmail coats these Orcs wore civilian clothing though it remained in the usual style common to the Elves of Sylldarin prior to Ammaril transforming them into Orcs. These Orcs, along with the others currently here in Oscay had been master artisans in Elf society before they were transformed by Ammaril's spell and they had retained this knowledge into their new existence so were the ideal candidates to oversee the construction of the palace. Ammaril was relieved that she had been able to locate these Orcs among the many that she had created since the only other solution would have been to bring in human artisans from the Hadarian Empire instead and she was reluctant to entrust such a serious undertaking as the construction of her palace to anyone that could not be guaranteed to be absolutely loyal to her above all else as the Orcs were.

"Greetings my queen. Have you come to inspect the work on your palace?" one of the three Orcs said as Ammaril dismounted from her horse.

"I have come to bring books from the palace library in Syllda and add them to my Great Library." Ammaril told him and the Orc bowed his head.

"Yes my queen." he said.

"That does not mean that I am not interested in my new palace though." Ammaril added and she looked towards the posts in the ground, "Is everything proceeding according to plan?"

"It is my queen. The ground for your palace will soon be cleared and construction will begin." the Orc artisan answered and Ammaril then looked around at the area in general.

"What about the walls?" she added.

"The wall will surround the entire palace grounds as you requested but construction will wait until the palace itself is complete to allow materials to be brought in more easily." the Orc explained.

"Of course." Ammaril said. She did not like the idea that the defensive wall would not be constructed until the rest of the palace was complete since without the time freezing spell to protect the Great Library it would be vulnerable until the wall was complete. Fortunately Oscay was almost inaccessible to any of Ammaril's enemies. It would take weeks for a ship to reach the continent and the secret of travel using the stone circles was known only to a handful of her followers. Eventually Ammaril would have to allow more people to come to Oscay but by then she expected both her palace and its defences to be complete, "I want the wall completing as soon as possible though, it must take priority over other parts of the city. Is that understood?"

"Yes my queen." the Orc replied.

"Very good, now get back to your work. I have work of my own to be doing in the library. I do not want to be disturbed." Ammaril said before she turned to the Trolls waiting behind her with their carts, "Bring the books to the library." she ordered and then she walked up the steps leading to the library's main entrance.

Allowing anyone into the Great Library carried with it the risk that they would try to remove some of the books but this did not apply to Trolls. Not only were they unquestioningly loyal to Ammaril in the same way that Orcs were but none of them could read, making the books useless to them so Ammaril was not concerned about them entering the library in that respect. On the other hand there was the chance that they could accidentally damage something so Ammaril stopped in the large outer chamber of the library and watched as the Trolls brought their carts inside. This chamber contained numerous statues of individuals significant to the ancient Oscari but unknown in the modern world as well as several massive dragon skulls that had proved to Ammaril that it was possible to drastically increase the size of the dragons that had existed previously, "I want the carts lining up along that wall. Take care not to damage any of the statues." Ammaril told the Trolls

and she pointed to a wall that was lined with statues and then she watched as the Trolls manoeuvred their carts, arranging them in a line along the wall.

Once the carts were positioned Ammaril walked up to the first one in the row and opened one of the crates it carried so that she could remove a book from inside. In the palace in Syllda Ammaril had taken care to have only books relating to a similar subject to be loaded onto the same cart so that she would not have to sort through everything again here so now she knew exactly what the rest of books on this cart would be about and now she just had to decide where they would be placed within the Great Library. The main sections of the library itself were already fully stocked with books but the Oscari had intended for these to be read and as such had included numerous rooms where this could be done privately. One of these had been temporarily converted into a bedchamber for Ammaril until her palace could be constructed but this still left others available and it was in these that she intended to store the books that she had brought from Sylldarwin. "Unload this cart." she ordered, "Then bring the boxes and follow me."

As Will and the rest of his group headed back to the *Storm Chaser* to see how the resupplying of the ship was progressing they saw that the *Splendid Spirit* was now in port, berthed to give the crew some leave and several Dannaron sailors stood on the dock close by it.

"Looks like we're going to have to go right past that lot Will." Gromar said.

"Is that going to be a problem?" Lucia asked.

"I hope not." Will replied, "Though I think I'll keep my head down just in case." he added as they walked closer to the Dannaron warship.

Unfortunately the sight of a group of people that included both an Elf and a Dwarf, neither of which were commonly seen in Sayal aroused curiosity in the Dannaron sailors both on the dock and still aboard the ship and a number of them turned to look at the group more closely.

"William Beckett?" a voice suddenly called out from the deck of the ship and instinctively Will glanced up to see a grey-haired man with a stern expression looking down at him.

"Keep moving." Will whispered.

"I take it that you know that man Will." Yilven said.

"Yes he was a part of the crew when I was aboard. Benedict Fischer, the captain's right-hand man among the regular sailors. Whenever someone was flogged he was the man who wielded the whip and he enjoyed it." Will replied.

"So a thug?" Dominic commented.

"The navy was full of them." Will said.

"I'd never forget you even after ten years William Beckett." Benedict called out and Yilven glanced at the man to see him waving someone over.

"Someone else is coming." he said softly and Dominic looked around just in time to see another figure appear at the edge of the deck.

"I think that's the man I spoke to when we arrived. What did you call him Will? John Castle?" he said.

"Let's just keep going." Will said as they passed by the sailors standing on the dock.

"You men, stop him." John called out from the ship and the sailors on the dock moved to block the group's path, "William Beckett you are a deserter and I intend to see you suitably punished."

"This isn't Dannaron, you don't have any authority to do anything to me here John. Even the captain will tell you that. You and he may have taken the odd bribe at sea but when in port with people watching he followed the rules." Will responded, lifting his head to look back at John.

"I'm the captain of this ship now Will and you belong to me. Seize him." John said sternly.

"I wouldn't try it if I were you." Gromar said as a member of the *Splendid Spirit's* crew stepped into his path. The sailor stood more than a foot taller than Gromar did but Dwarves were notorious for their physical strength and durability. Dominic also stepped forwards at this point and looked up and smiled at John and the other sailors on the ship.

"If you do not let us past then I shall have no choice but to summon the harbour master and have your men arrested for assaulting the captain of the vessel that I have contracted to the service of the Court of King Gerald of Hessenland." he announced and the sailors looked up at their captain, "Well captain?" Dominic added.

"Let them pass." John told the sailors on the deck, "But don't think that you've heard the last of this Will." he added.

"Thanks Dominic. That could have become unpleasant. Come on, we should get back to the ship." Will said before he and the rest of the group made their way past the *Splendid Spirit* and its crew and towards the *Storm Chaser* where Horace met them on the dock.

"Ah you're back." he said before he noticed the serious expression on Will's face, "What's wrong? Did the meeting with the mayor not go well?" he asked.

"The meeting went as well as could be expected. The mayor listened to what we had to say but all he can really do is send a messenger to Queen Isabel." Will answered.

"So why so glum looking then Will?" Horace added.

"The *Splendid Spirit* is in port." Will told him.

"Yes, I noticed the ship being moored earlier." Horace said.

"And Will was recognised by one of its crew when we walked past. Now its captain wants to arrest him." Lucia said.

"Luckily Dominic was able to calm things down by telling John Castle that I was working for him on behalf of King Gerald." Will said.

"Luckily for them." Gromar commented.

"Luckily for us I'd say. There were far more of them than us, plus those aboard the ship would have had weapons." Yilven pointed out and Gromar snarled for a moment.

"Do you think that there will be any more trouble?" Horace said.

"Not if we leave quickly. It's been more than a decade since I last saw the *Splendid Spirit* or her crew. With luck it will be at least another ten years before I see them again." Will said, "Now how has the loading of the supplies gone?"

"Not well. With all that's happening people are hoarding provisions just in case of a siege and that's driven prices up. I made sure that the crew were paid but that's it." Horace said.

"Did we lose any?" Will said.

"A couple. Lerron born so this is their home. I think they're going to stay and defend it but we got three new volunteers to sign on so we won't be short-handed." Horace told him and he nodded.

"So is everyone aboard?" Will said.

"Unusually, yes. With prices the way they are the crew didn't want to spend their hard-earned pay on just a couple of drinks so they've stayed aboard in the hope of being able to get more in Teuten. I think your hurry to leave may have had something to do with it as well. They didn't want to get left behind." Horace explained.

"In that case we should leave immediately. We should still have enough supplies to last us until we reach Teuten even without restocking." Will said before he started to make his way up the *Storm Chaser's* gang plank.

6

Upon returning to Syldarin with the carts filled with bodies Hiros had the Trolls acting as his labourers unload them in the large hall that the Elf necromancer had taken over for his work. His original plan had been to immediately start work on reanimating these corpses to add to his growing number of zombies but instead he left the Trolls to carry out their task while he exited the hall again and made his way to a nearby garden where he began to walk among the flower beds while inspecting them closely. His attention was not focused on the flowers themselves or even the plants from which they sprouted, instead he was more interested in the ground around them and he scoured every square inch of dirt until he finally came across what he was looking for.

"Ah, there you are. I knew that there had to be some of you around." he said as if speaking to a person as he crouched down and from within his robes he took out a small clay jar that had a cork in it that he removed. On the ground at the base of one of the plants in the garden were a pair of dead bees. Quite how they had died was not clear but their bodies appeared reasonably fresh and most importantly they were intact. Acting carefully so as not to damage the bees' delicate remains Hiros used his flask to scoop both of them up before he put the cork back in to seal it. Then he stood back up and returned to his workshop.

He was pleased to find that the Trolls had been able to lay out all of the human and Orc corpses just as he had requested even without him being there to keep an eye on them but for the time being he had other things to focus on and he made his way to his primary workbench at the side of the hall. This was a long surface that had shelves containing various chemicals arrayed along the back of it.

Hiros tipped out the two dead bees onto a small board and inspected them once again, verifying that they had not been damaged during transit from the garden to here and he was relieved to see that they were still intact.

"And now to work." he said to himself as he reached for a jar that contained a pale blue liquid. The jar was about eight inches deep and four inches in diameter so the amount of liquid it held was vast when compared to the size of the bees but most of Hiros' work was carried out on much larger corpses.

Placing the jar on the bench and opening it, Hiros then searched through his tools for one that came to a sharp point and he dipped this into the jar so that a drop of the liquid it contained stuck to the tip as he withdrew it. Holding this over one of the dead bees he shook the tool gently and watched as the drop of liquid landed on one of the bees and initially stuck to it before it began to be absorbed. Hiros then repeated this process for the second bee, allowing a single drop of the liquid from the jar to fall onto and be absorbed before he began to recite a spell.

"Death without death, life without life. Hazzar ish nearal." he said and he held his hand over the two dead bees with his fingers outstretched, letting some of his magical power flow out through his finger tips. This looked like lightning, pale green in colour and when it touched the dead bees it caused them to briefly glow with the same shade of green. Hiros then withdrew his hand and watched the bees closely. At first nothing happened, the bodies remaining still and lifeless but all of a sudden the wings of one of the bees began to move slowly. Then the bee righted itself, standing up on its legs and moving its wings again. This was followed by movement from the second bee that started with its legs all moving at the same time before it also righted itself.

Hiros held his hand over the bees again and while ordinarily they would have reacted defensively by flying away the two reanimated creatures remained where they were.

"Forwards." Hiros said and both bees began to walk forwards across the bench, "Stop." Hiros added and the bees stopped moving again, prompting another smile from Hiros. Then as one final test he focused his thoughts on one of the bees' minds, seeking out its memories. Whatever had happened to the bee before its death had been lost but he was able to see in his own mind what the bee had seen at the moment that it was reanimated as well as hearing the background noises coming from outside. These sights and sounds were distorted somewhat by the different range and method of sensing available to the bee but the magical link still allowed Hiros to interpret what it had seen and heard.

Satisfied that he now had the inconspicuous spies that he needed Hiros placed the small clay jar that he had used to transport the dead bees from the garden on the bench in front of the two reanimated insects.

"Inside." he said and the bees both walked across the bench towards the jar before they climbed inside.

Hiros then picked up the jar again and put the cork in the top to seal it. Had the bees still been alive then eventually they would have both suffocated inside the sealed container but being reanimated in the same way as Hiros' growing collection of humanoid zombies meant that they required no air to breathe and they

could remain inside the jar until they eventually rotted away, a process that the spell Hiros had used would slow down but could not stop entirely.

The crew of the *Storm Chaser* got to work quickly preparing the ship to leave but before they could cast off from the dock a group of four armed men approached and halted at the bottom of the gang plank.

"*Storm Chaser!*" one of the men called out and Will looked down from the rear structure at them.

"They look like the harbour master's men." he said to Yilven who was stood nearby.

"What do you suppose they want?" Yilven said.

"Maybe a message from the mayor." Will suggested before he called out to the men, "Yes, what do you want?" he asked.

"The harbour master orders you to remain in port." the man on the shore responded.

"Can he do that?" Yilven said, looking at Will.

"He can give the order, yes, he is the harbour master after all. Though stopping a ship from leaving a port isn't easy." Will replied. Then he looked at the men on the dock again and added, "We're ready to depart now."

"Well don't. Orders have been sent to the ships guarding the port not to let you leave." the man on the shore said.

"Ah, I suppose that that makes it easier. Most harbours don't have fighting ships at anchor right outside." Will said to Yilven before calling out, "What's the reason for keeping us here?"

"Captain Castle of the Dannaron warship *Splendid Spirit* has demanded that your captain be placed under arrest for deserting his vessel." the man answered.

"John Castle! I knew he'd be trouble if we stayed but I didn't think that he'd actually try to keep us in port."

Will said as the door leading to below decks opened and Dominic emerged onto the deck and walked to the top of the gang plank.

"What is the meaning of this delay?" he said.

"This ship is not to leave port by order of the harbour master." the leader of the men at the bottom of the gang plank told him.

"I am a representative of the kingdom of Hessenland, you cannot keep me here." Dominic said.

"Those are the harbour master's orders." the man at the bottom of the plank responded, "Take it up with him or this ship will be sunk if it tries to leave."

Horace, Lucia and Gromar all came rushing onto the deck now and climbed the steps to join Will and Yilven on the rear structure.

"What's going on?" Lucia asked.

"Did I hear that fool John Castle's name mentioned?" Gromar added.

"He wants Will arrested." Yilven said.

"What would they do to him?" Lucia said.

"Navies tend to hang deserters." Horace told her.

"Hang him? But it was ten years ago." Lucia protested.

"From what I know about humans they'd probably hang him twice for making them wait if they could." Gromar commented.

"Tell the harbour master that I want to see him immediately." Dominic said and the leader of the men at the bottom of the gang plank looked at one of his men and nodded.

"Go and tell him." he ordered and the man turned and marched away.

"Excellent maybe now we can get to the bottom of this." Dominic said before he turned and walked across the deck to the stairs so that he could join the others on top of the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure.

"Thanks for this Dominic." Will said as the wizard reached the top of the stairs.

"That's quite alright Will. You are transporting me after all." Dominic replied.

"What difference does that make?" Lucia said.

"There's an understanding between kingdoms that official messengers and ambassadors shouldn't be detained or executed." Will told her.

"That's one of the few redeeming qualities about humans that Elves respect." Yilven commented while Gromar frowned instead.

"But Dominic isn't an ambassador for the King of Hessenland, is he? He was sent by his order, not the king." he said.

"Yes but finding that out would take a long time. Someone would have to be sent to Hessenland and if I was sent by the king then Lerron would basically be admitting that they'd detained one of his messengers." Dominic pointed out.

"So you're bluffing then." Horace said.

"You mean lying." Gromar added.

"I think that bluffing sounds better." Dominic replied.

"But what if they find out the truth?" Lucia asked.

"Pretending to be an official messenger isn't looked on very well." Will said.

"Dominic would probably hang beside Will." Yilven added before he noticed the guard who had been sent to fetch the harbour master returning with a man that he assumed to be the harbour master himself, "Will, Dominic, I think that this is the harbour master now." he said.

"Good. Then maybe we can get this sorted out quickly." Dominic said.

"Perhaps you should invite him aboard rather than just yelling to the dock." Horace suggested and Will nodded.

"Yes that sounds like a good idea. Dominic, you and I can speak to him on the main deck. Horace, Lucia, you two come too. I'll offer him something to eat and drink." he said.

Heading down the stairs to the main deck Will and the others with him reached the top of the gang plank at the same time as the harbour master reached the bottom.

"I am Rafael Castellar the harbour master. I understand that someone is claiming to be a representative of King Gerald of Hessenland." he said.

"Not just claiming harbour master. I am." Dominic replied.

"Perhaps you'd like to come aboard harbour master." Will said and the harbour master glanced at his guards.

"Wait here." he told them before he walked up the gang plank, "I take it that you are Captain William Beckett, the man that is wanted by the Dannaron navy?"

"I am." Will replied, "Can I offer you anything to eat or drink? Our larder is reasonably well stocked at present."

"No thank you captain. I find the cuisine aboard even the best provisioned ships to be rather below my tastes." Rafael responded and Horace frowned.

"Will is also the man employed by me to provide transport on my travels." Dominic added.

"Unfortunately my orders are to provide every assistance to the *Splendid Spirit* while she is helping with the defence of our fair city and the captain of that ship has demanded Captain Beckett's arrest." Rafael said, "I believe he is meeting with the mayor now to arrange having him removed from this ship by force."

"How nice of him not to just try sending a force of his men aboard anyway." Horace commented.

"Probably worried about how it would look to our hosts." Will replied.

"If Captain Castle is speaking with the mayor then perhaps we should also. Do I have your word that Captain Beckett and myself shall be granted free passage to his office?" Dominic said to the harbour master.

"Of course. I haven't been given any orders to prevent anyone from disembarking from this vessel and you haven't caused me any problems while you've been here." Rafael said and Dominic smiled before looking at Will.

"Shall we? We wouldn't want to miss Captain Castle, would we?" he said.

"No we wouldn't." Will replied.

"Are you sure that it's safe Will?" Lucia asked, "What if Captain Castle tries to arrest you?"

"He can't unless the mayor says so and I trust the harbour master's word that I won't be arrested the moment that I step foot on the dock. We'll sort this out soon enough." Will replied.

Although not involved in the conversation with the harbour master both Yilven and Gromar watched closely from the top of the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure and they saw Will and Dominic walking down the gang plank with the harbour master.

"Where do you think they're going?" Gromar said.

"I don't know but Horace and Lucia will be able to tell us." Yilven replied and he hurried down the stairs to the deck.

"Hey wait for me." Gromar called out after him as he started to follow.

"Yilven, Will and Dominic have gone to see the mayor." Lucia said when the Elf came rushing up to her.

"Captain Castle has already gone there to try and get Will taken off the ship." Horace said.

"So he just walked off all by himself." Lucia added.

"The harbour master said that he'd be safe from being arrested for now." Horace said.

"Maybe but I think there could be other trouble in store for him." Yilven said as he looked along the dock to where Will and Dominic were walking away with the harbour master and he saw a group of half a dozen men also apparently watching them. Among this group was the man that Will had identified as Benedict Fischer and moments later they began to move, obviously following Will and Dominic into the city.

"What's happening?" Gromar asked as he then came rushing across the deck as well.

"I think that Will might be in trouble. Grab that hammer of yours, I think we should go after them." Yilven told him and he grinned.

"I'll be right back." he said.

"I want to come too." Lucia said but Yilven shook his head.

"No, you and Horace should stay here and keep an eye on the ship. We may need to depart in a hurry." he told her.

"Mayor Alondza is in a meeting right now I'm afraid." the mayor's assistant said when Will and Dominic approached the door to the mayor's office.

"With Captain Castle, yes?" Rafael who was still accompanying them said and the assistant nodded.

"Yes, that's right." he said.

"Then this concerns that." Rafael said and he opened the door to the mayor's office and went straight inside.

"What is the meaning of this?" Alondza asked when Rafael entered his office.

"Mayor Alondza please forgive this intrusion but there are people with me that I think you need to speak with concerning the *Storm Chaser*." Rafael answered and at the same time both Will and Dominic entered the office behind him.

"Mayor I want that man arrested immediately." John Castle exclaimed, leaping from his chair and pointing at Will.

"Calm down captain, you're making a fool of yourself." Dominic said before he looked at Alondza.

"Mayor Alondza please forgive this intrusion but I need to depart and the accusations being made by this man are preventing it. You know how important it is that I return to Teuten." he said and John snorted.

"He can leave any time he wants. He just needs to use a different ship or a different captain." he commented.

"Captain Castle does have a point there Herr von Garren." Alondza said.

"The conventions on the treatment of diplomats includes those employed for their travel. Captain Beckett is considered a messenger for the Kingdom of Hessenland." Dominic said.

"Well all I can say is that Hessenland must be getting pretty desperate to be recruiting a renegade like him as one of its diplomats." John said before he looked at Alondza again and added, "Mayor Alondza need I remind you that I am helping to defend your city and that I am supposed to be granted every courtesy in return? I consider the arrest of this wanted criminal to be covered under that."

"Mayor Alondza, has Captain Castle explained what I'm wanted for?" Will then asked.

"He's a traitor." John said before Alondza could reply.

"That is what the captain has told me." Alondza added.

"I deserted his ship. Captain Castle and his predecessor have both taken advantage of their positions to enrich themselves and I didn't want to be a part of it so when the ship put into port at Teuten I left." Will explained.

"That is a baseless smear." John responded, waving his hand in a dismissive manner.

"As is calling me a traitor." Will commented.

"Please gentlemen can we keep this civil?" Alondza said, lifting his hands in front of him, "As I have explained to both of you under different circumstances that I am just the mayor of this city and while that does come with a lot of responsibility I cannot make decisions on matters such as this. I must send for a judgement from Queen Isabel's court. Until then Captain Beckett is not under arrest but he must remain within the city."

"How long will that take?" John asked.

"Not long. The capital is just over a day's ride away. Either a decision or someone able to make it can be here in two or three days." Alondza told him.

"But Mayor Alondza I need to return to Hessenland." Dominic said.

"And as Captain Castle has pointed out you are free to do so, but you must leave without Captain Beckett."

Alondza responded while John grinned.

Will, Dominic and Rafael stopped in the street outside the building where the mayor's office was located.

"As the mayor said, you are free to move about the city Captain Beckett but you cannot leave. Your ship must remain in my harbour as long as you are aboard it." Rafael said. Then he turned to Dominic and added,

"Though perhaps I can help you find an alternative vessel to carry you home."

"Thank you but no, I arrived on the *Storm Chaser* with Will and I will also be leaving on the *Storm Chaser*. With Will." Dominic replied.

"As you wish Herr von Garren." Rafael said before he turned to leave.

"Thanks for the support. We should be getting back to the ship though. It will be dark soon." Will said before he heard John's voice from behind him.

"Don't be too confident about getting out of this Beckett." he said, "I've been waiting ten years to catch up with you and you're not going to escape me again. I'm going to get my money's worth out of you." he added before he pushed past Will and Dominic, heading back towards the harbour.

"I wonder what he meant by that? His money's worth I mean." Dominic said, watching John depart and a smile appeared on Will's face, "What?" Dominic commented when he saw this.

"John Castle and the old captain stashed their bribe money aboard the *Splendid Spirit*. They thought that they'd found a hiding place that no-one knew about but I'd managed to figure out where it was and when I left I took it all. I thought that it would make up for the wages I was owed and help set me up. Of course neither of them could ever report the theft because if they did then they'd have to explain where the money had come from." Will explained and Dominic smiled back at him.

"Very clever." he said, "Though of course I shouldn't condone stealing of any sort."

"Of course not. Though if I hadn't taken the money I doubt that I could have bought my way into being the *Storm Chaser's* first mate." Will replied and the two men started to walk back towards the harbour, following the route that John had taken but with him well out of sight by this point.

As the pair turned down a side street Will suddenly realised that they were being followed, a pair of men walking behind them at a distance not close enough to be noticed in a busy main street but more obvious when the street was otherwise empty.

"I think there are two men following us." he said to Dominic.

"Thieves?" Dominic replied.

"Possibly. Let's keep moving. I don't suppose you've got any magical tricks up your sleeve that we can use?" Will said.

"I might be able to unleash a blast or two to knock them back but I didn't bring my staff so I can't do much before I'll tire myself out." Dominic replied.

"That might have to do. I wish I'd brought a sword." Will said.

"That wouldn't have looked good in the mayor's office." Dominic pointed out before four men suddenly appeared at the end of the quiet side street and Will recognised one of them as Benedict Fischer.

"Well, well, what do we have here boys?" Benedict said as Will and Dominic noticed the cudgels that they were all carrying. Glancing behind them Will saw that the two men following them had also produced such weapons, proving that all six men were together, "Looks like a traitor to me."

"I am a representative of King Gerald of Hessenland and I order you to let us pass." Dominic said loudly, hoping that his voice might attract some attention from close by but there was no indication that it did.

"I don't see King Gerald here, do any of you lads?" Benedict said, looking at the others before looking back at Dominic, "I tell you what though, we don't have any quarrel with you so we'll let you go but William Beckett is going to get what's coming to him." he added.

"Absolutely not. I will not be intimidated by a bunch of petty thugs." Dominic replied and Benedict grinned at him.

"Fair enough. What's one more body to be thrown overboard once we're away from land?" he said, "Get them lads!"

The six sailors from the *Splendid Spirit* suddenly charged forwards, all raising their cudgels in readiness to strike.

"Phyan-sa!" Dominic suddenly exclaimed at the same time as he thrust his hand forwards towards the four men in front of him and Will to unleash a blast of magical energy. This spread out as it travelled and struck Benedict and the men standing immediately either side of him, hurling all three of them backwards and knocking them to the ground.

Unaware that one of their intended victims was a spellcaster the two men still on their feet suddenly came to a halt and looked at Will and Dominic nervously, unsure of what else Dominic might be capable of.

"Well done." Will said as he turned towards the two men behind them, leaving Dominic facing the man still standing in front of them, "Now maybe we've got a chance."

"What are you waiting for? Rush them before that wizard can hit us again." Benedict said as he began to get back to his feet.

The two men who had been following Will and Dominic still hesitated but the man in front of them charged forwards, covering the short distance between him and Dominic rapidly. Dominic dodged when he swung his cudgel but this cost him his balance and he fell to the ground. Luckily Will spun around and punched the man in the face hard enough that he also fell backwards, losing his grip on his weapon as he fell.

"Get up, quickly." Will told Dominic and at the same time as he reached down to help Dominic back to his feet he delivered a kick to the stomach of the man he had just punched.

All three men knocked down by Dominic's magical blast were now getting back to their feet and led by Benedict they charged forwards again. In response Dominic raised his hand to try and unleash a second

magical blast but before he could manage to cast the spell Benedict slammed into him, shoving him to the ground before aiming a punch at Will. Will was able to dodge this but he was distracted long enough for the other two men to grab his arms, holding him immobile so that Benedict could then strike him in his stomach, knocking the wind from him.

"Hold him up lads." Benedict told the men holding Will and one of them grabbed Will's hair to lift his head so that Benedict could punch him in the face, "How do you like it then?" he said but Will could not respond. Benedict heard Dominic trying to get back to his feet and quickly spun around to hit the wizard on the back of his head, "You should learn to stay down. It will be easier for you." he said before he looked at the two men still holding back, "Well? What are you two waiting for?" he asked.

"I think that they're waiting to see what we do." a deep voice responded from behind Benedict and he turned to see a pair of figures approaching from the same direction Benedict had come from when ambushing Will and Dominic. Both Yilven and Gromar were clearly armed, Yilven with his sword while Gromar wielded his war hammer in both hands.

"Let Will go. Now." Yilven added.

"Who the hell do you think you are to give me orders, Elf?" Benedict responded.

"He's the one with the sword and I'm the one with the hammer." Gromar said, "What have you got aside from those two little clubs that your friends hiding back there are holding?" he added, looking towards the two men still holding cudgels who had yet to become involved in the actual fighting.

"There are still six of us." Benedict said.

"If you count your friend on the ground, yes. Otherwise five." Yilven said.

"Which isn't going to be enough." Gromar said before he suddenly raised his hammer and charged forwards towards Will and the two men holding him. Then with a single powerful swing of his hammer he struck one of them hard enough in his chest that there was the sound of breaking bones as he was thrown backwards. With one arm now free Will jabbed at the throat of the other man holding him, taking him by surprise. The blow caused the man to let go of Will and stagger backwards, clutching at his throat as he struggled to breathe and Will turned towards Benedict.

"Still got some fight left in you, eh? Then I better finish this quickly." Benedict said and he drew a dagger from behind his back. Before he could use the weapon through Yilven charged at him while his attention was focused on Will. Rather than using the blade of his sword though he brought the pommel down on the base of Benedict's skull and his eyes widened for just a moment before he collapsed in a heap on the ground.

"He's still alive." Yilven said as he bent down to check on Benedict.

"So am I. Just about." Dominic said as he struggled to get back to his feet and Will reached down to help him despite his own injuries.

"What about those two?" Gromar asked and the group all turned to look at the two sailors from the *Splendid Spirit* that had spent the entire fight just watching from a distance.

One of the men promptly dropped his weapon and lifted his hands.

"We don't want any trouble." he said.

"You seriously expect us to believe that?" Yilven asked.

"It was all his idea." the second man added and he pointed to Benedict, "He said the captain would reward us for him." he added and he turned to look at Will.

"You could have said 'no'." Yilven said.

"No, they couldn't." Will replied, still breathing heavily, "You either do what he tells you to or he'll make your life hell aboard the ship."

"So what do we do with them?" Gromar asked.

"I'm guessing we can let them go." Dominic said, "It's not like they did us any actual harm. Unlike these four." and he looked down at the four dead and unconscious men on the ground around them.

"When Benedict wakes up he's going to be furious at you two for not doing more." Will pointed out, looking at the two sailors, "If you go back to your ship he'll take it out on you."

"We can't go back." one of the sailors said.

"What will we do? Benedict and the captain will come after us." the second said.

"You can join my crew. I can find work for you aboard the *Storm Chaser*." Will said.

"You're offering them work after they came here to help kill you?" Gromar said in amazement.

"Will did say that they had no choice." Yilven pointed out.

"Nevertheless, I'm not sure that I'd trust them either." Dominic added.

"I would. At least as far as Teuten where they can leave if they want. For now though we can be their route away from Benedict and Captain Castle." Will said and then he looked at the two sailors again, "So are you coming with us or waiting for Benedict to wake up?" he asked them and they looked at one another for a moment before they turned back towards him.

"We'll come with you captain." one of them replied.

"Then let's get out of here before anyone comes to investigate." Will said and the group began to continue along the side street. However, one of the sailors from the *Splendid Spirit* came to a sudden stop.

"Wait a moment, there's something I need to do." He said before he turned back around and rushed to where Benedict was lying on the ground and he kicked the unconscious man in the side, grinning widely as he did it, "There, that's better." he added as he then rushed to rejoin the others.

Horace and Lucia were waiting on deck when Will and the others returned to the ship with the two sailors from the *Splendid Spirit*.

"Will! What happened to you?" Lucia exclaimed when she saw the marks on his face from the beating he had received at the hands of Benedict.

"And who are they?" Horace added, looking at the two sailors.

"Would you believe that they're a pair of the mob that attacked Will and Dominic. Will thought it a good idea to give them work aboard the *Storm Chaser*." Gromar answered.

"They can't go back to their own ship now. This is the safest place for them but they need to get below before anyone sees them aboard." Will said and Horace frowned.

"Okay, I'll show them down." Horace said, "Come with me." he told the two sailors and he beckoned for them to follow him below decks.

"We need to set a good watch tonight. Yilven, Gromar, I'm afraid that that means the pair of you. If Benedict comes to quickly then John Castle might send someone to try and sneak aboard the ship regardless of what Mayor Alondza promised about us being safe here." Will said.

"You can count on us." Gromar replied, "No-one will get aboard with the pair of us on guard."

"In the mean time you look like you could do with your wounds looking at." Lucia said to Will, "I'll get you to your cabin."

"Thank you." Will responded before he and Lucia also headed away.

"I don't suppose there's anyone to help me with my wounds is there?" Dominic then commented and both Yilven and Gromar stared at him.

"Compared to Will you were hardly touched." Yilven pointed out.

"I suppose not. I guess I'll just have to go and clean myself up instead." Dominic replied.

Tarhoven was a small town on the coast of Tarran that was centred around a small harbour. From here fishing boats set out every day to catch fish from local waters while a handful of larger ocean going cargo vessels also frequently docked here. Karl arrived in Tarhoven just as the sun was setting but he could see that there were still several vessels in the harbour. In particular there was a knarr, a vessel similar to a longship but designed for carrying cargo, that Karl recognised as being the one used by the man he needed to speak to. This came as a relief to him since although the invading Orcs and Hadarians had not reached Tarhoven yet news of the invasion was bound to have reached the town and it was inevitable that some people would try to flee. Approaching the harbour he saw the captain of the knarr leaning on a fence, looking out to sea and Karl dismounted before approaching him.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be here." Karl said and the man looked around at him.

"I wasn't expecting you for another week. Maybe not at all given what's happening." he replied.

"That's why I'm here early. I need your help." Karl said.

"My help isn't free." the man said and Karl produced the purse of coins.

"I didn't expect it to be." he said and he tipped some of the contents into his hand so that the other man could see the silver coins it contained.

"So what do you want? If I don't have it then it might take a few days to bring in, maybe longer." the man said.

"I don't need anything bringing in, I need something taking out." Karl told him and he frowned.

"Taking out? What is it?" he asked and Karl put the money away again before producing the pair of letters from beneath his coat. Each of these was just a simply sheet of paper on which the messages warning about Ammaril's use of demons in her army had been written. No seal had been added to keep the information a secret but since neither Karl nor the smuggler could read the exact wording was a mystery to them both.

"Letters? What are they about?" the smuggler said.

"They're warnings about the army that invaded us. It will likely be heading across the Straight of Lerron soon and this is to warn the kingdoms on the other side about the monsters it contains."

"So you want me to carry those letters across the straight and deliver them?" the smuggler asked.

"Not quite. I'll carry the letters and deliver them. I just need you to carry me across the straight." Karl answered.

"In exchange for all that money in your purse? That's very generous." the smuggler commented.

"It's very important." Karl said.

"When do you want to leave?" the smuggler said.

"As soon as possible. The Orcs and Hadarians may not be here yet but they're on their way, you can rely on that." Karl said and the smuggler held out his hand with his palm open.

"Then we have a deal. I'll get you to Lerron when I get that money." he said and Karl took out the purse again. Rather than simply place it in the smuggler's hand though he tipped about half of the coins out into his own hand before giving them to the smuggler, "What's this?" the smuggler said, looking at the money in his hand.

"Half now and the other half before I disembark in Lerron." Karl said and the smuggler smiled at him.

"Very well, half now and half at the end of the voyage." he replied.

The kingdom of West Gerra had lived with the threat of Hadarian invasion for several years ever since the neighbouring East Gerra had been absorbed into the Hadarian Empire by force. Fortunately the terrain along the border between East and West Gerra was mountainous and the few passes through were guarded by strong fortresses that would make any invasion from the east very costly. However, by allying themselves with Ammaril the Hadarians had become significantly more powerful to the point where they could potentially absorb the losses they would suffer in an invasion so the King of West Gerra had made an overture of peace to Ammaril in the hope that this would prevent any such invasion.

The royal palace in Verrgen, West Gerra's capital city was located at the top of a hill around which the city was constructed. The idea was that any invading army would be forced to march up hill to take the palace but it also meant that the view from the palace covered a vast area of the city and the land beyond right up to the mountains along the horizon. Thomas had no interest in scenery though, no matter how impressive some people may have found it so instead he sat at a table eating the food that had been brought to him. Even though it was basic by palace standards it was still better than many of the meals he was used to. A jug of wine had also been left for him to drink which was also of better quality than he was normally used to and Thomas was considering the possibility that his current hosts were hoping that he would drink enough to become drunk in the hope that they could use it to their own advantage when the door to the room that Thomas was in opened suddenly and one of the court nobles entered flanked by a pair of palace guards in chainmail. The guards remained just inside the room standing either side of the door while the noble himself walked around the table at which Thomas sat and stood close to him.

"Enjoying your meal Mister Cooper?" he said, looking down at the plate that was now almost empty.

"Yes it's very enjoyable Baron Cordini. My compliments to the cook." Thomas replied and the baron looked at him without the hint of a smile.

"I'm sure the chef will be so glad to know that his work meets with the approval of someone like you." he said.

"So has the king decided whether or not to accept Ammaril's offer? They were simple enough so I don't see why I've been made to wait." Thomas said.

"The king is not in the habit of making rash decisions Mister Cooper. The court needed time to study Ammaril's terms before coming to a decision." Cordini responded.

"So what is the decision of the court? I do have other kingdoms to visit and Ammaril can be quite impatient you know. I'd hate to consider what would happen if she sent a force of Orcs to find out what happened to me. They could be rather quick to anger if anyone gets in their way." Thomas said.

"The king was not impressed by the offer you brought with you. He wanted to protect his kingdom from the Hadarians, not become subordinate to their Emperor." Cordini replied.

"It's just too bad that the Hadarians made a deal with Ammaril first then. Ammaril promised him dominion over everything this side of the Straight of Lerron and she seems to like keeping her word. Look at it this way, your king will still sit on his throne and still get to decide how his kingdom is run." Thomas said.

"As long as he sends tribute to the Hadarian Emperor." Cordini pointed out.

"Of course. So has your king reached a decision yet?" Thomas said.

"The king wants to speak to Ammaril." Cordini replied.

"That's not going to happen. Even the Hadarian Emperor hasn't been given a personal audience. However, I get my orders from her directly so meeting me is just as good." Thomas said.

"The king does not see it that way. You are a messenger, nothing more, not even a true ambassador. In fact I'd go as far as to say that the collar around your neck makes you look more like a pet than a servant. I may as well ask my dog to carry a message." Cordini responded and Thomas snarled.

"Yes or no baron? What's your king's answer?" he said.

"Despite my counsel and his own misgivings the royal court has convinced the King to accept the terms laid out by Ammaril. You may tell Queen Ammaril that the army and navy of West Gerra will join her forces. The king would still like a personal audience with Ammaril though. Can you deliver that message Mister Cooper?" Cordini said and Thomas got to his feet, prompting the two guards to reach for the swords that they carried. "Call off your men baron, I assure you that if Ammaril wanted you dead then you'd already be dead, guards or no guards." Thomas said and Cordini signalled for the guards behind him to stand down, "That's better." Thomas said as he watched the guards return to a more relaxed posture again, "I'll take your response back to Ammaril. I'm sure that she'll be glad to hear that you've agreed to her terms, it will avoid any further unpleasantness in the future."

"Very good. Should I show you out now or do you wish to remain here for the night?" Cordini asked.

"I've just told you how impatient Ammaril is. I'll leave now." Thomas answered.

"Very well. Allow me to escort you to the stables." Cordini said with a smile.

John stared at Benedict upon his return to the *Splendid Spirit* and snarled. With two of the crew dead and another two having deserted Benedict knew that the captain needed to be informed so he had gone straight to John's cabin to inform of what had happened as soon as he came back aboard. The beating that Benedict had received was clear for all to see and many of the crew were already secretly celebrating this, word spreading quickly among them.

"You're telling me that not only did you take men ashore to attack William Beckett without my permission but you failed and also managed to cost us four members of the crew? Two of whom may have deserted and joined Beckett's crew?" he said.

"I was certain that we could get him for you captain. There were just two of them and they were unarmed. I didn't know that the other one was a wizard and that the Dwarf and Elf would show up with weapons." Benedict replied.

"Well now Beckett can go to mayor Alondza and accuse us of trying to undermine his position. The mayor promised Beckett that he would be safe in the city until someone arrived with orders from Queen Isabel about what to do. Your stupidity and failure could see Beckett slip through our fingers. Beckett could even call for you to be arrested for attacking him and if he does then I won't have any choice but to agree to it. Didn't you consider that before you acted?" John asked.

"No captain. I thought it would be easy." Benedict answered

"You're a thug Fischer, a useful thug but a thug nevertheless. You don't do any thinking, I do." John said sternly.

"Yes captain." Benedict said.

"Now see the doctor if you need to because I expect you to be ready for duty in the morning. Now get out of my cabin." John ordered and he jabbed his finger towards the door.

7

When Will came up on deck the next morning his face still bore the marks of the attack the previous evening and he made his way to the side of the ship closest to the dock where Yilven was waiting with a pair of the ship's crew, all of them armed to defend against anyone trying to get aboard during the night.

"Will don't take this the wrong way but you don't look very good this morning." Yilven said.

"No and I don't feel too good either but at least I made it back here alive." Will replied and then he looked down the gang plank to the deserted dock, "Any trouble during the night?" he asked and Yilven shook his head.

"No. Gromar said that there hadn't been any sign of anyone trying to get aboard when I took over from him and no-one has tried since. If Captain Castle is going to try something else to abduct you then he hasn't shown his hand yet." Yilven said.

"I don't think he had anything to do with what happened yesterday evening Yilven." Will said, "The two men we brought back with us said that it was Benedict's idea. I think that this was just his latest attempt to curry favour with the captain and probably earn himself some extra money in the process. When I was aboard the *Splendid Spirit* that was how things worked, certain favoured crewmembers could also be cut in for a share of what John Castle and the captain at the time were making for themselves."

"So are you going to do anything about it?" Yilven asked.

"Of course I am. We may have left dead bodies in the street so we need to tell the mayor. With any luck he won't wait for the messenger from Queen Isabel's court to arrive and he'll just order the *Splendid Spirit* and her crew out of the city." Will answered.

"And if he doesn't?" Yilven said.

"Then I'll be wearing a sword on my belt and watching my back every moment that we're here." Will replied.

As the cousin of the Hadarian Emperor, Duke Engel had been rewarded with ruling Costria as a client state of Hadar and as part of that role he had commanded its military forces. Given the location of Costria along the western side of the Straight of Lerron this made the country a vital location and although the meeting to discuss the invasion of the nations of Entris to the east of the straight had been called in Tarranberg, capital of Tarran, the duke's presence had been demanded.

The others in attendance of the meeting were a mixture of human nobles from other places under Hadarian control plus a pair of other Orcs that Engel still found unnerving to be around. More interesting to him though were the four Elves who also arrived to the meeting, all of them wearing robes and three carrying staffs that made Engel think of wizards. That made a certain amount of sense to the duke who had heard about the ability of Ammaril's army to travel magically by use of the ancient stone circles that could be found all over the world and he guessed that they required a wizard of some sort to make them work but he was still curious to find out for certain. These four all arrived together and Engel watched them carefully until one broke away from the rest ahead of the meeting and Engel intercepted him in the corridor. All that Engel could tell about this particular Elf was that he was one of the two younger looking ones in the group.

"Excuse me." Engel said in one of the hallways of the palace where the meeting was being held but the Elf ignored him, continuing to walk towards the room where the Elves had gathered, "I said excuse me." Engel repeated more loudly and this time the Elf came to a stop, turned around and looked him up and down.

"Yes? What is it human?" he asked.

"My name is Duke Engel, what is yours?" Engel asked.

"Graysil." the Elf answered.

"Then I am pleased to meet you Engel. I was wondering whether you knew anything about what will be announced at this meeting." Engel said, eager to find out ahead of time what was going to be asked of him.

"No I do not." Graysil replied and Engel frowned for a moment, wondering whether the Elf was having difficulty understanding him or if he was being deliberately rude. Before Engel could speak again though one of the serving staff in the palace approached them.

"Excuse my lords but the meeting is about to begin. Prince Orcan has summoned everyone." he said.

"Of course we'll be right there." Engel responded while Graysil simply walked away, heading for the room where the meeting was to take place.

The meeting was taking place in what had been one of the palace's dining rooms when it was inhabited by King Lupold and his family, all of whom had successfully fled the city before Duke Engel could prevent it. Now many of the chairs had been removed but the large dining table still dominated the room and on this were numerous maps that showed the nations along both sides of the Straight of Lerron. Orcan and the

other two Orcs were already standing close to the head of the table when Engel entered and he made his way about midway along it, not wanting to stand too close to the Orcs but also not wanting to give the appearance of trying to avoid them. Then he watched as the others summoned for the meeting began to enter and also gather around the table. Like Duke Engel no-one, including the Elves seemed keen to stand close to the Orcs and so there was a noticeable gap between them and everyone else.

"Excuse me." Hiros said as he brushed past Dorsos and Shimmandra to position himself closest to the Orcs while still leaving a significant gap between him and them and he stood looking towards the Orcs when Orcan began to speak.

"I have decided how we will launch our invasion." Orcan said as everyone present watched him.

"Has Ammaril approved your plan?" Dorsos asked and Orcan snarled at him and let out a brief growl.

"Ammaril will be told of it warlock. She gave me free reign to plan it as I wished." he said.

"We take our orders from Ammaril, not you." Dorsos said.

"Then either tell her that you won't follow my plan and see what she does or follow the plan she ordered me to create." Orcan replied and he glared at Dorsos who hesitated nervously before he replied.

"I will do as you say Orcan." he said.

"A good decision." Orcan said before he glanced at Vendril who was standing beside him, "I have spoken with Vendril and he has agreed with my plan that includes an attack by sea."

"It will take a lot of ships to move our army across the straight Orcan." one of the Hadarians commented.

"Yes it will so they will need to be gathered quickly." Orcan said before he continued, "My plan is in three parts. First we will raid across the straight. Attack ships at sea and land warriors to destroy whatever they can. We will not be invading to begin with, just creating as much disorder as we can."

"Surely the nations on the other side of the straight will reinforce their coasts, if they haven't already started doing that. What do you hope to achieve?" Duke Engel asked.

"I want them to reinforce their coast. I want them to watch the seas because while they are watching the seas we will be moving Orcs and dragons using the stone circles to Lerron and Lastallo." Orcan answered, "With those warriors I will burn their towns and cities that are inland, forcing their warriors to abandon the coast to face us and at that time the full invasion will take place by sea, easily conquering the coastal areas." "That all sounds very complicated to me." Duke Engel said, "How will anyone know when the time is right to attack?"

"We will know because our forces will be able to see what our enemies are sending to face us. The first raids do not need to cause much damage, they only need to distract our enemies. The warriors I will lead using the circles will attack when we have sufficient numbers to overwhelm our targets and when resistance to our raids becomes lighter the invasion will be launched." Orcan said.

"Who will lead each part of the plan?" a Hadarian asked.

"Vendril will command the raids and the final invasion. Tiellan and I will command the warriors transported using the stone circles." Orcan told him.

"What about the other nations on this side of the straight?" Engel added, "When will we deal with them?"

"Some have already sent requests to meet and discuss joining us. Queen Ammaril has already sent a messenger to them. They will agree or they will also be conquered along with those who have not asked to join us. Conquering them will wait though, crossing the Straight of Lerron is what Ammaril wants first so that is what we will do." Orcan said.

"This plan seems to rely on dividing our forces at every stage." Duke Engel pointed out, "Raiding requires small groups rather than concentrated forces. Then you'll be taking two larger forces to two different kingdoms before we launch an invasion with whatever you leave behind. At the same time we still have some of the people of Tarran trying to fight us while any of the other nations on this side of the straight could invade while we're distracted so we have to leave enough men here to make sure that we can deal with those threats." Duke Engel said.

"The human is right." Dorsos added, "The plan is too complicated. Surely we should make sure that we control this side of the straight entirely before we expand across it."

"We will begin now." Orcan said, "Every day we delay is another day that our enemies have to reinforce themselves and fortify their cities. They will grow stronger so we will strike before they can increase their strength too much. That is the plan and that is what we will do. In Ammaril's name."

"Of course. In Ammaril's name." Dorsos replied though Orcan continued to stare at him for a while longer.

"You will all receive orders," Orcan said eventually, addressing the entire room again, "these will explain your own roles in this plan. I expect those orders to be followed without hesitation. How you carry them out will be up to you but I expect them to be carried out. I will not accept failure."

When the meeting broke up Dorsos and Shimmandra slipped away, making their way to a garden where they left the objects they carried that contained the Wraith tones given to them by Ammaril by the door before walking away from them.

"Is it wise to annoy Orcan?" Shimmandra asked, "Especially when he is on the verge of giving us exactly what we want? You said yourself that we need the invasion to proceed before we can."

"Actually I'm surprised that Orcan was able to come up with a plan at all. I thought that Ammaril's transformation spell had pretty much stripped out the intelligence from the Orcs." Dorsos replied.

"Their personalities may be gone but I think they still have the knowledge they had as Elves. That's why the ones who were warriors can still fight in an orderly manner and teach the others to do the same." Shimmandra suggested.

"Well hopefully none of them will retain enough rational thought to ask too many questions when Ammaril suddenly disappears." Dorsos said.

"Do you really think that Orcan's plan is too complicated to succeed though?" Shimmandra asked.

"Maybe, though all I ever led was a cult of a few dozen people. My followers never attacked anything larger than the odd isolated home to dispose of one of our enemies, normally someone who had left the cult and knew more than was good for them." Dorsos answered, "It certainly presents challenges for us though."

"How so?" Shimmandra said, frowning.

"Orcan wants armies sending to both Lerron and Lastallo so we could be separated and if that's the case we need to establish a plan for meeting up before we travel to Oscay. If we go there separately then we'll be more vulnerable. We know that Ammaril is there to have the capital of her new empire constructed as she wants and she probably thinks that she's invulnerable while she's there but she may have been smart enough to place guards at the stone circle closest to the city. Even if she hasn't then she may well sense the magical energy released when we arrive so she'll know that we're there." Dorsos explained.

"Yes and a single messenger wouldn't wait for a second one to arrive before delivering a message."

Shimmandra added.

"Exactly and I doubt that either of us could take her on alone if she's anywhere near that stone. We need to arrive together to avoid making it obvious that we're trying to avoid facing her alone and we need to keep her distracted before we strike." Dorsos agreed.

"So do you have a plan on how we'll do it then? We've no idea where she'll be or what she'll be doing when we arrive." Shimmandra pointed out.

"She shouldn't be too hard to find. If she's not in that library of hers then she'll be damned close to it.

Wherever she is though we need to get her somewhere private. All of this will be for nothing if the workers she has building her palace or anyone else actually witnesses us killing her. I plan on taking the demons I've created to be loyal exclusively to us along so they ought to be able to deal with anyone who tries getting close enough to become a problem." Dorsos said.

"Going somewhere private probably means into the library and I wouldn't be surprised if that's where the stone is, giving her access to its power though." Shimmandra said.

"I know. With what I've got in mind though I don't think that that will be too much of a problem. If we try to use magic to attack her then she might sense it before we can strike so I'm planning on something a little more crude than that." Dorsos said and he slipped a knife from his belt and held it up. The blade of this was long and narrow, obviously designed to stab rather than slash and intended to be able to penetrate deeply, "This should deal with her quite nicely. Slid between her ribs it won't give her the chance to cry out or cast any spells before she dies."

"Very neat. Do you have another for me or have you already decided that you'll be the one wielding the blade?" Shimmandra said.

"We can probably get another. This is a human city and humans are nothing if not well prepared to murder one another over even trivial matters, that means that they have the means to do so in great quantity."

Dorsos responded as he put the dagger away again, "What concerns me most about this is that Ammaril may have protected herself with a Wraith, possibly more than one. I suspect that the demons we'll be taking with us to Oscay would be able to take on Wraiths but they won't be in the room with us when we kill Ammaril so we'll need another way to deal with them and quickly." he added and Shimmandra smiled, "What?"

Dorsos asked when he saw this.

"I wouldn't worry about Wraiths Dorsos." Shimmandra told him, "I think that that Ammaril's pet human messenger has brought us the solution to that problem. The Wraith that he carried with him was destroyed by a young human woman with a magical dagger. It seems that the blade had been enchanted by a vampire to serve as a repository of magical power like a wand or staff. According to Thomas when the Wraith's ethereal form came into contact with the blade all of the magical energy that sustained it was drained. Now if

some former cabin girl can destroy a wraith with such a blade then do you really think that either of us would have a problem?"

"You're right." Dorsos said as a smile spread across his face also, "The question is do we have enough time to properly craft a pair of blades to store magical energy?" Dorsos said.

"According to the human the vampire that he served before Ammaril used basic painted enchantments to turn his warriors' shields into effective defences against the Wraiths. Crude and not very durable but it worked." Shimmandra said.

"That might work for something carried more openly but as you said it isn't durable. What if the spell rubbed off before it's needed? If we go walking around openly carrying daggers with their blades painted with spells then it will be obvious that we're up to something. We have to do this properly to avoid looking suspicious." Dorsos said.

"You mean that the more obvious we make our preparation the less people will suspect us?" Shimmandra commented.

"Yes. Amusing isn't it?" Dorsos replied.

"Amusing isn't quite the word I'd use Dorsos. I still think that we're taking a big risk here." Shimmandra said.

"Are you backing out? We can easily just carry on being servants to Ammaril and watch our power be diluted as she recruits more and more people to her service." Dorsos said.

"No I'm not backing out. I just don't want to rush into something that hasn't been planned properly." Shimmandra replied.

"Which is what we're doing now, planning." Dorsos said.

"So where do we meet if we aren't sent to the same place by Orcan?" Shimmandra added.

"Sylldarin seems like the most obvious location to me. There shouldn't be anybody near the stone circle near Syllda at that time whereas there could be any number of humans or even Orcs waiting near the circles here in the human lands." Dorsos suggested and Shimmandra nodded.

"Yes, that sounds good. We'll meet at the stone circle outside Syllda. Unless we get sent to the same place anyway," she said.

"In which case we'll be able to travel directly to Oscan together. Next though we need to get you a suitable blade and both of us need to work on enchanting them to act as stores of magical energy," Dorsos said, "and I think we should start immediately, before anyone can notice we've gone."

"Good idea." Shimmandra responded and the two Elves made their way back through the garden to where they had left the staff and pendant that contained Wraiths, picking them up and opening the door to go back inside.

"Ah there you both are." Hiros said as the door opened to reveal him standing right on the other side.

"What are you doing there?" Dorsos said, immediately suspicious that Hiros had been attempting to listen in on the conversation he had had with Shimmandra.

"Trying to find you. I wanted to know what you thought about Orcan's plan? I have to say that I'm not confident in his ability to plan out something as complicated as this invasion. Those Orcs haven't seemed to be too bright since I first saw them." Hiros said.

"So why not say so during the meeting Hiros?" Dorsos asked.

"Because while I'm not so certain that Orcan can organise an invasion I am reasonably certain that he can organise an execution for anyone who crosses him publicly." Hiros answered.

"Well Dorsos and I were just discussing the need to be well prepared for any eventuality." Shimmandra said, "If everything goes wrong then we may need to be able to look after ourselves rather than just relying on the Orcs. Dorsos has already found himself a fighting knife and I'm going to do the same. Plus we're going to use them as magical reservoirs."

"Yes, who knows when a little extra reserve power might come in useful." Dorsos added.

"What an excellent suggestion. Perhaps I ought to do the same. Graysil too. Though I must admit that I'm no expert when it comes to physical combat. On the few occasions that I've had to fight I've used zombies to do it for me," Hiros said before he frowned, "and perhaps if I'd learned to take care of myself instead then I would never have been caught."

"We were just going to go and find a weapon for Shimmandra. There must be something suitable in this wretched human city. Are you coming?" Dorsos said and Hiros responded by reaching out and placing a hand on the shoulder of both him and Shimmandra.

"I would but there are things that I need to check on here." Hiros replied.

"As you wish." Dorsos responded and he and Shimmandra then began to walk away, "We need to keep an eye on him. I think he's up to something." Dorsos whispered when he decided that they were out of earshot of Hiros. Meanwhile Hiros himself waited until the other two Elf magic users had disappeared from view

before he lifted his hands in front of him and looked at the reanimated bee on each.
“Now to find out what those two were up to.” he said to himself.

Hiros took the bees to a small bedroom among the palace’s guest quarters and set them down on a bedside table before closing and locking the door. Then he returned to the table and sat on the bed next to it before holding out one hand, hovering it close over the bees. A common magical spell was to establish a link between a magic user’s mind and that of a lower animal so that they could see and hear what the animal saw and heard as it happened and Hiros could easily have done this to monitor Dorsos and Shimmandra. However, other magic users would be able to sense this connection, often seeing it as a bright glowing ribbon of energy that extended away from the animal and leading back to the magic user in question so this was why Hiros had opted to make use of the reanimated bees. Having subtly placed one each on Dorsos and Shimmandra when he brushed past them at Orcan’s briefing he had then followed to see where they went so that he could recover the bees again. There was always the possibility that the pair had discussed nothing incriminating on this occasion and Hiros was prepared to use the bees again if necessary but he knew that leaving them in place longer to see what Dorsos and Shimmandra did increased the chance that they would discover what he was doing. Finding pairs of undead bees clinging to someone was not something that occurred often and Hiros knew that he would be the only person who could be responsible for something like that, none of the other magic users currently in Ammaril’s employ had knowledge of necromancy that rivalled his.

Hiros had erased the bee’s memories after he had initially reanimated them and so the first things they saw and heard were from Orcan’s meeting. Because of their placement within the folds of Dorsos and Shimmandra’s robes they had not been able to see anything of interest but they had heard every word that was spoken near to them so after listening to what had been said in the meeting again he found himself listening to the conversation between Dorsos and Shimmandra in the garden during which they were clearly planning the assassination of Ammaril.

Killing Ammaril and taking her place was not an idea that had occurred to Hiros, along with a certain amount of revenge that he hoped to visit upon the supreme sorcerer of Nhillan his ambitions were more focused on unlocking the secrets of life and death and finding a way to preserve his own existence indefinitely even if that meant being beholden to a ruler more powerful than he. That was not to say that he did not understand the point of view that Dorsos and Shimmandra seemed to hold that the overall amount of power they would eventually wield once Ammaril had finished recruiting other Elf warlocks as well as certain other Elves to her service would be significantly less than if they secretly killed Ammaril and then presented themselves as either her heirs or representatives.

Mayor Alondza listened carefully as a representative of the city watch explained to him how his men had discovered the bodies of two of the *Splendid Spirit’s* crew in a side street in the early hours of the morning while Will, Dominic and John Castle also listened in.

“This man and his associates murdered two of my crew.” John said when the watch captain had finished his report.

“It was self defence mayor.” Will responded, “We were ambushed by six of Captain Castle’s men right after you guaranteed us safety in the city.”

“Preposterous!” John exclaimed.

“Two of the crewmen involved had something of a change of heart and confessed that they had been sent to ambush Will in particular. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Dominic said.

“Mayor Alondza I have no idea what this man is talking about. All I know is that two of my men are dead and two more are missing. I suspect that they are being held captive aboard the *Storm Chaser*.” John said.

“Captain Castle might be telling the truth when he protests his ignorance mayor.” Will added, “The two crewmen who told us that they had been sent to ambush us only said that a crewman called Benedict Fischer had put them up to it. Benedict Fischer is a particularly unpleasant person with a history of

intimidating his subordinates to try and gain favour with his own superiors so I suspect that he was the one who planned the attack and the others were unwilling participants. Unfortunately for those killed.”

“Luckily two members of Will’s crew noticed this Benedict Fischer and his gang acting suspiciously and came to assist us. If not for them then I suspect that it would be Will and I that had been found dead by your city watch mayor.” Dominic said.

“Surely you don’t believe all of this do you?” John asked.

“Herr von Garran, can you or Captain Beckett produce these two men you say confessed to what happened?” Alondza said.

"Of course. Though it might be better if you could visit them. I'd hate for there to be any more unfortunate encounters on the streets if they were to come here." Will answered.

"They are holding my men! Mayor Alondza I demand that William Beckett be ordered to release them immediately." John said.

"There are no prisoners aboard the *Storm Chaser*, only crewmen and passengers who are there of their own free will." Dominic responded.

"They don't have to be aboard the *Storm Chaser* when you speak to them Mayor Alondza. Bring along as many of the city watch or the harbour master's men as you like and you can escort them to a place of your choosing, the harbour master's office perhaps. Then you'll know that they aren't being forced to say anything by either myself or Captain Castle." Will suggested.

"That does sound reasonable." Alondza replied before John leapt to his feet

"Mayor Alondza I must protest!" he shouted, "I have tried to be reasonable able this criminal being allowed to walk free around your city but this really is too much. Now he's encouraging other members of my crew to mutiny as well."

"Captain Castle I don't think that I need to speak to these men at all. You've been making a lot of demands of me over the last day and I think that that needs to stop. I want you to return to your ship and depart this city as soon as possible. Then you can depart Lerron's waters as well. While I am grateful for your offer to help defend Sayal, it comes with too many strings attached." Alondza told him.

John just glared at the mayor for a while, his face red with rage. Then he leant on the edge of Alondza's desk and looked down at him.

"Sir I shall write a letter to the Lerronian ambassador to Dannaron about this. Don't think that you're going to get away with it, any of it." he said before he straightened up and turned to where Will sat, "And as for you, don't think that you've escaped justice. I'll see you hang, you can mark my words about that."

John then turned to leave, pushing his way past Alondza's secretary as he stormed out of the office.

"I take it that we are free to leave mayor?" Dominic asked and Alondza smiled at him.

"Yes, you may leave and your ship may depart our harbour at any time. I shall give you a letter to present to the harbour master telling him this." he replied.

"Thank you mayor, though if it's alright with you I'd like to delay our departure for a few hours." Will said and Dominic looked at him.

"You would?" he said.

"I'd like to give the *Splendid Spirit* plenty of time to get out of Lerron's waters. They know that we're heading for Hessenland and Captain Castle might try to attack us en-route. The more distance he has to put between us to start off with the harder it will be for him to find us." Will explained.

"How long are we talking about?" Dominic said.

"I think that we should wait until nightfall. Leaving under cover of darkness will make it even harder for the *Splendid Spirit* to catch us." Will said before he looked at Alondza and added, "Assuming that that is acceptable to you of course mayor."

"Perfectly acceptable captain." Alondza said.

"In that case as soon as we have your letter mayor, we will return to our ship." Will said.

It was obvious to everyone on the deck of the *Splendid Spirit* that the ship's captain was in a foul mood when he returned and stormed up the gang plank, glaring at the crewmen present.

"Mister Beach!" he yelled out and the ship's first mate came rushing towards him.

"Yes captain?" he asked.

"Mister Beach we have been ordered to leave port. Get us underway as quickly as you can." John ordered.

"Yes captain. So we're to rejoin the other ships on watch?" the first mate said.

"No, that ungrateful mayor has ordered us out of their waters entirely. Just get us out of port and then I want to see you and Mister Fischer in my cabin." John told him.

"Yes captain." the first mate responded and as John made his way to his cabin the first mate began to issue orders.

As the *Splendid Spirit's* captain, John's cabin doubled as an office and so contained numerous items related to the running of the ship including log books and charts. He took one of these charts, one that covered the southern end of the Straight of Lerron, from the rack that contained them and unrolled it to study. He was still studying the chart as the ship left port and then a short time later there was a knock at the cabin door.

"Come in." he said without looking up from the chart and the first mate and Benedict entered the cabin and stood on the opposite side of the table from their captain.

"You wanted to see us both captain." the first mate said and John finally looked up from the chart.

The Shattered Stone

"Yes I did." he responded, "Thanks to Mister Fischer's little excursion last night we've been ordered away from Lerron and because of that William Beckett and now two more deserters think that they have escaped us. I intend to prove them wrong."

"So we're going after them captain?" the first mate said.

"We'll be waiting for them to come to us." John pointed out, "I know that their so-called ambassador is in a hurry to get back to Hessenland so they'll be sailing up the Straight of Lerron soon. I expect that they'll wait until tonight to leave to give them the cover of darkness. With an Elf and Dwarf aboard they will have the advantage of being able to post lookouts who can see further at night than we can but they have to head north so I intend to lie in wait for them about here." he then pointed to a point on the chart that was north of Sayal, "Given the speed of a cog like their ship they should get to this point shortly after sunrise tomorrow. We'll position ourselves close to the coast and work our way further out to sea about forty miles, I doubt they'll head further than that away from the east coast of the straight or it would add even more time to their journey. With a little good fortune we should be able to catch them then."

"And then we sink them?" the first mate said.

"Attack, yes. Though I'd like to get close and put a boarding party aboard. I want to see William Beckett hanging from the rigging of this ship rather than drowned. Our crew should have no trouble subduing his. John said.

"The men will probably appreciate the opportunity for some plunder captain. Not to mention the prize money for capturing a pirate vessel. I assume that that's how we'll report it." the first mate said.

"Yes I think that that would be the best way to handle this. Though I will have a few questions that I want to ask him first about the money he stole from me before I personally put that rope around his neck." John added and Benedict grinned.

"With your permission captain I'd like to help you ask those questions. Plus any you might have for that Elf or the Dwarf." he said.

"I'm sure that we can think of something Mister Fischer." John replied.

8

Initially after leaving Sayal the *Splendid Spirit* sailed west to appear as if she was trying to get clear of Lerron's waters as quickly as possible before turning north and starting to sail closer to shore again, confident that no local fighting ships would be sent to investigate their presence while the threat of invasion kept them closer to the main port cities. John Castle stood on the top of the rear fortified structure as the ship sailed with the chart he was following in a leather tube so that he could consult it whenever he needed to. Fortunately for him the weather was clear enough that he was able to make out significant land marks along the coast that indicated when the ship had reached its desired position.

"Take in the sail and drop anchor here!" he called out as he rolled up the chart again and returned it to its tube.

While the ship's sail was being taken in the first mate climbed the stairs to join the captain on the rear structure.

"What are your orders while we wait captain?" he asked.

"Have the crew prepare for combat and practice boarding manoeuvres. I have every confidence that we'll be able to catch William Beckett's ship and overpower its crew but I still expect them to put up a fight." John answered.

"Yes, after all what do they have to lose if they're going to be hanged as pirates." the first mate responded before a voice called out from the rigging.

"Ships! Ships hoy!" the sailor called out and when John and his first mate looked up they saw the man pointing further out to sea. Hurrying to the side of the ship the two men looked out to see for themselves where in the distance they could just about make out a pair of brightly coloured sails.

"Who are they?" the first mate said and John frowned.

"I can't tell from this distance but I think they're heading this way. Deploy the sail and weigh anchor. I don't want to be caught at a stop if they are hostile." John told him.

"And if they are captain?" the first mate asked.

"Then we fight." John replied simply.

As orders were barked crewmen either rushed to their assigned positions for combat aboard the ship. In addition to the sailors needed to steer the ship more men prepared the ballistas mount on the fore and aft structures while more positioned themselves along the sides of the deck or at the narrow slit windows in the structures with crossbows. Since fire was one of the most effective weapons against a ship even at sea yet more crewmen went around lighting small braziers so that the bolts launched by the ballistas and crossbows could be set alight in the hope that they would set fire to their target, posing a threat to both ships and their crews.

As the *Splendid Spirit* got underway once more the other two ships visibly turned to follow it, indicating that their intent was hostile since there was no other reason to intercept a ship that was only just visible. From their vantage point on top of the *Splendid Spirit's* rear structure John and his first mate watched the approaching vessels and it soon became apparent that their sails were identical in design.

"Costrian." the *Splendid Spirit's* first mate said, recognising the design that was used on ships of the Costrian navy.

"Bring us around." John ordered.

"Do you think that we can make it back to Sayal before they catch us captain?" the first mate asked.

"I'm not trying to outrun them I just want to be certain that they are matching our every move. Once could be a coincidence but if they turn again then I think that we can be certain that they're coming for us." John replied.

Turning the ship's rudder as far as possible brought the *Splendid Spirit* around in a circle and just as John had expected the two oncoming ships adjusted their own headings to intercept it.

"That's it. They are coming for us." the first mate said and John nodded.

"Yes, well we'll make them regret that won't we? This crew can handle a couple of stray ships from Costria of all places. They're just lackeys for the Hadarians, I'll bet that they haven't fought a battle in twenty years."

John said before he looked to the crewmen operating the ship's rudder, "Rudder to starboard, take us straight towards them. Ballistas should shoot as soon as the enemy comes into range."

With the opposing ships now sailing directly towards one another more details about the Costrian vessels were revealed more quickly and they were shown to be cogs similar to the *Splendid Spirit*, using a single mast and sail for propulsion rather than combining this with oars. The result of this was a ship that was more dependent of the strength and direction of the wind but that did not need to dedicate such a large proportion

of its crew to moving it through the water., making them available for other duties such as fighting. Like the *Splendid Spirit* these two ships also mounted ballistas and one of them shot a bolt towards the Dannaron ship. Like the *Splendid Spirit* the crews of the Costrian ships were setting fire to their ammunition to try and set light to their target so the bolt was easy to watch as it flew through the air towards the *Splendid Spirit* and several of the Dannaron sailors stood ready with buckets of water, ready to douse any flames as quickly as possible. It appeared that the Costrian crew had misjudged the range between the two ships though and the burning bolt dropped into the ocean about a hundred yards short of the *Splendid Spirit*.

"Ballistas return fire!" John ordered, estimating that the distance between the *Splendid Spirit* and the two Costrian ships would have reduced enough during the time that the burning bolt took to fly to bring them into range.

The crews of both the fore and aft mounted ballistas aboard the *Splendid Spirit* quickly lit the tips of their bolts and then took aim at the vessel that had just shot at them before both fired in rapid succession and the two burning bolts flew through the air towards it. One of these went wide and landed in the ocean between the two Costrian ships while the other struck the side of the vessel and its metal tip embedded itself in the wooden hull.

"A hit!" the first mate exclaimed.

"Yes a hit. Well done. Reload and prepare to fire again." John replied loudly though the two ballista crews were already hurrying to get their weapons ready to fire again.

Aboard the Costrian ship that had just been hit by the burning bolt the crew were working furiously to either dislodge or extinguish it before the flames from the oil soaked rags tied around it could spread to their ship and while some sailors tossed water over the side to try and put the flames out others tried to knock the bolt loose using long boat hooks and a third small group rushed below deck with hammers to try and simply knock the bolt back out through the hole it had made when it embedded itself in the ship's hull.

Both Costrian ships then returned fire from their own ballistas and three burning bolts flew towards the *Splendid Spirit*. Again two of these just plunged into the ocean but not before one passed through the Dannaron ship's sail and ignited it.

"The sail! Get water to the sail!" the first mate shouted, waving his arm towards the burning hole about half way up the sail.

Rather than ending up in the ocean the third of the ballista bolts landed on the *Splendid Spirit's* deck where it impaled one of the crewmen and hurled him backwards. Another crewman promptly rushed forwards not to try and help obviously dead sailor but instead to pour water over the burning tip of the bolt before the flames could spread to the deck.

The *Splendid Spirit's* ballistas fired again this time both bolts hit their target, one embedding itself in the hull not far from where the earlier bolt had just been knocked free while the second instead penetrated the forward structure fully and disappeared inside.

"Reload! Reload quickly!" John yelled before another pair of burning bolts came back towards the *Splendid Spirit* from the Costrian ships. After already seeing the *Splendid Spirit's* sail catch fire both of these bolts were aimed high but they flew past the sail harmlessly rather than igniting more fires and John grinned.,

"Quickly, before they can fire again. Go for their sail." he called out.

"Captain they're getting close now." the first mate pointed out and John nodded.

"Yes, time to add to our shooting power I think." he said.

"Crossbows! Fire!" the first mate yelled and there was a sudden volley of burning crossbow bolts fired from the side of the deck and also from the slit windows in the front and rear fortress structures.

Most of these flew towards the ship that the *Splendid Spirit's* ballistas had already shot at but some also flew towards the second ship and both were struck repeatedly while yet more crossbow bolts missed and landed in the ocean instead. These smaller projectiles could cause little damage to the two ships and the flames from those that hit their targets were quickly extinguished but several exposed crewmen aboard the vessel that was the primary target were hit and fell before the Costrian crews responded with volleys of crossbow bolts themselves and John ducked for cover behind the wall surrounding the rear structure of his ship. He then heard a 'thud' and his first mate dropped beside him but it was obvious from this blank, staring expression that he was dead and looking down John saw a pair of crossbow bolts sticking out of his chest. Looking around John saw that the first mate was not the only member of his crew that had been killed and there were two other bodies on the top of the rear structure alone, one from the men on the rudder and the other from the crew of the rear ballista. This did not stop the surviving members of the ballista's crew firing the weapon again though and they sent another flaming bolt into the ship that they had been targeting. This time though only this single bolt was fired since the crew of the forward weapon now all lay dead around it with crossbow bolts embedded in them.

"Somebody get on that ballista and keep shooting for all you're worth!" John yelled, knowing that even with both ballistas operating his ship would still be at a significant disadvantage while with just one the situation was hopeless.

There followed a flurry of crossbow bolts flying in all directions as the crews on the decks of all three vessels shot at one another as rapidly as they could and fires broke out on all three ships as sails and other flammable materials were ignited by the burning bolts, prompting crews to rush to put the flames out as quickly as they could, lowering buckets over the sides of their ships to fill them with seawater that they then threw onto the fires before refilling them.

The sails of all three vessels were obvious targets for the crossbowmen, being both easy to hit and flammable and aboard the two Costrian ships the ropes supporting their sails were cut so that they dropped to their decks. This enabled the crews to get to the burning patches more easily while also removing such a vulnerable target from the fight. The drawback to doing this was that it left the two warships adrift, with only their rudders to offer some slight manoeuvrability and John hoped that this offered an opportunity for the *Splendid Spirit* to escape.

"Rudder take us about. Set course north for home. Everyone else keep firing. Aim for their decks," he ordered, hoping that if his crew could keep the enemy pinned down then they would not be able to cause any more damage to his ship. However, while even random firing at the ships' decks could force crewmen there to take cover both of the Costrian ships had fortified structures to fore and aft just like the *Splendid Spirit* and just like the Dannaron vessel these had numerous slit windows through which crossbows could be fired. This meant that burning crossbow bolts continued to be shot towards the *Splendid Spirit* even as the ship was turning to try and escape and the ship's sail continued to be a major target for these.

There were already several holes in the *Splendid Spirit's* sail and more appeared as it was struck again by the latest waves of burning crossbow bolts sliced through and set fire to it in more places. The *Splendid Spirit's* crew rushed once again to try to get water up the mast so that it could be tipped down onto the sail where it was burning but the crewmen climbing the mast were themselves very exposed and some of them fell screaming to the deck as they were also hit by crossbow bolts that had been intended for the sail itself.

With more burning crossbow bolts hitting the sail and the crew unable to get enough water up the mast to extinguish the parts that were already burning the flames spread, consuming more and more of the fabric. The loss of the sail would not destroy a ship, it would merely set it adrift so once it was obvious that the *Splendid Spirit's* sail would be entirely consumed by flames the Costrian sailors turned their aim upon the deck and hull of the ship again, trading volleys of burning crossbow bolts with the remaining members of the Dannaron crew as all three ships now drifted with the ocean current.

All of a sudden there was a mighty 'crash' as a ballista fired by one of the Costrian ships struck the *Splendid Spirit's* mast, piercing it entirely. This was not enough for the burning projectile to set light to the wood of the mast but it did weaken it to the point that it was unable to support its own weight and it collapsed, falling forwards and breaking against the forward structure, destroying the ship's forward mounted ballista in the process and crushing several crewmen both on the roof of the structure and also on the main deck. Although the forward and rear structures were built to resist attack they were not the equal of stone fortifications on land so when the solid mast struck the forward structure it was the structure that broke first, sections splintering as the mast crashed through it, sending pieces of debris flying across the deck. Some of this struck members of the crew causing more injuries while more pieces of debris were hurled through some of the fires currently burning on the deck and spread the flames further as they too ignited.

With the loss of the mast John knew that it was now impossible for the *Splendid Spirit* to escape and his thought turned to his own escape. Large portions of the ship were now on fire and it seemed unlikely that the crew would be able to put them all out while still being shot at from the two Costrian vessels which meant that the *Splendid Spirit* was doomed. Sooner or later it would either be consumed entirely by fire or further attacks from ballistas would damage the hull to the extent where the ship sank and John did not want to still be aboard when either of those happened. He had no idea whether or not the Costrians would seek to take prisoners from among anyone who survived the destruction of the ship but if they did then he suspected that his fate would not be pleasant. At best he might be held for ransom if the Costrians thought that he might be able to arrange to pay them for his freedom or alternatively they might decide to exact revenge for their own losses on him as captain. On the other hand a more ordinary sailor might have a better chance of being ignored.

As well as the general quality of John's coat, the bars around his sleeves marked him out as the ship's captain but by removing this he could more easily be mistaken for an ordinary crewman as long as no-one looked close enough to notice the lack of the calluses on his hands that sailors inevitably developed from the work that they were required to do. As he looked around he saw only bodies on the roof of the structure and he focused on one of the men who had been manning the rudder. He was about the same size as John so

he crawled across the roof towards the body before removing his coat and putting it onto the body so that if the Costrians searched for the ship's captain they would believe that it was the dead man rather than John. From the corner of his eye John suddenly saw a Costrian sail being raised again and he turned to face it. The other ship had already drifted close to the *Splendid Spirit* and now that its sail was deployed it began to pick up speed, heading directly towards the *Splendid Spirit* and John's eyes widened as he realised what they intended to do.

"They're going to ram us!" he yelled.

Most naval ships were constructed with reinforced rams on their prows, designed to smash through the hulls of enemy vessels and located below the waterline for maximum effect and the Costrian vessel was no different. Easily able to outpace the already crippled *Splendid Spirit* the oncoming vessel rapidly caught up with the Dannaron ship and slammed into its side. This produced a loud crash and the sound of splintering wood as the *Splendid Spirit*'s hull was torn open. For a short time the two vessels moved along together. The reinforced ram initially kept the ships locked together but then the weight of the *Splendid Spirit* began to tear itself loose and there the sound of more breaking wood as the vessels separated themselves and the Costrian ship continued onwards leaving the *Splendid Spirit* listing badly. The collision had left a massive gaping hole in the side of the *Splendid Spirit* and water immediately flooded in through this, dragging the ship down into the ocean. Every man left aboard the *Splendid Spirit* knew that the ship would sink within a very short time the remaining crew all rushed to the side of the ship to leap over into the ocean, wanting to get clear before they could be dragged down with it.

John himself did not want to drown either and he too leapt from the ship, jumping off the back into the water and swimming away as the *Splendid Spirit* sank beneath the waves. Around him there were more members of the crew swimming away from where the ship had gone down, with most heading in the direction of the Costrian vessels and calling out for help. Any thoughts about how the Costrians might treat them were secondary to the thought of drowning and so they threw themselves on the mercy of their enemies.

However, the Costrians themselves were clearly not in a merciful mood and the second of their ships now also deployed its sail once more and began to move off. The men in the water continued to scream and shout for help though, begging for the Costrians to stop and pick them up right until the Costrian vessel that had just deployed its sail slammed into one of the survivors from the *Splendid Spirit* and the man promptly disappeared beneath the water before it turned red with his blood. The other men in the water then began to swim clear of the Costrian ships as they sailed away though some continued to plead for them to turn around and save them.

Meanwhile John's thoughts turned towards his survival and he looked around. As well as the other survivors from the *Splendid Spirit* there were numerous pieces of debris floating in the water and among these John saw one of the ship's rowing boats a short distance away from him and he immediately began to swim towards it. As he got closer to the tiny boat though it became apparent that it was floating at an odd angle. John hoped that this was because the boat was just partially flooded and that he would be able to bail the water out. However, when he reached the boat and looked inside he saw that there was a large hole in the side of it. Ordinarily the boat would have been able to hold up to half a dozen people but given the extent of the damage that had been caused to it John suspected that it would barely be able to support his weight but he climbed into the end of the boat that was still above water anyway. One of the boat's oars was still inside where it would usually be stowed along the side but John did not think that there would be any benefit gained from attempting to row the half sunken boat to shore. A splashing sound from nearby attracted John's attention and he turned to see Benedict swimming towards the boat as well.

"Captain help me aboard." Benedict called out.

"No, the boat won't take two." John responded.

"It will, there is plenty of room." Benedict said.

"It's flooded go somewhere else." John told him.

"There is nowhere else captain. Let me aboard." Benedict said as he reached the boat and he grabbed the back of it, pulling down as he tried to get himself out of the water. This served to make the boat rock and John saw more water coming in.

"Stop! You'll sink it." John said, pushing Benedict away.

"Please captain, help me." Benedict said, refusing to let go of the back of the dingy.

Then John remembered the oar and he reached around to grab hold of it before swinging it at Benedict like a club. Benedict now realised that there was no chance that John would let him into the dingy and even as John continued to hit him he reached out to try and grab hold of the captain, intending to drag him into the water with him.

John fought back harder though, continuing to strike at Benedict with the oar until he suddenly struck him on the top of his head and there was the cracking of bone. In an instant Benedict released his grip on John and

went limp, blood pouring from the wound that had just been inflicted to his skull. John then used the oar again, this time to push Benedict away from the dingy and he watched the man floating face down in the water. John then looked around and saw several other survivors now clinging to pieces of wreckage, some of them looking towards him suspiciously. While he still had the oar with which to defend himself though none of the other survivors dared try to approach him. John knew that he could not afford to relax though. Any of the other survivors could still attempt to take the dingy from him so he kept the now bloodstained oar resting in his lap just in case he needed to use it again.

Although the smuggler's vessel was not very large it was durable enough to carry him and Karl across the Strait of Lerron safely and was relieved when he saw the coast come into view ahead of them in the afternoon.

"Almost there now." the smuggler said, "Then I get paid the rest of my money, right?"

"Yes, then you get paid." Karl said before he noticed the ships gathered outside the harbour, "What are they doing there?" he asked.

"They look like warships to me." the smuggler said when he looked at the outline of the two cogs and saw the fortified structures at the front and rear. This was not the first time that the smuggler had journeyed as far as the port of Sayal but he had never seen the port protected by fighting ships before. Generally whenever he saw such a vessel he would turn the other way before they could try to inspect his own small craft, "Are these ships a problem for you?" he asked Karl.

"No they aren't a problem. I wouldn't be surprised if they're here because someone has already warned them about what's happened in Tarran. Just keep sailing." he replied before he hesitated for a moment and then added, "Unless you have a reason why you don't want the navy taking an interest in this boat."

"No, not on this occasion." the smuggler said as he sailed onwards.

"Hoy down there!" a voice called out from one of the warships as the smuggler's craft sailed close to it, "What's your business here?"

"I have letters." Karl shouted and he held up the two letters that he had been given, "There are still people who oppose the Orcs in Tarran and these contain vital information about what they are doing." he added.

"Continue into the harbour. Speak to the harbour master." a different voice then called out from the ship and Karl looked at the smuggler.

"Despite appearances it seems like we're welcome to land. This should be interesting." the smuggler said.

"Why haven't you been here before? You knew the way." Karl pointed out and the smuggler smiled.

"You know what I do." he responded, "Normally I'd avoid the port here and land further along the coast.

Generally after it gets dark too, just to be sure that I'm not seen."

The smuggler then guided his boat past the warships and into the harbour where he quickly located a vacant berth where he docked his boat.

"Can I help?" Karl asked as the smuggler began to tie the stern of his boat to the dock.

"Yes, grab that rope up at the front and secure us." the smuggler responded before he noticed a man who was obviously one of the harbour master's men approaching along the dock, "I'll deal with this guy."

"Which of you is the captain of this boat?" the harbour master's guard asked when he reached the smuggler's knarr and looked at it, seeing that despite it being a cargo vessel it appeared to be empty, "And what is your purpose in coming to Sayal?"

"I'm the captain," the smuggler said, "and this is just a passenger run for him."

The guard frowned when he heard this.

"Just one passenger?" he said and then he looked at Karl, "What is your purpose in Sayal."

"I'm here to deliver these." Karl answered and he took out the two letters that he'd been given.

"What are those?" the guard asked.

"Letters from people in Tarran. They've seen what the Orc army is doing and they wanted to warn everyone else. I need to get them to someone important." Karl explained and the guard turned back to the smuggler.

"How long will you be here?" he said.

"Just tonight. I'll leave again in the morning. I believe that this should be enough for my docking fee." the smuggler responded and he held up a pair of silver coins.

"Yes, they will be enough. You'll have until midday tomorrow." he said as he took the coins and then he turned back to Karl again, "Come with me." he added.

"Where are we going?" Karl asked.

"To see the harbour master. He will be able to help you get the letters to where they need to be." the guard told him.

The crew of the *Storm Chaser* spent the last hours of daylight preparing for departure and Will was in his cabin checking a chart very similar to the one that John Castle had used when plotting the route that he wanted the *Splendid Spirit* to follow when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." Will said and as he looked around he saw Lucia enter with a tray that had some food and a jug on it.

"I thought you might like something to eat before we left." Lucia said before she looked at the bruises on Will's face and winced, "Does it still hurt?" she asked.

"Not really and why do you bother knocking. You know that you can just come straight in Lucia." Will replied as Lucia set the tray down and she shrugged.

"I don't know. It just feels more respectful. You're still the captain after all. It doesn't seem right for me to just barge in. You might be busy." Lucia said.

"Well you could at least come over here so I can kiss you." Will said and Lucia smiled before walking across the cabin to where Will stood and he bent down to kiss her.

"Did I ever tell you how Captain Vendril liked having me as a cabin girl because he didn't need to worry about any of his Elf crew being attracted me? Maybe he had a point." Lucia commented.

"That's the Elves' loss." Will replied and Lucia then looked at the chart in Will's hand and saw that it was of the Straight of Lerron.

"Have you plotted our course?" she asked.

"I'm trying to guess what course the *Splendid Spirit* will take." Will answered.

"Do you think that Captain Castle will still cause trouble for us?" Lucia added.

"I'm certain of it. He was furious at the mayor ordering him to leave the city and he'll want to prove to his crew that he isn't to be taken lightly." Will told her.

"So what do you think he'll do?" Lucia said.

"I think that he try to ambush us en-route to Hessenland. He knows that that's where we're heading and the Straight of Lerron is a good place to spring an ambush. My guess is that he also knows that we'll wait for nightfall before leaving." Will said.

"So why not change your plan and leave at a different time?" Lucia suggested.

"Because darkness does give us the greatest advantage. Yilven and Gromar can see far better in the dark than any human and I want to take full advantage of that. John Castle is probably planning for that though so he'll be lying in wait where he expects us to reach by sunrise. Obviously he can't cover the entire straight so I'm trying to find a way that we can get around him but for that I need to know where he'll be at sunrise and how he'll move to try and catch us no matter what route we're taking." Will explained.

"Do you think you know him well enough from when you sailed aboard his ship to get us around him?" Lucia said but before Will could answer there was another knock at the cabin door.

"Will it's me." Horace's voice said from the other side.

"Come in Horace." Will responded and Horace opened the door to enter the cabin.

"I was just bringing Will something to eat." Lucia said when Horace saw her.

"Never mind that now." Horace replied, "Will the harbour master is here with someone who's just sailed from Tarran."

"Tarran? That's a long way to sail isn't it?" Lucia said.

"Pretty far, yes. I think we'd better go and see what this man has to say." Will said and he and Lucia followed Horace from the cabin.

Making their way up onto the *Storm Chaser's* deck the trio saw Rafael the harbour master and Karl along with a pair of Rafael's guards standing close to the top of the gang plank with Yilven, Gromar and Dominic. Will noticed that Yilven appeared to be holding a sheet of paper in his hand and was reading from it.

"Will I think you need to come and hear this." Gromar called out when he noticed Will.

"Harbour master, what's going on?" Will asked Rafael.

"Captain Beckett, this man has just arrived from Tarran with letters detailing the activities of the Orc army there." Rafael replied and he pointed to Karl.

"They're wiping out entire settlements at once and using the deaths to summon demons that they can bind to their service." Yilven said without looking up from the letter he was reading.

"I don't understand." Lucia said.

"I'm not sure that I do either." Will added.

"Demons are creatures created by pain and fear." Dominic said, "Most just exist wildly, created after great natural disasters but they can be created deliberately by killing enough people all at once. Then if you can get to them quickly enough you can name them and bind them to your service."

"I've heard tales about a few demons created by cave-ins that killed scores of miners. Nasty things that just came out of the walls at people." Gromar commented and Dominic nodded.

"Demons have natures that depend on how they were created. People being buried alive would produce a demon with an affinity for rock and dirt and would manifest as a being made of them." he said.

"How do you stop one?" Will asked.

"You don't. You just steer clear of wherever they are and hope that they wander." Gromar answered.

"Demons can be destroyed but you have to break the magical forces that hold them together." Dominic said.

"You mean like how Lucia's dagger killed the Wraith that was with Thomas?" Horace added.

"Not really. I'm fairly certain that that just drained the energy of the Wraith and you can't do that for a demon. As long as there is some power in the knife then it will hurt a demon though. A demon's magical energy is based around one concentrated type of thought, the fear or pain caused by one particular thing so if you introduce energy of a different type then it dilutes the demon's power." Dominic explained.

"This letter was written by Arrathan. It describes the creation of a fire demon by gathering the inhabitants of a town together and then burning them all alive." Yilven said, looking up from the letter.

"And you witnessed this?" Will said, looking at Karl but he shook his head.

"No, thankfully I've not seen any of these demons. I was just entrusted to bring the letters here because I knew a man who could get me across the Straight of Lerron." he said.

"That letter is in Elvish. How did you know that Yilven would still be here?" Lucia said when she noticed the writing on the letter.

"I didn't. I was given two letters, one written by an Elf and the other by a human. The idea was that with two in different languages it would be easier to find someone who could understand what they said." Karl replied.

"A good idea." Dominic commented.

"In that case can we take one of the letters?" Will said and then he looked at Dominic and asked, "Will your order understand a letter in Elvish?"

"Of course. A lot of academics speak it, almost as many as speak Treyman." Dominic responded.

"Good, then we should take the letter that Yilven has. Even if we can't get anyone in Hessenland to believe us perhaps we can try Raysalgard."

"Why not just take him?" Gromar suggested, looking at Karl.

"Because he didn't see the demons himself. Don't you remember how we were received when we tried warning the royal court about Ammaril? That letter was written by one Sylldarin's palace guard. That ought to carry some weight." Will pointed out.

"The mayor will have to be asked about the letter though we will still have the other one as well as their bearer." Rafael said.

"Then Dominic and I need to speak with Mayor Alondza again. Yilven, I think you should come with us this time too." Will said.

Once again Mayor Alondza was not alone in his office when the group from the *Storm Chaser* arrived along with Rafael and Karl. This time though he was in the company of a man who had a more regal appearance.

"Ah Herr Von Garran. Captain Beckett. Harbour Master Castellar. Please allow me to introduce His Grace the Duke Sorto, he arrived from the Court of Queen Isabel a short time ago." Alondza said as the group was shown into his office.

"I was instructed to rule on whether Captain Beckett could be considered to have diplomatic privileged." the duke said, "Although I believe that that is a moot point now."

"It is, thank you." Dominic said, "Unfortunately there are now even more serious matters at hand."

"You refer to the use of the ancient stone circles to transport armies from one nation to another? Your warning was received at court Her Von Garran and it caused a considerable stir. There are seven of those circles within Lerron and now a force of soldiers has had to be sent to each of them to stand guard. This is going to significantly reduce our ability to defend the coast if an invasion happens by that route." the Duke said.

"Actually your grace there is more news only just arrived. Letters brought by this man from Tarran." Rafael replied and he pointed to Karl.

"Letters? What letters?" Alondza added and Rafael held out one of them.

"This is one of them. It explains how the enemy are creating demons to fight in their armies. The second letter is the same but written in Elvish." he said as Alondza took the letter from him.

"Demons?" Duke Sorto said.

"The process described in the letters is an accurate description of how such things can be done your grace." Dominic said.

"I'd like to take the second letter, the one in Elvish with us to Hessenland." Will said.

"If it doesn't convince them then I'll take it on to Raysalgard. Yilven added.

Duke Sorto held out his hand towards Alondza and the mayor handed him the letter. The duke then began to read this slowly, it was not written in his native language and he had to concentrate to be able to translate it in his head. However, it did not take too long for him to realise the seriousness of the contents.

"Do we know how many of these demons have been created?" he asked and he looked at Karl.

"Like I said, I haven't seen any of them but a patrol sent out by Arrathan saw the Orcs and some Elf warlocks creating a fire demon." he answered.

"Creating a demon of any kind requires a considerable sacrifice. If the pattern described in these letters is consistent then Ammaril's forces will be slaughtering an entire settlement each time they create a single demon. That will limit their numbers though their power and resilience will make up for that." Dominic added. "Orcs. Trolls. Giant dragons. Now demons. How many monstrosities does this Ammaril have in her armies?" Duke Sorto said.

"Don't forget the Wraiths." Yilven commented.

"The point is that she has a lot and the longer this goes on the more I suspect she'll get. When Ammaril invaded Tarran she used a mix of ships and the stone rings so I expect she'll do the same again when her army comes across the straight. Only now that she's allied with the Hadarians her army is going to be much larger." Will said.

"This news needs to be taken back to the royal court. If the forces sent through the stone circles have demons with them then something needs to be done to stop them before they can run amok in our kingdom."

Duke Sorto said, "I will need to return to the palace at first light tomorrow and I'd like to take this man with me." he added, looking at Karl.

"I'll come with you." Karl responded.

"What about the letter in Elvish?" Yilven asked.

"You may take that. I have the other and their bearer, that ought to be enough for the Queen." Duke Sorto said.

"Thank you your grace." Dominic replied.

"Perhaps we should be leaving, I know that you're keen to get to Hessenland." Will suggested.

As Will Dominic and Yilven were leaving the mayor's office Will glanced at Dominic.

"I think that we might run into trouble between here and Teuten. What do you need to be able to produce a spell that can take out an entire ship?" he asked.

"A ship? I assume that you mean the *Splendid Spirit*." Dominic replied.

"Yes. I doubt that John Castle has given up on the idea of revenge against me. So I'd like a way of defending ourselves. When Marcus Quinnus chartered the *Storm Chaser* he brought along mercenaries who fixed a ballista to the ship but that was left behind in Oscan and all we have is about a dozen crossbows." Will said.

"Plus my bow." Yilven pointed out.

"Well many forms of attack magic will affect ships just as they would affect people but the problem is gathering enough power." Dominic said.

"Ammaril used her magic against a Hadarian longship. She was able to inflict serious damage to it with a magical blast but she could only do it once. After that she needed to rest." Yilven said, "Of course that was before she drained the power from the spell surrounding the Oscari's library. Now I suspect that she could take out an entire fleet of ships."

"I might be able to do the same, a single blast I mean, not an entire fleet. The ship would need to be fairly close though, no more than about fifty yards. Do you think that Captain Castle is likely to bring his ship that close?" Dominic said.

"I think he'll bring his ship right up to us. He'll want to kill me in person and face to face." Will replied.

"If they're going to get close then normally I'd suggest a fire based attack. I know a lot of naval combat makes use of fire. I could probably ignite a large part of a ship at up to twenty yards or so. All I'd need for that would be a source of fire. A lantern or even a candle would do." Dominic said.

"Twenty yards? I don't like the sound of being that close to a ship that's on fire. If we collided then we'd risk the fire spreading to the *Storm Chaser*." Will replied.

"Then a simple magical blast it is I suppose. Though I can't guarantee that it will stop a ship in one go." Dominic said.

"I have every faith in you Dominic." Will said.

The sun had already gone down by the time the *Storm Chaser* left the port of Sayal and sailed out into the Strait of Lerron, passing by the warships still guarding the port and then turning north before Will gathered all of the ship's crew together on deck.

"I need to warn you all about what we might be facing" he told them, "I suspect that the *Splendid Spirit* is going to be waiting for us further along the straight. You all know how hard it is for one ship to find another at sea and hopefully we'll be able to avoid her but we can't just count on that happening so we need to be ready. I want everyone ready for duty by sunrise and weapons will be issued. We're up against a warship but I don't think that the crew will try to sink us, they'll want to board us instead and although I'm their main target I doubt that they'll want to leave anyone to tell what happened."

"That's true." one of the crewmen who had come from the *Splendid Spirit* said, "It's not just those of us who've crossed Captain Castle who are at risk. He'll probably claim that we're all pirates to justify hanging everyone aboard and taking the ship."

"Hanging Captain Beckett and the pair of us over won't help the rest of you." the second crewman from the *Splendid Spirit* added.

"The captain's always had our backs anyway. He tried to deal with that vampire that Captain Atwood brought aboard." Horace said, referring to Will's predecessor as captain of the *Storm Chaser*.

"You can count on us captain. We won't give up this ship without a fight." one of the more senior crewmen commented and Will smiled.

"Thank you. Dominic will try to use his magic to help us but he might not be able to keep the *Splendid Spirit* away. I want enough men on the rear structure to use all of our crossbows. We'll shoot across to the *Splendid Spirit* when she pulls alongside. The same goes for Dominic's magic. If we attack too soon then Captain Castle may order his crew to shoot back and we'd be at a massive disadvantage then. As well as the weapons from the armoury I want everyone to arm themselves with anything else they can lay their hands on that can be used as a weapon. Boat hooks, hammers, knives, anything. Make sure that you have something to hand that you can fight with even if you don't have one of the weapons from the armoury. Now I recommend that everyone not on watch get some rest. We may have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow." Will said and the crew began to disperse, most of them heading below deck to get some rest as Will had suggested while those needed to operate the ship through the night remained on deck.

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As Will had instructed the entire crew of the *Storm Chaser* was ready as the sun came up the next morning and they assembled on deck. The *Storm Chaser's* armoury contained a number of swords and crossbows that had been distributed to as many of the crew as possible while everyone else had armed themselves with whatever they could find that could cause injury to someone. Although few of the ship's crew were trained for war most of them had at least been involved a few fights while ashore and Will was not concerned that anyone would suddenly panic when confronted by the enemy. If nothing else he hoped that their instinct to survive would be enough to convince them to fight.

Will himself was armed with both a sword and a crossbow while around him on the top of the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure almost everyone else was also armed with a ranged weapon as well as something to use if the enemy were able to climb the stairs and get within arm's reach. As well as the crossbows from the ship's armoury Yilven had his bow and Dominic was prepared to unleash a magical blast against the *Splendid Spirit* itself. Not everyone located here was armed for ranged combat though, the men on the rudder would have to remain at their posts so would be unable to take part in any battle. Horace and Lucia were also on top of the rear structure though neither of them was armed with a crossbow either due to not having the physical strength required to rapidly reload between shots. They were here because it was judged to be the safest place for them although Lucia still had her dagger and Horace had selected a cleaver from the galley so neither of them were entirely helpless. Finally two other members of the crew had been selected to stand guard at the top of the stairs leading from the deck to the top of the rear structure with boat hooks that could be wielded like spears to at least slow down anyone trying to get up them.

While the crew on the top of the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure were largely prepared to attack their enemies from a distance those on the main deck were prepared to fight off any attempt to board the ship and down here Gromar and the two crewmen who had previously been part of the *Splendid Spirit's* crew each led a group of men who would confront any boarders head on.

"Do you think we'll see them soon?" Lucia asked Will as the sun rose over the horizon.

"I'm still hoping that we'll be able to slip past them entirely. I suspect that Captain Castle will start his search for us close to shore and make his way further out to sea. The further out we went the longer it would take us to get this far along the straight so he'll be trying to put his ship at the point he thinks we could reach at any time given how far from shore we go." Will explained.

"How good do you think his estimate of our speed is? If he gets that wrong then all his calculations will be for nothing." Horace added.

"That's a good question and one I've been asking myself. Hopefully his estimate is well off and that will help us get past him because if it comes down to a chase then I don't think that we can outrun the *Splendid Spirit*." Will replied.

The *Storm Chaser* continued to sail northwards, heading for Hessenland at the far end of the Straight of Lerron. There was no sign of the *Splendid Spirit* as the ship sailed though and the crew began to believe that either they had managed to evade the Dannaron warship or it had never been waiting for them in the first place.

"Perhaps Captain Castle is not as obsessed as you thought Will." Yilven commented while Will consulted a chart.

"Perhaps not though I don't remember him making idle threats when I served under him." Will replied.

"What if he's heading back to Dannaron to have more ships hunting for us when we go past?" Horace suggested.

"Can he do that?" Lucia asked nervously.

"He could but I don't think he would." Will answered.

"Why not?" Horace said.

"Firstly because he needs his ship to catch us or there's a chance that someone else could find out what he's up to. Even if he's able to find other captains he can trust to cover for him killing us and taking our ship then they're going to want a cut for themselves. Secondly it would mean him having to put into port and then set off again. Unless we sailed right along the coast past Dannaron then it would be next to impossible to find us without using dozens of ships." Will explained before the lookout at the top of the *Storm Chaser's* mast called out.

"Debris in the water!" he shouted and he pointed ahead of the *Storm Chaser*.

"Debris? Is this going to be the same as last time?" Horace said.

"What do you mean by that Horace?" Lucia asked.

"Don't you remember Aldbertus?" Will asked, referring to a Hadarian sailor who travelled aboard the *Storm Chaser* to Oscay and died there, "We picked him and the other Hadarian survivors up from debris left floating in the ocean after they attacked the ships you and the Elves were aboard on their way to Oscay."

"Could Captain Castle have attacked the wrong ship and destroyed it to cover his tracks?" Dominic asked.

"Hey Will, what's going on?" Gromar then called out from the main deck below.

"There's debris in the water. It could be from another ship. Better get one of our dingies ready just in case." Will told him.

"Will I should get to the front of the ship." Yilven said, "I'll be able to see better from there."

"Go." Will responded, nodding his head and Yilven hurried down the stairs to the main deck before running right to the front of the ship and looking out over the ocean.

Ahead of the *Storm Chaser* Yilven could see several pieces of wood floating in the ocean though it was impossible to tell for certain whether they had come from a ship's hull or had simply been thrown overboard or washed out to sea from the shore. However, then Yilven noticed what was obviously a small rowing boat, though its angle in the water was odd and there was a single person sitting inside it.

"There's someone in the water!" Yilven shouted.

"Which way?" Will called out and Yilven pointed.

"That way. Looks like they're sat in a rowing boat that half filled with water." he responded and Will turned towards the crewmen on the rudder.

"Steer in that direction. I want to get us closer." he said before then looking down at the deck and shouting,

"Get that dingy ready. We'll get closer to the survivor and bring them aboard."

"At least we should be able to get some answers about what happened here." Horace commented and Will nodded.

"There's still the chance that a ship broke up after it got caught in a storm but I've not seen any signs of bad weather since we left port." he said.

At the *Storm Chaser's* prow Yilven continued to look out across the ocean. He could see other pieces of debris floating in the water and if one of them had a survivor clinging to it then others could also. The various pieces were scattered over a wide area though, ocean currents having spread them apart since the ship they had come from had been wrecked so it was quite possible that any other survivors had drifted much further away.

He continued to check on the man drifting in the boat and as the *Storm Chaser* drew nearer to him Yilven saw the man start to wave and call out, obviously doing his best to attract attention.

"Over here! Hey! Over here!" the man shouted and all of a sudden Yilven realised that he knew who this man was, it was Captain John Castle of the *Splendid Spirit*.

Rather than respond to John's cries Yilven rushed towards the back of the ship and up the stairs to where Will stood.

"Something wrong Yilven?" Will asked.

"Maybe, it's the man in the boat." Yilven told him.

"What about him?" Dominic said and Yilven smiled.

"You'll never guess who it is." he said.

"Someone we know?" Horace commented.

"It can't be." Will added.

"Who?" Lucia asked.

"John Castle." Will answered.

"Exactly. Though he isn't wearing his fancy captain's coat any more." Yilven said.

"Maybe his crew finally had enough of him and there was a mutiny." Horace suggested.

"I hope so." Will responded.

"Why do you say that Will?" Lucia said.

"Because if there was a mutiny then that means that the crew of the *Splendid Spirit* simply cast him adrift. On the other hand if the ship was sunk then whatever sunk it could still be around here." Will explained, "We'll send out a dingy and bring him aboard."

"We're bringing him aboard?" Lucia said in amazement.

"Will he tried to have you executed." Horace commented.

"If something did happen to the *Splendid Spirit* though then he's the only one who can tell us what that was." Yilven pointed out.

"Exactly. We have to know or the same thing might happen to us." Will added.

When the *Storm Chaser* got to within about a hundred yards of the half-submerged dingy the ship's sail was taken in so that it was left to drift with the current in the same way that the dingy was. Then one of the *Storm Chaser's* own rowing boats was lowered over the side and a pair of the ship's crew climbed down into it before they began to row towards where John was still waving.

"Over here, quickly," he called out as the two men rowed towards him. As soon as the boat from the *Storm Chaser* got close enough John reached out to grab the side before pulling himself into it, "Good, now get us back to your ship," he told the two crewmen and they glanced at one another before one of them noticed the oar sitting in the half-submerged dingy that they had just rescued John from.

"Grab that. It might come in useful," he told the other crewman and in turn he reached out for the oar.

"An oar? You've just rescued me and all you care about is an oar? I'm a captain of the Dannaron navy and I order you to get me back to your ship immediately," John said.

"Don't navy captains wear fancy jackets? Besides, there's no point in wasting it," the crewman who had just grabbed the oar responded before he put the oar down in the dingy from the *Storm Chaser* and the two crewmen began to row again, heading back towards their ship.

They rowed to the same point where they had departed from the *Storm Chaser*, where the ropes to secure the boat were still dangling down the side of the hull and there was a rope ladder so that the dingy's occupants could climb aboard.

John stood up in the dingy and grabbed the ladder as soon as he could and began to climb while the two crewmen worked on securing the dingy so it could be hauled back aboard the ship. When John reached the top of the ladder two crewmen on the deck reached down to help him aboard. John said nothing at this point, not thanking either of the men for their assistance. However, when he was standing on the deck his eyes widened as he looked at them and recognised them both as the two men who had deserted from the crew of the *Splendid Spirit* after Benedict had ordered them to assist him in his plan to abduct Will.

"You!" he hissed and then he looked around the deck, noticing Gromar among the gathered crewmen and when he looked up to the top of the rear structure he saw Will, Yilven, Horace, Lucia and Dominic looking back down at him.

"Welcome aboard the *Storm Chaser*," Will said and he made his way to the stairs that led down to the deck.

"This man is a mutineer!" John exclaimed and he pointed a finger towards Will but there was no response from any of the gathered crewmen. Instead Will just smiled as he walked up to John.

"You'll find that I am the officially recognised owner and captain of the trading ship *Storm Chaser* so that means that aboard this ship you address me as Captain Beckett," he said and John scowled at him.

"Very well Captain Beckett," he said, stressing the word 'captain', "I demand that you return me to the closest port in Dannaron immediately."

"I don't think so. You see I have been chartered by that man up there to take him to Teuten in Hessenland," Will said and he pointed to where Dominic stood watching from the top of the rear structure, "and we can't afford any further delays. That means that you'll be coming to Teuten with us. Firstly though you can tell me what happened to your ship. When we last met in Sayal you had one whereas now-"

"We were attacked by Costrians. Two of their ships ambushed us," John interrupted, "The *Splendid Spirit* burned and sank."

"Were there any other survivors?" Will said before one of the men who had rowed John back to the ship approached him with the oar that had been taken from the half sunken dingy that he had been found in.

"I think you should see this captain," he said, holding out the oar and he pointed to the edge where it was marked with what was obviously blood.

"Interesting," Will said as he took the oar and inspected the edge, "Do you know what this looks like to me? It looks like at least one other person survived the sinking of the *Splendid Spirit* and tried to get into the same boat that you were found in. Unfortunately, being the terrible human being you are you opted to murder them to avoid the risk of their added weight sinking the already damaged boat. How good is my guess?" he added before he handed the oar back to his crewman.

"I don't answer to you Captain Beckett. Now show me to a cabin so that I can rest until we get to Teuten if that is where you are taking me," John said.

"Cabin? Rest?" Will replied, "Do you have money to pay for this cabin and your passage?"

"Of course I don't you fool. Everything I had went down with my ship," John snapped back at him.

"Including your fancy captain's coat it seems. Or was that deliberate just in case you were picked up by the Costrians so that they wouldn't know who you were?" Will responded, "In any case if you can't pay for your passage then that means you'll have to work for it instead."

"Very well, I suppose that I can supervise a watch," John said.

"I don't think so. I already have enough people that I actually trust to supervise watches without adding a murderer to them. You'll work your passage but you'll do the tasks that I choose, not you," Will said.

"This is outrageous!" John yelled.

"Shut up!" Will shouted back at him, "Remember that I know you. I served under you and frankly I'm not one bit surprised that you murdered one of your own crew to try and save your own worthless life so you have a choice, you can either do the work you are given-

"Preposterous." John commented but Will just continued to speak.

"-you can be tossed back into the ocean where you can wait for the next ship that happens to come along or finally we can hold you in chains as a murderer and then hand you over to the authorities in Teuten to be hanged. You might get a trial or you might not. It depends on whether they chose to believe that you are a captain or just some loud-mouthed thug claiming to be one. I certainly wouldn't look to anyone aboard this ship for a character reference."

"Mark my words William Beckett, one day you'll pay for being so insolent." John said and Will smiled at him.

"Maybe, but not today Mister Castle." he replied and then he looked at a nearby crewman and added, "Find somewhere for our temporary crewman to rest. He's been through a lot so I won't ask him to carry out any duties until the afternoon watch."

Will then turned and headed back towards the stairs leading up to the top of the rear structure but before he reached them Gromar rushed up to him.

"Will are you sure that having that fool aboard is a good idea?" the Dwarf asked as they both headed up the steps.

"No but I don't really have a choice. Casting people adrift at sea isn't something that I want to get into the habit of, no matter who they are. Luckily John Castle isn't the sort of person who can inspire enough loyalty in anyone to be able to trigger a mutiny and make himself captain, especially not when there are two sailors aboard who can warn everyone else about what it's like to serve under him." Will said.

"You mean those sailors that he's now going to have to serve alongside?" Gromar said.

"Yes. We may need to keep an eye out to make sure that he doesn't have any unfortunate accidents between here and Teuten but with luck that should only be until tomorrow evening." Will said just as they reached the top of the stairs.

"What's happening?" Lucia said.

"Will's putting that idiot to work." Gromar told her.

"He can scrub the decks for a day and a half. Some real work will do him good." Will added, "The bigger problem is what happened to the *Splendid Spirit*, it was attacked by a pair of Costrian ships and sunk."

"The Costrians are allied with Ammaril." Yilven commented.

"Exactly. I wouldn't be surprised if she's ordered ship to start raiding all along the Straight of Lerron in preparation for an invasion." Will said.

"So she'd attack from the sea as well as through the stone circles?" Horace asked.

"Probably. That's how she moved her Orcs to Tarran after all. Now she also has the Hadarian and Costrian armies to move. That's a lot to be sending through stone circles just a hundred or so at a time." Will replied.

"True, there's a lot we don't really know about the stone circles. There could be some practical reason why Ammaril didn't rely on them solely when she invaded Tarran." Dominic added.

"So do we continue by sea or make for the closest port?" Yilven added.

"I need to get back to Hessenland." Dominic replied.

"You won't be getting anywhere if this ship gets sunk." Gromar pointed out.

"We'll carry on by sea." Will said, "With luck we'll avoid the raiders entirely. If not then I expect they'll try to board us, we're not a fighting ship after all so they could try to plunder our cargo. If that happens we'll stick with the plan we were going to use against the *Splendid Spirit* if it managed to catch us. We have our weapons and Dominic's spells. Hopefully that will be enough."

"Hope and luck? That doesn't sound like much of a war fighting strategy Will." Gromar commented.

"Maybe not, but right now it's all we've got." Will replied.

As Will had ordered the *Storm Chaser* continued to sail north along the Straight of Lerron and shortly after noon a plume of smoke was seen rising from over the horizon while Gromar and Will were stood on the rear structure.

"What do you think that is?" Gromar asked.

"If Ammaril is sending raiders across the straight then it could be one of the coastal settlements." Will said, "We're sailing past Dannaron right now and we know that they've attacked a Dannaron navy ship so why not a few coastal villages as well?"

"I hate to have to point this out but if those fires are still burning then doesn't that mean that the ships responsible are probably still close by?" Gromar said and Will paused to consider this. The smoke rising up over the horizon was thick and dark, suggesting that the fire was still burning which meant that Gromar's

observation was probably right, somewhere close by there was likely to be a warship from one of the nations now allied with Ammaril.

"You're right. They're probably not far away. Spread the word that we might be encountering trouble soon."

Will said and he looked to where his crossbow was propped up close by along with a quiver of bolts.

Despite the apparent danger the *Storm Chaser* continued to sail onwards and Will remained on deck, waiting to hear the moment that any other ships were spotted by the lookout at the top of the mast.

Before any ships were seen though the *Storm Chaser* got close enough to the source of the smoke that it could just about be seen from the ship. Just as Will had thought the smoke was coming from a coastal settlement that had been set on fire and while there were famous fires that had started by accident and spread to wipe out entire cities such blazes were far more likely to be started by an invading force as the ultimate act of spite, to destroy a settlement that could have stood for centuries because they lacked either the strength or the will to occupy it. In addition to the buildings that were on fire there were numerous smaller blazes much closer to the shore that Will guessed were mainly fishing boats that would have been operated by the local population.

"What happened?" Lucia's voice asked from behind Will and he glanced at her as she moved to stand beside him.

"Ammaril's raiders I think," he replied.

"So not one of the giant dragons then?" Lucia suggest and Will paused to think.

"That depends on how far they can fly. I think that a

"That letter Arrathan sent talked about a town being burned to create a demon. Do you think that that's what happened here?" Lucia said.

"I don't know. Dominic is the best person to ask that sort of question." Will said, "I suspect that the only purpose of raids like this is to spread chaos though. The rulers of the kingdoms all along the straight will have to send soldiers to protect every small coastal village like this and that will draw them away from the inland regions."

"Where the stone circles are?" Lucia commented and Will nodded.

"Exactly. I doubt that any kingdom has an army large enough to guard its entire coast and any stone circles within their territory. That's assuming that we even know about them all. There could be some hidden in remote places that no-one's visited in hundreds of years and Ammaril could use any of them to begin her invasion." he said before there was a sudden shout from the ship's lookout at the top of the mast.

"Ship hoy!" he yelled and both Will and Lucia turned to look in the direction that the lookout was pointing and in the distance the sail of another ship was visible.

"Do you think that's the ship that burned the village?" Lucia said.

"They might just be passing like we are but it's a big coincidence for us both to be passing by right after the village has been attacked and destroyed." Will responded.

"Should I go and get the others?" Lucia said and Will nodded.

"Yes, we need everyone on deck, just in case," he said and Lucia rushed away.

It did not take long for the rest of the ship's crew to come hurrying onto the deck, most carrying various weapons while others instead retrieved weapons that they had left on the deck in readiness for being called into action. Once again Gromar remained on the main deck with his war hammer to help lead the defence of the ship from any boarding action while Yilven, Horace, Lucia and Dominic all joined Will on the rear structure.

"How many ships?" Dominic asked and Will pointed towards the approaching vessel.

"Just the one for now it looks like. I can just about make it out," he replied.

"There is just one. I can't recognise the type from this distance and the sail is unmarked." Yilven replied.

"So it could be anyone from another cargo ship to Ammaril herself." Dominic commented.

"We'll just keep sailing north." Will said, "They're pretty far away so hopefully even if they have seen us they won't be able to catch us before we reach Teuten."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that Will." Yilven said.

"What do you mean Yilven?" Horace asked.

"I mean that the way that ship is moving I don't think that it's just under the influence of the wind and the tide. I think that's a longship or something similar. They have oarsmen as well to power them." Yilven answered.

"Then it's a warship." Will said.

"Then we can't outrun them?" Lucia said.

"No, not a chance. If that is one of the ship's allied to Ammaril then they'll easily catch us before it gets dark and we have the chance to try and lose them. Not that we won't try though. They might make a mistake or get tired of chasing us." Will replied.

"I take it that we should be prepared to fight though, just in case." Dominic said and Will nodded.

"Yes. We should be ready to fight." he said. Then after a moment's hesitation he added, "And we should get John Castle up here."

"Him? But why?" Lucia asked.

"Because he's a navy captain? He has experience in fighting battles at sea." Yilven said.

"Exactly. He knows that his neck is on the chopping block along with the rest of us and I need every man where he can do the most good." Will said before he looked down onto the deck where he saw John among a group of crewmen armed with various tools, "Captain Castle, please come up here. I think that we may have need of you." he called out.

John then made his way up the stairs to join Will and the others on the rear structure.

"I assume that from the way you just addressed me that you now recognise my usefulness Mister Beckett?" he said.

"That's still Captain Beckett." Will responded, "However, your assumption is correct. It appears that there is a longship heading straight for us. I may not like you but as you said I do recognise your experience. We have limited shooting power and a smaller crew than a warship but we're not entirely helpless."

"Yes, I see that you have some crossbows and the Elf has his bow also." John said.

"My name is Yilven of Agalla." Yilven told him.

"Of course." John responded.

"Dominic is our most potent weapon." Will added and John looked at the sorcerer.

"Dominic von Garran. Mage to the court of King Gerald of Hessenland." Dominic said.

"So you are a diplomat." John commented.

"Of a sort, yes." Dominic said.

"So what can you do to help?" John asked.

"As I've already discussed with Will I can unleash crude magical blasts that will strike like a hammer blow but I can also manipulate flames. Unfortunately the more powerful forms of magical attack are rather obscure and beyond my current capability." Dominic answered.

"When we were planning on fighting your ship we intended to let you get in close before we simultaneously shot at you with our crossbows and Dominic would conjure the most powerful magical blast that he could." Will said.

"Something that was likely to be a one off in my case. At least one powerful blast attack while any that followed would have been much weaker. All of course avoiding the risk of fire spreading from their ship to ours." Dominic added.

"A good plan given your resources." John commented, "I assume that you intend to attack this longship in the same way?" John said.

"We do." Will answered.

"Well it seems a sound plan to me. Though I do have one suggestion." John said.

"And what's that?" Horace asked and John glared down at him for a moment.

"You're running. Don't. We all know that they'll catch us so let them. Take in your sail now so that they don't have a target to shoot at." John said.

"That actually sounds like a good idea." Yilven commented.

"Of course it is. Unlike you Elves who have spent centuries hiding on your remote islands for centuries we humans have been interacting with the world and one another." John said and Yilven smiled.

"Yes and you seem to have perfected the art of killing one another nicely." he said.

"If we could get back to the matter at hand." Will interrupted before John could respond in kind, "For the duration of this battle John will be my first mate. Afterwards if I'm happy with his performance then he can continue in that position until we get to Teuten tomorrow. Oh and yes, that position does come with a private cabin. Any punishments to be issued to the crew will have to be confirmed by myself though."

"As you wish." John said and then a moment later he added, "Captain Beckett."

At John's suggestion the crew of the *Storm Chaser* took in their sail and allowed the ship to drift along with the current while further out to sea the longship continued to approach the cog under the influence of both the wind in its sail and also the numerous oars that extended from each side of the hull. This left the crew of the *Storm Chaser* with nothing to do but watch and wait while the longship approached and Yilven's keen eyesight allowed him to study their enemy at a significant distance.

"The ship is flying a Hadarian flag." he announced when he saw the colours of the flag being flown by the longship above its sail.

The Shattered Stone

"And the Hadarians are definitely allied with Ammaril." Horace commented.

"Even if they weren't I wouldn't trust them." Yilven replied.

"They attacked our ships when we were travelling to Oscay didn't they?" Lucia commented.

"Yes, four of them," Yilven responded before he added, "and like some of those ships this one appears to mount a stone thrower."

Stone throwers were a powerful weapon, easily able to smash through the hull of any wooden ship in the world. However, the weapons were notoriously inaccurate when fired from a ship on the ocean where it was impossible to have a perfectly stable firing position.

"They fire in an arc. It will be useless once they get too close." John commented.

"They aren't much better at long range either." Will added.

"Maybe we should have made a run for it after all." Horace commented but Will shook his head.

"No, they'd still have caught up with us sooner or later and if they did use that stone thrower I'd hate to be hit by chance." he said, "One good thing though is that if they have a stone thrower they might not have quite as many crossbows aboard. As John said that stone thrower can't be used when they're right alongside us, on the other hand our crossbows and Dominic's magic will be effective at that range."

"I recommend waiting until the last possible moment. Right as they're about to board us if we can." John said.

"Why? Shouldn't we try to keep them further away?" Lucia said and John sneered at her for a moment.

"Young lady if you knew anything about naval combat then you would know that when a ship manoeuvres close to board another the boarding party itself must muster on the deck. They will be clustered together and vulnerable to the magical attack." he said before turning back to Will and while Lucia frowned back at him he added, "Of course we'll need to be careful about them ramming us. That's what finished off the *Splendid Spirit*."

"Once they start trying to board us their ship will be pointing the wrong way to ram us though." Will pointed out, "We just need to make sure that when they pull away they aren't in any condition to come after us again."

"They look like they're getting closer. How long do you think it will be until they reach us?" Dominic asked as he watched the longship sailing towards them and Will and John looked at one another briefly.

"Not long now." Will said. Then he looked around and called out, "They're coming. Everyone into position now."

Without hesitation the *Storm Chaser's* crew began to move, most concealing themselves among the objects on deck or withdrawing through the hatches that led below so that to an observer the ship would appear to be unprepared to deal with an attack when in fact the opposite was true.

"I can't stand this waiting." Lucia commented.

"What do you see Yilven?" Will added, looking towards the Elf who had crouched behind a solid part of the barrier surrounding the top of the *Storm Chaser's* rear structure so that he could watch the approaching longship without being easily seen in return.

"I can just about make out people on the deck." Yilven responded without taking his eyes off the longship.

"Are they readying the stone thrower?" John asked.

"No, it doesn't look like anyone is going anywhere near it. In fact there aren't many people on the deck at all right now." Yilven said.

"I thought they needed to be on deck to board us." Horace commented.

"They do." Will replied and a smile appeared on his face, "But they can't get ready to board us if they need their crew to man the oars."

"They'll get to within a few hundred yards and then stop rowing, they'll just use their sail for the final stretch." John added.

"Yilven can you see clearly enough to count their oars?" Will asked.

"No, not yet. This isn't a good angle."

"Very clever. Count the oars and we will gain an idea of how many men we face." Dominic said.

"Yes and unless they outnumber us heavily then we may just have an advantage over them when they try to board us." Will said.

"We will? Lucia responded.

"Rowing is hard work young lady." John said, "Longships tend to travel under sail for most of the time. Oars are only used for shorter bursts of speed to avoid wearing out the crew. Unless slaves are being used of course. They are far more expendable."

"Expendable?" Lucia said, glaring at John.

"I'm sure John didn't mean to imply that you were expendable Lucia." Will said.

"She is a slave? I didn't realise." John said.

"I'm not a slave any more. Captain Vendril freed me after he bought me." Lucia said.

"There are no slaves on my ship John." Will said and John sighed.

"You always were sentimental William." he said.

"The ship is turning." Yilven said as the approaching longship started to turn so that its course more closely matched that of the *Storm Chaser*.

"So can you see how many oars are on each side?" Horace asked.

"Yes, hold on, I'm counting them." Yilven said as he began to count the number of oars he could see along the side of the longship. Each oar protruded through a dedicated hole in the side of the longship's hull though Yilven could see that not every such opening had an oar coming through it. The holes were spaced far enough apart to prevent the oars from clashing with one another if the crewmen working them failed to keep up a unified rhythm and this made counting the number of oars easier, "Fourteen." he said when he was done, recounting just to make sure that he got the same number a second time.

"Fourteen? Then that means that there are twenty-eight men rowing once the other side is taken into account." Lucia said, "There are about that many of us aboard the *Storm Chaser*."

"Fifty-six young lady." John responded.

"John's right." Will added.

"That isn't some little rowing boat. There will be two men on every oar." John continued.

"Plus the men on deck they outnumber us by more than two to one." Dominic said.

"Roughly the odds that I expected. Dominic we're going to be counting on your magic is going to even things up for us." Will said and Dominic nodded.

"I'll try." he replied.

The change in course by the longship allowed the vessel to approach the *Storm Chaser* in a way that would position the two ships side by side when they met and just as John had said as the longship drew close all of a sudden the oars were all lifted from the water and withdrawn back inside the hull.

"Is this it?" Horace said and Will nodded.

"Yes this is it. Without the oars they can get right alongside us and board us." he said before he called out, "Everyone stand by." and then he began to load his crossbow.

Even with its oars withdrawn the longship continued to gain on the *Storm Chaser*, its sail providing more than enough speed to catch up with the drifting cog and the crewmen now gathering on its deck were now easy to make out and it was obvious that the crew of the *Storm Chaser* were heavily outnumbered. The Hadarian crew did not appear to be wearing any armour, something that was unsurprising given the risk of drowning if a person weighed down by chainmail fell into the ocean but many carried shields and all were armed with swords, axes or spears. A handful were also armed with crossbows and they stood towards the edge of the deck from where they could shoot at the *Storm Chaser* without their line of sight being blocked by their fellow sailors. Other men that stood along the edge of the deck clearly carried grappling hooks and ropes that would be used to fix the two ships together before the boarding actually took place. Once the hooks were secured the Hadarians would physically pull the *Storm Chaser* closer until it was possible to leap from the deck of their longship to that of the cog. At the same time the longship's sail was lowered so that the two vessels would simply drift together rather than the longship pulling on the *Storm Chaser*.

"That's their captain right there." John said and he pointed to where a man in a green coat marked with yellow braid around the sleeves stood behind the rest of the crew.

"Yilven, what do you think?" Will asked.

"I think that that coat makes a good target." Yilven replied with a smile.

"In that case he's your first target. Maybe if you can put a few arrows through the more senior crew then the rest will be too confused to act in a co-ordinated manner." Will told him before the first grappling hook was hurled from the deck of the longship. This flew across the gap between the two ships before landing on the deck of the *Storm Chaser* and the man who had thrown it pulled on the rope attached to the hook, pulling it back until it caught on the rail at the side of the deck. This hook was followed by more being thrown from the longship, "Dominic are you ready?" Will asked and Dominic nodded.

"Ready when you are." he replied.

"Then let Yilven take his shot and then hit them with everything that you can." Will told him.

Yilven promptly leapt to his feet, raised his bow and shot an arrow towards the longship. From his vantage point on the top of the rear structure he was able to shoot this over heads of the crewmen on the deck and directly at the captain standing at the back. The Hadarian captain turned as the arrow flew, looking straight towards Yilven and he began to raise his arm as if to point towards the Elf but before he could manage this the arrow struck him in the centre of his chest and he promptly collapsed to the deck. The sudden death of their captain before even one of their number had been able to get aboard the *Storm Chaser* startled the

Hadarian crew and they all looked towards where their captain had fallen. This proved to be all the distraction that Dominic needed and he lifted his staff, pointing it towards the deck of the longship. "Phyan-sa!" he yelled as he channelled as much energy as he could both from himself and where he had stored it in his staff towards the longship.

The magical blast spread out as it rapidly flew across the water before it slammed into the side of the ship and there was a loud 'crash' sound as if a massive object had just collided with it. The strength of the blast ripped through the barrier around the side of the deck, reducing a section about twenty feet long to splinters and it also tore a large hole in the upper hull and deck right at the side of the ship. As destructive as the magical blast was against the tough wooden hull of the longship though, its effect against the crewmen caught within it was just as damaging. There had been more than a dozen men standing within the area struck by the blast and to each of them it was akin to being struck by a massive physical blow. None of the affected men were able to remain standing and about half of them were hurled backwards into those standing behind them while others fell into the hole created in the deck, two men screaming as they fell into the ocean itself.

After releasing such a powerful blast of magical energy Dominic staggered and steadied himself on his staff. "Dominic are you alright?" Lucia asked as she and Horace dashed to his side to support him.

"I'll be fine," he gasped.

"You don't look it. Sit down." Horace told him and with help from Horace and Lucia, Dominic lowered himself into a sitting position to rest while the battle continued.

"Crossbows!" Will snapped as he aimed his crossbow into the mass of Hadarians on the longship's deck and released a bolt. The other crewmen armed with crossbows did the same thing and several more of the Hadarians fell before they shot back. The combination of Dominic's magical blast and the volley of crossbow bolts from the *Storm Chaser* had significantly reduced the number of crossbows that the Hadarians had ready to shoot back with but several bolts still flew towards the top of the cog's rear structure since that was where the shooting from that ship had originated from, "Get down." Will exclaimed when he saw the Hadarian crossbow men take aim and he dived for cover.

On the other hand John reacted too slowly and one of the bolts hit him in the eye, penetrating deep into his skull and killing him almost instantly.

"Will are you okay?" Lucia called out.

"Yes I'm fine." Will replied and then he glanced at John and added, "Looks like fate finally caught up with him though."

Yilven then bobbed up again and fired another arrow, this time aiming for one of the Hadarians who had taken hold of the ropes attached to the grappling hooks and were pulling on them to draw the longship closer to the *Storm Chaser*. The arrow struck the man and he fell to the deck but another Hadarian stepped forwards to take the man's place while another Hadarian shot another crossbow bolt towards Yilven, forcing him to take cover again while the two ships were drawn even closer together.

"We don't have much longer before they're aboard Will." Yilven said.

"Gromar are you ready down there?" Will called out.

"Ready and waiting Will. Anyone who comes aboard uninvited is going to have to feel very unwelcome."

Gromar responded from his hiding place.

"Are we ready for another volley?" Will asked, looking around at the other men armed with crossbows and he saw that all of them had reloaded their weapons by this point, "Okay we'll get one last volley before they get aboard. After that just reload and shoot as fast as you can."

"Yes captain." one of the other men replied.

"Good. Now shoot." Will ordered and the men with crossbows as well as Yilven all stood up and shot their weapons towards the longship again. Will and Yilven both aimed for Hadarians who were themselves armed with crossbows to limit their shooting power while the others shot their weapons into the group of men waiting to leap aboard the *Storm Chaser*.

Just as Will had expected there was not enough time for his men to reload their crossbows again before the two ships were pulled close enough to one another that the Hadarian crew were able to chance leaping across the gap. However, the damage that Dominic had inflicted to their vessel meant that a section of the deck was not available to them to carry out this leap and instead of boarding the *Storm Chaser* as a single large wave the Hadarians had to cross either side of the damaged deck in two much smaller groups.

"Now!" Gromar bellowed and he and the other crewmen concealed around the deck all emerged and charged towards the Hadarians as they came aboard. Gromar swung his war hammer as he ran, smashing it into the chest of the first Hadarian he reached before simply barging into the man immediately behind him and he fell backwards into yet another man who had just landed on the *Storm Chaser's* deck. The man that

he fell into also tumbled backwards only with no more deck to land on he instead fell over the edge and into the ocean.

A crossbow bolt then flew close by Gromar and the Dwarf retreated. This enabled more Hadarians to make the leap from their own ship to the *Storm Chaser* but in doing this they blocked the line of sight of their crossbowmen to Gromar and the other crewmen defending the cog.

Instead of heading towards Gromar and the other men on the main deck three of the Hadarians that came aboard towards the rear of the ship turned and began to rush up the stairs that led to the top of the rear structure, knowing that this was the most likely place for the ship's captain to be directing its defence from. It was obvious that the *Storm Chaser* was not the totally defenceless target that the Hadarians had thought it would be and now they were keen to do all that they could to disrupt the considerable resistance that the crew were offering. In response to this the men stationed at the top of the stairs immediately thrust the boathooks that they were equipped with towards the Hadarians and the lead man raised his shield to deflect the first blow. However, in knocking the tip of the hook aside he opened himself to attack from the second man who stabbed him in the chest. The two Hadarians behind him had to act quickly to leap over his corpse as it tumbled back down the stairs but they were both able to avoid the falling corpse to continue and the next man blocked one boathook with his shield before swinging his axe at the second boathook to chop the tip from it, leaving the crewmen at the top of the stairs holding nothing more than a long wooden pole. This gave the Hadarians the chance to get far enough up the stairs that he was too close for the crewman with the remaining boathook to use the long handled weapon against him. Swinging his axe the Hadarian then cut down the crewman whose boathook he had already destroyed while using his shield to batter the other crewman out of his way. However, what he had not noticed was Horace charging towards the stairs with his cleaver in his hand and the Halfling swung this at the Hadarian's leg, striking him in his thigh and the man screamed as he collapsed. Dropping both his axe and his shield as he fell he clutched at the wound to his leg in an effort to stem the considerable amount of blood coming from it while Horace turned towards the next Hadarian and looked up at him.

"You little runt," the Hadarian hissed before all of a sudden a crewman of the *Storm Chaser* armed with a boathook swung it at him. The hook was too long for him to be able to stab the Hadarian with the tip but that did not stop him from striking the Hadarian as hard as he could with the long pole that it was mounted to and this sent him tumbling back down the stairs.

"Thanks," Horace told the crewman, aware that he would have stood little chance in a one-on-one fight against a man almost twice his size who had not simply failed to notice him.

Horace then heard the sound of more footsteps coming up the stairs and looked down them to see two more Hadarians coming up them before the one in front was struck by an arrow and he fell over the side of the ship where he struck the side of the longship as he fell. The second Hadarian then turned towards Yilven as he was reloading his bow and raised his shield to block another arrow only for the crewman at the top of the stairs to then stab him with his boathook.

"Will we need more help over here," Horace called out.

"I'm coming," Will responded as he drew his sword and he beckoned for another crewman who had been armed with a crossbow, "Come with me," he ordered and the other man hurried after Will, pausing when they reached the top of the stairs to pick up the axe dropped by the Hadarian Horace had attacked, a man who was now lying dead in a large pool of his own blood.

On the main deck of the *Storm Chaser* Gromar continued to lead the defence of the ship, standing in the centre of a line of crewmen that had formed across it. Although the Hadarians could only board from two narrow points they rapidly spread out to form a wider front themselves and for each man that Gromar struck down with his hammer there seemed to be another to take his place. Despite the losses that had been inflicted on the Hadarians by Dominic's magic and the *Storm Chaser's* crew the Hadarians still had the advantage of numbers and there were still more of them aboard their ship waiting to cross to the *Storm Chaser*.

"Will we could do with some help down here as well," Gromar shouted, aware that his line of men had been forced back almost as far as the ship's mast and if the Hadarians got that far then they would have the option of cutting through it and leaving the cog completely adrift.

"Perhaps I should go and help them," Lucia said.

"No, you stay right there," Will responded before he looked at the men armed with crossbows who were still exchanging shots with the crossbow men aboard the Hadarian longship. There were now only four of these men left but Will knew that they could do more good with Gromar than they could where they were now, "I want half of you down on the deck now," he told them and two of them set down their crossbows and rushed for the stairs on the far side of the *Storm Chaser* from the longship so that they could get down to the deck safely and join the crewmen defending it there.

"I don't like being so useless." Lucia said to Dominic who was still trying to get his strength back.

"You aren't-" he began before he suddenly stopped and frowned.

"What's wrong?" Lucia asked.

"Your knife." he said, looking at the knife that Lucia had in a small sheath on her belt.

"What about it?" she replied, looking down at the weapon as well.

"It was used to destroy the Wraith that accompanied Thomas." Dominic said.

"Yes. So?" Lucia said.

"So it contains the power of the Wraith, that's what it is designed to do, store magical power." Dominic pointed out.

"Power that you can use?" Lucia said.

"Possibly. I've never tried using the energy of a Wraith before. I don't think that any magic user has but it's worth a try. Help me up and hand me your knife." Dominic said and Lucia nodded.

Using both Lucia and his staff for support Dominic then got back to his feet and Lucia handed him her knife. Continuing to support himself with his staff Dominic then held out his other arm with which he held Lucia's knife and he pointed it towards the Hadarian longship, aiming for the deck beside the hole he had already blasted in it where a group of men was getting ready to leap across to the *Storm Chaser*.

"Phyan-sa!" he shouted as he released the power stored in the knife in one go. The vampire who had crafted the blade as a reservoir for magical power had been highly skilled and it contained almost as much power as Dominic's staff had done despite the massive difference in size and so the magical blast that Dominic unleashed was powerful enough that it scattered the men standing where it struck and there was another crashing sound as the deck beneath them was ripped apart. The blast also tore the barrier from the side of the longship and with it several of the ropes that now connected it to the *Storm Chaser*.

The effect of channelling so much power at once again took its toll on Dominic and he collapsed, letting go of both his staff and Lucia's knife.

"Dominic!" Lucia exclaimed as she tried to support him but his weight proved too much.

"I'll be fine, I just need to-" Dominic gasped before his eyes closed and he lost consciousness.

Upon seeing the ropes fall from the longship Will realised that there were now only two ropes holding the ships together, both of them close to the bottom of the stairs that he was at the top of.

"We need to cut those ropes. Everyone with me." Will said to the other crewmen at the stop of the stairs and they all began to move down the stairs with their weapons held out in front of them.

In return the Hadarians continued to try and force their way up the stairs, forcing Will and the others to have to fight their way down. Their actions were also visible from the deck of the longship and one of the handful of remaining crossbowmen shot his weapon towards the group, hitting the man carrying the boathook and causing him to fall, very nearly knocking Will and the crewman armed with axe over in the process.

"Will I've got him." Yilven called out, shooting an arrow from his bow at the Hadarian crossbowman while he was trying to reload his weapon. This arrow hit the man in the centre of his chest, piercing his heart and killing him instantly.

This gave Will and the crewman with an axe the chance to get to the bottom of the stairs where more of the Hadarians advanced on them.

"Horace, can you take care of the ropes?" Will said as he parried an attack from a Hadarian.

"Yes, I've got them. Just get me to them." Horace responded from behind the two men.

As Will and the crewman with an axe tried to clear a path to where the last grappling hooks connecting the Hadarian longship to the *Storm Chaser* were located Yilven also started using his bow to try and hold back any further Hadarian reinforcements from crossing over between the ships though by this point there were not many Hadarians left on the deck of their own vessel who could provide such assistance, most them having been either killed by Dominic's magical strikes or already crossed over to the *Storm Chaser*.

Gromar had also heard what Will had planned and he pointed towards the hooks.

"Push that way! We need to keep the Hadarians back from there." he called out to the sailors on the main deck and rather than just holding his position he tried to push forwards again, now less concerned about crossbows being shot from the longship.

As Will's group neared the grappling hooks Horace was able to dash to where they were caught on the side of the ship and he pulled himself up to the top of the rail around the side of the deck. Rather than attempt to dislodge the hooks themselves he swung his cleaver at the ropes connected to them instead, hacking through the first with three rapid strikes.

"First one down." Horace called out and Will quickly glanced towards the final rope extending between the two ships. This was just a few feet away but there were still several Hadarians between his group and the rope, making reaching it difficult even with Gromar trying to force his way towards them as well.

"Yilven can you hit the rope?" he called out and as Yilven looked down at the rope he loaded another arrow into his bow. He lined this up on the rope and shot the arrow but the movement of the ship made it miss by a narrow distance. Yilven did not give up though and he quickly loaded another arrow before firing it at the rope only to miss by a narrow margin once again. Yilven still did not give up though and he loaded and shot a third arrow. This time his shot clipped the rope, partially slicing through it. This weakened the rope significantly and more of the strands that made it up began to snap as the ocean current tried to pull the two ships apart. Immediately the Hadarians still on their longship stopped trying to jump across while the man who had taken over from their late captain ordered more grappling hooks. At the same time the Hadarians already aboard the *Storm Chaser* panicked when they realised that their own ship was in the process of drifting away and some of them attempted to leap back to their own ship. However, those who attempted this did so from towards the front of the deck where the two ships had already drifted further apart and the first three men to try this jump all fell short and landed in the ocean instead.

It was then that the final rope holding the two ships together snapped and they began to drift further apart. Seeing this the Hadarians remaining aboard the *Storm Chaser* stopped fighting and ran back to the side of the ship where they began to leap into the water, dropping their weapons and shields to avoid being weighed down as they started to swim back towards the longship. A few of the Hadarians had second thoughts about trying to swim in the open sea though and instead of jumping over the side of the *Storm Chaser* they just dropped their weapons and raised their hands in surrender.

"Deploy the sail. We need to get away from here quickly." Will ordered, "Yilven keep watch on that longship. If it looks like anyone is going anywhere near that stone thrower make sure that they don't get to fire it."

"Yes Will." Yilven responded as he turned his attention to the stone thrower mounted towards the front of the longship. For the time being at least though the Hadarian crew seemed to have no interest in trying to make use of the weapon, instead the surviving Hadarians were trying to assess the extent of the damage that had been inflicted to their ship. The hole that had been blasted in the side of their vessel represented a serious threat to the vessel, a weak point that if subjected to the force of a strong wave could further damage the ship as well as allowing water to flood into the vessel and possibly sink it. Therefore, the Hadarians were largely ignoring the *Storm Chaser* while they focused on keeping themselves afloat.

"What do you want doing with this lot Will?" Gromar asked as he and a number of other sailors surrounded the Hadarians left aboard the *Storm Chaser*, forcing them to their knees. There were a total of nine Hadarians who had surrendered rather than risk swimming back to their own ship and although they were outnumbered by the *Storm Chaser's* crew they could not be left to move about the ship freely. Will thought about how to deal with them for a moment. These men had attacked his ship and killed a number of his crew and in all likelihood they had also been responsible for destroying the coastal settlement that he had seen burning as the *Storm Chaser* sailed past it. Many sea captains would simply toss all of them over the side at the earliest opportunity, waiting only until they were too far from the longship for them to have any chance of being able to swim for safety or for their comrades to witness what was being done to them. However, Will was reluctant to take such extreme action no matter what the circumstances. At the same time he had no intention of being entirely merciful either.

"Take them below and secure them." Will said, "They can come with us to Teuten and we'll hand them over to the harbour master there."

"Okay you heard the captain." Gromar said loudly, "Get them below. We'll lock them in the forward storage compartment."

"No!" one of the Hadarians exclaimed when he heard this, well aware that the likely outcome of being handed over to the harbour master in Teuten would be to be hanged as a pirate within a day and he leapt back to his feet and tried to grab an axe from one of the *Storm Chaser's* crewmen who was standing close by him but before he could wrestle the weapon away from the crewmen Gromar leapt forwards and swung his war hammer at the man, striking him hard enough to send him flying back from the crewman.

"Anyone else want to try something stupid?" Gromar said looking at the scared looking Hadarians kneeling on the deck but they all averted their gaze as he turned to them, "Good. Now everyone on their feet, we're taking you below." As the Hadarian prisoners were being taken below Will looked around the deck. Unlike the Hadarian longship that continued to drift away from the *Storm Chaser*, his ship had escaped any serious damage during the battle and was capable of sailing, "Deploy the sail and get us underway. The Hadarians have already held us up long enough."

As several crewmen ran towards the mast so that the sail could be deployed Horace walked up to Will.

"Do you need me to do anything Will?" he asked.

"Yes, I need to know how many people we lost, how many are hurt and how many are still fit for duty. We ought to reach Teuten tomorrow but there could still be more Hadarian ships between here and there and I

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need to know what we have to work with." Will answered and Horace nodded.

"Okay, I'll get right on it." he replied.

Will then went back up the stairs to the top of the rear structure where he found Dominic still sat with Lucia beside him.

"Dominic, how are you?" Will asked and Dominic smiled at him.

"Tired but alive. Normally I wouldn't be using so much power at once. There's a reason that sorcerers aren't normally called upon to destroy warships. Manipulation of forces like fire is much easier than just unleashing raw magical energy." he responded.

"You did well. I don't think any of us would be alive without your efforts." Will said.

"You can thank Lucia as well. She kept that knife with the power from the Wraith inside it. Without that I couldn't have unleashed that second blast." Dominic replied.

"What else could I have done with it? It's not like I can cast spells using the knife myself." Lucia pointed out.

"Yes, there is that. But nevertheless I couldn't have done what I did without your help." Dominic said before he looked at Will and added, "You know that those Hadarians aren't likely to be treated very leniently when we get to Hessenland don't you?"

"Yes, they'll probably all hang as pirates even if they were just doing what their captain ordered." Will replied, nodding his head, "Some might be able to make some kind of deal if they have any useful information about what Ammaril and her allies are planning but I can't think of anything else that might save them."

10

Thomas paused to look around when he appeared in the stone circle in Oscay. Despite having used the circles numerous times to travel by now he was still nervous each time he did it that he would appear in some random spot in the world and be unable to get back to where he was supposed to be as had apparently happened to a few people over the centuries who had triggered one of the circles back accidentally and as far as their friends and family were concerned had simply disappeared. It was raining when Thomas arrived and he scowled, regretting not coming prepared for the weather here to be different to where he had set off from. Although in theory he could have used the stone circle to return to his point of origin and collect a more suitable coat or cloak he was not sure that the Wraith he needed to provide the power to make the circle function would permit this. As far as Thomas could tell though he had arrived exactly where he was supposed to be, outside the ancient Oscari city where their great library was located, the missing stone from the outside of the circle being the main giveaway and he began to walk in the direction of the city itself.

"Why couldn't you have built the circle closer to the damned city?" he said as he pulled the neck of his coat tighter around his neck to try and limit the amount of water getting in through this opening, knowing that the Wraith bound to the stone fixed around his neck would be able to hear him, however the ancient entity offered no response as Thomas continued to walk.

It took Thomas some time to reach the ancient city on foot, during which time he saw no signs of intelligent life. Within the city though it did not take long for him to hear the sounds of the Trolls clearing the area for Ammaril's future palace and the Great Library itself eventually came into view. Heading for the library Thomas suddenly found his way blocked by a pair of Trolls who threw aside the rubble they were carrying and snarled at him as he looked up at them.

"Hey I'm here to see Ammaril." he said but neither of the Trolls understood what he said and they continued to glare at him. It was now that the Wraith around Thomas' neck chose to appear though, its spectral form emerging from the stone as a pale light that then took on a vaguely humanoid form between him and the Trolls. Seeing the Wraith appear seemingly at Thomas' command, the Trolls realised immediately that he was supposed to be in the city and they backed away to let him past.

"Thanks." Thomas commented but there was no response from either the Trolls or the Wraith.

The Wraith remained visible for a short time but as Thomas started to move again the creature returned to the stone in the collar around his neck before he got too far away and caused the Wraith's strength to dwindle.

When the library was in clear view Thomas headed towards the main entrance but before he could start to climb the steps Ammaril appeared in the doorway and looked down at him.

"Stop right there Thomas. I did not summon you here." she said.

"No but I've visited all of the kingdoms you told me to and delivered your messages." Thomas replied.

"I see and what were their responses?" Ammaril said but instead of answering Thomas looked up into the sky.

"Look, can we continue this inside? I'm getting soaked here." he said.

"If we must. Though I warn you against attempting to remove anything from the library. It would not end well for you if you tried." Ammaril said.

"Don't worry, I just want to get in out of this rain. I don't care about your books." Thomas said as he started to walk up the steps towards the library and Ammaril waited for him to enter the library before she followed him inside.

"Now tell me what was said in response to my offers." Ammaril said sternly.

"Well none of them were exactly happy." Thomas told her.

"I do not care about their happiness." Ammaril commented.

"Well five out of the six agreed anyway. Hanging on to at least some power was preferable to losing everything to them." Thomas said.

"And the sixth?" Ammaril asked.

"The King of Orselland said that his people had already seen off four Hadarian attempts at conquest and he'd rather his kingdom was destroyed than subject to what amounted to Hadarian rule." Thomas said, "He also added a few comments about the arrogance of Elves."

"Well then I shall have to teach him a lesson about his own arrogance shan't I? I will give him exactly what he wants." Ammaril said and Thomas frowned.

"What he wants?" he said.

"Yes, you said it yourself. The King of Orselland would see his kingdom destroyed before accepting my terms so that is exactly what shall happen. His kingdom shall burn. I want you to return to Tarran and take my orders to my brother Orcan. He is to have all of Orselland's neighbours send their armies against Orselland. The kingdom may have defeated the Hadarians in the past but let us see how they can resist invasions along all of their borders at the same time. In addition he is to send half my dragons. While the King of Orselland sends his army to defend his borders my dragons will burn his cities to the ground," Ammaril told him.

Will smiled when he saw the entrance to Teuten harbour come into view and he gently squeezed Lucia's hand.

"Happy to be home?" Lucia asked.

"Relieved. We were lucky to escape that Hadarian longship. John Castle said his ship was attacked by two cogs. If we'd encountered them then the only chance we would have had would have been to try and stay ahead of them until it got dark." Will replied.

"So what will we do now?" Lucia added.

"I expect the Dominic will want us to go to the palace in Hessenstadt with us. After that I suppose we'll need to take Yilven on to Raysalgard though I don't know whether Gromar will come with us. He may want to head for home himself." Will replied.

"So if Dominic stays in Hessenstadt, Gromar goes back to the Dwarf kingdoms and we take Yilven to Raysalgard it will be just the pair of us and Horace left aboard.

"We will still have the rest of the crew." Will commented with a smile.

"You know what I mean Will. A few months ago I was the cabin girl aboard an Elven trade vessel. Since then I've been to Oscan and back and seen things I never imagined." Lucia said and Will nodded.

"I know what you mean. I'd been in the Dannaron navy for a while and then first mate of this ship. Now I'm a captain and one of the few people to have made it as far as Oscan and lived to tell the tale." Will said before he noticed a group of armed men standing on the dock and watching as the *Storm Chaser* approached, "This is odd." he said.

"What is?" Lucia asked as she looked at the armed men as well.

"Normally I'd expect just a couple of the harbour master's men to be ready to collect docking fees, not eight." Will replied, counting the men standing on the dock and then he looked along the dock and noticed more men in chainmail armed with crossbows positioned further away, "Eight plus however many crossbowmen seem to be about." he added just as Dominic emerged onto the deck.

"Ah it's good to be back in Hessenland." he said, looking up at Will.

"Maybe, though I was hoping for a warmer welcome." Will replied and he pointed to the party of armed men on the dock.

"I see what you mean." Dominic said, "Do you have any idea what they want?"

"No, we'll have to wait until we dock to find that out." Will replied.

The *Storm Chaser* manoeuvred alongside the dock and a pair of crewmen jumped from the ship to secure it in place before the gang plank was put in place and while Will walked calmly down it with Dominic behind him the armed men positioned themselves at the bottom to meet him.

"Captain Beckett, it's good to see you return." one of the armed men said and Will recognised him as one of the harbour master's guards who had often met the *Storm Chaser* when it docked in Teuten.

"I'm glad to be back though I didn't expect such a welcoming committee." Will replied and the guard smiled at him.

"I'm sorry but we're just taking precautions. I don't know how much you've heard on your travels but towns and villages all along the coast of the Straight of Lerron are being raided and burned it seems. Ships at sea as well." the guard said and Will nodded.

"Yes, we encountered a Hadarian longship yesterday and were lucky to get away. Fortunately we had someone aboard who was able to even up the odds for us." he said and he glanced at Dominic.

"So you're here because of the attacks?" Dominic asked and the guard nodded back at him.

"Yes, the mayor and the harbour master are worried that a ship at sea could be taken and used to infiltrate a raiding force into the harbour. We're supposed to check every ship that we don't recognise to make sure it isn't full of raiders." he explained, "Of course we know you so there's no need to search your ship."

"Actually we have something aboard that we need to hand over to you." Will said and the guard frowned.

"What's that?" he said.

"The Hadarians got aboard our ship and when we escaped some of them got left behind." Will told him.

"I'd have just pushed them overboard." another of the guards commented.

"It was tempting, believe me. Not only did they attack my ship but I think that they were responsible for burning a village on the coast of Dannaron but I thought it better to bring them back to port to have them dealt with properly. Some of them might have useful information after all."

"Alright then we'll take them off your hands. The mayor will want to have them questioned." the guard who had been speaking to Will replied.

"Good. Now what about docking? Has the harbour master ramped up the fees given the current emergency?" Will said.

"No, they're the same as the last time. How long do you plan on being here?" the guard said.

"A few days. We have to head for Hessenstadt but after that we'll be probably be heading for Raysalgard." Will told him as he counted out several coins and then handed them to the guard, "I'll have the prisoners brought out for you." he added.

When Thomas returned to Tarran he found himself surrounded by thousands of Orcs and Trolls as well as several of the legendary sized dragons that Ammaril had created and he smiled when he saw a tent nearby that flew the personal banner of Orcan. This meant that he had already moved his command post from Tarranberg to here, presumably so that he could more easily oversee the transport of his army using the stone circle that Thomas had just appeared in.

Thomas made his way directly towards the tent that flew Orcan's banner and saw that there were two Orcs standing guard right outside.

"I'm here with orders from Queen Ammaril." he said to the Orcs but they did not respond so he simply opened the tent flap and proceeded inside. Here he found Orcan along with Tiellan and Vendril as well as the four Elf warlocks now in Ammaril's service.

"What do you want?" Orcan said when Thomas entered.

"Ammaril has sent new orders following my mission to the other kingdoms on this side of the Straight of Lerron." Thomas replied and he held a letter that Ammaril had written her orders down on out towards Orcan who snatched it away from him and started to read, snarling as he got further through them.

"Is that going be a problem? Because you know that I'm just the messenger, right?" Thomas commented when he saw this.

"A distraction. Nothing more." Orcan responded, "The first warriors are about to travel through the stone circles. None of that is altered by these orders. I will continue to lead here while Tiellan shall move some of our dragons to the border of Orselland and Hadar. You will carry the queen's orders to the other human kingdoms so that they can order their armies to attack as she commands."

"Me?" Thomas asked, nervous about being sent back to the kingdoms that he knew had only reluctantly accepted Ammaril's control.

"That is what you are useful for, delivering messages, nothing else. If you cannot do it any longer then I shall inform Queen Ammaril that you are no longer useful and she can decide your fate." Orcan said and Thomas frowned.

"Okay, okay. I'll take your messages." he said.

"Good." Orcan responded as he pulled several sheets of paper towards him and pulled a pen from its ink well before he began to write.

"That's in Elvish. Will they know what it means?" Thomas pointed out when he saw that Orcan was writing in his own native language but the Orc leader ignored him, simply writing out three sets of orders and then handing them to Thomas.

"Take them and get out. If the human kings cannot read these themselves then they can find someone who can." he said.

"If you say so." Thomas muttered as he took the sheets of paper and turned to leave the tent.

"I will take the dragons to Hadar. I can be ready to attack in two days." Tiellan said when Thomas was gone.

"Good. That will give the humans the chance to begin." Orcan replied before Tiellan also left the tent and Orcan turned his attention to the four Elf warlocks, "You will now begin taking our warriors to their destinations." he told them, "Dorsos and Graysil, you will take them to the circle closest to the capital of Lerron. Hiros and Shimmandra will take the rest to Lastallo. Now that Tiellan is overseeing the destruction of Orselland I will select another to lead the invasion of Lastallo"

Hiros glanced at Dorsos and Shimmandra briefly, doing his best to gauge their reaction to this. He saw the pair look briefly at one another but aside from that they did not appear to be unduly concerned, presumably still confident in their plan to rendezvous in Syldarin before heading for Oscay.

"When do we start?" Graysil asked.

"Now." Orcan replied, "According to the humans their raids are meeting with success and the kingdoms will be moving their armies to protect against them. Now is the time to position our second wave. Go."

With only a limited amount of room within the stone circles it would be necessary for the Orcs, Trolls and dragons as well as their supplies to travel in groups. It was not possible to travel to a circle that was blocked, for example by a crowd of warriors who had just arrived there so the plan for moving was that after one of the warlocks would take a group to their destination those remaining in Tarran would wait, keeping clear of the circle themselves. Then once the destination circle was clear the warlock who had controlled the transit would return to Tarran to indicate this so that another group could safely depart. To avoid tiring out the warlocks they would rotate which of them was operating the circles, resulting in groups alternating between destinations as well as who went to any specific place.

The first to activate the stone circle was Hiros, who took a mixed party of Orc and Troll warriors to Lastallo, about two hundred strong. This group simply disappeared from the circle in Tarran and there was a brief delay before Hiros then reappeared alone.

"The first group is in place, standing guard around the circle Orcan." he announced as he walked from the circle and addressed Orcan.

"Good. Next group." Orcan said loudly and Graysil promptly made his way into the circle, walking up to the central stone while the circle around him started to fill with Orcs and Trolls again. Then when the circle had been filled again he placed his hand on the central stone and pictured his destination in his mind, a stone circle less than a day's ride from the capital of Lerron and he let some of his magical power flow into the central stone.

In an instant Graysil and the Orcs and Trolls were transported to the stone circle in Lerron. This circle was located within an area of low ground surrounded by forest. Here it was already dark but as an Elf, Graysil was still able to see relatively well, as could the Orcs who had retained the night vision that they had possessed prior to their transformation. Even without this ability to see even in poor light though Graysil and the Orcs would have seen in the light being cast by camp fires all around the circle.

Moments later a horn sounded from within the woods and there was the sound of movement from all around. "Spread out!" the Orc in command of the group brought here by Graysil yelled and the Orcs and Trolls all rushed towards the edge of the stone circle, spreading themselves out in all directions. However, before they got very far there was a sudden volley of crossbow bolts aimed towards the circle as the human soldiers who had been lying in wait began to shoot. Several of the Orcs were hit by these and fell to the ground while some of the Trolls simply roared in pain as they were also hit by crossbow bolts that lacked the power to bring them down with a single shot. Graysil immediately ducked, hoping that the circle's central stone would at least give him some protection from one direction. He watched as the Orcs and Trolls continued to spread out, eagerly awaiting the moment when he would be the only one left in the circle and as soon as he saw the last Orc step across its boundary he reached up and placed his hand on top of the central stone again, focusing on the circle in Tarran as he released some of his power into the stone.

In an instant Graysil was returned to the stone circle in Tarran where he found himself still surrounded by Orcs and Trolls but no longer being shot at by crossbows.

"They were waiting for us!" he exclaimed as he got back to his feet, "They attacked as soon as we arrived. I only just made it back here."

Upon hearing this Orcan made his way into the circle as well.

"How many?" he asked.

"I don't know. The circle in Lerron is in a forest clearing and the humans fired crossbows from within the trees. There must have been a lot of them though, enough to think that they could stand against us." Graysil replied.

"Then we will destroy them." Orcan told him and he looked towards Dorsos, "You will take a pair of dragons to Lerron now."

"Dragons?" Dorsos commented.

"Yes. Now." Orcan said before he turned a nearby Orc and added, "Send for two dragons. They are going next."

While Orcan and Graysil exited the stone circle Dorsos made his way into it and walked up to the central stone. Then he watched as the crowd of Orcs and Trolls around the outside of the circle parted to allow a pair of huge dragons to approach, led by one of the Orcs trusted to act as handlers for the dragons and he guided both of them into the circle. This required both dragons to fold their wings close to their bodies and curl their tails but they were just about able to squeeze into the circle and the moment that Dorsos saw that once this had been done he placed his hand on the central stone to activate it.

Dorsos suddenly heard the sounds of battle as he appeared in the circle in Lerron and looking around he saw a number of Orcs lying dead on the ground just outside it while more fought against humans within the

undergrowth. He could also hear the roars of angered Trolls as they too fought against the humans who had been waiting for the circle to be activated but Dorsos could not see them.

All of a sudden one of the dragons let out a roar as a crossbow bolt struck it and lodged between its scales. Turning its head towards the source of the attack the dragon unleashed a blast of fire from its mouth that engulfed part of the forest and set light to it. At the same time the second dragon leapt up into the air and spread out its wings to fly. The other dragon then copied this, launching itself into the air and spreading out its wings. This left the circle clear except for Dorsos and he quickly activated it again, vanishing as he returned to Tarran. Meanwhile the Orcs and Trolls continued to press onwards, hacking their way through the undergrowth and the Lerronian soldiers who despite having some limited success against the Orcs were finding the Trolls far more difficult to deal with. These larger creatures were much harder to bring down with just a single hit from either a crossbow or a hand-to-hand weapon while they could swing an axe or club hard enough to kill two or three men at once if they were close enough together. Only by forming large shield walls with ranks of spears to keep their enemies at a distance would the humans have a chance of defending themselves against them but the dense undergrowth made forming and manoeuvring such a cumbersome formation impossible. Instead the Lerronians had to try and bring the Trolls down from a distance with repeated hits from their crossbows while their swordsmen focused on the more vulnerable Orcs among whom losses were mounting.

The arrival of the dragons changed this though and the terrified Lerronians raised their crossbows and fired them at the giant flying reptiles. The size of the dragons made them easier targets despite their ability to fly but their scales were too thick for the bolts to be able to penetrate. Seeing that shooting the dragons' bodies was having no effect many of the crossbowmen shifted their aim towards the dragons' wings instead, hoping that these might be more vulnerable. Sure enough the crossbow bolts proved themselves able to pierce the dragons' skin here but they proved to be nothing more than an irritation to the gigantic flying beasts before they retaliated by exhaling further streams of fire that set light to the areas of forest where the Lerronian crossbowmen were located, burning or scattering them.

The stone circle was suddenly filled again for a third time as Graysil reappeared with another mixed force of Orcs and Trolls but this time most of the force were Trolls while the Orcs were all equipped as archers and as the Trolls began to advance into the trees the archers shot arrows towards the humans.

Facing the combined threat of Trolls charging towards them, Orcs shooting arrows at them and the two dragons circling overhead was enough to break the spirit of the Lerronian leader and he realised that his force was hopelessly outclassed.

"Retreat! Retreat!" he called out moments before an arrow struck him and he fell to the ground.

Now facing overwhelming odds and with their leader dead the remaining Lerronian troops panicked, turning to flee the field of battle. This was not the organised retreat that their leader had hoped to carry out though, instead it was a total rout as each human soldier focused on his own personal survival without thinking about any of the others.

Graysil had remained in the stone circle to observe the fighting and now that the Lerronians were fleeing the most senior of the Orcs strode towards him, halting just outside the perimeter of the circle.

"They are running. We need more Orcs to follow them. Cavalry." the Orc said and Graysil nodded.

"I'll tell Orcan." he said as he placed his hand on the circle's central stone and the Orc stepped further back from the edge of the circle before Graysil activated it and vanished.

Upon reaching Hessenstadt Will and most of the others began to ride in the direction of the palace. However, Dominic stopped them and pointed down a different street.

"No we need to go this way." he said.

"But the palace is this way." Will replied and he pointed in the direction they had been going.

"Yes but before we present ourselves to King Gerald's court I need to speak with my superior Sigismund Ead." Dominic told him.

"The man who sent you to find out the truth about Ammaril?" Lucia asked and Dominic nodded.

"Yes, I was instructed to bring back any information to him first. He will arrange for us to present what we know to King Gerald." he said.

"Then lead the way." Will said and Dominic turned his horse towards the direction he had pointed.

Riding along this street took the group to an ornate building that possessed a single tall tower towards the rear. It was located not far from the king's palace and above the large main door there was a large stone block into which was carved the phrase *Sapientia Ante Omnia*.

"Here we are, the College of Sorcery. The centre of all magical learning in Hessenland." Dominic said.

"What does that sign say?" Gromar asked, pointing to the stone block.

"Knowledge above all." Dominic replied with a smile, "It's old Trayman. It's the motto of our college. Come on, the stables are around the back."

The group then rode around the building until they came to a doorway large enough to admit a carriage or cart so there was plenty of room for them to ride right into the courtyard beyond it, at which point they were approached by two young men in robes.

"You can't come in here. Only members of the college may enter uninvited." one of them told Will before Dominic held up his staff from where he had mounted it on the opposite side of the horse to where the young men had approached from.

"They are my guests." he said as the two men stared with wide eyes at his staff, "I have urgent information for Sigismund Ead."

"I'm sorry my lord, I didn't realise that you were one of the order." the young man responded.

"Perhaps trying asking first next time." Gromar commented as he struggled to get down from his horse. On the other hand Yilven effortlessly dismounted from his horse and reached out to steady Gromar's to help him, "At least someone around here can be helpful." Gromar added.

"Where is Lord Sigismund?" Dominic asked.

"In his chambers I believe sir." one of the young men answered and Dominic nodded.

"Good. Then we'll go straight up and see him." he said before turning to the others and adding, "Follow me." As Dominic then led the group towards a nearby doorway leading into the building Horace glanced at the two young men who were now guiding their horses towards the college stables.

"So who are those two?" he asked, "They seemed a bit pompous for ordinary servants."

"College initiates, just starting out on the road to becoming sorcerers." Dominic replied, "Between studying initiates are expected to carry out many of the more mundane administrative duties around the college."

"Isn't it easier to just hire ordinary people?" Lucia asked and Dominic smiled.

"Oh there are people without any magical power working here but only in the lowest roles that do not require any access to the areas of the college where they won't come into contact with anything magical. The order doesn't want to take chances with outsiders coming into contact with magic." he said.

"Concerned for your staff or for protecting your secrets?" Gromar asked.

"Both. I've been told that in the old days there were some unpleasant accidents as well as instances of valuable artefacts being stolen." Dominic replied before they reached the bottom of a set of stairs that led upwards, "Up here. Sigismund's chambers are on the second floor." he added before he started to climb the stairs and the others followed him.

"How many sorcerers make up your order Dominic?" Yilven said.

"When I left there were just over thirty, plus about a dozen initiates." Dominic replied, "The exact number fluctuates of course and not all of them reside here. About half prefer to live away from the capital although they are still expected to follow any orders that are sent to them."

The halls and stairways of the college were all decorated with paintings of both men and women in ornate robes and holding staffs.

"So all these were wizards who were part of your order then?" Horace commented and Dominic nodded.

"Yes, there are official portraits of almost every senior member to have ever served in the order on display." he responded.

"Almost?" Yilven commented.

"The order is more than six hundred years old and there have been some members, even senior members who were disgraced and forced out. Obviously their portraits aren't going to be on display." Dominic said and Gromar smiled.

"Ah, brushing your shame under the rug." he said before the group reached the building's second floor.

"Here, Sigismund's chamber are just along this hallway." Dominic said, pointing down a nearby hallway that led from the landing. He then led the others as far as a door that appeared the same as the others in the hallway before he knocked on it and waited until it was opened to reveal Sigismund Ead, the deputy chief sorcerer to the court of King Gerald.

"Ah Dominic, you've returned at long last." he exclaimed when he saw Dominic and a smile appeared on his face.

"Yes master. I believe that you know all of my associates." Dominic replied and he indicated the others in the group who stood behind him in the hallway.

"Of course, I was present when they tried to warn King Gerald about the danger Princess Ammaril posed. Come on in, all of you." Sigismund responded and he stepped back from the doorway to allow the group to enter. The inside of Sigismund's chambers were decorated in the luxurious standard that someone of his status could command and there were several chairs scattered around the room, "Everyone feel free to take

a seat." he said as he made his way to a seat located beside a small table where a large book lay open on it and sat down.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your studies master." Dominic said.

"I rather suspect that they are connected to what you have come here to discuss Dominic." Sigismund replied and he picked up the book, holding it up so that Dominic could see the title on the cover.

"A study of blood magic?" Dominic said.

"Yes, I've been looking into the subject since you left. Of course given the ban on practising it there is only a limited amount of information available on the subject. Fortunately I was able to locate this volume in our library. The information in it is all second hand, copied from various texts compiled by various sorcerers in the old Trayman Empire who were under fewer restrictions during the reign of Emperor Calvus. Of course the Traymans then burned him to death along with many of his sorcerers for the evils they were accused of perpetrating against the people." Sigismund said, "Since I despatched you to learn the truth about the threat that Princess Ammaril posed events have somewhat overtaken you and we've received a great many reports about what she is capable of. Not least from the ship carrying young King Dellasin to Raysalgard."

"The king's ship stopped in Hessenland?" Yilven asked and Sigismund smiled at him.

"Yes, I'm sure you'll be glad to know that the young boy made it as far as Teuten. His ship put into port just long enough to warn us about Ammaril before heading north for Raysalgard where I'm sure that warning has been repeated." he said.

"Have you heard about the Hadarians joining forces with Ammaril?" Will added and Sigismund nodded.

"Yes, that was unexpected. As I'm sure you remember one of the excuses given for Hessenland taking no action was that it was assumed that Ammaril would have to fight her way past the Hadarians by ship. Though now I understand that she has the ability to move her army anywhere she wants using the ancient Oscari stone circles." he said.

"That's right. Apparently they are a means of magical transport. Every one of them will need to be watched." Dominic said but Sigismund sighed.

"That may be difficult. We can't be entirely certain that we even know where they all are, let alone the difficulties in organising enough soldiers to monitor them. Right now the best we can do is spread the word about the circles and encourage any town located close to one to watch it themselves and send word if they witness anything happening." he said, "In the meantime I was hoping that by studying the blood magic that Ammaril used to create the Orcs I might be able to find a way to counter them."

"Do you think that you can undo the curse Ammaril put on them?" Lucia asked.

"I doubt it. But there might be some side effect of the spell that we can use to our advantage. Without her Orcs and Trolls Ammaril wouldn't be quite the same threat, even with her Hadarian allies." Sigismund said.

"Don't forget the demons." Gromar commented and Sigismund frowned.

"Demons?" he said.

"I'm afraid so master." Dominic replied, "We received word from a source that we trust saying that warlocks loyal to Ammaril are summoning demons. The summoning of a fire demon was witnessed."

"Demons? What fool would summon demons? That violates every natural law." Sigismund said.

"I don't think that Ammaril is too concerned about laws of any sort." Horace commented.

"King Gerald will have to be informed." Dominic said.

"Yes he will and I'm sure that he won't be happy when he hears about them. Orcs and Trolls may be something new but at least they appear to be something that you can still kill with a sword or a spear. On the other hand if Ammaril is now using demons then we are going need to come up with alternative ways of fighting them." Sigismund said, "I expect that this will make things even worse for Adela. She was the leading voice in convincing King Gerald that he didn't need to take any actions at all when Captain Beckett and his friends first had their audience with him. When we heard about Syldarin she was made to look foolish and that only became worse when the Hadarians sided with Ammaril too."

"You don't seem very concerned about that." Yilven said.

"Should I be?" Sigismund responded and Gromar snorted.

"He's hoping that she'll be disgraced like the others whose pictures are missing from the walls. If he's the deputy court sorcerer then he'll be in line for her position in the royal court." he said.

"So that's why you were sent to join us. He wanted proof to undermine his rival." Will said, looking at Dominic.

"I was just told to collect whatever information I could Will, I promise." Dominic said.

"Dominic is telling the truth. I simply despatched him to determine the truth of your claims. As for my own motivations do they really matter? In fact shouldn't you be grateful if I am able to take Adela's place as the king's court sorcerer? Isn't it better for you to have an ally in such a senior position?"

Gromar snorted.

"I'm not bothered about your petty palace politics," he said.

"They are of no consequence to me either. Like Gromar I don't intend to remain in Hessenland." Yilven added in agreement.

"Nevertheless, Adela's position has been weakened while thanks to your help I will be the obvious choice to replace her and you will have my gratitude." Sigismund said before he turned his attention back to Dominic, "So tell me Dominic have you discovered anything that we might be able to use against Ammaril or her army?" he asked and Dominic glanced at Lucia.

"Only that some of the creatures she has brought into her army are vulnerable to objects intended for storing magical energy master," he replied.

"Which creatures? Surely not the Orcs." Sigismund said.

"No master, unfortunately neither the Orcs nor Trolls appear to have any specific weaknesses. However, Ammaril has also been able to recruit ethereal Wraiths to her cause. These seem to be all that is left of the ancient Oscari, their knowledge and power stored in gemstones. I have no idea what Ammaril promised in exchange for this but a human in her employ had one with him." Dominic explained.

"Thomas. I destroyed the Wraith with this." Lucia interrupted and she drew her knife.

"Apparently once the Wraith touched the blade the magical energy that it was made of was entirely drained into it." Dominic added.

"There's no apparently about it." Horace said, "That's what happened. That little knife saved Lucia and me."

"May I see it?" Sigismund asked and Lucia nodded, extending her hand further so that he could take the enchanted knife from her, "Yes, this is fine work," he said as he studied the blade and noted the inscriptions upon it.

"I was able to use the power stored in the knife to cast a magical blast spell." Dominic told him.

"Interesting. How exactly did it come to be in your possession though young lady? Wizards are not known for giving out such items." Sigismund said, looking up at Lucia as he handed the blade back to her.

"It belonged to a friend called Diera who was killed by men working for Ammaril." Lucia replied, "She was given it by the man she called her father."

"He was actually a vampire master." Dominic said.

"He went by the name Magister Marcus Quinnus." Will added.

"That would explain the quality of the work. Vampires are highly skilled and notoriously patient." Sigismund said.

"We also saw similar markings just painted onto the shields of the mercenaries he hired to go to Oscay with him." Gromar said.

"That appears to have been a temporary measure to protect his men." Dominic said and Sigismund nodded.

"Yes, nevertheless if it worked then we can at least provide some of our soldiers with a defence against these Wraith," he said.

"We didn't witness the Wraith being used as soldiers by Ammaril. The mercenaries working for Marcus Quinnus fought them when the Wraiths when they disturbed their resting places in Oscay." Will said.

"The one accompanying the man called Thomas may have been intended as a combination of bodyguard and a source of magical power to operate the stone circles master. He had no power himself but was clearly able to move about using them." Dominic said.

"All very interesting though somewhat concerning." Sigismund said, "After we heard about the use of the stone circles to move soldiers from one place to another we were at least reassured by the likelihood that they would need a sorcerer to operate them and as I'm sure you're all well aware such individuals are rare. However, if anyone can use a circle just by being given one of these stones that holds the essence of a Wraith then that opens up far more possibilities for people to use them."

"That doesn't seem to have stopped Ammaril from recruiting more magic users to her service though." Yilven said.

"Ah yes, the demons you say were summoned by other sorcerers loyal to Ammaril. Do you know who these are?" Sigismund asked.

"No, the letter from Arrathan didn't say," Yilven said.

"May I see this letter?" Sigismund asked and Yilven took it from his coat.

"I take it that you can read the Elven language," he said.

"Of course. Elven and ancient Trayman are important languages to magic users and academics all across Entris." Sigismund replied before he began to read the letter, "Yes, all of this seems to match what you have told me and I thank you for bringing all of this to my attention." Sigismund said when he got to the end of the letter and he handed it back to Yilven before turning towards Dominic again, "Dominic, King Gerald will have to be informed of all of this of course and I want you to come with me to court. It will be better if you can be

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on hand to tell him first hand what you have seen. Some of the court nobles can be rather dismissive of things that they don't understand and a lot of what is happening now is beyond anyone's understanding."

"Then all of us should go with you." Will said but Sigismund shook his head.

"No I don't think that would be a good idea. By all means come to the palace but I think you should wait while Dominic and I address the King to avoid confusing him with too many voices. If we need you then we can send for you." he said.

"Having us all in the room didn't help much last time Will. "Gromar pointed out, "Perhaps it would be better to just leave it to Dominic."

"Okay but we are coming along to the palace with you. I want to know exactly what King Gerald plans on doing." Will said.

11

King Gerald had gathered a large number of nobles together to discuss the crisis that Hessenland faced. No one now disputed the idea that Ammaril intended to invade and the only questions remaining were what form that invasion would take and when it would happen. Given the sheer number of people involved in the meeting the throne room was already crowded when Dominic and Sigismund were shown in.

"Sigismund, I thought you were dedicating your time to your studies of the magic Ammaril has used. Why are you here?" Adela asked when the two male spellcasters entered the throne room.

"My apologies but an agent I despatched to gather more information about Ammaril has returned with grave news." Sigismund replied.

"You sent an agent to learn more about Ammaril?" a man that Sigismund knew as one of King Gerald's more senior and trusted courtiers asked.

"I did. After the first reports were made to this court I considered them worth investigating further, unlike others in this court, so I sent Dominic Von Garran to see what he could learn and now he has returned." Sigismund said and he glanced at Adela as she glared at him angrily.

"And what have you learned that we do not already know?" King Gerald said, looking at Dominic.

"Your majesty I have learned that Ammaril has included creatures in her army that do not conform to the laws of the physical world. She has Wraiths that are the magical essence of the ancient Oscari and more recently her followers have begun to slaughter entire settlements for the purpose of summoning and binding demons." Dominic told him.

"The Wraiths may not be a large threat to your army Your Majesty, but the demons are another matter. They are incredibly dangerous creatures." Sigismund said.

"Priests can exorcise demons, can they not?" one of the nobles present said.

"They can Sir Richard, though the rituals take time and require preparation that cannot be carried out on a battlefield." Adela told him, "If a demon must be fought directly then magical means must be employed and they will also take time and effort to prepare if the person facing the demon is not a sorcerer themselves."

"What sort of preparations are need?" King Gerald asked.

"A magical weapon must be crafted Your Majesty." Sigismund said, "The aura of the weapon will weaken the demon. Even with such a weapon though destroying a demon will not be easy. It will do everything it can to survive."

"How many magical weapons do we have in our vaults?" King Gerald said and he looked at Adela.

"Three Your Majesty." she replied, "There is the Royal Sword of Truth that you use to test the loyalty of those you appoint to your court, the Sword of Shattering that will break any other blade it touches and the Resurrection Blade that reanimates its victims as zombies under the control of the wielder."

"That sword is evil and should have been destroyed when it was taken." one of the gathered lords said.

"That sword may now be all that stands between us and a horde of demons Your Grace." the chief courtier responded.

"Can you make more?" another of the court nobles said, looking at Adela.

"Unfortunately your grace even the most basic of magical weapons will take days to create. That is why they are so rarely created." she responded.

"If I may, there may be another alternative that was presented to us by a Vampire who sought to stop Ammaril gaining control of the Great Library of the Oscari." Dominic said.

"Vampires are not to be trusted. We are nothing but food to them." Adela said.

"Perhaps so, but they are powerful magic users. The one who tried to stop Ammaril was able to apply temporary spells to the shields of the mercenaries he hired. Perhaps we could do something similar. Rather than crafting magical weapons from scratch we could take weapons that have already been made and grant them temporary power. At the very least shields could be created to protect our soldiers from demonic attacks." Dominic said.

"Is such a thing possible?" King Gerald said, looking towards Adela but before she could speak Sigismund spoke first.

"It is Your Majesty." he said, "A spell of sorts can be applied to an object within a much shorter time but it will be fragile. Any damage to the surface will weaken or even destroy the spell and even if it is not damaged the magic will weaken naturally over the course of a day or so."

"Do we know how many demons have been created?" another noble asked and Sigismund looked at Dominic.

"Do you know any more than what was in that letter?" he said but Dominic shook his head.

"No, that's all the information that Arrathan sent us." he replied.

"Unfortunately not. The warning about the demons was delivered by letter from an Elf who remained behind in Tarran to fight against Ammaril's army." Sigismund said.

"Your Majesty this news is very bad. With the reports of raids on the coast and the threat of an invasion from the stone circles we are already having to choose what parts of the kingdom we will protect. If the enemy includes demons in their ranks then we also need to decide how much effort to put into fighting them and how to be ready to face them." another noble said.

"Your Majesty Hessenstadt must be protected above all." Sir Richard said, "Perhaps we should rely just on our navy to protect the coast and keep our army here. Order local lords and mayors to form militias from their own populations and have those that are capable construct ballistas to defend themselves against these giant dragons. Then when the invasion does come we can move out to meet it, no matter where or when it happens. In the meantime we should focus on preparing as much of our army as possible to combat these demons."

"Unfortunately Your Majesty I can see no alternative to what the baron is suggesting." the senior courtier added, "It may be unpopular with many but it is the only way I can see that would give us a chance of defeating an invasion."

King Gerald hesitated while he considered the advice he was being given. The current situation was far beyond anything that any of his ancestors had experienced during their reigns so there were no records to draw upon of how they had tried to deal such things and he knew that every piece of advice that he was being given was effectively being made up. However, at least the people giving the advice were broadly in agreement with one another so as long as he went along with them then no matter what the outcome there would not really be anyone who could claim to have advised against what he did.

"I have decided that the protection of the capital will be our priority." he said, "Local lords will be encouraged to raise militias within their own lands and prepare what defences they can. Our navy will protect our coast and I expect our sorcerers to work to provide as many weapons as they can to protect our soldiers from the unnatural creatures that we are facing. If we hear of an invasion then we shall send our army to defend against it but not before then."

"Did you get all that?" the senior courtier said, looking at the man who had been taking notes of everything said during the meeting and he nodded, "Good. Then see that copies of His Majesty's orders are despatched around the kingdom."

"Yes my lord." the man replied before he started to collect his papers together.

"The king has spoken." the courtier then announced to the room, "You should return to your other duties until he summons you again."

The gathered nobles then began to get to their feet to leave and Sigismund looked at Dominic.

"We should go as well. Adela doesn't look happy." he said.

"I agree master." Dominic replied, looking across the throne room to where Adela still sat glaring at the other two spellcasters. However, as they were leaving the room Adela hurried after them.

"Sigismund stop." she called out down the hallway after them and both Sigismund and Dominic came to a halt and turned to face her. Adela then walked up to the two men, both of whom towered over her and looked at them, "Do you think you're being clever Sigismund?" she asked.

"Clever? I do try to act intelligently my lady." Sigismund answered.

"And what exactly did you think that you were doing sending this member of our order out to gather information about Ammaril? I didn't give you permission to do that." Adela said.

"You didn't forbid me from doing it either. What's the point in my position within our order if I am forced to defer to you in everything I do? You didn't see the danger that Ammaril presented but I was concerned that there could be some truth in what we were told. Rightly as it seems. That's why I instructed Dominic to go and find out all that he could about what was happening." Sigismund replied.

"And I suppose undermining my position had nothing to do with it, did it?" Adela said.

"I am offended that you could suggest such a thing my lady. My only concern is that we provide King Gerald with the best advice that we possibly can. I cannot help it if the facts turn out to contradict your previously held opinions." Sigismund said and Adela scowled.

"Get back to your books Sigismund. Find a weakness in Ammaril's magic and don't get any ideas in your head about replacing me any time soon. You of all people should understand what it takes to become the head of our order. You'll find me more than capable of protecting myself from any would-be usurper." she told him before she looked at Dominic, "And as for you, the King has said that he wants magical weapons to be used against Ammaril. I suggest that you start work on one as soon as possible and hope that I don't notice you before all of this has been dealt with."

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Adela then turned around quickly and strode away from the two male sorcerers while they watched.

"So what now master?" Dominic asked.

"Now we do as Adela said. I have books to study and you should get to work on crafting a magical weapon. I take it that you know how to do it." Sigismund said and Dominic nodded.

"Yes master." he said.

"Good. Then get to it and don't worry. I promise you that I will be the head of our order Dominic and I promise that I won't forget the people who helped me get there. Or those that stood in my way." Sigismund told him.

While Dominic had accompanied Sigismund to the throne room Will and the others had been taken to the same room in which they had waited on their first visit to the palace to wait and food and drink was left out for them.

"I seem to be spending a lot of time waiting for humans." Gromar said as he paced up and down the room.

"At least the food is decent." Horace said as he filled his plate again and poured another goblet of wine.

"It's complicated you mean." Gromar said, "Just plain meat and mushrooms, that's all you really need."

"You mean rats and fungus. The staples of a Dwarven diet." Horace commented.

"There's nothing wrong with the Dwarven diet." Gromar responded, pausing from his pacing to look at Horace.

"Do you think we'll be here long this time?" Lucia said.

"I wouldn't put it past them to forget about us if Dominic wasn't with them. At least we know he'll come back for us." Will said.

"Are you sure about that Will? Dominic only joined us because his superior in his order told him to. For all we know he'll be given new orders and sent away without the chance to come back for us." Yilven pointed out.

"You don't think that he'd even come to say goodbye to us?" Lucia said before the door opened and Dominic entered the room and Lucia smiled, "I knew you'd come back." she said.

"So how did your audience with The King go?" Will asked.

"There's some good news and some bad Will." Dominic replied, "This time the court is taking the warnings seriously. They've already received reports about the raids on the coast and they believed it when they were told about the demons in Ammaril's army."

"That sounds good I suppose. So what about the bad news?" Gromar said and Dominic sighed.

"They don't know what to do about it. Any of it." he said, "Hessenland's army isn't large enough to defend every part of the coast and watch over every stone circle so it's going to be kept here in the capital. The plan is to just wait for news of an invasion before sending them out."

"That sounds sensible given the circumstances. If your army is divided then Ammaril's forces will be able to destroy it a piece at a time." Yilven said.

"Yes but it may not even have the weapons it needs to fight Ammaril's army when it comes to it. There are only three magic swords in the entire kingdom. My order has been instructed to create more but the process is slow if it's done properly." Dominic said.

"How do you do it? Make a magic weapon I mean." Lucia asked.

"Magic must be bound into the weapon from the time of its making. It isn't like crafting an object to simply store magical power or spell effects like a sorcerer's staff or wand or that knife you have. To create those all that is needed is for the spell to be engraved into the object. A magical weapon must be able to draw magic into itself from the world around us or it would quickly become of no more use than a mundane weapon of the same type. Most often such weapons are crafted with some specific purpose in mind as well such as bursting into flames or projecting a magical shield around the bearer." Dominic explained.

"Even among my people such weapons are rare." Yilven added, "King Larallus had just one in his armoury, a sword that felt practically weightless and could be used to strike blows incredibly quickly. What has happened to that since the fall of the kingdom I hate to think though."

"You think that Ammaril might have taken it?" Horace asked.

"Unlikely. Ammaril was never taught to use a sword though Orcan will have known about it and he may have taken it." Yilven replied.

"So that's something else we have to worry about. An Orc who can attack faster than anyone else." Will said.

"There were other magical items in the palace as well." Yilven added, "If Orcan has those then he may be even more powerful."

"Hopefully we'll never have to find out." Will said.

"I've been ordered to help creating more magical weapons." Dominic said.

"So you're not coming with us then." Horace responded.

"This is his home." Gromar pointed out.

"Actually I was thinking that I ought to come with you." Dominic said.

"Won't that get you in trouble?" Will asked.

"Possibly. Though as Sigismund told Adela about sending me to join with you in the first place no-one has specifically told me that I can't and Adela did warn me to keep out of her way." Dominic said.

"But what about making magic weapons?" Lucia pointed out, "Won't you get in trouble if you don't do that?"

"I can make a magic weapon in Teuten just as easily as I can here. There are blacksmiths there after all." Dominic said and Gromar snorted.

"Human blacksmiths." he said, "If you want a proper blade making then you need a Dwarf to forge it."

"I thought you were going home Gromar." Will said.

"I am once this is over and right now you obviously still need me. You can take Yilven to Raysalgard while Dominic and I work on his weapon." Gromar replied.

Lerra, capital city of Lerron was built on the shores of a large river that flowed towards the southern coast of the country and so did not meet with the Straight of Lerron but it was deep enough that relatively large ships could carry cargo and passengers between the city and the southern coast. In theory this represented a weakness in the city's defences and Orcan considered smuggling some of his troops into the city aboard one of these ships before emerging under cover of darkness and having them attack the gates from the inside. However, he quickly discounted this as impractical. He knew that the ship would have to be crewed by humans and it was possible that there would be people in the city who would realise that they were not the real crew because of their appearance or the way that they spoke. This left only the option of a more direct assault on the city and it was obvious that the inhabitants had been preparing for this. Scouts sent to observe the city reported that its walls were well manned and it appeared that numerous ballistas had been placed in key positions from where they could shoot at the approaches leading to the various gates in the wall. Orcan suspected that the inhabitants already knew that his army was close by since they would have received no reports from the soldiers guarding the stone circle so the chances of taking them by surprise were slim. However, while Orcan could not count on surprise he was more certain that he could count on the sheer destructive power of the eight legendary dragons he had with him.

As was common with human cities the ground around it had been cleared to prevent any potential invader from getting right up to the walls without being seen so this would have to be covered while being bombarded by the cities defences. There were a small number of structures that had been constructed in this area of otherwise clear ground but these were scattered and would not provide a means of approaching unseen, nor did their construction appear sound enough to resist direct hits by any of the weapons that would likely be defending Lerra.

The distance that had been kept clear around the city had been based on the range of the various siege weapons available. Since these typically had to be assembled in place the ground had been cleared far enough that any attacker would have to assemble their weapons in the open and while being shot at from the city. However, this was one of the factors that Orcan had been able to plan for and rather than having his Orcs build the stone throwers they needed out in the open he had had them build them several miles away. This was far too great a range for them to attack the city from but Orcan had also ordered that the stone throwers be constructed on wheeled carriages. While smaller ballistas were often designed to be transported on a cart it was rare for stone throwers to be mobile given their significantly larger size. As well as requiring a large team of horses to draw them their height made them unstable and they could easily overbalance but Orcan had considered this and rather than being pulled by horses positioned in front of the stone throwers they would be moved by teams of Trolls carrying them from either side overseen by the Orcs that would operate them once they were in place.

Orcan chose dusk as the time to launch his attack, knowing that that would maximise the advantage that the Orcs would gain from their superior night vision over the humans. However, something as large a stone thrower being carried by dozens of Trolls emerging from woodland was impossible to hide even as the light began to fade and the sentries on the walls of Lerra sounded bells to alert the inhabitants. Being prepared for an attack the city's defenders rushed to their positions, with hundreds of crossbowmen positioning themselves on the battlements atop the walls and at firing points set into them at specific points. More soldiers rushed to where more powerful weapons had already been set up to protect the city, a mix of ballistas mounted on the walls to large stone throwers constructed within them to be able to hurl rocks high up over them and these were the first weapons to be used, catapulting more than a dozen boulders over the walls towards the advancing Orcs army. Stone throwers were notoriously inaccurate when shooting at moving targets but in this case they did not need to directly hit the Orcs to cause death or injury. The force of each impact hurled debris from the ground in all directions and in some cases the stones themselves

fractured on impact and fragments of them joined this to cause further damage. One fluke shot struck one of the Orcs' own stone throwers as it was being moved into position and the wooden structure shattered under the impact and scattered the Trolls carrying it.

Most of the stone throwers got to where the Orcs wanted them though and the Trolls set them down before starting to hammer huge wooden stakes into the ground to secure them before they could be used.

Ammunition for the stone throwers was brought up in carts, each one carrying just three or four large rocks that the Trolls then loaded into the baskets on the throwers before standing back and watching as the rocks were then hurled up into the air.

Unlike the city's defenders who were attempting to attack an army on the move the Orcs were aiming their attacks against a very large and immovable target. Some of the catapulted rocks flew over the walls and came down within the city, smashing into whatever building happened to be underneath whether it was related to the defence of the city or not while others struck the outside of the wall itself, knocking loose sections of stone with each hit and weakening it. These hits against the wall were exactly what Orcan had hoped to achieve, his attention being to smash a way into the city that would enable the Orcs to enter while avoiding the defences that he knew had to be in place around the actual gates. The Orc army also had a number of siege towers in it that could be dragged up to the city walls in the same way as the stone throwers had been moved into position but doing so would expose the Trolls dragging them as well as the Orcs following behind to attack from the city all the while that they were crossing the open ground so Orcan instead intended to make an alternative entry point that could be stormed more quickly.

The Orcs continued to bombard the city, attempting to strike the walls again. This was not as easy as repeating exactly what had been done by the crews of the stone throwers that had already managed to hit the wall as each of the rocks being thrown since each of the rocks was different and they flew in different ways. Therefore, the bombardment had to be conducted almost at random and rocks continued to strike the walls or land within them.

In the meantime the city's defenders continued their return bombardment, launching more large rocks back towards their attackers but the assault continued and within the city walls the Lerronians prepared a force of cavalry to ride out to attack the Orc stone throwers more directly. However, Orcan had expected this and he was watching for them emerging from the city so that he could signal for the second stage of the attack to begin. This signal came in the form of a burning arrow fired up into the air. The arrow was easily visible in the darkening sky and as soon as they saw it the handlers of the dragons that had been waiting some distance behind the Orc army spread their arms out wide as a signal to the dragons themselves to take off and all eight leapt up into the air in unison, spreading their wings out wide as they flew towards Lerra. The dragons' flight path took them over the open ground where the Orc stone throwers had been set up and the Lerronian cavalry was now forming up to charge. The dragons swooped down over this area, flying directly at the startled cavalry and in rapid succession they all unleashed their fiery breath, enveloping many of the mounted knights in flames. Those that managed to escape being burned alive as the dragons flew overhead while unleashing their attack fared little better as their horses panicked at the closeness of the flames and reared up or bolted, throwing many of their riders as they fled in random directions.

What had been a force of several hundred men on horseback was now reduced a scattered force of barely a hundred but the survivors did not retreat back into the city, instead as the dragons were flying back up into the sky the horsemen's leader raised his sword into the air and called out to them.

"To me! Charge!" he shouted before lowering his sword to point towards the nearest of the Orc stone throwers that was just about visible to him in the fading light and he dug his heels into the side of his horse to get it to charge forwards, heading directly towards the stone thrower and its crew.

The surviving horsemen all followed their leader, charging towards the stone throwers in the hope of being able to destroy them before they could inflict too much damage on the city's walls but although Orcan had hoped that the dragons would completely annihilate the Lerronian cavalry he had also prepared for this and he raised his hand.

"Archers, forward." he ordered and several hundred Orcs rushed from the woods out into the open and knelt down in lines between the stone throwers before firing arrows towards the charging knights as fast as they could, cutting down riders and horses alike until the tiny handful that remained turned and fled back towards the city.

Now that the Orc archers were out in the open though they were vulnerable to the same stone throwers inside the city that were trying to destroy the Orcs' own siege weapons and when another rock hit the ground a few yards in front of them the debris created by the impact ripped through their line, killing several and injuring more.

"Archers fall back." Orcan shouted, knowing that now that the Lerronian cavalry had been forced to retreat the archers had nothing to shoot at and the Orcs withdrew back into the cover of the trees while the stone throwers continued their bombardment of the city.

The dragons had also circled back around by this point and although one of them swooped down on the scattered cavalymen and lifted one up off the ground in its claws the others instead headed towards the city walls and breathed fire towards the men positioned on the battlements. Some of the defending soldiers were able to protect themselves from this by taking cover as the flames flowed over the top of the stone walls but there were others who either were too slow or had nowhere to hide and they all screamed as they burned, some falling from the battlements entirely and plummeting towards the ground. Some of the Lerronian soldiers tried to shoot back at the dragons as they passed overhead but the few crossbow bolts that hit the gigantic flying reptiles failed to pierce their scaly hides.

As the dragons flew past the city though the crew of one of the ballistas that had avoided being doused in flames turned their weapon towards them and released the huge bolt that it was loaded with. By a stroke of luck this bolt hit one of the dragons in its flank and although it did not kill the beast outright it did cause it to release a screech of pain and turn away, descending towards the ground and landing heavily before it lay on its side with the ballista bolt sticking upwards.

Seeing one of the dragons brought down cheered the city's defenders and more of the surviving ballista crews turned their weapons towards the remaining creatures as they were circling around for another pass at the city walls. However, after being shot at the dragons also increased their altitude to try and keep out of reach of the enemy's weapons. A ballista was quite capable of shooting a large steel tipped bolt several hundred yards so one correctly aimed could easily shoot high up into the air but the mechanism that allowed the weapons to be tilted had not been designed with such extreme elevation in mind and the crews quickly found that they could not target the dragons at this altitude.

"It won't raise any higher!" a crewman on one of the ballistas exclaimed as he realised the issue.

"Here, remove this bar." another of the crewmen said, placing his hand on a wooden bar that was used to keep the ballista fixed to its mount and that also limited the amount by which it could be elevated.

"Hand me an axe." the first crewman responded and another man gave him a small hand axe that he then swung at the bar three times in rapid succession before he had smashed through it, "Now, let's try it again." he said, passing the axe back to the man who had given it to him before he tried raising the ballista again. The weapon still caught at the same point and when the man looked more closely he saw that there was still a fragment of the damaged bar remaining so he applied more force, slamming the weapon against what was left of the bar until it broke and he was able to aim the ballista higher before shooting it towards the oncoming dragons. Unfortunately for the ballista's crew the bolt flew just a few feet past the head of the dragon and instead of potentially bringing down another of the creatures it did nothing before it released another blast of flame that engulfed the ballista and its entire crew in one go.

It was then that a rock launched by one of the Orcs' stone throwers struck an already damaged section of the city wall, smashing through the outer layer of stone entirely and even from his position hundreds of yards away Orcan could hear the rumbling sound of the debris that fell to the ground. The damage was not limited to the external face of the wall though and debris continued to fall, just a few pieces at first but then larger sections of stone fell free before there was another loud rumbling as the entire section of wall above the point of impact and for several yards either side came crashing down, leaving a gap in the wall all the way through.

"The wall has gone." Orcan called out as he dug his heels into the sides of the horse he was sat upon, "Forwards!"

Orcan then rode his horse out of the forest into the open ground and either side of him hundreds of other Orc horsemen did the same before they broke into a gallop and charged headlong towards the gap in the city walls.

Behind the charging cavalry the army's siege towers were now moved out onto the field of battle, pulled along by teams of Trolls while companies of Orcs and more Trolls followed behind them. The surviving lookouts on the city walls saw the thousands of Orcs and Trolls now advancing towards them but the siege towers and infantry concerned them less than the large force of cavalry now heading for the breach in the city walls and they called out for troops to be rushed to defend it.

Ordinarily the approaching Orcs whether on foot or horseback would have come under continuous attack from crossbowmen and ballistas on the walls but these had been almost totally wiped out by the combination of the Orc stone throwers and the giant dragons still circling overhead and the resistance to the Orc charge was limited to a few remaining crossbows fired largely from slits set into the wall and the more random shots of the stone throwers within the city that continued to hurl rocks over the walls into the open ground. The Orc cavalry was moving far too quickly for the stone throwers to have any real chance of hitting them but the bulk

of the Orc and Troll army on foot was a different matter and a large boulder landed among a densely packed group of Orcs, crushing several outright and injuring more with the debris from the impact. Then a second large stone clipped the side of one of the siege towers being pulled by a team of Trolls and ripped the side right off as well as knocking its sideways enough that the Trolls pulling it were unable to prevent it from toppling over entirely, smashing apart as it hit the ground. Had there been anyone standing on that side of the tower then they would undoubtedly have been crushed but the army was using the towers for cover as it advanced so the Orcs and Trolls were behind them instead.

The stone throwers had little chance to bombard the Orc army as it advanced towards the city though as the dragons swooped down once again. This time instead of attacking the walls though they flew towards the stone throwers that were easy to spot thanks to their considerable size. As soon as the crews of the weapons realised that the dragons were heading towards them they scattered, abandoning the stone throwers before the dragons could use their breath weapons and each dragon unleashed another jet of flame that consumed one of the large wooden structures before moving onto the next.

Despite being on horseback it still took some time for the Orc cavalry to cover the open ground between the forest and the breach in the wall by which time a significant force of Lerronian soldiers was gathering within the city ready to face them, forming up in tight ranks to block the streets with walls of shields and spears pointing out from them. However, the gathering of such a large number of people together did not go unnoticed by the dragons and before even a single Orc could enter the city the dragons struck again, breathing fire down into the streets where the troops were gathered. The soldiers in the rear ranks had raised their shields over their heads as a defence against anything thrown over the front rank of shields but even this could not protect them from the dragons' fire and it flowed around the shields, finding even the smallest of gaps to reach the men behind them. The shields did prevent the Lerronian soldiers from being completely engulfed in flames but they still did not escape unscathed and just like the crews of the stone throwers they panicked and broke, those able to flee doing so while their comrades burned behind them.

The result of this was that by the time the Orc cavalry reached the breach in the wall they found streets of burning buildings but no soldiers prepared to repel them. This allowed the Orcs to slow their horses to a walk as they rode them over the uneven terrain of the breach itself where rubble from the wall was piled high until they reached the flat ground of the city beyond it.

"The palace is that way. Follow me." Orcan said, pointing his sword further into the city and he and the rest of the cavalry started to ride at a trot in the direction of the royal palace.

While the Orc cavalry were riding through the city the siege towers were pushed up to the city walls. During the last few yards of this Orcs climbed into the towers from behind and quickly climbed to the top so that they were ready to storm the battlements when the towers' ramps dropped, latching onto the wall so that the Orcs could immediately charge from them.

Despite the repeated attacks by dragons there were still Lerronian soldiers on the battlements, men who had been sheltered within the walls when the dragons attacked and who had now emerged to fight so when the Orcs emerged from their siege towers they found themselves facing these men. The Orcs were not put off by this resistance though and they charged at the human warriors eagerly to attack them.

In addition to the armoured soldiers though there were also a handful of both men and women among the walls' defenders who wore robes and carried staffs. These were the sorcerers present in Lerra who had been held back until the Orcs were upon the walls and each of them began by unleashing a magical blast aimed towards where the siege towers were latched onto the walls, the hope being that they would be able to do enough damage to render them useless and while the upper sections of two of the towers were shattered in an instant and nearby Orcs were hurled from the walls the remaining towers suffered either very little damage or none at all as the blasts were instead absorbed by the Orcs themselves.

Where the towers were damaged the Lerronians pressed forwards, cutting down the handful of now isolated Orcs before they could spread from the walls into the city but where the towers survived the Orcs continued to pour from them, rapidly making up the losses that they had suffered. Some of the Lerronian sorcerers had put all of their personal power as well as that stored within their staffs and other similar objects into the failed blasts and they quickly withdrew to rest and try to regain some strength but others had deliberately kept some power back, not enough to be able to try to unleash a second blast at the siege towers but enough for them to be able to fight with, channelling energy into their staffs so that they could use them as weapons that would deliver that energy into any opponent who was struck by it or unleashing much smaller magical blasts that were just enough to knock an Orc off balance and make him easier for one of the Lerronian soldiers to kill. However, the Orcs were just the first wave from the siege towers and behind them followed a wave of Trolls who were able to knock men from the walls with a single swing of their fist while being highly resistant to injury in return.

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The Trolls were not entirely invulnerable to injury though and some still fell as lucky spear strikes pierced vital organs or an injury to their legs caused them to stumble and fall from the walls, smashing through the wooden barriers on the inside meant to prevent accidental falls and plummeting to their deaths below. However, these losses were just isolated victories for the city's defenders as more Orcs and Trolls swarmed from the siege towers, steadily pushing the defenders back until they were forced to abandon the walls entirely and the invaders poured into the city en masse.

12

Queen Isabel of Lerron looked from a window in her palace at the dragons she could see circling the city in the sky overhead and then down into the streets where she could see fires burning. The queen had been young when her parents were tragically killed and she had ascended to the throne while still a teenager and it had been expected that her reign would last many years. However, with large parts of the city on fire and thousands of Orcs pouring in it appeared that it would not even last a decade.

"Majesty you should keep away from the window." one of her courtiers told her.

"Has Duke Ernesto reported in yet?" Queen Isabel replied as she moved away from the window and turned to face her nervous looking court. In response to this the various members of the court exchanged nervous glances before one of them spoke up.

"No your majesty. We know that he is attempting to rally enough men to resist the Orcs but so far he has not sent any word of the results." he said.

"The dragons." another added, "They seem to attack wherever people gather in large groups. It doesn't matter whether they are soldiers or just people trying to flee by boat. Half the docks are burning because of that."

"Then how do we fight them?" the queen asked and once again the courtiers looked at one another before one of them finally spoke up.

"We may not be able to Your Majesty." one said and the queen turned to her court sorcerer, an elderly man who was obviously using his staff for support as well as a badge of his office.

"What about your order? Is there nothing that you can do?" she said.

"I regret not Your Majesty. Aside from myself I have heard of only two others that even survived the fighting on the walls and I have not heard anything from them since. Perhaps it is time to consider leaving the city." he said.

"Flee while my people cannot?" Queen Isabel responded and she frowned.

"Your Majesty there are many more people in the kingdom who will follow you but your loss would cause a collapse in their spirits. If we can get you to Sayal then you can continue the fight from there." a courtier told her before the doors to the throne room were thrown open and a man in chainmail with a bloodstained tabard over it stumbled in.

"Your Majesty." he said, dropping to one knee, taking care not to fall over the sword at his waist as he did so while the door was closed behind him.

"Duke Ernesto. Rise." the queen said and he got back to his feet.

"Your Majesty the city is lost. The Orcs are at the front doors to the palace right now. With their dragons burning every large group of men I tried sending small units of crossbowmen to try and pick them off a few at a time in the streets but there are just too many of them. You have to flee now." the duke said to her.

Isabel sighed, still reluctant to leave her city despite the advice from her court being to do just that.

"Very well we shall-" she began before there was a cry from outside the throne room followed by an inhuman roar and Duke Ernesto as well as the guards present in the room all drew their swords and formed a wall between Queen Isabel and the door.

"Block the door." Duke Ernesto said as he and the guards stared at the door but no-one moved. Then he looked at the courtiers and snapped, "What are you waiting for? Move!"

The courtiers, despite not being used to physical labour suddenly rushed to move furniture in front of the door, picking up an antique table that had been part of the throne room's décor for more than a hundred years and carrying it towards the door. However, before they could use it to block the door it was thrown open and Orcan strode in with a pair of other Orcs either side of him while there were several more behind them. All of the Orcs wore chainmail though the mail worn by Orcan himself appeared different, gleaming brightly rather than being tarnished from use like the coats worn by the others.

One of the palace guards leapt forwards and thrust his sword out ahead of him but the Orc he aimed for raised his shield to block the blow and knocked the sword aside, leaving the guard open to attack from the Orc who swung his own sword at the man and struck him in his side. The blade failed to cut through the guard's own chainmail armour but the force of the blow was enough to break one of his ribs and he staggered backwards, dropping his sword and clutching at his side before the Orc struck again with a thrusting attack that cut through the chainmail and sent the blade into the guard, killing him instantly.

The court sorcerer quickly pulled a candle from a holder fixed to the wall and held it out in front of his face.

"Get down!" he yelled before he exhaled. Rather than trying to extinguish the candle though he released some of his magical power and a sheet of flame shot towards the doorway. One of the guardsmen was too

slow in getting out of the path of the magical fire and he screamed as his hair and clothing caught light but Duke Ernesto and the other guards were all able to drop below the level of the flames in time to avoid them. Although they did not understand the sorcerer's warning the Orcs did see the Lerronian guards diving out of the way and they also threw themselves to the floor. There was a slight delay in this though and the Orc who had moved forwards as well as several of the others moved too slowly and were also consumed by the fire. Orcan was able to avoid the flames though and he quickly got back to his feet and turned towards the sorcerer who was still holding the candle in front of his face as if ready to cast his fire spell a second time. Orcan immediately charged forwards, leaping over one of the Lerronian guards as he headed for the sorcerer and even as the old man was drawing in breath Orcan swung his sword and sliced off the man's head as the horrified courtiers looked on.

Closer to the doorway both Orcs and Lerronians were getting back to their feet and as soon as they could they launched themselves at their opponents, hacking and slashing with their swords. Queen Isabel's personal guards were among the best swordsmen in Lerron but they were outnumbered by the Orcs and while they were focused on one opponent another was able to outflank them and strike them from the side. Now that Orcan had dealt with the sorcerer he turned his attention back towards the guards at the doorway and Duke Ernesto stood out among them. Orcan snarled and charged towards the duke. Before he could reach the man though another of the guards stepped into his path with his sword raised. Orcan responded by swinging his sword at the guard. The man tried to parry this with his own weapon but instead of blocking Orcan's attack the sword's blade simply snapped when Orcan's hit it. Orcan's sword swing did not stop with breaking the guard's sword though and his blade also sliced effortlessly through the guard's chainmail as well as the man beneath it, freeing Orcan to continue towards Duke Ernesto.

The Duke saw the guard who had faced Orcan fall and he turned to face the Orc leader directly. Having seen how Orcan's sword had cut through another metal blade he knew that he had to be carrying a magical blade of some kind. He thrust his sword out towards Orcan, hoping to be able to deal with him quickly but Orcan reacted with surprising speed and moved aside enough that the duke's attack barely caught him. Ordinarily Duke Ernesto would have still expected such a blow to cut through the Orc's gleaming chainmail and sliced him open but instead he felt his sword being pushed even further aside, sliding off the mail links as if they were a solid piece of metal and he realised that Orcan's chainmail coat was also magical. Orcan responded by striking with his own sword and Duke Ernesto threw himself aside, knowing that it was impossible to parry the blade and attempted to launch a counter attack but Orcan reacted with unbelievable speed with his sword, suggesting that as well as making it impossibly sharp its enchantment also made the weapon incredibly light and easy to handle. Orcan used his sword to parry the duke's attack too quickly for him to alter the path of his attack, cutting through the sword that he held. The duke dropped his now broken weapon and was able to leap aside just fast enough to avoid Orcan's blade also slicing through him. Noticing a sword that had belonged to one of the guards already killed by the Orcs, Duke Ernesto picked it up and turned to face Orcan again but before he could make use of the recovered weapon Orcan thrust his sword forwards and it impaled him through his chest. The duke's eyes widened and he let out a brief gasp, his new sword falling from his hand. He then collapsed while Orcan's sword was still stuck in his chest and the result was that the blade sliced upwards before emerging through his shoulder.

Duke Ernesto had been the last of the guards left alive in the throne room and as more Orcs entered the room Queen Isabel and her remaining courtiers looked on in horror. Meanwhile Orcan turned to look at them and snarled before raising his sword to point at Queen Isabel.

"Leave her alone. Kill the rest." he ordered and as the Orcs charged forwards the courtiers screamed in terror.

Hiros stood on a hilltop as the sun was starting to rise and looked down at the remains of the capital city of Lastallo, huge areas of which had been destroyed by fire. Although part of the city had been protected by city walls these had been constructed during the days of the Trayman Empire and the city had long since expanded beyond them while the walls had remained unchanged and this had left a huge area unprotected. Rather than march his Orcs and Trolls into the sprawling mass of buildings though the Orc placed in charge of the invasion now that Tiellan had been sent to deal with Orselland had simply chosen to raze it to the ground and rather than using the stone throwers his army possessed to attack the walls he used them to hurl burning projectiles into it and along with the dragons his force included these had reduced the entire outer area of the city to ruin in the space of a single night. The advantage of this was that the building used by the order of sorcerers resident in Lastallo was in this outer part of the city and the prominent building was burned at the start of the attack by the dragons accompanying the Orc army before the city's inhabitants even knew that they were under attack. The effect on the population of the city had been dramatic as those who lived outside the city walls rushed to try and get to the relative safety of the old city within them, only to find that

the defending army had closed the gates and mass rioting broke out as the crowds tried to force their way inside using improvised battering rams which in turn resulted in the guards on the walls attacking them. However, when word of this spread within the city walls protests and rioting spread there also as people concerned about friends and family outside the walls tried to demand that they be let inside. This rioting was concentrated around the city gates and two of these the gates were torn down by the angry mob. This was exactly what the Orc leader had been waiting for and when the second gate fell he ordered his forces forwards. With the city's defenders distracted by rioting and smoke from the blazes outside the walls to cover their advance the Orc cavalry reached the gates almost unscathed, closely followed by their infantry that included Trolls.

"I hear that the palace has fallen. The humans were too busy fighting one another to be able to defend their city properly." Hiros said when he noticed Shimmandra approaching.

"Yes, their king opted to poison himself before the Orcs could capture him which is probably not going to impress Orcan though. His plan called for the human rulers to be presented to Ammaril alive." she replied.

"That's the thing about kings though. Kill one and there's always someone else to take their place." Hiros commented and Shimmandra nodded.

"Yes, I understand that the Orcs are trying to find out who is next in line. They've been able to find someone who speaks Elvish to translate for them." she said.

"Was there any real resistance?" Hiros said.

"A little. A couple of their sorcerers were in the palace instead of their tower when it burned and they tried to use their magic to defend it. All it did was slow down the Orcs for a short time though." Shimmandra told him, "How do you think the attack in Lerron went?"

"Probably the same. If the Orc placed in command of this attack managed to overrun the city in a single night then I have little doubt that Orcan is capable of the same." Hiros replied.

"Ammaril will need to be informed." Shimmandra said and Hiros smiled.

"Of course, I'll go." he said.

"No." Shimmandra responded without hesitation and Hiros frowned.

"Is something wrong? Why shouldn't I take word to Ammaril?" he asked and Shimmandra hesitated for a moment before she smiled.

"You have a city full of corpses right in front of you. Don't you want to grow that army of zombies you're creating?" she said.

"A good point. The more corpses I can gather the more I'll be able to advance my research." Hiros said, "If you don't mind taking word back to Ammaril then I would quite like to see whether there is anything here that could be of use to me."

"It's no trouble I assure you. I'll leave now." Shimmandra said before she turned around and started to walk away, heading for the camp where she could find a horse to take her back to the stone circle that they had arrived in Lastallo at.

Hiros turned back to look at the fire ravaged city as Shimmandra departed, waiting for her to get far enough away that she would not be able to see him following her to the stone circle. However, once he had given her the chance to build up a suitable head start Hiros also turned away from the city again and started making his way towards the camp.

Before returning to Oscay, Thomas decided that it would be better if he acquired a horse to ride to and from the stone circles that always seemed to be far from where he needed to be. The drawback was that horses were expensive so rather than purchase one along with everything he would need to buy he opted to steal one, reasoning that by the time anyone noticed he would be thousands of miles away so when he appeared in the stone circle in Oscay he was holding his stolen horse by its reigns. The horse flinched when they appeared, its simple brain unable to understand how it had moved from one place to another or how the time of day had suddenly changed as well but since there was no danger around the animal it quickly calmed down.

"Didn't like that hey?" Thomas commented as he patted the horse's neck, "Well you'd better get used to it. I'll probably swap you for one of the horses they have here but you'll still be travelling through these circles a lot." he added before he climbed into the saddle.

"The beast does not understand you." the wraith within the stone around his neck suddenly said and Thomas smiled as he turned the horse towards the city and began to ride.

"Ah, you speak." he said.

"You know I speak. I have spoken to you before." the wraith pointed out.

"Yes but only for purely practical purposes and this conversation isn't practical." Thomas replied.

"You are wasting time talking to the beast. I am telling you to focus more on your tasks." the wraith said.

"What tasks? I delivered Orcan's notes to Orselland's neighbours so right now their armies ought to be marching to the border's. Until Ammaril tells me what she wants me to do next I can talk to as many horses as I want." Thomas said.

"If you have carried out the orders given to you then you should return to Ammaril as fast as possible." the wraith said.

"Which is exactly what I am doing and stealing this horse means that I can do it quicker, as long as the horse is calm enough to ride of course. So if you know a better way of calming a horse than talking to it in a friendly manner then feel free to tell me." Thomas said but the wraith did not reply and Thomas smiled again, "Ah silence. Golden as they say." he commented as he continued to ride towards the city.

When Thomas reached the Great Library he saw that work on constructing Ammaril's palace was progressing much faster than he had anticipated, Clearly having the incredible strength of more than a hundred Trolls available meant that ground could be cleared quickly and now there were holes being dug for the foundations of the new building.

Thomas rode his horse to the base of the steps outside the library itself and dismounted. However, he knew better than to climb the steps and enter the library without Ammaril's express permission so instead he just looked up at the doors.

"Ammaril!" he called out as loudly as he could, "Ammaril are you in there?"

For a short time there was no response at all but then Ammaril appeared in the doorway and looked down at him.

"Thomas is that any way to address your queen?" she said.

"I'm sorry your majesty. I just returned to tell you that your armies are marching on Orselland. Orcan sent Tiellan and a bunch of dragons to join them." Thomas replied.

"I see." Ammaril said simply.

"So is there anything else you need me to do?" Thomas asked.

"No. You may wait until I send for you." Ammaril answered and then she turned around and walked back inside the library, leaving Thomas standing alone at the bottom of the steps.

"Wait. That's great." he said as he looked around at the ruined buildings all around him, "Where the hell am I supposed to wait?"

Shimmandra grew ever more nervous as she waited by the stone circle in Syldarin. She had removed the pendant she usually wore and left it at the camp in Lastallo so that nothing she said or did could be observed by the Wraith bound to its stone. Eventually the stone circle activated again and Shimmandra saw Dorsos standing by the central stone minus his staff with the Wraith that it contained. However, unlike her he was not alone, also present were what appeared to be four columns of fire but Shimmandra knew that each of these was one of the demons that he had created.

"What took you so long? I was starting to think that you weren't coming. That you'd changed your mind or we'd been discovered." she said.

"I couldn't just walk out in the middle of the battle. Orcan wanted Graysil and I close by just in case he needed magical support. As it happened the brute force and surprising level of cunning he possesses were enough on their own." Dorsos responded before Shimmandra looked at one of the demons.

"You've brought your friends I see." she said and Dorsos smiled.

"Yes, these four were the best I could do. Orcan may be occupied with stamping out the last pockets of resistance in Lerra but he's already talking about the main invasion and preparing his forces to march for the coast to meet it. If I'd brought a large number of demons here to help us then he'd have noticed that I wasn't just acting as a messenger. Luckily I'd foreseen that and had these four hiding near the stone circle already." he said.

"As long as he's kept busy while we deal with Ammaril." Shimmandra commented.

"Yes, though sooner or later I think it might be necessary for us to dispose of him and Tiellan. Orcan certainly doesn't seem to have lost any of the planning or leadership skills he was reputed to have as an Elf so he might be smart enough to figure out that something's not right when we become the sole route for orders to be issued from Ammaril." Dorsos said.

"Let him finish conquering the continent for us first at least. Then we'll have the power to conquer the rest of the world ourselves." Shimmandra replied.

"We'll see. Come on, let's go. Our destiny awaits." Dorsos said and Shimmandra entered the circle and walked up to the central stone beside Dorsos, glancing at the living columns of fire as she did so.

Dorsos then placed his hand back on the central stone and activated the circle, focusing his mind on Syldarin.

The Shattered Stone

In an instant the pair of magic users along with the four fire demons bound to them were transported to the stone circle in Oscay outside the ruined city that Ammaril intended to make her new capital and they looked around.

"Do you think she knows we're here already?" Shimmandra asked.

"I've no idea. When we were locked in the Tower of Sorcery's dungeon I certainly didn't notice when the stone circles in Syldarin were being used though I'm not a scryer. Anyway, knowing that we're here is totally different to knowing what we're really here to do." Dorsos answered as he started to walk towards the city.

Thomas found that a tent had been erected to function as somewhere that the Orcs directing the construction of Ammaril's new palace could have somewhere to store and eat their food and he selected this as the most suitable place to wait for Ammaril to summon him with new orders. The first thing he did after making this decision was to select some of the food for himself and begin to eat. None of this was fresh but the quality was better than most of what he had been forced to eat while growing up so he tucked in until he heard the horse that he had left just outside the tent neighing. His first thought was that some of the Orcs had returned to the tent to find the horse there and would be wondering what was going on so Thomas got up to go outside and meet them. However, as he drew back the tent flap he saw that it was not the Orc artisans outside and he frowned.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

A pair of the Orc artisans were stood just outside the main entrance to the Great Library as Dorsos and Shimmandra approached with the demons drifting behind them, their shapes shifting continuously in the air and they looked at the two Elves, watching as they started to climb the steps towards the library with the demons still following them.

"Wait." one of the Orcs called out, "Queen Ammaril does not wish to be disturbed."

"We've brought news from Entris." Dorsos replied, "She needs to hear it immediately and give her response."

"The queen will not want fire demons in the library." the other Orc said, knowing the devastation that could result from a fire breaking out in the library.

"Is that so?" Dorsos said as he looked at Shimmandra.

"Now?" she said and Dorsos smiled.

"Now." he replied before he turned to the demons and added, "Kill them."

Two of the fire demons suddenly sped towards the Orcs and enveloped them in flames, incinerating them in moments and without giving them the opportunity to cry out. Meanwhile Dorsos and Shimmandra looked around to see whether anyone else was watching but for the time being none of the other Orcs or Trolls were anywhere to be seen, the construction work currently being focused elsewhere.

"We're still clear. We should hurry." Shimmandra said and Dorsos nodded and then looked at the demons who had just killed the Orcs.

"You wait here." he told them. Then he pointed to a pair of large ornamental stone fire bowls that were positioned close to the door to the library, "Use them. Don't let anyone else inside."

The two demons promptly sped to the bowls and assumed the appearance of natural flames filling them while the two Elves and the other two demons entered the building, walking through the outer hall and into the library itself.

"This place is big. Where do you think that Ammaril will be?" Shimmandra said softly.

"Who knows? She could be looking for something in here, or studying something. She lives in here right now so she could be anywhere. We need to move quietly." Dorsos replied.

"Perhaps we should make our way around the sides of the library. If we don't see any signs of any of the side rooms being in use then we can start searching between the shelves. If she's not on this floor then we can try upstairs." Shimmandra suggested and Dorsos nodded.

"Good idea. We need to stick together though." Dorsos said. Then he looked at the two demons still with them, "Stay close and whatever you do don't touch anything in here. We need this place to be left undamaged."

The two Elves then started to walk around the side of the library's ground floor, staying together until they reached a door that led to a side room and Dorsos reached for the handle. Taking hold of it and looking at Shimmandra.

"Ready?" he asked and she nodded. Dorsos then opened the door as quickly as he could to prevent anyone in the room beyond from having time to do anything before he and Shimmandra had the chance to see what was in the room.

The room was one that was intended for the private study of books and it was obvious that Ammaril had been using it for that purpose. There were numerous pages of notes piled up on the various desks in the

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room but more significantly than those was the standing stone that had been placed in the centre of the room.

"Ammaril's stone from the circle." Shimmandra said and Dorsos grinned.

"As long as we can keep her away from this she's vulnerable. She still has to touch it to draw on its power." he said and Shimmandra stepped forwards, extending her hand towards the stone, "What are you doing?" Dorsos asked.

"I have to know. This won't take long." Shimmandra replied before she gently placed her fingertips against the surface of the stone and she gasped as her eyes widened.

"That's incredible!" she exclaimed as she pulled her hand back.

"Quiet! Ammaril will hear us." Dorsos hissed.

"If we have this stone it doesn't matter. You should feel it Dorsos, raw power like nothing I've felt before." Shimmandra replied.

Dorsos then raised his hand as well and began to reach for the stone before he suddenly lowered it.

"No, we don't have time for this. We need to find Ammaril." he said and he looked back out of the room into the library.

"Okay I'm coming." Shimmandra told him as she walked away from the stone again and both Elves along with the demons returned to the library where they continued to walk around the outside of the main chamber before there was the sound of a book falling to the floor and Dorsos held up his hand for them to stop.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered and Shimmandra just nodded, "Come on. I think it came from this way." Dorsos added as he made his way between a pair of nearby shelves.

Thomas hurried alongside Hiros towards the library. To see the Elf standing outside the tent had been a surprise to Thomas but nowhere near as much as a surprise as his explanation of why he had come to Oscay.

"I don't get it." he said, "How can Ammaril be in danger? Our enemies can't get here in under a few weeks."

"It is Dorsos and Shimmandra. They plan to murder her and take her place." Hiros told him before a group of four Trolls appeared ahead of them pulling large hand carts filled with blocks of stone, "You!" Hiros called out to them and they stopped, "Leave those carts and come with us." Hiros told them.

"This stone is needed." one of the Trolls responded.

"This is more important. Queen Ammaril is in danger." Hiros said and as soon as the Trolls heard this they dropped the carts and rushed towards him, "This way." Hiros added as he continued towards the library and Thomas and the Trolls followed him.

Upon reaching the bottom of the steps leading up to the library's main entrance Hiros started to climb them but he felt a hand on his shoulder and stopped, turning to look at Thomas.

"Wait a moment." Thomas said.

"What? We need to get inside." Hiros replied, pointing up the steps.

"When were those fires lit?" Thomas asked and he looked at the flames now burning either side of the entrance.

"The fires?" Hiros said as he looked up the steps again and Thomas nodded.

"When I was stood here earlier there were no flames. As far as I know there wasn't even anything in those bowls to burn." he said.

"I was watching the stone circle when Dorsos and Shimmandra arrived. They had four fire demons with them. Perhaps they decided that they didn't need all four to face Ammaril." Hiros said and Thomas' eyes widened.

"Demons?" he exclaimed.

"Quiet. I need to concentrate." Hiros replied as he focused his mind on the area around the entrance to the library and he sensed the unmistakable presence of something magical, "Yes, they're demons." he added.

"So what do we do? How do you destroy a demon?" Thomas asked quietly.

"Demons are magical creatures. You have to disrupt the magical energy that binds the elemental forces of their creation.

"I can help." a voice said from nowhere and the Wraith that was bound to Hiros' staff emerged from the stone, followed by the one within Thomas collar.

"This may not be easy." the Wraith from Thomas' collar said as Hiros lifted his staff off the ground and pointed it towards one of the bowls of fire.

"I'll see what I can do." he said before he began to mutter and Thomas felt the hairs on his neck start to stand on end.

"Hey what are you-" he began before there was a sudden flash of lightning from the sky that struck the tip of Hiros' staff and from there shot towards one of the bowls, shattering it as it struck.

The demon that had been waiting within the bowl let out an inhuman shriek and the flames appeared to flow out of the ruined bowl to take on the form of a column at first before becoming more humanoid. The second demon then also exited from the bowl it had been waiting inside but taking on a more spherical form floating in mid air.

"Phyan-sa!" Hiros snapped, thrusting his hand out in front of him to unleash a magical blast that struck the humanoid demon and small flames seemed to drop from it before burning themselves out as they fell but the demon remained standing, not even moving back an inch as the magical blow struck it.

The two Wraiths then sped forwards, both heading for the humanoid demon and extending their arms out to swat at it. Each hit created a brief flash and crackle of light while making the demon shriek again as the energy of the Wraiths disrupted the magic that bound it together. In response though the humanoid demon thrust out one of its arms and it appeared to extend as a jet of flame erupted from it, striking one of the Wraiths and causing it to appear to spin as its own magical energy was disrupted before it steadied itself.

"Stay here. There's nothing you can do." Hiros told Thomas and the Trolls before he charged up the steps towards the hovering demon with his staff held out in front of him and as he ran he muttered an incantation again, causing light to appear to surround the head of the staff.

The hovering demon unleashed another jet of flame that Hiros swatted aside using his staff and the fire struck the ground harmlessly. Swinging his staff back towards the demon Hiros frowned and thrust it forwards so that it entered the floating ball of flame and there was another shrieking sound as the magic of the staff clashed with the demon's own magical energy, causing it to suddenly retreat though as it did a ring of fire appeared to come away and evaporate to leave the demon noticeably smaller than it had been before. Meanwhile the two Wraiths circled the demon that had taken a humanoid form and continued to strike at it, each hit producing what looked like another small flash of lightning while the demon itself lashed out with one of its fiery limbs as if trying to swat flies buzzing around it only to find that the Wraiths were able to move too quickly for it to catch them. Each hit from the Wraiths weakened the demon further and its appearance changed, with holes seeming to appear within it as it struggled to hold its size and shape. This continued until all of a sudden the demon broke apart, with tiny flames scattering before burning themselves out.

This left just the hovering spherical demon that extended a tentacle of flame again and lashed out at Hiros in the same way as the humanoid demon had and while he was able to parry the first couple of swipes as he had done with the previous one he was driven back by their ferocity. Fortunately for him the two Wraiths were now able to support him and they rushed to intervene. One of the Wraiths charged at the extended tentacle and sliced through it with a swing of its arm causing the severed section to simply evaporate while the second wraith thrust its arm deep into the centre of the demon moments later and it appeared to burst, once again spreading small flames all around that vanished in a short time.

"Are you okay?" Thomas asked as he rushed up the steps towards Hiros and the Elf nodded though Thomas noticed that he appeared to be supporting himself on his staff.

"Yes, though that drained a lot of my power. Assuming that Dorsos and Shimmandra have two more inside the library with them I may not be able to do much against them." he said.

"As long as we can warn Ammaril isn't that enough? I mean she must be the most powerful magic user in the world." Thomas said.

"Yes, though she is reliant on the reserve of power she has in the standing stone for the most significant magic she has used." Hiros said and Thomas looked at the two Wraiths still hovering nearby.

"At least we have these two to help us." he said.

"Our power is not infinite human." the Wraith from Thomas' own collar responded, "Contact with a demon weakens us. We will recover in time, faster if we drain the life from someone but if there are two more demons as powerful as these were inside then we may not be strong enough to destroy them."

"So what do we do now?" Thomas asked, looking at Hiros.

"We go in anyway. Ammaril may need us." he answered.

Ammaril sighed as the book beside the one she wanted to take from the shelf fell to the floor, accidentally snagged by the one she had picked out and dragged out with it. She was in the process of bending down to pick the fallen book up and return it to the shelf when she heard a shriek that obviously came from outside the library. This did not sound like it was produced by any humanoid throat and Ammaril immediately stood up and frowned, listening to see if she could hear anything else that might indicate what was happening. At the same time she focused her mind to try and sense the presence of any magical energy nearby. However, she was surprised to find that there were two strong sources of such power within just a few yards of her and she reached her free hand towards the pendant hanging around her neck.

"Queen Ammaril." Dorsos said as he suddenly stepped into view with Shimmandra following right behind him.

"What's going on Dorsos?" Ammaril demanded.

"We bring word from Entris my queen. The second stages of the invasions of Lerron and Lastallo have been a success. Their capital cities have fallen and the main invasions of the coasts will soon commence." Dorsos said.

"I see now perhaps you can explain why you couldn't bring me this news without any of the demons." Ammaril said before she looked past the other two Elves and called out, "I command you to reveal yourselves."

However, rather than doing as Ammaril ordered as a demon that was bound to her would do the two fire demons waiting out of sight remained where they were.

"They won't follow your orders Ammaril." Dorsos said and a grin appeared on his face, "I made sure to create a few demons that were bound only to myself and Shimmandra, just for this moment."

"We're here to end your reign Ammaril. Your army and the lands it has conquered will be ours to control now, not just whatever pieces you opt to grant us." Shimmandra added.

"You fools! You will never control my army." Ammaril hissed.

"We'll see. Now." Dorsos said and the two fire demons moved into view, both appearing roughly humanoid.

Ammaril promptly tossed the book that she was still holding aside and then extended her hand towards one of the demons while keeping the other on her pendant.

"Az-ra!" she yelled and the flames that made up the demon were dragged towards her, appearing to flow into the tips of her fingers as the demon itself evaporated.

Rather than wait to find out whether Ammaril was capable of destroying the second demon as easily Dorsos threw himself at her and tackled her to the floor, clamping one hand over her mouth to prevent her from vocalising any incantations.

"Shimmandra, your knife." Dorsos called out and Shimmandra drew the small knife that she kept on her belt. This was far more of a tool than a fighting blade but it was still enough to be lethal if used correctly and she advanced towards where Dorsos had Ammaril pinned to the floor while the last remaining demon stood back and watched.

"Phyan-sa!" Hiros' voice suddenly exclaimed as he appeared at the opposite end of the rows of shelves and he released a magical blast towards Shimmandra. This was not very strong but it did take her by surprise and she was thrown backwards, the knife flying from her grasp.

At the same time Thomas charged forwards without thinking, rushing headlong at where Dorsos was holding Ammaril down and he kicked the Eleven warlock in his ribs, producing an audible 'crack' as one of the bones obviously broke and he screamed in pain as he let go of his grip on Ammaril and she pushed him back.

"Take my hand." Thomas said as he helped Ammaril to her feet. Meanwhile behind Hiros the two Wraiths and the Trolls appeared, the Trolls standing back while the Wraiths began to drift forwards. For a moment the demon remained where it was, its humanoid form appearing to just watch the mixed group of mortal and ethereal creatures now opposing it. It did not fear Thomas or the Trolls, none of them had the means to harm the demon but it had already witnessed Ammaril destroy its comrade and it could sense the magical power emanating from Hiros and the Wraiths also.

Both Dorsos and Shimmandra were lying on the floor of the library gasping for breath, leaving them both unable to command the demon to do anything so instead it chose to act in its own self interest and before any further spells could be cast it shifted its form into that of a floating ball of flame and shot upwards, travelling over the shelves filled with books without touching any of them until it reached a window and at this point it simply smashed its way through and sped away.

"You said you needed to feed." Hiros said to the Wraiths and he looked down at Dorsos and Shimmandra.

"No. I have other plans for them." Ammaril said sternly, "Pick them up and get them out of my library. I want them secured so that I can deal with them later. Once you have done that then return to me in my study. Both of you." she added, looking at Hiros and Thomas.

Securing Dorsos and Shimmandra outside the library did not take long. Two stone columns that had once been used to support part of a building but that now simply stood freely close to one another were located and the two Elf warlocks were tied to them and gagged to make sure that they could not use any magic to escape. Shimmandra still tried to wriggle free of the ropes but without any success while the pain that Dorsos was in owing to his injuries only became worse the more he moved so he remained still instead, just glaring angrily at Hiros and Thomas.

"This isn't over." he hissed, breathing heavily before a rag was forced into his mouth and secured in place.

"No, not yet but I doubt that Ammaril will keep either of you waiting long." Hiros responded.

"What do you think she'll do to them?" Thomas asked.

"I really don't know." Hiros answered and then he turned to look at the library, "Who knows what interesting knowledge she may have found in there? Perhaps we should go back inside and find out."

Leaving Dorsos and Shimmandra being watched by several Trolls, Hiros and Thomas returned to the library, walking up the steps and entering the building without waiting for Ammaril to specifically invite them inside and made their way to the room that Ammaril had turned into her study and where the standing stone was currently located.

"Ah there you are." she said, smiling as the two men entered the room.

"Dorsos and Shimmandra are secured my queen. You commanded us to return when this was done." Hiros replied.

"Yes I did. I need to thank you both for what you did. Just a few moments more and I would have been killed. I owe you my life and I intend to reward you both for that." Ammaril said.

"A reward?" Thomas commented with a grin.

"Yes Thomas and your reward will be the wealth that I know you crave. I have the wealth of Sylldarin to offer and I intend to make certain that you receive a significant amount. Enough that you will never need to worry about money again." Ammaril told him before she turned to look at Hiros, "As for you I feel that something different is required. First though I want to know what brought you to Oscan at exactly the moment that Dorsos and Shimmandra tried to kill me."

"Graysil noticed their odd behaviour my queen and brought it to me. I observed them more closely after that and discovered their plan to kill you and pretend to represent you when giving orders to the Orcs." Hiros told her and she snorted.

"Such a crude plan and quite unworkable as well." Ammaril said.

"What makes it unworkable? You use us to relay orders all the time. Who would notice if you suddenly said that Oscan was off limits to everyone except Dorsos and Shimmandra?" Thomas commented and Ammaril smiled.

"Everyone, everyone would notice Thomas." she responded, "All of my creations, Orcs, Trolls and dragons of legendary size are ultimately loyal to me. Every action they take is motivated by the idea of what my objectives are."

"Yes but if Dorsos and Shimmandra told them that the orders they were giving were coming from you then how would the Orcs know?" Thomas asked.

"Because that compulsion is backed up by a magical link between me and them. Not enough for me to be able to directly communicate with them or control them but a part of them is always aware of me. If I were to die then that connection would instantly be broken and the compulsion to act in my interests lost. Instead they would become tribal, acting in the interests of themselves and those useful to them." Ammaril explained.

"My queen, I hate to ask but what would happen when you finally pass of natural causes? Surely your empire would fall into chaos." Hiros said, frowning.

"I have no intention of dying of any cause Hiros and that brings me to your reward. Come with me, both of you." Ammaril said and she picked up a small jar from a table before leading Hiros and Thomas out of the room.

Ammaril then led the two men through the library to a particular shelf where she stopped and ran her hand along a row of books.

"These books cover some of what the ancient Oscari learnt of life and death, how to extend one and defeat the other." Ammaril said.

"I thought their empire collapsed because they all died off and became Wraiths." Thomas pointed out.

"They did. There was something about this world that meant they could not survive here and they could not leave. However, I do know that before coming here they regarded themselves as virtually immortal. Their ageing would eventually stop and unless killed by physical injury they would live forever. That is what I want Thomas, my empire will cover the entire world and I will rule it forever. What else could I do? I have no heirs and I never will, no man is my equal so how could I take a husband?" Ammaril explained.

"Then what do these books contain if not the secret to eternal life?" Hiros asked.

"How to turn one into the other Hiros. You have reanimated dead bodies as zombies you can command but the knowledge in these books would tell you how to preserve the spirit and create an undying creature that can think for itself rather than rely on someone else for orders. Not alive but not fully dead either." Ammaril told him, "You may take these books and study them to learn these secrets for yourself. I shall want them returned of course but I am willing to grant you the knowledge that they contain. Consider it a down payment on the knowledge I promised in exchange for your loyalty. Continue to serve me loyally and there will be further rewards." Ammaril told him, "Now let us deal with the traitors. I will need the stone bringing."

A trio of Trolls brought the standing stone from Ammaril's study to where both Dorsos and Shimmandra were tied to the columns while Ammaril simply gazed at the two bound and gagged captives.

"Excellent. Now we can deal with them." she said when the stone was set down and she removed the top from the jar that she still held before walking up to Dorsos and removing his gag. Then before he could speak she grabbed his face and squeezed to force his mouth open so that she could pour some of the contents of the jar into his mouth, angling his head so that the liquid would flow down his throat. Not all of this flowed into his stomach and he coughed and spluttered as Ammaril let go of him and then walked over to Ammaril to repeat the procedure.

"Will this work on them Ammaril?" Hiros asked when Ammaril then returned to stand by the stone and placed her hand against it.

"As well as it works on any other Elf Hiros. The drawback was always that a magic user would be able to sense the sorcery." she replied.

"No! You can't do this to us Ammaril!" Shimmandra called out but Ammaril smiled at her.

"I found you trapped in a hole in the ground and took you out of it. I promised you power and a life of comfort in exchange for your loyalty and you betrayed me. One way or another I will have that loyalty Shimmandra." she replied.

"You bitch!" Shimmandra screamed before Ammaril raised her arm towards the two captives and there was a sudden flash of light.

Dorsos and Shimmandra both let out loud screams immediately following the flash and they began to convulse. Moments later their skin began to lose its colour, becoming grey and then their features started to distort. Hair then began to come loose and fall from their heads to the ground while their convulsions continued. Their jaws expanded as their teeth increased in size and in particular their canine teeth grew larger in proportion to the others as they became similar to tusks.

All of a sudden Dorsos spat out a mouthful of blood and his body went limp against the ropes binding him, his head slumping forwards as he became motionless. On the other hand Shimmandra's body continued to shake and she continued to scream as she continued the process of transforming into an Orc.

"What happened to him?" Thomas asked, looking at Dorsos' body still supported by the ropes tying it to the stone column.

"His injury perhaps? You did kick him pretty hard." Hiros suggested.

"Some are too weak to survive the transformation. If he was injured then perhaps that weakened him enough that he could survive it." Ammaril added before Shimmandra suddenly stopped screaming and looking at her it was obvious to see that her transformation was complete. Instead of an Elf, there was now a female Orc tied to the column, "Untie her. I want to see if her power has survived the transformation as well." Ammaril ordered.

Hiros strode up to the column that Shimmandra was still tied to while she just snarled at him and cut the ropes binding her. Immediately she stepped away from the column and turned towards Ammaril, looking at her without speaking.

"Well at least she isn't attacking anyone." Thomas commented.

"The transformation has imposed loyalty to me above all else. She is waiting for me to tell her what to do." Ammaril said.

"I will do as you say my queen." Shimmandra responded, her voice no longer as smooth as it had been before her transformation.

"I will need a candle." Ammaril said, looking at Thomas.

"A candle? Oh right." he replied and he dashed back to the tent where he had been eating earlier and collected one of the candles he had seen in there before returning with it along with the stick it was mounted in, "Here you go, one candle." he said.

"Light it." Ammaril told him and he sighed.

"You could have said before." he muttered as he set the candle stick down and took his tinderbox from his pocket, using the flint and steel it contained to light the candle, "Here you go." he said as he handed the lit candle to Ammaril and in turn she held it out towards Shimmandra.

"Take this." she ordered and the newly created Orc took the lit candle from her, "Good. Now create a fireball and send it that way." Ammaril added and she pointed away from where they stood, into the ruins.

Shimmandra then turned in the direction that Ammaril had pointed and raised the candle in front of her while placing her other hand behind it. With a flick of her wrist she released a small amount of magical energy and when this hit the candle flame it produced a ball of flame about a foot across that shot out ahead of her.

Without being aimed at anything in particular this flew on and expanded slowly until it simply evaporated but

The Shattered Stone

the point had been made, despite her transformation into an Orc, Shimmandra was still capable of controlling magical power..

"So now you have an Orc witch." Thomas said.

"More than that, there is the potential for future generations of Orc magic users." Hiros told him, "The ability to wield magic runs in family lines. Not every child of a sorcerer will be one themselves but unless at least one parent is then a child cannot be."

"And no sorcerer would willingly consume anything containing the potion I used for the transformation spell. They would be able to sense the magic it contained. Though it may prove useful to have some spell casters whose loyalty will see them lay down their own lives to carry out my orders without question." Ammaril added, "In the more immediate future though our invasion plan will need to be altered now that Dorsos is dead and Shimmandra transformed. They were vital to the movement of my army using the stone circles but now we have only two sorcerers remaining."

"What about the sorcerers from the human kingdoms that have agreed to serve you? There must be scores of them." Thomas suggested.

"No. I will not trust working the stones circles to any human that is not controlled as you are. When we have conquered Raysalgard then I am sure that there will be more Elf sorcerers with whom I can find common ground but until then an alternative will need to be found. You two must wait while I decide what to do next."

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When Teuten came into view for Will and the others they could also clearly see the ocean beside it and they saw the dozens of ships that were anchored outside the harbour. All of these were cogs and their single sails had been lowered while they were stationary.

"We can't be too late. If the city had been invaded we would have met a messenger on the road here taking word to Hessenstadt?" Gromar said.

"We haven't missed an invasion." Yilven replied with a smile, "Those are Elven ships."

"Why would so many Elf ships be here though?" Lucia replied, "I travelled on Elf ships for a long time and they were some of the few that regularly went to human ports."

"I don't know but I can tell you that those ships all came from Raysalgard." Yilven said.

"It seems like you may not need the *Storm Chaser* to take you there after all then." Will commented.

"Perhaps not, though that depends on why these ships are here. If they are heading elsewhere I may still need your help." Yilven said.

"You'll have it if you need it." Will replied.

The group continued to ride towards the port city and when they entered it they saw immediately that the city was just as peaceful as it had been when they were last there but unusually there were obviously a large number of Elves in the city, the majority of whom were wearing the uniforms of soldiers from Raysalgard and some were also carrying weapons openly.

"They've brought an army into the city." Horace commented and Will nodded.

"Yes, not the sort of thing that a city mayor would normally be happy about. But no-one seems to be bothered by it at all." he said.

"Perhaps we should just try asking someone. One of the Elves." Lucia suggested.

"That sounds like a good idea to me." Dominic added and Yilven nodded.

"I'll take care of it." he said and he guided his horse to the side of the street where a small group of Elves stood talking to one another. The group was a mix of uniformed soldiers and Elves who had the look of sailors instead by their practical but well worn clothing. The Elves noticed him as he approached on horseback and stopped their conversation, looking up at him.

"My name is Yilven of Agalla. Why are you in this city?" he asked.

"Haven't you heard about Ammaril of Sylldarin my lord?" one of the sailors responded.

"I'm no lord but yes, I know about Ammaril. I was part of her expedition to Oscay. I escaped what she did to the others in the expedition before returning to warn others. Also I helped Dellasin escape from Sylldarin." Yilven said.

"Then we're here because you." one of the soldiers said.

"Because of me?" Yilven commented, frowning for a moment.

"Dellasin's ship reached Raysalgard safely." another of the soldiers said, "He may be just a boy but the other Elves you helped escape Sylldarin told everyone they could about what happened and King Thallas decided that the threat from Ammaril was too great to ignore. He has sent more than five thousand soldiers as well as half the kingdom's navy to help the humans fight her."

"Not to mention the sorcerers sent to try and counter Ammaril's magic while the king is raising a larger army back home just in case we fail. He won't let Raysalgard fall like Sylldarin did." a third soldier added.

"Who is leading this expedition?" Yilven asked.

"Lord Arrin, the king's cousin. He's probably still meeting with the human ruler of this city." the sailor who had spoken earlier told Yilven and he nodded.

"Thank you." he said before guiding his horse back towards the rest of the group who had been waiting close by, with Lucia translating for those who did not speak the Elvish language.

"Are they serious? They've come to fight Ammaril's army? Won't she just turn them all into Orcs as well?" Horace said.

"She would have to take them alive first. If they don't consume the potion that she has been using then her blood magic won't work and if the Elves have their own sorcerers with them then they will be able to detect the presence of the potion in any water source used by the army." Dominic pointed out.

"Do you want to go and talk to this Lord Arrin?" Will asked and Yilven nodded.

"If King Thallas has sent an army to fight Ammaril then there is little point in me travelling to Raysalgard anyway. I would be better off staying here and doing whatever I can to help." he said.

"In that case you should go and find him." Will said.

"Dominic and I need to find a forge we can use." Gromar added, "If we're going to be making magic weapons then we should get started."

"I guess that just leaves us three left." Lucia said, looking at Will and Horace, "What are we going to do?"

"We'll head back to the *Storm Chaser* and wait. If the Elves sail south then there'll be work carrying supplies for them." Will replied.

"Back to business as usual Will?" Horace commented.

"I know, it's been a long time since we just did a regular voyage carrying cargo. I've almost forgotten what it felt like to not have to worry about Vampires or dragons or the Hadarian navy. Though if we do end up carrying provisions for an Elf army then I wouldn't be surprised if they had us carrying a couple of dozen warriors to defend the ship. If they can shoot a bow as fast and accurately as Yilven then we'll be well protected as well." Will said.

"This could still be the last time that all six of us are together though." Lucia said, "If Yilven joins the Elf army and Dominic and Gromar just spend the rest of their time here making weapons then none of them might ever step foot aboard the ship again."

Gromar snorted.

"Do you really think that I wouldn't say goodbye before you set sail?" he said and Dominic smiled.

"We'll let you know where we're working, just in case you need us." he added.

"And I'll put in a good word for you with Lord Arrin." Yilven added, "I'm sure that he will welcome extra ships, especially well run ones like the *Storm Chaser*."

"Thank you Yilven." Will replied with a smile.

"And thank you again for getting me away from Ammaril." Lucia added, also smiling at Yilven.

"If I had left you behind then I would have regretted it for the rest of my life. At least now I know that you have found somewhere that you are happy and someone to be happy with." he replied. Then he looked around at the rest of the group and added, "I consider all of you my friends and I hope that we will meet again. For now though I must bid you goodbye."

"And good luck to us all as well. We might need it." Will said.

As Yilven rode towards the mayor's office he saw a group of Elves leaving the building, all but one of whom wore clothing marked with the same heraldry and for most of them this was of quality that suggested they came from a relatively high social status. One instead wore robes and carried a staff that suggested that he was one of the sorcerers who had accompanied the Elven army here while four had more battered looking tabards that were obviously worn over chainmail coats and Yilven guessed that these were bodyguards. These Elves noticed Yilven as he approached and they paused, turning to face him when they saw that he was an Elf rather than a human. Approaching to within a few yards of the group Yilven dismounted from his horse.

"Who are you?" one of the Elves in finer clothing asked

"My name is Yilven of Agalla." Yilven replied.

"Agalla? That is in Sylldarin is it not?" the other Elf added and Yilven nodded.

"Yes, or at least it was. Until Ammaril came. Now I'm assuming that it is as empty as everywhere else in the kingdom." he said.

"You are one of those who escaped." The other Elf said.

"I wasn't there when it happened. For many years I was in the employ of King Larallus and his family as the master of their lands. When Ammaril and Orcan launched their expedition to Oscay I was sent to help them explore that continent and protect them. When I began to suspect that Ammaril's true objectives were not in the interests of our people as she claimed I left and joined with another group that had followed us there."

Yilven explained.

"Dellasin told us about you. You saved him and many others." Another of the noble Elves said as he stepped forwards from the centre of the group, "I am Lord Arrin, sent by King Thallas to fight alongside the humans before Ammaril can get to Raysalgard and do there what she did to Sylldarin."

"Then you are the one I came to see my lord." Yilven responded, "I would like to offer you my services."

"Under other circumstances I might be suspicious of someone who claimed to know Ammaril and have been a part of her expedition, you could easily be a spy." Arrin said, "However, since you acted to get as many of your people out of Sylldarin and deliver them to safety, including the young king, I think that it is safe to trust you Yilven of Agalla and you are welcome to join me. Do you wish command of a company?" he then added and Yilven smiled.

"The offer is most generous my lord. Though my expertise is not in the command of armies, it is in hunting and tracking." Yilven told him.

"Then that is how you shall serve me. I have a number of scouts already but one more will not go amiss, especially not one as experienced as you must be Yilven of Agalla. You will command my scouts and report to me directly." Arrin said.

"Thank you my lord. I am at your service." Yilven replied and he bowed his head again.

"Good. The mayor of this city has agreed to us staying for the time being and word of our presence has been sent to King Gerald in Hessenstadt but we must be ready to move to wherever Ammaril's forces might appear. We know of the danger posed by the ancient stone circles but the number of attacks along the Straight of Lerron suggests that an invasion could come from the sea as well. That is why I am keeping most of my force aboard our ships and letting just a few at a time come ashore. We must be ready to sail quickly." Arrin said.

"Very wise my lord." Yilven said, "On that matter though I know of a ship that could be useful to you."

"There are no other Elf ships in Teuten." one of the other Elf nobles pointed out.

"No, this one is operated by a human called William Beckett. It is a cog called the *Storm Chaser*." Yilven said.

"The ship that carried the escaping Elves from Sylldarin." Arrin said with a smile.

"The very same my lord. It is the ship that brought me back from Oscay. Its crew may not be Elves but they are brave and their hearts are in the right place. They will serve you well if you would allow it." Yilven said.

"Mercenaries?" one of the other Elf nobles commented.

"They are not soldiers and their ship is not one of war but they will fight if they have to." Yilven responded.

"You do not need to explain further Yilven, you trust them enough to vouch for them and that is good enough for me. If they are willing to carry provisions and enough men to defend the ship in battle then I will pay them for their service." Arrin said, "How many men can it carry if it also carrying provisions for my army?"

"When it travelled to Oscay it carried a little over two dozen mercenaries in addition to their supplies my lord." Yilven answered.

"In that case if they will join us you may take twenty men aboard it and fill the holds with whatever provisions you can obtain. You know these people so you will sail with them as well." Arrin said and Yilven smiled.

"Thank you my lord." he replied.

In a port city the size of Teuten there were numerous blacksmith's forges. Some specialised in making serving the ships that came into the harbour, making tools and nails so that they could be repaired and maintained while others made horseshoes or other more mundane items. Normally just a few made weapons or armour but with the threat of invasion more blacksmiths were finding that they were receiving requests for such things and were turning their attention to them instead of the more peaceful items they usually crafted. This increase in business made it difficult for Gromar and Dominic to find themselves a forge where they could work but they eventually found one in the form of a small forge that was attached to a stable and run by an elderly man.

"I just can't work as much as I used to be able to." the man explained, "I can make a few horseshoes and the nails to fit them to a horse's feet so that I can keep a small supply ready for my stable but right now everyone is wanting forges that can churn out swords and helmets."

"Actually we'll be making weapons too, though not as many as most." Dominic replied while Gromar inspected the forge, "Well Gromar, what do you think?" he added.

"The forge itself is good enough for hard steel and the tools have been well looked after. It will do." the Dwarf replied, nodding his head.

"Then do we have an agreement?" Dominic asked, turning back towards the old man who owned the forge and holding out his hand with several silver coins in it. The man then smiled and took the coins from his hand.

"Oh yes, we have a deal. This amount each week." he said as he put the coins in his pocket, "Now I will leave you to your work." he added before he turned around and walked out of the forge.

"This forge will do but I still think you're paying him too much. He probably doesn't normally make that much in a week from this place and the stable combined." Gromar said.

"My order will be the one paying him," Dominic replied, "and right now I'm not concerned about whether or not its leaders consider this a good deal. When can you start forging a weapon?"

"Just as soon as you tell me what it is that we're forging. I'll need some steel of course and that's likely to be expensive right now so I hope that you have some more of those coins. Gold ones might be needed rather than silver." Gromar said.

"Don't worry I have gold as well as silver. Besides, we may need the silver for the weapon. As a metal it has some interesting properties in relation to magic." Dominic told him.

"Then maybe we should try to buy some more that, just in case." Gromar suggested.

"Yes, I suppose that right now there will be less call for silver than for steel." Dominic said.

"So what sort of weapon do you want to make anyway?" Gromar then asked.

"Actually I was thinking of two. Firstly I was thinking about the issue with Trolls, they obviously require a powerful blow to kill so something that increased the force of an attack would be good." Dominic answered and he looked at Gromar's hammer where it had been set down at the side of the forge, "In fact I was thinking of something rather like your hammer." he added and Gromar smiled.

"A hammer. Good. I like hammers. They're good for lots of things, but you said two so what's the second?" he said.

"A sword. More traditional than a hammer and more people would be used to using one." Dominic said.

Lucia had just emerged onto the deck of the *Storm Chaser* with a bucket filled with kitchen waste to be thrown over the side of the ship when she saw Yilven riding along the dock towards the ship and she smiled before she rushed to the side of the ship along the dock and waved to him.

"Yilven!" she called out gleefully and he smiled back at her as he rode up to the bottom of the gang plank and dismounted from his horse.

"Hello again Lucia. May I come aboard? I need to speak to Will." he said.

"Of course, you don't need to ask to come aboard." Lucia replied and Yilven tied his horse to a nearby post before walking up the gangplank.

"I feel I should ask, I'm not part of the crew any more." he said.

"So you found Lord Arrin and he agreed to let you join him?" Lucia asked.

"Yes, because of my experience he has taken me on as the leader of his scouting units. I will answer directly to him. Apparently he had already heard about me from the Elves from Sylldarwin who reached Raysalgard." Yilven answered.

"That's wonderful." Lucia said, "So what brings you back here so soon?"

"I spoke with Lord Arrin about using the *Storm Chaser* and he agreed that it would be a good idea. That's why I need to speak to Will." Yilven responded.

"Of course. He's in our – in his cabin." Lucia said, correcting herself part way through the sentence.

"Is it alright to go and see him?" Yilven said.

"Of course. I was just helping Horace with dinner, feel free to go below decks." Lucia told him.

"Thank you Lucia and even though we only parted earlier today it is good to see you again." Yilven said and then he started to walk towards the doorway leading below deck, leaving Lucia to finish her immediate task and return to the kitchen.

Yilven quickly made his way to the captain's cabin and knocked on the door, waiting for a response.

"Come in." Will's voice said from the other side and Yilven opened the door to reveal Will sat on his bed and looking at a chart that he had unrolled, "Yilven." he said with a smile when he looked up and saw the Elf standing in the doorway, "Don't tell me that Lord Arrin wasn't interested in taking you on."

"No, in fact he was quite keen to put me in a senior position once he found out who I am. He offered me command of a company." Yilven said as he entered the cabin but left the door open behind him.

"Well I was just studying the charts of the Straight of Lerron, wondering where the Hadarians and Ammaril's other allies are most likely to be lurking. Just in case we end up heading that way again." Will said.

"A realistic possibility given why I am here." Yilven said.

"You mean that Arrin wants to charter the *Storm Chaser*?" Will asked.

"Yes, at my recommendation. He wants to use the ship to move provisions for his army and to that end will put twenty soldiers aboard to protect you against attack." Yilven said.

"Twenty Elves shooting flaming arrows from longbows. That's a good deal of protection." Will said, picturing the number of arrows that twenty longbow men could shoot and knowing that while individually even a burning arrow could do little against something the size of a ship, when fired in great enough numbers the damage they could cause could be devastating, "Has he said where we'd be going?"

"No." Yilven answered, shaking his head, "For the time being it seems that the Elf army is just waiting to find out where they'll be needed."

"Just like Hessenland's army waiting in Hessenstadt." Will commented and Yilven nodded in agreement.

"Yes. If you agree then Lord Arrin would want to place his men and some supplies aboard the *Storm Chaser* and then wait to see where the army is needed. You'd be paid for your time in port of course so even if the fleet doesn't need to sail again you won't lose out on the time spent waiting." he explained.

"Well you can tell Lord Arrin that it will be our honour to join his fleet and he may send his men at any time." Will said.

"Thank you. I will tell Lord Arrin immediately. I'm sure he'll appreciate the quick reply." Yilven replied.

Ships were arrayed as far as Vendril could see in both directions. These were a mixture of cogs, longships, hulks and any other seaworthy vessel that was capable of carrying a significant amount of passengers or cargo. Now they were loaded with Orcs, Trolls and human soldiers from Hadar and Costria, more than forty thousand in total. This was one of the largest armies ever assembled, enough to conquer an entire continent before moving on to the rest of the world.

"Are we ready to set sail?" Vendril asked the ship's captain, another Orc who had once been a sailor in Syldarin and now commanded a squadron of ships for Ammaril.

"Yes my lord," he responded.

"Then send the signal. Let the invasion begin." Vendril ordered.

The Orc captain then signalled to another Orc crewman stood close by and he raised a horn to his mouth, taking a deep breath before blowing into it to produce a loud and constant tone that was carried over the ocean to the other ships nearby. In turn a member of the crew aboard each of these also blew a horn to produce a similar sound so that the signal spread out among the assembled fleet and informing them all that the time had come to depart.

As each crew heard the signal they began to raise their anchors and deploy their sails to begin their journey. The actions of the crews were not synchronised in any way and each ship handled differently so rather than setting sail in a unified fashion the fleet moved in a more haphazard manner with some vessels pulling ahead of others and because of this the fleet began to arrange itself into waves of ships. Although some of the ships in the fleet had the option of using oars to power their movement these were more suited to shorter bursts of speed than for a full ocean crossing, even one that was just across the Strait of Lerron so they relied purely on their sails also. Vendril had selected one of the fastest ships in the fleet so that he would be among the first wave to reach the other side of the straight where he would deliver the army to Orcan.

Knowing that the *Storm Chaser* would be taking on twenty additional passengers Will was keen to make sure that enough places were arranged for them sleep aboard the ship. He did not want to ask them to sleep on the deck, exposed to the elements so additional hammocks needed to be set up in the compartment where most of the crew slept. Fortunately this space was large enough to accommodate the twenty Elf warriors that he had been told would be joining them.

"What am I supposed to do about dinner?" Horace asked, entering the compartment while the extra hammocks were being set up, "If these Elves are supposed to be joining us then I need to cook more and that's going to take more time. Will the crew mind eating late?"

"Just feed our crew for now. The Elves may have already eaten but if they haven't then we can figure something out." Will said before another crewman entered the compartment.

"Captain the Elves are here," he said and Will looked at Horace.

"Looks like we can go and find out whether or not our guests are hungry," he said and the pair made their way back up onto the deck. Here they found Lucia leaning on the side of the ship and looking along the dock as a group of Elves marched towards it with another Elf driving a cart behind them that was loaded with supplies. Each of the Elf warriors carried both a spear and longbow with swords worn on their belts, showing that they were prepared for almost any type of battle. More interesting to Will and the others aboard the *Storm Chaser* though was the man who was obviously leading the Elves, walking alongside the two columns of warriors.

"It's Yilven," Lucia said, grinning.

"It is. It'll be nice to have him sailing with us again," Horace added.

"Yilven," Will called out as Yilven reached the bottom of the gang plank and ordered his troops to halt and turn towards the ship, "I thought you didn't want to be a company commander."

"I don't but this is hardly a company and while they're aboard your ship they'll be under your command Will. I'll just make sure that they understand your orders properly." Yilven replied, "As you can see we've brought some supplies with us but more should be sent later. Of course I'll need to meet with Lord Arrin regularly to keep informed about news of Ammaril's army."

"Well it's good to have you back aboard. Bring your men onboard and get them settled in. Then we can wait to see what Ammaril does next." Will replied.

Thomas spent two days waiting for Ammaril to summon him again. Hiro was able to spend the time studying the books that Ammaril had permitted him to remove from the library but Thomas had to find other things to occupy his time. Something made harder by the fact that neither the Orcs nor Trolls present in the city seemed to have any interest in the gambling that had long been one of his favourite ways to enjoy himself, especially when he was able to adjust the odds in his favour. Because of this he was almost eager to respond when she sent for him, even though he was certain that it would mean that she had another

message for him to deliver. However, when he and Hiros entered the library to speak with Ammaril he discovered the real reason for her summons.

Rather than being sent to act on Ammaril's behalf though she told the two men that she wanted them to travel to Lerron with her so that she could speak with her brother. Arriving in Lerron on horseback the three of them then rode to Lerra where they encountered a unit of Orcs guarding the gateway to the city.

"Your majesty." the first Orc to see them said, bowing his head.

"Is the city under control?" Ammaril asked, looking into the city.

"It is my queen. We have regular patrols to keep order." the Orc answered.

"And what about Orcan? Where is he?" Ammaril said.

"In the palace my queen. If you are going there then I will send a patrol with you." the Orc told her.

"I thought the city was supposed to be safe." Thomas commented.

"Any humans we encounter will think twice about attacking us if we're surrounded by a dozen Orcs." Hiros pointed out.

"I will accept your offer." Ammaril told the Orc and he signalled for a nearby group of Orcs to approach.

"Queen Ammaril is going to the palace. Make sure she gets there safely." he told them.

"It will be done." the other Orc responded.

The Orc unit then formed a ring around the trio on horseback and together they made their way into the city, moving at a pace that the Orcs on foot could easily match. The streets of the city were largely empty with the inhabitants largely afraid to leave their homes while Orcs and Trolls walked the streets. It was not possible for the entire population to remain inside all the time though so there were still some humans on the streets as Ammaril was escorted through them towards the palace and they looked at her nervously. Few of them knew much about Ammaril and none knew what she looked like but the sight of a pair of Elves and a human being escorted by Orcs was unusual enough to provoke an interest by most of those who saw them.

The city was largely intact but here and there were buildings that had been damaged during the attack, either struck by rocks hurled into the city by the Orcs' siege artillery or burned by dragon fire. The palace itself though was almost completely undamaged, with only the doors having been damaged when they were smashed open by a Troll. The open doorway was guarded by another unit of Orcs and they watched as Ammaril, Hiros and Thomas dismounted.

"I am here to see Orcan." Ammaril said to the guards.

"Yes my queen. He is inside." one of them responded.

"Good. See to our horses." Ammaril told him as she then walked past the guards and through the ruined doorway into the palace.

Orcan was in the palace throne room, discussing the current state of the city as well as the area surrounding it with several of his commanders when Ammaril entered. Queen Isabel remained present as well, now tied to her throne by her wrists and ankles and gagged with a piece of cloth torn from one of the curtains. The Lerronian queen had long since given up struggling to try and free herself after her efforts had got her nowhere and she was being largely ignored by the Orcs.

"My queen." Orcan said when he saw Ammaril entering the room while behind her came Hiros, Thomas and the newly transformed Shimmandra.

"Orcan, you have done well. I was told that the city is now under your total control." Ammaril responded.

"As you commanded my queen." Orcan said.

"And you've captured dear Queen Isabel as well." Ammaril added, smiling as she looked down at the captive queen, "Excellent. Unfortunately that was not duplicated in Lastallo where the king was able to avoid being captured."

Orcan let out a low growl.

"I will see to it that the commander of that operation is punished." he said.

"There is no need for that Orcan, I am sure that he did his best though Tiellan would have perhaps handled it better. He was after all your first choice to lead the invasion of Lastallo before I ordered the attack on Orselland. On the other hand I have news of my own that is rather more disturbing. Dorsos and Shimmandra betrayed me, betrayed us all and attempted to kill me." Ammaril told him.

"Then they should die. Slowly." Orcan replied immediately, "Let me do it. I will make them suffer greatly before the end. Their deaths will be a warning to any other potential assassins."

Ammaril smiled when she heard this.

"My dear Orcan, I am touched by your concern but I have already dealt with the matter in my own way.

Dorsos is already dead, he died quite painfully I'm sure you'll be glad to know. As for Shimmandra, well her loyalty is now beyond any doubt." she said and she looked at Shimmandra.

"You have turned her into an Orc." Orcan said.

"Yes, unfortunately for Dorsos he did not survive the process but Shimmandra did and so did at least some of her power." Ammaril explained.

"She can still use magic?" Orcan said, eyeing Shimmandra up with suspicion.

"She can, she has been tested with the creation of a fireball spell as well activating the stone circle to bring us here." Ammaril explained.

"Then perhaps all of your servants who can use magic should be transformed." Orcan suggested, shifting his gaze towards Hiros, "So that their loyalty can be beyond doubt as well."

"My queen I-" Hiros began before Ammaril interrupted him

"No, it has never been my intention to wipe out the Elven species entirely Orcan. Some will be left as they are, including the sorcerers that are loyal to me. Hiros has already proven his loyalty by saving my life from the assassination attempt. He and Thomas arrived just in time." she said, addressing her comments mainly to Orcan but also wanting to reassure Hiros that he was in no danger.

"As you wish my queen but I should send Orcs to guard you. You are too vulnerable on your own in Oscay." Orcan said sternly.

"Yes, I agree. Hiros and Graysil have shown themselves to be loyal by opposing what Dorsos and Shimmandra did but when we conquer Raysalgard I shall be bringing more Elves into my service who will need to be able to travel to Oscay. Dorsos and Shimmandra have shown that I cannot count entirely on Wraiths to keep my followers loyal, particularly if they are sorcerers. They would have the ability to destroy a Wraith. On the other hand my Orcs are nothing but loyal to me." Ammaril said in agreement.

"I will organise a personal guard for you immediately." Orcan said and Ammaril nodded.

"Yes, put together a force of your finest warriors, at least a hundred of them. It doesn't have to be done immediately, though I will want them soon. Half will remain with me as a personal guard at all times while the others will remain with you as an elite force of warriors for your most vital tasks. I shall grant each of them a Wraith stone so that they can activate the stone circles to enable them to carry messages directly between us and limit our reliance on the only three sorcerers that we have left." she said.

"Does that mean that you're done with me as your errand boy?" Thomas asked.

"Of course not. I can hardly send an Orc to deliver messages to human kings now can I? You will continue to be my ambassador to them while the Orcs will just carry messages between those who are already my followers. The two groups will also swap between protecting me and serving under Orcan every few weeks to make sure that their skills remain properly honed in battle. When I return to Oscay I shall take the first group with me as well as a pair of my dragons. Even if your warriors are not enough to deter another attempt on my life then I am sure that the presence of the dragons will be." she said.

"Yes my queen." Orcan said, bowing his head briefly.

"Good. Now to more immediate matters though." Ammaril said and she looked down at Queen Isabel who had listened helplessly to the conversation that had taken place in Elvish, wondering whether the people speaking had realised that she understood much of what was being said, "Remove her gag."

The closest of the Orcs to Queen Isabel then moved to remove the gag from her mouth, simply pulling it free and she gulped for air after having her breathing restricted by it for so long.

"So you're Ammaril." she hissed, glaring angrily at Ammaril as she spoke.

"So you know of me and you can speak some of our language." Ammaril responded.

"Just enough to know that you aren't really a queen. Just a princess, the younger sister with two brothers and a nephew who had more claim to their father's throne than you did." Isabel said and Ammaril scowled.

"And where are they now? Dead, transformed or fled." she said, "In any case Sylldarin no logner exists as a kingdom and yours will soon go the same way, turned into a province of my empire."

"Lerron will never be yours. My people will resist you and your pet monsters." Isabel replied.

"Not when you sign a treaty proclaiming me as your rightful ruler. You'll still have some limited power over Lerron but you will answer to me and my representatives." Ammaril said and she glanced at Hiros.

"Never. I am Queen Isabel of Lerron and it is my right to sit upon this throne and rule this country." Isabel responded sternly and Ammaril sighed.

"Oh dear, how unfortunate of you to take that attitude." she said before she turned to Orcan, "Leave her here in this room tied to her precious throne. Every day at dawn, midday and dusk give her a cup of water. Pour it down her throat if you have to but she will drink. Meanwhile continue with the invasion as planned. If she will not surrender her country then we shall take it by force and the blood of all of her subjects who die because of her will be on her hands. Of course if concern for her people or sheer hunger convince her to agree to my terms then she shall of course be released. Until then that throne shall be the extent of her kingdom. Replace her gag."

The Shattered Stone

"Yes my queen." Orcan replied, bowing his head again and he stuffed the gag back into Queen Isabel's mouth to silence her once more.

"Now tell me how far the invasion has progressed." Ammaril said.

"The capitals of Lerron and Lastallo fell quickly and Vendril's fleet crossed the straight with the bulk of the army my queen. They encountered some resistance from enemy warships but not much. Without orders from their leaders the resistance on land has been limited to fortresses and walled cities. We can lay siege to them all if we have to but we can only attack a few at a time." Orcan said.

"Just besiege them for now. I'm sure that Queen Isabel will see sense soon enough and order them to surrender. If not then we will just have to destroy them one by one." Ammaril ordered and she glanced at Queen Isabel again.

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Being directly answerable to Lord Arrin meant that Yilven was expected to attend the regular meetings that were held between the leaders of the Elves and Teuten's mayor in which the current state of the war was discussed. Although the fighting had continued across much of Lerron and Lastallo messengers had still been able to carry news north avoiding the bands of Orcs, Trolls and Hadarians that were laying siege to the regions that they could not sieze quickly. Fortunately this meant that their resources were being concentrated in these regions and as long as smaller settlements were not actively resisting the invasion they were being left alone for the time being.

"At the rate they are going Ammaril's forces will be in full control of both Lerron and Lastallo soon." Teuten's mayor said as he read from the most recent report issued by King Gerald's court. Here the mayor was able to update the Elves as well as the harbour master and the head of the city watch who would both have significant roles to play if Teuten itself was threatened. That seemed more unlikely now that Ammaril had begun her invasion at the southern end of the Straight of Lerron but the mayor did not want to be caught off guard by Ammaril's forces, "There is talk both here and in Dannaron about sending our armies and navies south to Freinland in the hope that our three combined forces would be enough to delay Ammaril's if she presses north rather than east towards Trayma."

"Four armies." Arrin said looking at the mayor who frowned in response.

"Four?" he said.

"You are forgetting my army mayor. If it is decided to move south to form a united front against Ammaril then my army will join yours. That makes four armies, not three." Arrin said and the mayor smiled.

"Of course." he said, "The obvious problem is that no-one wants to abandon our own cities just in case Ammaril sends warriors or dragons through the stone circles. So far no-one has come up with a means to destroy them so they have to be guarded."

"When will a decision be made?" Arrin asked.

"I don't know." the mayor answered.

"In that case we shall wait for now. Though I may move my force to Freinland regardless of any decision being made. My army does not need to guard any of the stone circles." Arrin said.

"Of course." the mayor said.

"Are you serious about taking the army to Freinland my lord?" Yilven asked as the small group of Elves exited the building and Arrin nodded.

"Yes. It takes far too long for a rider to get from Lerron to Hessenland and for another to bring word from their king. If Freinland is to be the next battleground then we should be there instead." he said.

"We can set sail before sundown." one of the other Elves suggested.

"I intend to head for Freinland but we have offered our help to Hessenland, I will not just abandon them without giving their king the opportunity to respond. I want a messenger sent to Hessenstadt to inform the royal court of our intentions. They may wish to join us in which case we should try to co-ordinate our actions, however should King Gerald prefer to focus on guarding his own territory then that is his right." Arrin responded.

"Will you send one of our own or hire a local?" another Elf said.

"A local. If we are forced to depart early then I don't want to strand one of our own here. There are enough messengers for hire in the city." Arrin replied, "In the meantime each of you should return to your ships and gather your crews. Purchase what provisions you can and be ready to leave in four days at the most."

Rather than return to Oscay Ammaril selected the royal bedchamber itself in the palace as her residence in Lerra and continued her studies using a selection of books that she had brought from her personal library rather than the Great Library of the Oscari. This was far smaller than the Great Library and the information contained within it was not as impressive but given that it contained not only books written by the Elves but also a number taken from a Vampire who had spent more than a thousand years gathering knowledge it contained some very useful information from a time period after that of the fall of the Oscari Empire, including some very interesting descriptions of human history and she was reading from one of these when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." she called out, looking towards door and when it opened Graysil entered the room with a smile, "You look happy. Is there good news from Lastallo?" she asked.

"Yes, the last of the northern cities has fallen. The entire kingdom is effectively under your control but there's

news from much closer to us now." Graysil answered.

"Really? And what might that be? Yesterday I was told that almost a quarter of the country is still not under my control thanks to Queen Isabel's damned cousin forcing us to destroy one settlement after another rather than just surrendering. The dragons and demons are powerful weapons but Orcan tells me that infantry is needed to secure captured territory and that still takes time before the next area can be taken."

"It's about Queen Isabel your majesty. She has asked to see you, well begged. I checked in with the guards and she's been screaming for you most of the morning." Graysil told her.

"Screaming, really? Well I never heard a thing from here. I'll say this for the Lerronians they built their palace well if sound like that won't carry from the throne room to here. Anyway, let us go and see what Isabel wants." Ammaril replied as she set her book down and stood up.

Ammaril and Graysil then made their way from the royal bedchamber to the throne room and as they neared it they heard the sound of Queen Isabel shouting, her voice sounding hoarse from over use.

"Where is Ammaril? Tell her I want to see her now! Please, I need to see her." she shouted while the two Orcs standing guard just outside the throne room remained motionless.

"I see what you mean." Ammaril said to Graysil before she opened the doors to the throne room wide and walked in, the Orc guards following them. Inside the throne room Queen Isabel was still tied to her throne as Ammaril had ordered and now her face was swollen under her eyes from weeping and her clothing was now stained where it had been soiled.

"Ammaril, at last." Isabel gasped, "I'll do it, I'll sign your treaty. Just let me go."

"My dear Isabel I am so glad to hear that you have come to your senses. In fact Graysil and I were just discussing how your people have had to suffer because of your cousin's insistence on continuing to fight." Ammaril said.

"I'll command him to stop, just untie me please. I need to eat and bathe. I'll do whatever you want." Isabel said.

"Excellent. I shall need a letter ordering your cousin to surrender as well but then I shall allow you to eat and clean yourself up before we move onto the full treaty." Ammaril told her and then she turned to Graysil, "Find some Orc women, four of them. They can see to Isabel's needs and make sure that she behaves herself. After that I will need to speak with all of my inner circle. We need to discuss the next stage of the war." she said.

When Ammaril entered the meeting chamber in the palace where she was to meet her inner circle she found Orcan, Vendril, Hiros and Graysil sitting around the table waiting for her.

"Tiellan is still leading the invasion of Orselland my queen." Orcan said before Ammaril could ask.

"What is the latest news from Orselland?" she asked instead.

"The advance is limited only by how quickly our allies can march." Hiros replied, "Every battle so far has been a total victory for us but the King of Orselland still refuses to surrender."

"Unfortunate but Orselland is just a distraction at this time. With Queen Isabel's signature on a treaty both Lerron and Lastallo are now mine. Now the time has come to expand our conquest further north until the whole of the Straight of Lerron is controlled by us." Ammaril said.

"You aren't going to just offer terms to the other kingdoms then?" Graysil asked.

"Yes, I thought that was the main reason for keeping the human Thomas around, to deliver your terms to the humans." Hiros added.

"That is correct." she said.

"So you will be offering them the chance to surrender?" Graysil said and Ammaril smiled.

"Eventually yes, I will offer the kingdoms on this side of the straight the opportunity to serve me willingly but first I suspect that they will require a further demonstration of my power. While we have been conquering Lerron and Lastallo the other human kingdoms will have been making preparations to resist us and they may still believe that their combined armies can defeat us. I intend to prove them wrong." she explained.

"You've already conquered two kingdoms in as many weeks. What more can you do to demonstrate your power?" Hiros commented.

"I can conquer another and conquer it in a way that no-one imagines possible." Ammaril answered.

"Until just a few weeks ago the world thought that giant fire-breathing dragons were just the stuff of legend." Hiros pointed out.

"Indeed, but they can still be killed just as the rest of my army is mortal and that gives my enemies hope that perhaps through luck or sheer numbers they will be able to grind my army down and defeat it. It is that hope that I need to destroy, to show that no amount of planning and preparation is enough. Only then will they see just how hopeless it is to oppose me." Ammaril responded.

"What do you demand of us my queen?" Orcan asked.

"As I said the army will go north and it will invade Freinland." Ammaril told him.

"Freinland?" Hiros commented.

"Yes. I intend to establish full control over both sides of the Straight of Lerron as quickly as possible.

Conquering Freinland will bring that objective closer regardless of how other nations react." Ammaril said.

"It will take some time to move the army that far north my queen." Orcan said.

"We can send some by ship. We have many ships available and no real opposition at sea." Vendril suggested.

"By all means use our navy to move our troops north but only so that they can rendezvous with the rest of our warriors on the border. We will invade by land rather than sea." Ammaril responded.

"It will be organised my queen." Orcan said, "There is also the matter of your personal guard."

"Have you selected the necessary troops?" Ammaril asked.

"I have my queen. They are waiting outside now my queen." Orcan answered.

Then I shall inspect them now. Find Shimmandra and tell her to meet us. She needs to bring the chest that I brought from Oscay." Ammaril said.

"As you wish my queen." Orcan replied.

When Orcan led Ammaril from the palace she saw a large group of Orcs organised into rows not far away in the main courtyard. Each of these was a warrior clad in a chainmail coat and carrying a shield, though the markings on these varied widely. Also now that Orc blacksmiths were making helmets shaped for an Orc's skull all of them were also equipped with one of these. As well as armour the Orcs were well armed as well. Each of them held a spear and had a bow slung across their back while either an axe or sword hung from the belt of each of them.

"These are your best warriors?" Ammaril asked with a smile, already knowing the answer. She suspected that most of them would have been soldiers before being transformed into Orcs and she had noticed shields that had obviously belonged to members of Sylldarin's Palace Guard among them though there was no way to tell whether the Orcs carrying these were the original owners or had acquired them after their transformation.

"They are my queen. One hundred and sixty in total. Some were with us in Oscay while others joined us later. All of them have proven themselves in battle though. All can ride and fight on foot or from horseback. They will do exactly as you command." Orcan replied. This last point had not needed making, the spell used to create the Orcs also made their loyalty to Ammaril unquestionable so there was never any doubt that they would follow her orders to the letter.

"This is excellent Orcan. I am pleased." Ammaril said.

"Thank you my queen. They will serve you well." Orcan said.

"Where is Shimmandra?" Ammaril asked.

"Coming. She went to fetch the chest." Orcan said and as if summoned by the question Shimmandra appeared carrying a chest in her hands and she walked up to Ammaril and Orcan.

"I have the stones my queen." she said and Ammaril smiled.

"Very good, put the chest down." she replied and Shimmandra did as she was told, setting down the chest at Ammaril's feet. Ammaril then crouched down to open the chest and inside it were numerous pendants similar to the one that Shimmandra still wore though far less ornate in design but that still mounted stones that contained the essence of Wraiths, "Help me with these." Ammaril added as she picked up several of the pendants and then passed some to Orcan and some to Shimmandra before picking up more for herself. Then she looked at the rows of Orc warriors, "You are the finest of my army," she called out to them, "each of you has shown yourself to be among the greatest warriors that the world has ever known and because of that you have been chosen to form my personal guard. Half of you will return with me to Oscay to protect me from any further attempts on my life while the rest will remain here to undertake the most important of tasks for Orcan. To help you in these roles each of you will now be given one of these." she continued and she held up the pendants that she held, "As well as being your badge these stones hold the power of one of the ancient Oscari, a Wraith and with them you will become an unstoppable force. The Wraith will fight beside you, crumbling our enemies to dust before your eyes while their power will enable you to travel using the stone circles without the presence of myself or any of the sorcerers in my service. No longer will you be bound to the movement of the rest of my army, instead you will be able to travel far and wide in my service and conquer in my name." she continued and among the Orcs she noticed grins that, thanks to their tusk-like teeth appeared as snarls.

Ammaril then walked towards the first row of Orcs and began to give each of them one of the pendants that she held. Meanwhile Orcan and Shimmandra did the same, distributing the pendants to the Orc warriors so that each of them had one. Although Ammaril had specified a need for one hundred Orcs in her personal

guard she had expected Orcan to provide more than this and as such she had prepared far more than one hundred pendants for them.

This had required a large proportion of the stones containing the essence of Wraiths that were available, with only a limited number of caches having been discovered but there were still enough to go around while leaving some stones spare for the additional warlocks that Ammaril hoped to recruit when it came the conquest of the remaining Elf kingdoms.

The Orc warriors remained in their rows as the pendants were handed out, bowing their heads for Ammaril and Shimmandra to be able to hang them around their necks and when this was complete both Orcan and Shimmandra approached Ammaril.

"The pendants are distributed my queen." Orcan said.

"And every warrior has one?" Ammaril asked.

"They do my queen." Orcan replied.

"Excellent." Ammaril said before she turned towards the rows of Orcs, "Now you have your pendants it is up to you to take care of them. Keep them with you at all times and do not lose them. The punishment for doing so will be severe. Now return to your duties and await further orders. Those of you who will be in the first group to go with me when I return to Oscay will be summoned later. For now though the army will march to Freinland and I will accompany it."

The border between Lastallo and Freinland was made up largely of steep hills and dense forests, with most of the paths between the two neighbouring kingdoms narrow and difficult for armies to march along but there was a single wide valley located on the border that made a natural crossing point and the only suitable route for an invasion. The river Havast flowed through this valley and it was from the name of this river that the valley had also taken its name, as had the village that was located towards the northern end of the valley. However, the village and the valley were not the only things to have been named after the river, as the only practical invasion route between Lastallo and Freinland a fortress had also been built to defend the crossing and that too had taken its name from the river it stood beside.

The fortress of Havast had stood unbroken for centuries. The current fortress was not the first such structure to have stood on the spot, the old Trayman Empire having placed a garrison here after defeating the tribe that had settled on the site before even that but that old wooden structure had long since been replaced. Much of its resilience came not from the thick stone walls that now made up every side of it but the geography of the site on which it had been built. The fortress itself was built on a tall mesa, the top of which was more than twenty feet above the level of the ground around it, adding to the height of its walls and making it even more difficult for siege towers or ladders to be built that were tall enough to scale this and reach the battlements. There had once been tracks leading up the side of this mesa but after the site was abandoned by the Traymans and the new fortress constructed these had been dug out, leaving the only way up to the fortress as the drawbridges that could be retracted to seal it entirely, leaving an attacking army without any weak points to focus their assault on. The Traymans had used the original fortress as a base for their legions as they pushed north from Lastallo into Freinland but when the Trayman Empire collapsed it had been the Frein who had taken over the fortress and since then it had been the cornerstone of their military strategy during the wars that they had fought against their southern neighbour, blocking any advance along the valley and instead forcing them to send invasion forces by sea along the Straight of Lerron while acting as a secure base from which to launch their own invasions into Lastallo. The river itself was wide and deep enough to allow ships of significant size to sail along it but the fortress had two means at its disposal to prevent this from being used as a means to bypass it. Firstly there were the weapons of the fortress that could be used to shoot at any passing vessel but also there was a thick chain that stretched across the river, set into a huge stone block on the opposite bank and leading to the fortress opposite where the length could be adjusted using a large reel. Letting out more chain from this would drop the chain into the water where it would lie along the bed and allow boats to pass over it while if it was pulled tight then it formed a barrier across the river it would block passage to all but the smallest of boats. Throughout all of the wars across the centuries one thing had been proven time and again, the fortress of Havast was invincible.

The Frein had not been idle though, they had heard about the strength of Ammaril's armies just like every other nation in Entris had and the nation's rulers had issued orders to prepare for an invasion. While it was considered most likely that such an invasion would come from the sea and most preparations were being made in the west of the country the fortress of Havast was also preparing itself just in case an invasion came through Lastallo.

It was Ammaril's legendary sized fire-breathing dragons that caused most concern for the Frein lord who commanded the sizeable garrison at the castle and he had had men working day and night to further improve the fortress's defences against flying opponents. Some of the measures taken were offensive in

nature, making sure that there were as many ballistas as possible on the battlements that could shoot high up into the air at dragons but thought had also been given to protecting the men stationed on the battlements whose function it would be to shoot crossbows down at an advancing army while also defending against any direct assault, no matter how unlikely that might be, against the fortress walls. The solution that had been decided upon was to construct simple roofs above the battlements that would not only shield the soldiers stationed there from view from above but also provide them with protection. The frames of these roofs were made of wood of course, but it was obvious that this would be vulnerable to fire and so thousands of slate tiles had been brought in so that they could form a fireproof protective layer over the frame. The only parts of the battlements not protected in this way were the places where the ballistas had been set up, the crews of these needing to be able to both see and shoot skywards.

Between the additional weapons and improved protection provided to the fortress its commander hoped that Ammaril's forces would do what so many other invaders had done and give up and look for an alternative invasion route rather than risk defeat against what humans considered to be the most impregnable fortress that the world had ever seen, rivalled only by some of the underground mountain kingdoms of the Dwarves. After setting up camp just south of the border between Lastallo and Freinland, Orcan despatched scouts ahead of the main army to survey the land around the fortress. Individuals on foot or horseback could sneak around the fortress where a larger force could not and get closer to observe it in better detail. When these scouts returned they confirmed what Orcan had suspected, the occupants of the fortress were well prepared for an attack. In addition to the physical modifications made to the fortress to try and resist an attack by dragons breathing fire from above the garrison had been reinforced, not by other troops from Freinland but from the heraldry they wore on their clothing and shields they appeared to have come from Lastallo and the obvious answer was that these were soldiers who had fled north when their kingdom was invaded rather than risking death by fighting where they were. That they now appeared willing to stand and fight within the walls of Havast indicated the faith that they were placing in the strength of the fortress. These escapees from Lastallo were not the only ones to have joined the Frein garrison within Havast though for there was a third contingent of troops that were identifiable from their differing heraldry as having come south from Dannaron, indicating that the rival kingdoms on this side of the Straight of Lerron were putting aside their usual petty squabbles to present a united front.

Little did they know that no matter how many soldiers they had or tall or thick the walls they hid behind were they would not be enough to protect them and with the reports from his scouts in, Orcan went to the tent where his sister waited.

"Ah Orcan, you have news?" Ammaril asked when he entered the tent to find her reading from a book as she often was.

"Yes my queen." he responded with his usual bow of his head.

"Then tell me." Ammaril said.

"The scouts I despatched to observe the fortress have returned." Orcan said and Ammaril smiled.

"And what did they have to say?" she asked.

"As we expected they are prepared to fight. They have placed weapons on their battlements that can shoot at dragons in flight. They have also built roofs above large parts of the battlements that will hide them from above." Orcan said.

"Roofs? What are these made of?" Ammaril said.

"My scouts described them as stone my queen." Orcan answered.

"They have heard detailed descriptions of my dragons then. They know that wood would just burn so they have built something that they hope will protect them. Now go on, continue with your news." Ammaril said.

"The warriors inside the fortress have been reinforced my queen. My scout saw warriors from both Lastallo and Dannaron among those on the battlements and patrolling the valley." Orcan said.

"Were your scouts seen?" Ammaril said.

"I do not know. If they were then they were allowed to return here without being attacked." Orcan said.

"So the occupants of the fortress might know that we are close by but deliberately chose to let your scouts go." Ammaril commented.

"They could my queen." Orcan replied.

"Oh well, it will do them no good in the long run. Neither will the reinforcements. In fact, I'm quite happy to hear that Dannaron has sent its army to assist its neighbour. If we can destroy them here then their king will be far more likely to simply give up when confronted by the threat of us invading his territory." Ammaril said, "What of the fortress itself though? Is it as formidable as I have always heard?"

"It is my queen. The walls are tall and strong, made even taller by the ground that it is built on and all of the gates and other ways in and out are also high up. No siege tower built could reach the top of the battlements. There does not appear to be any sewer at ground level either, all waste is thrown from higher up

the walls so that cannot be used to infiltrate the fortress either.” Orcan said. Though obviously an unpleasant route to take, the tactic of having a single scout or spy infiltrate a fortress using its own drainage system was an old one and the builders of Havast had obviously considered this when they constructed it.

“That was to be expected. Bring me Thomas.” Ammaril ordered.

“Yes my queen.” Orcan responded and he bowed his head again before turning around and leaving the tent. Ammaril went back to studying her book while she waited but it was not long before Orcan entered the tent again, this time with Thomas following close behind him.

“I have brought Thomas as you requested my queen.” Orcan said.

“Thomas.” Ammaril said, looking up from her book, “Tell me, do you speak much of the language of Freinland?”

“Frein? A little. I had to deal with a lot of people from different places for Magister Quinnus.” Thomas responded, “I can say a few simple phrases but mainly about exchanging packages. You don’t want me to take a message to that fortress do you? They’re likely to just toss me off the battlements.”

“No, there is no need to be concerned about that Thomas. I have a different task in mind for you.” Ammaril replied and she looked at Orcan, “Orcan you said that the fortress was sending out patrols.”

“Yes my queen. They search the valley.” Orcan said.

“Good. I want one of those patrols attacking Orcan. Bring me a single prisoner in reasonable health, it doesn’t matter whether any of the others escape to warn the fortress just as long as your Orcs are able to bring one of them here. Do you understand?” Ammaril told him.

“Yes my queen. A single prisoner. The others may escape.” Orcan said.

“Very good. Now see to it.” Ammaril said.

“Yes my queen.” Orcan replied before he turned to leave the tent once again.

“Did I understand that right? You just told him that all the others from the patrol can be allowed to go running back to the fortress to warn everyone there about us?” Thomas asked in amazement.

“It appears that your knowledge of the Elven language is good enough but do not concern yourself Thomas the defenders of the fortress of Havast may already know that we are here. Orcan sent out scouts and although none of them were attacked it is possible that they were seen and word of our presence taken back to the fortress. However, I do not anticipate the occupants coming out to attack us. They would rather that we go to them and destroy ourselves battering against their walls.” Ammaril said.

“City walls don’t seem to have done anyone any good so far.” Thomas pointed out.

“No, though they are still an impediment to my army and the walls of Havast are very strong. How much do you know of the fortress Thomas?” Ammaril responded and Thomas shrugged.

“I don’t know. I just know that it’s said that it has never fallen. The Lastallans tried to invade Freinland a few times but they were beaten back here every time. When Freinland took over part of Lastallo they were eventually driven back to here but this was as far as things went. This is as far north as Lastallo ever gets.” he said.

“Do you know what was here before that though Thomas?” Ammaril added.

“No, I don’t have any idea. The history of Freinland is not something I’ve studied. I’ve just heard the more popular stories.” Thomas replied.

“Well I do know the history of this area Thomas, I have read the account of a witness who not only saw the original Trayman fortress of Havast built, he also saw what was here before that as well.” Ammaril said and Thomas frowned.

“The Trayman empire fell centuries ago. Who could have lived so long that they could have seen them building fortresses?” he said.

“Your former employer for one. Magister Marcus Quinnus. Was he not a part of Trayman society during the days of their empire?” Ammaril said.

“Yes but he was a-” Thomas began before he suddenly hesitated, “You’re talking about a vampire.” he said.

“Precisely, a vampire, another example of the means that some of the ancient Oscari used to try and escape their impending deaths only to find themselves cursed to require the life force of others to continue their survival. One of their kind resided in these parts for a while, long enough to witness the Frein constructing the fortress that stands in the valley to this day. Before that the Traymans had also built a fortress on that spot, partially because of the ease with which the location could be defended but also to signal their control to the tribes who lived here and had used the mesa on which the fortress is now built as a place of worship to their primitive gods. You see even longer ago the Oscari came here also because it was a place where two ley lines crossed.” Ammaril said.

“Are you saying that there’s one of those stone circles inside the fortress?” Thomas asked, “Are you just going to send your Orcs right inside and bypass the walls entirely?”

"Even if that were possible it seems that the use of the circles for transportation is known to my enemies now and any such circle would be well guarded. However, to the primitive humans who lived here more than a thousand years ago the circle was sacred and as a part of their conquest the Traymans pulled down and scattered the stones, destroying the functionality of the circle in the process." Ammaril explained.

"If they destroyed the circle then what good is it to you now though?" Thomas said.

"The Trayman scattered the stones enough to destroy the circle but they did not carry them far." Ammaril said.

"I'm not surprised. That one you have your Trolls carrying around for you seems heavy." Thomas commented.

"Exactly, so the stones from the circle were scattered only throughout the valley and not beyond. So when the Frein began to build their fortress they used whatever convenient stone came to hand." Ammaril told him.

"Are you saying that the stones from the old stone circle are now part of the fortress walls?" Thomas said.

"Yes Thomas, that is exactly what I am saying. In fact they have contributed towards the reputation of the fortress in their own way. Sorcerers from Lastallo have tried attacking the walls using magic only to find that their spells had less effect than they ought to have had. That is because the energy of the spells was being drained into the stones from the circle." Ammaril said and Thomas smiled.

"Like the one you used to drain the magic from the spell surrounding the Oscari library." He said.

"Precisely. Of course the amount of power used by the Lastallan sorcerers was insignificant compared to that but the theory is the same. The circle may be gone but the individual stones still exist and if the occupants of the fortress do not surrender then that is how I shall destroy it. Not lay siege to it or take it by force, I shall annihilate it utterly." Ammaril continued.

The patrol consisted of nine men-at-arms. Six of these men carried spears and shields while the remaining three cradled loaded crossbows as they walked along the path that led up one of the hills at the side of valley. This was a path that one of the Orc scouting parties had already observed a patrol taking while they had been observing the fortress and now a larger and well-armed party of Orcs was lying in wait for them just within an area of undergrowth that the path ran past.

The leader of the band of Orcs signalled to a group of archers waiting nearby and these warriors suddenly leapt to their feet and drew back the strings of their bows. Seeing this the human crossbowmen began to raise their weapons but the Orc archers released their arrows before any of them could take aim in return and a single volley of arrows struck all three crossbowmen, the tips piercing their chainmail through the many holes in the links that made up the long coats.

"Wall!" the leader of the Frein patrol ordered and his men quickly shifted from marching in a column to standing side-by-side so that their shields came together and formed a basic wall between them and the Orcs while their spears pointed out over this. While such a formation offered excellent protection from the front though it limited the ability of the soldiers forming the wall to manoeuvre.

The Orcs had expected such a response to their attack and the Orc archers quickly discarded their bows and instead picked up shields and drew swords as they advanced on the men standing behind their own long shields. The men watched these Orcs as they approached, levelling their spears in readiness to stab at them as soon as they came close enough. Armed only with swords the Orcs appeared to be at a distinct disadvantage in terms of the reach that they had with their weapons.

However, as the Orcs began to advance two further groups of them emerged from the undergrowth, one to either side of the first and it was obvious that now that they obviously outnumbered the humans they intended to encircle them.

"Back." the patrol's leader told his men and they cautiously began to back up, trying to keep as much distance between themselves and the Orcs as they could but the Orcs in the two flanking groups promptly broke into a run and charged at the humans. This forced the patrol to divide their attention between the groups approaching from either side and distracted them from the initial group that had been directly ahead of them. These Orcs then also broke into a run and the patrol found themselves at the centre of a group of charging Orcs much more numerous than themselves and it was now that the patrol's leader lost his nerve, "Run!" he yelled and he turned to flee.

The other humans also turned to try and escape but by this time the Orcs were almost upon them and they struck from behind. However, rather than using their swords to cut down the humans they just slammed into them with their own bodies, knocking them to the ground in the process and then diving on them to pin them down while wrestling their weapons from them. The slight head start that the patrol's leader had got by starting to flee just a moment ahead of the others was enough that he was not immediately caught by the Orcs and having already brought down the rest of the patrol they ignored him, allowing him to escape while they dealt with his men instead.

The Shattered Stone

The leader of the Orc patrol looked down at the five human soldiers who were now being held on their knees while their hands were bound behind their backs.

"Our orders were that we only need one," he said to the other Orcs.

"What do we do with the rest?" one of them responded and the leader considered this for a few moments.

"Kill them," he said. Unable to understand the Elf language that the Orc was speaking, none of the humans reacted to this.

"Which do we keep?" the other Orc asked and the leader looked along the line of scared looking humans, none of them certain about what was about to happen. As far as he could tell there was no difference between any of them so instead of basing his choice on any particular characteristic he simply selected one at random.

"That one," he said, pointing to one of the men.

"No! Please! Don't harm me!" the man pleaded, not knowing why he had just been chosen but none of the Orcs understood his words any more than he had understood theirs. The man also struggled against the grip of the two Orcs holding him down but he was unable to break free before another Orc simply used his sword to slit the throat of the man beside him. This was then copied by other Orcs, slitting the throats of the three other prisoners not selected to be taken back to the Orc camp while the chosen man could only watch in horror.

"Bring him," the Orc leader commanded as he turned away and the surviving prisoner was promptly lifted to his feet and dragged along by his Orc captors.

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Ammaril looked up from her book as Orcan entered her tent once again.

"My queen, the force I sent to acquire a prisoner has returned." he said.

"And were they successful?" Ammaril asked.

"They were my queen. They have brought back one of the human warriors." Orcan told her and she smiled.

"Very good. Bring him before me and fetch Thomas. I will have need of him." she ordered.

"Yes my queen." Orcan responded before he exited the tent and Ammaril turned to where a sheet of paper lay on a nearby table, picking it up and glancing at the writing on it. She knew exactly what the letter said of course, having written it just a short time ago but she reread it anyway before the tent flap opened again and Orcan returned. This time he was not alone though, instead he was accompanied not only by Thomas but also by two other Orcs who dragged the human prisoner between them. Although the man still wore his chainmail coat his helmet and all of his weapons had been removed from him before he was brought before Ammaril.

"Untie him." Ammaril ordered and the Orcs released the human's bonds while Ammaril glanced at Thomas, "Thomas tell him that he will not be harmed as long as he does not attempt to escape or attack anyone." she said and Thomas nodded.

"They won't hurt you." Thomas said to the prisoner, considering his words carefully.

"They killed everyone else. Murdered them in cold blood. Only our commander got away, he turned and ran." the man responded quickly and Thomas struggled to understand what he was saying.

"Just don't try anything. Do what I say. Do you understand?" he told the other man and he nodded in return.

Thomas then looked at Ammaril, "Okay I think we understand one another. What next?"

"He needs to take this letter to his lord at the fortress of Havast." Ammaril said and she held out the sheet of paper that she had picked up. Thomas took the letter and looked at it instinctively.

"What does it say?" he asked, unable to read it.

"It commands the garrison of the fortress to surrender. It promises them life if they do or death if they do not." Ammaril answered and Thomas smiled.

"Should be an easy choice." he commented before he turned back to the prisoner and held up the sheet of paper, not realising that he had it upside down, "Take this." he said, pointing to the paper, "Give it to your lord."

"You're letting me go?" the man asked and Thomas smiled at him.

"Yes." he said simply, unable to immediately think of a more sarcastic reply that he was able to translate into Frein and he handed the paper to the man.

"What does it say?" the man asked as he took the paper, also looking at the writing on it despite being unable to read even his own language, let alone the Elvish that the letter was written in.

"It offers you all the chance to live." Thomas told him.

"If we surrender to them?" the man asked.

"Yes, if you surrender." Thomas answered.

"Count Havast will never agree." the man said and Thomas turned to Ammaril.

"He says that his lord won't surrender." he said.

"How unfortunate. Though I am willing to be merciful. If his lord insists on throwing away his own life then so be it, but any person who leaves the fortress before I destroy it will be allowed to surrender as well." Ammaril said and Thomas turned back towards the man again.

"Just take the letter. If your lord doesn't give up then you can still leave and give up. Anyone else can as well." he said, hoping that he was getting the message across correctly and the man nodded.

"Okay, I'll do it." he replied.

"Good idea." Thomas responded, smiling at him.

The prisoner was escorted to the edge of the Orc camp by Thomas and a pair of Orcs. No effort was made along the way to conceal anything about what the camp contained so he saw not only the Orcs and Trolls it contained but also the numerous human troops who had been brought across the Straight of Lerron from Hadaria and Costria. However, what drew the strongest reaction from him was when all of a sudden a pair of massive dragons flew overhead and he looked up at them in a mixture of amazement and terror.

"Big aren't they?" Thomas said, "I've seen them hit by hundreds of crossbow bolts and not even notice. Just wait until you see them breathe fire as well. Whoosh!" he added and he suddenly spread out his arms ahead

of him as if a jet of fire was erupting from him. This sudden gesture made the other man flinch but he remained silent as they continued towards the edge of the camp, "Well here we are. You're free to go now." The man took a few nervous steps before he glanced back over his shoulder to see what Thomas and the Orcs were doing but they were still right where they had been so he continued to walk away from them, heading in the direction of the fortress. He continued to walk for a short time before all of a sudden he broke into a run and rushed away from the Orc camp as quickly as he could until he disappeared from sight.

The fortress of Havast was too far away for the soldier to be able to run all the way there even without being weighed down by his chainmail armour and by the time he reached it he was staggering and out of breath. Despite wearing a tabard over his chainmail that identified him as Frein a small unit of cavalry still rode out from the fortress when he was seen just in case he was merely wearing the clothing of one of the garrison in an attempt to infiltrate it. The four horsemen rode down a drawbridge and galloped towards the approaching man.

"Halt!" one called out and the horsemen came to a stop in a line beside one another several yards ahead of the approaching man and they levelled the spears that they carried, "Who are you?" he then called out to him.

"Jehan Havan." the man gasped and he held up the letter he had been given, "My patrol was attacked and I was taken to the Orc camp. An Elf woman then gave me this letter."

"Give it to me." the man on horseback who had already addressed him said and Jehan walked up to him, holding out the letter for him to take, "This is in Elvish." he said, frowning when he saw the distinctive lettering but unable to read it.

"I thought so. I didn't recognise any of the writing but they said it was for Count Havast. It asks him to surrender the fortress or it will be destroyed." Jehan replied and one of the men on horseback snorted.

"Havast is indestructible. It cannot be taken or destroyed." he said.

"That is what I was told." Jehan said.

"Come with us. If this letter is meant for Count Havast then you can give it to him and he can decide what to do with you." the leader of the horsemen said and he handed the letter back to Jehan before turning his horse around to ride back to the fortress.

Jehan accompanied the horsemen who rode slowly to match his pace and they went up the ramp formed by a drawbridge into the fortress where the horsemen dismounted.

"Come with me." the leader told Jehan and he beckoned for him to follow as he made his way from the small courtyard immediately inside the fortress and through a doorway. He then proceeded to lead Jehan towards the centre of the fortress where its tallest tower was located. This was guarded by a pair of men who bore the personal heraldry of Count Havast but they permitted Jehan and the horseman to pass. As soon as they entered the tower Jehan saw that the style of the interior changed drastically. Rather than just plain stone walls most were covered in carved wooden panelling or tapestries that concealed the stone. Jehan was then taken to a room that was far enough up the tower that its windows looked out over the battlements and into the countryside beyond. These faced north towards the nearby village rather than south towards the border to make it more challenging for an invader to shoot through them. The room was decorated in the most luxurious style possible, with portraits covering most of the walls. All of these were of men with a similar general appearance that suggested they were related and behind a large wooden desk sat a man who also had such features.

Count Havast was a large man but this was in terms of his weight rather than his height and he was eating even as Jehan was shown into the room.

"What is this about?" the count asked.

"This man was taken prisoner by the enemy your excellency." the horseman who had shown Jehan here said.

"And he escaped? Very commendable." the count responded.

"No, they let me go." Jehan said and the count snarled.

"Speak only when addressed." the horseman whispered to him.

"Why did they let you go?" the count said looking directly at Jehan.

"Tell the count what you told me." the horseman added as Jehan hesitated.

"They wanted me to deliver this to you your excellency." Jehan said and he held out the letter Ammaril had written and placed it on the count's desk.

The count reached out to slide the letter towards him but scowled when he saw that it was written in Elvish.

"This is Elvish. Read it for me." he said and he slid the letter to the side of his desk where an advisor who had been waiting close by picked it up and began to read out loud.

The Shattered Stone

"To the lord of Havast Fortress, you may think the walls of your fortress strong and your warriors brave but know now that the power at my disposal is without limits and your fortress will fall by sunrise tomorrow if you do not surrender it to me. In exchange for this surrender I will permit you to continue with your stewardship of this land under my rule and according to the orders of my representatives. Refuse and you will die along with everyone else within your walls. Signed Queen Ammaril, heir to the Oscari. Ruler of all." the man read. "Ha!" Count Havast exclaimed, "Heir to the Oscari? She's nothing but a witch with a bit of power. Let her try attacking and we'll see how quickly her army crumbles." he said. Then he looked across his desk at Jehan, "Go and draw new weapons from the armoury. I want every able bodied man ready for when Ammaril's forces attack. At least she was kind enough to tell us ahead of time when she intends to do it." he added.

Back in Ammaril's tent Thomas grinned as he entered.

"I take it that my offer has been despatched." Ammaril said to him without looking up from the book she was reading.

"Well the prisoner is gone and he had the letter with him when he disappeared over the hill as fast as he could go. There's no guarantee that he wouldn't just toss it away as soon as he thought he was out of sight but I believe that he'll take the letter back to the fortress with him. Then it's up to this Count Havast to decide what to do." Thomas said.

"And what do you think he will do Thomas?" Ammaril asked.

"It's hard to say, he could go either way. Most of the more pompous and arrogant nobles I've been sent to deal with in the past are cowards so he could just give up. Alternatively he could be so confident in the walls around him that he'll just ignore your offer in the belief that he's perfectly safe." Thomas said, "I suppose he could also just panic and try to escape, leaving the fortress in someone else's hands. I tend to think that's unlikely though. Given the reaction of that prisoner to what I told him if I had to pick one then I'd say that he'll think his fortress will protect him and he'll just sit and wait. He won't have a clue about what you're planning. I don't understand it myself, how can the use of the stones from the circle destroy the fortress?"

"You know that this stone acts as a store for magical energy. A great deal of magical energy." Ammaril replied and she looked towards the standing stone that she had had brought into her tent so that it would be close to her at all times.

"Yes." Thomas said, "But how does storing magic help?"

"On its own it doesn't. That energy needs to be released. It also needs to be placed within the stones to begin with. Even the spell used to freeze the Great Library of the Oscari did not use enough magical power to fill even this single stone to capacity and I need to fill every one of the standing stones used in the construction of the fortress of Havast with as much power as they will contain. The key to that is the central stone, the one in each circle that taps into the power of the ley lines." Ammaril said.

"So your plan is to just transport the fortress somewhere else?" Thomas suggested and Ammaril smiled.

"No, that is not what will happen. The circle used for transportation has been destroyed, the outer ring of standing stones removed from their locations where they could focus the power flowing from the ley lines and return it to the centre evenly. Now though the standing stones are scattered to far and too randomly to do that. The magic will still flow but it will be random and violent, seeking out the former standing stones by the easiest possible route and when that power is returned to the central stone it will be even more violent. You have seen me cast spells of attack, picture that a thousandfold. More. Do you know what a volcano is Thomas?" she explained and Thomas shook his head.

"No, I've not heard that word. Is it something to do with magic?" he responded.

"No, there is nothing magical about a volcano Thomas. Volcanos are part of the ground where molten rock spews forth and can wipe entire cities from existence. I intend to create the magical equivalent of a volcano Thomas and I will wipe the fortress of Havast from existence." Ammaril said.

"Hold on a moment, if you're going to activate the central stone then don't you, or someone, need to be touching it? How will you get them close enough and if they're touching the stone when the fortress comes down around them then what happens to them?" Thomas said, suddenly aware that thanks to the collar around his neck he would be the most likely candidate to have to infiltrate the fortress and activate the stone. "There is no need to worry Thomas. I will not be sending you to your death, in fact I won't be sending anyone into the fortress. I will activate the stones myself and I will do it from far outside its walls. Rest assured that only our enemies will die tomorrow." Ammaril told him.

Throughout the night preparations were made within the fortress of Havast to repel the attack that was expected to come at first light. Soldiers practiced their combat skills in the courtyards while last minute shipments of supplies were brought in from the nearby settlement just in case the Orcs opted to lay siege to the fortress instead of attacking it directly.

As was to be expected there were some among the garrison who, despite the reputation of the fortress as impregnable attempted to flee before any attack could take place but the nature of the fortress made such attempts difficult at best and most of these deserters did not even make it beyond the walls before being caught. Only those tasked with bringing in supplies had any real chance of escape but not even all of them were successful and every man caught trying to flee was hanged and their bodies left dangling in one of the fortress's courtyards as a warning to others considering the same.

Care was taken to make sure that everyone in the garrison was able to get at least some rest during the night though before everyone was roused before dawn, early enough that when the first rays of sunlight came over the hills the battlements and shooting slots in the walls were fully manned and ready while crews stood ready on the numerous ballistas that were expected to shoot down Ammaril's dragons.

"Are we prepared?" Count Havast asked as he stepped onto the battlements on top of the fortress's central tower.

"Yes your excellency." one of the other men, an assortment of advisors and minor nobles who commanded the garrison and scribes there to record what happened, responded.

"Did we lose many in the night?" the count added.

"We hanged nine for desertion or mutiny your excellency." a man in chainmail answered, "There may have been a few others that escaped but there has been no mass disobedience from any of the garrison's contingents."

"Very good. Now I suppose we just have to wait to find out what the witch has in store for us. I for one hope that she sticks to her word and attacks at dawn, I don't want to be waiting all day for nothing." the count replied.

While Count Havast was surrounded by his fellow nobles and advisors Ammaril was also in the company of most of her inner circle, standing with Orcan, Vendril, Hiros and Graysil standing close behind her on the top of a hill overlooking the fortress. Even Thomas had woken early enough to join them, his normal desire to avoid getting involved in battles being overpowered by his curiosity to see the effects of what Ammaril had described to him the day before. Only Tiellan was absent from the group, Ammaril's cousin still being occupied with the invasion of Orselland. Now that Ammaril had her personal guard several small units of these Orcs were also close by, far enough away that they would not get in Ammaril's way but close enough to be able to respond to any threat that suddenly appeared. The chances of that were slim given the excellent all round view that they had but neither Ammaril or Orcan were taking any chances following the recent attempt on her life. Unusually for when she planned to cast a significant spell Ammaril had not had the standing stone brought with her and instead she just carried her staff.

"So how are you going to do this? Surely you can't make out the individual stones from here." Thomas said. "I do not need to. I only need to know that they are there." Ammaril replied as she looked towards the fortress.

"They might be able to see us here my queen." Orcan added as he looked at the fortress as well and was able to pick out individual soldiers around the ballistas where they were not shielded by the recently added slate roofs.

"Perhaps, though even if they could see us clearly enough to recognise us there would be nothing that they could do. We are too far away for anyone to shoot at or for a sorcerer to attack using magic." Ammaril said.

"Except you intend to destroy that entire fortress using magic." Hiros pointed out and Ammaril smiled.

"Yes I do. Though as Thomas has mentioned I will not be using any ordinary attack spell. Now watch." she said and she raised her free hand towards the fortress visible in the distance.

To Orcan, Thomas and Vendril nothing appeared to happen but both Hiros and Graysil saw what looking like a tendril of light emerge from the tips of her fingers and wind its way down into the valley towards the fortress.

"What's happening?" Thomas asked.

"Ammaril is projecting her power, attempting to connect with something receptive." Hiros answered.

"Ah, like the stone." Thomas said.

"Yes, like the stone. Now be quiet, you don't want to break her concentration." Hiros told him as he watched the tendril of magical energy continue to make its way towards the fortress.

Ammaril guided the tendril up over the walls without a single person within the fortress being able to see it, none of them being able to perceive the magical energy. As Ammaril extended the tendril she felt the tug caused by the stones that had once stood around the edge of the circle as these tried to draw the energy closer to themselves and she had to force it to carry on in the direction she wanted it to go. From the description in the ancient text written by the Vampire who had observed the construction of the fortress Ammaril knew that the central stone of the circle was located at the base of the fortress' central tower and

this is where she guided the tendril of magical energy towards, sending it through the narrow gaps under wooden doors and down stairs into one of the fortress' cellars where what had once been the central stone of an Oscari stone circle and then later the altar stone of an open air pagan temple was now set into the cellar floor face down to conceal the markings engraved in it.

Ammaril smiled when she felt the magical tendril make contact with the central stone and she fed more power into it, enough to bring the stone to life. Ordinarily the central stone in a circle was how a traveller would determine their destination, focusing their thoughts on where they wanted to be. Such communication with the stone was only possible by direct contact though and even if the circle had still been intact then Ammaril could not have used it to transport anyone this way. However, what she was able to do was input the relatively small amount of power required for the stone to connect to the natural magical pathway that was the ley lines and the moment that she did this the energy of the ley lines flooded out through the stone. As usually happened in a stone circle the energy being released from the stone was drawn towards the stones that had once made up the outer edge of the circle itself. However, whereas as a circle would draw the energy equally in all directions, now the random placement of the other stones pulled it out unevenly, with some stones receiving a greater share than the others.

"I can see light coming from the wall." Thomas said when he saw points of light start to appear high up the fortress wall.

"It's the standing stones taken from the circle, they're absorbing enough power to make them glow." Hiros said.

"So it's working then?" Thomas asked.

"I think so, yes." Hiros answered.

Ammaril's plan was indeed working and now even some of the garrison inside the fortress began to notice that something was wrong as here and there stone blocks began to glow and people felt as if the hairs on their body had started to stand on end. In a stone circle the process of charging the stones and then releasing that to power the transport of everyone within the circle happened very quickly but in this case the abnormal method by which the central stone had been activated and the unbalanced distribution of the energy prolonged the process significantly, continuing to build up energy in the stones until one of them reached a point where it could contain no more without releasing it, something that it did in an incredibly violent manner rather than just reflecting it back towards the centre of a circle as it was intended to do. The over charged stone that was set into one of the fortress' walls simply exploded and unleashed a massive magical blast that ripped through the wall before just a moment later a second stone exploded, followed almost immediately by more. These blasts happened in such close succession that it was difficult to distinguish one from another and from where Ammaril and the others stood on the hilltop it looked as if the entire fortress was simply consumed in a single giant flash of light and a loud 'boom' that made everyone including Ammaril recoil. Debris from the fortress was propelled in all directions, including up into the air and this rained down throughout the valley as the group standing on the hilltop watched. This was mainly stone but there were also large pieces of wood and rather gruesomely parts of bodies of varying sizes.

"It's gone. The entire thing is just gone." Hiros said in amazement.

"Yes, thanks to the knowledge that I was able to discover about its construction." Ammaril replied, "However, when the humans hear of the fortress' destruction they will have no way of knowing how it was done. All they will know is that the fortress was destroyed and they will assume that I am capable of doing the same to any other fortress in the world."

"Yes but who's left to tell anyone about the destruction?" Thomas asked as he watched debris continue to fall and wondered whether any of it could reach as far as the spot where they stood. Some of the debris was clearly landing within the nearby settlement and from the hilltop it appeared that any building struck by the falling stone was utterly destroyed along with its occupants, suggesting that although the inhabitants of the settlement may have witnessed the destruction of the fortress they would not survive long enough to tell anyone else about it.

"Be patient Thomas. Eventually someone will come to this valley and discover what has happened here. Then they will carry word back to others and they will lose all hope of defeating me." Ammaril responded.

Will and Horace inspected the supplies being brought aboard the *Storm Chaser*, checking to make sure that crates and barrels had been properly filled. The supplies had been bought by Elves sent into the city to obtain what they could and Will knew that they would not be familiar with which merchants were honest and which would seek to take advantage of a customer who was likely to be far at sea before finding out that they had received less than they had paid for.

"Well they're full of flour and it looks good to me." Horace said about the sacks that had just been unloaded from a cart.

"Okay get them aboard and into the forward hold." Will told the crewmen standing close by.

"And make sure that they're up high. I don't want rats eating all this before I get a chance to bake with it."

Horace added.

"Did someone say 'rats'? I could do with a snack." a familiar voice called out from close by and both Will and Horace turned to see Gromar and Dominic walking along the dock towards them.

"Gromar. Dominic. What brings you down to the docks?" Will asked them.

"We heard that all of the Elves in the city were heading back to their ships so we thought that meant that you'd be leaving with them." Dominic replied and Horace nodded.

"Yes, we're off to Freinland." he said.

"A messenger just returned from Hessenstadt saying that King Gerald will also be sending a force of two thousand men south to reinforce them as well." Will added.

"In that case we're here just in time." Gromar said, "We're here to sign up as well."

"I thought you were making magical weapons." Horace commented.

"We've done that. Two of them. I have a new hammer now." Gromar replied.

"There's also a sword that I think you ought to see Will." Dominic said.

"Okay come aboard. We can take a look at them in the main passenger cabin." Will said before he looked at Horace and added, "Can you handle this Horace?"

"Of course. I'll make sure that the cargo is all secured." the Halfling replied.

"Thanks. We'll be in the main cabin." Will told him before he started to make his way up the gang plank and Gromar and Dominic followed him.

Will led them to the main passenger cabin, though both had already spent more than enough time aboard to know where the cabin was. This cabin was the closest thing to luxury aboard the ship, with several beds set against the walls and chairs around a circular table in the centre of the room Gromar had a large sack bundle over his shoulder and once inside the cabin he placed this down on the table before undoing the cord that kept it closed. Unwrapping the bundle first revealed a war hammer that was similar to the one that Will had already seen Gromar wielding apart from the obvious silver coloured engraving set into the head of the weapon and running down the shaft. The pattern of this engraving looked like writing, though if it was then Will could not read what any of it said.

"This is a rather crude weapon." Dominic said as Gromar picked up the weapon.

"Crude? It will split a boulder in two." he responded, swinging the hammer up and down slowly as if to demonstrate its use.

"It uses magic to amplify the strength of any blow." Dominic explained, "There's no finesse about the weapon at all, just an enchantment to convert magical energy directly into physical force. The second weapon is rather different though."

"This one's a sword." Gromar said, setting his hammer down on the table and then unwrapping the rest of the bundle to reveal the sword that it contained. Just like the hammer the blade of this appeared to be covered in silver engraving along its entire length, the pattern appearing to be some sort of text rather than a simple decorative pattern.

"So this does more than just make a blow stronger then does it?" Will asked.

"It actually doesn't make the power of a strike any stronger at all Will." Dominic answered and Will frowned.

"So what does it do?" he said.

"For this sword I was concerned about the sort of enemies we might face. Gromar's hammer may be useful against some larger and physically resilient like a Troll but for this weapon I was thinking more about Wraith or demons." Dominic told him.

"So will Gromar's hammer not work against them?" Will said.

"You bet it will Will. It will smash through them just like anything else." Gromar responded with a grin.

"The sword does something different Will. It is built to disrupt the flow of magic around the blade." Dominic explained.

"And how does that affect demons and Wraith exactly?" Will asked.

"The blade functions in a similar way to Lucia's dagger but rather than storing the magical power that it comes into contact with, it disperses it back into the world's natural magical energy. If it works the way I think that it will then it will evaporate them." Dominic told him.

"I don't understand." Will said.

"Think of Wraith and demons being like water sacks." Dominic said, "This sword will act like a blade slicing through the sack and causing the water to pour out. In this case the sack would seal again once the sword was withdrawn but as long as you can keep the blade in contact with either of them they will continue to lose their power."

"Will a sorcerer be able to use that power later like you did with Lucia's knife?" Will said.

"No, if the sword worked like that then there would be a limit on how much energy it could absorb before it stopped absorbing any more and I didn't want that. By dispersing instead of absorbing the energy the sword can be used repeatedly without becoming useless." Dominic told him.

"Pick it up. Feel the weight." Gromar said and Will reached out for the sword, picking it up off the table and feeling how heavy it was, "Good?" Gromar asked.

"It feels about the same as the swords aboard the *Storm Chaser*." Will replied.

"So good then?" Gromar said and Will nodded.

"Yes, it's a good balance. Not too heavy but tough enough that you aren't worried about the blade bending or breaking in combat." he said.

"I'm glad you like it Will. Consider it yours." Dominic said and Will looked at him in surprise.

"Mine?" he said. The rarity of magical weapons in the world made them highly sought after and valuable.

"Of course. If we're going to fight Ammaril's army then you're going to need it.

"I'm just a ship's captain. I won't be marching into battle." Will pointed out.

"I think that we all know you're much more than just a captain Will. You won't be able to resist getting involved." Dominic said.

"If you could then you wouldn't have accepted Yilven's offer to sail with the Elves." Gromar added.

"Sooner or later you and Yilven are going to go into battle against Ammaril and you'll need that sword at your side." Dominic said.

"And you'll have me and my hammer there too." Gromar said.

As the *Storm Chaser* sailed from the harbour it was immediately surrounded by the Elven fleet as they all set sail south along the Straight of Lerron. Standing on the top of the ship's rear structure Will looked out at the other vessels with the rest of the group they had travelled with over the past few months.

"I used to think that sailing with Captain Vendril's fleet was impressive but that was only five ships." Lucia commented.

"I just hope that we all manage to get as far as Freinland." Will replied.

"If there are still Hadarian pirates in the straight then they'll think twice about messing with a fleet this size." Gromar commented.

"And as far as we know Ammaril's dragons don't fly very far out to sea." Dominic added.

"We're doing the right thing Will. Ammaril has to be stopped." Yilven said.

"Yes but so far no-one's come up with a way to actually stop her, have they?" Horace pointed out.

16

Thomas rode his horse at a gallop as he returned from the capital of Freinland. Just as Ammaril had predicted news of the total destruction of the fortress at Havast had reached the royal court and triggered outright panic. With no explanation being available of how Ammaril had destroyed the fortress that had stood undefeated for centuries the Frein could only assume that she was capable of doing exactly the same to any other fortress or city that she came across. The special circumstances that had enabled Ammaril to destroy Havast were unknown to them. The panic in the court had rapidly spread throughout the rest of the city and by the time that Thomas had arrived the troops protecting the city were all deployed on the streets to try and maintain order while large numbers of men were being summoned to train as soldiers as well.

When Thomas then arrived at the palace with an offer of surrender as an alternative to complete destruction there had been no hesitation in accepting it and now Thomas rode back to the valley of Havast where Ammaril's army was camped. A small group of Hadarians was deployed just north of the valley as sentries and Thomas slowed down as he approached them, not wanting to be killed by what amounted to his own side, even if his service to Ammaril was somewhat under duress.

"Who are you?" one of the Hadarians demanded.

"I'm Ammaril's messenger. I have the reply from the Frein royal court." Thomas told him.

"How do I know that you're really a messenger? You could be a spy." the Hadarian asked and Thomas sighed as he looked down at the man from his horse. He suspected that the Hadarians were bored and looking for any excuse to attack someone but Thomas wanted to make sure that that someone was not him. Reaching towards his neck Thomas lifted the collar that was fixed there.

"Would a spy be wearing this?" he asked and the Hadarians stepped back. They did not understand the true significance of the stone that was set into the collar but word about Ammaril's new force of personal guards and the pendants they wore as a badge as well as the Elf sorcerers with such stones in their staffs had spread so it was widely held that anyone who had such a stone must be part of Ammaril's inner circle.

"You may pass sir." the Hadarian said and the other Hadarians all cleared the road in front of Thomas, allowing him to proceed. Thomas said nothing in return to the soldiers and instead just rode onwards into the valley where Ammaril's army now waited.

Thomas rode through the camp ignoring the numerous humans that now made up more than half of Ammaril's army until he reached the area where Ammaril herself had her tent. This area was surrounded by Orcs from her new personal guard intended to prevent any assassins from trying to get close to her but unlike the Hadarians they instantly recognised Thomas and allowed him to pass unchallenged as he rode up to Ammaril's tent and dismounted. Two more of Ammaril's personal guard stood directly outside the tent but they also did nothing to prevent Thomas from entering it where he found Ammaril and Orcan speaking with Tiellan.

"Ah Thomas, good news. Orselland is now under my control as well. Tiellan has just arrived with Graysil with the news." Ammaril said.

"I have more good news for you Ammaril, the Frein have agreed to your terms just like you said they would. This kingdom is now part of your empire and what remains of its army will fight for you." Thomas told her.

"That is excellent news." Ammaril responded and she turned to Orcan, "Orcan I want you to take the army north again. Move it to the border between Freinland and Dannaron, that will be our next conquest. Hopefully we will take it even more easily than we took Freinland."

"I assume that you'll be sending me to offer terms again." Thomas commented.

"Yes, by this time news of both the destruction of the fortress here at Havast and the surrender by the Frein will be on its way to Dannaron, it may already be there. I want you to travel to Westshore and deliver an ultimatum to its king. Accept my rule or suffer the consequences." Ammaril answered, "There is a stone circle less than a day's ride from Westshore so you should travel using that."

"If that's what you want. Where is the nearest circle to here?" Thomas asked.

"South in Lastallo. I will travel with you." Ammaril told him.

"My queen you should not go to Westshore. Let the human carry your message alone." Orcan protested.

"Oh I don't intend on going to Westshore Orcan. I will take half of my personal guard as well as a handful of dragons and return to Oscay, I have been gone too long from the library. In the meantime you must be ready to take control of Dannaron. I have little doubt that their king will also agree to surrender rather than risk total destruction but if I am wrong then you will have to take the kingdom by force." Ammaril told him.

"Yes my queen." he replied.

"There is another stone circle within Freinland that is not far from its northern border with Dannaron. You may wish to send some of your troops there so that if an invasion is necessary then they may make use of it to reach the capital more quickly. Thomas, that is where you should head for when you have the reply from the king." Ammaril said.

"Yes my queen." Orcan repeated.

"Good, then that is settled. I will show you on a map where you can find the stone circle and then I must leave." Ammaril responded.

In addition to the usual sailors required to operate the *Storm Chaser* each shift on this voyage also included a portion of the Elf soldiers onboard standing on deck near to the ship's prow. This kept them out of the crew's way while having them immediately available should the ship come under attack and because of this a small brazier had been set up here and kept permanently alight, providing the Elves with a means to ignite their arrows if the need arose. But as the fleet sailed southwards Will's attention turned to the sky rather than who was on deck.

"I don't like the look of that cloud." he said while stood on the rear structure with Yilven.

"Do you think it's a storm developing?" Yilven asked and Will nodded.

"A big one." he answered.

"When we first set out from Sylldarin aboard Vendril's ships we encountered a storm. That was why we had to dock at Teuten, one of the ships suffered damage to its mast" Yilven said.

"With all these ships so close together that could be an issue." Will commented, "It might not take much for the weather to cause a collision and then we could lose two ships along with everyone aboard them both. Rescuing people from the ocean in bad weather isn't easy. You can't send out a dingy for them or it will just get swamped."

"Lord Arrin is signalling, look." Yilven said suddenly and he pointed towards the ship commanded by Lord Arrin himself. As the lead ship of the fleet this was positioned at the front and sure enough there was an Elf standing on the rear structure with a pair of burning torches that he was moving around.

"Do you know what he's saying?" Will said.

"No. I'm not a sailor. Do you?" Yilven replied.

"I'm not an Elf. The human navies along the straight use almost identical signals between ships but these are nothing like what I'm used to. It isn't even random words, just random movement." Will told him. Then he glanced down at the deck and noticed that the Elves towards the front of the ship had also noticed the signals coming from Lord Arrin's ship.

One of these Elves then came rushing back towards the rear structure and up the stairs.

"Lord Arrin sends orders." he said.

"We saw. What is he saying?" Yilven asked.

"We are heading towards a storm. Lord Arrin does not want to risk the ships at sea in it so he is ordering us to port." the Elf warrior told him.

"We're turning back to Teuten?" Yilven said but the other Elf shook his head.

"No my lord. Lord Arrin commands us to head for port to the south." he said.

"Head for port to the south." Yilven repeated, looking at Will and he winced, "Is something wrong?" Yilven said.

"Sort of." Will replied, "The next port to the south on this side of the straight would be in Dannaron. In fact it's Westshore, the capital of Dannaron."

"Ah, I see your dilemma." Yilven said, "Do you think that the authorities in Westshore will try to arrest you when we dock?"

"I doubt it. Only a few people there actually know who I am and that I'm a deserter from the navy. One less now that John Castle is dead, but I just don't like to tempt fate if I can help it. I probably won't have any cause to go ashore anyway. I've docked there several times under Captain Atwood but I just stayed aboard while he took care of things ashore, just in case I was recognised by someone." Will said.

"Good idea. I'm the one who needs to contact Lord Arrin anyway. I don't have to take you with me." Yilven said before he noticed the ships of the Elf fleet all start to turn eastwards towards shore, "The fleet is turning. Perhaps we should do the same." he added and Will nodded.

"Rudder to port and adjust the sail. Follow the rest of the fleet." he ordered and a few moments later the *Storm Chaser* turned in the same direction as the Elven ships around it, heading for the relative safety of Westshore.

Although the fleet had been sailing in deep water it had not strayed too far from the eastern shore of the Straight of Lerron and the coast had remained in sight at all times, making it easier to navigate towards the port city that was the capital of Dannaron and it was not long before the entrance to the harbour also came

into view. As with other nations along the straight Dannaron had deployed its navy to protect the city from Ammaril's raiders but these had been pulled back into the harbour. Now the only protection for the harbour was a chain hung across the entrance that prevented the Elf vessels from entering it. Instead the fleet dropped their anchors just outside and waited while a dingy rowed from the shore towards the closest Elf ship, the vessel that carried Lord Arrin.

"Do you think they'll let us in?" Yilven asked.

"Probably. I suspect that they just want to make sure that these ships really are full of Elves. By now everyone in Entris must know that the Orcs were created from Elves so they'll need to make sure that these ships aren't just ones taken from Sylldarin by the Orcs." Will answered.

"I hadn't thought of that." Yilven said just as Horace emerged on deck and climbed the stairs to join them.

"What's happening? I just came up to throw this rubbish overboard and I see we're about to land. Have we reached Freinland already?" he asked.

"No, there's a storm coming in from the south. Lord Arrin ordered the fleet into port." Yilven said and Horace looked towards the shore again, then frowned.

"Wait, is this-" he began.

"Westshore. We've come to Dannaron." Will interrupted and Horace sighed.

"So I guess you'll be staying aboard the ship." Horace said.

"That's the plan. Just in case." Will replied and then Yilven pointed towards Arrin's ship where the dingy could be seen rowing back towards shore.

"Looks like we're about to find out whether they'll let us into the harbour." he said and the trio watched as there was some discussion between men on the harbour wall and then one signalled to someone else, instructing him to open the harbour. Then moments later the heavy chain blocking access to the harbour suddenly dropped into the water, producing a large splash before it sank from view.

"Looks like we're going in." Will said before in a louder voice he called out, "Okay we're going into the harbour but this isn't a free for all. Just wait for the ships in front of us to move first before following them in." then after a brief hesitation he added, "Then find us somewhere to dock where we won't be too obvious to the locals."

The harbour was crowded even before the Elf fleet entered and there was not enough room for all of the ships to moor against the dock directly and about a quarter of them instead had to be moored alongside other ships. The *Storm Chaser* was one of the ships able to moor itself directly to the dock but one of the Elf cogs then pulled alongside it with some of its crewmen standing by with ropes to throw across.

"Secure those lines." Will ordered and several crewmen rushed to that side of the ship to catch the lines as they were thrown before tying them to the *Storm Chaser*, connecting the two vessels close enough together that the Elves were then able to lower over a gang plank that would allow them to get to the dock by crossing the *Storm Chaser's* dock.

"This is a tight squeeze." Horace commented as he looked around the harbour and saw other ships being secured to one another in the same way.

"At least we'll be safe in here. Safer than on the open sea anyway." Will said before he looked across the ship's deck again and shouted, "I want everything secured. Take in the sail and tie down anything that has to be left on the deck. We don't know how strong this storm is going to be."

It was then that an Elf walked along the dock and stopped at the bottom of the *Storm Chaser's* gang plank.

"I have news from Lord Arrin." he called out and Will nodded.

"Please come aboard." Will responded and as the Elf started to walk up the gang plank Yilven looked at Will.

"Perhaps I should fetch the captain of the ship beside us. The news is probably for everyone." he said and Will nodded.

"Okay, I'll tell this guy that you're on your way." he replied and then as Yilven dashed towards the Elf ship tied to the *Storm Chaser* Will and Horace made their way to the top of the gang plank to meet the Elf messenger, "Welcome aboard the *Storm Chaser*. I'm its captain William Beckett." Will told him, "Yilven has just gone to fetch the captain of the ship next to us. They should be here soon."

"Thank you. Every captain needs to be informed." the Elf replied.

"I don't like the sound of this." Horace commented.

A few moments later both Yilven and the captain of the Elf ship arrived and Yilven looked at the messenger.

"What is your news?" he asked.

"Lord Arrin sends his compliments." the messenger began, "He wants all captains and his advisors to meet aboard his vessel as soon as possible. We will not be proceeding to Freinland."

"So we're staying here in Dannaron?" Will asked.

The Shattered Stone

"Yes, that is correct." the messenger answered and Will looked down at Horace.

"I think I agree with you." he said.

"You do?" Horace replied.

"Agree with what?" Yilven said.

"I don't like the sound of this at all." Will told him.

When Thomas appeared in the stone circle closest to the capital of Dannaron he suddenly found himself surrounded by soldiers. Equipped with swords and shields they rushed from the forest surrounding the circle and extended the points of their weapons towards him. For a moment Thomas was tempted to ask the Wraith in his collar kill them all but then he reconsidered this. Given the number of soldiers around him there was too much chance that at least one of them would be able to run him through with their sword before the Wraith killed all of them so instead he opted for diplomacy.

"I'm not your enemy." he said, raising his hands.

"Then how were you able to appear in this circle?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Because Ammaril sent me. I'm just a messenger. Look." Thomas answered and he reached into his coat pocket to remove the letter that Ammaril had given him to present to the king of Dannaron. Then he held this out towards the soldier so that he could see the wax seal.

The name on the letter and the impression on the seal were both meaningless to the soldier, he could not read the name and he did not know anything about Elf seals. However, he knew enough to realise that whether or not he was being truthful about being an official messenger, presenting him to his superiors in Westshore would look good. If he was bringing a diplomatic message then the king had to be made aware of it while if he was lying then he was a spy and capturing him would make the soldier and the rest of his men look good. It was even possible that there would be a reward for capturing him.

"Very well." the soldier said as he lowered his sword, "We'll escort you to the king."

Work on her new palace had progressed significantly since Ammaril had left Oscay and now the first few layers of stone were already in place for the walls, making the intended layout of the building visible.

"You have done well in my absence." she said to one of the Orc artisans overseeing the construction.

"Thank you my queen. We wish only to serve." he responded with a bow of his head.

"Of course you do but that does not affect how impressed I am. As you can see I have brought more Orcs with me from Entris. Many of these are my new personal guard but there are also more artisans and others to support you in your work. You will be in charge of them. Brief them and assign them work as you see fit. I want at least the exterior of my palace finished before the winter arrives." Ammaril told him.

"It shall be done my queen." The Orc artisan replied.

"Good. Now continue with your work." Ammaril said before she turned away and walked to where the heavily armed Orcs that made up her new personal guard were lined up in rows, waiting for their orders.

Approaching the nearest of them in the front row she briefly looked around before turning back towards him, "So tell me what you think of protecting this place as it is now." she said to him and he also glanced around quickly at the ruins that surrounded the area where the library stood and Ammaril's palace was being constructed. The Troll labourers had cleared much of this but further away there were still the ruined remains of ancient structures all around.

"Difficult." he said simply.

"Why?" Ammaril asked.

"Too many places to hide while approaching.

Ammaril nodded, accepting what the Orc said as true.

"So how would you protect the library and my palace?" she said.

"Stop the enemy from getting to the ruins. Stop them from hiding within them." the Orc answered.

"So just protect the approaches?" Ammaril said.

"Yes my queen." the Orc agreed.

Given that anyone coming to Oscay for any purpose, including attempting to kill Ammaril would have to come a long way there were only so many ways that this could be done. The most obvious was to use the stone circle just outside the city. This would require at least one of her own subordinates with magical power to turn on her but the actions of Dorsos and Shimmandra had proven that that was possible and as Ammaril recruited more Elves to her service the chances of such a betrayal would increase. This meant that the stone circle would need to be guarded at all times.

The next most likely route of attack was via the harbour where the five ships of Ammaril's original expedition had made landfall. Those five ships had all been destroyed in a futile attempt to keep her and her new Orc and Troll army trapped here in Oscay but someone else could possibly make the journey by sea. Even now

there could be more ships attempting the crossing. There was no guarantee that any ships coming to Oscay would make for the harbour either, they could just as easily make landfall elsewhere and send parties across land to approach the city from almost any direction. However, even with her new personal guard Ammaril knew that there were not enough Orcs to completely surround the city.

"The stone circle will need to be permanently watched. Anyone arriving in it must be held there until I give permission for them to enter the city." Ammaril ordered.

"It shall be done my queen." the Orc said.

"Lookouts must also be placed at the harbour. Any ship that attempts to enter must be destroyed. Speak to the artisans about the construction of the necessary weapons to do this. Also establish patrols around the edge of the city. They may not be able to guard every possible approach but they will be able to watch for the signs left by someone trying to sneak into the city unobserved. Any intrusion must be reported immediately. Most important of all though I want a force of Orcs available at all times, ready to protect me. Wherever I go, they must follow." Ammaril continued.

"Yes my queen. We will defend you with our lives." the Orc said and Ammaril smiled.

"Hopefully it won't come to that." she said.

Alone in his tent, Hiros opened the wooden box in which the books from the Great Library were contained. Each book had been carefully packed, wrapped in cloth to protect it while they were away from the library. Ammaril had entrusted the books as well as the knowledge within them to Hiros and he did not want to risk any of them being damaged.

There was another book included with the ones from the Great Library, one filled with handwritten notes that was perhaps even more important than the others. This book contained all of the notes that Ammaril had made over the years concerning the language of the ancient Oscari that, while similar to the Elves that they had created, had a number of key differences that would make reading it impossible without some form of translation and that was what the notes were intended to provide.

Setting this translation guide down on a table Hiros then selected one of the books from the case and unwrapped it before sitting down beside the table so that he could refer to the guide as he began to read.

He looked up when the tent flap opened and Graysil entered.

"Graysil am I needed?" Hiros asked.

"No, I just wanted to let you know that the scouting parties have returned and it looks like Dannaron is still preparing defences so either that human Ammaril entrusts to deliver her messages hasn't made it to their king or-" Graysil began.

"Or their king has chosen to reject Ammaril's proposal and call her bluff about destroying his kingdom." Hiros interrupted.

"Exactly. It looks like we may have to fight them." Graysil said and Hiros sighed.

"Oh well, at least we are still superior to them. I have no doubt that Dannaron will fall just as easily as Lerron and Lastallo did." he said and Graysil looked down at the box filled with books.

"So those are your reward for saving Ammaril then are they?" he said.

"Yes, knowledge of life and death. Or at least some of it. Ammaril has plans to live forever and given my background she wants me to see what knowledge I can glean from these books. If I'm successful then she will provide more later on." Hiros replied.

"All thanks to the information I provided you with about Dorsos and Shimmandra." Graysil pointed out.

"Yes and we are both very grateful to you, myself and Ammaril." Hiros said.

"Though she isn't grateful enough to me to hand me a set of books from the Great Library." Graysil commented.

"Give it time. She will. Like I said, she gave me these books for a very specific purpose. I've been studying necromancy for decades. Longer than you've been alive." Hiros said and then he smiled.

"What's so amusing?" Graysil asked.

"Oh just the idea of measuring time by how long someone has lived when discussing necromancy." Hiros answered, "Anyway, as I was saying Ammaril has provided me with these books because of my own personal experience and for a very specific purpose. If you had such knowledge then I am sure that she would have given you something suited to it as well. In the meantime remember this, your loyalty has been noticed by Ammaril and I suspect that such things will be rewarded in time. Certainly a lack of it will be punished harshly Don't end up like Shimmandra. She still has her power but other than that she's no less of a puppet than any of the other Orcs and Trolls are."

"I suppose so." Graysil replied, "So have you discovered anything new?"

"Possibly. As you know the Oscari tried to preserve themselves in three different ways. The first was the direct transfer of their essence into a human or an Elf but our bodies couldn't contain the raw power and the

result was the creation of Vampires, cursed to remain out of daylight and feed on the life force of others while still possessing only part of the knowledge and power they originally had. We were the second attempt, but whereas they were able to transfer some of the power they once had the Oscari knowledge and essence was lost. That leaves only-" Hiros began.

"Wraiths." Graysil interrupted.

"Exactly. Wraiths. The disembodied essence of the Oscari but that too seems to have cost them a great deal of their power and knowledge while leaving them trapped within their stones." Hiros said, nodding his head, "According to Ammaril the Oscari did not die naturally before they came here but something about the world made it so that they could not survive here as they were. But it looks like while the Oscari could not preserve their own lives they may have been able to extend those of their creations and perhaps even other creatures natural to this world indefinitely. The secret lies in using magical power to maintain control over the body at the point of death."

"You mean like the way that you control zombies?" Graysil said.

"Similar, yes. In fact the creation of zombies may stem from an effort by early sorcerers to reproduce this, tested on people who lacked magical power themselves." Hiros said, "Of course if that is true then the efforts clearly failed. Nothing of who a person was remained after they become a zombie." Hiros explained.

"But you think that you've found an answer?" Graysil asked.

"Possibly. Though it does not fit with the limited description that Ammaril gave of the Oscari as beings who would not die. Casting a spell of resurrection at the moment of death still suggests that the subject is dying. I'm hoping that what I've found is merely an indication of what is possible rather than an absolute limit. I've studying death for so long that the idea of being able to defeat it entirely is the most enticing thing I can imagine." Hiros said.

"I must say that I rather like the idea of eternal life as well. Hopefully Ammaril will be in a sharing mood when it is discovered." Graysil added.

King Godwin, ruler of Dannaron had not received Ammaril's offer well. Instead when it had been read to him by one of his courtiers he had hurled a metal goblet at the man and flown into a rage. Fortunately for the courtier the goblet had missed and a member of the palace staff had rushed to clean up the mess. It was obvious to Thomas that if left to his own devices the king would insist on fighting on, despite the loss of several thousand of his troops when the fortress at Havast was destroyed and the seemingly imminent destruction of any kingdom that refused to bend its knee to Ammaril. From what Thomas could tell this was not out of bravery on behalf of the king, he seemed as cowardly as any of the nobles that he had encountered even before being despatched to one royal court after another by Ammaril. Instead his refusal to immediately accept the terms offered to him seemed to stem from another character trait that Thomas had observed in many members of royalty – arrogance. King Godwin simply could not accept the possibility that his kingdom could fall. Of course Thomas knew that the destruction of the fortress of Havast was not something that could be easily repeated and if Ammaril's bluff was called then this fact would soon become obvious. Having seen the forces at Ammaril's disposal, Thomas had little doubt that she could continue to conquer one kingdom after another until the entire continent, or even the entire world was under her control but that would take far more time than if kingdoms simply surrendered to her.

However, while the king obviously had the final say in whether or not his kingdom would join others in ceding power to Ammaril his court could still influence his decision and it was clear that there was a significant number of members of the court, though still a minority who were concerned that Ammaril could destroy any city or fortress she wanted in an instant. Apparently threatened with certain death this led them to want to agree to what Ammaril was offering and now there was fierce debate raging in the court as one faction attempted to convince the king to accept the terms presented to them while others, for one reason or another wanted the king to remain defiant.

Thomas had been given the use of a small room in the palace while the offer of surrender from Ammaril was discussed. This was not in one of the more luxurious areas that were normally given to visiting dignitaries but despite his role as an ambassador for Ammaril it was obvious to anyone who encountered him that he was not of the usual social class of an ambassador. Therefore, the room he had been provided with was one usually given to the staff of such a noble individual. The room was still comfortable though and the food that was brought to him even without having to ask for it was as good as any Thomas had eaten and he had just finished such a meal when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." he said, expecting one of the palace staff to enter but instead of the expected serving girl the door opened to reveal Prince Richard, the eldest son and heir to King Godwin and from what Thomas had seen one of the faction in court who was advocating that the king accept Ammaril's terms, "Your highness, I wouldn't expect someone of your station to knock." Thomas added.

"I wasn't entirely sure about whether or not you'd be alone." Richard replied.

"Who else would be in here with me?" Thomas asked and Richard smiled.

"The serving girls brought you food didn't they? And wine?" he said.

"Yes, you feed your guests well." Thomas answered and Richard smiled.

"And if you offer the palace serving girls a few silver coins they'll give you more than just food and wine." he said, "I suspect that they'd charge you more given that you aren't a prince but I'm sure that they'd still be amenable."

Thomas frowned for a moment, angry at the missed opportunity. In many of the taverns he had been in he would have taken his chances and offered money to serving girls in exchange for having them share his bed but he had not wanted to risk angering his hosts by making such an offer in the palace.

"Did you just come here to check up on my sleeping arrangements your highness?" Thomas asked.

"No, I came here to ask for your help." Richard told him and Thomas stared at him for a few moments, wondering what help he could possibly be to a prince.

"My father is being stubborn." Richard said, "That's nothing new of course but we are being faced with the total destruction of the kingdom. He thinks that we can still stand against your queen's armies even though what happened at Havast should be enough to convince anyone that we can't."

"No, of course not." Thomas said with a slight smile, hoping that his expression would not give away the fact that he knew what the prince had said to be false, "So what do you think that I can do to convince the king that he needs to change his mind?"

"Say? Nothing. I don't think that there is anything that will get my father to change his mind about this. As well as more than ten thousand of our own soldiers we currently have armies from three other kingdoms here to and word has just come from the harbour that a fleet of Elf vessels has just arrived carrying thousands of Elf warriors as well." Richard said and Thomas' eyes widened.

"Elves?" he said.

"Yes Elves. From Raysalgard. They sailed all the way south to here. Apparently they were on their way to Freinland to try and help defend them but had to land here instead because of the storm coming up from the south. Obviously the harbour master told them the news that Freinland had fallen and they instead sent word to my father that they were willing to stand with him and defend Dannaron instead." Richard explained.

Thomas considered the implications of having an army of Elves in Dannaron. While the presence of thousands more troops in the kingdom to help defend it had obviously boosted the confidence of King Godwin, Thomas suspected that Ammaril would not be too angry about their presence. She had, after all, transformed the Elves of her own homeland Syldarin into the Orcs that now made up a large portion of her army and everything she had said so far indicated that she intended to do the same to the people of the four other Elf lands in the world. To Thomas this meant that she might actually be happy to learn that there were several thousand of them in Dannaron that she could transform into yet more Orcs for her army.

"Don't worry too much about the Elves until I've had chance to speak to Ammaril about them. It's the king that we need to worry about." Thomas said.

"That's just it," Richard replied, "my father's mind is made up about refusing to surrender and there won't be any convincing him otherwise."

"Then what help can I offer?" Thomas said and Richard leant closer.

"If we can't change the king's mind then perhaps we need to change the king himself." he said and it suddenly became obvious what he expected Thomas to do. He wanted him to kill King Godwin so that he could ascend to the throne himself.

Actually killing the king was not an issue for Thomas. He would once have refused outright to even consider such a thing, not because of any moral objection to committing murder but because kings tended to be surrounded at all times by guards who could not be bribed but could be counted on to protect their king at any cost. However, now he would just have the Wraith that was bound to the stone in his collar carry out the actual killing. Not only would the ethereal creature be guaranteed to get the job done but it would also be able to protect him from the king's bodyguards while Thomas made his escape.

Of course there was no guarantee that once he ascended to the throne Prince Richard would not suddenly have a convenient change of heart and also refuse to accept the terms of surrender that Ammaril had offered. His opposition to his father's position may have been for show. Then another thought struck Thomas.

Prince Richard did not know about the Wraith in his collar. It was quite possible that he had his own plan for murdering his father and then taking his place on the throne, one that would not put Thomas at as much risk of being executed in the most gruesome manner possible if by some miracle the king's bodyguards were able to destroy a Wraith and arrest him. There were undoubtedly sorcerers in Dannaron just as there were in every other kingdom in Entris.

"What do you need me for?" Thomas asked and Richard reached into his pocket and produced a small clay bottle with a cork sealing it.

"One of the College of Mages gave me this in exchange for me naming him as the next supreme mage. Even the smallest amount taken in my father's wine will kill him in moments. The problem is that I can't get it into his wine. I'd be noticed sneaking into the kitchen and I can hardly just stop a serving girl in the corridor while I pour this into his drink. Nor can I bribe one of the servants. It would give them the opportunity to blackmail me later on." Richard said.

"On the other hand I can go into the parts of the palace where only servants go. Even if I'm caught and challenged by guards I can say that I just took a wrong turn and got lost." Thomas commented and Richard smiled again.

"Exactly. I can tell you which goblets my father uses and you can sneak into the kitchen and insert the poison into them." Richard said.

"You've got this all planned out, haven't you?" Thomas said and Richard snarled for a moment.

"You can exhale now Will, we've made it." Yilven said as he and Will approached the gang plank that led up to Lord Arrin's ship, the captain of the Elf ship moored beside the *Storm Chaser* not far behind them.

"What?" Will replied.

"I don't think you've taken a single breath since we stepped onto the dock." Yilven said.

"I hadn't noticed." Will said.

"Never mind that now. We're here and you haven't been recognised as William Beckett the great mutineer." Yilven said before they both started up the gang plank.

"Desertion, not mutiny. I deserted from the Dannaron navy, I mutinied against Captain Atwood on the *Storm Chaser*." Will pointed out.

"I apologise. If called to testify against you I shall be more careful in what I say. I'd hate to see you hanged for the wrong crime." Yilven said and Will curled his lip.

"Thanks." he said.

At the top of the gang plank an Elf sailor directed them both towards the fortress-like rear structure of the ship.

"Lord Arrin is expecting you in his cabin." he said in a manner suggesting that he had already said the words several times to different people and Will and Yilven made their way through the door that the sailor had pointed towards. This led directly into Lord Arrin's cabin, a large room that was dominated by a table around which he and more than a dozen other Elves stood.

"I have brought Captain Beckett my lord." Yilven said as he and Will entered the room.

"Good. We'll begin once everyone is here." Lord Arrin responded.

As they waited Will and Yilven both looked down at the table that they were stood around and saw that a large map of Dannaron was now laid out on it. Interestingly the writing on this was not in the Elf language, instead it was in the local tongue suggesting that it had been acquired quickly after the fleet had docked. Looking at this Will saw the names of places that he remembered from the time that he had lived here and believed that he would never see again.

The other Elf captains arrived piecemeal depending on how quickly the order to attend the meeting had been able to be delivered to their ships and how far away they were docked but once the last of them had arrived Lord Arrin began to speak.

"It appears that being forced into port because of a storm to the south is a piece of good fortune." he announced, "When I spoke with the representatives of Dannaron who boarded my vessel they informed me that news has reached them that Freinland has already surrendered to Ammaril's will. The reports are that the fortress at Havast was utterly destroyed in some way that is unknown and rather than risk their entire kingdom being destroyed in the same way their king surrendered. This means that Ammaril's army will now be marching north towards Dannaron. It seems that Ammaril has already sent an emissary to King Godwin to demand that he also surrender but the king has rejected these demands and intends to fight. Therefore, I have sent word to the palace that we will stand with his army while we wait for more of Dannaron's neighbours to send further reinforcements."

"Hessenland?" Yilven said and Arrin nodded.

"Yes, we expect a significant force from Hessenland to arrive soon but also Dannaron's eastern neighbours. So far Ammaril appears set on establishing complete control of the Straight of Lerron but once she has it she will undoubtedly move eastwards." he replied and then he pointed to the map where the border between Dannaron and Freinland was clearly marked, "There are four major crossing points between Dannaron and Freinland and I intend to march towards the closest. This is the most likely place for Ammaril's army to

attempt to cross into Dannaron due to its proximity to the capital. If she should cross at one of the other points in an attempt to evade us then we will still be able to move north to block their advance."

"Excuse me." Will said, raising his hand to attract the attention of Lord Arrin and all of a sudden every Elf in the room turned to stare at him.

"Yes Captain Beckett? You have an alternative plan?" Lord Arrin asked.

"No, I'm sure that your plan is the best that is available. I wanted to ask about what you said earlier, about King Godwin rejecting Ammaril's demands for surrender." Will said.

"Yes, despite the threats made he has refused to give in." Lord Arrin replied.

"Well I was wondering exactly how this offer of Ammaril's had been made." Will said.

"I was told that an emissary had been sent to the palace." Lord Arrin told him.

"Lord Arrin for an emissary to reach here so quickly would require them to travel using the stone circles." Yilven pointed out.

"Which means Thomas." Will added.

"Thomas?" Lord Arrin commented, "Who is Thomas?"

"A criminal formerly in the employ of the Vampire Marcus Quinnus and now apparently serving Ammaril my lord." Yilven told him.

"He's a thief and a murderer. He may not wield the knife himself but he'll pay others to do it for him if it gets results." Will said, "If he's here then it might be as more than just a messenger."

"Captain Beckett is correct my lord. If Thomas is in the city then he may be planning more than just delivering a message, he may have some plan to undermine the defences of the kingdom." Yilven added and Lord Arrin frowned.

"What sort of plan?" he asked and Will and Yilven looked at one another.

"I don't know but I think we should try and find out." Will said.

"Will is right my lord. We should do everything we can to determine what Thomas is doing here." Yilven added.

"Let us take some of my crew. We'll find him and see what he's up to. He'll probably be at the palace or if not then someone there will know how to find him." Will said.

Lord Arrin considered this for a short while.

"Very well, Yilven you and Captain Beckett's party will go to the palace. Officially you will be there to act as an intermediary between us and King Godwin but while there you should attempt to discover the intentions of Ammaril's messenger. I will provide you with a letter of introduction to present to the palace." he said eventually and Will smiled.

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Returning to the *Storm Chaser* Will and Yilven gathered Gromar, Horace, Lucia and Dominic together to explain their plan.

"Thomas is here." Will told them, "We think that he's at the palace. If not then he won't be far away."

"What's that little creep doing here?" Horace asked.

"Up to no good no doubt." Gromar added.

"But why would he be allowed in the palace?" Lucia said.

"Ammaril has sent an offer of surrender to King Godwin." Yilven said, "Freinland has already surrendered and she obviously wants Dannaron to do the same."

"Freinland has surrendered?" Dominic commented, "But I always heard that the border between Freinland and Lastallo was impenetrable. How could the country have fallen so quickly?"

"Apparently the fortress at Havast was destroyed and Freinland surrendered to prevent Ammaril doing the same to the rest of the country." Will said.

"If Ammaril has the power to destroy Havast then we're in big trouble." Dominic said.

"I know." Will replied.

"Why? What's so special about this fortress?" Lucia asked.

"Ammaril has taken other fortresses before." Horace pointed out.

"Taken, yes but Havast has never fallen and Lord Arrin said that it was utterly destroyed rather than taken." Will said.

"No-one knows how it was done and that makes people afraid." Yilven said.

"King Godwin has turned down an offer of surrender but Thomas might be up to something more than just delivering messages. We need to find out what he's up to and stop him." Will said.

"Will if Thomas is carrying a message from Ammaril then he could be considered a diplomat here under truce." Dominic said.

"You mean we can't do anything about the worthless little coward?" Gromar said angrily.

"We can still find out what he's doing here and if he's doing anything more than a diplomat could be expected then he can't claim the protection of one." Will said, "Now let's go. Whatever Thomas is up to we can't give him the chance to finish it."

Will still knew enough about the layout of Westshore to be able to lead the others to the royal palace. The sun had already set and the darkness combined with the rain from the storm that had now reached this far north served to keep most people off the city streets and they soon reached the palace. Arriving on horseback the group rode up to a large archway that provided access to the main courtyard but found the gates closed and locked. However, when they arrived a guard peered out through a small window set into the wooden gates.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he asked and Yilven produced the wax-sealed letter that Lord Arrin had given him.

"Lord Arrin of Raysalgard has requested that I come to the palace to act as his representative to the court of King Godwin." he said as he passed the letter through the window and the guard took it from him even though he was unable to read it himself.

"What about the rest of them? Does the letter cover them as well?" the guard said, looking at the other members of the group.

"This man is Dominic Von Garran, a sorcerer from Hessenland. Since that nation is also sending soldiers to help defend Dannaron he will be able to represent them informally until they arrive." Yilven said, looking at Dominic, "The other man and the Dwarf are my messengers. They will carry communication between myself and Lord Arrin while the Halfling and the woman will make sure that our meals are prepared and our chambers kept clean without needing to bother your own staff."

"Wait here." the guard said before he closed the window in the gate.

"So we're supposed to just wait out here in this rain?" Horace said as he looked up into the sky.

"Not a very good way to treat an ambassador is it?" Gromar added.

"At least he didn't just tell us to come back tomorrow." Will said.

The group did not have to wait very long for a response to the letter and they heard the sound of a heavy bolt being pulled back before the gate swung open.

"Please do come in out of the rain." a courtier who had joined the guard said and Yilven rode first through the archway, followed by the rest of the group, "Lord Yilven welcome to the palace of King Godwin." the courtier

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said and he held up the letter, its seal now broken, "Your credentials appear in order so I will show you to some quarters for the night. The king is currently resting but I can arrange for you to meet with him shortly after breakfast."

"That is acceptable. I have no urgent news for the king so tomorrow will be fine." Yilven replied as several stable hands approached to take the group's horses.

"If you would like to come with me then I shall show you to the chambers that shall be set aside for you and your staff Lord Yilven. I regret to say though that there has been no opportunity to prepare suitable quarters for you yet and I must ask you to instead take one of the more basic servants' rooms with your staff. Just for tonight of course. Tomorrow a more suitable room will be made available to you." the courtier said as he led the group into the palace itself.

"That will be acceptable. I'm not actually a lord or a real ambassador, I am merely the representative of Lord Arrin." Yilven said then he suddenly added, "Tell me, is it true that Ammaril has also sent an ambassador to meet with your king?"

"She has sent a messenger, hardly an ambassador, though he is being treated in accordance with the conventions on the protection of diplomats." the courtier said, "In here please." he then added, opening a door that led down a narrow hallway.

As darkness fell Thomas opened the door of his room and looked along the hallway outside. Just because he had been told that he could wander around most of the palace as he wished he did not want to be seen by any more people than necessary given what he was about to do.

Prince Richard had given him a precise description of the goblets that the king and queen used themselves so that he could add the poison to them. Thomas had no concerns about poisoning the queen as well as the king and it appeared that Prince Richard cared no more for her than he did for his father either. Thomas' only worry with the plan would be that the king would not drink until long enough after the queen had and the effects of the poison on her would become obvious, thus preventing the king from drinking while he summoned help. From what the prince had told Thomas there was no antidote to the poison so whoever drank it would be sure to die but whoever drank second might be put off from doing so if they saw that something was wrong and then the plan would fail.

With the hallway empty Thomas was able to walk calmly down the stairs to the next hallway and from there he headed in the direction of the palace kitchens.

When he reached the stairs leading to the kitchens themselves he heard the sound of voices coming from within. This was not a surprise though, he knew that the palace kitchens would be kept operated until a very late hour so that food could be sent to whoever requested it and even when the preparation of new food ceased there would be the work of cleaning the kitchen to undertake. Waiting until the kitchen was empty would mean leaving the poisoned goblets there all night and there was no guarantee that someone else might not decide to drink from them, despite them supposedly being for the exclusive use of the royal couple. Thomas went down the stairs and opened the kitchen door calmly, no longer making an effort to conceal his presence. Instead he was now focused on making his presence in the kitchen appear perfectly normal and innocent.

"May I help you sire?" one of the kitchen staff, a young woman who had previously delivered food to Thomas' room asked and for a few moments Thomas' thoughts turned to what Prince Richard had told him about what else the palace staff would be willing to do before he responded.

"I was just feeling slightly hungry." He replied.

"You could have just rung the bell sire. I'd have come to you." the serving girl said.

"I'm not really sure what it is that I want so I thought I'd come down here and see what was available." Thomas told her.

"Feel free to take a look around my lord." an older woman added while she kneaded dough that was most likely intended for bread to be served the next day, "Sally there will get you anything that you like the look of."

"I shall." Thomas said and he looked around the kitchen as if he was studying the various hanging meats or shelves of vegetables that were on open display rather than attempting to search out the goblets used by the king and queen.

The hallway that the courtier took Will and the others into led to a flight of stairs that led up to another hallway where there were several rooms along one side.

"The six rooms at this end will be yours. Your belongings will be brought up from the stables shortly." the courtier said.

"What about Ammaril's messenger? Is one of these rooms his?" Will asked.

"Yes, the one at the far end. I would ask that you do not disturb him." the courtier answered.

"Do not worry. My staff and I would not think of embarrassing you or the king." Yilven said and the courtier bowed his head for a moment.

"Thank you my lord. I will leave you to get settled in. As I said, your bags will be brought up from the stables for you. You are free to wander though the throne room and royal apartments are out of bounds to all and I would ask you to consider carefully about displaying weapons so openly." he said, still referring to Yilven as if he was a member of the nobility and he looked at the swords Will and Yilven carried as well as at Gromar's hammer.

"Is anyone else hungry? Which way is the kitchen?" Horace then asked.

"Food can be brought to you. There is a bell in each room that will attract a servant." the courtier said.

"Horace Bramble is my cook. He and Lucia will handle the preparation of my food." Yilven responded.

"My apologies. In that case you may find the kitchen down the stairs at the far end of the hallway and then to the right. Follow the hallway around the corner and there will be more stairs leading down to the palace kitchens." the courtier said.

"Thank you." Horace replied before the courtier turned and headed back down the stairs.

"So let's see what these rooms are like and then I'm going to go and find those kitchens." Horace said.

"Why? What do you think that you might find down there?" Lucia asked and Horace smiled at her.

"Food of course. Didn't you hear me? I'm hungry." he replied.

"We need to take a look at Thomas' room." Will said, looking along the hallway.

"What if he's in there?" Lucia said.

"Then we can get some answers straight from him." Gromar said.

"I'm rather hoping that he won't be there. I'd rather not risk attacking him before we have any proof." Will replied, "With luck there'll be something incriminating in there that we can take to the king. Dominic, Gromar, you two keep watch here. Lucia and Horace, you take that second door at the other end of the hallway. Yilven and I will check Thomas' room."

"What do we do if someone comes?" Horace asked.

"Just walk away quickly and we'll get out of the room before anyone finds us in there. Hopefully." Will answered before he started to walk along the hallway towards the room that had been indicated to them as being Thomas'. As Will walked Dominic and Gromar positioned themselves at the top of the stairs that they had just come up, looking down to watch for anyone approaching. Meanwhile Horace and Lucia followed Will and Yilven until they reached the door to Thomas' room and Horace and Lucia carried on walking to the far end of the hallway where they positioned themselves to keep watch from this direction also. Will then looked at Yilven.

"Can you tell whether he's in there or not?" he asked softly.

"I'll see." Yilven whispered back and he leant in close to the door, placing his ear as close to it as possible while Will stood back and remained quiet, "I don't hear anything." he added.

"Let's knock to be sure." Will said.

"What if he is in and he answers?" Yilven said.

"Then we run away quickly." Will answered with a smile and Yilven frowned before he knocked gently on the door and waited for a response that did not come, "Open it. Carefully." Will told him and he opened the door slowly, peering into the room.

The room was still lit by a number of candles in an ornate stick that Thomas had left burning but there were no signs of Thomas himself.

"Empty." Yilven said and he stepped into the room with Will behind him.

"Good, let's see whether there's anything in any of these drawers or wardrobes. Be careful not to disturb anything too much." Will replied and the two men began to hurriedly search the room, opening every available cupboard and drawer to examine the contents. Most were empty, Thomas had only brought with him what he could carry on his horse and this was just a change of clothing. Anything that he had that was either valuable or incriminating was obviously still in his immediate possession.

"There's nothing here Will, not unless you think he plans to destroy the city with a few dirty clothes." Yilven said when the last of the drawers had been opened.

"Yes, you're right." Will responded before he looked at the bed, "Just one more place to check. Under the mattress. I'll need your help." he added.

"Of course." Yilven replied and the two men stood side-by-side to grab the edge of the mattress and lift it up, peering underneath to see whether it had been used as a hiding place but once again there was nothing to be found, "Still nothing. We're wasting our time here Will. If Thomas isn't in here then he must be wandering the palace and that probably means that he's up to something."

"Yes, we need to find him. Come on, we better tell the others." Will replied. Then he took one last look around the room to make sure that it looked the same as it had done when they entered and that they had not missed anything obvious before he headed back out into the hallway.

"Did you find anything?" Lucia asked when she saw the two men exiting Thomas room but Will shook his head.

"No but if Thomas isn't here then he must be up to something so we need to find him." he said as Gromar and Dominic approached from the other end of the hallway.

"So was there anything in there worth finding?" Gromar said.

"No so we're going to have split up and find Thomas. He must be somewhere inside the palace. If we search in pairs then when we find him one person can keep an eye on him while the other goes and gets the rest of us."

"I'll take the kitchen." Horace said with a smile and Lucia sighed.

"I'll go with him and make sure he does just stay in the kitchen eating." she said and Horace frowned.

"Okay you two see if you can find him anywhere in the servants' quarters and work areas." Will told them, "Dominic and Gromar, see whether he's anywhere in the grounds. Yilven and I will check the various guest quarters and dining halls. He must be under the same restrictions as us so he shouldn't be able to get into the royal quarters."

"If he came here using the stone circles then he must have another Wraith with him Will." Dominic pointed out, "He could just have it kill anyone who gets in his way."

"Then we also keep an eye out for doors that should have guards but don't." Will replied, "Don't go anywhere we shouldn't, just fetch everyone else and we'll go in together."

Thomas was getting more and more frustrated as he continued to search the kitchen for the goblets used by the king and queen. Prince Richard's description of them had been very precise, gold with a crest of the royal coat of arms being fixed to the outside, but nothing that Thomas saw came close to matching it. There were plenty of gold goblets, plates and cutlery arranged on a shelf and had there not been so many witnesses Thomas would probably have taken the opportunity to acquire some of these for himself but the crest of arms on all of them was engraved rather than added to the outside.

However, just as he was about to give up the kitchen door opened and one of the palace servants entered bearing a tray that had a pair of goblets and an empty jug on it, all of which bore the crest of arms in the exact style described by Prince Richard.

"Do their majesties want more wine?" the old woman baking bread asked but the servant who had just entered shook his head.

"No, at least not yet." he replied.

"They will, they always do. Better rinse those goblets out and put them down over there ready." the woman told him and she indicated a table beside the shelves where the other cutlery was stacked.

The man then took the tray and goblets to a wooden bowl where he scooped water from a nearby barrel into it so that he could wash them. Thomas watched out of the corner of his eye while this was done and he slid the tiny clay bottle of poison from his pocket, waiting until the man carried the tray and goblets to the table where he had been told to put them and it was then that Thomas approached the serving girl who had spoken to him when he first entered the kitchen.

"I've made my choice, can you help me?" he asked her.

"Yes sire." she replied with a smile.

"I'd like some wine and food." Thomas added.

Thomas followed the serving girl across the kitchen towards the shelf and the nearby table, standing so that he was between her and the tray that had just been set down. The serving girl looked at Thomas and smiled at him for a moment before she picked up a tray from a lower shelf and then reached for a cup from a higher one. At that moment while no-one was watching Thomas pulled the cork from the tiny clay bottle of poison and poured some into each of the goblets on the king and queen's tray. The liquid poison was colourless and Thomas placed just a few drops in each goblet to minimise the chance that someone would notice that it was there before putting the cork back in place to keep what was left of the poison in the bottle. If it was as effective as Prince Richard said then Thomas thought that it might come in useful later someday.

"What would you like me to get you sire?" the serving girl asked just as Thomas was returning the bottle to his pocket.

"What's in those pies over there?" Thomas asked, pointing across the kitchen.

"Rabbit or mutton." the serving girl answered.

"In that case let's start with a rabbit pie." Thomas said.

Initially everyone in the group followed Horace as he hurried down the stairs towards the kitchen, most intending to take a different path to the parts of the palace they would be searching.

"Remember that you're supposed to be searching for Thomas, Horace. Not searching for food." Gromar said sternly.

"It's a kitchen, I doubt that I will have to actually search to find food and can I help it if I'm hungry?" Horace responded as he reached the top of the stairs leading down to the kitchen. However, just as he turned to go down them the door at the bottom opened and Thomas emerged with the serving girl beside him, a tray of food in her arms and Horace and Thomas both froze when they saw one another at opposite ends of the stairs.

"Horace what's-" Will began when he saw this and stopped right behind the Halfling, looking past him down the stairs where he also saw Thomas and his eyes widened.

When the rest of the group appeared behind Will and Horace, Thomas suddenly turned and bolted back into the kitchen.

"Sire what's wrong?" the serving girl asked in surprise.

"After him!" Will exclaimed and the group suddenly came rushing down the stairs, causing the serving girl to scream as they pushed past her.

"I'm sorry." Lucia said as she passed by the shocked girl who was still holding the tray but the others ran past without a word.

Inside the kitchen the staff turned to look when Thomas suddenly burst back into the room and looked around.

"What's the best other way out of here?" he said and he pointed to another doorway, "Where does that go to?" he asked, heading for the door he had pointed to.

"That leads to-" the woman baking bread began before the door Thomas had just come through opened again and Will and the rest of the group burst into the kitchen as well, half of them carrying obvious weapons despite having been cautioned against this. Thomas quickly pulled open the second door that he had just reached only to find himself looking at a flight of steps that led down into a darkened lower level, "It's the cellar. Where we keep things cold." the woman said but with no other avenues of escape open to him Thomas fled down these stairs into the darkness, hoping that there would be an alternative exit somewhere down there.

Will and the others ran after Thomas, weaving between tables and startled palace kitchen staff before they reached the doorway that Thomas had fled through and they looked down into the darkness as well.

"See anything?" Will asked, looking at Yilven and then Gromar.

The Elf and Dwarf both looked down the stairs, their eyes able to see in the dark much better than humans or Halflings could.

"Looks like barrels." Gromar said.

"Yes, barrels." Yilven agreed and Will looked around.

"Is there another way out of there?" he asked, looking at the kitchen staff who still had no idea what was going on.

"Yes, there's a loading hatch that leads into the courtyard." a young man replied.

"Then we can't just wait for Thomas to come back this way. We'll have to go down after him." Will said.

"Gromar and I should take the lead." Yilven said and Gromar nodded.

"Agreed. Let's go." he said and the pair began to descend the stairs into the cellar.

"What about taking candles?" Lucia suggested but Will shook his head.

"No, Thomas didn't have anything to provide light so having a candle would just tell him where we were before we could find him." he pointed out.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs Yilven and Gromar paused to look around the cellar. The stairs ended somewhere in the centre of the room and it extended off to both sides, looping around behind the stairs as well as stretching out ahead. After several yards the open layout of the room that was filled with barrels changed to shelves that contained a mix of bottles and jars containing various food and drink that needed to be kept in the cooler air of the cellar.

"Can you see him?" Dominic asked.

"No, but there are plenty of places to hide in here. Which way now?" Gromar answered.

"We need to split up." Will said, "Horace, you and Lucia stay here to make sure that Thomas doesn't double back. Gromar and Dominic search the room behind the stairs. Yilven and I will go straight ahead."

The group then split into three pairs, each moving cautiously through the darkened room. Yilven and Gromar took the lead in each of their assigned pairs, making the best use of their superior night vision while Will and Dominic could only watch for movement closer to them. Circling around the stairs Gromar and Dominic found

more rows of shelves and they walked along the end of these, peering between them one at a time.

"I heard something." Dominic said suddenly and both men stopped.

"Where from?" Gromar asked quietly.

"Down there I think." Dominic told him and he pointed between the shelves in front of them.

"Wait here. I'll check it out." Gromar told him and with his war hammer in his hands he advanced between the shelves while Dominic stayed where he was. Gromar moved cautiously between the shelves until he got about three quarters of the way to the other end, at which point he stopped and looked down at the floor near the end of the shelf, "There you are." he said, a smile spreading across his face and he suddenly reached down with one hand and grabbed hold of something. All of a sudden there was a high-pitched squealing that made Dominic jump but when Gromar lifted his hand again rather than dragging Thomas to his feet he instead lifted up a large rat that he had just grabbed hold of, the rodent squirming and kicking its legs as it tried to get free.

Meanwhile by the stairs Lucia spun around, her attention attracted by the sound.

"What's going on?" she asked and Horace smiled.

"I think Gromar just found himself a snack." he said and Lucia frowned.

"What?" she said.

"A rat. I've heard them make that sound in traps." Horace told her.

Gromar grinned as he held the rat where Dominic could just about make it out in the darkness.

"Just a rat. Nothing to worry about." he said before he bashed the rat's skull against the nearby shelf to kill it and then set it down, "I might come back for that when we're done. It looks tasty."

"Probably very well fed on royal kitchen scraps." Dominic commented.

Towards the other end of the cellar Thomas listened rather than looked, knowing that his pursuers were too far away for him to see clearly but wanting to know where they were. He had heard the instructions that Will had given so he knew that the way back up to the kitchen was blocked and that the group were searching the cellar for him in pairs. He had the Wraith in his collar to defend him of course but he had already seen Lucia destroy such a creature so he did not intend to just rush into attacking any of his pursuers until he was confident that he would be able to defeat them without the Wraith being destroyed. Then a thought occurred to him.

"I don't suppose you can see them can you?" he said softly, knowing that the Wraith would be able to hear him.

"They are close enough that I am aware of their presence." the Wraith responded.

"So how about you tell me how to sneak around them or find me another way out of this place?" Thomas asked.

"Two are blocking the stairs you came down." the Wraith answered.

"Yes but that's just a woman and a Halfling. I can handle them as long as they don't get the drop on me again. You just need to stay put so that that woman can't use her magical knife on you." Thomas said, "What about another way out?"

"I would need to emerge and explore." the Wraith said, "They would likely see me."

"In that case the stairs it is. Beckett and that Elf are between it and us though so guide me around them. Then when I go for the stairs you watch my back. It's the woman and the wizard that can destroy you."

Thomas told the creature.

"Very well stay close to the wall as you head back to the stairs. The Elf and the man are on the far side of this place." the Wraith responded.

"Thanks." Thomas said and he started to move back towards the stairs leading up to the kitchen, keeping close to the wall beside him so that he could stay away from Will and Yilven. However, not long after he had begun the Wraith spoke again.

"The man and the Elf are coming this way." it said and Thomas paused, his knife in his hand.

He looked in both directions, searching for any signs of movement within the darkness and took a step closer towards the stairs. However, as he did so he inadvertently brought his foot down next to a rat, nudging it slightly and the creature let out a squeal as it retreated.

"That way!" Yilven exclaimed when he heard the sound of the rat and he started to run towards the source with Will following him, making sure to remain behind Yilven and trust in his low light vision as well as his excellent hearing.

Thomas started to hurry towards the stairs as well but all of a sudden he found his path blocked as first Yilven and then Will appeared in front of him with their swords in their hands.

"Going somewhere Thomas?" Will asked and Thomas snarled at him.

"I'm going to need you now. They can't hurt you." Thomas said and the collar around his neck glowed before the Wraith emerged from it, the spectral figure floating clearly visible in the darkness between him and Will

and Yilven. However, while Thomas had expected them to retreat at the sight of the ethereal creature Will instead stepped forwards.

Before Will could say a word though the Wraith charged forwards, its phantom arms outstretched before it and Will reacted as he would to any other such attack by raising his sword and swinging at the Wraith. The blade passed through its arms and the Wraith let out a screeching sound as the end of each limb vanished. The Wraith retreated and as Will watched its arms began to regrow. Will had no intention of giving the Wraith the opportunity to recover from his strike though and he lunged forwards with his sword outstretched in front of him. Lacking any form of a physical body there was no resistance at all as the blade hit the Wraith in the centre of its ghostly torso and Will had to hold himself back before he could stumble into the creature himself. The magic of the blade functioned exactly as Dominic had told Will it would, disrupting the opposing magic that held the Wraith together and it screeched again as it appeared to recoil away from him. Will was not about to let the Wraith escape though and he advanced as it retreated, keeping his sword within it. The blade glowed as more of the Wraith's energy was drained away and the creature began to lose its shape, the light it was emitting becoming more of a blur rather than something that appeared vaguely humanoid and then came one last loud screech before it broke apart into a cloud of tiny lights that spread out like sparks from a fire before simply vanishing in mid air.

"Where did you get that?" Thomas said, panicking as he backed away from Will and Yilven.

"I gave it to him." Dominic said as he and Gromar appeared behind Will and Yilven, "Horace and Lucia are still guarding the stairs." he added to Will before Thomas abruptly turned around and ran.

"I've got him!" Yilven exclaimed as he broke into a sprint and ran after Thomas.

Thomas knew that he was unlikely to outrun the Elf in the darkness of the cellar so when he reached the end of the shelf beside him he came to a sudden stop and spun around before grabbing hold of it and pushing as hard as he could. Although it was heavy, the shelf was not secured to the floor and it began to tilt, tipping bottles and jars from it onto the floor and showering down on Yilven. Yilven realised what Thomas was planning as soon as he grabbed the shelf though and he leant forwards as he ran, raising one arm over his head to shield it before the shelf was pushed far enough that it overbalanced entirely and the remaining contents all fell to the floor with a loud 'crash'. There was not enough room for the shelf to fall before it struck the neighbouring shelf though and thanks to this being against the cellar wall it had nowhere to fall to and remained standing rather than collapsing as well. This left a low tunnel through which Yilven continued to move as quickly as he could, ignoring the various containers of food and drink that were now lying scattered across the floor at his feet.

Annoyed at his failure to stop Yilven, Thomas continued to flee but he moved further away from the wall in the hope that he might be able to lose the Elf among the shelves but as he moved to the next row he heard a voice call out.

"There he is!" Gromar shouted and when Thomas turned to look towards the voice he saw Gromar striding towards him with his hammer held in both hands while Will and Dominic followed close behind. Rather than try to tip this shelf over as well Thomas continued to move across the cellar before he ducked back between a pair of shelves leading back towards the stairs, reasoning that he at least stood a chance of being able to overpower Horace and Lucia before the rest of his pursuers could catch up with him and then he could escape from the cellar before fleeing the palace entirely.

Behind him Yilven met with Will, Gromar and Dominic when they all reached the end of the shelves at roughly the same time, Yilven having been slowed by the falling shelf.

"Where did he go?" Dominic asked, looking around.

"He's doubled back. I can hear him over there." Yilven replied and he pointed back towards the stairs.

"Horace! Lucia! He's heading your way." Will shouted before he and the others started to hurry back towards the stairs as well.

"Don't worry Will, we're ready for him. He won't get past us." Horace responded.

It did not take long for Thomas to reach the stairs and when he did he saw both Horace and Lucia standing to either side of the bottom step while leaving the stairs themselves clear. Both held small knives and Thomas grinned as he raised his own slightly larger blade.

"Just keep out of my way and there's no reason for anyone to get hurt." he said as he slowly made his way towards them. Then he glanced over his shoulder as he heard the sound of footsteps behind him and saw Yilven and Gromar leading Will and Dominic towards him. Turning back towards the stairs Thomas then broke into a sprint.

Surprisingly to Thomas neither Horace nor Lucia made any attempt to step into his path to block the stairs and he guessed that the pair were both too intimidated to try and stop the man who was much larger than either of them. Because of this Thomas continued to rush directly towards the stairs and leapt up to the first step without Horace or Lucia doing anything to stop him. However, the moment he took another step he felt

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something pull against his ankle and before he could stop himself he fell forwards, landing face first on the stairs.

It was then that Horace and Lucia struck, leaping onto his back and pinning him face down to the stairs.

"Get his knife." Horace told Lucia as she grabbed hold of Thomas' arm and dug her nails into his wrist.

"I've got it." She replied as the knife fell from his hand.

"You got him." Will said as the others then arrived behind them.

"It was easy." Horace responded while he continued to press Thomas' head down against the stairs, "We just found a bit of rope and strung it across the bottom step."

"We thought that he wouldn't notice it in the dark." Lucia added.

"And obviously he didn't." Horace said.

"Very clever." Will said with a smile before the door at the top of the steps opened to reveal a pair of palace guards while kitchen staff peered out from behind them.

"What's going on down there?" one of the guards demanded.

"They attacked me." Thomas said when he was brought out of the cellar and along with Will and the others disarmed before being taken to the office of the same palace courtier who had shown them to their guest rooms by a unit of guards.

"He's working for Ammaril. We needed to find out what he was doing here." Lucia responded.

"Delivering a message and waiting for a reply." Thomas said, glaring at her.

"That doesn't explain what you were doing in the kitchen." Will pointed out.

"Why were you in the kitchen?" Thomas snapped back at him.

"Looking for you." Gromar pointed out.

"I was just getting something to eat." Thomas said.

"We were told that there was a bell you could ring." Yilven commented.

"There is. Food and drink can be brought to you." the courtier pointed out from behind his desk.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted. I went to take a look." Thomas said.

"And you spent a long time doing it. We were shown to our rooms and had time to be there before coming down to the kitchen and finding you." Gromar said.

"I can take as long as I like deciding what to eat." Thomas said.

"You weren't so picky when you were aboard the Storm Chaser heading for Oscay." Horace said.

"I don't need to explain myself to you, runt." Thomas said, snarling, "You and that girl broke my nose. Look." and he pointed to his injured face before looking at the courtier, "Aren't you going to do anything about this?" he asked.

"No." the courtier replied, "You may be being treated as a diplomatic messenger but you are still an agent of an enemy of Dannaron who has threatened us with total destruction. On the other hand Lord Yilven and his party have pledged to protect this nation. Now why were you in the kitchen for so long?"

"I've told you, I was hungry." Thomas answered.

"There are only two reasons to be in the kitchen, firstly to take something away and secondly to leave something behind." Will said.

"Poison?" Dominic suggested.

"He didn't know we were here though, so he couldn't have been trying to poison us." Lucia said.

"Search him." the courtier said and the guards in the office moved closer, grabbing hold of Thomas and reaching into his pockets.

The first item they found was his purse that they tossed onto the table.

"Looks like Ammaril pays well." Gromar commented, looking at the size of the purse before one of the guards produced the clay bottle with a cork in it and placed it on the desk beside the purse.

"What's that?" Horace asked.

"May I?" Dominic said, looking at the courtier while reaching out for the bottle without touching it.

"Be my guest." the courtier replied.

"That's not mine." Thomas said, "Someone must have slipped it into my pocket. The Halfling or the woman. It was them."

Dominic picked up the bottle and removed the cork before peering inside and seeing the liquid within. Then he sniffed it.

"Careful. If it's poison then you don't want to be affected by it." Will cautioned him.

"I'm sure it would take more than a small sniff. Otherwise Thomas would risk being overcome when he used it." Dominic pointed out.

"So is it poison?" Gromar asked.

"I'm not sure. We should test it." Dominic answered.

"Test it how? On him?" Horace said and he looked at Thomas.

"I like the sound of that." Gromar muttered.

"You found a rat in the cellar, didn't you?" Dominic replied. Then he looked at the courtier and added, "In the meantime no-one should be given any food or drink from the kitchen."

"Of course." the courtier said before he looked at a guard and added, "Get someone to catch a rat and have it brought here. Alive."

"And some meat. Just a scrap will do." Dominic said and the courtier nodded.

"And a scrap of meat as bait." he said before the guard left the room.

It did not take long for the guard to return in the company of one of the palace servants who was carrying a bucket from inside which there was a squeaking sound coming.

"Where should I put this sir?" the servant asked, looking at the courtier.

"You may put it on my desk." the courtier responded.

"Yes sir." the servant said and he placed the bucket on the desk as instructed. Then he took a small cloth bundle from his pocket and unwrapped it to show off a tiny piece of meat about half an inch cross, "I was also told to bring this." he said.

"I'll take that thank you." Dominic told him and he took the meat in the cloth from him. Then he gently tipped the open bottle of poison over the meat, letting a few drops fall onto it before setting the bottle down again, "Now let's see what happens." he said as he dropped the meat into the bucket and watched to see what happened.

As expected the rat moved towards the piece of meat as soon as it was dropped into the bucket and after first sniffing at it, began to eat. Soon the entire piece of meat was consumed while the rat apparently suffered no ill effects.

"Nothing." Thomas said, guessing that the delay in the poison taking effect that Prince Richard had told him about was why the rat remained alive. However, if this was the case then he knew that he needed to leave before the poison had chance to work, "Perhaps now you can release me."

"He's up to something." Will said.

"I'm nothing but a messenger." Thomas said before the rat in the bucket began to squeal and convulse.

"The poison's working." Dominic said, "It just took time."

The courtier then glared at Thomas.

"Take him to the dungeons." he said sternly and the guards grabbed Thomas by his arms and started to drag him towards the door.

"You can't do this to me! Ammaril will make you pay!" he yelled as he was removed from the room and the courtier looked at Dominic, "What do you think he did with the poison?"

"I can't say." Dominic replied.

"Perhaps we should check the kitchen and ask the staff where he went." Will suggested and the courtier nodded.

"Of course, come with me." he said.

The courtier led the group back down to the kitchen where most of the staff had now retired for the night but there were still several of them on hand cleaning up while bread for the following day baked in the ovens.

"How can we help you sir?" the woman who had baked the bread asked the courtier when he entered.

"The man who was in here looking around and was then taken away by the guards may have attempted to poison something in here. Where did he go?" the courtier responded, looking around the kitchen as he spoke.

"Everywhere sir. He said he wanted something to eat but didn't know what so he looked at everything." the woman told him.

"So any of the food could be poisoned?" Gromar said.

"That wouldn't make any sense." Dominic said, "He must have had a specific target in mind. I doubt that little bottle had enough poison in it to kill everyone in the palace."

"The king." Will said and the courtier turned to face him.

"He wouldn't dare." he said.

"Of course he would. The king has rejected Ammaril's terms. Perhaps Thomas thinks that killing him would result in someone more likely to accept them would take the throne, or at least cause enough chaos to prevent your army from organising a proper defence while Ammaril invades." Will said.

"Is there any particular food or drink that is reserved just for the king?" Yilven asked.

"There are a few things that are only consumed on special occasions unless the king or queen request them, rare wines and such, but in general all senior staff and guests have access to everything in here." the courtier told him.

"So if poisoning food or drink wouldn't guarantee killing the king what else would?" Gromar said.

"Cups. Or jugs if the king has his wine served in a jug." Horace said, smiling.

"Does the king have a particular cup that only he uses?" Will asked, looking at the courtier.

"Yes, yes he does." the courtier replied and he looked towards the shelf of cutlery, seeing the king's personal goblets on the tray beside it, "There." he said, pointing to them and the group then hurried across the kitchen towards the tray.

"Did Thomas get over here?" Dominic asked, looking at the woman who had spoken previously and she nodded.

"Yes, he went there with Sally when she was collecting a plate for his food." she replied as Yilven picked up one of the royal goblets from the tray and peered inside, seeing the tiny pool of colourless liquid that could

easily be mistaken for water left after it had been rinsed at the bottom.

"There's something in this one." he said as Will picked up the second goblet and also saw a small pool of colourless liquid at the bottom.

"This one too." he added.

"I will inform the king." the courtier said.

King Godwin was clearly not happy about being summoned back to the throne room at a time when he expected to be relaxing for the evening. However, when told that an attempt on his life had just been foiled he accepted the necessity of it. Only a handful of courtiers were available but word was sent to gather as many members of the royal court as possible while the king was briefed on what had happened.

"The poison was placed in your personal goblets Your Majesty." the courtier who had been dealing with the situation told King Godwin as he sat on his throne with a serious expression on his face while he listened to the explanation of what had taken place in the kitchen and the testing of the poison. Behind the courtier stood Will and the rest of the group, listening as the courtier described their actions. All of them stood behind a thick white line on the floor of the throne room that marked the limit of how close to the throne a person could stand. This was a crude security measure, keeping people beyond the distance from which a sword could be swung at the king.

"At least he's not taking the credit." Gromar whispered to Will.

"And where is this assassin now?" King Godwin asked when the courtier was done speaking.

"Taken to the dungeons Your Majesty." the courtier answered.

"Bring him here. I want to see him for myself." the king ordered.

"Yes Your Majesty." the courtier responded and he nodded to servant standing by the throne room door and the man hurried from the room.

It did not take long for Thomas to be dragged into the throne room in chains by a pair of palace guards, his face now bloodied and bruised where he had obviously been beaten during his brief captivity. However, the guards had been able to avoid inflicting any serious injury and he was still capable of standing before they forced him to his knees.

"So this is the scum that would take our life then is it?" King Godwin said, sneering at Thomas.

"He is Your Majesty. The bottle of poison was found on his person and he was seen beside the goblets into which it had been added.

"Have you anything to say for yourself?" King Godwin said as he continued to stare at Thomas.

"I had no choice. If I didn't go along with the plan then the Wraith in this collar would have killed me." Thomas responded and the king looked at the courtier.

"Wraith?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty. It seems that there was one of Ammaril's creatures contained within the collar around his neck. It was destroyed by these people during his attempt to escape." the courtier replied and he indicated towards Will and the others.

It was then that Prince Richard entered the throne room, freshly arrived back at the palace after a night out. One specifically planned to keep him away while his father was poisoned.

"What's going on father?" he asked out loud as he walked close to the throne, crossing the white line on the floor in the process, "I get back and I'm immediately ordered here to an urgent meeting."

"It was him! It was his idea!" Thomas exclaimed, raising his hands as far as his chains would allow to point at the prince, whose eyes widened in response.

"What is he talking about? What sort of accusations is he making?" he said.

"An attempt on the lives of ourselves and the queen was made tonight Richard. Fortunately our friends here were able to put a stop to it before either of us could be harmed. Now the worm responsible appears to be implicating you in the plot." the king said.

"He said that if you were killed and he took the throne then he would surrender to Ammaril. That's why I had to do it or the Wraith would have killed me." Thomas said and Prince Richard snorted.

"This is absolutely ridiculous. As if I would conspire to poison my own parents." he said, "This criminal scum is clearly desperate to save his own worthless life."

"Nobody's mentioned poison." Lucia said suddenly with a smile.

"That is true." King Godwin said, now glaring at his son.

"What are you accusing me of father?" Prince Richard responded defensively.

"Are you so desperate to sit on this throne that you can't wait for us to die of natural causes?" the king said, the anger clear in his voice before he turned to one of the guards in the room, "We want our son's chambers searched thoroughly let us see whether there is any further evidence of treason in them."

"Yes Your Majesty." The guard responded before he exited the throne room.

"There's someone else as well." Thomas said suddenly, "The prince told me that the poison was supplied by a sorcerer who wants to be in charge of his order. The prince was going to appoint him once he was crowned king."

"This man is lying to save his own skin. Can't you see that father?" Prince Richard said.

"We see that you knew more about the attempt on my life than you should have done." King Godwin responded.

"A coincidence, nothing more." Prince Richard said, "Search my chambers for all I care, in the meantime I am leaving. I'll be back when you're ready to talk about this sensibly."

"Remain where you are. No-one is leaving yet Richard. Not until this matter is dealt with fully." King Godwin ordered as the prince turned his back on his father.

"Dealt with fully?" the prince said, "Like you dealt with the offer this man brought from Ammaril? I always knew that you were a pompous fool father but Dannaron will be destroyed thanks to your madness." he added as he turned back around and it was then that Will noticed the dagger that the prince was sliding from the back of his belt.

"Lookout!" Will yelled as he suddenly rushed forwards and dived at the prince just as he produced the dagger. Will grabbed him around his waist before he could lunge at the king though, knocking him to the floor where the dagger fell from the prince's grasp.

"Unhand me you ruffian! Don't know who I am?" Prince Richard snapped as guards were rushing forwards, some to grab hold of both Will and the prince while others moved between them and the king to block the path of an attack. Will simply raised his hands as the guards lifted him to his feet while the prince attempted to shake their grip off, "Get your filthy hands off me!" he exclaimed.

"Release him." King Godwin said, looking at the two guards now with their hands on Will's shoulders while he stood still.

"Yes, release me this instant." Prince Richard said.

"No." the king responded, "Our son is under arrest for treason. He has attempted to commit murder here in this very room as well as by employing this agent of Ammaril to poison us and our wife. While it seems that Captain Beckett has saved us a second time. You may step back captain."

"Thank you Your Majesty." Will replied as he carefully backed away from the throne until he was beyond the white line on the floor.

"Remove our son and his co-conspirator from our presence. Take both to the dungeons until we can decide what to do with them both. Then somebody find Prince Harold and have him brought here. He may be only fifteen but he is our heir now and he should be a part of this." King Godwin said and guards began to drag both Thomas and Prince Richard towards the doorway, the prince struggling in vain to try and get free.

"You're a fool father! You won't get away with this!" Prince Richard yelled as the guards pulled him away but the king ignored his son's protests as he turned towards the palace courtier again.

"We want the sorcerer who provided the poison found. If our former son will not give up the name willingly then find whatever means is needed to obtain it. He is no longer a prince of the realm and can no longer expect the privileges that come with such a position." he said. Then he turned towards Will and the rest of the group and smiled, "As for you, you have saved our life. That will not be forgotten and it will be rewarded handsomely."

"You should ask for a pardon Will." Lucia said softly.

"What did you just say young lady?" King Godwin asked and Lucia hesitated.

"She suggested that I should request a pardon from you Your Majesty." Will replied.

"A pardon? You have committed crimes against us?" the king said.

"I was in your navy and deserted to escape a corrupt captain Your Majesty." Will told him.

"A serious crime. Desertion is punishable by death." King Godwin said, "Though I suppose that it is fitting that if you save the life of a king then that king should save yours in return. Very well, let it be known that we, King Godwin, do hereby forgive Captain William Beckett of his sins against us and free him from any penalty associated with them. Now, as to a more material form of reward."

Thomas had been kept awake during the night by the sounds of screaming coming from one of the other cells in the dungeon he had been thrown into. These screams had been mixed in with pleas for mercy by Prince Richard as the guards extracted the information they had been commanded to obtain. The guards obviously got the information they needed during the night though since at sunrise Thomas looked out through the tiny window in his cell when he heard more begging from the courtyard outside and he saw the bloodied Prince Richard being dragged towards wooden block before he was forced to his knees bent over with his neck resting on this. Then after a final blessing by a priest he was unceremoniously decapitated by a single swing of a large axe wielded by a masked guard.

Prince Richard's execution was not the only one that morning though and after the prince had been put to death another man was dragged into the courtyard. This was someone that Thomas did not recognise and he did not say a word as he was tied to a wooden stake before bundles of firewood were piled around him before being set alight to burn him to death.

After witnessing these two gruesome executions Thomas backed away when he heard the sound of keys jangling and the door to his cell was unlocked permitting Will and Dominic to enter while the guards remained outside.

"Come to gloat?" Thomas asked, looking up at the two men.

"Come to bargain." Will answered and Thomas frowned.

"Bargain for what? I doubt that King Godwin is planning on setting me free after he's just had his own eldest son beheaded. I don't know who that other poor fool was or what he did but the king obviously wasn't merciful about him either. At least he didn't beg for his life when they tied him to the stake they burned him at." he replied.

"That other fool was the sorcerer who provided the poison to Prince Richard." Dominic said.

"The guards cut out his tongue before they burned him to make sure he couldn't use the flames to cast any fire magic before he died." Will added.

"Which just leaves you. The man who tried to poison the king and queen of Dannaron." Dominic said.

"The king wants you to suffer and since he had his own son's head cut off I don't relish your chances. As I understand it he is planning on having you crucified. His guards will nail you to a large wooden cross and leave you to die on display for his people to see." Will added.

"At least I'll have plenty of time to think about William Beckett the deserter from the Dannaron navy getting what he deserves." Thomas replied loudly so that the guards outside could easily hear what he said but Will just smiled.

"You're a little behind on the news Thomas." he said, "In exchange for saving the life of the king from you and Prince Richard I've been pardoned for that. I could walk right up to a navy ship and shout out who I am and what I did and they couldn't do a thing to me."

Thomas snorted.

"So you exchanged the king's gratitude for a lousy pardon. I've have asked for gold and then left before anyone figured out who I was." he said.

"Oh we got gold as well." Dominic said, "King Godwin kindly shared out his son's wealth between his other children and us. Not enough for us to be able to live off it for the rest of our lives but a respectable sum."

"Which just leaves you here in this cell until your cross can be assembled." Will added.

"So what incentive do I have to make a bargain with you?" Thomas said.

"Because I'm pretty sure that we can convince the king to have you hanged instead." Will said.

"That's not much of a choice." Thomas responded.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. Do you really want to die slowly nailed to a cross rather than choke much quicker with a rope around your neck?" Dominic said.

"I told you he wouldn't co-operate. Let him suffer." Will said and Dominic nodded before the two men both turned to leave.

"Wait, hold on." Thomas called out, leaping to his feet as the other two men began to walk away.

"Too late. You had your chance." Will responded without turning around again.

"I can help you. I can tell you how to destroy Ammaril's army." Thomas exclaimed and upon hearing this Will and Dominic stopped and turned back towards him.

"Stop her army? That seems hard to believe." Dominic said.

"It's true I swear." Thomas said.

"Okay so how do we destroy her army?" Will asked.

"Ammaril, you just have to kill her and her army falls apart." Thomas said and Will and Dominic looked at one another.

"Does that sound reasonable?" Will said but Dominic shrugged.

"I don't know. Remember, the magic that Ammaril used to create her army is unknown to anyone else." he said.

"How do you know this?" Will asked, looking back at Thomas.

"Two of the Elf warlocks that Ammaril recruited into her service turned on her. They tried to kill her and take control of her army. When they failed Ammaril told them that their plan would never have worked. There's some link between her and all of the things she's created. The Orcs, the Trolls and even those huge dragons. It's not enough for her to be able to control them or know what they're all doing but it's what makes them loyal to her. If she wasn't around then they'd all just start looking out for themselves." Thomas explained frantically.

"So kill Ammaril and the army turns on itself?" Will said.

"Maybe. I don't know for sure. I only know what Ammaril said." Thomas replied.

"Who was around to hear it?" Dominic said.

"Apart from the pair who tried to kill her? Another warlock called Hiros and a few Orcs and Trolls." Thomas told him.

"It could have just been for the benefit of the other warlock. This Hiros." Dominic said, glancing at Will.

"Hiros saved Ammaril. If he hadn't turned up then the other two would have killed her." Thomas said, "He's as loyal to her as those Orcs and Trolls are only I think he's doing it to gain access to that library of the Oscari and it's worked too. Ammaril has let him take a bunch of books from it as a reward."

"So only the other two warlocks would have heard what she said. What did she do with them? I doubt she just let them off with a stern talking to." Will said and a grin appeared on Thomas' face.

"Oh no, she made sure they wouldn't try anything like that again. She had that potion that creates Orcs poured down their throats and cast her spell again. The older one died during the transformation but the woman survived and now she's an Orc." he said.

"Wait, can she still use her magic?" Dominic said when he heard this.

"Yes, she can. Ammaril tested her." Thomas replied.

"Will this is significant." Dominic said, looking at Will.

"Why?" Will asked.

"As far as we know none of the sorcerers in Sylldarin were turned into Orcs, they would have been able to sense the magical energy of the potion that contaminated the water it was added to. That means that there were no Orc sorcerers. Now there is one and if she has any children then there could be more of them. An entire bloodline waiting to happen. We've seen Orcs on the battlefield, now imagine if some of them could use magic as well." Dominic said.

"I'd rather not, but finding one particular Orc among an army could be impossible. On the other hand if what Thomas says about Ammaril is true then maybe we can stop her army right now, before the threat of Orc sorcerers can become serious," Will said before he turned to Thomas and added, "and I'll bet that he can tell us where she is. Well, where is she?"

"Oscay." Thomas answered, "She's having some new palace built right next to that library. It's where she's going to rule her new empire from."

"Oscay. It will take weeks to get there." Will said, "Assuming we survive the crossing in the first place, a lot of ships don't."

"Maybe there's a faster way. One that he can help us with." Dominic said, looking at Thomas, "How do the stone circles work?" he asked.

"Yes, I can tell you but I want more than just a death that's quicker than being crucified." Thomas answered, "I want to go free."

Will smiled.

"Then you're to die slowly." he said, "Come on Dominic, we should get going if we're going to be sailing for Oscay. We can leave this afternoon."

"I told you how to defeat Ammaril's army. We made a bargain." Thomas called out.

"Yes but then you refused to tell us how the stone circles work. The bargain was all or nothing so you get nothing. Think about that while you're on the cross." Will told him.

"Okay I'll tell you, but you guarantee that I won't be crucified?" Thomas blurted out before the other two men could leave the cell.

"That's what the king agreed to. You tell us everything you know and he promises to have you executed relatively quickly." Will said.

"It's easy but he'll have to do it. You need magic to trigger the circle. That's why Ammaril had this put around my neck." Thomas said and he looked at Dominic at the same time as pointing to the collar that was still fixed around his neck.

"Tell me how." Dominic responded, "Be exact."

"You just place your hand on the stone at the centre of the circle and think about where you want to go. You need to be as precise as you can or you might end up on the wrong side of the world." Thomas explained.

"You said that magic was needed." Dominic commented and Thomas nodded his head.

"Yes. The Wraiths I carried with me put power into the stone through me." he said.

"There was no spell?" Dominic said and this time Thomas shook his head.

"No, just power. It activates the stone and it does the rest. It sends you along the ley lines to where you thought about going." he said.

"So does that sound legitimate Dominic?" Will asked.

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"If we consider the stone circles to be magical artefacts in their own right then yes, it makes perfect sense. Some of them require some input of power to activate them." Dominic answered, "The problem is that I haven't been to Oscay. Will I still be able to take us there using the circle?" he added, looking at Thomas. "It doesn't matter. I don't know how it works but the circles will take you as close as possible to wherever you're thinking of. That's why you need to be precise." Thomas said.

"So what do you think of when you go to Oscay?" Will said.

"I just thought of the library. The circles seem to understand that well enough." Thomas responded.

"I doubt that Ammaril is there alone. How many others are in Oscay?" Will said.

"I don't know. The place is crawling with Trolls now, they're being used to build her palace." Thomas told him.

"What about Orcs?" Dominic added.

"More now. When the attempt was made on her life there were just the artisans needed to direct the building of the palace but after it she had her brother create a bodyguard force. I don't know how many are with her but there could be about a hundred. Plus the Wraiths. Each of her bodyguard was given a pendant with a Wraith stone in it like my collar. The idea is that they'll be able to travel using the stone circles themselves but those things will fight as well." Thomas said.

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Back in the throne room of the palace Will and Dominic presented the information that they had obtained from Thomas to the royal court as well as Lord Arrin, Yilven and several senior Elf commanders. The seat that Prince Richard had previously occupied was now occupied by his younger brother Harold and the teenager watched and listened to everything in silence as he tried to get accustomed to the functioning of the court.

"Without Ammaril her entire army will collapse?" King Godwin commented when he heard the news.

"That is what Thomas claimed that Ammaril said and there doesn't appear to have been any obvious reason for her to lie Your Majesty." Dominic replied.

"Even if Ammaril's death won't cause her army to fall apart we cannot ignore the benefits of killing her. She is possibly the most powerful sorcerer that the world has ever known. Just by herself she is a threat." Lord Arrin said.

"Plus we know where she is and roughly how many warriors she has with her." Will added.

"We also have a means to reach her using the stone circles." Dominic said, "I understand that Thomas was discovered in one of them?"

"Yes." a courtier replied, "One about a day's ride from here. Since then no-one else has appeared there."

"Then that's how we should travel to Oscay." Will said. Then he looked at Dominic and added, "Assuming that you think you can make the circle work."

"I think so. If Thomas could travel using them then I ought to be able to do it as well." Dominic said.

"I assume that 'we' refers to the party that stood before me before, when the assassin was caught." King Godwin said and Will glanced towards Yilven.

"If Yilven is willing to join us then yes, that's who will go." Will said.

"I'll join you Will." Yilven said but then he looked at Lord Arrin and added, "My lord it would make sense to send a force to support us. If we are to face a large number of Orcs then we should have a superior force to support us."

"Yes it would. A hundred foot and fifty men equipped to fight on foot or as cavalry. They will be able to reach the circle quickly and then fight as desired when you reach Oscay. If the information about the enemy strength in Oscay is correct then that should be enough to defeat them without significantly weakening our forces here." Lord Arrin said.

"The Orcs, yes, but they will need help to defeat the Wraiths. Their weapons and shields should be modified to allow them to drain a Wraith's magic. It's the only way that they'll stand a chance." Dominic said, "The enchantment doesn't need to be permanent."

"The sorcerers who accompanied my fleet can take care of that. I will send three to accompany you as far as the stone circle and enchant weapons and shields whenever you stop but they will have to return just in case your mission does not go as planned." Lord Arrin said.

"We only need Dominic to get us to Oscay." Will replied.

"Then it is agreed. Captain Beckett will lead a force to the stone circle and from there travel to Oscay to kill Ammaril. In the meantime my army will prepare to meet Ammaril's on the field of battle. Dannaron will never surrender." King Godwin said.

As Lord Arrin had promised a force of a hundred and fifty Elf soldiers was gathered, all of them mounted on horseback and armed with bows and spears, enabling them to fight either on foot or from horseback as needed. In addition to these soldiers the three sorcerers promised by Lord Arrin were also present on horseback. As well as provided the troops he had promised Lord Arrin had also provided additional equipment for Will's group and now all of them wore chainmail shirts for protection. They were also well armed with each of them carrying a hand weapon and all but Dominic also having a bow or crossbow on their back.

"Isn't this what you said you didn't want Yilven? Command of warriors?" Gromar asked as he looked at the large force from the back of his horse.

"I'm not in command here Gromar." Yilven replied and he looked at Will and added, "He is."

"Is that true Will?" Lucia asked and Will smiled.

"Yes, Lord Arrin has entrusted command of these troops to me for this mission." he said.

"Sure you can handle commanding an army of Elves?" Gromar asked.

"I think so. Thanks to Yilven and Lucia My Elvish has improved. Though I might need some help in making sure that I tell them to march the right way." Will answered.

"So is there an actual plan for this?" Horace said.

"We travel to Oscay. We find Ammaril. We kill her. That's about it." Dominic said.

"Not much of a plan." Gromar commented.

"It's simple. Simple plans are better because there's less to go wrong." Will said.

"It's vague. Vague plans go wrong because they aren't properly thought out." Gromar responded.

"All we know is that Ammaril is likely to be close to the Great Library. Possibly inside it and we don't know exactly how many Orcs are protecting her or where they are. Until we know that there isn't much point in making a detailed plan." Will said.

With the construction of her new palace progressing well Ammaril found herself being called away from her studies in the library more often to inspect work to make sure that it met her requirements. Already the ground floor was largely complete and this included the central chamber that was set to become a hybrid of throne room and study for Ammaril, a place where she could hold court when required and read privately when able. Once fully furnished it would serve as a more luxurious replacement for the small room in the Great Library she currently used for her studies and a private exit would provide her with access to her bedchamber on an upper floor without requiring her to pass through more public areas of the palace. Here privacy would be paramount, the day to day running of her empire would be left to others while she focused on unlocking all of the secrets of the ancient Oscari from their library. A second side entrance connected to a long hallway that led directly to the Great Library that would enable Ammaril to move from one to the other, again in private and it was along this hallway that she had walked to view the throne room for herself. "Your throne room is complete my queen." the Orc artisan told Ammaril as she looked around the newly constructed room. Right now the room was empty of furniture and lacked doors and glass in windows while there were still piles of rubbish to be cleared away but it was easy to picture what it would look like once these details were completed. The floor of the room was split into two sections that were separated by a simple step that was just under a foot tall for most of the width of the room though there was a ramp in the centre that connected the two slightly different levels. The lower section of floor was where Ammaril's court would be located while the upper one already included a pair of slightly raised plinths close to one another. One of these would be occupied by her throne while the other was intended to be the location of the standing stone she used to cast her most powerful spells and this was the reason for the ramp. Although Ammaril planned to spend most of her time in the palace and library she also realised that there would be some issues that would require her personal attention, the invasions of the other Elven kingdoms for example. She was the only person who could cast the spell that would turn the inhabitants into Orcs and even if she was willing to share the knowledge of this spell with any of the warlocks in her service, which despite their apparent loyalty she was not, the standing stone would have to be able to be moved from its place here. The ramp, as well as the design of the wide hallways leading out of the palace would give enough room for a suitable cart to be brought all the way into the throne room.

The walls to either side of the room were bare now but eventually they would be lined with bookcases. Some of the space on these would be occupied by books taken from the Great Library that Ammaril was in the process of studying but the majority would instead hold her personal library, consisting of the books taken from the Vampire she and her brother Orcan had killed years earlier and also the books that she would herself write to store the knowledge she would develop herself. Only the wall behind where Ammaril's throne would eventually stand was different. This was an external wall and so it had a large number of windows running for most of its length. The glass for these was already in place and there was also a large glass door that allowed access to what was to become a private section of the grounds. The grounds themselves were not yet completed so rather than the neatly designed garden that Ammaril had specified the throne room just looked out over the half-built palace walls and then the ruined city beyond that.

"How soon can this rubbish be cleared and the furniture brought in? I want to relocate to here as soon as possible. The chambers I am using in the Great Library were not designed for the work" Ammaril asked.

"Immediately my queen. The Trolls have already begun to clear the debris and the furniture has been constructed. It just needs to be fitted." the Orc artisan answered.

"Very good. Get it done." Ammaril ordered, "When the furniture is in place come and tell me. We will move the standing stone then."

"Yes my queen." the Orc artisan responded before Ammaril turned to leave, heading back down the hallway that bypassed the rest of the palace to get her to the library at the far end.

When she reached the library she made her way to the room currently used as her study and began to gather the books from her personal collection that would need relocating to the throne room. Most of the

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books were still in the wooden chests that they had been transported in, Ammaril had always known that the use of this room would only be a temporary measure as a place of study so she had not fully unpacked, removing only the books she needed and then returning them to their chests when she was finished with them. She closed and locked each of the chests, not concerned about the chance that any of the books might be stolen but concerned that some of them might be damaged or mixed up accidentally if the chests were dropped between here and the throne room and they fell out.

The process of packing the books did not take long and Ammaril waited before a pair of Trolls appeared in the doorway and bowed towards her.

"Ah there you are. Have you been sent to help me move my things?" she asked and one of the Trolls nodded once.

"Yes my queen." he responded and both Trolls entered the room, picking up one of the heavy wooden chests each as easily if they were empty and carrying them away to the throne room.

Although the force being sent to Oscan was able to reach the stone circle in about a day they did not immediately use it. There had been too little time available during rest stops for the sorcerers accompanying the force as far as the stone circle to produce a reasonable number of objects that would offer protection from Wraith so Will ordered that the force spend some time resting while more were prepared. The easiest objects to modify for such protection were the shields carried by the Elves and so the sorcerers set to work on applying magical markings to as many of these as they could, empowering them as storage vessels for magical energy and by the time the sun was setting there were enough shields to equip most of the Elves. "We've got about a hundred and twenty shields in total. The enchantment won't last of course but it should do while we find Ammaril." Dominic told Will. Unlike the shields that Marcus Quinnus had created for his mercenaries that had the enchantment written on the front the shields enchanted by the Elf sorcerers had the enchantments engraved on the back. Despite the enchantment being engraved rather than simply written on the surface it was not permanent as more magical energy was drained by the shields the enchantment would be rendered inert, the energy dissipating rather than being stored.

"So about thirty short." Will replied nodded, "That will have to do. When you activate the circle I'll have the troops with the enchanted shields on the outside and those without behind them with bows. If there's a welcoming committee of Orcs and Wraith waiting for us in Oscan then we could be going straight into a fight." "I'll bear that in mind." Dominic said and Will turned towards where Yilven was speaking with several of the Elf warriors.

"Yilven." he called out and the Elf left the others he was speaking to and approached Will.

"Yes Will?" he asked.

"I think we're ready to go now. I want the Elves arranged in two circles. An outer ring of infantry all facing outwards to form a wall of shields around us and inside that a mix of archers and cavalry ready to attack anyone lying in wait for us at the other end. We'll be right in the middle with the horses." Will told Yilven and he nodded.

"I'll go and give the orders now." he said before he turned and hurried back towards the Elves he had been speaking to.

Everyone travelling to Oscan now gathered together within the stone circle. Just as Will had instructed he and the rest of his group stood around the central stone while the expedition's horses were brought in around them. The Elves then formed a perimeter around them while remaining within the area of the stone circle. As Will had instructed this was in two parts with about fifty of the Elves forming an inner ring that was an alternating mix of archers and cavalry while outside of them the rest stood as close to one another as they could with their shields held up in front of them with their spears ready to drop down to prevent an enemy from getting close.

"Ready?" Dominic asked as he looked around.

"How do I know?" Horace responded.

"Just get on with it." Gromar added, glaring around him as if they were already in enemy held territory.

"Okay here goes." Dominic said as he reached his hand towards the central stone.

"Wait, will this hurt?" Lucia said and Dominic hesitated.

"I don't know. I doubt it if Ammaril's army has been moving animals using the circles. If it caused them pain then they'd refuse to enter them." he said.

"Let's get it over with and find out." Gromar said.

"Do it Dominic." Will added and Dominic placed the palm of his hand on the stone before hesitating.

"Is something wrong?" Yilven asked.

"Did it not work? We haven't moved." Lucia said, looking around again.

"I haven't done anything yet. I was just seeing if I could sense the power of the ley lines." Dominic replied.
"Can you?" Lucia said.

"No, it just feels like stone. Not surprising really. If it was charged with magical power normally then at least one sorcerer would have noticed by now." Dominic said, "I'm going to activate the circle now. Thinking of Oscay and the Great Library of the Oscari."

All of a sudden everyone inside found themselves standing in a different stone circle, with the sun in a different position in the sky.

"What happened? I didn't feel anything." Lucia said.

"I think that means we've moved." Gromar replied.

"This is Oscay. The stone circle outside the city and right where we need to be." Will added before Yilven saw movement in a nearby treeline.

"Orcs!" he shouted, pointing towards the source of the movement.

In an instant the Elf archers facing towards the treeline let loose a volley of arrows that vanished into the trees before moments later just over a dozen armoured Orcs wielding a mix of swords and axes came charging out into the open. The Orcs were not alone though and behind them a force of about twice as many Trolls also emerged from the trees.

"Form two lines. Archers behind, spearmen in front. Cavalry move to the flanks and stand by." Will ordered and then he looked at Yilven who nodded to indicate that the order was clear.

Some of the Trolls held rocks about the size of a human, Elf or Orc's head and they hurled these towards the Elf line. Some of these fell short but others struck the line of shields and smashed right through them. The front rank of Elves reacted quickly to this by shuffling sideways to close the gaps in the shield wall, knowing that it had to kept whole in order to be effective.

"Whoa!" Horace exclaimed when he saw this.

"Archers." Will called out and the rear line of Elves released another volley of arrows towards the Orcs and Trolls but the Orcs retreated when they saw these flying through the air and used the larger Trolls for cover. Many of the arrows struck the Trolls but most merely embedded themselves in their flesh, with only one of them being struck in such a way that it staggered back while clutching at an arrow embedded in its neck as blood pumped out from an artery before collapsing in a heap.

"Will they'll smash our infantry apart if they keep that up." Yilven said.

"They can't." Dominic said, "If they hurl enough rocks then some of them might hit the standing stones and damage them."

"Will that stop the circle from working?" Gromar asked.

"We'd be trapped here." Lucia pointed out.

"I don't know exactly. If Ammaril took one of the stones from here then the circle must be able to withstand some losses but there must be a limit or why bother with them at all?" Dominic said, answering Gromar's question before several more rocks were thrown. This time only two struck the Elves while the rest fell short,

"See? They aren't throwing them as hard as they can. The rocks are only falling short, never going long. They don't want to risk the integrity of the circle." Dominic said.

"They're still throwing them though. Maybe they're willing to risk a little damage." Gromar pointed out.

"Will we can't make it to the city with them at our backs the whole way." Yilven said and Will nodded.

"I know." he said and he looked at Dominic, "Can you do anything to help?" he asked.

"Perhaps. Horace I need a flame." Dominic responded, "In the meantime keep those archers shooting. You might take down a couple more of them."

"One flame coming up." Horace said as he rummaged through his bag for his tinder box, "I need something to burn. Do you have any paper?" he added, looking at Dominic.

"Here." Dominic said as he took a bundle of paper that he used for making notes from his own bag and he handed them to Horace who tore one of the sheets into strips to use as fuel for his fire.

"Quickly if you can Horace." Will said as he unslung his crossbow and drew back the string.

"Got it." Horace said as he created a spark that ignited the end of one of the strips of paper and then carefully lifted it up to hand to Dominic.

"Thank you Horace, that's just what I need." the sorcerer said as he held up the burning paper toward the Trolls near the treeline.

Aligning the head of his staff with the burning paper Dominic then channelled his power through the staff so that it shot out towards the flame. The effect of this was to create a stream of fire that shot upwards in an arc over the heads of the Elf warriors, several of whom flinched from the sudden heat as it passed over them and then came back down again to strike the ground in the centre of the line of Trolls. Upon impact with the ground the flames spread out in a sudden blast that immediately consumed the closest two Trolls while dowsing several others with flames as well and causing them to flee in random directions as they burned.

"Can you do that again?" Will asked.

"Just give me a moment." Dominic answered but the Orcs and Trolls did not intend to give Dominic the chance to regain his strength to make another attack and the Trolls roared as they were ordered forwards by the Orcs behind them and they charged towards the lines of Elves. The Elf archers responded with another volley of arrows that had no effect on the massive Trolls and Will raised his hand towards the Trolls.

"Cavalry, charge!" he shouted and the Elves on horseback immediately urged their mounts into a gallop, riding around the sides of the infantry line and levelling their spears as they charged towards the oncoming Trolls.

Under orders from the Orcs following them, the Trolls split into two groups, one to face each of the groups of charging Elves. The Orcs also divided themselves into two groups, still keeping behind the Trolls for protection from the Elf archers. A handful of the Trolls still had rocks in their hands and they hurled these towards the charging cavalry, now able to put all their strength into the throw. Only one of these struck a target, hitting a horse and bringing it crashing down along with its rider.

The Orcs still had more in store for the Elves though and before the cavalry could reach them or the Trolls a glowing light came from the pendant that each wore before ghostly figures emerged from them.

"Wraith." Yilven said when he saw these.

"These must be the personal guard to Ammaril that Thomas told us about." Dominic added.

"All the cavalry have shields that will protect them. For a time at least." Will commented, hoping that the shields would be enough.

The Wraith glided between the Trolls and sped towards the Elf cavalry who reacted by raising their shields that were engraved with the spell that was supposed to protect them against their ethereal opponents. The Wraith reached the Elf cavalry quickly, reaching out their arms towards them. The first Wraith to reach the Elven cavalry went for the rider himself and the Elf was able to place his shield in the creature's path. The Wraith screeched as soon as it touched the shield and the enchantment activated, draining the magical energy that sustained the creature into the shield. The Wraith tried to pull back but the spell had it trapped and the drain continued until the creature vanished.

Seeing this the other Wraith dodged away from the Elves, not wanting to suffer the same fate as the first.

One was too slow in turning aside though and the Elf that it had been heading towards extended his shield arm outwards as if he was swinging a sword at an opponent and swatting the Wraith. As soon as the shield hit the ethereal creature it suffered the same fate as the first to come into contact with one of the shields and its energy was quickly drained into it.

In each group of cavalry some of the riders now peeled away from the main group to follow the Wraith as they turned while the majority continued to ride towards the Trolls that were ahead of them with their spears levelled. The first of these to reach the Trolls drove the point of his spear right into its chest, striking will all the force of a charging horse and the spear penetrated deep enough into its flesh to reach its heart. The Troll fell dead immediately, ripping the spear from the Elf's grip and forcing him to evade the huge body as it fell forwards.

More of the Elves then reached the Trolls, some of them able to stab the larger humanoids with their spears with varying results while in other cases the Trolls swung the crude hand weapons that they carried at the Elves and struck them with enough force that it sent them tumbling from the backs of their mounts. In one case a Troll instead was able to grab hold of a horse by its neck and twist it hard enough to break and the unfortunate Elf on its back fell to the ground with it, being crushed beneath its weight. Some of the falling Elves died instantly from the fall, breaking bones or being trampled underfoot by their own horses. The survivors did not fare much better though as the Trolls struck at them while they were vulnerable, hacking at them with their crude weapons or simply stamping on them before they could get back to their feet. Only one of the fallen Elves was able to get back to his feet and draw his sword in time to try and defend himself.

However, when he swung his sword at the Troll in front of him he was unable to do anything more than cause it to roar in pain when he hit it whereas when the Troll swung its own axe back at him the strength of the blow was enough to shatter his shield entirely and send him flying backwards several feet where he landed on his back, helpless as the Troll then ran up to him and swung its axe down into his chest.

The Wraith moved in from the sides of the cavalry, hoping to be able to attack from angles that the Elves could not defend themselves from but the riders who had broken away from the main group turned to follow them and one cavalryman was able to ride right up behind a Wraith and swat at it with his shield, causing it to evaporate as its magical energy was drawn into the shield.

Another of the Wraith turned towards the Elven infantry rather than looking for a way to attack the cavalry and it sped towards the line of shields. Anticipating that these shields would also be marked with the enchantment that protected the cavalymen the Wraith increased its altitude above the ground, intending to pass over the heads of the warriors high enough that they would not be able to use their shields against it.

However, when Dominic saw the Wraith rise up above the Elves he thrust out staff.

"Phyan-sa!" he exclaimed and a blast of magical energy erupted from the end of the staff and sped towards the Wraith before it could move out of the way.

There was a bright flash as the magical blast struck the Wraith and it fell apart, separating into multiple smaller glowing orbs that scattered before they simply vanished.

Elsewhere another Wraith descended to almost ground level as an Elf on horseback charged towards it, getting beneath the level of the enchanted shield. This also positioned the Wraith too low to effectively attack the rider so it instead did the next best thing and attacked the horse on which he was sat. The horse let out a cry and collapsed as soon as the Wraith touched it, sending the rider falling forwards. Then as he lay helpless on the ground the Wraith switched from attacking the horse to attacking him, draining his life before he could attempt to defend himself.

"They're going to need help." Will said as he watched the cavalry weaving between the Trolls, striking at them with their swords while doing their best to avoid being struck in return. The difficulty was that after the initial charge where it had been possible to inflict significant damage using their spears the Elves now required multiple serious hits on a Troll to despatch it while just one swing of a crude blade or club could smash the bones of either a horse or its rider and the initial advantage that the Elves had had in numbers was starting to diminish.

"We should advance and let the cavalry withdraw." Yilven suggested and Will nodded.

"Infantry advance in line." he called out and the Elves on foot began to march forwards behind their shield line, maintaining their formation to ensure that gaps did not appear in the protective barrier, "Come on, we'll need to follow them." Will added and he and the rest of the group hurried after the Elves.

Seeing the infantry now marching towards them one of the Trolls turned and let out a roar before it charged directly at them, knocking aside a cavalryman who got in his way.

"I've got this." Gromar said suddenly and he broke into a run, passing between the Elf archers and reaching the shield line just as the Troll did, brushing aside the spears that the Elves attempted to use to keep him back from them. Taking full advantage of his considerable size and weight the Troll simply slammed into the line of Elves and smashed them out of his way to break through. However, before he could take advantage of now being behind the line of shields Gromar swung his war hammer. Because of the massive difference in their sizes Gromar could not aim for the chest or head where the Troll's vital organs were located so instead he aimed for one of its knees. The magic of the hammer amplified the strength of the blow massively to shatter the knee with a single hit and the Troll roared in pain as he fell to the ground whereupon Gromar delivered a second magically enhanced blow to the Troll's head, splitting open its thick skull and killing it instantly.

"Close this gap. Don't give them a way through." Gromar told the Elves. It was obvious to him that the three Elves who had been struck by the Troll's charge were not fit to return to the line so he indicated for the Elves to the side of the gap to move sideways to fill it instead.

"Signal for the cavalry to fall back and regroup." Will ordered and one of the Elven archers lifted a horn to his lips and blew to produce a loud, continuous tone. Upon hearing this the remaining cavalrymen immediately turned their horses and rode away from the Trolls that they had been engaging. This now left the archers with clear targets and they immediately loaded their bows. At the same time Will lifted his now loaded crossbow to his shoulder and took aim at a Troll that was visible over the heads of the Elves between them. Yilven also copied this, raising his bow to fire over the two lines of Elves in front of him.

"Archers release." Will shouted as he shot his crossbow and at the same time Yilven and the other Elf archers all released their arrows.

Once again these did little individually but there were so many when compared to the number of Trolls to be shot at that three more of the large humanoids fell, succumbing to a mix of injuries suffered from multiple arrow hits and sword and spear wounds from the cavalry that were now riding around the sides of the infantry's shield wall to regroup.

Although the Trolls had suffered significant losses, now down to around half their original number the remaining ones did not give up and urged on by their Orc commanders they all charged towards the Elf line, prompting Gromar to push his way forwards.

"Out of my way." he said, pushing between two Elf spearmen to position himself out in the open in front of the shield wall.

"Gromar get back." Will shouted.

"I can do more here than back there Will and you know it." Gromar responded and then he charged at a Troll heading towards him and swung his war hammer as he had earlier, smashing the Troll's knee and bringing it crashing to the ground. This time though he did not finish off the Troll while it was lying helpless on the ground, instead he turned to hunt for another target only to find a Wraith speeding towards him. The ethereal

creature had hoped to catch Gromar by surprise before he could retreat back behind the shield wall but Gromar did not retreat. Instead as the Wraith got closer he swung his war hammer again and it passed through the Wraith's body. The magic of the hammer disrupted that of the Wraith, seeming to cut a path through it and slice it in two and the creature shrieked before it evaporated in front of Gromar.

An arrow then landed close to Gromar and he looked around to see that the Orcs who until that point had not been playing an active role in the fighting had now unslung the bows that they were armed with and were aiming them towards the Elves. They seemed reluctant to shoot their bows at the line where the Trolls were assaulting it but Gromar was in a more exposed position so they targeted him instead. Although Gromar also carried a crossbow slung across his back the weapon was not ready for use so rather than shoot back he opted to do as Will had told him and he dashed back towards the shield wall where the Elves briefly opened a narrow gap for him to squeeze through while the other Trolls reached the Elf line.

As had happened earlier the Troll attempted to simply smash through the shield wall using their own weight and bulk against it. Another volley of arrows struck the Trolls just before they struck the shield wall and another of them was killed, falling forwards into the shield wall and knocking several Elves backwards and crushing one of them beneath the corpse. Meanwhile a second Troll broke through the shield wall right in front of Will group and Dominic pointed his staff towards it.

"Phyan-sa!" he exclaimed as he unleashed another magical blast from the end of his staff. This struck the Troll and it was pushed backwards through the same hole that it had just created as it fell. Rather than smash its own way through the shield wall a second Troll attempted to take advantage of this gap in it but the Elves were ready for this and as the Troll leapt over the body of his fallen comrade the gap was filled by the points of spears from the Elves either side of it, both of them piercing the Troll's abdomen and he doubled over as he died.

The next Troll to reach the shield wall did not simply rely on its own weight to smash through it, instead it made use of the heavy axe it carried in both hands and swung the weapon at the Elves from just beyond the reach of their spears. This shattered several shields and sent their owners flying backwards under the force of the blow and left a gap in the shield wall wide enough for the Troll to pass through. The Troll then charged towards the line of archers behind the front line of spearmen and they fired another desperate volley of arrows into him only for them to simply lodge themselves in his flesh without causing any significant injury. The archers ahead of the Troll scattered as the massive figure charged into their midst, still swinging his axe at anything even remotely close enough to make it look like it was within reach of the weapon.

"Horace I need that flame again." Dominic said, looking down at where Horace had been keeping the paper burning and Horace held up another strip of paper that was on fire at one end.

"Here." he said and Dominic smiled. Rather than take the paper from the Halfling though he merely held out his staff so that the tip came close to the fire.

"Pyrus." he said softly and the fire from the paper seemed to leap towards the staff forming a ball of flame that hovered close to the head of the staff and moved along with it, "Okay let's go." he said to Will and Yilven and then the three men charged towards the Troll with their weapons ready. Lucia was about to follow as well when Horace grabbed her.

"Will would never forgive himself if something happened to you." he said.

"But we have to help." Lucia responded.

"Then let's try shooting something." Horace suggested and he unslung the crossbow he had across his back. Lucia also had a crossbow slung on her back and she unslung the weapon as well.

While Horace and Lucia were struggling to draw back the strings of their crossbows Will, Yilven and Dominic charged the Troll that had just broken through the shield wall and Dominic thrust his staff towards the creature so that the fireball now floating at the head was pushed towards him., causing him to back away and raising an arm to shield his face and while he was distracted both Will and Yilven struck, slicing at the Troll's stomach. Their swords cut deep enough that the Troll roared in pain and blood poured out from the wounds. Then the Troll dropped his axe and clutched at his stomach as if trying to stop the bleeding but his injuries were too serious and he staggered for a few moments before collapsing.

Before the Elves could close the gap in the shield wall the two remaining Wraith darted through it.

"Will look out! Wraith!" Lucia called out when she saw this and she pointed towards the ethereal creatures that had just broken through the Elf line.

Rather than attacking any of the Elves the Wraith focused on Will, Yilven and Dominic, correctly identifying them as the leaders of the Elf force and they sped towards the trio. Will did not hesitate when he saw this though and he stepped forwards with his sword held ready so that at the exact moment that the Wraith reached out towards him he swung his sword towards the creature and sliced right through it. There was a screech as the Wraith broke apart into two clusters of glowing lights that passed by either side of Will harmlessly before vanishing and Will turned towards the second Wraith.

This creature hesitated, floating in the air and looking at Will and Yilven, wondering whether all three had weapons that could destroy it. However, while the Wraith was focused on Will, Yilven and Dominic, Gromar ran up behind it and swung his hammer. The head of the hammer passed effortlessly through the Wraith and it did not even screech as it too evaporated, eliminating the last of the ethereal creatures that had emerged. "Good thing it didn't look behind it, eh?" Gromar said, "I just wish that there was a little more to them. It's like attacking air and swinging a hammer at nothing tends to throw you off balance. I think I prefer fighting Trolls." "Then perhaps you're in luck Yilven replied as another Troll hurled itself at the Elf shield wall. However, the Elves reacted by pulling their spears back before the Troll could smash them aside and then thrust them forwards again to impale him as he ran onto their points. The Troll roared in pain for a moment before falling forwards and the Elves retreated before they could be crushed beneath the bulk of the corpse. No other Trolls attempted to exploit this gap though, instead the handful that remained came to a stop and just roared at the Elves. One of them bent down to scoop up a large handful of dirt from the ground and hurled it towards the Elves. The strength of the impact against their shields made some of the Elves stagger backwards for a moment but the dirt was too soft to do any real damage and they quickly regained their composure and retook their places in the line.

The Elf archers shot their bows at the Trolls again and this time a pair of crossbow bolts also flew towards them as Horace and Lucia finally got their weapons ready. Meanwhile Will turned to look at the cavalry. The Elf horsemen had ridden around the shield wall and gathered just outside the stone circle behind it. There were significantly fewer of them than there had been when they had arrived in Oscay with around a third of them now lying on the field of battle where they had died. There were remarkably few wounded among the cavalry, with attacks by Trolls and Wraith tending to kill outright rather than wound but still three of the Elves had dismounted from their horses and were having wounds seen to.

"Prepare for another charge." Will called out to the cavalry and then he pointed beyond the shield wall and past the Trolls to where the small group of Orcs still loitered shooting the occasional arrow towards the Elves, "Go for the Orcs, not the Trolls."

The cavalry then reorganised themselves, with those fit to ride turning their horses before their leader raised his hand.

"All ready." Yilven said, looking at Will and he nodded.

"Archers, keep shooting at those Trolls. Cavalry, charge!" he ordered and at the same time as the archers released another volley of arrows the cavalry rushed into action as well, galloping back around the shield wall as a single cohesive unit rather than the smaller groups that had fallen back.

Being shot at by arrows focused the simple minds of the Trolls on the Elf infantry rather than the cavalry so they did not react as the Elves on horseback rode around, keeping their distance so as not to get in the way of the archers as they shot yet another volley of arrows and another of the Trolls was brought down with dozens of arrows sticking out of his body.

Although the Trolls paid no attention to the cavalry though the Orcs did see the force of horsemen circling around their larger shock troops and undoubtedly heading in their direction. Rather than attempt to flee though and despite being outnumbered by almost five to one the Orcs stood their ground and shot their bows as quickly as they could, knocking three of the Elves from their horses but the rest continued towards them with their spears levelled. When the Elves got within a few yards of the Orcs they attempted to scatter, hoping to be able to slip between the horses but the Elves were too numerous and they speared around half of the Orcs before most of the rest were trampled beneath the horses' hooves. Only one Orc was able to avoid being impaled or ridden down and he drew his sword to slash at the nearest Elf, cutting deep into his leg before the following rider thrust a spear point at him and stabbed him in his side.

With the Orcs all dead the leader of the cavalry brought his men to a halt and had them form a line beside one another facing back towards the infantry's shield line to leave the Trolls between the two groups and only then did the massive creatures realise the situation that they were in.

Although the spell that had transformed the Trolls from Ogres had made them unquestioningly loyal to Ammaril they were not inclined to throw their lives away for no reason and being both heavily outnumbered and caught between two groups of well armed Elves caused them to finally break and flee. The gaps between either flank of the two parts of the Elf force was large enough to offer the Trolls obvious avenues of escape and the largest of their number waved towards it.

"Run!" he yelled and the Trolls all broke into a run, this time heading away from the Elves and into the wilderness.

"Let them go." Will called out as he watched the Trolls fleeing from his force, "We don't have time to go after them." then he turned to Yilven and added, "I need to know what we have left. Everyone who is healthy will come to the city but the wounded will remain here, no matter how minor their injuries might be. They can hide in the forest until we get back."

The Shattered Stone

“What if someone else uses the circle?” Yilven asked and they both glanced at the stone circle.

“If it’s just a messenger then they can shoot them if they want but I don’t want them taking any risks by engaging an actual Orc patrol. We’ll gather up the dead and conceal them but then we need to move. The longer we delay the more chance Ammaril’s army will have to start its invasion of Dannaron.”

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The battle against the Orcs and Trolls had cost the Elves about a fifth of their number in killed and wounded along with several of the horses. Fortunately there were still enough horses left for all of the healthy Elves to be able to ride to the city and Will watched as they climbed onto their mounts. Then he glanced at the Elves who would be remaining behind, all those who had suffered even slight injuries and could possibly slow down the rest of the force. It would be up to the walking wounded to make sure that the more seriously hurt were looked after until the rest of the force could return and they could all travel back to Dannaron.

"Forward." Will ordered when the last of the Elves was in his saddle and the force began to ride, moving at a moderate pace towards the city where according to Thomas, Ammaril could be found.

Yilven took the lead on the ride towards the Great Library, watching the ruins for any signs of movement. The broken terrain provided almost limitless hiding places in which Orcs or Trolls could be lying in wait.

"Under different circumstances I'd find all of this fascinating." Dominic said, studying their surroundings carefully though for different reasons, "Just think this city was once home to thousands of Oscari, the most powerful people to have lived."

"Only they all died out, didn't they?" Gromar pointed out, "Apart from the fragments of themselves they were able to scatter in others."

"I'd hoped never to have to come back here again." Horace commented before Dominic could respond as he looked around as well.

"So why did you?" Lucia asked.

"The same reason as the rest of us." Gromar said, "To see this through to the end."

All of a sudden Yilven brought his horse to a stop and raised his hand for the rest of the force to stop as well.

"Has he seen something?" Horace asked as Yilven dismounted from his horse.

"Maybe. I'll go and find out." Will said and he also dismounted before leading his horse to where the Elf stood, "Yilven what's wrong?" he said.

"Nothing yet Will but I think that we should continue on foot from here on. Leave a few men here to watch the horses but I think that stealth is going to be of more use than speed now." Yilven replied. Then he pointed to a nearby section of the ruins, "The horses can be concealed over there. Four men ought to be enough to keep watch over them adequately. I can see signs that this road is in use but there doesn't seem to be any indication of regular patrols through the city."

"Okay." Will said, nodding his head in agreement, "I take it that you won't want us to keep using the road either?"

"No, we should cut through the ruins instead. They'll offer more protection than if we're caught out in the open." Yilven said and Will turned to face the others.

"Dismount. We're proceeding on foot from here on in." he ordered and the rest of the force also began to dismount from their horses.

Yilven paused as soon as the Great Library came into view to study the structure. It was obvious that things were different to how they had been the last time that he had seen the library. Now the ruins surrounding it had been cleared for a distance of more than a hundred yards and the constructions of an entirely new building was well underway beside it. From the angle he was viewing from Yilven could not tell if the two buildings were merely very close to one another or if the new building was actually connected directly to the Great Library. Thanks to the ruins being cleared though it was also easy to see the rows of tents that had been erected for the Orcs and Trolls present to serve Ammaril.

"Any sign of Ammaril?" Will asked but Yilven shook his head.

"No. I can see Orcs and Trolls moving about but there's nothing obvious to indicate where she is. My guess would be somewhere inside the library itself, she's obsessed with the knowledge it contains." he said.

"How many Orcs and Trolls?" Will added, looking towards the library himself but unable to make out the same detail that Yilven could.

"Just a handful of Orcs right now though I think that there are quite a lot more of them about. That handful we encountered at the stone circle were just a fraction of them. The majority that I can see are Trolls." Yilven said.

"How do you know that there are more Orcs about if you can't see them?" Will said.

"From the tents. There must be enough tents here for a hundred or so Orcs. The Trolls use much cruder tents originally made for when they were Ogres. Presumably modified for the larger size they are now but the design and crudeness of the construction are both the same." Yilven explained.

"That looks new. Ammaril's new palace I take it?" Will said and he pointed to the half-completed palace. "That's my guess. See how the ruins have been cleared. That's going to make sneaking up on Ammaril harder." Yilven said.

"It will only take a few of us to deal with Ammaril but I'd rather not have to fight hundreds of Orcs and Trolls." Will said and then he looked around at the ruins, "How well do you suppose the troops Lord Arrin provided us with could use these ruins as cover to attack that camp?"

"Shoot and move?" Yilven suggested and Will nodded.

"That's what I was thinking, yes. A few dozen arrows shot into those tents would be unpleasant for anyone inside them and turning the attention of the Orcs and Trolls towards the ruins."

"While we sneak in from another direction you mean?" Yilven said.

"Exactly. I'm thinking that that library ought to cover our approach if we can get the Orcs looking in this direction instead." Will said and Yilven looked towards the library again.

"I think that would work. It might be useful if Dominic could conjure up some fireballs to attack the camp as well but that would tie him to the source of the flames and keep him out of our raiding force. We might need his power against Ammaril." he said.

"Yes, a shame that Lord Arrin couldn't have spared any of his sorcerers." Will agreed.

"I should circle around the camp and the library. It will give me a better idea of how many Orcs and Trolls we're up against and how they are deployed." Yilven said and Will nodded again.

"Do it. I'll tell the others what the plan is." he said.

Orcan was staring at a map when Tiellan entered his tent to speak with him.

"The army is waiting. It is growing impatient. When do we attack?" Tiellan asked.

"The human traitor Thomas should have brought word by now," Orcan replied and he lowered the map, "but the orders from Queen Ammaril were to wait for him to bring word from Westshore."

"Do you think Dannaron will surrender?" Tiellan said.

"No. If they were going to then we would have already heard by now and our scouts have observed the gathering of troops and preparation of defences. They will fight." Orcan said.

"They will lose." Tiellan added.

"Yes they will. They will fall like all the other kingdoms have fallen already. Then we will take Hessenland and the entire Straight of Lerron will be under our control and we can move east." Orcan said.

"First we need to invade Dannaron though." Tiellan pointed out.

"Yes, first Dannaron must fall." Orcan agreed. Then after a moment's hesitation he added, "I am travelling to Oscay to speak with Queen Ammaril. She must be told that her agent has failed her and now an invasion must take place. You will be in command until I return."

"Yes Orcan." Tiellan said before Orcan put down the map he had been studying and exited the tent.

Outside a pair of Ammaril's personal elite warriors stood on guard and Orcan looked at one of them.

"Come with me. I need to go to Oscay to speak with Queen Ammaril. You will activate the stone circle for me." he ordered, knowing that in order to get to Oscay he would need one of them to activate the nearby stone circle. Ammaril had yet to see fit to provide Orcan with a pendant or other object containing a stone that held the essence of a Wraith.

"Yes my lord." one of the Orcs responded and both then followed Orcan as he walked through the camp to where there were horses available. Although the nearby stone circle was within walking distance of the camp Orcan knew that the circle in Oscay was further from the location of the Great Library and Ammaril's new palace so having horses would enable him and the other two Orcs to get there and back much more quickly than if they had to walk.

Getting to the nearby circle on horseback took only a short amount of time and the three Orcs all dismounted at its edge. This stone circle had been heavily overgrown when the army had first arrived in the area to make camp but the vegetation had been cleared from inside it by Trolls and now nothing larger than the stump of a tree was present to block the circle from being used to its maximum capacity.

Orcan and the other two Orcs led their horses to the centre of the circle where one of Orcan's guards placed his free hand on the central stone.

"To Oscay. To the Great Library." Orcan said again and the Orc with his hand on the stone nodded. There was a brief glow from the pendant around the Orc's neck as the Wraith within channelled just enough of its magic through the Orc into the stone to activate the circle and all of a sudden the three Orcs all found themselves standing in the stone circle just outside the ancient Oscari city in Oscay where the Great Library could be found.

Immediately all three saw the signs of the battle that had taken place here recently. The bodies of Orcs and Trolls could be seen scattered across the ground between the circle and the nearby forest. The corpse of a

horse was also visible among the dead from the battle but there was no immediate indication of who was responsible.

"Wait here." Orcan ordered the other two Orcs and he let go of the reigns of his horse to run towards the closest of the corpses. This was a Troll lying face up and embedded in its front were several arrows. Orcan plucked one of these from the corpse, breaking off the head in the process. Orcan examined the workmanship of the arrow closely, trying to determine something about who it had belonged to from this but the tail section alone proved inadequate. He was just about to turn back to the body of the Troll to dig out the arrow head to examine that when all of a sudden there was the sound of something flying through the air towards him from the direction of the trees and he turned just in time for another arrow to strike him in the centre of his chest.

Had Orcan been wearing mundane chainmail then the narrow arrowhead would most likely have pierced it and killed him almost instantly but the chainmail coat that he wore was an heirloom of the royal family of Syldarin, used by a succession of Elf kings when they went into battle. Each link of the chainmail was enchanted so that the coat formed a solid magical barrier rather than just being a collection of individual links that arrows could penetrate. Therefore, instead of killing Orcan the arrow simply bounced off his chest and fell to the ground at his feet. Glancing down at this arrow Orcan realised immediately that it was Elven in origin. While the Orcs still had many arrows that had been made to Elf designs it was unthinkable that an Orc would be shooting at Orcan or that they would have killed the warriors guarding the stone circle so the only other possibility was that somehow a force of Elves had managed to reach Oscay. There were only two ways that Elves could have got to this place, either using the stone circle or by ship before marching through Oscay and neither of these seemed likely to Orcan. However, whether they had been able to discover how the stone circles operated or if they had set sail many weeks ago to get this far did not matter to Orcan right now. All that was important was that there was a hostile force present in Oscay that had wiped out the guards at the stone circle and this meant that Ammaril was in danger.

Orcan ran back into the stone circle just as another arrow flew from the woods and struck the Orc who had activated the stone circle.

"There are Elves here." Orcan told the other Orc, "Get back to the army and bring-" he continued before all of a sudden a third arrow hit the remaining Orc in the side of his head, passing right through his skull and erupting from the other side.

Orcan now had two choices. He suspected that the Wraith within the pendants worn by the two dead Orcs would provide the power needed to activate the stone circle if he demanded it of them so he could return to Freinland and gather reinforcements before coming back here. However, he did not want to delay getting to Ammaril a moment more than necessary so rather than going back for reinforcements he opted to carry on alone and as yet another arrow bounced off the magical field created by his chainmail coat he climbed back into the saddle of his horse and urged it into a gallop, heading out of the stone circle and towards the ancient ruined city.

Yilven moved cautiously as he circled the Great Library, examining it, the half-built palace and the camp carefully from all angles. In doing this he saw the connecting hallway running between the library and the palace and when he returned to the rest of the force he was smiling.

"You find something interesting?" Gromar asked when he saw the expression on Yilven's face.

"The new palace is connected to the library." Yilven replied.

"So if we can get into the library and Ammaril's not there then we can get directly to the palace instead?" Will said.

"Exactly. Getting there will require caution though. The Orcs are patrolling the perimeter of the camp, including the library and palace." Yilven said.

"How many?" Will asked.

"I saw a group of four." Yilven answered.

"Four of them, four of us. Six if you include Horace and Lucia." Gromar said and Lucia scowled at him.

"Why wouldn't you?" she said.

"Because neither of you is exactly a match for an Orc in combat." Gromar said.

"We dealt with Thomas." Lucia pointed out.

"If we encounter a patrol and can't get around them then they'll have to be dealt with quickly and quietly." Yilven said, ignoring the bickering between Gromar and Lucia.

"Very well, we'll do our best to just keep out of sight but if there's no other option then we'll have to figure out the quickest way to eliminate the patrol. Now what about approaching the actual library?" Will said.

"There's a spoil heap close to the rear of the library that looks like its where all the cleared debris has been taken. That could give us some cover but there's too much chance that we could run into Trolls carrying

more loads there. I think that we're better off approaching the front and using the distraction of the attack on the camp to get inside unnoticed." Yilven said.

"Okay, if you think that's best then that's what we'll do. The troops are organised into smaller groups that can use their bows and then change positions rapidly. Some will remain hidden until the Orcs come to try and root them out and ambush them." Will said, explaining what had been decided while Yilven was scouting the area.

"Good. It's best if the groups all remain at least a hundred yards from the cleared ground. The Orc patrol was moving close to the edge so that should keep our troops out of sight. We should get moving though if we want to be in position by the time the attack starts." Yilven replied.

The force then began to split up. The Elf warriors divided into their assigned groups and advanced towards the Orc and Troll camp. These groups moved further apart as they got closer to cover a broad area before taking cover within ruined buildings. These were chosen so that it was possible to light small fires within them without attracting the attention of the Orcs in the camp. These fires were not intended to provide heat for the Elves, only a source of flame so that their first volley of arrows aimed at the tents could also be used to start fires throughout the camp that would hopefully cause more panic and disruption.

While this was happening Will and Yilven were leading their own group towards the main entrance to the Great Library. There was a considerable area of open ground between this and where the ruins now extended to so they would have to time their sprint between them carefully. However, they were still making their way through the ruins when Yilven suddenly waved them back.

"Orcs!" he hissed when he saw the group of four Orcs moving towards them, following the edge of the ruins closely.

"How many?" Will asked.

"Four of them. I think it's the same group I saw earlier walking the perimeter. They're close enough that if we retreat they'll see us." Yilven answered as he raised his bow and took aim at the lead Orc.

"Wait." Dominic said.

"What?" Will said.

"If these Orcs are part of Ammaril's personal guard then won't they be accompanied by Wraith?" Dominic pointed out.

"He's right Will." Gromar added.

"So we're up against eight, not four." Will said, "Yilven this will be your call. If you think that they're getting too close then we'll shoot them. Dominic you hold them off with your magic but be ready to attack as soon as we see any Wraith appearing."

The group waited as the Orcs continued to approach the ruined building that they were sheltering in and it became apparent that they were checking inside every building that they passed by.

"They aren't going to just go past us." Yilven said.

"Then we wait until the last moment and all shoot together." Will said and he raised his crossbow. The others in the group did likewise, aiming their weapons towards the approaching Orcs until they walked up to the building where the group waited and looked inside.

Yilven fired first, releasing an arrow that pierced the forehead of an Orc and this was followed by four crossbow bolts that struck two of the remaining three. The remaining Orc leapt into the ruins, drawing his sword as he did so and at the same time there was a light from the pendant around his neck before the ghostly figure of a Wraith emerged. The Orc looked around briefly and saw that Will was the closest person to him. The Orc then swung his sword down towards Will who reacted by lifting his crossbow to block the blow and the sword embedded itself in the wooden body of the weapon.

"Phyan-sa!" Dominic exclaimed as he unleashed a blast of magical energy at the Wraith but the creature moved out of the way unexpectedly and the blast instead blew a large chunk out of the already ruined wall near to where the Orc had leapt over it. In moving aside though the Wraith moved within arms reach of Lucia just as she drew her dagger and she thrust the tip into the Wraith. The magic of the blade drew the energy of the Wraith and it appeared to thrash about screeching before fading away to nothing.

"Well done Lucia." Horace said while Will and Yilven drew their swords and Gromar picked up his hammer but outside the ruined building two more spectral figures rose up from the bodies of Orcs.

"Can they get far enough to tell anyone about us?" Gromar asked.

"I don't know but they can try to stop us from getting to the library." Will replied and he rushed from the building with his sword in his hand.

One of the Wraith charged directly at him and he swung the sword towards it, slicing right through it and evaporating the ethereal creature. Seeing this the second Wraith slowed down and at that moment Dominic released another blast of magical energy.

"Phyan-sa!" he called out as he cast his spell and the magical blast hit the Wraith, causing it to disintegrate instantly.

"What about the fourth one?" Horace asked as the rest of the group emerged from the ruined building and looked at the dead Orcs on the ground.

"That one is lying face down." Dominic replied, pointing to one of the bodies.

"What difference does that make?" Gromar said.

"It might not make any but when I see Wraith I can see the magical link to the stones that their essences are kept in. If the Orc is lying on top of the stone then maybe the Wraith can't appear and keep that link." Dominic suggested.

"Never mind that now. Let's go." Will responded.

With the debris cleared from Ammaril's throne room the process of bringing in furniture could begin and the first item to be put in place was the throne itself. This was the exact same throne that her ancestors had sat on for more than a thousand years, transported from the palace in Syllda so that Ammaril could take what she saw as her rightful place on it.

Sitting on the throne Ammaril watched as a group of trolls then pulled a small but sturdily built cart into the throne room. On the back of this was the standing stone and Ammaril pointed to the raised dais beside the one on which her throne stood where she wanted it placed.

"Put it there." she commanded and one of the Trolls bowed before the cart was pulled up the ramp. The stone was incredibly heavy and even for the four Trolls working together it was hard work just to get it into position before the cart was carefully tipped to let the base of the stone slide from the cart into place. The four Trolls then lifted the top of the stone from the cart to straighten it up and when they stepped back Ammaril saw the stone standing upright exactly as she wanted. Getting to her feet she then stood in front of the stone and smiled at it, "Excellent." she said and then she turned to dismiss the Trolls but before she could she heard the sound of a distant cry of alarm.

As intended the initial volley of flaming arrows took the Orcs and Trolls in the camp entirely by surprise and almost a hundred burning projectiles flew through the air and then landed among them. Most of these were aimed for the various tents where the flames from the arrows spread to the cloth and animal skins that they were made of. In addition to the tents though some of the arrows were aimed towards various clusters of wooden boxes and sacks that were visible to the Elven archers and in moments there were fires burning around the camp. This was no raging inferno though, each blaze was small and self-contained with little chance of spreading to consume the camp, let alone the Great Library or Ammaril's palace.

Some of the Elves fired another volley of arrows before they began to move while others abandoned their positions immediately, moving to the next before firing again. Meanwhile in the camp the Orcs of Ammaril's personal guard were rushing to get organised and yelling orders at the Trolls to prepare for battle.

One of the first groups of Orcs to be ready rushed from the campsite into the ruins surrounding it but before they could reach one of the buildings from where some of the flaming arrows had been shot there was another volley of arrows that flew at them from the side, cutting all of them down. Their ambush successful, the Elves who had remained unnoticed in this building then copied the ones who had attacked the camp and withdrew, moving to another firing position that the Orcs would know nothing about.

"That's it. They're going after the Elves." Will said, watching the Orcs and Trolls deploying to head into the ruins after the Elves shooting at them while seemingly ignoring the fires burning all around their camp.

"I'll go first." Yilven said and then he broke into a sprint, running across the open ground between the edge of the ruins and the front of the Great Library. Rushing up the steps he then took cover behind one of the large columns before looking around to see whether anyone appeared to have reacted to his presence. However, the closest people to him were the rest of the group in the ruins and no Orcs or Trolls seemed to have noticed him. He moved quickly to a window beside the main doors of the library and peered inside, checking that there was no-one guarding the entrance and then when he saw that the initial hallway was empty he waved the rest of the group towards him.

"Okay it's clear." Will said, "Gromar you next. Then Horace, Lucia and Dominic in that order. I'll bring up the rear."

"Got it." Gromar said and he ran towards the library as well, his hammer in his hands and the moment that he reached the bottom of the steps Will looked at Horace.

"Go." he said and the Halfling gulped.

"Okay." he said and he handed his crossbow to Will, "Perhaps you should hang on to this one since yours got broken." he said and Will smiled as he took the weapon.

"Thanks. Now get going." he said and Horace cautiously exited the ruined building they were hiding in and

looked around to double check that the coast was clear before he too ran across the open to get to the library.

Lucia moved to the edge of the ruins in readiness for her turn but Will suddenly placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back.

"Will what's wrong?" she asked and Will pointed to where a group of Trolls had just appeared around the corner from behind the library, "Are they coming for us?" Lucia added.

"I don't know." Will replied.

The Trolls ran along the length of the library and Yilven, Gromar and Horace all retreated behind the columns. The Trolls did not even turn though when they reached the front the front of the library and instead carried on.

"Looks like they're heading for the Elves." Dominic commented and he looked in the direction that he knew the Elves to be located in. From this distance none of the humans could see what was happening but they could hear the occasion yell by an Orc or a Troll as they reacted to the attack.

"More might be on their way so never mind going one at a time. We'll go together." Will said as he took Lucia's hand, "Ready?" he asked her and she nodded.

"Ready." Dominic added.

"Then let's go." Will said and all three of them emerged from the ruins and broke into a run towards the library, crossing the open ground quickly and then rushing up the steps to where Yilven, Gromar and Horace all waited.

"So much for one at a time." Gromar said.

"Never mind that now." Will replied, "Let's get inside this place."

"This is really it, isn't it? The Great Library of the Oscari." Dominic said, smiling as he placed his hand against the door.

"You're not about to declare that everything inside belongs to you are you? Because that's what happened with Ammaril." Gromar pointed out.

"No, though I wouldn't mind being able to study some of the contents once this is over." Dominic replied.

"We'll see." Will said, "Now let's try this door."

The doors opened easily when the handles were turned and the group quickly dashed inside the library. Lucia gasped when she came through the doorway and found herself confronted by the preserved skulls of ancient dragons.

"So Ammaril wasn't the first to create such legendary creatures." Dominic said.

"It doesn't look like it, no. Though what happened to them is anyone's guess." Yilven replied softly and then he pointed to another set of doors, "The library itself is through there." he said.

"My queen we are under attack." one of the Orc artisans exclaimed as he ran into the throne room and Ammaril scowled.

"Who dares intrude on my palace?" she demanded.

"My queen we aren't certain but it looks like a force of Elves has managed to find a way here." the Orc told her and her expression softened.

"Elves you say?" she said, "Go and tell the others that this attack must be beaten back at any cost. However, if it is possible then I want my guard to take prisoners. After they have told us all that they know they will join our ranks."

"Yes my queen." the Orc replied, bowing his head before rushing back out of the room.

"My queen should we also go and join the battle?" an Orc guard, one of four present in the room said and Ammaril glanced around her. Although she had her own magic and the near unlimited reserve of power contained within the standing stone to draw on she did not want to risk fighting an unknown number of Elf warriors should they manage to penetrate the palace this far. Therefore, keeping the four Orcs and four Trolls currently present here made a lot more sense.

"No." she said, "I want all of you to remain here with me just in case."

"Yes my queen." the Orc guard responded and he and the other Orcs all drew the swords they were armed with.

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Yilven continued to lead the way as the group crept between the shelves of the library, watching for any indication that Ammaril was close by.

"Incredible." Dominic said, reaching for a book at random.

"We aren't here to read." Will said as Dominic flipped through the pages.

"I can't read this anyway. It could take years to translate." he said and then rather than returning the book to the shelves he stuffed it into his bag, "I'll study it later." he commented.

"Rooms up ahead Will." Yilven said, "I think this is where Ammaril was preparing to move to the last time I spoke with her. She didn't want to stay in her tent."

"Then this could be it. We search them. Quietly." Will replied.

Each the rooms ahead was behind a closed door and Yilven made his way to the closest where he took hold of the handle while the others gathered close around him before he threw the door open.

The room on the other side was currently unoccupied but the presence of bedding and a handful of trunks indicated that it was currently in use as a sleeping chamber.

"Not here. We'll try the next one." Will said, not interested in searching through the contents at this time.

The group then moved on to the next door in the row that opened into Ammaril's previous study. Although she had now abandoned this room it still showed some signs of recent use with papers on some of the tables. The floor also showed signs of damage to the woodwork where the standing stone had stood.

"I think Ammaril was here." Yilven said.

"Though she obviously isn't now." Gromar added and he pointed to the marks on the floor, "Those look like they came from that damned stone of hers."

"If that is the source of most of her power would she stray far from that?" Lucia asked.

"No she wouldn't. Not only because she might need the power but because she needs to make sure that no-one else could get their hands on it." Yilven answered.

"Next room." Will said.

"Wait one moment." Dominic said and he rushed towards the papers.

"Dominic I've told you about this." Will said, "We aren't here to study."

"I'm not studying. I'm stealing." Dominic replied with a smile as he quickly grabbed as many of the sheets of paper that held Ammaril's hand-written notes as he could and stuffed them into his bag with the book he had already taken from the shelf, "There, now I'm ready."

"Good, but from now on just remember why we're really here." Will said as Dominic returned to the rest of the group and they moved on to the next doorway.

When Yilven opened this door it revealed a room that had obviously been heavily modified recently. The opposite wall had been knocked down entirely and in its place was a hallway that extended beyond the limits of the building.

"Ammaril's palace." Yilven said.

"What?" Horace asked.

"This hallway leads to Ammaril's palace." Yilven said.

"Then it's a good bet that the bitch is at the other end." Gromar said.

"There's still a lot of the library to search." Dominic pointed out.

"Like Yilven said, Ammaril won't be far from that stone and we know that the stone has been moved. Why just move it from one place in the library to another?" Gromar said and he pointed down the hallway, "She's down there, mark my words."

"Follow me." Yilven said and he stepped through the doorway.

"Wait." Horace said and the rest of the group turned to look at him, "I can't believe that I'm about to say this but maybe someone less conspicuous ought to take the lead." he added nervously.

"Horace is right. I can move quietly but it doesn't look like there are many places to hide along here. He should take the lead." Yilven agreed and Will smiled at Horace.

"Be careful old friend." he said.

"Don't worry, I will." Horace said before he followed Yilven through the doorway and made his way around the Elf.

With Horace now in the lead and holding a knife out in front of him the group made their way along the hallway ahead of them. As Yilven had said there were few hiding places in the passage that led towards the palace. There were occasional alcoves along the way where it appeared that decoration would eventually be placed but for now these stood empty and represented the only practical hiding places along the hallway.

Horace darted from one of these to the next while the rest of the group followed at a distance until Horace reached the far end of the hallway.

No door had been fitted into the frame yet and instead there was a curtain hung across the doorway. Horace grabbed this and carefully drew it back, peering out into the room beyond and his eyes widened when he first saw the standing stone and then caught a glimpse of Ammaril as she spoke with an Orc beyond it. He took a quick look around the throne room and saw other Orcs and a number of Trolls scattered around it. Letting go of the curtain Horace then backed away before he turned and headed back down the hallway towards the others.

"Ammaril's there, I saw her," he told them.

"Alone?" Dominic asked and Horace shook his head.

"No. I saw Orcs and Trolls in the room as well. At least three of each, I couldn't quite see the entire room. She has that stone in there as well," he said.

"We should try to keep Ammaril away from the stone," Dominic said, "If she can access its power then the only thing she'd need to worry about is unleashing so much at once that it brought the entire building down on her."

"If those Orcs are part of her personal guard then there will be Wraith with them," Yilven pointed out.

"If we just kill her then what happens to the Orcs and Trolls?" Lucia asked.

"That's a good question. At best they'd lose interest in us entirely, though I doubt that will happen. I suspect that we'll need to fight our way out of here in any case," Will answered.

"Hopefully without damaging the library too badly," Dominic commented.

"So how do you want to handle this Will?" Yilven said and Will paused to think.

"Dominic do you think that you could take down a Troll in a confined space?" he asked.

"Probably, yes," Dominic answered. Then he looked at Horace and added, "Did you see anything burning in the room? Even just a candle would do."

"Yes, I think there were candles on the far side of the room but there was a large window that was letting in light," Horace told him.

"As long as there's just one flame close by I can use magical fire. If not then a more direct magical blow will have to suffice," Dominic said to Will.

"Why not just carry something burning with you?" Gromar asked.

"Because I don't want to accidentally set fire to that curtain when we go through," Dominic said.

"In that case I want you and Gromar to deal with the Trolls, Dominic. Yilven and I will handle the Orcs. Horace and Lucia, Ammaril is yours," he said.

"Ours?" Horace replied in surprise.

"Physically she is not strong," Yilven said.

"I'll give you back this crossbow and you can both try shooting her first," Will added, handing the crossbow back to Horace. The weapon was already loaded so Horace smiled, knowing that he did not have to struggle with the mechanism, "The same with you Lucia. Try to shoot Ammaril first," Will added, looking at Lucia.

The group then crept to the curtain at the end of the hallway, not wanting to be discovered at this late stage until they were perfectly positioned to strike.

"Ready?" Will whispered, looking around at the rest of the group and they all nodded back at him except for Yilven who loaded an arrow into his bow first before he also nodded.

"Ready," he whispered back and Will suddenly drew back the curtain and burst through the doorway into the throne room.

The moment he did this everyone present turned towards him and an arrow shot from the doorway, hitting an Orc on the far side of the room between his eyes and killing him instantly. Yilven then tossed his bow aside and drew his sword instead as he and Will both charged towards the nearest of the three remaining Orcs.

Behind them Gromar and Dominic burst into the throne room as well and Dominic spied a pair of Trolls standing beside a lit candlestick. Stretching out his hand towards this he released a powerful burst of magical energy, focused on the flame itself. When this energy mixed with the candle flames it fed them massively and there was a sudden ball of fire that engulfed both nearby Trolls. Neither Troll was killed outright though and they both ran from the throne room, screaming in agony as they burned.

Ammaril finally reacted at this point and she thrust her hand out towards Dominic.

"Phyan-sa!" she exclaimed, unleashing a magical blast that struck the sorcerer and hurled him backwards into the wall beside the doorway that he had just come through. Dominic narrowly missed hitting Horace and Lucia as they rushed into the room as well but the distraction he provided to Ammaril enabled both of them to aim and fire their crossbows. Both crossbow bolts hit Ammaril but neither struck a vital point. One of them just clipped her upper arm and continued flying onwards until it embedded itself in the wall while the other

pierced the palm of her outstretched hand and she let out a shriek as she stared at the bolt now sticking through her hand.

Ammaril's guards did not just wait to be attacked themselves and the remaining Orcs and Trolls all charged towards the group as they spread out from the hallway. First to reach an opponent was one of the Orcs that charged towards Yilven and their swords clashed. Meanwhile Will dodged as another Orc swung his blade at him. Then there was a light from the pendant around the Orc's neck and Will saw the ghostly form of a Wraith begin to appear. He reacted quickly to this though and he swung his own sword towards the light. The Orc parried the attack but not before the magical blade made contact with the energy of the Wraith and began to draw it in. This time however, the Wraith was not destroyed. Being only partially emerged from the stone in which its essence was stored the ethereal creature was able to pull itself free of the blade by retreating back into the stone though it still let out a sudden shrieking sound. Seemingly cowed by this demonstration that Will and the others had the capability to destroy them, the other Wraiths remained within their stones while the third Orc guard ran towards Ammaril to protect her. He did not get far though as Yilven leapt aside from the Orc he was fighting and stabbed the running Orc in his side, bringing him crashing down to the floor of the throne room.

While Will and Yilven engaged the Orcs, Gromar met the nearest Troll head on. The massive humanoid was unarmed but he still swung his fist towards Gromar as hard as he could. Gromar met this with a swing of his hammer though and when the head of the hammer met the Troll's fist it smashed through flesh and bone, pulverising the Troll's arm up to the elbow. The Troll roared in agony as he staggered backwards, his remaining hand now clamped over the stump of his ruined arm while Gromar turned his attention to the second Troll while the first collapsed with blood continuing to pump from the wound. This Troll also swung its empty hands at Gromar, trying to keep the Dwarf at a distance and Gromar dodged and weaved to avoid simply being swept away.

Meanwhile both Horace and Lucia cast aside their now unloaded crossbows and drew their knives as they charged at the startled Ammaril. Before they could reach her though there was the sound of hooves on stone and a horse unexpectedly charged into the throne room before Orcan leapt down from the saddle.

"Ammaril!" he called out and this snapped her back to her senses. Looking around Ammaril saw Dominic lying at the side of the room, he was not moving but she could sense the magical power in him that told her that he still lived. Will, Yilven and Gromar were all battling against her remaining bodyguards while both Horace and Lucia were now heading towards her.

"Phyan-sa!" she exclaimed, but then she winced as she tried to extend her injured hand and the magical energy that she released dissipated almost immediately.

"Grab her!" Horace yelled and he lunged at Ammaril, knocking her to the floor.

The Orc fighting Yilven lunged at him again and Yilven moved aside just in time to avoid the attack. At the same time he tripped the Orc and as he fell Yilven brought his sword down on the back of his neck to break it. Then he turned to face Orcan as he rushed to his twin sister's defence. However, as Yilven raised his sword Orcan swung his own back at him and when the two blades met Yilven's simply snapped, Orcan's magical blade cutting right through it. Yilven gasped, realising that Orcan had plundered the magical weapons kept in the armoury of the royal palace in Syllda and in this moment of hesitation Orcan struck again. Rather than using his sword though Orcan simply headbutted Yilven, the thicker bone of his transformed Orc skull protecting him from harm while Yilven was stunned by the blow and collapsed. Rather than finish him off though Orcan continued towards Ammaril, focusing on protecting her above all else.

Will dropped to one knee when his Orc opponent attempted a decapitating swing of his sword and before the Orc could lower his blade again Will thrust his own blade upwards, the tip entering under his jaw and punching out through the top of his skull. Then as he was pulling his sword free again Will turned to see Orcan nearing Ammaril along with Horace and Lucia.

Lucia turned towards Orcan with her tiny knife in her hand but he simply struck her with the back of his hand and she cried out as she was effortlessly knocked aside. Horace and Ammaril were wrestling on the floor as Horace attempted to stab her with his knife while she tried to throw him off. Their proximity made it dangerous for Orcan to risk using his sword, one slight error could mean the blade slicing into Ammaril as well as Horace so instead Orcan simply reached down and grabbed Horace by the back of his collar before dragging him off Ammaril and tossing him aside.

Orcan then raised his sword to bring it down on Horace before he could even try to defend himself but as his blade began to fall there was the sound of metal striking metal and Orcan turned his head to see Will smiling at him while their blades were locked together.

"You're not the only one with a fancy magic sword." Will said.

With Horace no longer holding her down Ammaril quickly crawled towards the standing stone and pulled the crossbow bolt from her hand before placing it flat against the surface of the stone, drawing its power into her and focusing on her injuries to use it to heal them.

Will then leapt back and Orcan lunged at him only for Will to parry the attack, Orcan's blade once again failing to break Will's magical weapon and there were sparks as the two blades struck one another. Will and Orcan both tried to overpower one another, pushing their swords forwards but neither could force the other to back down until Orcan suddenly let out a scream of pain and both he and Will looked down to see Lucia still lying on the floor but now with her knife sticking all the way through Orcan's foot.

Will quickly leapt back and Orcan staggered, still holding up his sword and Will swung his blade again. This time Orcan was too distracted to be able to parry the attack and Will's blade sliced off his hand at the wrist. Then as Orcan staggered back further, gazing in surprise at the stump of his wrist Will scooped up his dropped sword and leapt forwards with a blade in each hand. Placing one of these on each of Orcan's shoulders he then brought the two swords together, slicing the Orc's head off cleanly.

With each swing of the Troll's arm Gromar had been forced to take a step back, being carried towards the wall behind Ammaril's throne and eventually he found himself with his back literally to the wall. However, when the Troll made its next swing at him his arm struck the stone wall with enough force to make him cry out in pain and pull his arm back. Seeing his opportunity Gromar then went on the attack and leapt forwards to swing his hammer at the Troll's leg, knocking it out from under him. Gromar then dived out of the way as the Troll fell forwards through the large window and smashing his head against the wall just above.

Looking around Gromar saw Ammaril beside the standing stone, looking as if she was using it to support herself. Then she raised the hand not pressed against the stone and pointed it towards Will and Lucia.

"Now you die!" she shouted.

"Not today witch!" Gromar responded as he raised his hammer and charged towards her.

Ammaril looked around when she heard this and was just in time to see Gromar swinging his hammer towards her head. Instinctively Ammaril ducked and the hammer passed over her only to strike the standing stone instead.

There was a sound like thunder as the magical strength of the hammer split the stone all the way through and the top part of it toppled to the floor with a loud 'crash' before breaking into several smaller pieces. This was accompanied by a brilliant light as raw magical energy stored within the stone was freed by the blow from the enchanted hammer. This was not a controlled release like the casting of a spell though, instead the energy flooded out into the throne room and everyone present was forced to shield their eyes.

The light from the magic escaping the stone also flooded out of the palace, not requiring a straight path as it worked its way out not only through the large windows nearby but also through the front of the building and the battle still raging outside between the Elves and Orcs and Trolls suddenly paused until it faded a few moments later. When the faded though it was obvious that something was different as neither the Orcs nor Trolls continued to press their attack.

Inside the throne room Will and Lucia lifted their heads when the light faded.

"Are you okay?" Will asked and Lucia nodded, "Thank you for your help by the way. You did well." he added and Lucia smiled.

"That's why you brought me here isn't it?" she replied and then she leant forwards to kiss Will.

"I'm fine as well by the way." Horace said as he sat up.

"Yilven what about you?" Will asked.

"My head is sore and I am sure it will remain so for some time yet." Yilven answered, "My sword is ruined though."

"I have a spare you can have. A nice sharp one. Orcan won't be needing it any more. Gromar, are you okay?" Will said but there was no reply and everyone turned towards the remains of the standing stone. Only about half of the stone remained upright now with several large chunks scattered over a small area beside it. Of Gromar or Ammaril though there was no sign, both had simply disappeared.

"Where did they go?" Lucia said, looking around the room for any indication of them.

"Maybe Ammaril escaped and Gromar went after her." Horace suggested but Yilven shook his head.

"No, they couldn't have got far enough to be out of sight already." he said.

"Then Gromar is dead?" Lucia said as tears started to form within her eyes.

"It looks that way. Though he took Ammaril with him." Will said before there was a groaning sound from the side of the room and when everyone turned towards it they saw Dominic beginning to stir, "Dominic." Will said as they rushed towards him.

"What's happening?" Dominic asked as he sat up, "Did I miss something?"

"Everything." Horace told him, "The battle is over it seems. At least in here it is."

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Dominic looked at the faces looking back down at him and realised that there was one missing.

"Where's Gromar?" he said as he tried to stand and Will and Yilven helped him to his feet.

"Gone." Will said.

"Literally." Horace added and he pointed to the remains of the standing stone, "He did that with his hammer and there was this bright light. Then when it cleared he was just gone."

"Ammaril too. She was also by the stone when it happened." Lucia added.

"Gromar destroyed the stone?" Dominic said and he walked, unsteadily at first towards what was left of the stone and placed his hand on it, "Nothing. I can't sense any power from it at all. All of it must have been released at once."

"So what happened to Gromar and Ammaril?" Horace asked.

"Burned. That much uncontrolled power? Nothing could withstand it." Dominic answered.

"Then Gromar really did give his life to kill Ammaril." Lucia said before there was the sound of footsteps from outside the throne room and everyone turned towards the doorway, Will raising his sword.

The figures that appeared in the doorway though were Elves from the force that had been providing a distraction for the group.

"What's happening out there?" Yilven asked them.

"The Orcs are gone my lord. The Trolls as well." The leader of the Elves replied, "There was a bright light from inside the palace and then they and the Trolls just scattered." the other Elf told him.

"That's good isn't it? If they all scattered here then maybe the same will happen across Entris." Lucia said.

"If what Thomas told us is right then hopefully that is what will happen. Though the Orcs may continue to cause problems, they will just be in smaller groups." Dominic said.

"Then perhaps we should get going as well. I don't want to be around when the Orcs here decide to get themselves organised again and come back in any numbers. Not to mention the Wraith these Orcs have around their necks. They may be laying low for now but I get the feeling they might feel brave enough to try and pick us off eventually. We need to be gone before then." Will said and Dominic placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I agree that we need to be going quickly Will, but I would just like to grab a few more volumes from the library first. Just enough to give me some idea of what it might contain. Future expeditions might be able to discover more." he said.

"Future expeditions?" Horace said with a snort, "Who would want to come back here?"

"Someone will. As long as there is the promise of some reward there will always be someone to take the risk." Yilven responded.

"Well it won't be me. I've had more than enough of Oscay, can we please go back home now?" Horace said.

"Yes Horace, as soon as Dominic has all the books he can carry we can go. I'm with Horace, I've had all I can stand of Oscay." Will replied.

22

The collapse of Ammaril's army in Entris did not happen in an instant, instead a chain of events occurred at different times in different places that caused it to break apart and go from being the largest and most powerful fighting force that the world had ever seen to individual bands of warriors interested only in personal survival. It began with dragons released to hunt that did not return. Some simply continuing to fly as far as they wished in search of new nesting sites while others went on wild rampages, burning and killing at random to satisfy their hunger and rage before they too scattered in all directions.

The Orcs and Trolls were another matter though. Their sentience, even if limited in the case of the Trolls meant that for a time they continued to behave as they had done previously, carrying out the tasks assigned to them. However, when it came time for them to stray from those tasks even slightly they ignored how things had previously been done and acted in a way that was easiest for them.

This started with smaller groups in areas occupied by Ammaril's forces where individual units of Orcs and Trolls simply began to take whatever they wanted from the local populace. Anyone who attempted to get in their way was simply attacked regardless of whether they were a civilian attempting to protect their property or an allied soldier who knew that their standing orders prohibited looting. This random violence sparked a response from the local population with angry mobs launching attacks against their occupiers.

Such incidents were limited in their effect though and the true end of Ammaril's army was triggered by a group of Trolls that were part of the force waiting to invade Dannaron with the bulk of the army deciding that they were too hungry to finish their work without stopping to first and they searched for the nearest source of food. This happened to be a group of horses that were tethered nearby and the Trolls strode up to the nearest and simply smashed its skull open before they began to drag the carcass away to strip the meat from it. The horses had belonged to a unit of Hadarian cavalry and as soon as they heard the sound of one being killed these men rushed from their nearby tent to find the Trolls dragging the dead horse away.

"What are you doing?" the horse's owner called out and he rushed up to the Trolls. None of the Trolls understood what the man said and they carried on walking away, ignoring him until he then reached out to grab one of them, "Hey! I'm talking to you." he shouted but the Troll simply looked down at him, snarled and then swung his arm to bat him away with enough force that he was thrown through the air before landing several yards back.

Seeing this the other cavalymen as well as several other nearby Hadarians drew their weapons, surrounding the Trolls who just looked around and growled at them. Then one of the Trolls let out a roar and charged forwards to attack.

The fighting spread quickly through the army's camp as more Trolls who witnessed this also rushed to join in the fighting and the Hadarians called for more of the army's human troops to join them. Word was also sent to the Orcs that made up the core of the army that the Troll labourers were in revolt but instead of coming to help their human allies the Orcs were initially indifferent but then some of them also began to plunder the supplies of the humans while they were occupied fighting the Trolls and more fighting broke out between Orcs and humans.

Hiros was sat in his tent reading one of the books provided to him by Ammaril, continually having to pause to check the notes she had provided him with regarding the language that the book was written in. Uniquely he was served by a number of zombies that he had personally reanimated from both human and Orc corpses so he had little direct contact with the rest of the army and he was quite happy for the invasion of Dannaron to be delayed to allow him to continue his studies.

He heard the increase in sound coming from outside but ignored it, putting it down to being an increase in activity caused by the army preparing for the invasion to take place imminently but he looked up suddenly when the tent flap was drawn back and Graysil rushed into the tent.

"Ah Graysil, what's the hurry?" Hiros asked.

"What's the hurry? Don't you know what's going on out there?" Graysil responded, pointing back out of the tent.

"Should I?" Hiros said.

"It's chaos. The Orcs and Trolls have gone mad, they're just attacking things at random. Even one another. The humans are trying to get organised but no-one seems to know who's in charge any more." Graysil told him.

Hiros set down the book he had been reading and got to his feet.

"Let me see." he said and he strode to the tent flap where he looked outside.

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In the area immediately surrounding his tent things appeared perfectly normal with more than a dozen zombies waiting for instructions but further away things were obviously not as they should be. There were several plumes of smoke rising up into the sky that were obviously too large to be from simple cooking fires. Then he heard the sound of screams as men died.

"What happened?" he said.

"I don't know. One moment everything seemed fine and then this. I think it started with Troll labourers revolting but then the Orcs joined in as well. Only the humans are still acting like an army. I thought that Ammaril's spell was supposed to make the Orcs and Trolls absolutely loyal to her. How could they turn on her now?" Graysil said.

"Ammaril." Hiros said softly.

"What?" Graysil commented.

"Ammaril is dead." Hiros replied, turning suddenly towards Graysil, "She said that if she ever died then the loyalty of the Orcs and Trolls to her army would just vanish. That's why Dorsos and Shimmandra could never have taken over."

"So what will they do now Hiros?" Graysil asked.

"Whatever they want. They'll just be looking out for themselves. Some will undoubtedly form small war bands and become raiders but others might just head out into the wilderness and stay out of the way." Hiros replied.

"Is there really no way that we can take control of them if Ammaril is dead?" Graysil said.

"None that I know of. If there is then the knowledge to do that exists only in the Great Library in Oscay." Hiros said.

"Then perhaps we should go there." Graysil suggested but Hiros shook his head.

"No." he responded.

"But why not? Even if the knowledge to take control of the Orcs and Trolls isn't there then the rest of the library still is." Graysil pointed out.

"Yes and also a continent now filled with Trolls and any Ogre tribes that were not transformed plus any of Ammaril's personal guard that have survived. Not to mention that if Ammaril has been killed then whatever killed her might still be there. Now tell me, do you want to face all of that with just the pair of us and however many zombies I can control at once?" Hiros said.

"No, no I don't. Then what are we going to do?" Graysil said.

"Run. Find somewhere to lay low and hide. We still have our lives and our freedom and that's more than we had when we were locked in the dungeons beneath the Tower of Sorcery." Hiros said.

"Run to where though?" Graysil said.

"Anywhere. We can still use the stone circles to get to wherever in the world we want to go. Personally I think I'll head east, back home to Nhillan. I know a few places that I can hide for a while and I have scores to settle there as well." Hiros said before he turned to some of the nearby zombies, "Go inside the tent. I will be in shortly to pack my books. Then I will want you to carry them." he told them and the zombies began to shamble into the tent as instructed, "Well unless you're coming with me I suppose that this is goodbye Graysil." He added as he turned back towards the other Elf.

"I don't think that I'd fit in in Nhillan. I might head north for Raysalgard eventually but I think that there might be profitable opportunities here among the humans yet." Graysil said and Hiros smiled.

"Then I wish you every success in the future. Feel free to seek me out if you need me but until then goodbye Graysil." Hiros said and he held out his hand. Graysil took the offered hand in his own and shook it before he let go.

"Goodbye Hiros. It was good to have known you." he said before he turned and ran off, heading away from the centre of the camp where the fighting appeared to be worst. Hiros did not wait to watch though, instead he went back inside his tent where he found the zombies waiting for him and looked around. All that was of real value to him was his staff along with the Wraith it held and the books he had been given by Ammaril so he pointed to them.

"Put those books in that chest." he told the zombies and they immediately started to move towards the books while he collected his staff.

The chaos and confusion in Ammaril's army did not go unnoticed forever with small scouting parties from Dannaron witnessing the infighting between different elements of the army as well as the indiscriminate raiding by Orcs and Trolls and in response to this Dannaron's army began to march south into Freinland. This latest invasion was actually welcomed by the people of Freinland and when Dannaron's army reached each settlement they found themselves welcomed with open arms, provided with food, lodgings and volunteers eager to help liberate their homeland from the Orcs and Hadarians. Word of the invasion spread

faster than the army could march and all across Freinland there were acts of defiance against the token forces left to occupy the kingdom with camps burned and isolated groups of soldiers attacked by mobs. In response to this uprising the Orcs and Trolls simply scattered into the wilderness, splitting up into small bands that were a mix of warriors and the workers who had supported them. One of these groups followed Shimmandra to the nearest stone circle where she activated it and took them far away in an instant while others sought out forests and caves where they could hide and continue to launch raids from. On the other hand the Hadarians and other human troops that made up the rest of the army attempted to retreat in good order, heading for the coast in the hope of being able to escape across the Straight of Lerron. However, even here they found little comfort. The fleet that had been anchored on the coast had suffered the same loss of cohesion as the army and many of the Orc sailors had simply ransacked the ports and other ships of whatever they could before setting sail. Then what remained of the human ships had already fled back across the straight, their crews as eager to get back home as the soldiers now desperate for a way out of Freinland. A few were still able to escape, bribing the crews of local vessels to carry them across the straight while others opted to press gang sailors and hijack ships to get them home but the vast majority found themselves trapped between the ocean to the west, advancing armies to the north and east and a rebellious population all around them.

Thomas realised what was about to happen when a pair of guards entered his cell and without speaking to him they lifted him to his feet and bound his hands behind his back. He did not struggle against this though, not wanting to make his last moments any more painful than necessary. The guards then led him from the dungeon and out into the courtyard where there was a long wooden platform that stood about three feet off the ground and a short distance from this a wooden beam was mounted running parallel to it above head height. As if the purpose of this was not obvious to anyone who knew that executions were carried out in this courtyard right now a single noose of rope hung from the beam and after Thomas was led up the steps leading to the platform he was stood in front of this.

One of the guards then reached out to grab the noose and pulled it back towards the platform before placing it around Thomas' neck. Then the guard smiled and leant close to Thomas' face.

"Take a look up there you scum, you've got a royal audience. Aren't you lucky?" the man said and he pointed to a balcony that overlooked the courtyard where King Godwin and his queen were now standing looking down towards Thomas, "All ready Your Majesty." the guard called out.

"Then let him pay the price for his crimes." King Godwin responded loudly.

"Mind the step." the guard then whispered into Thomas' ear before he pushed him forwards off the platform. Thomas felt himself drop for a moment before the noose tightened around his neck before everything went black.

Epilogue

Will and Lucia married soon after their return to Entris. They had three children together and lived happily in Teuten for fourteen years until an outbreak of fever tragically claimed both their lives just a few hours apart and they were buried side by side to spend eternity together.

Horace opened a bakery and married the daughter of one of his suppliers. Following the death of Will and Lucia he took in their three children and raised them alongside the five he had with his wife. He lived a long and happy life, passing on his business to his sons when he finally retired.

Dominic returned to his order in Hessenstadt as a hero and his superiors found that he could no longer be manipulated to serve their own agendas. Rising through the order's ranks he was eventually appointed as the leader of the order and became the chief sorcerer to the royal court.

Yilven travelled north to the Elf kingdom of Raysalgard where he lived out the remainder of his life in service to Dellasin, making sure that the memory of Sylldarin and its lost people would live on.

The world itself adjusted to the new situation that it found itself in. Severely weakened by its losses, the Hadarian Empire found itself unable to defend itself from its neighbours as well as increasing unrest within its borders and a series of small wars saw it collapse within a year. Meanwhile bands of Orcs and Trolls would continue to raid human and Elf lands, spreading out across the world. These were limited in their size though, the newly founded Orc and Troll tribes were unable to unite under a single leader and even the most successful war bands would eventually splinter when they became too large. This convinced the world that the threat from them was over, that never again would they face the threat of a large-scale invasion from an army of Orcs united around a single ruler.

They were wrong...