The Cabal of Animosity

# Prologue

A strong breeze from East swooped over the docks at Langiar harbour, bringing in a smell of salt and seaweed. The night was quiet. Only a faint cough echoed among the district warehouses. A ragged, homeless woman rummaged the trash bins. Frantically searching to find scraps of food to eat. Maybe even an upgrade to her tattered clothes. Over the last days, the summer heat had been strong. It was preferable to walk around in the refreshing night avoiding the beating sun and the warm cobble streets.

But she was not the only one moving around the docks. A small group of four well-dressed people snuck around the alleys. In contradiction to the homeless woman, they avoided the yellow streetlights and moved with light footsteps. They were heading towards one of the warehouses in the middle of the docks. Determined. Soundless. Taking to the shadows, they crept through the narrow alleyways and climbed over two smaller storerooms towards their destination. An enormous warehouse. Although not the front side of it, but the side.

“Here, hand me the stained glass” a gruff growl whispered “and light the blue candle. We need to find that entrance. Quickly.” A moment later a small, blue light cast shadows on the wall of the warehouse. “There! The owl” commanded the robust man. He was dressed in a black jacket and flat cap with his signature purple scarf slightly covering his scar that ran over his right eye and nose. None of it had not moved since they left, despite the athletic movements required to his destination. After letting the light from the candle shine through the stained glass fragment, a small door frame and an outline of handle sparkled like stars in a moonless night.

The last smoke from the factories in the south of Langiar was long gone. Even the noisiest taverns and pubs across the districts were quieting down. The harbour district only had a few of them, as the cargo ships rarely stayed for long. The country of Gattitano was split into three regions, with Langiar as the capital of the region of Jusi. Langiar’s production of building material, in particular its steel industry, combined with a strong tools production and coal extraction, supplied essential products for the entire country. And had provided the city and region with prosperity over the last three decades.

The small group of four began to make a commotion. “How does this crystal work? It does not fit!” rung out in frustration. A definitive “Shh! Quiet down you.” sounded behind the purple scarf. He grabbed the crystal of the hand of a tall, thin man. and manoeuvred it into position. A small, perfectly pitched click signal his success. They entered.

The homeless woman continued walking the streets, chewing on some chicken pieces thrown out. As most of the homeless had been helped off the streets over the last decade, there was more food to the onces remaining. She praised her luck on finding such lavish food. A small kitten walked out from one of the alleys. It seemed a little frighten and hungry. The woman could not refuse such a small friend and gave it a meaty leg. It purred happily in response. A few pets were in order.

The four were finally inside the warehouse. The goods within were organised almost like a maze, but they moved swiftly through it. They reached the far corner. They had found the offices. They entered and grabbed a few, large papers, mostly looking like floor and building plans for other buildings among a few books and records. One of the four, a petite, woman, strode across the office. She promptly sealed the selected items into her small briefcase.

In the neighbouring districts, five workers had arrived at the post office and began their work. Sorting letters and packages from yesterday took time. In particular, as names and addresses had to be recorded on and off the records. The manager arrived, entering the post office through a large wooden door bearing a small carving of two oxen around the door handle. She entered the storage room, which connected the front and her small office.

She quickly greeted the others and went to her office. A note was left for her. Right after finishing reading, she told two of the workers, Bertha, and Tomas, to go to the docks. An important shipment of letters and packages had arrived late last night and had not been picked up. The two hastily stopped sorting and went out the back. They cranked the car. Luckily, very few drove at night. They had the entire road for themselves, as they headed towards the docks.

At the warehouse, the four intruders had begun emptying oak barrels for their content across the stored goods. They had found them exactly as agreed. With a “Light it up” from behind the scarf, the three compatriots grinned. The got everything the needed. It was time to end the mission with a spectacle.

After petting the cat for a few minutes, the homeless woman began to wonder where to rest. Although more pleasant to walk around in, the night still incurred sleep in her. However, a weak smell of burning kerosene began to fill the street. She looked up and saw a yellow and orange light from the inside. She took a step back in desperate disbelief. Suddenly, four people burst through the side of the warehouse. Instinctively, the kitten hissed and scuttered away, barely leaving a shadow behind it.

As the four realised they were five, their smiles retracted. A “Grab her” bellowed in the alley. Quickly a short, bulking man from the intruders tackled the homeless woman. He dragged her across the ground. A tall man with grey hair waddle over to help, grabbing her ankles. “Throw her in building and remove the handle”.

The homeless woman briefly regained consciousness, only to see two stern, sinister eyes, with a scar running over the right eye like a stone cracked in half. The door was slammed. Sealed from the outside. She began hammering where the exit once was, but to no avail. Outside only a shattered crystal and a small, golden brooch with the symbol of a hawk laid across the ground. As the colours from inside the building intensified, the hammering sound began to stop.

Bertha and Tomas were almost at the package distribution centre. It rarely happened that shipments were late. The Travelling Oxen had made it their business to move letters and packages. No one did it better. Explaining why they had to rush to get the late shipment. Everyone wanted something, either information or maybe a rare, exotic good. And the best way to maintain the competitive advantage is a swift, traceless delivery even if the sun was nowhere to be seen.

As the car approach the harbour district, they saw the sky illuminated by a yellow and orange tint in the horizon. They looked at each other. Confused. Puzzled. The sun should not rise for another hour. Before Tomas could utter his thoughts, a bell sounded, and two wagons passed by them. It was the fire brigade, and they were headed in the same direction as them. They arrived to see a warehouse close to the distribution centre surrounded by firemen. The warehouse was engulfed in flames. Only word coming to mind was “inferno”.

# Chapter 1 – Smoke Signal

The sound from the footsteps drummed like the marching sound from an experienced warband. Quicker. Stronger. No matter the running pace, the sound grew ever eery. Walls and buildings raising ever taller. Encapsulating. The yellow shine began to flicker. One by one the streetlights turned off, until complete darkness swallowed the street whole. The beat grew louder. Slamming hard enough for a headache to develop. It stopped. Nothing sounded, but the hammering feeling kept going. Thirty seconds went by. Sixty. With the coordination of a pack of hyenas, a sea of torches was lit, and a red flash revealed everything.

Marley sprang out of the armchair. He had finally fallen asleep, although this dream was the worst one so far. He looked outside. A calm ocean as far as he could see with dark, purple thunderclouds lighting up in the distance. The toll of a summer heatwave. Time to freshen up a bit. And to forget the dream. Splashing his face with fresh water always did the trick. The small blood veins in his eyes revealed themselves after his poor sleeping regiment as of late.

He looked in the mirror. He could not stop seeing the mint-green towels in the reflection. It polluted the view, distracting from the beautifully carved mahogany door. As the water ran down his cheek, he contemplated whether to leave the towel hanging and find something else to clean up with.

There was a light knock on the room door. A crew member called from the outside of the door. “Sir, the dinner began forty minutes ago. You can still make the main course if you hurry, Sir.” As Marley went to the door, droplets of water fell from his he cheeks. He opened it. A broad shouldered, young cabin boy stood there, surprised to see Marley open the door. “I will be there in five”. The cabin boy gave a nod and hustled towards the dining area. Marley reluctantly picked up the towel with a sigh.

As Marley went out the door, he attached the final suspender. He headed towards the dining area following an extravagant red carpet. And the details of the woodwork on the walls were fascinated. None of details seemed to reappear. Almost like they were telling a story. Though the splash of water to his face had revived Marley, he still mouthed a small yawn as he rounded the corner to the dining hall. And almost walked straight into another passenger. A man. Big as a boulder, but as well-dressed as a nobleman doctor. “Sorry, I did not see you”. Rather impressive, given he was at least a head taller than Marley. The man calmly nodded with a dubious eye and sophisticated gesture to him. As Marley turned around, he twisted the left part of his moustache.

Marley walked in the dining area. The cabin boy caught his attention immediately. He strode towards the far corner, where a small table for four was standing. Unused. A lone survivor of the ball night on the ship, probably because it was so cut of the festivities of the evening. A jazz song played in the background. It was more upbeat tonight than usual. The cheerful nature marked the last night of the seven days voyage. And the music did its job. Passengers had already left their seats to mingle, and a few brave souls even had begun to dance. Well, two of the young men were clearly dancing on liquid courage.

“Here Sir. I will be right back with the main course. Tonight’s dinner is lamb with fried potatoes, haricots, and a red wine sauce. Anything the kitchen should be aware of before serving?” Marley shook his head. The Cabin boy went on his way with a swift pace and seemed to be quick on his feet, as he danced through the most talkative guest.

There was remarkable little disturbance to see in the golden chandeliers tonight. Marley was thinking of the thunderstorm he saw in the horizon. It would probably still be a little while before its wind and waves reached the ship. Thunder, so powerful and beautiful. Terrifying and cleansing. Unfortunately, the dining hall did not have any windows to observe its nature.

His thoughts drifted from thunder to the electric power lights hanging around the hall. Ah, electricity, a favourite subject of his, had just been discovered a few years prior to his birth. It was everywhere in his young teenage years. The benefit of being a child from a noble family. Toys, inventions, and news came to one’s house naturally. What good could it do, and how many could benefit from it? Lightning under the control of civilization.

As he opened his eye, he realised he got company at his table. A young woman, probably a few years older than himself, sat across from him. Marley jumped in his seat. “Sorry” she said. “But your facial expression looked like you were enjoying yourself, and I would not like to miss it.” She sat there in a sleek, long, red dress, flicking her brown, curly hair as she turned her head. Waiting for Marley. “What do you mean, Miss?” Marley asked. A small smile grew over her round, rose red cheeks.

“Miss Rosegaard.“ She locked eyes with Marley. Determined, but curious. Marley was stuck between his daydream and reality. It was not until Miss Rosegaard raised her eyebrows that he regained his noble manners. “Marley. Of house Canuvia.”

She kept looking. No change in her facial expression. Not satisfied. Marley thought he might as well say something. A small, embarrassed sigh came out as he began speaking. “As I was leaving my cabin, I noticed a weather front approaching us. A thunderstorm to be precise. And each strike illuminated the sky with bright white colour amidst an ocean of purple clouds. I could not get the image out of my head”. Talking about the weather, what a classic.

Miss Rosegaard widened her gaze for a moment. Satisfied or displeased? But as she opened her mouth a man put his large hand on her shoulder. “Leave him be Elenora”. It was the man from outside the dining hall. Sitting down while he stood up, only amplified his statue. He was mountain. “But would you mind a dance with me instead? I at least know your games”. Elenora took his hand, but Marley noticed what could be a slight eye roll. Or was she just give Marley a last look?

The cabin boy returned. Dinner was served. The highlight was definitely the fried potatoes drizzled in garlic butter. And the glass of red wine on the side did wonder. Invigorated, Marley listened to the band for a few moments. A few new numbers were playing tonight.

The glass of wine was replaced with a cup of tea, while the remaining first class passengers still mingled with one another. Luckily, Marley’s late arrival and dinner had discouraged anyone to join him. Suddenly, the dancing crowd began to stop. A wave of whispering spread throughout it, like a strong wind through a forest. They began to move out of the hall. It was probably the arrival of the thunderstorm, and though the intense sound of thunder would give the music a spin, it was less fun to dance to the rhythm of waves rocking the ship.

Marley began to follow everyone as one of the last to leave. But people were moving towards the upper decks rather than their cabins. Marley followed like a sardine in its school. They reached the upper decks. No rain met them. No thunder echoed. Only a fair wind.

A stench of smoke had replaced the smell of seawater. Confounded, Marley found a small spot where he could see what was going on. He was not meet by dark purple clouds as he hoped, but an orange and red ocean. Part of the docks of Langiar was aflame.

# Chapter 2 – What to follow

The captain announced everyone to return to their cabins over the speaker system. The stank of smoke weighed down on Marley, even in his room. He began collecting his luggage. At least the time could be used for something useful.

He heard the cabin boys knocking on the doors up and down the hallway. Properly to inform the guest of the docking and collect their luggage. At this point the captain should have talked to one of the harbours pilot captains to find safe docking. Sure enough, the young cabin boy that had collected Marley earlier that night knocked on his door. A bead of sweat ran from his eyebrow. Hard job, moving heavy suitcases, even though he clearly was fit for it. Marley offered him a glass of water. “No, one will question you for taking two minutes more to move my luggage,” said Marley. Though not a socialite, offering a short respite seemed right. A smile of relief appeared on cabin boy’s lips.

Between the sips of water, the cabin boy told what he knew. And as a return for the small break with extra details. Apparently one of the larger warehouses had caught fire the night before. And as it contained kerosene, the blaze had rapidly spread to the nearby buildings. The description reminded him of his nightmare earlier that evening. Luckily the fire departments in the city had reacted quickly and enclosed the fire to a few blocks of buildings.

After an hour of delay, the ship docked at the small old south of Langiar. A caravan of automobiles was parked for all the first class passengers to disembark. Although a first class passenger, Marley would rather walk. He walked down and picked one. They drove around a few corners, when Marley paid an extra coin for the driver to forget where Marley got off. It was a fine opportunity to get lost and think of where to stay.