

76.

“What do you make of it?”

“Looks just the same to me now as it did yesterday.”

I huffed in exasperation at Jorgagu’s reply. The orc knew the importance of discovering the mechanics of the trap laid for us, yet after several days of scouting our targets out he was succumbing to his racial impatience. At least he wasn’t as bad as Gnar, who after a few hours decided he didn’t like having to restrain all his newly-minted professionals aching to prove themselves.

Seeing my irritation, my enchanter defended himself. “She looks the same from the port as she did from the starboard! There’s nothing unusual about her hull and there’s nothing ominous about her decks. She’s a normal vessel, just escorting the prison ship on its way.”

I had to agree with him on all counts but one: there was something ominous. Call it paranoia, but Andros had to know of my connection to Hali, and I couldn’t believe that they’d just surrender her to me without some trick.

When we first caught up to the ship carrying Hali across the high seas, I thought that the second ship was the surprise. After thorough investigations both visually and with my domain, it appeared decidedly average. So I considered that the escort ship was a decoy, and the trap truly was on the unassuming vessel carrying Hali. That assumption was also disabused, as the conditions aboard the prison ship were all too plain.

In the back of my head I wondered if Andros was giving me Hali as a peace offering, or as a means of sending a message. If that was their intention, however, they should have taken better care of her.

The ship Hali was on was categorized as a ‘prison ship’ and looked like an ark meant to keep prisoners in and rescuers out while managing to float. Adding canvas for sailing appeared to be an afterthought. Their speed across the ocean had not been due to adverse conditions or a leisurely pace, but because the prison ship just couldn’t manage any better. It was an abysmal sight that wounded my sailors’ pride. In the week we’d shadowed them I’d seen how their escort vessel had to work to stay a consistent distance away from them, their maneuverability was so bad.

If the construction of the ship was a horror, there weren’t words for the interior. The ark had four sub-decks and each one was a descent from the one above. On the first deck the crew was housed along with the supplies for the journey. It was clear that the deck had been repurposed to hold a crew rather than prisoners, but their state wasn’t worse than some ships I’d served on.

The next deck was filled with human prisoners, some chained but most free. The greatest restriction was space, as they were all pressed against each other. I didn’t think they had it so

bad at first either, since I was spying through the ship with my upgraded Domain rather than taking a direct peek. If I had, I would have noticed immediately that they weren't provided any sources of light and there was not any way for them to deal with their waste. Food and water were issued, but the crew supervised from the deck rather than enter and distribute it to each prisoner, meaning that the strongest or sneakiest people ate while the others did not.

The third deck was worse. It was crammed full mostly with madu and tarish, though there were orcs present as well. They were mostly all manacled, received less food, and several of the prisoners were subject to a routine brutalizing from a strongman to keep them from recovering.

The bilge was as bad as the third deck, but with a shin-deep mixture of filth and seawater. There were a pair of cages there as well, one having a pair of orcs and the other a strapping young human who had some arrangement with the guards to get decent food.

It took me hours of scanning, filtering through details before I was able to find Hali in the press on the second deck, and when I did my blood ran hot. She was injured and manacled in a corner where she couldn't even compete for food. The only sustenance I'd seen her get was some water that a pitying tarish youth gave her.

I restrained my anger to properly assess the trap I was sure existed, but couldn't find.

"Do we intend to simply be their unknown escort to their destination?" Gnar impatiently demanded.

"Drese?" I said, depending on the steady life master to weigh in and tell me if I was being paranoid or if the orcs were being hotheaded.

"I am not a naval strategist, nor any other type of tactician. I cannot speak for the wisdom or foolishness of an approach. I can only say, given the state of affairs aboard the vessel, that we are on a timer and ... my heart aches for them."

A few hours ago the crew had cleared out corpses from the lower decks, those who hadn't survived the journey thus far. We dropped behind and I had the orcs pick the bodies from the water before the sharks could. Drese had examined them, and each had told a story of abuse and neglect that lasted longer than the prison ship's voyage.

I clenched my jaw as I listened to my officers. "Very well Gnar, let's draw up battle plans."

A week of scouting gave me time to do far more reconnaissance than we typically conducted, and I'd taken notes on everything I thought relevant from shift changes to meal times. I couldn't sense or interpret every detail I saw through my Domain, but I saw and recognized more with my last upgrade than I had previously. When we boarded the vessel for the first time, I was already familiar with it.

We had dropped off team of 10 orcs on the hull of the escort vessel under the command of one of Gnar's sergeants. Their task was to sabotage the ship's rudder and use some of Jorgagu's trinkets to otherwise cause mayhem and trouble without actually boarding the ship and challenging the contingent onboard.

Meanwhile, I took the Roc's Eye over to the prison ship and stationed her on the opposite side, running parallel. The weather was stormy and had been for days, a consistent downpour driving the crew to hunker down and keep less vigilance than they were supposed to. The darkness didn't help matters either.

I climbed up the side first, my water whips silently lashing to the gunwale and pulling me up. I dragged a pair of boarding hooks behind me which I quickly and quietly planted. The first pair of orcs that scampered up those lines each brought sets of their own, and Gnar's whole team was swarming up the side before Mirash and I even silenced the lookouts.

The decks were ours, and the decks were quiet.

Gnar had a love of charging into the fight, roaring and insulting his enemies. I hadn't had to teach him the value of stealth, though, he understood the importance of covert actions and performed just as well padding around as he did taunting his foes, even if he and most his team lacked the skillset of rogues.

I identified for him where the remaining crew were, and he stationed pairs and trios at every hatch before dropping the hand signals and in a normal volume saying "attack!"

My professional warriors and marines burst in on the unsuspecting crew in a bloody massacre. 23 seconds later, panting breaths and my boots on the deck were the only sounds as I stepped around pools of blood, making my way down.

Some deaths I'd caused would haunt me. Some would not. Some that shouldn't would still visit me in my dreams, but I didn't expect that from this lot.

I had a green glow-stone in my hand and resisted the urge to vomit at the stench from below. I was well aware of how ripe people could become if there was no opportunity to bathe for extended times and how the nose could get used to and filter out unpleasantness, but this was atrocious and I had no idea how the crew let it get so bad.

The humans of the first deck had realized something happened but the sounds had been too swift for them to realize it was an attack. Instead of cowering, they were pressed close around the ladder, the strongest thinking themselves threatening.

I lifted my tricorne to show my gaunt face and lowered my stats for public display. The starch immediately left those who'd thought they had spine and I had plenty of personal space around me, even if I was the only one. I said nothing, merely continuing down to the third deck while Gnar and several orcs made their own presence known.

The wretched prisoners of the third deck were not so cowed, but they were not all as coherent either. Lack of light and irregular meals meant they had no sense of time and many were in a torpor. With the help of my boarding team, I cleared a path towards the corner with Hali in it, gently lifting away the wide-eyed tarish youth who'd had pity on her and given her water.

Hali was clothed in torn, filthy rags caked in waste and dried blood. Her once long, luscious hair had been shorn some time ago, and what had grown back was matted. When I lifted her I was shocked at how light she was. She had sores and rashes on her skin, and her lips were swollen and chapped. Yet she forced her eyes open and strained to focus on me, fought to comprehend what was happening. The corner of her mouth twitched in an approximation of her old perpetual smirk.

"Dread pirate Seaborn," she rasped. "I knew you'd come ..."

Her head lolled as she fainted and I cast a minor heal on her, concerned about the stack of severe debuffs on her that limited her health pool to a fraction of her constitution. She wasn't in danger of dying in my arms just yet, though. We would take care of her.

"Gnar, pass the word to Drese when he boards from the Eye and have ..."

I trailed off as my eyes caught on another face. I'd seen this man with my Domain and hadn't given him much thought because he wasn't the woman I was looking for, but still I had felt some manner of pity for him because he had a collar around his neck bolted into the bulkhead near the ladder. Now I saw the details.

His hands had been cut off at the wrists, and angry streaks of infection ran from the amputations up his arms. He had a customized set of manacles around his forearms: they held him because there was a spike running through them, piercing him between the bones of his arm. He stood listlessly, with a talent born of necessity for resting on his feet as his immovable collar allowed no movement at all. It didn't mean that he was rested, as it was impossible to sleep well like that and bruises around his neck showed where he'd slumped against the collar before and faced strangulating himself if he couldn't find the strength to stand again.

The face of this wretched, abused man was that of Marcus Renshaw; the self-proclaimed wizard who had taught me magic in Tulisang before being abducted on the eve of the town's takeover.

One of the orcs had liberated a set of keys from an officer and I ordered him to release Marcus immediately.

"Know him?" Gnar asked, looking distinctly uncomfortable holding Hali in his arms. Maybe it was her odor, but I thought he'd have that look if any unconscious female from another race was foisted on him.

"I know him well," I replied. "I thought I'd never learn what happened to him! To find him here is a shock, and I can't wait to get answers from him."

“Does he owe you money?”

“What? Why would he owe me money?”

Gnar shrugged. “Just how excited you were to find this guy, I thought he might owe you some gold.”

I shook my head and centered myself. I'd just saved by Hali and my old tutor. This was going better than I could have hoped. I focused on Domain again and saw that our team on the escort ship had succeeded in their sabotage and was swimming back to the Roc's Eye, leaving the escort ship a chaotic mess as they struggled to respond and hail the prison ship.

There were shouts above us. I turned my senses to the pair of orcs we'd left on the main deck above; standard procedure for us. They were readying their defenses against some foe ... in the air? My senses extended to the water and the ships on it, but not to land and only very weakly to the air. In further upgrades, the air might be mine as well, but not yet.

“Gnar,” I warned.

“I see,” he growled, quickly – but not unkindly – setting Hali down next to a shocked madu who cradled her out of instinct seeing the care we placed on her. “Whatever trouble is harassing those two ...”

We both froze as both marines were subjected to a storm of attacks. One held his own defensively, while the other took a bad hit that cost him a third of his health immediately. Before he could recover another hit took an equal chunk from his health pool.

And then the figure lightly touched the deck, giving me a picture of a short humanoid, before latching their mouth on the marine's neck. By the time Gnar had pounded up to the second deck the rest of his health had been siphoned away.

Sensing a trap was closing, I tried to claim the prison ship. We could submerge and leave any attackers behind.

You are unable to raise this ship. This ship is under the control of a hostile force.

That shouldn't be possible. Unless the attackers above were part of the ship's command, we'd executed the whole crew. Even if they were, they hadn't been present during our takeover and I should be free to lay claim to the ship; if I had a contesting claim to someone else then we'd both receive notice and have the chance to duke it out.

Somewhere, hidden on this ship, at least one crewman was hiding.

I could see everywhere with my Domain and knew the layout of the whole ship, there wasn't anyone hiding in some nook. No, if anyone was hiding it was in plain sight.

“Mirash!” I yelled. “Someone from the crew is hiding among the prisoners. Find them and kill them! Now!”

I darted up the ladder after Gnar and some others, coming in behind them as they burst onto the main deck roaring. Gnar’s roar turned into a choked grunt as he stopped in surprise. I peeked over his shoulder to see what had stopped him and how I could flank our enemy.

I was faced with a pale girl no more than five feet tall, with vibrant blue eyes and pale blond hair in a braid over her shoulder. She wore a black cloak that billowed against the wind and seemed like it wanted to lift her away. She had a rapier in her hand that was as pale as bone, and as I watched the blood that was on it disappeared, sucked into the blade.

And she had orcish blood on her chin, standing over the body of my dead fighter. She smiled at us, showing her fangs while she pulled a pristine white handkerchief from a pocket and soiled it by wiping the blood from her chin. Her eyes locked with mine and flashed red for a brief moment.

“Are you wearing my hat?” she asked.

“Vampires,” Gnar murmured, before shouting at the marines billowing up behind him to stay below, except for a few that he called forward. I recognized that those were ones with some sort of mental resistance skill.

While the female vampire before us was riveting, she was not the only one. Another floated – actually floated, his own cloak of shadow gifting him some version of flight – and towered over our second deck lookout. He seemed content to let the orc stay behind his shield, and now that we had stormed the deck seemed to forget about him altogether.

“G’evening,” he called, continuing to float in the air. “So you’re the unlucky cursed fella?”

“Jared,” the female one said, her voice chiding. “It’s not polite to call him unlucky!”

“I’m sure he’d agree he’s had better days.”

They both looked at me. They launched a surprise attack and showed they were capable of quickly inflicting massive damage, but then bantered and played rather than strike. That was somewhat typical of what I’d heard of vampires: either they were brooding deceivers or chillingly playful apex predators. Their condition wasn’t too common, but it transcended racial lines. Vampires were usually treated very politely by all but were hardly welcome by anyone.

And if they survived turning into a sapient being, then they had a frankly unfair amount of skills and attributes to wield – at least they did at night. Which this was.

Bloody fishguts.

The death of one of my marines upset me. He'd been honed in combat over previous boarding's and had survived them all, even if healing from Drese and myself was sometimes necessary. Now he was dead, killed in a few moments. I pushed down my anger, though. Having their attention and sensing this was a genuine opportunity to converse, I stepped into their banter to try and gain some benefit.

"Jared's right, my lucky stars don't seem to be out tonight."

The woman grinned like I'd said something very amusing. Or maybe she just wanted to show off her fangs again and see if I'd shiver. I did not. I foresaw a tough fight, but didn't really doubt that we could gang up on the two.

In a way I felt vindicated: I was sure there was some hidden trap and here I was right. What would they have planned if I'd attacked in the daylight, though?

Jared floated towards the gunwale, giving the wounded lookout a chance to escape below deck. He didn't look anything like the blonde woman; tall, lanky, with a mop of black hair and dark eyes. He was just as pale, though.

He shifted a bag he carried and I recognized it as one of the adventurer's dimensional bags.

"So, is this an adventurer's society contract for my head?"

Jared gave me a look of disdain while the blonde laughed. "The adventurer's society," Jared said. "Is an illustration of a failure in society. The armament and sponsorship of an unregulated, unaffiliated militia ..."

Okay, so they weren't adventurers then. I was proof that you didn't strictly need to belong to the society to get your hands on a functioning bag.

As Jared waxed poetic on the failings of the very principles of the adventurer's society, he pulled a handful of things from his bag and tossed them overboard. As soon as they entered the ocean, I sensed them filling the water with a lure and a bloodlust. Whatever he'd thrown in, it would pull in unintelligent sea creatures from all over and then create a feeding frenzy for predators.

This ship was sturdy, but it was usually considered utter stupidity to risk attracting sea monsters without having an idea of what you were doing.

"... so you would do well to consider the station of those you are addressing prior to assuming that they belong to rabble simply because of a wrongfully patented product."

"Don't worry about Jared," the woman said. "He's a self-proclaimed political analyst. You should really be worried about me."

No sooner had her words fallen on my ears than she blurred towards me. I cast a water shield reflexively and was shocked as each of her thrusts with her rapier removed between 60-70 points from it! Gnar stepped forward to broadside her just as my shield collapsed in a puddle and she darted away, still smiling like a cat playing with a mouse.

I grumbled and tried to claim the ship again. Mirash still hadn't found the hidden crewmember. I really hoped these two weren't involved.

Jared threw another concoction over the side. This one had a more powerful lure, like he was deliberately trying to call some denizen of the deep.

Still, as long as these two were willing to simply banter and batter at me that played into our advantage. Mirash had more time to root out the survivor.

I also had other advantages to play.

The Roc's Eye surfaced with my direction and my constructs worked with Travis to smoothly bring it alongside, even in these seas. My skill combined with Remote Operations made for an easy process.

Drese had remained on board the Eye as backup in case either our team or the team sabotaging the escort vessel needed powerful healing. Now he climbed the rigging of my cutter and jumped over the gunwale to the prison ship.

Good, now we had a powerful dedicated life mage to extend our fighting capabilities and help us recover from injuries!

The presence of the Roc's Eye made the vampires curious, even excited as they watched a ship emerge from the sea. Their expressions changed drastically as soon as Drese boarded, though.

They stared at Drese like they'd just identified the man who'd poisoned their pet. For his part, Drese stared back like he'd found a rat in his bed. The blonde said something to Jared in a language that I'd never even heard before.

And then everyone attacked each other.

Unlike when the woman had taken down my shield or when Jared had toyed with our lookout, this wasn't playful or restrained. This was a death match.

The blonde woman attacked with her rapier and an unexpected strength for someone so petite. Jared floated up and back, getting range and casting spells. The orcs didn't hold back and began triggering professional abilities immediately.

I'll admit that I'd been punching above my weight for so long, tricking my way into victories or escaping wrathful retribution that I'd begun to overestimate my power. My string of successes

ever since taking on the orcs had bolstered my illusion. I knew that the professional warriors I led had a stronger martial prowess than I, but I was a fast skirmisher with enough tricks that I never felt like I was lagging behind. There was always a need for me somewhere.

It only took a few seconds of embroiled battle with these elites for those illusions to be shattered.

One marine after the other activated buffs and blurred with movement as they launched attacks faster and more devastating than stats alone could support. One stomped his foot down and the deck seemed to roil away from the epicenter. Another's axe was suddenly covered in jaggedly sharp ice, someone else's hit as though it weighed three times its actual weight. Another blade was swung and an illusory edge detached from it and grew several times larger as it became a ranged attack on the hovering Jared.

Yet each attack was absorbed, deflected or avoided by the two vampires.

Blondie didn't just flow with speed, she seemed to grow or shrink as shadows and afterimages clung to her. The turbulent deck was ignored as her cloak lightened her step to a hover. I thought an attack had decapitated her only for the image to distort and realize that she was already riposting.

Jared didn't engage in the melee, but instead floated out of direct range. He first cast spells on his partner, presumably giving her the illusions among other buffs, but I tasted his first offensive spell shortly.

Deathly energies flooded me. Even though I could tell that they were unable to adhere to my cursed constitution as effectively as a normal living creature, it still inflicted a harsh damage over time effect, equating to a point or two of damage every second.

I had taken poison and each of the orcs had sustained some injury, ranging from simple wounds that stole large chunks of HP to critical points that limited movement speed. If either of the vampires had taken an injury, we couldn't discern it. Fifteen seconds into the battle, and it seemed like we'd bitten off more than we could chew.

Then Drese stepped it.

He'd been charging some spell, and with its completion he suddenly radiated some type of energy that made the woman hiss and immediately back off. He touched me and then each of the orcs, healing our injuries like he had on every boarding.

I checked his mana levels and saw that he was over $\frac{3}{4}$ empty, the healings taking up most of his mana but the life aura he gave off wasn't inconsequential either. I mutely handed him half a dozen mana potions and distributed stamina potions to the orcs to use instead of the ones they normally carried. In that first round I'd been mostly useless, not having the space to use my damaging spells and lacking the skills to jump into the melee. I'd thrown some blades, and those hadn't worked. My biggest contribution was handing out potions.

Blondie suddenly blurred and reappeared, her rapier poised to thrust into Drese's back. I used a wind push to knock her back, but whatever skill she used wasn't completely rebuffed. Drese spun around and used his forearm to deflect the blades' tip while his other hand glowed with energy, hitting the woman in the stomach with an open-handed strike. She shot away from him and landed several feet away with an angry shriek. Three orcs moved to capitalize on her weakness, but Jared swooped down on Drese – obviously the most important target to the duo.

Angry at my inability to help fight the blonde woman, I decided to try my hand with her flying partner.

Jared had claws extended, each finger capped by a sharp steel weapon and darkness swirling around them. The claws pierced Drese's hastily erected golden shield, but stopped him from reaching the life mage. The vampire retreated from Drese's harmful presence, his sneak attack failed ... as my own sneak attack sent our bodies colliding.

I'd summoned eight water whips and used two to launch me at the retreating vampire while the other six extended from me in a wide net, fully expecting Jared to dodge like his partner did and ready to snatch at him to fulfill my attack. Actually catching him off guard and running into him surprised me, but I still managed to make my dagger find flesh in our tumble.

A harsh punch knocked me free and a few slashes broke my water whips' hold on him. He looked at me with anger and disgust, as though furious that someone so far beneath him would dare catch him off balance.

I cast feather fall on myself to lessen the effect of gravity, as my many arms extended to grab rigging and spars. I was intimately familiar with the workings of ships, and my Domain gave me perception into what I couldn't directly look at. My talent with my water whips meant that I could hold these eight arms even stretched like they were for a long time. They held me supported in the air like a spider in the center of their web, ready to pull me in any direction.

Jared's eyes widened slightly as he understood my technique gave me my own form of flight, even if his was far more maneuverable. I was encroaching on his space, declaring the air to be our own battlefield.

He was more than ready to take the fight to me.

I took him to be primarily a caster, but his metal claws spoke of martial strength and that's what he used off the bat, flying towards me with an aim to slice my throat open. I pulled on two of my arms to pull me in a direction out of his initial path as I removed my trident from my dimensional bag, but Jared's maneuverability immediately proved its function as he effortlessly turned to give chase.

I lashed onto the crow's nest and changed my upward momentum into a parabolic arc around the topsails. Jared saw my trajectory and moved to intercept me as I made a full circle, but he underestimated how well I could find new anchor points to adjust my course. I moved my center of rotation from the crow's nest to the mast and suddenly shot towards him, my trident leading

the way. He tried to avoid me but I still hooked him with a tine, the impact nearly knocking the weapon from my grip. Swinging and flying around carried a lot more force and momentum than a simple jab did!

Jared hissed in pain but lashed out as well and I felt several darts break through my protection and my skin, delivering yet another type of poison into my bloodstream. I cast my own healing spell on myself which mitigated the effect, but I'd need to get down to Drese to fully deal with Jared's method.

The vampire pulled himself off my weapon and dodged my follow up attacks. I cast a cone of frost that caught him in its area of effect. It didn't seem to harm him, but it did slow his speed slightly. That reduced his ability to dodge the air blades I targeted at him as well.

He did not take it sitting down. His response to my area spell was to launch out a cone of darkness that clung to me, blinding me even after I swung out of its area of effect. I was able to 'see' with my Domain, letting me remain in the fight to his apparent surprise, but it was harder to focus on details without practice.

After that, he launched bolts of miasmic energy at me. I dodged each, but even a near brush brought chills to my skin and a sense of rot and decay. Hissing in frustration, Jared reached into his own dimensional bag and pulled out a staff. I thought it was his chosen weapon to contend with my trident, but I was wrong. Instead, he pointed and activated it, sending a string of webbing shooting out.

He didn't target me, but instead pointed his staff all over, weaving sticky webbing to the sails, spars, rigging and masts. When the charge was depleted and the webs were spent, the vampire tossed the staff aside and grinned at me, it being his turn to be the spider at the center of the web.

I could see his strategy. He had the maneuverability to flow around all of these threads, while they should seriously mess with my own method of swinging around. He wasn't wrong, the difficulty for me just went up; but the web wasn't just a sticky trap, they were all additional anchor points for my water whips which didn't care about the adhesiveness.

And when the battlefield got chaotic, I got to pull more tricks.

Jared didn't hesitate to move for me, and I first swung away from the ship and the mess of webbing. He didn't immediately follow, trusting I had to return, but the brief respite let me check on the progress of the battle below.

Things seemed to be going in our favor, but the battle was on a knife's edge. The main contention seemed to be between blondie and Drese, with the orcs landing the occasional hit but also being a vulnerability. I could sense some sort of ties between the vampire and each of the warriors she'd injured, creating some sort of slow, continuous drain on their health that bolstered her own. She'd essentially turned them into bottomless health potions, as Drese

continued to heal them. The ultimate question was whether the 7 on 1 fight would be able to whittle down the vampire's resources before Drese ran out of mana potions.

Judging by how Jared also seemed willing to let things play out, he was confident of his partner's abilities. However, Gnar had a trick that he hadn't activated yet.

Gnar had used his stonewall and some empowered strikes of the bat, but had held off on using the orcs signature rage ability. Now, using the power he had as a tribe leader, he not only activated his rage, he coordinated it with the other five orcs to all rage simultaneously!

The blonde vampire was finally pushed to be not only on the defensive, but on the run.

Jared noticed the change and moved to intervene. I lashed onto a web to pull myself back, causing Jared to hiss in anger again. He moved to reengage me, but not before shouting something in that other language and throwing his dimensional bag to the blonde.

Oh. That might impact the orcs' ability to whittle her down.

I had never given my bag to anyone else, it had been so integral to me since I picked it up that the thought had never even occurred to me. Seeing that this battle was almost as much defined by resources as it was power or skill, I decided to do the same thing.

I pulled a pair of traps and a mana potion from my bag and stuffed them in my pockets before throwing my bag to Drese. It was harder than I expected. Not my method of slinging it down to him, but my sense of watching a safety net disappear out of reach.

And then Jared was upon me, fangs exposed and claws extended.

I immediately regretted giving up my bag, as my trident proved unwieldy as I dodged through Jared's web. Nearly taking out the vampire's eye with it gave me another second of breathing room, enough to place my first trap. I made it look like I desperately reached towards a web as I was out of balance, but really stuck the rectangular plate full of spooled wire against it before altering course.

The vampire had a sense for danger, as even though it didn't pick up my trap immediately it realized something about my actions was off and slowed. These traps were based on a magical proximity sensor, however, and it detonated as he passed without needing any tripwire.

The trap was one of my favorites: razor wire rapidly deployed in an area. It was good for slowing down enemies who didn't want to press through it, and by adding different powders and solutions to it I could inflict different effects on the victims. This one had a slowing agent on it; again leaning into restricting enemy movement.

The razor wires lashed against Jared and cut several webs. The vampire roared – roared – in anger, a primal sound that nearly made me regret using the trap. He pulled himself free as I

drank my mana potion to stem the ongoing cost of using my water whips, the razor trap tumbling down and alternately getting tangled and cutting the webbing.

I underestimated the fury of a vampire. Jared didn't jump back into his pursuit of me – he lunged straight at me and cut every web between us into shreds. I pulled myself away but he cast a spell. At least I assumed he did, since my sense of direction was suddenly skewed even through my Domain, and I'd swear the whips I pulled on to take me away from the vampire were pulling me towards him.

I flexed my Domain, leaning on its claim of space as I fought the disorientation. I felt the illusion snap, bringing a sense of vertigo as reality suddenly shifted.

But before I could escape, Jared slashed at me with his claws. Shocking cold and warmth struck my abdomen with what I associated to be a deep and dangerous wound. I could only be grateful that the strikes weren't imbued with poison or magic, but they still hurt me.

He had a hold of me, and he slashed me again, and again. I let my water whips dissipate as I reached up with both hands and grabbed his head before channeling shocking touch directly into his skull.

Jared spasmed and roared before his cloak seemed to forcibly tear him away. I slowly drifted with feather fall, but didn't have time to even summon another whip before Jared was streaking towards me again. I didn't want him that close to me again: close enough to use shocking touch was close enough for him to mangle me with his claws. Instead I brought my hands together in his face with a thunderclap spell that again sent us in opposite directions.

Jared looked at me and his eyes flashed red.

Jared has tried to engage you in mental combat!

I thought I might have been able to resist his engagement, but feeling blood pour from my abdomen I thought this gambit was worth it. We could take our battle to Tadra, the mental realm, and see which of our afflictions gave us more power.

The answer was the same as an age old question: what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?

There was a heavy strain on my mind as I sensed my familiar dark ship below me, but above were the upper levels of a stone tower, dark and lightless. I could sense it was trying to form a base even as my ship tried to form masts and sky. When I'd battled my father, our minds had at least cooperated on the realm to an extent. Between this vampire and me there was no common ground. My curse resolutely anchored me to a ship on the ocean, but Jared seemed equally anchored to some type of belfry.

"This is MY realm!" Jared roared from the darkness above me. "You will give in, you insignificant abomination of cursed energies!"

“Pound sand,” I retorted. A moment later our battle was decided as our realms ripped apart and we were both forcibly ejected from Tadra.

I didn’t know how much time had passed, but I was lying on the deck and my wounds had been healed. That was the danger of engaging in mental combat with a broader battle going on, you were helpless to other foes. Thankfully, Drese and the orcs had been able to look out for me.

I sat up to get my bearings and instead got a shock. Two more orcs were dead, and the remainder were exhausted after their rage expired. That wasn’t the most stunning thing, though. What was stunning was the power Drese was wielding.

Seemingly unfettered by the mana supplies I’d given him and by virtue of being the last man standing whole, he had gone all out. He had turned into a beacon that repelled the vampires seeming to eat away at their flesh if they dared get too close. Floating wisps nurtured myself and the orcs who set up a ragged defense around me. As I watched a portal opened to some dimension and a tawny, six-legged mountain cat emerged. It immediately focused on the blonde woman and attacked, each of its claw swipes seeming to cut the air in an extended swipe.

Drese didn’t watch the attacking cat, but instead eyed Jared, who was floating back in his dark cloak. They didn’t immediately attack each other, but it was clear there was still no love lost between them.

“Why pursue this end?” Drese asked. “You were not aware of my involvement, so it wasn’t on my account.”

“The monarch called in a very old favor,” Jared hissed. “Being free of it would let my clan operate freely again.”

“Judge for yourself whether you deem the benefit of this undertaking worth the risk,” Drese warned.

Jared tossed something overboard before holding his hands a foot apart, darkness beginning to swirl between them. Drese prepared several layers of shields, and after an eight second casting time a bolt crashed into them and broke several with burst of blinding light.

A sharp pain erupted in my chest. When my vision cleared I saw the handle of a blade sticking from my chest.

“Our clan needs this to survive,” Jared said. “And Seaborn is the only one we need to kill.”

Drese sent a wave of healing magic towards me with a glance but then frowned and looked at me closer.

I for one was feeling very wrong. It wasn’t just the sight of the dagger with barbed hooks along both edges, or the fact that it was protruding from where my heart was supposed to be; it was

the golden-orange film on the blade and the heat that was building in my chest. The heat spread throughout my body quickly, making my head feel hot and feverish and my limbs feel like they'd been burned. The feeling worsened as it seemed like my blood began to boil and sweat evaporated from my skin even as it poured from my pores.

I activated my healing spell, replenishing waters. The deeper magic spell ate through my whole mana pool but had always been able to instantly heal me.

Except this time. Relief hit as the fire abated, but it quickly fanned up again and I was out of tricks.

I was dimly aware of more fighting going on around me, but I couldn't focus on it. My vision was blurring and filling with white, my eyes were burning along with the rest of my body as the heat seemed to ramp up exponentially, molten fire filling my veins. I tried to get up and stumble over the side to the sea, but flopped on the deck like a fish.

I had to cool down! I had to get into the sea, I had to get to safety!

I activated my ability, and this time there wasn't any restriction on claiming the ship. Mirash had done it, he'd found the last hiding crewmember. Neither of these vampires were it.

I brushed the messages aside and instead focused on submerging the ship below me, sending the whole thing down to the sea, carrying me with it.

Water finally crashed over the main deck and struck me, sending steam upwards. It didn't fix whatever was wrong with me though, and I continued to burn up from the inside. Distantly, I knew that the battle continued on as the vampires forewent the need to breathe in order to continue trying to eliminate me. Sea creatures that we all should be wary of were in the water around us, attracted by the bait Jared had thrown out.

All I could think of was that safety would come in the deep, and urged the ship down as much as it could as delirium and finally unconsciousness took me.

Author's Note:

Another meaty, 7,200 word chapter in exchange for being a day late. :P

AND Dom's finally rescued Hali AND Marcus! What's happening there? I'll let you know as fast as I can get it on paper!