## The Westerosi II: Subprime Directives

*by Mal3*

### Summary

Part II of The Westerosi Saga: Extradimensional horrors threaten to destroy the Seven Kingdoms--as well as all life as we know it--and Captain Jade Hasegawa of the Starfleet Rangers has to rise to stop them. If she accidentally conquers Westeros in the process, well... oops? Oops counts at a court-martial, right? Right?
Dear Mom, Mama, Dad & Everyone,

**Kongou** is just about close enough that I can finally start sending compressed text over subspace and not have it come out as garbage. That means I can write you directly and know that you'll get the letter, instead of having to trust to some random First Federationer I'll never actually meet face to face. At least now if the message gets corrupted I can blame the Fleet's censors. (As an aside to the censors, assuming you're reading this, please don't wield the markers of doom on this letter. I'll get you all ice cream and beer when I get back to Federal space, promise!)

I'm writing to you from Winterfell this time. You remember Winterfell from my first letter, the gigantic castle sitting out in the middle of a boreal forest? It's kind of become my center of operations since the last time I had a chance to write you. It's been a **weird** couple of months, let me tell you.

For the record, I'm still alive (obviously). I'd say "and well" but... well, it's a long story. I'm neither on fire nor on the run, which is about as well as I can be at the moment. Things out here are escalating in ways I didn't expect seven months ago when a hunting party stumbled over me and the ship. I finally found out what happened to Victory to cause me to crash-land here, and that's opened some pretty big cans of worms.

Remember the trees I wrote about? That's pretty much where it starts and ends. The notes on the Tanis Map entry I followed all the way out here were about the trees. It turns out they're a Builder project, or part of one at least. I'm still putting it together—psionic gestalt images are a real pain in the ass to sort through—but apparently the trees were here but pre-sophont before the Builders arrived, part of a symbiotic pair with a local humanoid species. Anyway, I guess the Builders saw the potential in the trees and their symbiotes and decided to uplift them. That thought just... wow, right? We've uplifted all sorts of animals in our time, primates, parrots, sehlat, but uplifting **plants**? I don't think even the maddest genetic engineers from the bad old days would've thought of doing something that crazy! I suppose the trees' psionic potential made it a little easier but still, wow.

The tree uplift wasn't the whole of the project, either. According to the trees, Planetos (and no, I didn't name it!) is close to something they call "the Shroud." I think that's the dimensional brane where psi energy originates? It's hard to tell—the trees obviously don't speak human, and they're given to poetic metaphor as a matter of course. I think they might've picked that bad habit up from the Builders. Anyway. So the source of all psi energy is, like, half a degree away on the zorth axis from normal space-time around Planetos, which is why the place feels like it's crackling with psi all the damn time. Mama, you'd love just soaking up the psi around this place. I've gotten used to it over the last couple months but if I stop and concentrate I can feel the energy just sort of **coating** everything like mist. It's... there's no good way to put it into words, really.

But (and there's always one of those) therein lies the problem: the proximity of this Shroud to Planetos is why the Builders set up shop here, and they managed to provoke something on the other side. I'm still not sure exactly what it is when it's at home, to be honest. The Builders called them "the Unbidden," the human locals call them "the Others." They didn't seem interested in giving me their names the first-and-so-far-only time I've talked to them. At this point all I know is that they're psionic
(naturally), they're hostile, hungry and really interested in leaving Planetos. According to the trees, the Builders fought them, managed to trap their scout force in some kind of prison in the northern polar regions... and then they abandoned the planet not long after.

I know, right? I guess they decided the locks were secure and the trees, the symbiotes and the humans could handle the situation if they needed to. And I suppose they weren't... wholly wrong? According to my research and the trees, about eight thousand years ago the Unbidden started to slip out of their cages and ran riot and a coalition of the species managed—barely—to shut the whole thing down before everything got too far out of control.

But that was a long time ago. The trees' numbers have dwindled, the original symbiote species seems to be all but extinct and the human populations have forgotten pretty much everything they need to know. All the relevant information's changed into myth, legend and religion. And the Unbidden are starting to break free again. Some of them already are free, but not (yet, I think) in enough numbers to push south from the poles. The trees were desperate; they needed a Builder, and they've been gone for who-knows-how many years.

Enter yours truly and her trusty ship. Victory entered the system at just the right moment. I'm no Builder, at best I know what their stuff looks like and how to maybe make it safe for study, but I guess any old doofus in a starship is going to look like a Builder if you're desperate enough. They brought me down using a focused psionic strike to the engines, in just the right place that I'd put enough of the pieces together that I'd initiate contact and we'd be off to the races. (Admittedly, I don't think they intended to kill the ansible along with the warp drive. That was probably a mistake, but I'm not 100% sure of that. I know that if I needed Builder assistance I wouldn't want to stop with just one. But that's just me.)

That in and of itself would be bad enough. Actually no, there's no reason to pussyfoot around it: this is exactly bad enough that I've declared a Section Three intervention over the whole clusterfuck. Like, formal record of intent before the court martial and everything. This is some industrial-grade shit I've found myself in. And to make things worse, I stepped in a big pile of it that isn't covered by Section Three guidelines.

I've been making friends since I've been here. I told you about some of them in my first letter. They're good people, they really are. Primitive compared to anybody back in Federal space, yeah, but you don't have to have some kind of advanced space-brain to have a good heart. Besides, you know how I always end up collecting strays, right? Some—well, most—of these friends move in Planetos's upper class, and they have enemies. I'm not trying to offend anyone, but I admit that I haven't been as diplomatic as a Starfleet officer ought to be in situations like this. I've done my best to maintain a certain level of distance from the ruling class, no loaning the ship or anything in my toybox out to help maintain the status quo or anything, but that in itself is considered mildly impolite by my hosts. And in the end my tendency to make friends screws me over more than anything else; in a feudal society who you know defines you almost as much as what you can do, and my landing zone locked me into a space in local politics I didn't really grok until it was way, way too late.

Long story short, the king of Westeros died about a month ago. His heir... isn't one of the best people in the world, if I'm going to be honest, and he either wanted my total loyalty as a vassal or my head on a stick for treason, depending on the time of day. And while I was gallivanting about talking to the psionic trees and learning about the Unbidden, it turned out that members of the nobility had concerns about the crown prince's legitimacy and were moving to unseat him. He moved faster.

One of the people I'd befriended was one of the people he had imprisoned, her and her father. For various reasons she had one of my communicators and called for help. I've never, never been able
to refuse a damsel in distress. After all the times you had to bail me out in primary and secondary you know that more than anyone else. When she called, it didn’t matter to me that I was potentially about to blow a huge hole in General Order One and the other contact regulations. I was on autopilot: the only thing that mattered to me was making sure she was safe. So I did what I do best, I went in, saved the damsel and blew a hole in the contact regs big enough to fit Canaveral in.

My heroic rescue set things in motion I didn’t understand in the moment, but the longer this goes on the bigger and uglier it gets. There’s a civil war in the offing; I console myself that the civil war was probable even if I hadn’t gotten involved, but that’s cold comfort. I’m a known associate and counsellor of one side, which limits my ability to move and get things done in the middle of the Section Three intervention.

I’m... not okay. I’m almost completely alone here and this thing with the Unbidden is bigger than anything I’ve ever had to deal with. If I screw this up, it’s not impossible that these things will get out and threaten the entire galaxy, and until Kongou gets here it all falls on me. At the same time I have to try and diplomance my way through a bouncing baby civil war, try and get everybody on the we-don’t-want-to-all-die page and hopefully do it without smashing down any more Federal laws in the process. There’s no way in this world or any other that I am anywhere near "okay."

But I’m coping. I’m not completely alone: I have Al, and Thoros, and Mel and a small gaggle of kids who look at me like I’m the biggest, baddest hero in the whole world. I still have Victory and most of the toy chest. Kongou and her squadron are on the way, even if I can’t stop it myself all I have to do is hold the line until she gets here.

This thing is huge and it’s scary and if I spend too much time thinking about it I kind of want to curl up in my bunk and wait for it to go away... but I will be fucked sideways with a cactus before I let this goddamn thing beat me. I am a Starfleet Ranger, and this is the sort of thing they trained us for at the academy. Well, not this exactly but this kind of scenario. Mostly. They covered it in a couple third-year seminars, at least.

I think I’m gonna be okay. Eventually. Someday.

I love all of you. I’d tell you not to worry but I know better than that, so just remember that I’ve got every intention of coming home alive and intact, and if these Unbidden bastards are going to stop me they’re gonna have to work for it. Give all the littles a hug from me and tell them I’ll be home as soon as I can.

Love,
Jadey
Moments In Transition

TYRION

Tyrion Lannister groaned as the horse beneath him swayed and bobbed, reminding him with every step how much he truly loathed travel by horse. At least the gold road was in better condition over the pass and down into the heart of the Westerlands than the kingsroad had been anywhere in the North. He rode with a small gathering of redcloaks, men Jaime had gifted him with when he departed King's Landing. A thoughtful gesture, that, and the men themselves had been pleasant enough company for commoners. The entire trip had the feel of a grand excursion, riding for some days them stopping at the nearest inn to have some (usually) palatable food, perhaps spend some time at the local brothel if there was one, then back onto the road home. Now, finally, they were approaching the Deep Den, warden of the gold road pass and the final stop before they entered the golden farms of the Westerlands.

As they drew near to Deep Den, all of a sudden the road seemed to be filled with men at arms. A good two hundred Lannister men stood encamped along the road and outside the walls of the mountain keep. Weariness drained from Tyrion and he spurred his horse onwards to the gate, leaving his companions behind. At the gate two men wearing the badger of House Lydden stopped in front of him. "Who goes there?" the taller and uglier of the pair demanded.

"Tyrion Lannister, son of Lord Tywin," Tyrion called out. The guards looked at him—I do have a distinct profile—and silently opened the gates. Tyrion rode in to find more Lannister men mingling with Lydden's household guards, and in the middle of all the activity his lord father glowering at something in the middle distance.

That glower fixed itself on him, and Tyrion flushed a little. Reining to a halt and carefully dismounting, Tyrion met Lord Tywin in the bubble of activity around them.

"Tyrion," Lord Tywin said coolly.

"Father," Tyrion said with a respectful nod. "For a moment I thought something had gone wrong with our lord of Lydden. Hunting bandits?"

"What are you doing here?" the old lion demanded. Tyrion blinked in confusion.

"I was returning to Casterly Rock from the capitol," he said cautiously. There was an odd energy in the courtyard. A sense of restrained violence tinged the air. "I believe I sent you a raven about it when I departed."

Tywin snorted. "And no doubt prolonged your trip by stopping at every inn and whorehouse on the road."

"I was in no great hurry to return home."

"And what news have you heard?"

"News?" Tyrion's brow furrowed. "Nothing since we entered the mountains several days past." The sensation pricked again at his scalp. "Why?"

"King Robert is dead," Lord Tywin said. Tyrion stiffened, then sighed. Well, that was faster than I had anticipated. "Killed in a hunting accident, by all reports. Joffrey has been crowned and I ride to King's Landing to take up my post as Hand."
"Congratulations, Father," Tyrion said, and half meant it. He looked around. The Lannister men didn't have the look of an honor guard escorting the new Hand of the King. They seemed to have a considerably rougher cast to them. No doubt part of that was due to hard riding on the gold road and yet there was still something terribly off about the situation. "I feel like there's something more I am missing here, though," he said finally.

Lord Tywin Lannister's moods rarely strayed from grim even at the best of times. From the clenching of his jaw and the narrow slits of his eyes, Tyrion could guess that the lord of Casterly Rock was absolutely bloody furious. Which didn't make much sense; Robert was dead, his grandson was king and he about to take up the Handship again. What cause would he have to be angry? Lord Tywin reached into his surcoat and pulled out a scroll. "Read," he ordered, thrusting the scroll at Tyrion.

Tyrion took the scroll and did as he was bid. The message was from Pycelle, he recognized the Grand Maester's spidery handwriting, and made very little sense. Chaos in the Red Keep, a warning from the master of magic and the king was being... reluctant about something. "I take it things have not gone well, then?" he asked.

"Robert's pet witch appeared not long after His Grace's coronation," Tywin replied, scowling. "Shouting some nonsense about grumkins and monsters from beyond the Wall." He pulled a small bundle of similar scrolls from his coat and waved them in Tyrion's face. "Then the madwoman defied the Iron Throne, allied herself with the Starks and humiliated my son!" He threw the scrolls at Tyrion. "You suggested we ally ourselves with this creature, and now it's turned against us. Look at what you've done now" he all but shouted, the implication hanging thick and greasy in the air between them.

"Aye, I thought we might make the witch our friend," Tyrion said absently, thumbing through the scrolls and taking in all the reports of what had happened: almost all the Kingsguard defeated, their pride sorely beaten, the Mountain slain by dire sorcery—and what a terrible shame that was—stopping to wince as Pycelle described the injuries Jaime had taken. "I also feared that something like this might happen," he continued. "Robert used a soft touch on the woman and successfully kept on her good side. Joffrey was eager to have a court sorceress, mayhaps too eager. I daresay he tried to push and Lady Hasegawa pushed back to the court's detriment." Tyrion looked thoughtful. "We might still be able to salvage this."

Lord Tywin's glare could have burned all the Westerlands to ash in that moment. "No," he said with finality. "There will be no salvaging. This foreigner has dared to insult the throne and House Lannister at the same time with her actions. Do you intend me to grovel at her feet for her favor?"

"This is not some upjumped merchant from the Free Cities trying to haggle over spices and cheese, Father," Tyrion argued. "You haven't seen what the witch has at hand and what she can offer, I have. We cannot make her bend the knee to Joffrey or to our house, there is no force on this earth that can make her do that."

"A pretty Dornish mummer girl flutters her eyes at you and you abandon your family," Tywin sneered. "Is a foreign cunt all it takes to turn you?"

Tyrion flushed with anger. "You've not seen the ship, my lord," he said stiffly. "A hulk of white metal as big as the largest dromond in the Lannister fleet, perhaps bigger, floating in the air like a cloud. What coin is there in all of Casterly Rock—in all the world—that could make a mummery like that? My lord father, you needs understand that the only coin worth anything here is our good will. If we arranged a meeting, or even an exchange of letters, apologize for Joffrey, at the very least listen to what she has to say—"
"Enough!" Tywin barked. "I will hear no more of this talk from you or anyone else. I don't need a drunken dwarf or an old fool muttering in my ear at all times about witches. The woman Hasegawa will be attainted, declared outlaw and subject to the king's justice as soon as I reach the Red Keep, if not before."

_Gods damn everything, has your pride finally overtaken your sense?_ "Do you think that matters, Father?" Tyrion said quietly. "The master of magic still has her ship and her abilities. How much do you truly believe she cares about titles, or being named outlaw? Robert stepped lightly with her—as far as Robert could step lightly—because he saw that he couldn't press without losing control."

"A sufficient reward ought to remove her ship from her," Tywin replied. "Enough golden dragons to make a man wealthy for the rest of his life. Perhaps a keep somewhere, should the victor be landless. There are enough greedy men in Westeros to make it possible."

"You're trying to chain a dragon with paper rope, Father," Tyrion warned. "Joffrey tried to press his advantage and all he got for it was a court full of battered knights."

"Joffrey is a boy," Lord Tywin said. "She'll find defying a man a more difficult task. And I will not brook any defiance, not from this witch or from my children." He leveled a glare at Tyrion. "You will stay here until my party departs, then return to Casterly Rock. Do not leave until I summon you." The proud old lion turned and walked out the castle gates, back to the road and the soldiers waiting thereon.

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**FLASH TRAFFIC**

**TO:** KIRK, Cpt. Winona, cmdg. FWSS Kongou CA-314  
SUVOK, Cdr., cmdg. FWSC Kirkwood Gap R-1821  
SH'QESRIR, Cdr. Vroli, cmdg. FWSC Hiroko Ai R-1209  
OLAYINKA, Cdr. Temitope, cmdg. FWSC Soval Variations R-1104  
**FROM:** HASEGAWA, Cpt. Jade, cmdg. FWSC Carefree Victory AGS-3172

A big Planetosi hello going out to my rescue party! Direct communication that's more than 140 characters a burst transmission, ain't technology grand? Even if this is compressed to hell and back, short plaintext messages ought to be okay until you get close enough that we can start using compressed video.

Right now, you're still too far away to be of any physical use, more's the pity. But you've got bigger & badder library computers than I do and working ansible links to all the data. So you guys can be my plucky research team assisting the noble heroine as she attempts to unfuck this situation, okay? Great. Let's get started.

Psionic defense is the key here, so let's start digging into the all data we've got on blocking psi energy. Sort it into two piles: one for anything that looks feasible for a grade-1 sensitive to accomplish using the resources of a Triumph class scout with a busted warp core. The other pile is for the big, ridiculous schemes, the bigger and more ridiculous the better. I might not be able to use them _now_ but there's a non-zero chance the Builders left a bunch of other toys behind on this rock. A silly scheme might be able to leverage that better than a serious one. Or I could just be talking out my ass, that's a possibility too.

Next on the agenda is diplomacy. I'll be sending a staged text dump over the next few days containing everything I've been able to get my hands on regarding Westerosi law. From that, I need somebody to go over it and use that to build a "let's not kill each other because ice monsters are coming" treaty. I know, it's kind of a long shot but if you can get me something that works within the
confines of Westerosi law and custom I have a better shot at making the intervention work than if I just bully everybody into submission. I mean, I'm pretty sure that might work but it'd make my life way more difficult than it really needs to at this point. Also, I don't want to have to find a desert island to operate from if the bullying plan falls through.

That's about all I can ask for at this point. Clear skies, guys.

—Hasegawa

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**THE CHEESEMONGER'S PALACE**

Illyrio Mopatis sat in his courtyard, staring at the image of his old self. The young face stared back wordlessly. He wondered, now and again, what the young bravo would think of his station. The life of a Pentoshi magister seemed so far away at the time. Would he be pleased that he'd reached the pinnacle, or dismayed by everything that climb had cost him? Now, the magister sat, nibbling on dates and cheese as his oldest friend in the guise of a household guard relayed current events from Westeros.

"I fear I lost track of her in the confusion," Varys admitted. "The queen regent sent parties after her but failed to catch up before the ship arrived. Ser Gregor reportedly got the closest but lost his head in the process."

"Martell will be pleased by that," Illyrio grunted. "Or not; who knows with that one. Mayhaps he wanted to see to Clegane personally." He waved a chubby hand. "It is no matter. Tell me more of this threat the witch made towards the king."

"No threat," Varys replied. "To threaten implies a personal connection. No, this was a warning clear as day. She believes that the Others of legend are alive, awake and marching south towards the Wall as we speak. And she had the head." A faint shudder rippled through the large man's body.

"You saw this," he half-asked.

Varys nodded. "I did. It was a most convincing scrap of evidence."

"And this was no mere mummery? I can think of men in the Free Cities who could make such a thing appear to be real. This Ulthosi witch might be skilled, but how much is real and how much fake?"

"I know, old friend. This would be so much easier if it was mummery and puppetry, but the world is not so simple as all that. I had a chance to examine the head closely, after the lady departed but before the king took possession. If this was a puppet or some kind of mechanism it is so far beyond any kind of trickery we are aware of that I cannot tell the difference."

Illyrio pounced on the last statement. "But there is a chance," he said.

"There is," Varys said. "But I do not give it much credence. I find no motive in creating such a thing and then acting the way the former master of magic did. The head makes an excellent tool for insinuating herself deeply into the new king's counsels, but then she assaults a dozen men, grievously injures the Kingslayer and flees with the Starks in tow. There's no obvious gain in doing this, yet she did. Madness? Perhaps, but it is a very consistent and compelling madness. Also, my little birds in the north sing that the northmen at the least take her warnings very seriously. No my friend, I believe we must take her claims—and her evidence—as what they appear to be."

Illyrio sat silently, looking at his former glory and nibbling on dates without thinking, for a long time.
"This complicates matters," he said finally.

"To an extent," his old friend replied. "But not perhaps as much as you might fear."

"I wish I had your confidence, old friend," Illyrio said. "The Dothraki are marching, but young Viserys is not among them. My agents tell me he finally crossed the khal one time too many and, well." He sighed dramatically. "I told the boy he should stay as my guest. A pity. Still, the khal is heading south but we have no clear idea on where he's headed or when he'll turn his eyes westward. Or even if he will, for that matter. Without the khal..."

"I urged you once to put the khal aside," Varys said in reply. "Again, we must do so. If the khal turns west then we may add him back to the playing board but for now it doesn't matter what he does. The time for waiting and delays is over, my friend. Events have finally overtaken us; this matter beyond the Wall overshadows everything, but there's still an opportunity to be had."

Illyrio raised an exquisitely dyed eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Joffrey may wish to move north to answer the insult given him, but the old lion will prevent him from doing so whilst the Baratheons are against them. Lord Tywin would prefer to let his enemies weaken each other before he moves to eliminate them with one bold stroke. If the Starks take the warnings seriously they are not likely to move south whilst the Wall is threatened. The Vale is closed to outsiders, the gods only know what the ironborn will do, Stannis and Renly cannot make common cause and Dorne will not follow any of them. In this stalemate we have an opening, but it will not last long. Letters need be sent; to Connington, to tell him to prepare the boy, and to Strickland, to secure his men."

"I think I see," Illyrio mused. "We attack the weakest party and secure our position? Strickland's men ought to be able to take the capitol whilst the other players are paralyzed. A risky gambit to be sure, but..."

Varys shook his helmeted head. "You misunderstand," he chided. "Joining the fight in the south is the losing move. The players are paralyzed, as you said, and that paralysis means the upheaval we need is not present. The winning move is to the north. Our prince and his army must join with the Starks and aid in the defense there."

Illyrio stopped chewing, openly staring at his longtime accomplice in disbelief. "Has this dead man's head made you take leave of your senses?" he demanded. "You propose to send him to the Starks? How could you even think for an instant they'd accept him?"

"Think, Illyrio," Varys said in a low, urgent voice. "None of the southron lords will send more than a token force to the Wall, assuming they don't simply laugh away Stark's attempts at convincing them. Stannis might send more, but with his brother and the Lannisters to fight even he cannot send away too many men. Tales are already starting to spread of the witch and her warning; the people begin to wonder if the lords are squabbling whilst the realm is threatened. What better moment for him to appear, standing with the northmen at the Wall defending the realm against legendary foes? Ned Stark will bend the knee out of sheer gratitude in that event."

"What of the witch?"

"We needs sway her to our side, or at least sway her to neutrality. Sending the boy north will help in that—it shows we take her seriously. The rest... it will be difficult, she flits about Westeros like a demented raven, not staying for too long in one place. Preparations need to be made; she seeks to unify Westeros against the threat, but she cannot be allowed to unify it behind anyone other than our prince. Perhaps the Dornish could be our intermediaries in this cause. I must find the new pattern.
"I know not if I like this plan, old friend," Illyrio said, frowning. "Too much is left open to chance, and factors we cannot control. If we send the boy to the North, if we gain the witch's favor... if, if, if. Too bold, too bold. What happens should the Starks see him as a threat? What happens if he fails?"

"If he fails..." Varys shrugged. "The witch claims that this is a threat that will swallow all of Westeros, possibly the entire world. If the prince that was promised cannot stand against such things, what hope do any of us have?"

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***FLASH TRAFFIC***

TO: HASEGAWA, Cpt. Jade, cmdg. FWSC Carefree Victory AGS-3172

FROM: KIRK, Cpt. Winona, cmdg. FWSS Kongou CA-314

We'll get right on that, Captain. Also, be advised that all communications from this point will be going on record as part of the Section Three investigation. You might want to remember to moderate tone in official communiques from here on out.

—Kirk

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***FLASH TRAFFIC***

TO: KIRK, Cpt. Winona, cmdg. FWSS Kongou CA-314

FROM: HASEGAWA, Cpt. Jade, cmdg. FWSC Carefree Victory AGS-3172

The part of me that was seriously concerned about decorum in communications broke off and burnt up somewhere over Westeros, I think. Got way too much to worry about than policing my language when speaking (typing? Whatever) to my fellow Fleet officers. Besides, I might as well give the people who end up transcribing this mess into the official record something entertaining to read while they're doing it.

—Hasegawa

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DAENAERYS

They rode out of Vaes Dothrak at dawn, the shadows of the Horse Gate pointing long towards the west. Khal Drogo led the khalasar under the bronze stallions out of the sacred city and turned south, keeping the rising sun on his left. Dany followed dutifully on her silver, escorted by Ser Jorah Mormont. The morning light caught off of Drogo's long braid, causing it to shine like burnished obsidian.

The light also caught on Dany's newest gift, an odd ring of blue-veined gold, joined to a bracelet of the same material by fine golden chains. Her sun-and-stars had found the ring somewhere deep within the markets of Vaes Dothrak and brought it back to her. Or perhaps it was one of her khas, or the bloodriders? She wasn't sure. It seemed odd that a khal, especially as mighty a one as Drogo, would go hunting for trinkets in the marketplace. But that was apparently what happened.

The ring was Valyrian, that much she was sure of. Of her heritage Dany knew little in truth, mostly what her brother Viserys had been known or was willing to teach her, along with some extra reading in the rare times they had secured the patronage of a man with a library. One of the few things Dany
knew was the dragonlord script, and this was inscribed along the inside and the outside of the bracelet.

The inner track was in High Valyrian, a language Dany knew a little of. She could make out the words *dragon* and *master* and that was about it. The inscription on the outside of the bracelet was older, the script more worn but still cut deeply and cleanly into the gold that it might be readable after many centuries, and the words made no sense to her. They seemed Valyrian, but were unlike anything she'd ever heard before.

"Zlaldimandenak zalzeh nilar peksehbk bihzihseh mbirehd," Dany murmured, stroking the cool metal. In response the metal warmed under her fingertips for an instant. She felt something flicker in her breast, then flutter down into her swollen belly. For a moment she could feel something inside her and around her, flames licking around her hands as the world shifted just a little and she could see… blue and gold and red and green flowing all around her and Drogo.

"Your pardon, Princess?" Ser Jorah's voice came from behind her, breaking the moment. The colors vanished from Dany's sight as she turned to see her lone loyal knight looking at her with great concern.

"Ser Jorah?" she asked.

"You said something aloud I didn't quite catch," he explained.

Dany blinked. She had said the inscription aloud, hadn't she? "I was just… thinking about this bracelet my lord husband gave me," she said, raising the encircled arm to show Ser Jorah. "It's Valyrian, I think. I wonder how it came to Vaes Dothrak?"

Ser Jorah shrugged. "Who knows, Princess?" he said. "It's said that most of the dragonlords' treasure vanished with them in the Doom, but they ranged all across Essos in their time. It may be that one khal or another picked up the trinket in the years after, when the Dothraki established their domains over this land."

"And then it came to me," Dany said, absently rubbing the golden bracelet. This time, it remained cool to the touch. "I wonder if it's magic?"

"Who can say for certain, Princess? It's known the Valyrians used the dark arts as much as they used dragons."

"Aye." Dany rubbed the bracelet again, tracing the shape of the runes beneath her fingers. She could feel the colors start to lick at her fingertips again as she did so. "And where did my ancestors learn these arts, Ser Jorah?"

The knight shrugged again. "The dragonlords kept their secrets well. I doubt even your family knew much of anything about their origins. No Targaryen ever said as much after the conquest, at least."

Dany made a small noise of disappointment and let the ringed hand drift over her belly. The ring warmed a little, pulsing in time with her heart. It might've been her imagination, or some trick of the rising sun, but the colors seemed to flash around the ring, as if it was waking up from a long sleep.
"Queenscrown," he said, putting his finger down on the map. "The keep is abandoned but still in good repair, and there are orchards and fields still bearing crops where the village used to be. I would rather it not be so close to Umber land, but there are few holdfasts left in the Gift."

Lady Jade hummed in agreement. "It's suitable as a rally point at least," she said. "Send the free folk south to the tower, then spread them out east and west so they've got room for forage?"

"Aye," Ned said. "We can't just let the wildlings flood through the Wall, that would be the makings of a disaster." He could see it in his mind's eye: a great mass of wildlings coming south without direction, no King-Beyond-The-Wall to give even the slightest leadership, pillaging every village and small keep between the Gift and the Neck. "Mance Rayder needs keep his people close; Queenscrown lets him do that."

"I can't see him reneging," the sorceress said. "He knows what's at stake here. I'm worried about outlying groups, but..."

Ned sighed. "Small groups we can deal with, or hand over to Rayder to dispense with, so long as he can keep the greater mass in line." Ned wasn't sure this was the wisest course. In the long years of the North the wildlings had never been trustworthy. Starks died because of wildling treachery. Given the greater threat looming over all of them, though... "We will need Lord Umber to show willing first," he said. "Last Hearth has the worst experience with wildlings of all the Northern houses."

"Whenever he shows up," Lady Jade noted. Ned nodded and returned his attention to the map. The North never felt so large as when he was expecting somebody to make the journey to Winterfell. "I could've gone and picked them up," the sorceress continued, again. "Last Hearth, Dreadfort, Karhold. A nice, simple quadrangle, could've arranged to pick up them and a half-dozen retainers each and brought them back to Winterfell inside of a day. We could've have all of this over and done with days ago instead of waiting around staring at maps with our thumbs up our asses."

"Aye, I respect your concerns, Captain," Ned said patiently, again. "But in this I felt it better if my bannermen had a more gradual introduction to your..." he gestured vaguely, "abilities." Shocking them beyond the capability of rational thought might serve our purpose in the moment, but I still have to live with them when you're gone. "You'll have your moment to surprise Lords Bolton, Karstark and Umber when they see your ship at the gates."

The sorceress from beyond the fixed stars, possibly the most powerful single person in the whole of Westeros, thumped her head against the table and groaned like Robb might when avoiding tutoring. "Yeah, yeah," she said. "I'm sorry I keep carping on it. I'm just used to a faster pace of life."

"If every man could fly, I imagine there'd be less patience for those who walked," Ned noted. Lady Jade looked up and cracked a small smile.

"That's a pretty good way of putting it," she said.

A knock came at the door. Ned turned his attention that direction and called for the knocker to enter. Maester Luwin came in bearing a collection of scrolls. "Ravens from the south, my lord," he said.

Ned blinked. "Oh?"
Luwin held out a scroll with an expression of distaste. "King Joffrey demands that Lord Robb hand over, ahem, 'the traitor Eddard Stark and the renegade Jade Hasegawa' to the king's justice, that he return his lawful betrothed and that he himself travel to King's Landing to bend his knee and pledge himself to the rightful king."

Lady Jade gave him a wry look. "Well, aren't we popular," she said. For a long moment all Ned could see was red. That creature will never have Sansa flashed hotly through his mind. It was only the beginning, of course. The Lannister boy still had Stannis and Renly to deal with in the south, even with the Westerlands in his camp he hadn't enough to attack the North directly. Not yet.

"What else?" he said tightly. Luwin gave him a concerned glance, then went fishing through the scrolls.

"Messages from the Baratheon brothers, both requesting our loyalty," Luwin replied, leafing through the scrolls. "Stannis is... fairly abrupt in his message. Renly's a bit more polite but the gist remains the same: bend the knee or see the weight of Westeros arrayed against you."

"Send ravens back to Stannis and Renly," Ned ordered. "Tell them of our situation and ask if they will support the Wall. Let us see where the Baratheons stand on this." Stannis had the rightful claim, this was true enough, but if he was disinclined to come north and offer aid then Ned would take his faith elsewhere.

"And let them know I'll be coming south to meet with them personally," Lady Jade put in. Luwin looked at her in surprise. "Make sure to mention that. I'm sure they'll be very interested in that part."

"Is that wise, my lady?" Luwin asked.

The sorceress shrugged. "No idea, but if we need to get Westeros behind us it's worth trying."

"Any other messages, Luwin?" asked Ned.

The maester plucked one last scroll out from his collection. "An interesting puzzle, this one," he said. "It came on the same raven as the Iron Throne's message, but was addressed directly to Lady Jade." The sorceress blinked when he handed her the scroll. She unrolled it and read the contents.

"Huh," she said. "That's... unexpected." She raised an eyebrow. "How secure are the ravens, exactly?"

"How do you mean, my lady?" Luwin asked.

"Can they be tampered with? Messages altered or switched out en route?"

The maester looked thoughtful. "Ravens can and often are shot down during sieges," he said. "But once a raven is in flight... no, I daresay it's impossible to change a raven's scroll once it's away. To suborn a raven would require suborning the maester responsible for the raven. Not an impossible task, I regret to say, but difficult."

Lady Jade hummed to herself. She held up the scroll before her eyeglass and gently tapped the earpiece, then crumpled the scroll and tossed it into the fire. "Well, something to keep in mind," she said. "Guess I'll have to see what Pycelle does next."

"What was that all about?" Ned wondered.

The sorceress opened her mouth to reply, then scowled. "I really wish Westeros played card games," she grumbled. "I can't use any of my favorite metaphors. Let's say, hm, that I was just given a
weighted die but I don't know if it's weighted in my favor or not."

"You've a man inside," Ned said, the light dawning.

"I might have a man inside," Lady Jade corrected him. "I might also have an elaborate trap waiting for me. Either way it's not worth exploring until I have more intelligence."

"A wise decision," Luwin said. He might have said more but a cry came up from the hallway:

"Riders, milord! Bearing the sigils of Karstark, Umber and Bolton!"

"About frickin' time," Lady Jade said.

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**THE GREAT JON**

There was a *gigantic fucking boat* made of white metal squatting between the wintertown and the gates of Winterfell. He'd heard the rumors flying all about the North, even read a raven or two from Ned and young Robb—before this latest madness at any rate—about all the strangeness surrounding the Starks the last half-year. If they'd come from anyone other than Ned Stark he'd have dismissed it as drunken ranting, or some mad bard working on a new song.

Having finally seen the godsdamned thing, everything he'd heard started to make... perhaps not *sense*, not quite, but it put more than a few things he'd heard in an altogether new light. And judging by the considering look in Roose Bolton's flat eyes, he wasn't the only one who'd put two and two together.

"Gods," Rickard Karstark croaked. "Where did Ned get a thing like that?" It was half chance that they all met along the road; none of their holdfasts were on the same road, but all roads in the North led to Winterfell or the Wall, and when the lord of the North calls for his bannermen to meet in person, then all sorts of interesting meetings may happen.

Bolton regarded the boat a little bit longer, then shrugged. "No doubt Lord Stark will have an answer," he said. "But now we needs ride on, my good lords. Our liege lord requires our presence and we have a duty." He spurred his horse and moved to ride on past the horse. Jon followed suit, spurring his horse just a little more so he would draw even with the Dreadfort's master. Karstark continued to gawp for a moment, then shook himself and set his horse to a gallop.

The gates of Winterfell opened for them, and they rode through. Inside the courtyard the household guards—a damn sight fewer guards than Jon was expecting—went through their drills, watched closely by a boy who could only be young Robb. A huge grey wolf sat at his feet, watching the three lords and their retinues ride in with unnerving closeness.

"Well I'll be damned," muttered Jon. "Ned hadn't mentioned anything about that in his ravens."

Jon found a likely place to dismount and swung down from his destrier. Looking around, it seemed that Winterfell was preparing for war. That fit with what the last raven had said: *gather the banners, be prepared to march south*. But then why would Ned have called the three of them in particular to Winterfell? Where were the Glovers, the Cerwyns, the Flints, the Manderlys?

A door rattled to one side, Jon turned and saw Ned coming out from the main keep, followed closely by old Luwin and a slight Dornish girl in green tunic and black trousers. *Oho, now this is interesting*, he thought, taking a knee before his liege. Ned looked like he'd been through another three wars or more in the year since Jon had seen him last.
Ned smiled in welcome. "Rickard, Roose, Greatjon," he said. "Welcome back to Winterfell, all of you."

"I would say it was a pleasure to return, my lord," Bolton said as he rose. "But your missive interrupted our muster. I'm most curious as to why."

"At this point I think we've all gotten the raven from King's Landing," Rickard added. "Rumors floating up from White Harbor about the new king and other things, too." The Karstark shot a look at the Dornishwoman. "Things I had trouble believing until I saw what was sitting outside the wall."

As usual, Jon had to step in and get to the point. "Are we going to war, Ned?" he asked bluntly.

Ned grimaced. "That's a more complicated question than you might imagine," he said.

"Don't see how," Jon countered. "We're either goin' to war or we aren't."

"Perhaps we're getting ahead of ourselves," Bolton cut in. "For one, who is the young lady behind you, Ned? If rumor is right, I suspect she has something to do with the... thing sitting beside your castle gate?"

Ned made a slight gesture of introduction. "My lords, this is Captain Jade Hasegawa and yes, that is her ship. My lady, allow me to introduce you to Rickard Karstark, Roose Bolton and Greatjon Umber. These three are among my strongest bannermen." The girl in green bowed stiffly at the waist.

"I am pleased to meet you," she said, her speech ringing with an accent Jon had never heard before.

"Others take me, you're the witch," Rickard said. "You're the one they say cut down half the Kingsguard and pulled Maegor's Holdfast half off the high hill." Jon blinked. That little thing did that? Truly?

"Captain Hasegawa has been the guest of Winterfell for some time now," Ned went on. "It was on her advice that I asked you three to come here."

"That bad, eh?" Jon wondered. The little witch looked like she wanted to laugh.

The three lords followed Ned into the hall, where a simple lunch of cheese and salt pork was awaiting them, along with the customary bread and salt. They each took a small portion of the bread and salt, then dug into the actual food on the tables. The whole of the Stark family was there, all of them eating and talking amongst themselves. The atmosphere was fairly light, and the witch girl pulled out a lute sized for a man Jon's size and played a few songs that brightened the air a little.

After the luncheon, Ned and the witch took them back into his solar, settled them down with goblets of wine and Ned sealed the door behind them.

"Alright, Ned. What's got such a fire under your arse?" Jon asked. "Are we going to war or not? And why pull us away from gathering our men at that?"

Ned glanced at the witch, but she had apparently gotten into a staring contest with Roose Bolton. Good luck with that, woman, Jon thought. "We are at war, Greatjon," he said. "Two wars, in fact."

"I take it that we are striking south," Bolton said calmly, like attacking the other six kingdoms was a thing northmen did every fucking day.
Ned hesitated. "The messages Robb sent on my behest involved our men going to war in the south," he said. "But that was before Robert... well. And it was before Lady Jade offered intelligence of her own that put things in an entirely new light. As I said, we're now involved in two wars."

Rickard leaned in, fingers stroking his beard. "Wildlings, then," he said. "We've heard rumors about a new King-Beyond-The-Wall rising the last few turns."

"The wildlings are a part of it," Ned agreed. "And that is why I've asked you three here. Of my banners, your holdings are the ones that deal with wildling raiders the most often. I need your support in the war to come."

"By the gods you'll have it!" Jon declared, bringing a meaty fist down solidly on his armrest. "Nothing more satisfying than killing a few hundred raping savages in skins."

The witch looked at Ned. "Time to stop dancing around the issue, Lord Stark," she said.

"Aye," replied Ned. He looked Jon square in the eye. "We're not going to war against the wildlings, Jon."

Jon blinked. "What?"

The witch, meanwhile, had pulled a covered cage out from beneath her chair and set before the three lords. "The free folk are moving south," she said. "But they're not doing it of their own volition. They're being driven towards the Wall, by these."

With a swift twist she pulled the cover off the cage and revealed the rotten head of a woman sitting under glass. The woman's head had been cut away cleanly at some point, but it had seen more than a bit of time exposed beforehand.

Jon looked scornfully at the witch and opened his mouth to say something when the head's eyes opened and looked at them. The eyes were cloudy and lit with an unnatural blue light, and he could feel the glare they gave off. The half-rotted jaw worked, exposed muscles clenching and twisting as the head tried to... say something? Crawl through the glass and bite their throats out? Jon couldn't say.

Rickard's face went as gray as his beard. "They said something about that in the rumors, too," he muttered. "But I didn't think... I couldn't think."

Roose Bolton's flat pale eyes held a disturbing glimmer of interest as he beheld the moving head. "Interesting," he said. "Very, very interesting..."

"There are thousands of these damn things currently running around north of the Wall," the witch said. "If that was it, it'd be bad enough. But that isn't it."

Bolton looked up sharply. "You claim that the Others are not just tales, then?" he said, almost mildly.

"I hope you're up to date on your legends, milord Bolton," the witch replied. "Because brother, you're in one now."

"Gods bugger me," Jon said, not taking his eyes off the loathsome thing under glass. "So, war to the south with the Iron Throne, and war to the north with the dragon-buggering Others? This is a hell of a war you've got planned, Ned."

Ned smiled thinly. "Not one I ever thought I would fight, but fight it we must."

Rickard's complexion regained a little color and he leaned back. "You clearly have a plan, Ned," he said. "I take it we're part of that?"
The lord of Winterfell nodded. "Let me tell you what we've come up with and please let me finish before you start jumping in."

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 214

If there's one thing I haven't quite gotten used to yet it's the way getting people to where they need to be takes fucking forever in this place. I know, I know, it's a bit hypocritical of me to say that considering I flew in a straight line for 600 days straight to get from Canaveral to Planetos. Still, even then I was halfway plugged into life back home through the ansible. This bit where it takes the better part of a month to arrange a meeting that could've been done instantaneously back home is just... it's frustrating. What makes the frustration worse is that I can't shake the feeling Stark's pretty much going throttle to the firewall in terms of how fast he can physically make things happen.

What I'm honestly afraid of at this point is it might not be enough. I have no good eyes on the Unbidden right now, just a couple communicators in the hands of people who just about know how to turn them on. If they pick up their pace—which they just might—there's a good chance I won't know about it until it's all over. So that's keeping me up nights.

Anyway.

The three lords we really need to convince about this free folk deal finally showed up at Winterfell this morning. Our first meeting was largely productive, which puts it ahead of a lot of meetings I've been to at starbase. They've seen the evidence, they've heard the story and now it's time to hammer out a functional plan. So far Stark's managed to get his old drinking buddy Lord Umber mostly on board; he's willing to not ride out and start actively hunting free folk on his lands. To be fair that's more than I expected for the first meeting. Even with the whole Unbidden thing hanging over us like a particularly nasty cloud there's a lot of bad history between the Northerners and the free folk. I'm not expecting everybody to sit down and hold hands round the campfire first thing. It'd be nice, it'd make a lot of future planning a hell of a lot easier, but I'm not expecting it. Grand alliances to hold back huge elemental evils aren't forged in a single afternoon of planning.

It'd be nice if that worked out, but sadly we're not all Andorians here. So negotiations are in order. Umber seems like he'll be fairly easy to win over, at least for the broad strokes and if we can keep the majority of the free folk away from Last Hearth. Lords Bolton and Karstark are a little more reluctant, but Stark seems confident that he can bring them around given enough time. Karstark—a cadet line of the Starks according to fount-of-all-knowledge Luwin—seems to be a lot like Stark, a guy given to thought more often than action. He's having trouble wrapping his head around the Unbidden (fair enough) but his eyes keep coming back to the head-in-a-jar gracing Stark's office. If he wants something it's likely going to be prestige, maybe the right hand seat at the dinner table or a decent cut of any booty they take when the war in the south kicks off, something tangible to counteract the more esoteric horrors of the story they've fallen into.

Roose Bolton, on the other hand, is just plain creepy. I'm not sure if he's the best poker player in the history of the species or if he just straight up gives no fucks whatsoever about the whole "oh BTW legendary monsters are real and are coming to eat your face alongside their armies of undead minions" thing. He's definitely holding out for a concession of some kind, but I don't know what just yet.

Negotiations are in swing. At a minimum all parties are convinced that something hinky's happening in the far north of the world, and that it's probably better to have thousands of free folk running around south of the Wall than having an extra umpty-thousand zombies heading south for the aforementioned face eating. I was a little afraid that that particular point might be trouble, but so far it
hasn't been. Which is nice. Right now it's just a question of who's going to pay what.

And we need to know soon as possible, too. Not long after we broke for dinner, word came down from Aemon at Castle Black: Mormont's scouts finally encountered the first group of Mance's people. Not a lot of them, maybe a couple dozen out of however many he's gathering and sending south, but word's apparently getting back and the Watch is taking the whole thing seriously. Mormont's sticking them at the northern foot of the Wall for the moment, close enough that if something goes really wrong they can get them through the tunnel with minimum hustle but still on the wrong side until Stark gives him an official all-clear. Violence has been restricted to dirty looks and name calling for the moment, but the longer the Watch has to play babysitter for the free folk the drier the tinder's going to get. (Aemon's metaphor not mine, for the record.) And as more of Mance's followers show up the situation's only going to get worse. Mormont has to start moving those people through the Wall and into the fallow land to the south soon or this isn't going to end well.

The hell of it is, now that I've told my story and shown off the head, my part in the negotiations is more or less done. So now I get to jump from one impossible task to another! Ain't my life grand? Time to start worrying more about the south.

The one thing I tolerate about the slower pace of life in Postclassical Westeros is that things haven't gotten started in earnest just yet, which means I still have a window to plan out my line of attack. Armies are mustering, swords are sharpened, etc. but I've got time to shut this whole thing down before it gets too far out of hand. It's time for Cap'n Jade's Magical Zombie Mystery Tour to kick off.

So, prospects: the Iron Throne's closed to me for the moment... my own damn fault, but that's a bridge already burnt. While it'd be nice to have the high king as a cudgel to beat the other nobles into line, even if I hadn't pissed Joffrey off so badly none of the people I need to talk to are inclined to listen to anything he has to say anyfuckingway, so I might as well stop worrying about it.

Aside from the king in King's Landing, the remaining players in the south are Houses Arryn, Baratheon, Greyjoy, Lannister, Martell, Tyrell and Tully. According to the most recent news the Baratheons are divided between King Bob's younger brothers, so that promises to be a fun one. They've already sent "requests" for Stark's loyalty. On a personal level I think Stark favors the middle brother over the younger. Having met the younger brother (albeit briefly) I can understand that, but I'm going to have to try and convince both of them to make common cause. Renly Baratheon seems to be allying with House Tyrell; with a little luck if I convince one I get the other at the same time. The Tyrells seem to be a major food exporter, and that will be very handy as the seasons start to change.

Martell seems to be sitting this one out. Probably smart of them, all things considered. I have an in with them thanks to Al, so I might send her off to do the initial recce probe solo, let her explain what the hell's going on before I make an appearance.

The Tullys seem to be in a tricky spot: they're allied with the Starks but they're also in a part of Westeros that's mostly river valleys and floodplains. Not a great strategic position, and not one that's been reinforced all that much over the years either. The current Lord Tully might be willing to go to bat for us at the Wall, monsters having a focusing effect on the mind, but they're more vulnerable to reprisals from the Iron Throne than any of the other houses. I don't know, have to try it and see.

Arryn might be an interesting one. Apparently the current regent of the land Lady Arryn (wife of the late Lord Jon and mother of the too-young-to-rule Lord Robert) closed her borders around the time I landed. An interesting coincidence, that. At least I have a way of hopping borders no knight can touch. (moo hoo ha ha ha) Lady Arryn is also apparently Lady Catelyn's sister; I should reach out and see if she's interested in coming along and helping with the argument? It couldn't hurt the
situation much if any, I don't think.

The Greyjoys are... well, they don't seem to be well-esteemed by the rest of Westeros. So far as I can tell, they're only high lords because somebody needed to rule the Iron Islands and nobody else wanted the job. That's... great. Experienced sailors might be useful in evacuating the north, though: moving free folk from the coastal towers south to safety might be an option if I have enough ships. It's an option worth looking into.

And then there's the Lannisters. I'm not expecting much from them, if only because they're so deeply (and creepily) tied to King's Landing at this point. However... everybody I've talked to who has an opinion on the Lannisters respects the current patriarch. Lord Tywin has a pretty good reputation for pragmatism. I might be able to talk him around to the full nature and scope of the threat, and if I can do that then I might—might—be able to get the west and the Iron Throne on board and on the same page in one throw. If not, well... no further harm done, right?

So there's the game plan: head south and try to convince the lords of Westeros that beating each other up is counterproductive when facing zombies. Busy, busy, busy! Never a dull moment in the middle of a crisis.
Our science team has done a preliminary analysis of the documents you transmitted. Our chief sociologist is dubious that there's a peaceful solution to the succession crisis, I'm sorry to say. She has found a distinct lack of fallbacks in the case of a disputed succession, particularly at the top levels. There are mentions of a "Great Council" that was called several times over the last few centuries to adjudicate the royal succession but the track record there is mixed at best. So far as she thinks the Westerosi are much more likely to fight it out than talk it out.

We've sent the documents and our preliminary findings back up the chain to Canaveral. The blueshirts attached to Foreign Office might have a little more luck figuring something out. For now, our recommendation is to stall as best you can until the FO comes up with something. This council idea might be worth looking into, even if it falls apart it should hold together long enough for Canaveral to get back to us.

On an unrelated note, it appears somebody leaked your situation to the general public. We don't know who, but apparently half the Cape is up in arms over it. In the last 72 hours we've received several thousand messages from people around the galaxy offering well-wishes and advice. Would you like to take delivery?

—Kirk

Your analysis doesn't surprise me all that much. Depresses me, maybe, but not surprises. This is a warrior culture, and those are always more interested in beating each other up than anything else. If you think the council's the closest thing to a good bet I have, I'll give it a swing. The situation's fraught, but if I can at least get five out of the seven on board we can contain the remainder and still retain a margin... maybe it'll give the Foreign Office a chance to work a miracle.

Or I could always start up a game of fizzbin and hope for the best. That works too.

As for my email backlog, feel free to forward anything you or your team think would be useful, or even anything that you personally find funny. I could always use a good laugh.

—Hasegawa

Shireen stood at the edge of the dock with her father, mother and teacher, trying not to bounce on her heels with excitement. The raven from Winterfell had come several days before announcing that her
uncle Robert's sorceress was coming to Dragonstone. Shireen had overheard stories about this new sorceress from her father's soldiers, that she'd set wolves loose in Maegor's Holdfast, spanked the pretender with the Kingslayer's own blade then set the Hand's tower afire before flying cackling off into the night. It was all very exciting, and she couldn't wait to find out what this sorceress was truly like.

Father and Maester Cressen seemed less pleased by this. "Magic's a dangerous thing, Shireen," was all that Cressen would say on the matter, and he looked troubled whenever Lady Melisandre talked to Father about the war, or when ravens came in from elsewhere bearing news. As for Father, he seemed less happy about the magic and more that Uncle Robert's sorceress stayed in the North instead of coming to Dragonstone. Father didn't like the Starks, why Shireen didn't know, but there was something there that made everything queer and difficult.

But the raven said she was coming and would land at the port of Dragonstone, and so they waited. These days the docks were filled with ships and men bringing food and soldiers to Father's army, but on Lady Melisandre's advice a large portion nearest the gate was cleared ("She's the only one of us who's seen the thing, Cressen, of course I'll listen to her.") and sat empty. The royal party stood nearby to see the sky-ship whispered of in King's Landing for themselves and greet the king's old master of magic.

"So, where is she?" Father asked the air. Lady Melisandre cocked an ear skywards.

"Soon, I think," she pronounced. "Listen to the air, Your Grace. Do you hear that?" Shireen strained her ears and soon hear a distant rumble, like never-ending thunder. "That is the ship," her teacher went on.

Cressen mimicked Melisandre actions, then looked outwards. "Towards the west," he said.

Shireen looked westwards. There was nothing but sky, sea and the thin line of the coast. Then she saw it, a white shape lost in the gray-white clouds dotting the horizon, growing steadily larger. "I see it!" she cried, pointing at the shape. The sound grew louder as the shape resolved into a graceful white form that flew, higher and faster than any bird, over their heads, looped around the summit of the Dragonmont and trailed back towards the port. The sky-ship lowered itself gently into the harbor, avoiding the crowd of galleys and other ships, to come bobbing alongside the dock cleared for it.

"She didn't ground," her teacher mused. "Curious." Shireen could hear the ship singing to itself, a deep rumbling hum she could feel in her belly. The water beneath the ship seemed to churn, though there were no oars or anything in the water to make it turbulent. Near the middle of the dock a great round door emblazoned with golden crescents tapped up against the rough wood.

A few moments later there was a funny hissing sound and the door opened. Out stepped a slender Dornishwoman in green and black, followed by a large man in robes the same style as Lady Melisandre's and a dark-skinned young man in robes similar to Maester Cressen's. The three turned to face Dragonstone and the woman in green stopped cold, staring at the castle and the mountain beyond.

"Well," she said clearly enough for the royal party to hear over a dozen yards away. "Somebody had a serious hard-on for dragons." The young man in maester's robes seemed to double over coughing, whilst the red-robed man leaned over to whisper to the woman. She looked back at him, then towards the party. "Ah. Whoops," she said, grabbing her maester by the elbow and walking forward. Two yards away the three travelers from the sky-ship stopped and the green woman bowed deeply to her father.

"Your Grace," she said in the common speech with a lilting accent. "Captain Jade Hasegawa,
Starfleet Ranger Corps."

Father raised an eyebrow. "Not Lady Hasegawa," he asked. "Or Master of Magic?"

"I resigned the title when I left King's Landing," the sorceress replied. "As for my ennobling, well... I prefer Captain, but I've been called Lady so often the last six months I'll answer to it anyway." She shrugged. "I am who I am, no sense in pretending otherwise."

"Very well, Captain," Father said. "Welcome to Dragonstone." He gestured to Shireen and her mother. "My wife, Queen Selyse, and the Princess Shireen, my daughter."

The captain bowed again. "Your Grace, Princess," she said. Captain Hasegawa glanced at Shireen, and she could see those bright green eyes widen just a little as the sorceress took in the scars. She felt her face grow hot, and she wanted to duck behind Mother or Father and wait for the stare to go away. But the stare never came, the sorceress said nothing of her ugliness, instead saying something that made Mother smile warmly.

"Two of my counselors, Maester Cressen and Lady Melisandre." Father went on. "The third is busy with other duty but will join us this evening to discuss events in the North." Once again the captain bowed, this time to Cressen.

"An honor to meet you, Cressen," she said. "Always enjoy meeting fellow seekers of knowledge."

Cressen returned the bow as best he was able. "Thank you, Captain," he said. "Though I confess I know little of your... peculiar abilities. The Citadel has been trying to keep some of us abreast of your doings but, well."

"Oh, I suspected as much," the captain said with a laugh. "I made a bit of a spectacle when I dropped by Oldtown a while ago. In fact, let me introduce you: this is my apprentice Alleras." The dark young man bowed in similar fashion as the captain. "I met Al in the Citadel library when I was doing some research. Nobody seemed to be using him, so I decided to borrow him. I might have forgotten to return him," she added with a sheepish smile. "Terrible habit, really. The bane of libraries across the galaxy."

Cressen gave the young man a considering look. "No doubt the archmaesters will have a stern lecture for you when you return, my lady," he said. "Perhaps you would let me borrow your apprentice during your stay? I would find a report from a fellow maester quite enlightening."

"Of course," the sorceress waved. "But no forgetting to return him; I called dibs." She turned to Lady Melisandre. Her teacher stood there as enigmatic as always, meeting the green woman's eyes without hesitation. "So this is what you've gotten up to since we last met," she said.

Lady Melisandre nodded regally and murmured "My lady," but the sorceress stepped forward and pulled her teacher, the most elegant and imposing woman Shireen had ever known, into a crushing embrace.

"None of that now, Mel," she said. "It's damn good to see you!" Her teacher laughed quietly and whispered something in the sorceress's ear. Captain Hasegawa blinked. "What, right now? I just got here," she said.

"Not yet," Lady Melisandre replied. "You still have the time you need for your plans. But things were set in motion before their allotted time, and now events are starting to move faster than they might otherwise have. When the bleeding star splits the skies, that is when you need to go."

"Oh, well. That's different then," the sorceress said with a relieved sigh. "I don't think
I understood that, but I'm guessing it's one of those you'll-get-it-when-you-need-to sorts of things, right?" She released Melisandre and turned back to Father. "Well, Your Grace, I'm honored to meet you but you've probably got a lot of stuff to get back to. And I have a lot of stuff to do too. So! By your leave I'll go wander around the island a bit, then we'll meet after dinner to discuss?"

Father considered this. "A fair enough proposal," he said. "You have my leave. See to their apartments," he said to Mother, then turned and walked back towards the docks. Mother sighed and left as well, trailing courtiers.

Shireen stayed behind, not-quite hiding behind her teacher's robes. The sorceress noticed her—but then she hadn't been hiding very well—and looked her over. "Hello there," she said. Shireen tried to say something, but those eyes were on her scars again and her throat closed up. The other two travelers had seen her too, and the stares became all the worse for it.

But all the sorceress said was: "That doesn't look like it was any fun," in a mild tone.

Mustering all the Baratheon courage she could, Shireen squeaked out a reply. "Greyscale," she said. "I was a babe when it happened." That was true, and it hurt no less for that. The sorceress's eyes vanished behind panes of glass and she stooped to meet her face to face.

"Would the little princess like some advice?" she asked. Shireen's throat closed again, and she nodded rapidly. "Okay then. The next time you catch a stranger staring, you look them right in the eye," she said, bright green eyes latching onto Baratheon blue, "you smile at them, like this," the sorceress smiled in a funny, sharp kind of way that reminded her of the sailors playing at dice, "and then you say, loud enough for them to hear..." she leaned over and whispered the last part into Shireen's ear:

"('You should see the other guy!')"

Shireen blinked once, twice, three times. The sorceress winked at her, and the dam burst. She started to giggle, and couldn't stop giggling for near five minutes. "Really?" she said when she could finally form words again. "Really?"

The captain shrugged. "Well, it works for me," she said. "Now why don't you and Mel give me the ten-cent tour? I've got a long couple of days of yelling at your dad ahead, so let's go sightseeing while he builds up the steam to yell back, yeah?"

The rest of the day they explored Dragonstone. Shireen took the captain around the castle, showing her all the gargoyles and the dragons. Captain Hasegawa asked all sorts of questions, about the dragons, about the castle and the mountain and everything under the sun. Shireen tried to answer as best she could, but some of the questions went right over her head.

"That happens more often than not," the young maester Alleras told her. "You either figure out what she's saying in short order, or you start to ignore it."

Soon enough it came time for dinner, and Shireen left the party to dress properly. Mother always insisted on proper clothing for meals, and now that she was queen and Shireen a princess the insistence grew ever stronger. Once attired Shireen went to the great hall for dinner. Father was there already, discussing something with Maester Cressen and good Ser Davos standing before the high table. She took her seat and found that the sorceress had taken a spot nearby.

Shireen dimly remembered a feast at King's Landing, when she was still small and Father took her to court to meet her uncles. The feasts there were loud and gay, when she wasn't surrounded by people giving her pitying or mean looks. Feasts on Dragonstone were less loud—it wasn't Father's way—
but they were warm enough, to shut out the gloom outside.

As the fruit gave way to poached sunfish and the minstrels grew a little jollier, Mother asked the sorceress, "Are you enjoying yourself, Captain?"

The sorceress plucked a remaining plum from the table and nodded. "Pretty relaxing, actually," she said. "King's Landing was always a little raucous for me, and Winterfell, well... it was fine when I first landed but things are getting tense in the north."

"I was surprised you came to the feast," Mother admitted. "From the stories we've heard of you, we expected you to stay locked away in your ship until the time came for prophecies of doom."

The sorceress nibbled on her plum. "I like the company," she said simply. "And to be honest being alone in the ship isn't all it's cracked up to be. Nothing like waking up in the middle of the night hearing spiders the size of horses climbing all over the ship."

Shireen choked on her watered wine. *Spiders the size of what?* Mother paled and made a distressed squeak. The captain paused, and looked a little pained.

"Let's... let's just say that landing in Westeros and everything's that happened so far is at best only the third, maybe fourth-worst thing that's ever happened in my travels," she said, and refused to speak again on the subject.

Shireen was happy not to press. Dinner went on as it usually did, the fish replaced with bacon and turnip soup, then moving into bread with honey. Patches came in and sang one of his songs, the same odd ditty he'd been singing since Lady Melisandre arrived about stars and moons and burning feathers. Something in the song caught Captain Hasegawa's attention; her eyes snapped to Patches and never left his face, even after he finished that song and sang two more.

"There's a hell of a thing," she said quietly, so quiet that only Shireen could hear. "Need more data before I jump to any conclusions."

Lady Melisandre saw the odd dark mood come over the captain and cleared her throat. "I remember well your penchant for storytelling, my lady," she said, startling the sorceress out of her reverie. "Perhaps a tale before the end of dinner?" The captain blinked and looked back at Lady Melisandre with hooded eyes.

"I believe I could tell a tale, if His Grace allows," she said, looking at Father. He set his mouth and nodded once. "Very well. This is a story that, I feel, fits our circumstances in a way. It's a tale of Nasrudin, a great sage of the East and one of the wisest and Wittiest in all the lands of men.

"Once upon a time, Nasrudin went to a great kingdom to visit old friends and, as old friends are wont to do, they sang songs and told jokes. One of those jokes involved the king and when word came to the king he, as kings are wont to do, grew wrathful and ordered Nasrudin arrested and imprisoned. The sage begged forgiveness but the king was furious, and ordered him executed the next day. That morning Nasrudin went before the king and said, 'O king, you know me as the greatest of teachers. If you but delay my sentence a year, I will teach your favorite horse to sing!'"

"A singing horse?" Shireen said skeptically. "That's silly."

Captain Hasegawa took a sip of her wine. "Oh, the king knew quite well no such thing was possible," she confided. "But Nasrudin was a great teacher, and was not known for idle boasts. Besides, the king's anger had cooled a little from the previous night and he was amused by the man's audacity. 'Very well,' he said. 'You have a year. But if you have not taught my horse to sing by the
end of that year, I will have your head.'

"That evening Nasrudin's friends came to visit him, and found the sage in good cheer. 'How can you be so happy?' they cried. 'Do you really believe you can teach the king's horse to sing?"

"I now have a year which I did not have yesterday,' Nasrudin said in reply. 'Much can happen in a year's time. The king might repent of his anger and set me free. The horse may die, and in that case he would be obligated to release me. He may die in battle or of illness, and it's traditional for a successor to pardon all prisoners on taking office. Or he may be overthrown, and again it's tradition to release prisoners in that time.'"

The sorceress took a long drink from her cup, winked at Shireen then looked at Melisandre with an arched eyebrow. "And if the worst comes to the very worst,' Nasrudin said, 'maybe the damned horse will learn to sing!"

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CERSEI

Were Cersei Lannister honest with herself, she might concede—graciously, of course—that small council meetings were the most wearying part of her regency. Nothing but listening to dull old men drone on endlessly about coin, or trade, or how many cattle some insignificant lord ruling a tower in the middle of nowhere might owe his cousin. After a fortnight enclosed with the small council one might be excused for forgetting there was a war on.

At least things had gotten a little better once Lord Tywin arrived to take up the Handship. The droning didn't stop, could never stop, but the condescending little smirks and excuse me Your Grace allow me to explains ceased whenever her lord father was in the room. Everybody in the Seven Kingdoms knew that Tywin Lannister was not a man to be talked down to.

Almost everybody, at least. The Ulthosi witch crossed her mind again, eyes flashing as she unmanned her brother in front of the Iron Throne. Her face betrayed no expression, but her hand twisted hard against the wooden armrest of her chair. The witch was still loose, out there in the North with the rest of the barbarians. After seeing the true extent of Jaime's injury her father had been furious, no matter how that old goat Pycelle tried to soothe him by claiming the damage to his manhood was minor and would fade with time. The witch will get hers in time she thought, letting her hand relax. A Lannister pays their debts, and we will pay this one in full.

Cersei turned some of her attention back to the meeting. Lord Tywin was quizzing the master of coin on certain issues regarding her late husband's debts. Littlefinger, well groomed as always, addressed the king and went on with his smug assurances regarding the state of the crown's finances. She cared little for how much coin was owed to whom; the Lannisters controlled the Iron Throne, and the mines and vaults of Casterly Rock would produce for a thousand more years.

Her perfect son seemed to mirror her distaste with Littlefinger and his numbers. He nodded here and there, showing his understanding of the issue while waiting for the Hand to be done with the man so they could turn to more important business. After what felt like an eternity Lord Tywin turned to the Spider, and his new reports from the rebel territories. This at least should be useful. Stark had not yet marched south, though everybody at the table knew he would. The only question was when and how many would march with him. And how many Starks we have to kill to restore order.

“My agents report that the North is in turmoil, Your Grace, my lord,” Varys simpered in their direction. “Lord Stark has met with many of his loyal bannermen—who are gathering, I should add—but the meetings seem to have thrown the situation into greater confusion.”
Cersei’s proud little lion drummed his fingers on the table. "And the witch?" he asked.

"Still within the walls of Winterfell, Your Grace," the master of whisperers replied. "I have heard that she may leave shortly. Most likely to Highgarden or Dragonstone to meet with the other rebels. I should note," he added, "that once her ship takes to the air I lose sight of her until she lands."

"I thought your little birds were everywhere?" Joffrey grumbled. The fat eunuch betrayed no emotion save an insipid look on his face.

"My little birds are marvelous, Your Grace, but they needs land and sing before I hear them. Once airborne the witch is as hard to track as any other bird."

"Hmph," the king said.

"Is there any more to report, Lord Varys?" her father asked.

Varys nodded. "Indeed. Renly Baratheon has closed himself up in chambers with Mace Tyrell. What they are discussing I do not yet know, though I expect them to come to an arrangement soon. Stannis is still on Dragonstone; he has called the royal fleet to his banners, and I am sad to report that more captains are loyal to him than to the king. He has an advantage over us in terms of galleys, but still few knights or infantry to his name." The Hand nodded, clearly unhappy with the news but unable to do anything about it. Inaction grated on Cersei, but there was nothing to be done as yet. Until Uncle Kevan finished the muster and brought the strength of Casterly Rock out of the west all her father was willing to do was sit in King's Landing and wait for an opportunity.

"Lord Varys," Joffrey said suddenly, "you said the witch was heading to Dragonstone or Highgarden. Can we send someone to see to her?"

The Spider looked at the ceiling, as if doing sums in his head. "It could be done," he said reluctantly. "A loyal man might be found and sent on to either place, but we could only choose one. As I said, Your Grace, when the bird takes to air I cannot predict where it will land next."

Joffrey nodded decisively. "Do it then," he ordered. "I want her brought to me so Ser Ilyn can take her head, to match the one she gave me." He smiled. "Ser Waymar could use the company of a good woman, don't you think?"

The small council laughed politely at her lion's little jape, and applause rang through the chamber. The council looked at each other in surprise before their attention went to the doors at the far end. Cersei saw a stranger in the doorway, clapping like he was on the green watching a tourney. The man was tall, pale and wiry with one bright blue eye. He moved and she could see the other eye hidden behind a patch of black silk. "It is as the minstrels sing," he said warmly. "Fair of face and speech is the rightful king of Westeros."

Ser Mandon drew his sword and stepped forward to defend his king. The rest of the council —cowards, all of them— scrambled out of the knight's path. Joffrey drew himself up. "Who are you?" he demanded. The pale stranger ceased clapping and went to one knee, head bowed.

"Forgive your humble servant, Your Grace," he said. "I have been abroad a number of years and only just heard of your accession whilst providing upon the Stepstones. Naturally, my first thought was to race to King's Landing and swear myself to your service." The pale man looked up at Joffrey, and Cersei could see the summer sky in his eye. "If it pleases Your Grace, you may call me—"

"Euron Greyjoy," Lord Tywin said coldly.

The man smiled broadly at the Hand's announcement. "I see my name precedes me," he said.
"I recall you from Lannisport," her lord father replied. "I have heard the stories of you and your ship of mutes. Tell me, Greyjoy, why shouldn't I have Ser Mandon strike your head from your shoulders right now as payment for your crimes?"

"Why, my lord Hand, I was pardoned!" exclaimed Euron. "His Grace's noble father said as much to my brothers and I on Pyke, after my brother Balon failed to slip his yoke. We bent the knee and were forgiven. Would such a noble lad as our king go back on his father's word like that? I've not broken the king's justice nor the king's peace in the years since. Let bygones be bygones, my lord Lannister."

"Sheathe your sword, Ser Mandon," her proud little lion said, gesturing to his loyal Kingsguard. The Valeman looked dubious, but did as he was bid and settled in behind the king's chair. "Lord Greyjoy, we will always welcome those who bend their knees to the Iron Throne, as is right..." he trailed off, then added, a little puzzled. "But you weren't summoned. Why have you come?"

The Greyjoy's smile never wavered. "A man can't simply do what he feels is right?" he wondered, climbing to his feet.

"Not a man like you," replied Lord Tywin, his voice drier than the Dornish wastes.

Euron laughed. "Ah! A touch!" he cried, grasping his heart and staggering backwards. "The tales are wrong about you my lord, truly you have a mighty wit." He settled back and regarded the Hand with his smiling eye. "You are not wholly wrong though, Lord Tywin. I have come for a purpose beyond simply swearing my leal service to our rightful king."

Lord Tywin scowled, and Joffrey leaned forward. "And what, my lord of Greyjoy, is that purpose?" the king asked.

The Greyjoy's blue lips parted in a grin. "Why, magic of course. I've heard tell of this witch that bedevils Your Grace and the court. I offer neither sword nor sail, but my special skills in your service, Your Grace. My art against hers."

"You would be better off offering intelligence on your brothers if you wish a boon from the Iron Throne," replied Lord Tywin. Euron's smiling eye returned to gaze on the unmoved Hand.

"Oh, there's not much intelligence there my lord," he said. "My brother is a simple creature at heart, along with the rest of mine kin. If you like, I will tell you how to be the wind in their sails, and push them wherever you wish them to go. They may prove some use to you against Renly or Stannis in that way. But that is not near what I offer His Grace." The smiling eye turned towards Joffrey, and the sun outside the small council chamber seemed to dim, like a cloud was passing by.

"You fear this witch, I know," the pale man said, low and intent. "No, do not speak, Your Grace. I can see it writ in your face. She did great and terrible things in your presence. Any man might be afraid in that case, there is no shame in it, feel not unmanned. But hear me now: my arts are wider and deeper than hers, my king. Fear no longer! Allow me into your service, Your Grace, and I shall raise up such a storm against this Dornish pretender that even the Godsgrief himself would find standing in those winds difficult. I will destroy your enemies. I will bring them low and see them naked in chains before you. All I ask is for the chance to stand by your side. Allow me this morsel, the smallest of your mercies, and none will withstand you."

As he spoke, the pale man approached the king's chair until he stood almost directly before it. Ser Mandon's hands twitched, ready to strike the man down should he take another step further. Cersei's eyes locked onto the Greyjoy's pale face and blue lips. He looked like a man half-dead, and yet his eye twinkled and his smile was full of youthful merriment.
"You forget yourself, Greyjoy," he father growled. He opened his mouth to speak further but was halted when her proud lion, wonder shining in his face stood and said:

"Kneel, Lord Euron." The Greyjoy's smile was triumphant as he knelt and bowed his head. "I, Joffrey of House Baratheon, First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, name Euron of House Greyjoy Master of Magic and an adviser and friend to myself and the realm. Rise, my lord, and be welcome in King's Landing."

"Your grace does me great honor," Lord Euron said. "I believe this is the beginning of something truly wonderful."
DAVOS

The king didn't shy away from the head.

King Stannis's court stood around Aegon's painted table, listening with skeptical ears as Captain Hasegawa relayed her tale of monsters and approaching darkness from beyond the Wall. When the witch unveiled her gift of a wildling's head, still straining to escape its confinement, the court all recoiled from the table. Davos grasped at his luck with his good hand, staring warily at the head, which stared hatefully back at him with glowing blue eyes. Lord Bar Emmon blanched and muttered oaths to the Seven, unable to look away. The queen looked ill and turned her face away immediately. Even Lady Melisandre, the unflappable red priestess, stepped backwards when the ghastly sight was uncovered, her face pale and drawn. But Stannis did none of those things. He held firm, looking at the witch as she finished her report on the monsters in the North and the northmen's plans to deal with them.

"And that's where the situation stood when I left Winterfell yesterday," the witch concluded. "It's... not the best position, I admit, but there are worse ones."

The king looked at the still-moving wildling head on his table, then looked back to the witch. "How many?" he asked.

The witch shook her head. "Somewhere between too many and way too many," she said. "I don't have hard numbers, or even a decent estimate but... my working theory right now is that they can animate any body that's mostly intact. The climate above the Wall's good at preserving things and the free folk have been up there for, what, at least eight thousand years give or take? Pretty stable population, fairly consistent death rates among adults..." The witch's eyes unfocused, then refocused on Stannis. "Yeah, way too many's the right answer."

Davos blanched. One of these monsters, safely reduced to a head on a table, was bad enough, but more of them, walking and killing? What manner of nightmare have we found ourselves in? The king seemed unmoved by this claim, merely grunting in reply, never taking his eyes from the witch. "And what would you have of me, captain?"

"Well, the plan was to rally the south in defense of the realm," the woman said dryly. "That means men and swords to the Wall, yes, but also to get your people preparing for winter as soon as they can, because it's going to come down hard and fast. I don't know that the Others are accelerating their timetables, but we know they're out there, and they know we know. More specifically, they know I know, and that might be enough to get them marching a little faster. No matter what, the people of Westeros need to start preparing for winter now, without delay." Marya, Davos thought. He would have to send word back to his keep on Cape Wrath. Matthos would be the best to go, him or Maric would be the best choices to send. The king will need me, and Dale and Allard soon enough, I wager, he thought.

"And what will Eddard Stark give me in return for my aid?" Stannis asked.

"I've been given to understand he supports your lordship's claim under Westerosi law," replied the witch. "And that he believes your claim about the late King Robert's children. As far as physical
aid... that I don't know. I've been a bit busy with larger problems. I expect he will send men south, if he can."

It was not the best answer the witch could've given. "If he can," repeated the king. "Which means no, or not enough as to make a difference. His support is welcome... after a fashion," he said, dragging the words out. "But words are wind; if Ned Stark's support is to mean anything I need swords as well as words."

"That cuts both ways, my lord. He needs yours as well," Hasegawa countered. "Most of his forces will be tied up policing the free folk, keeping them away from his subjects and vice-versa. We're not talking about one band or a dozen here, this is tens of thousands of people, maybe more, fleeing the monsters crawling south behind them. The Night's Watch has barely a thousand people to watch the entirety of the Wall. They need your help as much as you need theirs."

Stannis shook his head. "I have not the men to secure the throne and aid Stark at the same time," he said bitterly. "You mock me by dangling the crown before me, like cheese before a rat. Yet what am I king of? Dragonstone and a few rocks in the narrow sea, that is my kingdom." He fixed the witch with a fierce glare. "Tonight you dined with my lords bannermen, such as they are." Davos suppressed a groan as the lords in question shifted uneasily. "A poor crop, if truth be told, but they are what my brothers have left me. I am king of nowhere, with not enough men to secure the throne that is my right.

"The red woman counsels me to go north, just as you do. That my destiny and my crown lie in the shadow of the Wall. But what good does that do me? I have barely five thousand swords at my call; my lady wife may claim her father and brothers will rise for me, but even assuming they're brave enough to defy Mace Tyrell that only gives me another two thousand at best. What good would seven thousand men be in that frozen pit? And what happens when my paltry banners and I abandon the south to aid my brother's dear friend, the man Robert abandoned his brothers for? Will I return to find that mad boy still on the Iron Throne? Or will I be forced to bend the knee to my traitor brother, who play-acts as a knight and has no conception of what it means to be king? No, Captain Hasegawa, I cannot allow Westeros to fall into their hands."

The witch looked gravely at the king. "Does that mean you won't come north, even knowing what's happening there?"

"Will you support my claim?" Stannis countered. "Not Ned Stark; his word is known to me. Will you join him in supporting me?" The witch blinked, a strange light coming into her eyes.

"Why should I support you?" she asked, eying him as if weighing him on a balance. "Give me a good reason."

Stannis's jaw clenched. "It is my right."

"A good reason, I said."

Davos grasped again at his luck. The witch had just struck at one of the king's sorest spots, possibly without knowing. Or not, mayhaps? What game is the woman playing with Stannis?

"Is that not good enough?" Stannis wondered. "The boy Joffrey is false, as is his brother and sister; I am Robert's eldest brother. The rightful claim is mine and mine alone. You yourself said Eddard Stark would support that."

"Stark would," agreed the witch. "However, I'm not Ned Stark. The legal claim is a start, but if you want my support you need more. Blood only gets you so far, Lord Stannis." An eyebrow quirked
upwards. "As I understand it, your brother proved that when he rebelled against the Targaryens."

The muscles in the king's jaw coiled even tighter. "What must I say to convince you that I am the rightful king?" he grated.

The witch stilled. Her eyes closed and she breathed deeply, nostrils flaring like a warhorse's. "Do you know what happened in King's Landing that last day?" she asked, her voice light though Davos could hear the distant toll of something lurking behind the horizon there. "The truth, not the rumors or the stories about how I toppled Aegon's tall towers with a glance or whatever bullshit the minstrels are spreading."

Silence reigned at the table for a long moment. "I do not," Stannis said finally. "I know you spoke to Joffrey Waters, presumably giving him the same warning you gave me, and then you thrashed his knights before fleeing with Stark and his daughter in tow."

"That's about the gist of it," she said slowly, eyes still closed. "I told Joffrey about the threat beyond the Wall, even gave him a head like this one. I told him Westeros needed its ruler, now more than ever. He said he would consider it, but only if I swore myself to him." Her eyes opened, blazing green. "He had no right to demand my loyalty," she seethed. "I berated him for his ignorance and insolence, and he said he was the king. Would you like to know my reply, Your Grace?"

The words hung in the air. Stannis's face might as well have been carved from stone. "Enlighten me," he said.

"I told him, 'then act like a king.‘" The witch's voice was flat and hard. Davos had the sudden, gut-wrenching feeling of being caught between the king and his womanly counterpart, two rocks in the midst of a great storm that he had to thread his way through. "Words are wind, so you say. That's fair. But you have to understand, Stannis Baratheon, there's much, much more at stake here than the rightness of your claim or whoever sits on the Iron Throne. In any other circumstance I'd be bound by the laws of my people and the oaths I swore to stay well clear of your quarrel with Joffrey. Sadly, I can't do that no matter how much I may prefer it. The threat we face may well endanger my people as much as it does yours, and that grants me... leeway. Not much, but some. If Westeros needs to be united to face the Others, then I can work to unite it."

Davos blinked, a small hope swelling in his chest. He'd half expected the king to dismiss the witch outright after that, or summon the guards and repeat what the singers said about the Red Keep. But this was more than he could have hoped for at that moment. Gods be good, let her stand with the king!

Stannis seemed just as surprised. "And what does that mean?" he asked cautiously.

"Act like a king, Your Grace," she said. "Prepare your smallfolk for the coming winter, order them to start harvesting and storing like their lives depend on it, because they almost certainly do. The Citadel hasn't marked the change yet, but it's coming. If you can't send all your forces to the Wall, then send some. Enough to tell Lord Stark that you're taking his warning seriously, no matter that you can't abandon the south to your enemies. I can burn a day or two to bring Stark here to Dragonstone to swear fealty, if that's a thing that needs to happen. He may be able to spare men to come south, I don't know that. I know he's expecting Joffrey to strike north at some point..." the witch shrugged. "That kind of generalship is beyond me, I'm afraid. But even a small detachment of northern soldiers south of the Neck is a statement in itself, right?"

"If I agree to this, what happens next?"

"I get Stark to agree—more or less a formality—and then I move on and dance this dance again with
the other high lords of Westeros," replied the witch. "The riverlands won't need much convincing; they'll likely follow Stark's lead without much pushing. Then the Reach, perhaps the Westerlands after that. Joffrey's a lost cause but I might have better luck with Lord Tywin or his son. Then the Vale, Dorne, the Iron Islands... everybody who needs to know. If everybody knows, then maybe there's a way out of this mess without needing a war." Stannis glowered in the witch's general direction. "Oh don't give me that look, *Your Grace,*" she said. "I've been doing my reading. Your histories mention something about a council of some kind? If we got all the high lords in the same place... but that's for the longer term, I think."

"You would trust this to a Great Council instead of fighting?" The king's teeth ground together, and if Davos was honest his weren't far behind. Everybody knew of the councils, rare though they might be. His lord was just and honorable, but his chances at a Great Council were... not the best.

"If I can I'll bring this to a peaceful conclusion, Lord Stannis," the witch said calmly. "That's as much a part of why I'm here as to warn you all about the Others. I don't have any interest in seeing Westeros bleed if it doesn't have to... but I won't seat you—I won't seat anyone—on the throne by main force."

"But you *could,* couldn't you? No one in Westeros has a ship like yours, you could hang over an army and rain fire or stones down on them until they yield." Stannis's voice dripped with accusation. "You have power unseen in Westeros since the death of the dragons, and yet you will not stand for the right."

The witch's eyes flashed, but her voice was still calm. "You presume much, *Your Grace,*" she said lightly. Davos blanched and stepped closer to his king, the better to shield him from the witch's wrath. "I am given leeway, not free rein, by the nature of the threat we all face. And you still need to prove yourself a king, remember? Joffrey's proven himself cruel and useless. I don't know Renly yet. You? You have potential, maybe, under all that snarling and those dark looks. But I know this much, Stannis Baratheon," she added with steel in her voice. "If you have any true love for the realm, for your child, for *anything* save your pride then you'll at least *think* about going north before you go to King's Landing."

Stannis's blue eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched and unclenched, before he finally spoke again. "You've given me much to think about, Captain," he said at last. "We will continue this... discussion... in the morning." He turned without another word and left the chamber, bannermen and courtiers trailing in his wake. Davos let out a relieved breath. The argument had not come to blows, though not for lack of trying, nor had the king chosen to do something... rash. For such small mercies Davos thanked his luck and the gods.

The witch stood at the end of the painted table, breathing deeply. "By the titanium tentacles of Klono," she said to no one in particular. "This is going to be a piss-cutter of a job."

"Indeed, my lady," the red woman said suddenly from behind Davos. The smuggler-knight restrained himself from jumping; indeed he'd forgotten that the foreign priestess had been in the room the entire time, lurking round the edge of the king's party. "His Grace has a will of iron, but iron may be forged by heat and flame. Remember that our lord does not set us to tasks that we are unequal to."

The witch raised one black eyebrow. "You stole that line from Thoros," she accused. The red woman looked amused and tilted her head.

"Divine inspiration comes to us all, my lady," she replied piously. The witch chuckled, then laughed. The laughs echoed in the empty hall.

"Oh man, yeah I suppose I had that coming," she said, removing the glass from her eyes and rubbing
them. "Still, he didn't demand I take a knee before hearing me out. Puts him one up on Joffrey, at least."

For the first time since meeting the witch, Davos felt compelled to speak. "I would ask my lord's pardon for him, captain," he said. "The past few turns have been... difficult, to say the least. Especially since his brother's death."

The witch waved him off. "No, no, you don't need to apologize for him," she said. "It is what it is, and even being an argumentative son of a bitch puts him above Joffrey. At least I know where I stand with him and it's not 'guards, guards,'" she added wryly.

Davos let a small smile crack on his face. "Aye, that's one thing true about my lord," he said.

"Still," the witch sighed. "It'd be nice if things moved a little smoother. You'd think a warning about an imminent threat to everything that lives would be enough to get people moving." Davos wanted to argue that, the rightness of Stannis's claim and the unfitness of the Lannisters and Lord Renly, but held his tongue. He could argue his way past customs-men, but this was a level far beyond his talents.

"Even in the face of everlasting night, men will remain men," the red woman noted. "But even the most stubborn cannot resist the truth forever."

From outside the hall came a low voice. "Everything in this life that I love could be swept away without warning," it sang. "But the birds still sing, and the church bells ring, and the sun came out this morning."

The witch looked up sharply at the song, surprise clear in her face. "Hold that thought," she said, swiftly exiting the chamber. Davos followed out of curiosity. He had a good idea of what they'd find, and he was right: the king's hideous fool Patchface squatted in a dark corner near the stair. The witch stooped down next to the fool, who looked up, eyes unfocused. "Hey there," she said quietly.

The fool's eyes blinked, but did not clear. "My kind lady," he mumbled. "Kind and bright, filled with starlight, how can poor old Patches help you?"

"Was I leaking?" the witch said in reply. Davos glanced at the witch. Leaking, he thought. What does that mean?

The fool chuckled without mirth. "Leaking? Oh yes kind lady, like my poor lord's ship before the storm. Leak leak leak and we all sink beneath it." He leaned into the torchlight, the green and red chequy on his face almost glowing in the flame. "Clever gulls, clever men, clever clever fools, I know. Under the sea the storms churn up the mud, everything clear becomes hard to see."

"What in the gods' names does that mean?" Davos wondered, but the witch paid him no heed.

"I'm sorry," she said to the fool. "I can't stop the leaking. I didn't know anybody would pick it up."

Patchface threw back his head and cackled hideously. Even the witch drew back a little at the noise. "Oh kind lady, so kind and gentle," he chortled. "Not your fault, not your fault. Stars fall and songs change and pale-haired princes come to ruin for naught. Under the sea they know not the stars, and seashells twinkle in their place, oh oh oh. But a kinder song may be sung, before the end. No red flames in the cold dark." The fool levered himself up with a startling swiftness and darted down the stairs, singing as he went.

The witch watched him go, arms folded. "Huh," she said to herself.
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 224

We have an accord. It's not a great accord and I'm going to end up revisiting it more than once before this thing is all over, I think, but for now I'll take it. King Stannis has agreed to send three hundred of his knights to Winterfell as a gesture of comradeship to the Wardens of the North, who are currently busy getting ready to receive refugees. In return, Stark will send a thousand foot soldiers and as many ships he can spare to Dragonstone, along with letters backing up Stannis's claims that Joffrey and his siblings are illegitimate and endorsing his rightful claim to the throne.

I called Winterfell via Sansa's communicator, and after a bit of confusion re: Starfleet magic Stark agreed to the king's terms. It went faster than I think anybody was expecting, but he'll have the letters drawn up and sent with his men, and I might swing north on my way out of Dragonstone and pick up some copies, too. See where that gets us.

Stark's a man known for honesty, so his endorsement of Stannis might be enough to sway Westeros. At the very least it ought to give the fence-sitters some pause. I certainly hope so, because we really don't need the scrum breaking out into something larger if we can avoid it. Every man under arms is a man not prepping for winter, after all. Wouldn't do us any good to be unprepared, no matter how long the autumn ends up being.

(Just as an aside, I am still really weirded out by the length of Planetosi seasons. It's just wrong that the seasons are this long and potentially of variable length to boot. I suspect the Unbidden have something to do with it, some sort of passive climate control ability maybe. If they do start upping their timetables we might find out too; the seasons might start shifting faster than the locals are expecting. Something to keep in mind. Anyway.)

After we'd squared things with Winterfell Stannis very pointedly asked me again if I was going to support him alongside Stark. I suppose at this point it's a fair question; he's doing everything I can ask him to do at the moment, and I basically dared him to do it too. Being a tremendous coward I told him he was ahead on points, but I still had to meet his brother before I decided to back a claimant. Or even if I was going to back any candidate, for that matter. I brought up the great council thing, he ignored it and I ignored that he ignored it because I spent the last two days trying to put together something that wouldn't collapse ten seconds after I looked away and I'm not going to set all that work on fire right now.

Out of the two-of-three claimants I've met so far Stannis is the best, but considering the other one's Joffrey that's not saying much. I'm not sure I like Stannis to be honest; he's a prickly bastard and kinda got a bad case of tunnel vision. But he didn't dismiss the issue out of hand, he's willing to unbend enough to work with me, even on a limited basis, and that might be enough. The big test will be getting everybody together and seeing if they're willing to follow him, but that test is going to have to wait.

Tomorrow I'm off to Highgarden to talk to the Tyrells and Stannis's little brother. All I have to go on with them is testimony from others, and it's... let's just say it's biased and leave it at that. I met Renly a handful of times in King's Landing, he seemed decent enough for a noble. I guess we'll find out how much of that was true and how much was a front. I hope I can make him see reason... or at least I hope he's easier to browbeat into submission than his brothers.

I don't have the time to play many more games, dammit.
Musical note: The song Patchface plucked out of Jade's noggin is "Rumours of War" by Billy Bragg.
The Green Witch In Highgarden

WILLAS

The first inkling Willas Tyrell had of the witch's arrival was the sound of thunder from a clear sky disturbing his birds. His falcons keened in alarm as the thunder grew louder, and Willas was forced to soothe them one by one as the noise built and passed by. To his eternal regret, this meant he missed the spectacle of the sky-ship drifting over and around Highgarden like a cloud of silver before settling down before the main gate. By the time he'd gotten his birds calm and hooded, the spectacle was over. Willas sighed, grabbed his crutch and limped off to his chambers, to put on some cleaner clothing. It wasn't every day that the great keep of the Tyrells received a visitor as grand and uncanny as a witch, after all.

Not long after he had reached his rooms and shed his stained shirt, the door shook with urgent thumping. "Willas? Willas!" His sister Margaery pounded on his chamber door in very un-ladylike fashion. "Come on, brother! The witch is here!" Willas slipped on a plain, if serviceable green doublet with the Tyrell rose embroidered upon it and went to open the door.

"Shouldn't you be with the king, Your Grace?" he asked. His sister pouted in his general direction, the same way she always did when she decided he was being difficult.

"Renly will keep," she replied. "He's jesting with Loras." Something he couldn't quite identify flickered across her face, before vanishing behind a bright smile. "Now come along, Willas! Everybody's waiting for you, you know."

"And they'll have to keep waiting a bit longer. Highgarden's much bigger for me now than when I was a boy," Willas replied dryly.

The walk from his apartments to the gate was long and difficult, of course. Highgarden was by no means a small castle, and the nature of Willas's injury meant that any great distance was a challenge. When weakness overcame him he'd sometimes consider getting a litter like his grandmother Olenna used from time to time, but the notion pricked his pride badly enough that Willas Tyrell would grit his teeth and redouble his pace as best he could.

As he had expected, the king was waiting for them at the gate, as were his father Lord Mace and his younger brother Loras. King Renly was bedecked in green, as was his custom, the thin circlet of his kingship around his temples at a jaunty angle. "Goodbrother!" called the king as they approached. "I see our lovely Margaery found you in time."

"Your Grace," Willas said quietly, ducking his head in greeting. "I would hate to have missed this moment."

His lord father harrumphed, just loudly enough to gain his attention. "Your Grace, are you certain you wouldn't rather use the great hall?" he asked. "This, this creature is said to have strange powers. You saw the ship, for the gods' sakes!"

"I did," replied the king. "And I've seen it half a dozen times at King's Landing already. We have nothing to fear, my lord of Highgarden; after all, there are no Lannisters here!" So saying he motioned to the gatekeepers to open the wide doors.

As the doors swung open and the king's party strode (or hobbled, in Willas's case) through, the ship's occupants were emerging from a ramp at the stern. Three travelers in total, a large man in red, a
smaller man in gray and a woman in green. Nothing about these folk suggested to Willas the sort of power that would raze Maegor's holdfast and leave Joffrey Baratheon sitting dazed in the rubble. Aside from the ship, you limping fool, he chided himself. He focused on the traveler in gray for a moment: his skin was dark, the hair cut close to the scalp, and he carried himself like a maester of noble birth. The face seemed somewhat familiar as well... Willas smirked as he put the puzzle together. Prince Oberyn Martell's brood was one of the better known Dornish scandals. One Willas could attest to, having received plenty of letters detailing their exploits offending the southron nobility over the years of their friendship. I wonder if he knows what his girl is doing now? He made a note to write Oberyn at the first opportunity.

The woman in green, though... this, then was the witch of Ulthos, the one whose legend was spreading like a forest fire through the bards and minstrels of Westeros. She didn't seem like much at first glance; slim, Dornish in coloring and favoring a tunic a little too dark to be Tyrell green over which she wore a long leather coat that matched her hose. The most intriguing part of the witch's costume were the thin frames of Myrish glass she wore on wires perched before her eyes; the glass caught the light reflecting from Highgarden's white walls and made her eyes impossible to see. Sitting—no, he corrected himself, hovering—over the witch's right shoulder was a small steel ball with a glowing blue eye. The witch's familiar regarded the king and his party with the same gimlet indifference one of Willas's falcons might have looked at a tourney field.

The travelers stopped a good ten paces from the king. The two behind the witch dropped to one knee, whilst the witch stood before them. King Renly seemed most pleased to see the witch again. "Ah, Lady Jade," he said happily. "It's good to see you once again." He turned to Margaery. "My sweet, this is Robert's master of magic, the Lady Jade Hasegawa of Ulthos."

"You are most welcome here, Lady Hasegawa," Margaery said, ever the soul of courtesy. "Be welcome to Highgarden in the name of the king and my lord father."

"Lady and master of magic no longer, I'm afraid," the witch said with a small, private smile. "Captain Jade Hasegawa of the Federal Worlds Starfleet Ranger Corps, at your disposal my lord, my lady." The witch bowed stiffly at the waist. It seemed to him to be similar to styles used by soldiers in the Free Cities and points eastward, though he'd only read of such things before.

"Your Grace," Loras corrected sharply. Willas suppressed a groan at his brother's tone. "And you should kneel when you approach the king."

The witch tilted her head. "Should I?" she said simply. "He's not my king." The entire party shifted uneasily at that declaration. Renly blinked, nonplussed. Lord Mace reddened. Tyrell and Baratheon guards fingered their swords uneasily. Every man there had heard the songs of the witch's hour in King's Landing, and none thought it would end differently if it came to blows at the gate. Well, perhaps not Loras, Willas thought. Though a good spanking might do him some small good in the long run. "But then, neither Joffrey nor Stannis are my king," the witch continued, ignoring the knights' unease with grace. "There's no man or woman in this world I'll call my king; my allegiance is already spoken for. However!" She clapped her hands, causing half the guards to jump a little. "I have need of a king to do the king's business, so I'm looking for a good one."

Loras and Mace bristled, but Renly just laughed. "The only woman in the world who goes shopping for kings like chickens at the market," he said with a broad smile. "I look forward to treating with you and the North, my lady. No, no, I understand Joffrey had you attainted; I will reverse it, if you desire. Such boldness shouldn't go unrewarded."

The witch smiled thinly. "I have no need of nobility for myself, Lord Renly... but your offer is very kind, regardless. As for talking, well. Did you receive Lord Stark's raven?"
"Aye, and an interesting tale it is. My maester swears up and down it must be false."

"Oh, I don't doubt he does. When you're ready to discuss things at length, be sure to bring him along; it ought to be enlightening."

"I look forward to your discussion," Renly repeated, bemused. He summoned one of Highgarden's stewards. "Find a place for the captain and her companions, and see that they have every comfort. My good captain, it has no doubt been a long journey; I would be honored if you would share meat and mead with me at Lord Tyrell's table tonight."

The witch bowed again. "Of course, Your Grace. By your leave, I'd like to take a chance to look around the castle in the interim. I've seen Highgarden from a distance, but this is my first opportunity to see it up close."

His father stepped forward, close to the king. "I would ask your word that you conduct no magic within Highgarden, my lady," he said formally. "I must see to the safety of the king as well as my people, you understand."

"Mm, of course, of course," agreed the witch. "Lord Mace, isn't it? In the interests of safety, I'll happily agree to your request, my lord. And you should join the king and I when we meet. This will concern you as well."

"You honor me with your concern," his father said in reply. The witch bowed to him, again in that stiff manner.

"Then everything is settled? Good." Renly held out his hand to Margaery, and she took it gracefully. "We'll speak again after the feast, Lady Jade."

Renly led his bride back towards Highgarden while the steward conducted the witch and her two companions to rooms elsewhere in the castle. Lord Mace and the rest of the welcoming party departed with the king, but Willas stood there deeply in thought, gazing at the sky-ship. He'd seen the scroll from Winterfell, warning of dangers marching on the Wall and calling for aid. His father had scoffed at the thought of mere wildlings being a threat to, well, anybody, and Renly had seemed offended by the note. A delaying tactic, no more he'd declared to the assembled lords of the Reach. Willas hadn't been so sure of that. He'd never met Eddard Stark, but the man had a reputation for honesty that crossed all seven kingdoms. If he claimed he needed swords to fend off an assault on the Wall, that was most likely true, or close enough to the truth as to make no difference.

Which put them all in a pretty position. Renly wanted the North—specifically he wanted House Stark's reputation and honor—to back him against the Lannisters and his brother Stannis. Willas rather doubted that Renly ever expected Stark to want something in exchange, but this business at the Wall had forced his hand. He had numbers, but no legitimacy. And into this mixture came the witch, unassuming affect backed by monstrous power, and an agenda well outside their own.

Willas wondered who would win, if anybody could.

With that cheerful thought, the heir to Highgarden turned and hobbled his way back through the gate and towards his rooms and his books. He needed to know more, about the North, about the witch, about the situation in general, before he could give good counsel on the situation.

As was customary, the nightly feast was grand. The troubles hovering over Westeros had not yet lessened the famous bounty of Highgarden. If the feast was a little more glorious then perhaps the presence of the king at the high table lent a greater air to the proceedings. Or at least that was what Willas supposed his father and goodbrother told themselves, as the muster of the Reach continued
outside and around them.

A few discreet remarks to the stewards ensured that Captain Hasegawa was seated on the dias next to him and in close proximity to his grandmother. Lady Olenna Tyrell had a profound knack for seeing the heart of matters and ferreting out the truth from all those she came in contact with. Willas wasn't entirely sure if it was something innate or simply the benefit of a long life, but either way he expected it would make for some interesting dinner conversation.

He was seated, chatting idly with his grandmother when the witch slipped in besides him. "Ah, hello there," she said in greeting, then took a closer look. "You were with the king, but I don't think we were introduced...?"

Willas smiled. "Willas Tyrell, my lady," he said "A pleasure."

"Of course. How are you today, milord?" The witch reached for a cup of wine and raised it to her lips.

"Crippled," Willas replied blandly. The witch froze, then coughed into her cup. "Are you well, my lady?"

The sputtering witch put down the cup with deliberate slowness. "Oh yeah, just peachy," she said weakly. "Wasn't really expecting that answer."

"Well, it happens to be true. It happened when I was a boy, my first attempt at being a knight."

"Dornish treachery," his grandmother sniffed. "A hundred red scorpions wasn't enough damage to the Reach for their taste so they send their viper into our midst."

"I rather doubt Prince Oberyn bewitched me to get caught in my stirrup, Grandmother," he said dryly. "Captain, may I introduce my grandmother Lady Olenna?"

The witch dipped her head in greeting. "Milady, an honor."

Olenna eyed the foreign woman carefully. "Interesting clothing," she said finally. "Is mannish dress the custom where you come from, or are you a deviant?"

The witch laughed. "Sadly I left my pretty princess dresses at home. I wasn't expecting to be wining and dining with the nobility, just working." She sighed deeply. "Ah well, I suppose I'll just have to make do with what I have."

Willas had a sudden sinking feeling that the evening might be a little too entertaining.

The feast rolled on, course after course served as the players played and tumblers tumbled. Willas ate sparingly, watching the witch closely. She too seemed to eat little, only indulging in a few foods while keeping a careful eye on Renly. The man who would be king sat with his sister on his left and his brother on his right. Renly doted on Margaery in an almost perfunctory manner, kissing her brow now and then between feeding her tidbits on the point of his knife, but spent most of his time speaking and jesting with Loras.

"If you're looking to usurp my granddaughter, young lady," Lady Olenna finally said, picking at a plate of pease, "you'd be better off looking elsewhere. You're dressed rightly for that, though, I'll give you that much."

"Hm?" said the witch, looking away from the king and queen. "Oh no, nothing like that milady," she said. "I prefer my men a little more intellectual to be honest. No, I don't have any interest in Renly
"Grok?" his grandmother said. "Sounds rather obscene."

"A word from my homeland, it means to understand something as deeply as you possibly can. Lord Renly seems to be very interested in becoming king. I want to know why; what makes him want the throne, and if he'd be any good on it."

Lady Olenna raised an arch eyebrow. "And what business is it of yours who's king on the Iron Throne?" she asked.

Captain Hasegawa gave her a considering look, then smiled a sharp smile. "You know, it's funny you'd ask that," she replied. "I think you're the first person to actually wonder aloud—to me—about why I'm involved in this fight. Everybody else just seems to take it as granted." She raised her cup in salute. "A toast to your perception, Lady Olenna."

His grandmother raised her cup in mockery. "And allow me to exercise my gift once more and note you failed to answer my question."

The witch laughed. "Well played. I'll tell you this much then: it's simultaneously none of my business and entirely my business."

"If I wanted riddles with no answers I could consult with the septons. Or speak to my grandson, whichever." Willas winced, not the least because there was painful truth in that.

Hasegawa paid him no mind and took a drink. "In one sense it's none of my business because this isn't my country," she said slowly. "Renly, Stannis, Joffrey... whoever wins isn't my king. I owe no allegiances. At best I'm a visitor to Westeros. When I leave this country, I'm likely never going to come back." The witch's face darkened a little at this. "Whoever takes the throne is a matter for the Westerosi and should be settled by the Westerosi. Simple enough, right?"

"But now we get to the complicated part that makes this my business. The dispute between Renly and Joffrey and Stannis... it's dividing and distracting the realm at a moment when it needs to be united and focused. When, not if, it comes to open warfare thousands of people are going to die; most of them don't deserve it, and none of them should. I have a mission, a duty... a sacred obligation maybe? Call it whatever, the point is I just can't let you all go ahead and kill each other until there's a clear winner. If I'm going to accomplish my mission—and if you're all going to live to see another summer—then I need to bring the Seven Kingdoms together under one ruler." Hasegawa said, her voice level and matter-of-fact.

"I noticed you left off an option," his grandmother said idly. "Your magic boat could take you anywhere in the world. You could go to the Free Cities or Mereen or even Asshai-By-The-Shadow and live a life of luxury, leaving us poor fools to our no doubt justly deserved fate. Why not do that than run about sorting out which ungrateful lord gets Aegon's pointy chair?"

The witch chuckled without any warmth. "That, my dear lady, was never an option to begin with," she said. "I've got a mission here, like I said. Leaving now means I abandon the mission and abandon your world to its fate... and your world is worth fighting for." She leaned in over the table. "Tell me, Olenna Tyrell, just between you, me and the table settings... what would you do, what would you ask others to do, if it meant protecting your grandchildren?" She made a quick little gesture towards Margaery, laughing gaily at some jape of Renly's. "What price are you willing to pay to see them live long and happy lives?"

Lady Olenna, the most fearsome woman Willas Tyrell had ever known, possibly the most fearsome
woman in the whole of Westeros, scowled at the witch and turned her face. "When I was a girl, the septas warned me about people like you," she said.

Captain Hasegawa merely drank her wine. "I only point out that you did ask," she noted. "And hey, now you've got an idea of what I'm going to be talking to Renly about."

"You may not like what you find there, girl."

"Maybe not. I doubt Renly's more difficult than the weirwoods, though. Besides," she added with a twinkling eye. "I've got an angle."
"Another raven from the Citadel, my lord," Pycelle quavered. "The astronomers are in agreement that the seasons are changing. They say that the white ravens will be sent within the next two turns of the moon, perhaps sooner."

The Hand grunted, not looking up from his paperwork.

"The conclave of archmaesters also believe the coming winter will be a harsh one," he continued. Lord Tywin continued to ignore him. "It might be wise to have the king decree that all men not under arms begin preparing for the winter to come. And if the former master of magic was correct—"

"Enough." The Hand slapped his desk, scattering papers around it. "Tell me, Grand Maester, what do intend to accomplish with all your prating?"

The Grand Maester smiled blandly. "My intent, my lord, is to see the Seven Kingdoms prosper under the wise rule of the house of Lannister, nothing more and nothing less."

Tywin scowled. "Your toadying does you no favors, Pycelle. You wish to see the realm prosper, and to this end you keep blathering on about that Dornish mummer and her fantasies?"

"My lord Hand," Pycelle started, then paused. "I and my fellows at the Citadel do not agree on much," he said. "The nature of scholarly work, I'm afraid. However, that... natural disagreement tends to make the things on which we do agree all the more important."

Lord Tywin snorted. "If you're about to tell me that the Citadel is taking this upjumped madwoman's claims seriously—"

"All of her claims? No, my lord. The archmaesters are not so foolish as to believe everything the woman has said. But enough of them, enough that the conclave is willing to... entertain the possibility that magic is returning to Westeros. Enough that they are concerned, especially about events in King's Landing."

"And what 'events' concern that gaggle of withered old men?" The Hand said, returning to his parchments.

"His Grace's replacement for the lady of Hasegawa."

"The king may do as he will."

"Aye, that's the way of kings. And yet the archmaesters fear that the king may be unduly influenced by a man like Greyjoy, as opposed to listening to the wisdom of his noble Hand and grandfather. Archmaester Marwyn wrote specifically, wondering why you and the queen regent have yet to put a stop to it."

"Why should we?" asked Tywin in reply. "Greyjoy is mad, but his madness entertains His Grace. Let the fool practice his follies and amuse the king."

Pycelle frowned. It was a perfectly reasonable answer to some extent, and yet. "As the court let the Ulthosi woman practice her follies and amused Robert?"
The Hand looked up from his desk and glared at the Grand Maester like he hoped to set the maester's robes aflame with his eyes. "If you're going to say something, say it and stop dancing about like a Braavosi dandy," he growled.

Pycelle took a deep breath. "Madmen in the court can be dangerous, even if they are not on the throne," he said. "The conclave is concerned that Lord Greyjoy has unrestricted access to the king, and I cannot disagree with them on that. By rights they should not be allowed to meet alone; the queen regent or a trusted man—perhaps your brother—should be nearby and on guard whenever the two meet."

"Nothing but cravens in skirts," Lord Tywin grumbled. "Ser Kevan has other duties to perform, I cannot spare him to play the king's nursemaid. Still... the suggestion has some merit. Tell the other frightened old women that I will consider their suggestion. Now leave me be."

The Grand Maester wandered through the keep, deep in thought. He meandered through the mazelike halls of Maegor's holdfast while he pondered the latest ravens from Oldtown and where they stood. The very idea of magic returning to the land was dangerous. Dangerous and not a small bit frightening. But then, if the tide rises what are we to do save float or sink as we may?

His wandering brought him to a side chamber guarded by a white cloak. The Grand Maester blinked; the king's apartments were elsewhere, and there was no reason for him to be anywhere near this room. At first he thought the younger prince or princess might be playing inside, but then he heard the unmistakable voice of King Joffrey coming from inside.

"Nobody understands, that's the problem." The king's voice drifted out from his chambers. Pycelle slowed his pace, just enough that he might hear what Joffrey was saying but not enough to appear like he was skulking. Not that the Grand Maester would ever think of doing such a thing, gods forbid. "Not Mother, not Grandfather, not even Lord Euron truly understands the things that trouble me. I wonder if this is what Father felt like when he first ruled? The weight of the world on your shoulders and nobody who really understands what that means? But you, ser, you know, don't you? I can see it in your eyes, the look of a man who's seen things no one else has. I saw it in Father's eyes, once upon a time. I see it in my reflection. No one understands our burdens but each other."

There was a pause, but Pycelle couldn't hear any sort of reply. "Yes, yes. You're being too modest, ser," the king said cheerfully. "I know you'd rather be out there striking fear into the hearts of the crown's enemies. So would I! But Mother and Grandfather won't let me." An ugly note crept into Joffrey's voice. "Patent, plotting Grandfather with all his schemes, waiting like a spider in his web whilst my enemies buzz about the kingdoms. It's not what Father would've done. He wouldn't have squatted in the Red Keep while treason—treason!—festered in all Seven Kingdoms. The North rebelling against us, my uncles plotting to remove me... and this witch at the center of it all. Father wouldn't have let her flit about raising the country against him; he'd have smashed her ugly Dornish face in with his hammer!"

"Well," the king went on. "Grandfather may not want to summon the levies but there are other ways, ser. Other ways. Father knew that well enough when he ordered somebody to finish off the dragon and his whore sister. And Lord Varys knows so many useful people, too." Pycelle sighed. He had no true love for the Ulthosi woman—if anything he was more interested in what she represented than the woman herself—but it was a shame that it had come to this. Such a pity. Perhaps he'd have the
opportunity to study her works in greater detail, once it was all over.

The king's ramblings faded as he walked by, nodding courteously to Ser Mandon who stood on guard at the king's door. The Valeman stared blankly at the maester, as usual. Pycelle repressed a twitch; the man had a knack for being unsettling, even when doing nothing.

Varys was waiting for him in his chambers. "You heard," the Spider said plainly.

Pycelle thought of a hundred things to say, get out of my room at the forefront of his mind, but in the end he simply nodded. "What a world we live in," he mumbled. The master of whisperers hummed tunelessly. "What are we to do?"

"Perhaps Ser Jaime might put his sword to use again?"

The Grand Maester glared at his uninvited guest. "If that was a jape, it wasn't very bloody funny." It also pricked Pycelle's interest that the eunuch would be so bold. Spies were everywhere in the Red Keep, and not all of them were in the Spider's employ. If someone overheard that and brought it to the Hand, or worse the queen regent...

"No, I suppose not." Varys held up his hands in supplication. "Peace, Grand Maester. There is little we agree on, but in this moment we may well be united. The king is... young, and easily led astray," he said carefully. "The Hand seems content to let him amuse himself while he plans for war, which might be a mistake. And I dislike this new court sorcerer. The Hand's refusal to do anything about him despite his history concerns me. It would not do us any good if Greyjoy turns our work against us..." the eunuch trailed off, deep in thought. "Steps need to be taken, I think."

The spymaster rose and bowed to the grand maester. "There are things I need to do. Thank you for this little chat, Grand Maester," he said, then left.

WILLAS

They convened that evening in Lord Mace's solar, the king, the witch and the lord of Highgarden. In days past the solar had been, among other things, a tribute to Mace Tyrell's hunting and hawking prowess, stuffed heads mounted on the walls amid the maps of the Reach and other sundry artifacts of the office of Lord Paramount. In the past moon's turn Renly had taken over the chamber almost completely; the trophies remained, but the maps of the Reach were replaced with maps of Westeros, including one that almost covered the great oaken table that served as the solar's centerpiece. The room was lit by half a hundred lamps burning merrily in the fading twilight as the council entered.

Renly took the high chair at the far end of the great table, Lord Mace sitting at his right hand and Willas at his father's right hand. To the king's left sat two maesters, one who belonged to Highgarden and one who belonged to the king. Maester Lomys was the Tyrell man, a cheerfully ruddy presence who had been tending the ravens and the library for as long as Willas could remember. Lomys said nothing, his face set in an inoffensive, contemplative blank. Closest to the king was his own maester, a proud devil of a Valeman by the name of Corwyn, who also said nothing, merely looking down a somewhat overlarge nose at the king's guest. Behind and between Renly and Mace stood Loras, clad in shining mail and ready to defend them.

The witch stood at the opposite end of the table, straight as a spear, flanked by her Martell bastard and her Myrish sellsword. She carried a large jar of some kind, covered by a white cloth. This she carefully placed on the floor and waited, looking at Renly with some mild interest. Willas matched her stare with his own, carefully observing the foreigner for things he knew not. Some sign of treachery perhaps, or a hint of what the witch wanted to tell Renly. The tales of the witch's hour
danced around the exact content of the warning, only hinting at what Hasegawa had actually said to Joffrey. Tyrell spies within the Red Keep were only a little less vague—sadly none had been in the throne room on the day—but they were adamant that whatever the content of the warning, it was freely given and quite dire.

As far as Willas was concerned the greater question was how much the king and his father actually believed, if anything at all. The two maesters were of little help there: as news of the Ulthosi spread over the past half-year it seemed as if the whole Citadel had been thrown into confusion and argument. Lomys had expressed skepticism to Willas in private before the sky-ship arrived, but since the ship flew over Highgarden had been quiet and oddly humbled. Corwyn on the other hand had a tendency to ignore anything he considered foolish, and the sky-ship hadn't quelled that much if at all. If the maesters ask the wrong questions this might get awkward, he thought.

"Well, my lady," Renly said, spreading his hands. "We're here as you requested. What pray tell is so important that you would travel as far as you have to speak to us?"

The witch barked out a single laugh. "Oh, Your Grace has no idea how funny that is," she said, shaking her head. "But that's a story for another day. So. Before I begin, I'd like to ask you all a question: how much do you know about the Long Night?"

Willas blinked. Of all the possible opening gambits, that was not one he expected. He racked his brains, trying to remember everything he'd read—recently, even, once the ravens from Winterfell started coming—about the old legend. His lord father simply looked confused, while the king just smiled back at the witch.

"We know most of the stories that were told to the Andals by the First Men," Maester Lomys said cautiously. "The basics of the story haven't changed much since that time, of course: the darkness that lasted a generation, the Others invading from the uttermost north only to be beaten back by a band of heroes. Here in the Reach the story goes that it was Garth Greenhand's sons—or mayhaps grandsons, the legends differ a little—who defeated the Others. Accounts differ from place to place, and everything blurs together after the passage of so many years, you see. At any rate, day returned and the heroes went on to found the Age of Heroes. One of Garth's kin stayed behind to build the Wall and found House Stark, and well... that was the end of it."

"As a person unfamiliar with Westeros you wouldn't understand, of course," Maester Corwyn said with exaggerated politeness. "Most of the tales of the Long Night are no doubt puffed-up legends of ancient wars between the primitive First Men tribes. The long history of bloodshed between the savages before the coming of the Andals explains things like the Wall easily enough." The Valeman turned to the king. "Your Grace, the Citadel has studied these tales for years and there is considerable doubt as to the truth of them. There are countless stories of the Greenhand; one for every man in the Reach possibly. Not all of them could be true."

"And yet," said Willas, "there are things that don't agree with the Citadel's reasoning. If the Wall was merely meant to keep wildlings away it could be much smaller and just as effective. Yet the Night's Watch spent years piling it ever higher. Why keep adding to the thing until it's second only to the Hightower in height just to keep away a pack of savages in skins? Why even make a thing like the Watch in the first place, if it were just wildlings? House Stark and their banners could man the Wall just as well, so why wouldn't they? No, Maester Corwyn, there's something else the Citadel has overlooked all these years..." He trailed off, realizing every eye in the room was now on him. Lomys kept up his mask, but the king's maester looked like he was about to leap across the table and throttle him.

"Interesting," the witch said, eyeing him with approval. "Lord Willas makes some important points:
so much of the Wall and the Watch don't make a lot of sense strategically unless you take the stories of the Long Night seriously."

"Fables," Corwyn sneered.

"Some, sure," the witch said, waggling a hand. "Others, well. A wise man in my country once said that when you eliminate all other options whatever remains—no matter how improbable it may be—must be the truth. When I first saw the Wall, I asked a lot of the same questions Lord Willas just did, and then I went looking for answers."

"I remember you tearing apart the king's library," Renly noted absently. "Pycelle was less than pleased with you, as I recall, but too afraid of your arts to confront you about it."

"Really? Huh. Ought to get him a fruit basket in apology. Well... aside the point. Anyway, after quite a bit of running around I finally found the answers I was looking for."

The witch pulled the cover off, revealing a glass jar with a man's severed head inside. The head was years old, possibly older, the skin gone leathery and worn away by time and the elements. To Willas's mounting horror he could see withered muscles bunching and twisting, working the jaw in a mockery of life. Blue eyes swivelled in rotted sockets, staring hungrily at the king's party. Willas Tyrell regarded the living dead and wondered how much worse it could get.

Hasegawa continued to speak. It got worse. So very much worse.

She told them the tale of venturing beyond the Wall, of finding the wights gathers in the frozen wastes. Of discovering three Others—actual Others, nightmares from the songs made flesh—who confronted her, and what happened next. She told them of hunting walking corpses through the snow-covered forests, and all through this talk the head silently stared at them, the unearthly blue light in decayed eyes burning into themselves.

The maesters were deathly pale and silent. Lord Mace's naturally florid complexion had gone gray as he stared at the witch and the head. Father never believed in the first place, Willas thought. He'd thought it all some sort of flanking move in the greater game not... whatever nightmare tale we've found ourselves in.

Renly had not gone pale nor had he done much of anything, regarding the abomination at the far end of the table with mild interest, as if a particularly clever cat had just dragged in a rabbit for its master.

"A trick," Corwyn gasped finally, tearing his eyes from the awful sight. "Some sort of foreign mummery, it has to be."

"Remarkable," Lomys breathed. "No obvious signs of a mechanism of any kind, just flesh and bone." He gave the jar a hearty shake, and the thing inside rattle around like a dried pea. "How many
more of these things are there?"

"I have enough heads for the high lords of Westeros if that's what you mean," she said promptly, "but if you're talking about where our boy here came from well... oh yeah. I don't have a full count, but assume tens of thousands or more. Every person beyond the Wall they kill becomes part of their army, and there's a lot more people up there than I think the Citadel ever knew about."

"A trick!" Corwyn snapped, glaring at the witch. "What is your secret, witch? What did you do to this head to make it like this? Did you defile some poor fool's grave to find this, or did you just murder a man to make your forgery?"

"What?" Hasegawa said blankly. Her servants glanced at each other, then quietly stepped back from the witch. There was a faint buzzing as one of her familiars dropped to her shoulder. "Why... why would you think I faked this? What possible gain is there for me to fake any of this?"

"That I know not," Corwyn replied stubbornly. "To gain His Grace's confidence like you wormed your way into King Robert's court, perhaps?"

"He sprang that one on me!"

"A likely story. No doubt you've some demonic scheme planned for King Renly once he's in your clutches." The familiar buzzed louder as the witch's face darkened, and Willas watched the byplay with sick fascination. It seemed that he was about to see the Ulthosi's wrath inflicted on the recalcitrant maester first-hand.

Then the king coughed lightly. "Maester Corwyn," he said mildly. "Your passion does you credit. Your discretion however does not."

The maester turned to face his king. "Your Grace," he said.

"Thank you, Corwyn. That will be all for now." Renly said firmly. The maester looked as though he were about to object, then whirled on his heel and stalked out of the solar. "Please forgive Corwyn my lady. He really is a very good maester, within his limits." His gaze sharpened a little. "Is that what my brother sent you away to search for?"

The witch shrugged. "I had suspicions things were going awry in the north, but no proof. Robert wanted proof before he would take action."

"And so you went, and so he died before you could return, I see." Renly straightened in his seat. "You put me in an interesting predicament, Lady Jade. You've given me something you claim proves that foul things are stirring in the north, and yet mine own maester declares it to be a falsehood. And there are other things stirring in the North alongside your wights and Others. Things that I know not if I can allow." Lord Mace started at the king's pronouncement, turning his face away from the head to look at the king. "What you have given me are great matters for a king, to be sure... if they are true. And they are not the only matters to face me. I must give this careful thought, you understand."

The witch looked at Renly without expression. Willas looked at the witch, then at the king. His lord father started to say something, then fell silent. It felt like the world was balanced on a knife's edge.

"Walk with me, King of Westeros," she said quietly. Renly looked bemused. "Right now?"

"Please. No lords, no maesters; just you and me."

"And my loyal shield," the king replied easily.
Loras

Loras Tyrell loved Highgarden in the daylight, the sun glistening off its whitewashed walls, the green and gold banners snapping in the wind. He loved it no less in the dark, though he didn't often get to see the many lamps and torches throwing golden light over the polished stone of its hallways. Tonight, he tread carefully behind his king as he walked down the halls of his ancestral home alongside the witch from Ulthos. Loras watched the witch carefully; her back was open to his strike, though he knew not if that actually meant anything to a witch.

He remembered the tourney outside King's Landing well: turning from his horse just in time to see Ser Gregor Clegane bearing down on him, when the Mountain's sword was struck from his hand by a bolt of blue-white fire. He owed her his life, which grated on his knightly pride. A woman should owe a knight her life, not the other way around. The witch reminded him of Selwyn Tarth's fool brute of a daughter more than anything else, a foolish wench playing at things women had no business dealing with. Like Renly, the thought swam around in his mind. He tightened his grip on his sword and kept his eyes on the witch's back. If she tried anything, he would be ready. He had to be ready.

"You know, it's a funny thing," Lady Hasegawa said as they strolled down the torchlit halls.

"What is, my lady?"

"Not a week ago I had a very similar conversation with your brother. Everyone I asked said he was the stubborn one, and yet we managed to come to an agreement fairly quickly." She paused, tilting her head. "He was about as much of an asshole about it as you though, so I guess you two really are brothers." Loras growled under his breath at the insult.

"I'm glad that I did not disappoint," Renly replied easily.

"Oh I didn't say that," chided the witch. "Stannis at least saw the threat for what it was, whereas you seem bound and determined to make this difficult."

"Why my dear lady, I know not what you mean."

The witch halted, forcing Loras to pull up short of running her down. "Stop with the bullshit, Renly. It's just us here, and it's unbecoming. No matter what the succession issue was I expected you to be more reasonable about this than Joffrey, you know."

Renly turned to face the witch, his smile glimmering in the torchlight. "I rather thought I was. At no point did I threaten you with arrest or attaintment, even though I most certainly could have. Indeed, for some of your comments this eve I could have your tongue and no lord, not even my wayward brother, would say otherwise."

"I wouldn't recommend trying," replied the witch. "So that's it? You're just going to brush this off like Joffrey?"

"Not like Joffrey, my lady. Corwyn disputes your story, and that is enough to sow doubt. Not, perhaps with Lord Mace or myself, but my banners will wonder: why does the king abandon the pursuit of the Iron Throne in favor of chasing snarks and grumkins at the Wall? Has he abandoned us on some whim like Mad Aerys? Will my banners remain with me, or will they turn to the Lannisters as the only sane lords in a Westeros gone mad?"

The witch sighed and resumed walking. "Again, I can see the sibling resemblance," she said.
"Though I can't figure it. What do you get out of all this?"

"Isn't Westeros enough?"

"Maybe. But why? Why do you want to be king, Your Grace?"

Renly shrugged elegantly. "Why do Joffrey and Stannis want to be king?" he countered. The witch seemed unamused by the response.

"Joffrey thinks he's Robert's firstborn, so the throne goes to him by right. Stannis disagrees on his parentage, so the throne should go to him by right and law."

"And do you believe Stannis?" This then was a question worth asking, to Loras's mind.

"Stark believes him," she said lightly. "The evidence is a bit strange to my eyes, but it's compelling."

They reached the doors to the east gardens. Renly threw them open with a careless gesture and they walked through into the silent courtyard. The sky above them was clear and filled with stars, while torches from watchmen dotted the castle ramparts.

"Ah yes, my brother's 'evidence,'" Renly chuckled. "So convenient, isn't it? That the queen was not only cuckolding Robert, but with her brother to boot. That there is no trace of Baratheon blood in my nephews or niece. If one were inclined to trust such a man, which most of the lords of Westeros would not."

"Oh really? I imagine he'd be more trustworthy if he had people backing his words. Like, say, the lord of Winterfell... and his brother the lord of Storm's End," the witch said.

"He has too much to gain from Joffrey being a bastard, and 'truth' is a matter for maesters and septons. Why I doubt even your magic could determine the truth of the matter."

"It could, probably." The witch looked up at the stars. "It's not my field of expertise to say the least, but it's not impossible. But then I'm the only one who would understand it... well, maybe my assistant would too, but that's it. And besides, I'm too close to the Starks to be credible anyway, even though..." she trailed off. In the dim glimmer of the torches Loras thought she was frowning.

"Even though?" prompted Renly.

The witch shook all over, like a dog. "'Y'know what, doesn't matter anymore," she said. "The point is, the evidence Stannis and Eddard have is more compelling and makes more sense to a Westerosi audience that any foreign gibberish I spout, no matter how shiny my toys are."

"And people trust Eddard Stark," sighed Renly. "I take it by your talk they've reached an accord?"

Loras had suspected something like this might happen. Stark had rebuffed Renly's generous offer before confronting the queen, and especially after news of the witch's hour reached Highgarden he knew that Stark was no longer an option. Eddard Stark was a grim, hidebound man, much like Stannis in his own insufferable way. He wouldn't support Renly so long as Stannis lived, no matter how much better his golden rose would be as king.

"After a fashion," Lady Hasegawa said. "Neither one really has the forces to do what they want, but... an agreement to support each other to the best of their abilities. Men north to defend the Wall, and men south to help Stannis claim the throne."

"Mm, a pity. I would hate to have to kill men needed at the Wall should my brother continue to be
"We're getting off-track," the witch said suddenly. "You still haven't told me why you want to be king, Your Grace. What is it that keeps you from supporting your brother? Joffrey was born to it. Stannis has the proof to invalidate Joffrey's claim; by Westerosi law he has the right to it. Why not back him? What makes Renly Baratheon want to be king over his brother?"

Something in the witch's tone seemed to needle Renly. He stiffened and replied in a waspish tone of voice. "Ah yes, support my brother and receive nothing but sharp words and glares in the process. My brother never cared much for anything other than his precious duty. Just like our brother Robert never cared much for anything save his wine and his lost wolf maid. He might have the legal right, but the law failed when Robert overthrew the Targaryens in the first place. If Robert could shoulder the burden of usurper then so may I, and I would do it better.

"Work with Stannis? Perhaps I could, but to what end? My beloved, loyal, dutiful brother might be capable in a mean way, but he has nothing but contempt for the great game of thrones. He despises the lords, and they would despise him right back. Aegon the Unlikely's policies combined with the gentleness of his father Maekar. Any attempt at gentling him would be thrown back in my face, just like Stannis burned the food Lord Mace's armies left behind when they abandoned the siege of Storm's End.

"I would be the better king, my lady. Where my brother has contempt for the game, I know how to play and play it well." Renly smiled, a sharp thing in the glimmering dark. "Stannis would fight his lords to keep them in line. My bannermen will fight each other for the honor of dying for the king."

"That's an interesting idea," the witch said. "Also rather cynical."

"It comes with the crown, so I'm told." Renly shrugged. "Men will follow me as they did Robert, and I will lead them to the Iron Throne. It's that simple, really."

"Do they?" asked the witch, head tilted to one side.

Renly gestured to the silent walls of Highgarden. "They already do," he said. "Tyrell swords make me king. Rowan and Tarly and Caron make me king with axe and mace and warhammer. Tarth arrows and Penrose lances. Fossoyay, Cuy, Mullendore, Estermont, Selmy, Hightower, Oakheart, Cran, Caswell, Blackbar, Morrigen, Beesbury, Shermer, Dunn, Footly... all the chivalry of the south rides under my banner, and that is the least of my power. The full muster of the Reach is a hundred thousand strong, sword and spear and pike. The muster of the Stormlands a quarter that. No army in Westeros could withstand such a force."

"Almost no army," mused the witch quietly. She whistled a long, low note, her familiar chiming and buzzing in reply. "Is that your answer then?" she asked. "You have the strength, therefore you should be king?"

"Do I need another answer?" Renly wondered.

In reply, the garden filled with a quiet rumble as the sky-ship lifted from its place in the flower fields and flew over the castle to hang over the garden like a steel cloud. A beam of brilliant white light stabbed out from the ship's belly to engulf the king and the witch.

"I dunno, if I were you I might want to think of a better one," she said mildly.

Loras drew his sword, placing himself between the witch and his king. "You dare!" he snarled, advancing on her. The moment she moves her hands, the next twitch of her lips and I strike her
The witch's eyes seemed to glow behind the Myrish glass in the unearthly light. "I could reduce the both of you to ash in the next moment without breaking a single window in Highgarden if I wanted to," she told him coldly. "Choose your next action carefully."

Renly put his hand on Loras's shoulder. "Peace, Ser Loras," he said. "The lady is merely making a point, methinks." Loras scowled, but stepped back. He kept his sword out and carefully ready to strike should the need arise, glaring daggers at the witch as the king continued. "Reduce us to ash, eh?"

"Not something I want to do. Not now, not ever to be honest."

"A lovely sentiment, my lady," said Renly, squinting through the white glare. Behind them Renly heard servants and guards running about, headed for the garden.

"Being an obnoxious son of a bitch isn't a capital crime, even if I believed in execution as punishment," the witch replied. "It's a question of trust, Renly. You trust Loras to not cut your head off when you're not looking, right? You trust Lord Tyrell not to tell the servants to poison your food. You trust your bannermen with weapons around you when you go into battle. And they trust you won't randomly decide to have them murdered for some little offense, right? You trust each other with your lives all the time.

"If Westeros is going to survive, then you need to scale up the mechanism by which you extend this trust. You want to be king, *Your Grace*? Then first you have to act like one. The Lannisters aren't the enemies you should be worried about. Whether or not you're on the Iron Throne, the Others are coming and they will come for you." The witch shook her head. "Joffrey failed his test. Stannis understands the nature of the threat but can't quite let go of his issues."

"And where do I fall in this test of yours, Lady Jade?" asked Renly.

"I don't know. Your muster will be needed at the Wall, eventually. But first you need to get your sworn lords preparing for winter. You need men in the fields sowing, reaping, storing food for the coming season—and I know that it hasn't happened yet, but it's coming regardless. What good's a king without a kingdom? And when it comes down to it, *Your Grace*, will you lead all the chivalry in the south to the Wall to fight nightmares? Will you be willing to eat rats in the cold dark if it means protecting Westeros, or will you stay here when the moment comes? Are you willing to give it all for the crown you think you deserve?"

Loras Tyrell had known Renly, the love of his life, for many years. They had gone through many trials together, and the one great constant was Renly's boundless confidence. Now, the rightful king sounded oddly uncertain, and it worried Loras. "I... don't know," he said. "I must think on it."

The witch whistled again, and the sky-ship's light snapped off like an eye closing. Loras could hear the thing rumble as it moved back it where it came from. Guards spilled out into the courtyard, and under their clamor Loras almost missed the witch's reply: "This is what it means to be king, Renly Baratheon. Don't forget that."

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**SARELLA**

"I'm not optimistic," Jade said as they walked down from the castle towards the ship.

"Really," replied Sarella. "I heard you had quite a lively discussion with the king last night." Which
was putting it mildly. Half of Highgarden had been in an uproar last night after the sorceress had decided to engage in an impromptu show of force.

"Lively, yeah. Productive? That I'm not so sure about," Jade sighed. "He went on about how big his army was, so I tried to crack that smug shell of his by showing him a bigger fish. I'm kind of afraid I broke him in the process."

Sarella raised an eyebrow at this declaration. "It seems a bit early to say you've broken the man," she noted. "My sister might be able to do it quickly, but she would need her spear and fists to do it. Unless he was crumpled at your feet pissing himself after your little display I doubt you did that much damage." She paused, thinking about it. "He wasn't, was he?"

"Oh no, nothing so dramatic. It's just... hell, I don't know. Renly seems like a good-time guy at heart and I don't think he was ready for the full Hasegawa lecture experience, yknow? He thinks he'd be a good king because the Tyrells are backing him, but that's all there is to the guy. Break that confidence and there's not that much there underneath."

"Mayhaps you should've tried treating with Lord Tyrell directly, then?" Mace Tyrell had a reputation among the great of Westeros, and Sarella didn't think highly of the man. And yet he'd survived siding with the mad king when others lost their heads or went to the Wall, so there must be something there under all that pompous fat.

"Yeah, that's on the agenda if the king waffles," Jade agreed. "I think I've got Mace's number. Tricky, but... how badly d'you think that fucks us if we go behind Renly's back?"

Sarella shrugged. "I could not say, my lady. It depends on how Renly reacts."

The cobbled path from the gate led them down towards the ship. Around them milled a crowd of smallfolk attending to their own work; farmers and tradesmen coming to and fro from the port on the Mander. As they neared the ship, Sarella noticed a flicker of brown cloth in the corner of her eye, somebody in robes carefully pacing them just out of line of sight.

"We're being followed," she murmured, low enough that only the lady would hear. "Behind and to the left."

"Mm," Jade hummed. "He's not alone." As they approached the ship's berth there was a cluster of men in tattered brown robes standing between them and Carefree Victory. They looked like begging brothers, filthy and footsore. None of them seemed armed, but Sarella knew better than many how innocent robes could be. Old instincts rose in her mind, and she carefully slid her hand to the dagger on her belt, picking out her targets as the begging brothers turned to face them.

Jade and Sarella stopped half a dozen paces from the band. Behind them the noise of footsteps halted. The brother in the lead was tall and rough-looking. She could see muscles bunching under the filthy rags he wore as he stared at the pair.

"Hello boys, something I can do for you?" Lady Jade asked.

The begging brother's eyes lit up. "Death to the witch!" he cried, casting aside his begging bowl and producing a long, sharp knife. He lunged towards Lady Jade, the point of his knife aimed squarely at her heart.
"Death to the witch!" cried the begging brother, throwing aside his bowl and lunging towards them, a wickedly sharp knife in his hands aimed squarely at Lady Jade.

The sorceress yelped and twisted away from her attacker, the knife’s point grazing along the outside of her coat as the man stumbled past. Overextended, the assassin tried to swing around but Jade was already behind him, bringing her hands together and slamming doubled fists into his exposed back. The man went crashing to the ground, his knife tumbling from his hands into the short grass besides the path.

Sarella already had her dagger out and turned to face the men—three of them, now, all in the same brown robes—coming up behind them. The beggars gawped at the man already lying beneath the sorceress's foot.

"Fuck," the leader of the trailing group said, then seemed to recover himself and called out in a much louder voice: "The witch must pay for her crimes! The Warrior guides your hands, brothers! Rush the bitch!" He also produced a large knife and charged. His two companions followed suit, drawing heavy staves and shouting incoherently. Behind Sarella, the group of beggars between them and the Carefree Victory issued their own challenge, rushing towards them.

Jade had just enough time to cry out "Mayday! Condition zero!" before the gang of beggars was upon them. Sarella ducked a swing from an ugly bald beggar's stick, the heavy wood rushing through the air just barely above her scalp. She countered with her free hand, driving it palm-first into the ugly man's face. She felt his nose shatter under her hand and for a dizzyingly sick moment she found herself back in that cold cave beyond the Wall. The ugly man reeled backwards but Sarella didn't press the advantage, and in that moment the assassin who'd been following them jabbed his dagger in her direction. She pulled away, but neither fast nor far enough; the blade glanced off her left side. It felt like something cold dragging across her skin, followed by something red-hot.

Sarella lashed out at the assassin with a contemptuous kick. Her boot didn't catch anything vital, but it did strike home in the man's right knee. The assassin went down howling, his knife falling away. Another kick aimed squarely at the man's stomach shut him up quite nicely. The action made her side ache all the more, but the sight of her attacker whimpering on the ground made up for the pain. After everything I've seen, I refuse to die by your hand, she thought.

She turned to assist Lady Jade, who was staring down the remaining beggars between them and the ship. Her gauntlet was unfolded and pointing towards the lead beggar, a ragged man wearing mail under his robes and a dirty shortsword in his hands. The sort of things a poor sellsword or hedge knight might own, Sarella realized, not a devout begging brother. Clearly, there might be more to this business than what it seemed on first glance.

"Okay," Jade said calmly and clearly, "okay guys, fun's over. How about we talk about this like reasonable people, huh?"

The man in armor hefted his sword. "You think the Warrior's chosen will lie down for you, cunt?" he spat. "Suffer no witch to live, say the Seven. And besides," he added with a cruel smile, "the price on your head will pay for many good works. We aim to collect in the name of the gods."
Jade sighed. "Well, I offered. Remember that." She looked up at the ship. "And that's game."

Behind them, Sarella could hear horses thundering down from the castle. Above them, the faint and familiar hum of magic filled the air. The lead beggar had just enough time to tilt his head up before the familiars descended on them like a cloud of very large and angry hornets. The beggars shrieked and fell as the little round machines loosed bolts of sorcery against otherwise defenseless men. The leader tried to rush Jade one last time before three familiars dropped him at once, smoke curling gently from singed robes.

Sarella stepped over the groaning men to stand at her mistress's side. The pain in her side didn't seem to be getting better; in fact it seemed to deepen with every movement. "You couldn't have done that right off?" she said, trying to keep her voice light.

"Yeah, yeah, they always say that," Jade grumbled, giving her a sidelong glance. "You okay, Al?"

She shook her head. "Just a scratch," she said, her hand going to where the man's blade had sliced her shirt.

Jade's glance turned into a worried look. "Scratches don't normally bleed that much," she said, then whistled. Sarella blinked and pulled her hand away from the injury, covered in rather more blood than she'd expected. The ache continued to throb.

"Oh," she said weakly. "Fuck." Her legs suddenly felt weak. She wobbled, and almost fell over, only stopped when the sorceress grabbed her by the shoulders. The horses were closer now, and Sarella forced herself to focus. Thoros and a pair of Tyrell guards rode down the path, shock evident in their faces.

Thoros dismounted, approached and said something, but the pain was too great for Sarella to focus on it. She only barely heard Jade's reply. "—what the hell they were doing here, and for who," Jade said to him. "No killing, no lasting damage, but I want to know."

"It shall be done, Captain," Thoros agreed. "I'll have them in the hold soon enough. Where will you be?"

"Medbav," Jade replied. The world swayed and Sarella had the impression she was being lifted up. She's stronger than she seems floated irreverently through her head as Lady Jade pulled Sarella onto her shoulders. Her vision cleared for a moment and she could see all of their attackers on the ground, guarded by familiars. I guess we made a bit of a mess. Poor Lord Mace, having to clean up after us. She giggled quietly at her own joke; it helped keep her mind off the pain.

Getting back into the ship and up into the ship's surgery was an unreal experience, drifting almost silently through the metal hallways on Lady Jade's back. The surgery was a small enough affair, an antechamber attached to the apothecary containing a single bed with a glass cover over it. The cover slid back as they entered. "Autodoc, table for one," Jade announced as the bed prepared itself.

The world swayed once more as the sorceress pulled Sarella off her shoulders and gently laid her down on the surgery bed. Then, with ruthless speed and efficiency, she found herself divested of all but her smallclothes. I would have preferred a more romantic setting for this, she thought idly. Through the haze she could see Jade look at her, eyes wide with surprise and a hint of darkness on her cheeks. "Did I say that out loud?" she ventured.

For the first time that morning, Lady Jade smiled, just a little. "You did," she answered. "And it's very flattering. I think. Right now though…" she touched a control and a window of light popped into being before her. "Moderately deep stab wound and… looks like some kind of toxin. Huh." She
whistled and another familiar buzzed into the room. "Wakko, remote link, message for Thoros: Secure those knives, they may have something on them." The familiar chimed and bobbed. "Okay, nothing that the doc can't handle, that's good. Okay Al, you just settle back and relax as well as you can, everything's going to be okay." Something chimed outside of Sarella's sight, and the glass cover slid up over her. "See you tomorrow," Lady Jade said.

The tube glowed with a comforting blue light. The pain in her side started to ease, and she felt very tired. The air was warm, the pain lessening and the sound of the magic working sounded like the calls of ravens in the distance. Sarella's eyes closed, letting exhaustion close over her like a comforting blanket.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 228.1

I was better off in the frozen wastes dealing with the barbarians, the zombies and the goddamned ice demons than I am down here in the "civilized" part of Westeros. Christ on a fucking tricycle. I'm not sure if the people who just jumped us were actual religious fanatics, assassins disguising themselves as fanatics, or a mix of the two. Thoros is downstairs finding out the truth, and then I might be heading out to tase a few people while Al's mending in the autodoc.

Al. Fuck. One of a half-dozen people on this goddamn rock I actually like got shanked. Words cannot describe how pissed I am right now, and the worst part is I'm mostly pissed that I was too busy being a showboating asshole to watch Al's back like a smart person would've.

Note for future reference: Recycle a few drones and build more shield units, one for Al and one for Thoros. If this shit is going to escalate—and it probably is—then I need to do a better job of protecting my people. Can't be everywhere all at the same time and anybody who rides with me is vulnerable.

It's too early in the morning to get drunk and brood, dammit. Might as well start recycling those drones and brood while I wait for the next thing to go wrong.

WILLAS

After breakfast, Willas had intended to tend to his birds and perhaps do a little research into the Gardener kings and their connection to the Long Night. The previous night's display, terrifying as it was, intrigued him. The idea that the old tales had any truth to them had never truly crossed his mind before. Now, though… now there was evidence that there was more to the world than the Citadel had thought. Perhaps much more crossed his mind. Ulthos was an empty spot on the map, marking the lands beyond Asshai and Yi-Ti, the perfect place to claim as a homeland for someone who had come from elsewhere. That particular secret no doubt wasn't in his books, but perhaps there were other clues; the Tyrell libraries held hundreds of ancient books and scrolls from the days when the Andals wrote down all the First Men did not. There might be something in there worth examining.

Willas desperately wanted to dig deep and learn what the old kings knew, if anything. To learn what they knew and how it might be used to keep Highgarden safe in times like these. Instead of that, he was intercepted by a steward on his way out of the great hall and aimed back towards his father's solar. "Lord Mace wishes your counsel," was all the man would say on the subject, and so Willas went.

He found Father standing before the table he and Renly had plotted at for so many days, staring forlornly at the maps and piles of parchment upon it. "Is something wrong, Father?" he asked, limping up to his seat at the table. Father looked up and blinked, before returning his gaze to the large
map of the Reach that lay upon the table.

"No," he sighed. "I was just pondering… all that effort, gone in moments. First Robert, now this woman falling from the sky to upend the board. What a waste."

Willas didn't quite know what to make of that. "You couldn't have known beforehand," he said.

His lord father scowled. "I should've seen Robert coming. The Lannisters are as predictable as the tide if you know what to look for, my boy. The moment that damnable woman got scent of our plans… ah well, no use crying over spilled milk."

"It was a foolish plan and you know it," his grandmother announced as she entered the room, her servants half-carrying her as usual. "Expecting that fathead to set aside the Lannister woman and her children for Margaery, instead of him treating her like just another piece of quim? I wish I knew what fever convinced you that made any sense."

"Renly was sure of it," Father replied. "He and Loras both thought they could convince the king…" he shook his head. "It no longer matters. I thought to gain some certainty with Renly but now this Ulthosi witch and her revelations have thrown it all into chaos again.

Willas looked up at his father. Even when truly indecisive, Mace Tyrell was good at appearing calm and confident. Now, he looked uncertain, not an encouraging sign. "You believe the captain, then?"

"Let us say I am more willing to believe than disbelieve, at the moment. It's a difficult tale to take in, but Lomys seems convinced and he's not one to lie. Not to me, at least. I am willing to accept that the witch believes her tale and that the Reach needs take action before too long has passed. The problem is the king… I know not what His Grace believes in this matter, and it worries me."

"You crowned the boy," Grandmother chided.

"We've been over this, Mother," Father said tiredly.

"No, I've been over this, you've simply rolled your eyes and ignored what I had to say. As usual."

"What would you have me say, Mother?" wondered Father. "That proclaiming Renly king was a risk? I knew that the moment he and Loras retreated here. That we've put ourselves in a dangerous spot? We were always going to be endangered if the succession came to a fight, so why not try to advance ourselves? Great reward requires great risk, and we have no better chance to put a child of Tyrell blood on the Iron Throne than now."

"We never should've gotten involved in the first place, you fat fool," Grandmother snarled. Willas flinched at the heat of her words. "Let Stannis and Renly batter each other senseless or kill Joffrey, if they can. Highgarden should stay above such foolishness."

"All the wealth of the Reach cannot buy us neutrality, Mother!" Father snapped. "The Lannisters are to our east and west, Renly and Dorne to our south, the Arryns and the wolves to our north. All of them will look to the Reach for support, and the moment we raise our banners for one the others will fall on us like vultures. We are too wealthy to stay above the fray for long and not strong enough to fight when beset on all sides. Every time House Tyrell has tried to stay out of the crown's disputes, the war is inevitably fought at our gates, and every time that happens, with every drop of Reachman blood spilled our hold on Highgarden slips that little bit more." He scowled ferociously at the maps strewn about the table. "History tells us that the Reach may be players in the game, or they may be the playing field. The riverlands had that choice taken from them, and where are the river kings now?
It's really that simple, Mother. Choosing to be players carries a risk and you might call it foolish—you may even be right. But I say that pretending to be above it all and losing our bannermen by oath or sword one by one is a hundredfold times more foolish! I will not be the lord who sees the name Tyrell go into the rubbish pile like the Teagues or the Justmans, nor will I see the Gardener's kingdom sundered by a rabble of bloody Stormlanders or Westermen!"

"A pretty speech," replied Grandmother. "And now what? Your crowned boy won't dance to your tune, so you're willing to throw him from the walls? I daresay you won't find another puppet so easily if you discard them so quickly. Certainly not one who doesn't already have a puppeteer."

"That, I know not," Father said slowly. "Are you happy now, Mother? The fool admitting his foolishness to the world? Under my tutelage Renly will make for a fine king—" Grandmother snorted at that "—but if the Ulthosi is right then he cannot afford indecisiveness in this moment. Where that leaves us in the end I know not, but only the gods truly know where the end lies of any of us. Right here, and right now, we have things to decide upon."

"Bringing us back to Renly, and Captain Hasegawa," concluded Willas. "Does Highgarden take action with her, and what action should we take?"

"Aye, and there's the rub," Father said. "How far may we go, and what good will it do?"

"Commanding the smallfolk to begin preparations for winter seems wise enough, as far as it goes," Willas mused. "The season hasn't quite turned yet, but early storage isn't the worst thing to do. At the least it'll give our people something other than the war to worry about. And if the captain is right about everything..." he trailed off, leaving the unspeakable unspoken.

"Yes, that is within our rights as Lord Paramount at least," Father said. "The question of sending men and food north, though... it is tempting, very tempting."

"Sending anyone north is tantamount to allying ourselves with the Starks," Grandmother said, "and if Eddard Stark isn't already allied with Stannis then I'm a Frey. Renly would see us all dangling from nooses before he sent men to aid his brother's friends, you know that."

"Aye, and yet..." Father shook his head. "This entire situation is mad."

"On that, my son, you and I agree."

A knock came at the door. Father motioned and one of his grandmother's servants opened the solar door. A steward's head popped in and announced, "Captain Hase... the witch has arrived, my lord."

Father sat down in his great chair, assuming the guise of a great lord of men. "Send her in," he commanded, settling back into his chair. Willas sat at his right, Grandmother at his left.

The witch strode in, disheveled and furious. Willas noticed reddish smudges hastily wiped away on her face and hands as she marched up to the great table, her little magic ball creatures swarming like bees around her. *That bodes ill*, he thought, stomach clenching, as she approached. "I have had an incredibly shitty morning," she announced. "I was jumped by goons, my apprentice was wounded and I am about this close to snapping and just lighting shit on fire until people start paying attention."

She flopped into an empty chair opposite Lord Mace then threw them a bright, brittle smile. "So how's your day going?"

Grandmother looked at Father, the question plain in her eyes. Father ignored her, looking at the witch dumbfounded. "I beg pardon, my lady," he said cautiously, "but did you say you were..."
The captain's eyes narrowed. "A pack of thugs disguised as beggars jumped Alleras and me outside the ship and tried to knife us maybe an hour ago," she said with exaggerated calm.

"Was the injury serious?" Willas asked. "Maester Lomys is quite skilled at healing, I trust him with my life." He held back a wince at the thought of the captain's apprentice taking serious harm at Highgarden of all places. Of all the things they needed right now, the Red Viper's ire was nowhere on the list.

Captain Hasegawa's eyes shifted to him. "It wasn't great," she said. "But my supplies are good enough for the job. Alleras is resting on board my ship, should be fine in a day or two." She nodded to Willas. "The offer's appreciated, though."

"I will give thanks to the gods for that," Father said earnestly. He then slammed his fist down on the table with surprising ferocity. "PATE!" he roared. "GET IN HERE!"

The steward who had announced the captain scrambled into the solar. "M-my lord?" the man quavered.

Father pointed at Captain Hasegawa. "The Lady Hasegawa and her companions were attacked," he thundered. "At the gates of Highgarden! At my bloody doorstep! Did none of you even think to inform me?"

"My lord," the man started, swallowed heavily, then began again. "My lord, the incident was over before the guards could intervene. We informed His Grace but you sent instructions not to be disturbed until the witch arrived."

Father's face was more florid than he'd ever seen it before. "My lady, please accept my deepest apologies for what happened," he said. "You are my guest here at Highgarden, and thus under my protection." He turned his attentions back to the steward Pate, who stood in the door like he was ready to flee at a moment's notice. "You," he growled. "Set guards along the path between the gate and the ship, and guards around the thing. None are to get within a stone's throw without my leave. Mine, mind you, not His Grace's or anyone else. Understood? Now go." Pate scrambled out of the room, white-faced and near pissing his breeches.

Captain Hasegawa's face softened a little, though her eyes remained skeptical. "Let's say it's a set of mutual errors, to be honest," she said. "But I accept your apology in the spirit it was given. Hopefully I'll get some details out of the goons before too long."

"My captain of the guard and the gaoler would be quite happy to assist, my lady," replied Father. "They're both quite skilled at obtaining confessions from the wicked."

The captain seemed oddly taken aback by the offer. "That's... very generous," she said. "But I think I'd rather Thoros did all that. In my country we've found that a priest can do better at extracting truth from a man than a torturer." She shook her head. "We'll get there when we get there. Now, since you asked me to meet with you for some other reason, what would you like to talk about?"

Father settled back in his chair, his anger from the previous moment wafting away like smoke. "Have you and His Grace come to terms?" he asked.

"Not yet," she replied. "He didn't seem receptive last night, and this morning it felt like he was avoiding me? It's not exactly an encouraging thought, to be honest."

"Aye." Father looked at the captain, weighing her, this odd creature in green and black with her
magic and devices. "His Grace is, naturally, most concerned with fighting the traitors and usurpers who contend for the Iron Throne against him. It is likely that he would rather focus on that than the… alarming nature of the intelligence you've given us."

The captain's face fell, just a little. "Yeah, they're brothers alright," she murmured, then continued on in a stronger, if no less weary voice. "Well, if that's the case then I doubt I'll make much more headway. Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Tyrell. I suspect as soon as Al is good to travel we'll be on our way."

"Before you leave, my lady, consider this." Father gestured grandly to the table. "His Grace is concerned with matters of the throne, but he appointed me his Hand. As such, I have considerable leeway to act in the king's stead whilst he is distracted."

"Huh," the witch said, looking at his father with fully-open eyes. "That's an interesting move to make, milord. Also a dangerous one, if I understand it correctly."

"His Grace is a generous man, like his brother," his father replied with the tone of an indulgent father. "I doubt he'll demand my head for any minor indiscretions. Sending a few shiploads of food to Winterfell or White Harbor is just ordinary, everyday business, is it not? And should a few volunteers go along to protect the shipments from bandits and pirates, or as new recruits for the Night's Watch, well, that's the way of life in Westeros since before the dragons." He leaned back in his high chair, exuding a faint air of smugness.

Captain Hasegawa leaned forward intently. "Alright then, Mace," she said. "Let's talk turkey."
This entire goddamned country is a nest of backstabbing weasels, but for once that might actually be working in my favor. So, you know, hooray for small victories.

Let me explain. No, that'd take too long; let me sum up. I gave King Renly the briefing I'd worked up on the situation in the north, hoping to convince him to start prepping for the long winter and to start sending reinforcements north to backstop the whole ice demon invasion thing. It didn't work out the way I expected it to. No, that's not fair. It didn't work out the way I hoped it would. Renly pretty much rejected the briefing out of hand, which surprised me a little. Even Stannis accepted that this was a thing that was happening in front of him.

So I pressed a little harder, and maybe came across a little stronger than I should've. I'm not sure, but at the end of our conversation I think I might've thrown the king into a mental paralysis. Needless to say this isn't going to go down in history as one of Starfleet's more successful diplomatic adventures. It's not a complete wash, though. Renly might be, but as it turns out Renly may not be the driving force in his factions. When it comes to Stark, or Stannis, I know that they run their groups by force of personality if nothing else; I deal with them or not at all. Renly's charismatic, and he keeps his people happy so they'll support him but that seems to be the limit of his administrative skills. The more interesting people are the ones backing his play for the throne: the Tyrell family. They seem to be calling more of the shots than I might've expected at first.

And so, we dive deep into the down and dirty diplomatic dealings. This morning after I got Al into the doc and started stripping down drones for components, I received an interesting offer from the Tyrell patriarch, who also happens to be Renly's grand vizier. Lord Mace Tyrell strikes me as a man who loves his creature comforts, and as someone who's always looking for an angle. And he believes me about the Unbidden, I think. At the very least he sees the situation in the north as something to be worth worrying about and he's willing to provide support to the cause. Specifically, Tyrell's happy to supply food and finished goods from the Reach to help prop up the northerners and the free folk, along with sending volunteers (possibly "volunteers") north to help bolster the defenses.

On the one hand, great. The Reach is probably the strongest material economy on the continent, especially in the agricultural sector. Keeping everybody fed is going to be a critical part of this business and the Reach can build a surplus that'll last not only themselves. On the other hand, if Renly decides to pretend that all of this is one weird trick to force him to submit to his brother we could all be in a world of hurt if he turns on the Tyrells. Barring extraordinary circumstances I'm already locked out of King's Landing; losing the Reach would be a nasty blow to my ability to keep things together.

Gripping hand, I literally have no better option with the Reach right now, unless I want to lead an uprising against Renly personally and I don't want to do that. Tyrell is willing to come to terms, he wants a deal and he's got enough authority to deal without getting the king involved. If the king does get involved… well, we'll burn that bridge when we get past it.

… I actually paused there for a moment because I thought Al might pop up and correct me. I've gotten too used to company, the lack of it's making me twitchy.

Right, enough of my variable angst, onward. With the Tyrells as in the bag as I can get them for the
moment, that makes two functionally-successful stops on the world tour. It's a start, not a finish, still a lot of work to secure those two points but it's looking less impossible now than it did when I started this mess. The next question is where do I go from here.

I'd like to hit up the Westerlands ideally, they're the main financial center of the Seven Kingdoms, so getting them on-side would be a big help. Problem is they're tied pretty directly to Joffrey, and well... yeah. That one's gonna take finesse, maybe more than I actually have, to *not* become a huge flaming clusterfuck. Let's shelve the Westerlands for the moment.

The Riverlands strike me as potentially easy mode, since they're already tied to the North via marriage alliances. If Stark hasn't already gotten them hooked in with him I can make an appearance. I ought to anyway, but maybe I don't have to put as much effort into convincing Stark's in-laws as I did into the Baratheon brothers. Dome... if I understand Al she's got a massive in with the Dornish court. Once she's healed up we'll figure out how to exploit that correctly.

The Vale and Iron Islands are basically black boxes to me right now. From my research I've got the vague idea that the Vale is sort of the center of knightly culture in Westeros, an artifact of being the first place to get knocked over by the Andals when they arrived, and the Iron Islands are... Viking pirates of some kind. Neither one sounds particularly open-minded, but the attempt needs to be made. Probably the Vale first; Stark has an in there via his wife, whereas the islands are pretty insular.

So, Riverlands, then Vale. Sounds about right, I think.

In the meantime, Thoros is asking the goons we caught this morning some pointed questions. Hopefully we'll have an idea on what that was all about soon so's we can go out and chastise whoever sent them after us. I'm in just a pissy enough mood that chastisement sounds like a good way to depressurize a little.

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**THOROS**

"Well," he said happily to the cluster of bound men sitting on the floor of *Carefree Victory's* hold, "now that we have a moment, let's discuss why you lot decided to attack the captain."

None of them seemed particularly interested in answering him at first. Of the half-dozen or so men he'd stowed in the hold, four just kept their eyes down and mouths shut, one white-faced man kept mumbling prayers to the Seven under his breath and the last one, the man in armor he'd guessed was the leader of the pack, just glared at him.

"Is this truly how you want things to proceed?" he asked. "My mistress has questions she'd like answered... and to be honest I'd like some answers as well. They say the gods of Westeros look favorably on those who tell the truth; how's about it, lads?"

The leader grinned at him through a mouth of broken teeth. "Send the bitch down here and I'll tell her all sorts of things," he leered. "Maybe if I'm nice I won't gut her like her boy."

Thoros sighed mightily and cuffed the man, not hard enough to cause permanent damage but enough to send him toppling over to the floor. "You think you've power here?" he asked. "Were I bound hand and foot in the belly of a magic ship, I'd be less feisty."

"Untie me you witless aurochs!" the man shrieked. "I am a knight of the realm and a loyal servant of the king!"

"No, you're a cutthroat hiding in a septon's robes." Thoros leaned over the man. "I may not follow
the Andal faith, but I respect most of those who preach it. They may be heathens to R'hllor's light, but many of the septons I've met were good men. Decent men, anyway. I can't say I like a man who calls himself a knight hiding himself as a beggar to stab a woman and a boy unawares." A thought occurred to him. "You know," he added, "the Lord of Light instructs that lawbreakers should be sacrificed to the flames. The captain would be disappointed, I know, but perhaps 'tis better to seek forgiveness than permission?"

The white-faced man grew even paler and his whispered prayers grew ever more frantic. The leader swore at him, but the other four men finally looked up, and looked at him fearfully. "You'd do that?" one asked.

Thoros pointed at their leader. "Him I'd set on the fire with nary a twinge of conscience," he said.

"But if we told you why we did it, would you set us free?" The man sounded a little hopeful.

Ah. Of course. "Lad," he said, not unkindly, "you attacked a noblewoman on Mace Tyrell's doorstep and wounded her retainer. That means death or the Wall—and to be honest that's just delaying your fate; life at the Wall's getting dangerous these days. I'm offering you all two choices: you can talk to me and I'll see that you die quick and clean. Or you can say nothing, I'll say as much to Lord Tyrell's men and you die by inches in Highgarden's dungeons. Because Lord Tyrell will want the truth as much as I do, and he won't be as kind about it as I am."

The man swallowed, and talked. Thoros listened, knowing the ship's spirits would take down the testimony for the captain to go over later. He didn't particularly like what he heard.

After getting all of the men—even the reluctant "knight"—to confess at least a bit, he turned the sorry pack over to the captain of Highgarden's guard about who had cooperated, who had not and how that should be handled. That sorry task over and done with, he returned to Carefree Victory to inform the captain of his discoveries.

Captain Jade, it turned out, was in the middle of a rain bath when he entered. "Be just a second!" she called. Thoros found the captain's chair and sat down to wait. The noise of water stopped and the captain stepped out with a Qaathi cloth wrapped around her waist. "Got them to talk already?" she said. "What's the word?"

Thoros carefully kept his gaze on the captain's eyes. "Best to avoid temptation. "Aye," he replied. "You're not going to like it."

Jade sighed. "So standard speed and heading, got it," she said. "What'd you learn?"

"Most of the crowd were local cutpurses," Thoros informed her. "The kind of man found in towns up and down rivers like the Mander, mostly interested in coin and not caring much about who gets hurt when they obtain it." He frowned. "One actually was a begging brother; the others convinced him that 'foreign witchery' needed to be fought and the reward would go to the Faith if he helped. I suspect that may be a portent of ill fortune to come."

"Mm, yeah," Jade mused, discarding the towel and pulling on a set of smallclothes. "I don't want to be the focus of a holy war, but... yeah. What about the goon in mail?"

"Ah yes, him. That one claimed to be Ser Wyl of Hardstone, which if you've never heard of it I wouldn't blame you, as I haven't either. He was approached a fortnight or so ago by a man offering him a pouch of silver stags to hire some men and a promise of Lannister gold and a place as one of the king's sworn swords if he delivered your head to King's Landing."
"Lannisters, huh?" Jade said as she donned her customary trousers and shirt. "Joffrey, Cersei, Tywin or other?"

Thoros shrugged. "Good Ser Wyl didn't say, and likely does not know. The offer came from a man wearing colors that might've been from a crownland or Westerland house—but they could've been from any number of Reacher houses as well. If the Lannisters were involved they covered their tracks well enough. Were I to guess, I'd say the king made the offer or I'd say the Hand did. Either could offer gold and a place at court easily enough, and at this distance there's not much difference."

"Well, that's lovely. What did you do with them?"

"I handed them off to the Tyrells. I suspect they'll be quietly hanged before sundown tonight." The captain stiffened, just a little, then seemed to slump in on herself. "Something amiss?" he asked.

Jade shook her head. "Nothing. I'm not fond of judicial murder but I suppose... when in Rome, right?" She smiled wanly in Thoros's direction. "Can't change the world by myself, all I can do is save it so it can change." She shook again, like a dog climbing out of a pond. "Fuck. Okay, so, from here to there. If Joffrey's sending assassins we're going to need to up our protection a little. I've got a couple things cooking, but from here on out we're gonna be a lot more cautious."

"I may know a few people, should you wish to expand your retinue," Thoros offered. The captain looked thoughtful, but shook her head.

"Let's pin that one and save it for later. Our carrying capacity's limited after all, and I'd still like to travel as light as possible for the diplomatic stuff. Once we're done with that, though... are these people ones you'd be willing to trust on wight hunts?"

"Absolutely."

"Excellent."

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**SARELLA**

The world from on high was absolutely fascinating. She could see the whole of Westeros at once as it truly was, not as abstracted, distorted lines on a map in the Citadel. Even from such a great height she could still pick out small details if she focused. There was the Sandship's prow standing proud on the Dornish shore, there stood the ruin of Harrenhal in its twisted glory, there the sun made the Trident shine like steel as it stabbed eastwards from the western hills. She plunged through the black sky heedlessly, drinking all of Westeros in and committing it to memory.

To see a view like this was worth anything and everything.

*You know, little serpent,* a voice said from everywhere and nowhere at once, *I hate to interrupt your revelations, but you really should be flying.*

Sarella blinked and looked around. The sky was dark, even though the sun still shone. (Lady Jade had said something about that once, hadn't she? It was hard to remember anything outside this landscape she fell through.) No man or woman was in sight. "Who said that?" she asked.

*Who is asking?* Replied the voice.

"I am?" Sarella said, confused. "There's nobody else here save you and I." An unpleasant notion struck her as she recalled what happened before she arrived here. "Am I dead?" she half-asked.
"Do you think you are?" The voice sounded oddly amused by the idea.

Sarella considered it. "I don't think so," she said slowly. "I don't remember dying. I was hurt but... no, I don't think I'm dead. Unless you know differently?"

An interesting question, the voice mused. *I rather suspect you're alive; your mistress would never allow you to die without permission.*

"That's not as comforting as you might think," she said dryly.

*I was not put on this earth to be a source of comfort, little serpent,* the voice rumbled.

Sarella looked around, and still saw no one nearby. "Where are you?" she demanded. "Or are you simply a voice in my head, and I am finally going mad?"

*Look up,* the voice said. Sarella did so, and spied a crow, almost invisible against the black sky, turning lazy circles above her. *Do you see now?* The crow spiraled downwards until its head was level with hers.

"Well met, ser crow," Sarella said, then frowned. Something about the situation tugged at her memory, and she pushed the thought as hard as she could. "I feel like we've met before," she ventured.

*Once on the Prince's Pass, I asked if you wanted to learn to fly,* the crow replied. *You were... ambivalent on the subject. Now, I suspect you've made up your mind.*

"Oh," said Sarella, unenlightened. There was something more she was missing, something bigger than a single chance meeting. She turned away from the rising landscape and put all her thought to the subject; her memories flowed slow and sluggish, like honey in winter, but she could almost see it. Something Lady Jade had reported after her time with the weirwoods. A man named *Brynden* who kept appearing in the form of a *crow*.

Everything fell into place at once. "Fuck me, you're Bloodraven!" Sarella blurted. The crow's head tilted a little.

*Ah, of course. That bloody woman again,* it—*he*—said with mild heat. *My reputation precedes me, I see.*

"That's... that's one way of putting it," she stammered. Of all the things she thought might happen in her life, being stuck in a dream with *fucking Bloodraven* was something she'd *never* dreamed was possible, let alone would happen. "What do you want with me, Lord Rivers?"

*Now it's 'Lord Rivers,' eh? Amazing what a little bit of knowledge will do.* Bloodraven seemed darkly amused by her phrasing. *What I want is what I've always wanted, girl: for the realms of men to be safe and at peace, and to finally rest from my labor. And for that to happen, you need to learn to fly.*

"Fly," she said flatly.

*It's quite the honor, you know. Few ever get the chance, and few of those succeed.*

Sarella's mouth suddenly felt dry. "And what," she said, swallowing hard, "pray tell, happens to those who fail?"

*Most forget and go about their lives,* Bloodraven replied. *A few remember and spend the rest of their lives chasing powders and potions in a vain hope of trying again. Some get too close before they fail...*
and die. The crow turned its head away. And one… but I will say no further now.

Sarella stuck that last little tidbit away for future investigation. "Well," she said with her father's confidence. "We'd better get started then, shouldn't we?"

The old bastard squawked in laughter. *I had thought someone of a maesterly temperament might be more resistant to the idea,* he chortled. *But I suppose you've seen enough to convince you otherwise, eh? Very well little serpent, let us begin…*

Sarella awoke in the surgeon's box as the glass cover slid backwards with a cheerful chime. Her side no longer hurt; in fact nothing hurt all that much. A quick probing of where the wound was revealed a thin ridge of scarring and nothing more. On a nearby chair a set of her preferred shipboard clothes lay neatly folded. She swung off the bed, stretching away a slight stiffness before donning clothes and leaving the surgery in search of the captain.

It turned out they were already airborne, as she noticed the clouds speeding by when she entered the bridge. The captain turned away from the controls and smiled at her. "Welcome back," she said warmly.

"Thank you, my lady," she replied. "How long was I—?"

"About a day and a half," Lady Jade said.

"At least I didn't miss much," Sarella murmured. Memories of the fight, and afterwards, flooded into her mind. "Ah, about what happened after I was injured…"

"I know," Jade said with a quick look Sarella interpreted as *not here*. "Lots to talk about."

A quiet cough came from her left. Sarella jumped a little, turning to find a slight man in green and gold watching the two of them with quiet amusement. "Pardon me, Captain, Maester," Willas Tyrell said.

"Lord Tyrell?" Sarella said blankly. "What are you doing here?" She turned to Jade. "You managed to get Renly to agree? And I missed it!?"

Jade looked a little pained. "No, I didn't manage to get Renly on board," she sighed. "Instead, well…"

"My father has agreed to, um, how should I put it? Certain *arrangements* with Captain Hasegawa and her allies," Lord Willas put in helpfully. "I have been tasked as Highgarden's envoy to Winterfell, to ensure that these things are done with all our interests in mind."

Her mind whirled with the possibilities. The Reach wasn't in the alliance, not just yet, but they were willing to work alongside the Starks behind Renly's back. That was far more than she'd ever expected from a man like Mace Tyrell. Especially since he was sending his son and heir as an envoy—and potential hostage, should Mace turn his cloak. "I see," she said slowly. "Welcome to the company then, my lord of Tyrell."

"Thank you, Alleras," he said gravely. "Though Lord Stark may not like the intelligence I bring him. Our northern lords sent ravens just before we left Highgarden: Joffrey's army is on the march, and he's heading north."
The Florent was going to be the death of him, he could feel it. Ser Axell Florent, uncle of the queen and former castellan of Dragonstone had been named as the king's interim liaison to Winterfell and thusly took up his station in all his beetle-browed glory. Ser Axell claimed to have the king's trust in all matters, but so far as Ned could tell Stannis Baratheon had sent the man to Winterfell because it was sufficiently distant from Dragonstone and the cost of sending him to Asshai was too great. This day, Ser Axell had invaded his solar to pester him once again on the whereabouts of the men Ned had sent south. Thankfully his bluster hadn't disturbed the direwolf slumbering before the fire, that might make for a difficult situation to explain to the king.

"A raven from White Harbor arrived this morn," Ned said before the man could puff himself up properly. "Our complement arrived there some days ago, and their paths crossed His Grace's men in Lord Manderly's court. If they make haste, the king's soldiers will be here in no more than a fortnight."

Ser Axell stroked his generous chin in thought. "Aye, that's good," he murmured. "And what of your men, my lord? How soon until they reach the king?"

"Lord Manderly had ships waiting for them," replied Ned. "From there it is up to the winds and the water. I would imagine not much longer than a fortnight if the wind is favorable."

"Well, that's not an issue," Ser Axell said happily. "Ser Davos and his sons are the finest seamen I've ever met, and I've met quite a few in my time on Dragonstone. They'll get the North's finest to the king come calm or gale, believe me. Now," he continued, "where shall we put them?"

"The Wall," Ned said, gesturing to the great map of the North and the lands beyond. A gift from the Lady Jade created using high-flying magic, as he understood it, the map showed the forests, rivers and hills exactly as they were in the moment her familiars passed over the country. "The Watch will need reinforcements first. Ideally I'd send them to Castle Black straightaway, but they won't have the provisions to make for the Wall if they've already left."

"I don't know if the men will appreciate that," the Florent said. "Going to the Wall has a certain aspect to it, after all. Wouldn't it be better to keep them close in Winterfell?"

"I have my own men to guard Winterfell." Fewer than I once did. "And my banners are needed elsewhere; to guard the wildlings as they settle in the Gift and to protect our backs from southron aggression. His Grace's forces will go where they are needed, and for the moment that is the Wall."

"I still don't like it," Ser Axell objected. "These are good men you wish to send to that frozen hell. Better to have them close."

Ned closed his eyes, doing he best to ignore the stabbing pain that lanced through them as the Florent "suggested" to replace his household forces with Stannis's men once more. "They go to that frozen hell to prevent it from creeping southwards, Ser Axell," he said patiently. "You've seen the fate that awaits us if we fail."

"They may object to the king," the Florent said.

"Let them." Ned smiled grimly. "That might make for an entertaining jest." Ser Axell drew breath to
press again when the solar trembled with the sound of thunder. The huge mound of slumbering fur before the fire twitched, a massive head lifted and Moro bounded out of the room with a mighty bark. "It seems the lady has returned from her excursion south," Ned said mildly. "Shall we see what news she brings, Ser Axell?"

Lady Jade met them just outside the tower, petting Moro alongside a dark-haired man who stared at the direwolf with disbelieving eyes. The man seemed vaguely familiar to Ned; a resemblance to Loras Tyrell, though somewhat older. One of the other brothers, Willas or Garlan, perhaps. He had never met either Tyrell, though their reputations were known to him. The sorceress looked up from Moro and smiled. "Lord Stark," she greeted.

"Lady Jade," Ned dipped his head in greeting. "I see you've brought another guest to Winterfell."

"Yeah, I keep collecting them," Lady Jade said ruefully. "One more person to put on the council I guess. I don't think you've ever actually met, though: Willas Tyrell, this is Eddard Stark. Eddard Stark, Willas Tyrell."

The Tyrell stepped forward cautiously, offering a hand in greeting. Ned noted that the man favored one leg. So, this is the famously crippled heir to Highgarden. He clasped the offered hand in his own. "Welcome, Lord Willas," he said. "Has Renly seen sense, then?"

Willas Tyrell shifted, just a little. "Not precisely," he admitted. "His Grace is, ah, still coming to terms with the nature of the emergency at the Wall. However, I believe that between my father and Captain Hasegawa we can bring him around before things become truly dire. For now, House Tyrell will stand with the North against this foe as best we can."

Naturally, this was the moment Ser Axell decided to speak up. "And how is that, exactly?" he asked. "If that foolish boy won't bend the knee to the true king—"

"Whatever His Grace does," Lord Tyrell said, stressing the words just a little, "is beyond my ability to guess for now. My lord father has decreed, among other things," he glanced at the sorceress at this, "that food and supplies are to be sent to the Night's Watch, along with men to guard the shipment. A gift, to remind the Watch that they are not forgotten by the south."

"And if the Wall needs men more than food?" demanded Ser Axell.

The Tyrell looked faintly smug. "Horses and carts are valuable goods," he said in reply. "Should the Watch decide that they need them, then my father's men would have to stay and make sure they were put to good use. We must protect our investments, after all."

"Speaking of investments," Lady Jade said, "we've got news. Looks like King's Landing is making their first move. They're headed north."

He knew this was coming, but even still the news was a shock to him. "Truly?" he said. "Not south or west to deal with Renly?" That was the wiser move, he knew. If Renly had the Reach and the Stormlands behind him—no matter what deals Lady Jade had made with the Tyrells—then he was the immediate threat to Joffrey, not the North. A man like Tywin Lannister would know that, would know to deal with the Baratheons before heading north to repay the insult of his continued existence. But if he was truly heading north then... "Why?"

"That, I couldn't say," Lord Tyrell said. "Our scouts spotted the bulk of Joffrey's forces heading in the direction of the Trident. Presumably the Lannisters left enough men behind to invest the capital against Renly or Stannis. Or it could be some kind of odd feint, trying to draw somebody out of position, but that seems unlikely."
Ned frowned. "We are missing something," he said.

"Probably," agreed Lady Jade. "And we probably won't find out what until it's too late. For now though, we'll need a plan."

"Aye, you're not wrong about that my lady." Ned looked at the Tyrell. "Lord Tyrell, if you and the lady would be so kind as to join me in my solar? We have much to discuss."

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**CERSEI**

The queen regent checked her appearance one more time in the mirror. As expected, it was flawless, clad in flowing red embroidered in golden thread as befit her house and status. Her lord father had departed, finally bringing war to the rebellious wild men of the north. The Baratheons massed their forces as best they could, but the finest soldiers of the Westerlands held King's Landing and could not be dislodged even if the fool brothers could join their efforts.

*Westeros belongs to Joffrey. The fools will see that in time.* Cersei smoothed her gown one last time and waited for her evening's dinner guest. The time for passion had passed; Jaime was with Father and the army, hungry for glory and to repay the insult given him in the throne room. It was back to that terrifying moment that Cersei's mind wandered; she'd never felt more helpless in her entire life watching those little metal monsters rip Jaime's armor apart and leave him defenseless before the witch. The one constant in her life was her reflection's prowess in battle and the witch tore that away from both of them in one fell moment.

A polite knock came at her chamber door. She gestured for a servant to open the door, and there stood the master of magic, clad in the finest black broken only by the gray shield on which his sigil stood, a red eye supported by two crows. The Greyjoy bowed to her, as was right. "How may I serve you this eve, Your Grace?" he asked. Cersei smiled graciously and allowed him entrance.

"I wished to speak with you," she said as the servants poured wine, "but most of all I wished to thank you. Joffrey is strong but... after what the foreign creature did, I feared for him." Her golden boy's face, pale and terrified, flashed through her mind. "Your words have strengthened his resolve immeasurably."

Lord Euron ducked his head a fraction. "Your Grace is kind," he said humbly. "My efforts were modest at best. I merely let the king see what was already within him, nothing more."

"I must disagree, my lord," Cersei replied. "There's a fire within my Joff that I haven't seen since he was very young." *Not since that horrible beast Robert dared lay his hands on my boy.* "I had thought that fire was gone forever, ground out by the burdens of the crown. But now your counsel has brought it back, let him be so much better than he was."

"As I said, Your Grace, he had the fire within him already," said Lord Euron. "He simply needed to have it... rekindled."

Servants brought them food suitable for an evening meal, roasted rabbit basted with honey and arranged on trenchers with fresh summer fruit. The master of magic complimented her cooks and told a story of how he encountered in Essos a strange fruit from the Summer Isles or beyond that when cut smelled horrible and yet delivered the most delightful flesh when cooked. Cersei smiled and laughed when appropriate, allowing the Greyjoy to be at ease in her presence.

Once they finished dining and the servants had cleared away the remains, Lord Euron settled back in his chair, idly swirling a goblet of wine in his hand. "I thank you for the meal, Your Grace," he said.
"Now, shall we get to business? I wager that you had more to speak to me about than simply thanking me for my counsel."

Now the true work begins. "Of course, my lord of Greyjoy," she said with a quiet smile. "My lord father is away at war and has left the burdens of Handship to my uncle. Ser Kevan is an able man in his own way but the difficulties of ruling King's Landing, to say nothing of the realm as a whole, may be too much for him. Adding to that the stress of his eldest son..." Cersei swallowed a frown at the thought of Lancel. That had been an ugly business, but necessary. Kevan mourned but did not know, and that was for the best for all of them.

The master of magic leaned forward. "Ah, I see," he said. "You fear he may not be up to the challenge of maintaining the regency with your father away? I suppose that is possible. The king is willful and Ser Kevan never struck me as a man with much imagination. I would be happy to help you support His Grace should any conflicts arise." He smiled, just a little. "Though I must insist on gaining something for my assistance."

The queen regent nodded, feeling a rush of triumph. Every man can be bought with the right coin, and none have more coin than Casterly Rock. "What do you need?"

"Many things," Euron Greyjoy's eye twinkled in the candlelight. "Though most can wait for now. His Grace has given me a place to continue my studies and I have my tools, but what I need most now are raw materials to work with." The master of magic's voice was quiet now, almost completely hushed as he leaned in close to Cersei.

"Raw materials?" Cersei replied, her voice just as hushed. He smiled gently and touched the back of her hand, eye still twinkling. He is not Jaime, but still he is not homely, she thought idly. And he knows how to treat a queen.

"You know of what I speak," he said, his eye never leaving hers. "King's Landing is a great city. Thousands of people crammed into too small a space. All the goldcloaks need do is deliver a handful of these people to me instead of carting them off to the gaol or merely running them through. Just a handful, no more, no need to rouse suspicion. What are a few urchins and gutter dwellers compared to those such as we?"

Cersei felt his eye boring into her, but she summoned her resolve and gazed back squarely. "And what will you do with them?" she asked fearlessly.

The master of magic's smile broadened. "Their sacrifice will allow the Iron Throne—allow your son—to reach a greatness even the dragonlords of old Valyria never managed," he said. "They will be the foundation of a Westeros that will surge out and take what it wants, when it wants it. In time, your son will shake the pillars of the heavens themselves thanks to them. I will make their lives and deaths matter. But first the sculptor must have his clay."

Lord Euron's fingers felt white-hot against the back of her hand. "I believe I may be able to accommodate you," she said, her voice sounding like it came from a great distance away. Her lips twisted in an honest smile. This would be an excellent way for Robert's leavings to be useful, for the good of the realm. "In fact I know of some already who might not be missed."

EDDARD

"So, could I borrow your wife?" the sorceress said, then paused. "Wait, no, phrasing. Let me try that again. If it's agreeable to the both of you, I'd like Lady Stark to accompany me on my next trip south."
Ned blinked. "May I ask why?"

"My next destination is the Vale, then Riverrun. Or possibly Riverrun and then the Vale, haven't decided yet. Either way, Catelyn's got family in both places and she'd be a great help in making sure negotiations go a little smoother than they did in Dragonstone or Highgarden."

"I see." And he did, the request was reasonable enough. Yet, with the Lannisters finally moving and in an unexpected direction the thought of sending Cat away from Winterfell, much less below the Neck filled him with dread. "I know not if I like the idea of sending more of my family into that nest of vipers, Lady Jade," he said slowly.

"Oh believe me I totally get that," replied the sorceress. "Still, these ought to be fairly safe. We'll be leaving in a day or two and there's no way the crown's army will reach Riverrun before I can. I'm not all that concerned about getting in or out of the Eyrie either, for that matter."

"Aye, there is that," Ned said. "Riverrun would welcome Catelyn with open arms, that much I know, and Hoster would welcome any intelligence on the Lannisters if they truly are moving on his lands. The Vale, though..." He trailed off. None had heard from the Lady Lysa or her son since Jon Arryn had died, save for the one message she sent to Cat implicating the Lannisters in his death. After that, silence had fallen like a cloak over the Eyrie. It worried him. "Will you protect her?"

Lady Jade snorted. "I can make life difficult for anybody who tries anything," she said. "Short and difficult if it comes down to it. Really hope it doesn't though."

Ned nodded. "In that case you may ask her yourself later. If she agrees then... I like it not, but she may help you embassy, provided you ensure her safety at all times."

They had been deep enough in counsels that Ned only faintly heard the door open. He looked up but saw nothing, then from behind Lady Jade came a young voice filled with more venom than he'd ever heard before: "You." The sorceress's head snapped up and she whirled, turning enough that Ned could see the slim form of Jojen Reed standing behind her. He glared at the woman with an expression that shifted between shock, awe and loathing.

"Me?" ventured Lady Jade.

"You're the falling star," Jojen replied. "You're the one who broke everything."

For once the indomitable Lady Jade seemed utterly taken aback. "I, uh," she said. "I'm pretty sure that things were kind of a mess before I ever got here, kid. And you are...?"

"This is Jojen Reed, my lady," Ned interjected. "He arrived with his father Lord Howland two days after you departed for the Reach. He's been a well-behaved guest, for the most part," he added with a stern look the boy ignored.

"You keep changing things," Jojen hissed at the sorceress. "Before you came I could see everything clearly, I knew what the path looked like. I saw everything that was going to happen; the direwolf and the stag dying together, the sea coming to Winterfell, the three-eyed crow and the winged wolf, I knew how it all happened. But then you fell from the sky and everything's changed." Ned recoiled at the boy's words. How could he know? How would he know any of that?

Whatever anger the boy had dissolved, his voice changing to small and plaintive like any confused and miserable boy Ned had ever known. "Why do you have to keep changing things? It all ends with the sun rising in the north and I don't understand anymore. Why couldn't you have stayed in the
The sorceress looked at Jojen with a troubled expression. "I think," she said, crouching down to meet the boy's eyes, "that we need to have a nice long talk, Jojen." She looked up at Ned. "If you don't mind putting this off for a bit?"

"Of course not, my lady," Ned replied, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. "Jojen, should I speak to your father about this?"

"Please don't," Jojen mumbled. "I don't want Father or Meera to worry. But I know you will."

Now just as discomfited as Jojen or the sorceress, Ned turned to leave. "You may both use the solar for your conversation," he said. "I will see you both at dinner, if not before." He quickly stepped out and closed the door behind him, letting the thick wood swallow the voices before he heard something he really did not want to hear.
I'm afraid I don't have much in the way of good news for you this week, Captain. On the political front, we've received an updated analysis from the sociology team at Starbase Canaveral. Canaveral believes that your current diplomatic effort is the best move going forward, but they're also estimating that you'll hit a diplomatic wall within the next month or two. Every faction you've tried to persuade so far has been inclined to at least listen, if not agree, and the sociologists don't expect the remaining factions to be willing to hear you out. They may even become hostile if you press, so Canaveral advises that you take as light a touch as possible. That said, my chief sociologist wants me to include that they disagree with Canaveral's assessment; a show of strength against any pushback might—and I want to stress the *might*—be enough to give you space to work. Cmdr. zh'Charrath's cultural background obviously has something of an influence on zher analysis, but I can't say that zhe has steered us wrong in contact scenarios with aggressive sophonts in the past. As the operative on the ground during an intervention, the decision is yours to make.

On the defense front, attached to this message are a collection of psionic shield systems you ought to be able to put together using available resources. We've sorted the designs according to how much strain they'll put on your autofac tanks and whether or not you need to start cannibalizing components from the ship. The bad news is that all the shields we've managed to come up with are very limited in scope so far; the majority are personal-scale, or at best could cover a radius of less than three meters from the source point. Our engineers understand from your reports that you have a set of networked drones that might be able to expand coverage but these psi-shields are very energy intensive. It's likely that you wouldn't have more than a few minutes before losing power and having to swap power cells or hook the shield up to main power. We *can* get longer and better performance from the shields, but that requires a larger and more consistent energy source. Ship's mains could sustain a 1km bubble more or less indefinitely, but that would require removing the warp core or one of the secondary fusions to do it, and we know that's not an option at this juncture. Your best bet for any defensive measure would be to find a consistent external source of power and exploit it to the fullest. I know that's a thin reed, but it's all we've got at the moment.

I'm sorry we don't have anything really better for you, but we're not giving up yet. My engineers are working on the question, and they might be able to pull something out of their hats. In the meantime we'll keep you abreast of the situation on our end as best we can. Clear skies, Captain.

—Kirk

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**CATELYN**

In her youth, Catelyn Stark had spent much time on boats; they were, after all, one of the best ways to get around the riverlands she called home. The creaking of wood and the sound of water against the hull of the boat were things she knew, understood and appreciated, familiar things that reminded her of Riverrun and her family.
The Carefree Victory was wholly unfamiliar to her. The sky-ship betrayed no sense of motion, only the ground gliding beneath it at once faster than she ever dared anything could move and yet still so very slowly let her believe that she was not standing still. The sound of current was replaced by the soft rumble of whatever magic drove the ship through the air, low chimes and notes coming from the walls and the sorceress softly singing as she wove her magic.

Mado kara mieru
Kagayaku ume ichirin
ichirin hodo no
sono atatakasa

Mado kara mieru
Mabushii me ni wa aoba
Yama hototogisu
Aa hatsugatsuo

The words made no sense to her, but they sounded like the strange words the sorceress used to greet the king that day in Winterfell. Every now and again more such words would slip into her speech, and Cat would wonder how much more there was to the Ulthosi woman and her ways. The sorceress' song finished, and Cat turned away from the window in the front of the ship. “More of your magic?” she asked.

“Hm?” The sorceress looked up from the panoply of lights on the desk before her and blinked. “Oh!” she said, seemingly a little embarrassed by the sudden attention. “No, it's just an old song my grandmother taught me,” she added with a small laugh. “She liked to sing when she was traveling, I guess I inherited it.”

“It was very pretty,” Cat said. “Even though I knew not the words. Is that the language of your people?”

“Some of them,” replied the sorceress. “Somewhere between half and two-thirds of my family come from that background, I think. Genealogy was never really my thing. Anyway, the song's about the seasons, from spring to winter and back again. Each verse is its own poem, and... well, nihongo poetry is tricky to translate at the best of times. The first verse is something like, um, 'Looking through the window I see on the plum tree, one blossom's worth of warmth.' Or at least that's what Maga told me when I was little.” She smiled sheepishly. “The things you think about when you're far from home, yeah?”

How strange this woman is floated through Catelyn's head in that moment as she beheld this creature that had fallen into their lives half a year prior. She could not reconcile the curious, amused girl in woman's shape that darted about the castle poking her nose into everything like an eager child, and the formidable witch that called down overwhelming force on Jaime Lannister's head to rescue her daughter. The way Sansa told the story, it was a whirlwind of magical fire that ripped the Kingslayer's armor apart like butter and left him naked before the sorceress's final blow. She wasn't entirely sure she liked the way Sansa's eyes gleamed when she told that last part of the story, though; the Kingslayer may certainly have deserved it, no question, but the pleasure her daughter took from seeing the Lannister unmanned was... unseemly. Ned was no help in that regard when she mentioned it, only noting that “the wolf's blood will out, one way or the other.”

She hoped that, when the time came to betroth Sansa—properly this time, to some loyal Northern or river lord's son—that she would refrain from such behavior. Or at the least her betrothed would learn to tread lightly, lest he be trod upon.

“It'll be another hour or two before we reach Riverrun,” the sorceress said. “If you'd like I can open
“Thank you, but no,” Cat said. Silence fell awkwardly over them for a time, punctuated only by the sky-ship's own noises. Cat turned back to the window, watching as the stony fields of the barrowlands turned to the deep greens of the Neck, letting the landscape beneath them quell a few of the twists in her belly. “May I ask a question, Mistress Jade?” she asked suddenly.

“Oh? Sure, go ahead.”

“What happened in King’s Landing?” Cat asked, turning completely away from the window to look as closely as she could at the Ulthosi.

The sorceress blinked hard. “I would've thought you had heard the story already,” she said. “I mean, I'm pretty sure it was everywhere in Winterfell by the time I got back to the castle.”

“I do not understand why you did what you did,” Cat replied. “You took an enormous risk to protect my family, from what Ned said your own people will punish you for it—” a flash of pain crossed the sorceress's features at that “—and you knew that, but did it anyway. You are not our blood, you are not sworn to my lord husband, you are not even Westerosi. And yet you did this, and I know not why.”

The sorceress closed her eyes. “There are a million and one reasons for why I did what I did,” she said slowly. “Tactical, strategic reasons: I needed your husband to command the North while I dealt with the Others. Immediate reasons: Joffrey managed to punch every single button I have and by the end of our conversation I just saw red. But in the end, I did it because a little girl asked me for help and to my people if someone's in trouble and they ask for help, you help them. Everything else was a bonus. Or not; I suppose we'll see how that shakes out in the end.” She opened her eyes and returned Cat's stare. “That's the why. If you want clarification on the what I'm happy to help.” Her lips quirked upwards in a wry smile. “Or we could wait for Sansa to finish her song. It's actually a pretty solid accounting, as these things go, last time I heard her working on it.”

“I feel like you're a terrible influence on my daughter, and yet I cannot fault you much for that. Like I cannot fault the sky for being blue, or water for being wet.” Or wolves being wolves, for that matter.

“Thank you. I think.”

***FLASH TRAFFIC***

TO: KIRK, Cpt. Winona, cmdg. FWSS Kongou CA-314
FROM: HASEGAWA, Cpt. Jade, cmdg. FWSC Carefree Victory AGS-3172

Well, I can't say I'm shocked by any of that. The political analysis sounds about right: I've pretty much burned through all the easy-mode alliances (or maybe “easy-mode” because goddamn some of these people are stubborn) and now it's onto the trickier ones. I've got decent hopes for the next three on the list, but that's just putting off the inevitable since the final two are either hostile-neutral or outright hostile at this point. Based on field conditions I've probably got a better shot taking zh'Charrath's advice more often than Canaveral's, so thank zher for the suggestion. I can't say it's worked perfectly but it's better than the sweet nothing I was on track to get previously, so.

Looked over the designs, I can retrofit some of these into the drones and get a decent phased-array going but you're right on the power consumption. I figure the array would only get me ten minutes of shield tops before the drones shut down, so that's less than ideal. On the upside though, you did enough of the groundwork that I think I can use your shield designs to recalibrate the deflector for
anti-psi operations. *That* could end up being handier on a longer term than a standard shield.

Keep up the good work, Captain. Next report to come NLT six days from now.

—Hasegawa
The Summer Lord In Winter

CATELYN

When last she saw Riverrun, she left in a boat heading to the North with a babe in her arms to meet a lordly husband she barely knew. Now, she returned from the North on magical wings on a mission from her beloved lord husband, her babe now almost a man grown.

Catelyn knew well the walls and towers of her childhood home, but looking down on them from the viewpoint of a raven—or a dragon, or mayhaps even a god—she could see everything at once. The intricate pattern of her mother's gardens were laid out around the sept like embroidery on a gown of green silk, the tall trees of the godswood straining out to touch the sky-ship with their branches, the dun sandstone walls keeping the rivers at bay. Even from this unfamiliar vantage Cat could pick out the places where she and her brother and sister played as children.

Riverrun was surprisingly beautiful from above.

The sorceress hummed without tune as he worked her spells on the Carefree Victory. "Pretty place," she said offhandedly. "Where would you like me to land?"

Cat tore her gaze away from the sight and turned her attention to the sorceress. "The west gate," she directed. "Besides the river road near the moat." Riverrun was not Winterfell; the stronghold of the North might be able to contain the sky-ship within its walls, the river fortress would only succeed if half the keep was missing.

"Copy that," replied the sorceress, swinging the ship around to the west. The castle slid out of the window, replaced by the fields and the course of the Tumblestone growing ever close. The ship sang to itself as the ground approached, the deck bumped gently beneath her feet and Cat was home.

From the river road Riverrun looked much the same as it did during her youth. The bridge across the moat was down, the Tully banners snapped in the wind above the castle as always. But there were almost as many men on the walls as there were in the days of Robert's Rebellion and another tight knot of knights standing on the road opposite the sky-ship. Is Father expecting trouble? The Lannisters could not have come so quickly, unless there was another army coming down the Tumblestone, but Father or Edmure would have sent ravens calling for aid if that were true.

One of the knights across the road espied Cat and the sorceress standing at the sky-ship's ramp and started forwards, followed by others in considerable haste. Her men tensed, but she merely stepped off the ramp and into the summer grass. The knight was a bit broader in the shoulders than she remembered, his beard a little fuller, waistline perhaps a little thicker than the last time she'd seen him. His hair was still the Tully auburn and his eyes the same blue she saw in her sons, though. No matter what was going on, he was still very much her brother.

"Cat!" Edmure roared, striding across the road with arms wide open. He met her at the foot of the ramp and pulled her into a mighty embrace. "Welcome home, sister!" Catelyn smiled and returned her brother's embrace.

"I'm glad to be back in Riverrun," she said, remembering the melancholy of exiting the Water Gate with her son. "I wish the circumstances were better, though."

Edmure laughed, though there was not much humor in it. "Aye, that's for certain," he said, releasing her. "And this is the girl who made such a fuss in King's Landing, eh?"
The sorceress bowed in her foreign fashion. "Captain Hasegawa, Federal Starfleet Ranger Corps, milord," she said. "I see my reputation precedes me again."

There was a bit more warmth in Edmure's laughter now. "That's one way of putting it," he chuckled. "Though I doubt you stripped the Kingslayer bare in the throne room then turned his cock into a cunt."

Cat coughed, carefully looking neither at the sorceress nor her brother. "All I can say," Mistress Jade said carefully, "is that he was asking for it." Edmure blinked, looked at her then stepped back, carefully adjusting his tabard.

"I... see," he said slowly.

"I wouldn't worry too much, milord," the sorceress placated. "That was the end of a lot of really poor decisions on Ser Jaime's part. It would take you... oh, at least a month of fucking up daily for me to do unto you what I did to him."

"Ah," Edmure said faintly. "Well, then I shall be the gracious host and hope not to offend you as badly as Jaime Lannister, my good captain."

Something in the way Edmure phrased that pricked at Cat's ears. "You are our host, Edmure? Is Father away?" she asked.

Edmure looked uncomfortable, then glanced over Cat's shoulder at her men and the sorceress's companions. He sighed. "Father is... unwell," he said reluctantly.

Cat felt a chill go down her spine. "Unwell?" she echoed. Please, gods, let it be some small ailment.

"For quite some time now, I'm afraid. Vyman tends him as best he can, and he's had more good days than bad but..." Edmure shrugged helplessly.

The world seemed to fall out from under Cat's feet. She stared at her brother, disbelieving. "Why did you not send a letter? Ravens? Why am I only learning of this now?"

"He asked me not to, he was worried the riverlords might react poorly to his illness. Cat, please..."

"Take me to him," Cat ordered, eyes flashing. "Now." Edmure held up his hands in surrender.

"Very well, sister. I need to take the witch girl to him as well, while he's still awake."

As soon as Edmure's back was towards her, Cat turned to the sorceress. "I would ask a boon of you my lady," she whispered urgently. "I know you claim no prowess in healing but..."

Mistress Jade looked pained, but nodded. "I can take a look, unobtrusively," she said quietly. "But there's only so much I can do. Please don't expect miracles."

"I know, but... please, my lady. He is my father." It was a small thing to say, Cat knew, but it was the only thing she could say. The sorceress did not give her any reassurance, no understanding look nor comforting touch. She only nodded again, and that was just enough to soothe Catelyn's nerves for the moment.

The Hoster Tully she remembered was a giant of a man, tall and broad with only a hint of gray in his beard hinting at how old he actually was. The man sitting up in her father's bed was white-haired and shrunken, a pale shadow of the giant in her mind's eye. But his eyes were still sharp and caught hers as she entered the bedchamber. "My little cat," he said warmly. "So good to see you again."
Cat rushed to his side and took his hand. "Father," she murmured. His had was terribly thin and bony, but still warm to the touch.

Her father patted her with his free hand. "Enough of that, child," he said. "I'm ill, not dead yet. The Stranger will have his hands full taking me; us Tullys don't die easily after all." He kept his hands on Cat and turned his face to her companions. "You're the one in all the stories from the capital, and the songs whenever I can sneak a harpist in here under my son's nose. Lady Hassey of Ulthos or somesuch."

Mistress Jade bowed. "Captain Hasegawa, Lord Tully. Lord and Lady Stark have spoken highly of you." The little metal ball floating over her shoulder flashed blue, then green, then blue again.

"No doubt," Father's gaze sharpened a little. "From what I hear I owe you a debt of family for my goodson and granddaughter, but no matter what flatteries Ned poured in your ear I daresay you're not here to collect on that debt. What brings the witch of the North south, captain?"

"I would never," the sorceress said piously. "But there's no beating about the bush, is there? I am here on critical business. I'm sure you've heard a dozen different reasons as to why things went sour in King's Landing, but you need to know the truth." The sorceress's boy maester brought forth the covered jar containing the wildling head and held it within sight of her father and Edmure. "There's a very long story here, but this is the short of it."

Cat had already heard the story twice, once from Ned after the Ulthosi had revealed her discoveries that night after the witch's hour when the sky-ship had flown back to Winterfell, and again in the great hall when Mistress Jade had revealed another such head to the people of Winterfell and such lords as had arrived before she flew south to deal with King Stannis. The heads remained no less terrible to look at, pale and rotting but still filled with otherworldly life and strength. Cat watched her father and brother carefully; Lord Hoster eyed the sorceress and her display with keen eyes, his face betraying no emotion yet his hands trembled beneath hers. Edmure paled at the sight of the head and flinched when its eyes rolled in his direction. I cannot blame him for that, she thought. Edmure is a man and a knight, but what man would not flinch when faced with such uncanny things?

When the sorceress finished, Edmure rocked back from the hideous display, his complexion waxy. "Gods," he said, rubbing his beard. "What a nightmare!"

Her lord father was more composed, his eyes never leaving the bottled head. "What would you have us do, my lady?" he asked quietly. "Swords and spears for the Wall?"

"Some, maybe," Mistress Jade replied. "This isn't a fight we're going to win with ordinary means, I think. More men to keep an eye on the Wall would be appreciated, but right now what you need to do is get your lords and your people together and get them preparing. I can't stress this enough: the main weapon the Others have against your people is cold. Every town, every village, every farm in the riverlands needs to be ready for winter as soon as autumn comes otherwise a lot of people are going to die... and every death on our side is a potential recruit for theirs."

"I see," Father replied, withdrawing a hand to stroke his white beard. "That would be a wise precaution, my lady. Very wise indeed. And I would have that done, or see Edmure do it, if not for the Seven-damned Lannisters infesting my lands!" The last came out as a very Tully-like boom, his free hand curled into a fist and punching into the bedsheets.

"I'd wondered if you'd heard yet," the sorceress said. "We only received word a day or so ago." Edmure scowled.

"Edmure, tell Cat and the captain what they need to know," her lord father ordered. "Forgive me, but
the stress of the day tires me. I can only stay focused for so long..." he trailed off, the sharpness in his eyes fading away.

Edmure put his hand on Cat's shoulder. "We'll go to Father's solar," he said quietly. "He'll be better tomorrow, especially if you're here." Cat didn't want to go, didn't want to leave her father's side, but she let Edmure gently pull her away from the bed and towards the door to the solar.

She and the sorceress entered the solar first, Edmure tarrying to give instructions to the servants and Maester Vyman. She leaned in close to Mistress Jade and asked what her opinion was in a low voice.

The sorceress's face was grim. "There's nothing I can do," she replied quietly. "Even if I was a proper doctor with a full medical setup it'd be tricky. I can offer the maester some medicine to help with any pain, something that ought to keep him clear-headed more often than not but I just don't have the training or the resources. I'm sorry."

Cat closed her eyes and sighed. I will not blame her, she told herself. "I understand," she said as the door opened and Edmure came in, and that was that.

Once inside, Edmure took his place at her father's desk, lord of Riverrun in fact if not yet name. "We've had ravens by the flock," he said. "As well as some gossip running up the rivers faster than horse or foot can take it yet. A handful of people fleeing the advance. Not many so far, but the further they get the more will run west to stay out of their way."

"So where are they right now?" asked the sorceress.

Edmure grimaced. "So far the Lannisters have been keeping close to the kingsroad, on the eastern shore of the God's Eye. We've received word that packets have broken off to besiege Harrenhal and occupy some of the keeps nearest the road, but the main force will have reached Darry and crossed the Trident within the next fortnight, mayhaps the next sennight."

Mistress Jade hummed and clicked her tongue. Her ever-present familiar glowed and a pane of light popped into being in front of her. On it Cat could see the most detailed map of Westeros she had ever heard of. "Interesting," mused the sorceress. "He's moving fast, bypassing the riverlands almost entirely."

"For now," Edmure cautioned. "Lannister leaves enough behind to guard his rear and bully our sworn lords into obedience, all the while charging north." His fingers drummed on the wood of their father's desk. "No southerner army has ever successfully passed the Neck, not even the Conqueror tried it. Tywin Lannister either has a plan to force his path through or balls of Valyrian steel... and if any man alive could, Lannister's the one."

"Hm. What happens if he fails?"

Edmure's expression was bleaker than she'd ever seen it. "Then he takes his army and satisfies his need for vengeance on you and my goodbrother on the riverlands, most likely. He will come here to force my lord father to bend the knee to his boy king, and even if we do he'll let his army rape and pillage their way across the Trident. I'm already expecting him to send men down the river road to demand Riverrun's fealty and compliance; he cannot leave us unguarded. And if the people flee before his men then we will have to keep them as safe as we can here."

"At Riverrun?" Cat said, disbelieving. "Where would you keep them?"

"It might not be the size of Winterfell, Cat, but it's a lot bigger than you would think," replied
Edmure. "Plenty of space for people fleeing the Lannisters."

The sorceress looked at Edmure with considering eyes. "It seems to me like you're putting yourself at a tactical disadvantage there," she noted. Cat nodded in agreement. Her brother had a soft heart, perhaps too soft to be a proper lord, to worry about so many useless people in a land about to be under threat by an army. A true lord of summer, unprepared for winter's cold.

"Tactics can go hang," Edmure growled. "These are my father's people. They're my people. They're afraid and they come to me for help. I have a responsibility to keep them safe; what good am I—what good is House Tully even if I fail those relying on me for protection?"

"And what good are you if you starve them to death inside your castle, you fool?" Cat wanted to shout the words at him, to knock some sense into that soft heart and soft head of his, but she only glared at her younger brother. It would do little good to anger Edmure, only turn him sullen and a sullen Edmure was next to useless. The sorceress merely hummed without melody once more. "Ed," she said finally, "how'd you like to be king of Westeros?"

All of Cat's thoughts crashed to a halt at this. She stared, gaping, at Mistress Jade. The sorceress looked back at Edmure with mild interest, like an unusual but interesting carving on stone. Edmure gaped much like Cat, until he recovered just enough speech to reply. "Ah, an... an excellent jest, my lady," he coughed.

Something odd glimmered in the sorceress's eye. "Who said I was joking?" she said.

"You cannot possibly be serious!" Cat snapped. Both her brother and the sorceress turned to her. "My brother is a good man, but he has no right, no claim to the Seven Kingdoms! Every man in Westeros would name him usurper if he even tried. None would follow him on such a foolish venture!" She couldn't believe what the sorceress had said. Visions of fire and blood tumbled through her mind's eye; Robert's Rebellion, only ten times worse and the gods' favor not with the Tullys. The madwoman would destroy her family on some foolish quest to take a throne they had no right to? "Even with your backing all you would achieve is ruin and death upon his house for no gain!"

"Maybe. Maybe," replied the sorceress. "Still, I am looking for a king, and all the current candidates lack something Ed here seems to have in abundance. I'm not asking for an answer now," she added before Cat or Edmure could object further. "Just... keep it in mind, okay? One day I might ask again and need an answer. For now, let's concentrate on the Lannisters."

Edmure's mouth opened, closed, opened again, then he settled back in Father's chair and sighed. "Aye, the Lannisters," he said. "Can I impose upon you to deal with the situation, my lady?"

The sorceress leaned back in her own chair, gazing at the magic map. "Hm, maybe," she mused. "There's only so many options that don't involve indiscriminate slaughter at this point. I might be able to stop the advance, but I don't know if I can spare the time to shove them back to King's Landing personally. And I do need to talk to Lord Tywin still. Maybe we can work something out? For now, let's see what we can hash out for getting your people prepped, and then we'll see about getting the Lannisters off our collective back..."
CATELYN

The Eyrie was impregnable, or so the singers claimed. Circling like an eagle above the Giant's Lance, Catelyn agreed with that. The seven tall towers of the castle jutted up from the mountain's peak, with only a narrow path leading from the castle gate to the Gates of the Moon at the foot of the mountain. No army in the world could attack the Eyrie from below and come away victorious.

Visenya Targaryen and her dragon proved that what was strong below wasn't necessarily strong above. Mistress Jade had taken one glance at the goat path up the mountain, muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "fuck that" and, like Visenya before her, made her own path into the Eyrie. The Carefree Victory was no dragon, too large to fit inside the castle garden, so instead the sorceress carefully nudged the sky-ship alongside the trail that led up the steep slope until the side bumped gently against the last turn in the path before the castle gate. "About as close as I can make it," she said as the ship came to a stop.

Lysa was waiting for them just inside the welcoming hall, clad in blue and white silks and surrounded by her knights, retainers and a scattering of lords high and low. "Cat," she said, smiling. "Oh, Cat, how good it is to see you. My sweet sister." She pulled Catelyn into a warm embrace. "It's been so very very long," Lysa murmured against her.

Her sister was two years the younger, yet she looked much older now. Lysa had grown thick, pale and puffy in the years since Catelyn had seen her last. Lysa's Tully-blue eyes were pale and watery, darting to and fro, her small mouth had turned petulant. Life had not been kind to the pretty young girl Catelyn remembered from their youth in Riverrun; the only thing left of Lysa's former beauty was the long fall of auburn hair tumbling loose around her shoulders.

"You look well," Catelyn lied. "Tired, but well."

Her sister broke the embrace. "Tired. Yes. Oh, yes." She glanced behind Catelyn and spied the sorceress, waiting politely behind Catelyn. The petulant twist of her mouth twisted even further in a way Catelyn didn't recognize. "And this is your attendant?" she asked.

"Captain Hasegawa, Lady Arryn," Mistress Jade introduced herself, bowing in the Ulthosi fashion as she always did. "I apologize for any difficulty, but my business is urgent."

"Urgent indeed to jump over the Gates of the Moon," Lysa said. A handful of the retainers tittered at this. Most of the men surrounding Lysa meant to woo her and rule the Vale; Catelyn wondered if any could succeed. "Tell me, captain, does this have to do with the… recent events in King's Landing?"

The sorceress raised a jet-black eyebrow. "After a fashion," she allowed. "It's a long story, my lady, but there are things you and your lords need to know."

"Mother?" a small voice said. Lysa turned, her gown swirling around her. Robert Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie, stood behind her, clutching a ragged cloth doll and looking at them with large eyes. He was a painfully thin child, small for his age and trembling. "Is this her?" he asked, eyes fixed on the sorceress.

Her sister smiled, but the smile did not reach her eyes. "This is your aunt Catelyn, baby. My sister, Lady Stark. Do you remember?"
The boy glanced at her blankly. "I think so," he said, though he had been less than a year old the last time Catelyn had seen him. His attentions returned to the woman in green and black beside her. "Are you the witch?" he asked Mistress Jade directly, his eyes blinking wetly in her direction.

The sorceress seemed a little taken aback, though she rallied gamely. "I suppose I might be," she replied.

"They say you can fly," the Lord of the Eyrie said.

Mistress Jade shrugged. "I have my ways," she said vaguely.

"I can make people fly." Robert piped, showing signs of life for the first time. "I can show you!"

Catelyn's eyes narrowed at that pronouncement; something about the way the boy voiced it made her uneasy. The sorceress apparently noticed as well; her eyes shifted quickly from Robert to Lysa to Catelyn and back again.

"That's… nice?" she ventured. Robert nodded happily, oblivious. "Maybe later?"

Lysa fussled with the boy's fine brown hair. "My Robert is quite the child," she said fondly. "Fine and strong. Jon thought so too."

"Of course," Mistress Jade said neutrally. "Lady Arryn, we've come a long way and we really ought to get to business—"

"Oh yes yes, of course." Her sister brushed the sorceress off with an idle wave. "We will speak more at dinner, my good captain. For now, please be welcome in the Eyrie. Cat, please come with me; we have so much to speak of."

Her sister led Catelyn to the solar, smiling all the while. The Eyrie was small by the standards of the great houses, and yet it seemed to be strangely deserted to Catelyn as she passed through the empty stone halls. They said things of little consequence as they walked, until they came up a spiral stair to the solar. "Leave us," Lysa said to her attendants. "I wish to speak with my sister alone." She smiled warmly until they withdrew…

…and scowled ferociously the instant the door closed. Catelyn had rarely seen her sister so wroth before. "Have you gone mad?" Lysa snapped at her. "You brought that… that creature here, trying to drag us into your quarrel with the Lannisters…"

"My quarrel?" Catelyn could hardly believe her ears. "They were your quarrels first, sister. It was you who sent me that cursed letter, you who wrote that the Lannisters had murdered your husband."

"To warn you, so you could stay away from them! I never meant to fight them! And now you've brought your husband's pet witch here!"

"She is not my husband's pet."

Lysa laughed harshly. "Gods, Cat, do you really think the Lannisters care? I've heard all the songs and stories about what she did to the king; what rains do you think will fall on Winterfell for that transgression?"

Catelyn ignored the twisting in her belly. She knew quite well what the Lannisters were capable of. "They are of little import," she said tightly, hoping it was true. "There are worse things in the world than the Lannisters."

"Oh yes, wildlings and snarks and grumkins," Lysa said derisively. "Old tales meant to frighten
fools." Catelyn thought about Mistress Jade's reports, the heads she had shown Ned and her father and Edmure. Winter is coming, she wanted to say, to grab Lysa's shoulders and shake her until she understood. "You are welcome to stay in the Eyrie," Lysa went on, making Catelyn feel anything but. "Tomorrow noon my son will preside over the court. You and your witch will be allowed to say your peace there." Her sister turned away and Catelyn had the distinct feeling of being dismissed like an errant serving girl.

"So that went well," Mistress Jade said as Catelyn rejoined her. She gave the sorceress a confused look. "I mean, nobody's dead and the castle's not on fire, so I'm willing to call that a good start."

"Lysa is not happy that you're here," Catelyn said. "She's willing to let you plead your case at court tomorrow. Beyond that I cannot say." She looked back towards the tower rooms where Lysa lived.

The great hall of the Arryns was pale and austere like their colors, festooned with the moon-and-falcon banners of House Arryn. The Lord of the Eyrie sat in court atop the weirwood throne of his ancestors, multiple fat cushions wedged beneath his cheeks to lift him to the height of a man. Lord Robert sat listlessly in the throne, occasionally toying with his doll as his lady mother conducted the affairs of state from her lesser throne besides his. Catelyn watched the boy and thought about her Rickon, half his age and five times as fierce. Jon Arryn's son, she thought. Many of the lords in attendance that day doted on her sister, but others stood back, watching the byplay very carefully. The lords of the Vale sense weakness. They are restive. She wondered if Lysa knew… or if she cared.

After what seemed an age and a half, Lysa motioned to the herald, who called out "Lady Stark of Winterfell and companion, you may approach." She and Mistress Jade stepped forward, with the sorceress's maester falling into step behind them.

"What do you wish to say to the Lord of the Eyrie and his sworn lords?" Lysa said grandly. The Lord of the Eyrie seemed unaware of anything save his doll. His sworn lords crowded around the High Hall, curious enough to get a look at the foreign sorceress.

"I have a lot of things to say," Mistress Jade replied. "But first things first." Her gaze swept across the hall. "Let's start with a history lesson: how much do you—any of you—know about the old stories?"

"Like the Winged Knight?" Lord Robert said, speaking for the first time that day. He leaned forward eagerly, causing the mound of cushions he was perched upon to wobble precipitously.

"Older than that, young lord," the sorceress said, "What do you know of the Long Night?"

Lysa frowned. "That is not a tale suitable for children," she said. Catelyn thought about Old Nan telling stories of the last hero to Bran, who was not much older than little Robert. The assembled lords and retainers murmured uneasily. They expected messages from the North or Stannis about the Lannisters, not this.

Old Eon Hunter, stout and gray and gone to seed, harrumphed loudly. "We put no stock in pagan tales," he said. This set off a little more murmuring, particularly among those close to the Royces. House Royce was of First Man blood and were kings before the Andals, a thing that the family had never forgotten.

"No, my lord?" Mistress Jade said with a quelling look. "Well, let me educate you…” The sorceress began her tale in Catelyn's hearing for the third time; she paid it as little heed as she could, taking in the reactions of the listeners instead. The lords of the Vale stood and muttered. Lord Arryn's old steward Nestor Royce rubbed at his beard, deep in thought. Lord Hunter seemed carved from the
milk-white stone of the hall, staring at the sorceress with frank disbelief. Lysa's face froze as the Ulthosi spoke of her sojourn above the Wall, meeting with the wildling chieftains and the terrible things she found there.

As she reached the point in her tale where she met the wights, little Lord Robert hopped to his feet, so upset that he dropped his doll. "You lie!" he screamed. "That's not real! Others aren't real! You're lying! Mother, make him stop lying." The boy shook with fear and fury.

"Of course she does, sweetling," her sister said calmly. She drew her son close, holding him safe in the circle of her white arms. "This witch attempts to frighten us, baby. No one can breach the Eyrie's defense; no one will hurt my sweet boy here."

"I only wish I was lying, young lord," the sorceress said softly. "That would make everything so much easier for all of us." She was very careful to note that the Eyrie was not so impregnable as Lysa had claimed. For the first time in centuries Visenya's route to House Arryn's holdfast was open, and Lysa—or the lords—would have to be blind not to see that. "But I can't lie, not about this. Terrible things are moving in the lands beyond the Wall."

Robert glared at Mistress Jade. "You're a liar. Mother, I want to see her fly."

Time seemed to stop. Two guards in sky-blue cloaks stepped forward and the sorceress took a step back. In a moment the space between them was filled with floating balls. The Ulthosi's familiars, more of them than Catelyn remembered seeing at any one point before, fell from the ceiling, eyes glowing bright. Catelyn felt a tug on her shoulder and glanced backwards; the sorceress's big sellsword had a hand on her, ready to pull her away at a moment's notice. He gave her an apologetic look and a small shrug at her glance.

The sorceress had her hands up, palms out and facing the throne. "Okay," she said evenly, "let's nobody do anything hasty here." She whistled two sharp notes and the familiars swirled around her and her party, chiming like disturbed birds. The Arryn guards drew up between the sorceress and their charges, hands on their swords but not yet drawn.

For a long moment Catelyn feared there might be violence in the High Hall, another witch's hour to add to Mistress Jade's legend, when the scene was broken by a voice half-remembered: "Well, this seems very exciting!" the voice drawled. Catelyn turned and saw a face to match the voice stride confidently out of the assembly. "Pray forgive my intrusion, my lord," he said with a short bow. "I only just arrived. I dare hope I am not too late?"

"Petyr," she murmured. The years had not changed him much. Petyr had been a small boy, and he had not grown much since boyhood. He was still slender and quick, with the sharp features she remembered and the same laughing gray-green eyes. He had grown a beard, a little pointed thing on his chin, and threads of silver woven through his hair though he was not yet thirty.

He stopped on seeing her, eyes wide in surprise. "Cat," he said quietly. He hadn't expected her; he'd clearly seen Carefree Victory but hadn't known that Catelyn was a passenger aboard it. "My lady of Stark," he added with another brief bow. "Such fascinating company you keep these days."

Lysa's expression softened when she saw Petyr. "You are as welcome as always in the Eyrie, my lord," she said. "The foreign captain was telling us such interesting tales when you joined us."

He gave her a sly smile. "It is quite the story," he agreed. "I heard much of it in King's Landing not too long ago." Petyr had risen far in his fortunes since the last time Catelyn had seen him, bleeding on the ground after his attempt at dueling her lost betrothed. The realization made her spine stiffen a little. King's Landing, she thought. This may be chance, but not mere chance. Petyr—Littlefinger is
"Do I know you?" Mistress Jade mused, hand on chin. The sly smile drained off Littlefinger's face. "Have we met? Wait, no, I've got it… Baelish, right?" she snapped her fingers and looked pleased. A few of the lords of the Vale sniggered quietly—or less than quietly—at the look on his face as she said it. "We did meet that one time, didn't we?"

"Lord Baelish," Lysa said sharply. "He is a sworn lord of the Vale and due your respect."

Petyr lifted a calming hand. "I'm sure she meant no offense, my lady," she soothed. "A foreign commoner cannot be expected to know Westerosi ways after all."

The sorceress sighed deeply. "True, I've got heavier things on my mind than remembering who everyone is. Defense of the realm and all that stuff, you know. Can't spend all my time on the small things in life." Littlefinger's eyelid twitched at that last jab. Catelyn closed her eyes and tried not to groan.

The moment passed and Lysa returned to her throne, still clutching her son in her arms. "Regardless," she said with great dignity. "My son, the Lord of the Eyrie, has declared you a liar, captain. What say you to that?" Petyr winked at Catelyn, then settled back into the crowd near the front.

"I have proof." A simple, bald statement that set off more murmuring amongst the lords. Littlefinger hunched forwards, looking almost hungry as he eyed the sorceress.

"Show us your 'proof' then," Lysa ordered.

Mistress Jade shot a look at the Lord of the Eyrie, almost disappeared in his mother's embrace. "I'm not entirely sure Lord Robert should be here for this…" she began.

"Do as I say, witch!" Lysa spat, her mouth twisted into a scowl. "Reveal it now, or leave!" The sorceress shrugged and gestured to her maester. Alleras brought forth the covered jar with the wight's head in it and set it on the cold stone floor before the throne.

"Once upon a time, this was a man," Mistress Jade said, taking hold of the cover. "Now, it's something else." She whipped the cloth away from the jar to reveal the decayed head gnashing and snarling silently within the jar. The sight never ceased to be horrible, no matter how many times she witnessed it. Men swore, women shrieked in fright as the terrible thing tried to escape its glass prison.

Only Petyr, brave Petyr didn't shy away from the head, looking at it in outright fascination. No doubt some part of his mind was trying to discern how it worked.

Lysa stared at the thing, face ashen. "A trick," she gasped. "It has to be. A falsehood meant to get us to fight the Lannisters for you."

"Why?" The sorceress shook her head. "I have no dog in a fight with the Lannisters, Lady Arryn. Not really… and even if I did I don't need your help with that. What I need from you is for you to help your people." She fixed the lords of the Vale with her gaze. "Tell your people, harvest your crops, store grain, prepare rations. Send men to Winterfell and the Wall if you must, if having something to stab makes you feel better about this, but I'm telling all of you right here and now that this is the enemy you need to be concerned about. You need to get ready because the Starks are right and winter is coming. It's coming for all of us and it doesn't care how shiny your armor is or how tall your castles are."

"Mother," squeaked little Lord Robert. The boy was paler than his mother, and utterly unable to take
his eyes off the wight's head. "Mother, it's looking at me. It won't stop looking at me Mother. Make it stop looking. Make it stop make it stop make it stop." The last came out as a tortured scream and the boy began to shake in his mother's arms. His tabard darkened and the acrid smell of piss filled the High Hall.

Lysa held her boy close as her maester rushed forward to aid the Lord of the Eyrie. Her ashen complexion darkened with rage. "Get out!" she snarled. "All of you!"

Mistress Jade's sworn shield stuck close to Catelyn, moving cautiously as the lords of the Vale swarmed out of the hall. The sorceress stepped carefully backwards, her familiars buzzing and chiming around her all the while, never letting her eyes stray from Lysa and her son. The wight head she left in front of the throne, still trying to chew its way through the glass.

Once out of the High Hall and the doors closed, the sorceress sighed. "We should be going," she said.

"No doubt," Petyr's voice replied. He walked out from behind a nook near the door. "Lysa's a lovely woman in her own way, but you've upended her world and frightened her son. Leaving as quickly as possible is your best option, I'm afraid."

Mistress Jade eyed Littlefinger. "Such a shame, really. I was hoping to have her support."

"Even if you hadn't scared them half to death that was unlikely. Lady Arryn is more likely to close her borders to everyone, especially after this." Petyr sighed. "A pity. I had hoped she might be interested in what Joffrey had to offer but alas."

"Well, the next time you see His Grace," Mistress Jade said, "remind him of what I said. Maybe he'll figure it out."

Littlefinger gave her a considering look. "I am not so high in the king's counsels, but I will report what you said." He paused. "The Spider was right about you; you are dangerous. Also interesting." Petyr smirked in a very familiar way and bowed. "Until our next meeting, my lady."

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LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 239

Well. That was a complete shitshow. I think my good luck on the diplomatic front is finally running low. That sucks, but we've gotten some decent progress so far.

Okay, recap for the record: I did the whole dog and pony show for the lord of the Vale, and it didn't go nearly as well as I had hoped. It wasn't the complete disaster that King's Landing was, but it was pretty damn close. The current Lord Arryn—the previous one having died and set off all of this nonsense with the Lannisters, or so I am given to understand—is very young and I'm pretty sure has something wrong with him. His mother is very very way too overprotective of him, to the point that whatever physical issues he may or may not have are oh so much worse. He decided he didn't like my story, his mom backed him up and things kinda slid from there.

The presentation did not go as well as I would have liked, is what I'm saying. I didn't get a clear answer out of the Vale, but I'm guessing we shouldn't expect them to join anybody's coalition soon. A representative from King's Landing was there too, an old friend of the Tully kids apparently, but thanks to that screwup he's probably not going to have much better luck convincing the Arryns of anything than I am. I suppose that's a win for the anybody-but-Joffrey alliance, but kind of a wash
for the let's-all-not-get-killed-by-interdimensional-ice-monsters alliance.

Dammit.

In other news, the Lannisters are making pretty good time: survey sats picked up a big blob of dudes crossing the big river that runs through central Westeros. I'm going to have to reorder my priorities for a second. My next step is to take Lady Catelyn and her bodyguards back to Winterfell, and then I'm going to have to see if I can head this nonsense off at the pass…

…and if I can't, then I need a plan to neutralize a large, pissed army before it can cause any more damage than it already has.

_Dammit dammit!_
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 240

Can't put it off any longer; it's time to go talk to the Lannisters.

This one's gonna be a right pisscutter, as my grandpa used to say. (Salt of the earth, us Martians.) My primary target's supposed to be tough but fair. Or at least that's what everybody seems to say about him. Even Stark thinks Tywin Lannister's administration during his time as vizier was well done. By all rights if I give him the briefing straight he'll react similar to Stannis Baratheon: skeptical but willing to listen.

On the other hand, I did make his son and grandson look stupid in front of a large audience, and he's at the head of an army laser-focused on the area where I and the Starks are currently based out of, instead of everywhere else Joffrey has rebellion problems right now.

So yeah, right pisscutter it is. Thank you honored grandfather for the necessary expansion of my vocabulary to deal with the problems I run into as a Ranger, no matter how mad Mom got when you talked like that around me.

But I digress. Which is unlike me, I know. So, have to talk to the Lannisters, which means I need to get close to the Lannisters. In order to do that, I need to solve the small problem of the large army between me and the Lannisters. My current methods—i.e. rely on bluster, bullshit and people paying too much attention to Victory to notice little old me—might be able to get me into the camp. Maybe even get me close. But I don't know if it's enough to buy me a space to talk. In a military camp all it takes is one guy taking a swing, or getting ordered to take a swing, and they'll be all over me, and at that point it's either beat them all up one-on-one, fight my way back to the ship or call in an airstrike. And that's just not a good way to end the day. So let's cross out just landing and walking right up to Lannister.

This is a job that requires a subtler approach. Problem is, Rangers aren't really all that good at subtle. They teach us how to do it, but most Ranger problems have a solution that's some combination of "hide behind a rock and scan it," "shoot it" and "run away as fast as you can."

Hm. Scan it. The drones relay through the ship's communications system; I could use that as a cutout, drop a drone into the camp and talk to the Lannisters through it. Pull the sǐmsense rig off the translator and wire it to comms, that'd give me better feedback than trying to do it through a screen. Might lose the drone but I've got enough of them that's not a serious worry. Drop the drone and stand off out of sight.

It's a plan. I don't know if it's a good plan, but it beats beating up the entire Lannister army individually or indiscriminate murder.

JAIME

It was raining in the riverlands. Again. For the third day in a row the gods had decided to piss on the West. Jaime was tired of waking to the sound of raindrops, puddles of cold mud everywhere and the constant mist and fog covering the fields and little woods that dotted the land near the Trident.

At least he wasn't trapped in the tents like the rest of the army. The king's host had stopped at Darry to reprovision and wait for the Trident to recede enough for the crossing. Lord Darry and his
household weren't the most generous of hosts, which was to be expected considering the situation. Still, Lord Tywin Lannister's name held considerable sway in these parts and with the more active objectors now adorning spikes above the castle gate, Raymun Darry was much more cooperative. Jaime's father had even generously allowed the man to continue to use his own bedchamber.

Jaime drew his white cloak about him and braved the rain and mud, headed towards the great hall where his father and the captains of the king's army conferred. The fog was thick even in Darry's small courtyard, and he kept his eyes on the mist as he walked. Fog was dangerous; all sorts of threats could be hiding within. Even now Jaime kept on guard for those who might think him easy prey, assassins and footpads... and the sound of small bells. *Those damnable bells.*

A figure loomed out of the fog, had raised in greeting. Jaime smiled as he espied the red hair and rangy shape of his old friend Addam Marbrand. "Hail, coz!" he said with a laugh. "What news from the hall?"

Addam's long hair swayed limply in the haze. "Nothing save the rain, Lord Commander. The Hand and the other captains await your presence."

"I should likely get out of the rain before my cloak gets too much mud on it," Jaime agreed. "Gods, you'd think we were in the stormlands rather than the riverlands."

Addam walked beside him. "I'd rather we were in the stormlands," he said quietly. "There's a war to be won there."

"We're at war now, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Are we?" his old friend asked. "Renly Baratheon is massing in the Reach. His brother is trying to do the same at Dragonstone and Cracklaw Point. Two rebel armies in our rear, each capable of putting the capital under siege. And where are the finest knights in the Westerlands? Riding like mad for Winterfell, intimidating every castle we see along the way."

"If this is a war, coz, it certainly is a queer one."

"The Baratheons will murder each other easily enough," Jaime repeated his father's strategy. "One we're done burning the wolves out of their den, we'll have an easy enough time destroying whichever was the victor, if either."

"So you say, Jaime," Addam replied dubiously. "But then there's this witch. Worrying about swords is one thing, but having to keep an eye out for magic..."

Jaime stiffened, just a touch. "Have a care not to say that around Father," he cautioned his friend.

"Oh, I know, there's no wisdom in poking the old lion. Still, you've met the witch, Jaime. What truth is there in this business?"

Jaime thought about a whirlwind of light and the chiming of little bells. "Enough," he said shortly.

Lord Tywin passed him a map of the ruby ford and the lands north of the Green Fork. "What do you make of the land here, Ser Jaime?" he asked. "You have seen much of it before, after all."
Jaime gritted his teeth and looked over the map. It seemed correct enough to him; he'd never cared much about the riverlands to begin with. "My last time here I was more concerned with protecting the king than the keeps we passed," he lied. "Past the ford there's not much beyond a few villages and holdfasts. Little keeps held by little men, mostly."

His father grunted. "Sworn to House Frey, no doubt," he said. "Do you think any would stand against us, Lord Commander?" Something in his voice lit a momentary flash of annoyance aflame in Jaime's heart. **Do you really expect these shepherders and shit-shovellers to take up arms against us, Father?**

"I doubt it," Jaime snorted. "Do sheep assault lions? Some will come out to swear fealty to the king, as they should, but most will just huddle in their towers and pray until we pass by." That much he'd seen the last time he'd traveled the kingsroad. The little lords along the way were cowed by Robert's progress, absurd wheelhouse and all. An army would have little trouble with such cravens.

His father nodded again. "The less men we have to leave behind to maintain garrison, the better," he said. "The Freys may prove difficult, but Lord Walder is easily persuaded. And what about the Neck, Lord Commander? What would you say about that?"

Jaime thought about the swamps, the lizard-lions and the reeking mire surrounding the road. "We will have to ride up the causeway," he said carefully. "Even if the swamps and the North's little frogs weren't an issue, the mire would slow the army down. Once there we would have to pass Moat Callin." Which would be difficult at best. He'd seen how the old towers were placed, and how the causeway wound through them.

Lyle Crakehall harrumphed, a booming sound that echoed through the hall. "Moat Callin is an old ruin," he proclaimed. "Even if there are men there, what walls exist that would stand against us? My lord, let me take half a hundred outriders north to the Moat and capture it in the name of the king. It would be child's play for my knights."

Assuming that Eddard Stark has cheese between his ears and hadn't already garrisoned the place, you mean, Jaime thought. Stark was a high-handed, inflexible prig but he only rarely played the fool. If he meant to bar the south he'd have more than half a hundred already standing ready for anyone coming up the causeway.

Lord Tywin took this outburst in stride. "Perhaps the bold stroke would be sufficient," he said. "Regardless, we will tear down all this barbarian mummer y that cowed every king and prince in Westeros once and for all. Moat Callin is merely the beginning."

The captains of the West rumbled in agreement. Jaime was looking forward to it, in fact. **Wolves have no right to look down upon lions.** Bringing down the North, the unbroken citadel of the First Men, would be worthy of a song or two. And bringing Stark, his Tully bitch, their pups and the witch woman back to Joffrey in chains would be very satisfying.

Then he heard the echo of little bells somewhere inside Darry's hall. Jaime's hand snapped down to his sword and he spun, looking for the source. The captains of the West looked at him curiously, then looked around as the bells tinkled into silence.

"Who goes there?" Lord Tywin demanded. A light like a bolt of soundless lightning flashed through the hall and when it died, the space immediately before the Lord of Casterly Rock was filled by the ghostly impression of a slim Dornishwoman in mannish dress.

"Lord Lannister," the witch of Ulthos, architect of all Jaime's pain, bowed deeply. "A pleasure to meet you at last."
His father's expression seemed carved from stone. "What is the meaning of this?"

The ghost cocked her head. "A direct meeting seemed less than wise," she replied. "The army, you understand. Landing at the gate, talking to the guard, punching him, punching the man who came to help him, punching the guy who came to help him and the next and on and on... it was going to take too long. You're a busy man, I'm a busy woman, we both have way too many things to do to waste time with that kind of nonsense." His father seemed a bit nonplussed by that little tirade. "So!" The ghost clapped noiselessly. "Shall we get down to business?"

"Have you come to swear your fealty to King Joffrey?" Lord Tywin said coolly.

The ghost raised a single black eyebrow. "I think you shouldn't ask questions you already know the answer to, my lord," she replied. Lord Tywin turned away from the apparition.

"Then we have nothing further to discuss, woman," he said to the far wall. "I believe you know the way out." Now it was the witch's turn to look nonplussed.

"Oh, come on, don't be like that," she chided the lord of the Westerlands. "I came all this way and went to all this trouble and you're not interested? I'm disappointed, Lord Lannister. Everybody else I've talked to might not have believed, but at least they heard me out." Lord Tywin studied the papers on the table, studiously ignoring the ghost. "Really? Really? You're going to play this game? Well, that's fine; I don't have to talk to just you."

His father's hand came down on the table with a hard bang. "Out, all of you," he commanded. The captains of the West all looked at each other, decided discretion was the better part of valor and abandoned the hall as best as they could. Addam was the last, giving Jaime a sympathetic glance as he departed.

"You know, that won't necessarily stop me," the ghost mused.

Lord Tywin glared at the witch's image. "We have nothing to say to you, witch."

"Fine," the ghost snapped. "Then listen. I'm sure you already heard the story from Joffrey's court, but you need to hear it personally. There's more at stake here than whatever dynastic issues you're worried about, Lord Tywin."

"A pretty mummer's tale you weave," his father sneered. "Snarks and grumkins massing above the Wall, and all the world needs saving by you. Aegon the Conqueror couldn't have done better with such a story, I'll grant you that."

"Though a much better pair of teats than Aegon had, wouldn't you say, Father?" Jaime put in helpfully. The witch blinked and smiled so sweetly at Jaime that he drew his sword and almost took a step backwards.

"Why, look who's up and about!" she chirped. "Swelling's gone down, I take it? All that riding north hasn't made it worse?"

Jaime pushed down his anger and let the sudden rush of terror at being under the witch's scrutiny yet again be buried under a mocking smile. "Pycelle is a better healer than you think," she said easily. "Why, my manhood is better than before."

"Oh, I'm sure Pycelle's a man of many talents," the ghost said thoughtfully. "No complaints from the ladies, then?" Jaime's smile slipped a little. In truth Cersei hadn't complained the last time they had a chance to share a bed together, just before the army left King's Landing.
The trap was there, waiting for him, but the particulars eluded him. "A Kingsguard knows nothing of such things," he lied. "Especially not the Lord Commander."

"Oh sure," the ghost agreed cheerfully. "I totally believe you, Jaime. But you see, I came into some interesting information," she added. "If I knew then what I know now, no maester in the world could've saved your balls. And here we are. Funny old world, isn't it?"

"And what grave disservice had I done to deserve such treatment, my lady?" Jaime asked archly. "Laughed too hard at your japes? Not placed your pet dogs on the throne? Slurped my soup too loudly? I beg you, what was my error?"

The false cheer drained out of the witch's ghostly face, leaving a mask cast out of bronze. "Winterfell," she said flatly. The trap's jaws closed around him, and he felt sharp fingers of ice crawl up his spine. The things I do for love, oh gods. "Ah, so you do remember," she added, a glint of something cruel in her eyes.

"I remember nothing," he said hoarsely. He remembered Cersei's warmth in that godsforsaken cold, the boy in the window, the look on the boy's face as he tossed him...

The sword in Jaime's hand slipped, the point striking Lord Darry's stone floor with a ringing sound. His father turned to look at him with narrowed eyes. The same way he always looks at Tyrion.

The ghost's eyes flickered behind Myrish glass. "I thought you were a better liar than that," she said sadly. "Shame, that."

The shock and fear turned to anger under the witch's gaze. Jamie snarled and thrust his sword at the ghost. His sword found only air, passing through the apparition with no resistance. "I have no need of your pity, witch!" he spat.

"Jaime," his father said steadily. "Enough." The words penetrated his anger enough, just enough to let him sheathe his sword and go to his father's side, glaring daggers at the ghost all the while. "Whatever lies you wish to spread about my son will find no purchase here," he said. "There is no soil in all of the Westerlands that your noxious weeds will grow in, woman, and in the name of Joffrey of House Baratheon, first of his name, I will crush your insurrection and repay the insult you have done to my house. You and your puppets will never sit the Iron Throne."

The witch was still for a long moment. "Is that really what you think, Lord Lannister? That this is all for the throne?" She fell silent again, and his father started to turn away when she exploded.

"You goddamned imbecile!" she roared, fury in her eyes. "This isn't about the Iron Throne, you tremendous jackass! It's not about valor or fortune or glory, it's not about beating you or Joffrey or any of the other over-armored idiots in this godforsaken place! I'm not doing it because it's fun, God knows I'm not doing it because it's easy. I'm not even doing it because it works because who the fuck knows if that's even true! I do what I do because it's right! Because it's decent! And above all, it's kind.

"I could leave Westeros," the witch said. "I could run away and pretend none of this is happening. But if I do that, good people will die. If I stand and fight, some of them will live. Maybe not many, maybe not for long. And hey, you know, maybe there's no point to any of this, maybe it's all fruitless. But it's what I can do, so I'm going to stay here and I'm going to keep doing it until it kills me."

The ghost pointed at the Lord of Casterly Rock. "I told the king and his court that I would drag them to salvation, kicking and screaming if necessary, and now I tell you the same thing."
Your assistance would be appreciated. I don't need your permission. I'll tell you this much, Tywin Lannister: go home. Fight the Baratheons if you feel you must, but go home. Harvest crops, store food. If your knights demand glory then send them to the Wall. Winter comes, Lord of the Westerlands, and it will devour you whole if you aren't ready. Don't throw lives away on whatever revenge you're trying to work through; you're supposed to be better than that."

"Get out," Lord Tywin seethed, his face red. "I'll have you used like a half-copper whore before I see you flayed for speaking to me like that."

The ghost just looked disappointed. "Well then," she said, and vanished. Bells sounded in the hall, and Jaime looked up to see one of the witch's godsdamned metal demons dart out of a high window. So that's how she did it, he mused.

Any further discussion was cut off by a deep rumbling coming from above the castle. Father and son rushed out into the courtyard to find the sky lit up in a hundred different colors. The thick clouds flashed red and gold, blue and green. Shafts of brilliant light shot downwards and illuminated the army camp, sending men and horses scattering in all directions.

"My lord!" Addam Marbrand gasped as he saw them standing in the doorway. "What is happening?"

"The ship," Jaime mumbled. "Her ship is here." Just then the white metal belly of the sky-ship emerged from the clouds. The lights faded and the rumbling grew louder, until some knights clapped their hands over their ears. Soon enough, the rumbling took on the nature of a voice:

"MEN OF THE WESTERLANDS, MEN OF THE CROWNLANDS, HEAR ME." the witch's voice boomed like the Mother's from the clouds. "THIS IS NOT YOUR WAR. YOU WHO HAVE WIVES, CHILDREN, PARENTS BEHIND YOU! RETURN TO YOUR HOMES! A LONG WINTER APPROACHES AND YOU ARE NEEDED THERE, NOT TO DIE POINTLESSLY IN THE SWAMP."

The voice paused, then continued. "THOSE WHO STILL WISH TO FIGHT, GO TO MOAT CALLIN AND PLEAD YOUR CASE THERE. THE WALL NEEDS DEFENDERS, MEN OF HONOR AND VALOR TO STAND AGAINST ONCOMING NIGHT! GO, IF YOU MUST, BUT SEND WORD TO YOUR HOMES! THE OTHERS ARE COMING!" The rumbling faded, the ship's belly retreated into the clouds and the king's host was left standing speechless in the rain.

Jaime waited for the last of the rumbling to subside, his white cloak growing dark with damp, before returning to Castle Darry's great hall to resume planning the assault on the North.

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LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 241

I suppose it went better than the Arryn embassy. I mean, nobody pissed themselves and I didn't put an ally at risk of defenestration or anything. But yeah, so much for my diplomacy skills.

Of all the reactions I've gotten so far, the complete brush-off wasn't one I expected. In hindsight I probably should've expected that; Joffrey gave me a pretty similar reaction and I'm guessing he's not that far off the apple tree from his grandfather—more so assuming Stark is correct. (Ew, just in case I hadn't mentioned it in a while.) And yet I was banking on Tywin Lannister being... I dunno, more pragmatic about things? Like, I get that his pride was wounded but still, magic lady tells you major bad mojo is coming, maybe you should put some energy prepping for that instead of invading everywhere willy-nilly? But Tywin isn't that kind of man, I guess. Which is a pity; I'd been hoping for a rational discussion after the shitshow that was the Eyrie.
At a minimum I'm going to end up testing zh'Charrath's show of force theory. When negotiations went absolutely nowhere with Lannister I decided to see if I couldn't put some fear of god into his army. It was very impressive, and hopefully that will cause his army to shed people. The fewer soldiers keep going north, the better. On the other hand if Lannister's people are more afraid of him than they are the nebulous wrath of witchcraft they might maintain unit cohesion, in which case I'm going to have to resort to drastic action. Blowing up a good chunk of the causeway through the Neck is a pretty good deterrent, but we need to try and keep that open for logistics. Indiscriminate murder might end up being my only option here, and I'm not looking forward to that.

So, diplomacy has failed and I'm kinda bummed about it. However, I did get a look at Lannister's camp during my visit. Tywin was there, his eldest boy was there (And apparently got a promotion? I need spies to check up on stuff like that. Make a note: next time, bring spies.) along with a whole bunch of knights and lords... but there was somebody missing.

Maybe I can talk sense into a Lannister. It's a bit of a detour, but getting somebody, anybody on the ball in the west is worth the delay. I can send Al ahead to my next destination, hopefully get a little credit built up before I arrive for once... yeah, this sounds workable. I like plans; plans are always good.
Moments In Transition II - You Can't Go Home Again

SARELLA

The transporter's light faded, placing Sarella in a copse of stubby orange trees just off the garden path. She looked up just in time to see a small white shape through the leaves, far higher than any bird could fly, dart into the cloudtops. She shifted the pack on her back a little, feeling the package she carried settle in the bottom as her shoulders moved.

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Sarella Sand was completely on her own. The captain still had pressing business with the Lannisters—a vague hope that she could still reach accommodation with Casterly Rock if not King's Landing—and so entrusted Sarella with opening negotiations with Dorne in her stead.

"I don't plan on being more than a day or so behind you," she'd said, handing her a Starfleet tunic with the winged badge of her order sewn into it. "One way or the other this shouldn't take long. Until then, be honest, be direct and make sure your family gets the message." She then tapped Sarella on both shoulders and added "Congratulations, you're a Ranger now." The captain's half-serious quip made her feel proud in a way she hadn't expected. Perhaps this was what a squire felt like when their lord knighted them at the end of their service.

And so, Sarella found herself using the transporter once again to enter a lordly palace unannounced. At least the gardens where her uncle made his home of late were a far fairer place than the bowels of the Red Keep. She stepped out of the trees unnoticced and walked down the pink marble path leading to the pools.

She remembered the Water Gardens, the pools, the fountains, the groves of orange trees surrounding the terraces. In her youth Sarella spent her time between splashing in the pools and examining the waterworks, trying to understand how it all fit together. Her sisters and the other children never understood her fascination with pipes and pumps, preferring to play in the water. None ever mocked her for it; oddity or not she was still the Red Viper's daughter. But her interests created a distance between her and them that she never felt capable of bridging. As beautiful as it was, and as much time as Sarella spent there in childhood it was never home. Home was wrapped in faint, vague memories that might as well be imaginings of the Feathered Kiss, or the comfortable mustiness of the Citadel, or Carefree Victory's clean white walls.

Or perhaps the great band of stars that crossed the sky like Nymeria's ten thousand ships. The captain's teachings were a revelation in more ways than one.

Sounds of life and laughter came from ahead. Children played in the pools, lordly and smallfolk alike as had been decreed long ago. One of the older girls turned and caught sight of Sarella. With a sudden whoop the girl leaped from the pool and ran at full tilt towards her.

"Sarella!" her little sister Elia cried, arms wide open. "It is you!" Elia crashed into her, almost knocking Sarella off her feet with the impact.

When did she get so big? Sarella wondered. Elia had been barely two-and-ten when she left Dorne for Oldtown. Now she was almost a woman grown, with their father's height and slender frame. "Hello, little horse," she said, returning Elia's embrace.

"Little horse!" Elia said indignanty. "I'm Lady Lance now! I'll meet you in the lists for three falls!"
"Oh aye, and I'll lose all three," Sarella replied with a smile. "But then I'll challenge you to archery, and we know Lady Book will beat you soundly with a bow."

"Lady Book?" Elia looked not quite up, but not quite down either. *Gods she has gotten tall.*

"Well, if you're Lady Lance, that makes me Lady Book, don't you think?"

"It's a fitting name for you," a rougher voice said from behind her. Sarella half-turned and saw the broad form of her sister Obara striding down the path right behind her.

"Obara," she said.

"Sarella," Obara replied. "Finally tired of chasing after old gray rats?"

"Not exactly," said Sarella. "I still have my chain, but I've also found a new vocation, you might say."

Obara eyed her, a faint glimmer of suspicion in her dark eyes. "Interesting colors you wear, sister," she said. "I'm not sure green suits you."

Sarella's hand brushed against her borrowed tunic. "I think it suits me quite well," she said absently. Obara grunted in reply.

"You didn't come in from the gates," Obara noted, eyes still narrow.

Sarella tried out one of the captain's smaller smiles. It felt surprisingly natural.

"I have my ways," she said idly. Obara grunted again. "Is Uncle Doran here?" She figured he would be; Prince Doran had left Sunspear for the Water Gardens a few turns before Sarella had departed for Oldtown, and so far as anyone knew he had not returned to the castle since.

"Aye," Obara replied slowly. "The prince is here. He's been hidden away in chambers the last few days with another visitor."

"Oh?" This was interesting intelligence? Presumably not an envoy from King's Landing; Lord Tywin was still in the north and Joffrey didn't have the wit to send more than demands.

Her sister shrugged. "A Pentoshi cheesemonger of some sort, that's all I know. If you want to speak to our uncle you'll have to wait, Sarella."

"This cannot wait, Obara." In theory it could, but she was not going to disappoint the captain any more than she had to.

Obara sighed mightily. "You're going to be a pain about this, aren't you?" she said. "Very well. As it happens the princess arrived from Sunspear yesterday. If you can convince her, then mayhaps you can speak to Uncle."

Sarella considered it. She knew Princess Arianne, to an extent, and wasn't sure of her ability to convince the princess of anything, much less the enormity of what was coming south. And yet... "I suppose it couldn't possibly go worse than not speaking at all," she said.

Detaching Elia from her waist with a farewell and a promise of stories about her travels, Sarella let herself be led from the pools to a terrace nearer the sea. Inside the princess of Dorne sat at a table covered with blood oranges, nibbling on the fruit.

Arianne looked up from her fruit and her full lips widened in a broad smile. "Why, our little
bookmouse has returned!" she exclaimed. "Welcome home, cousin!"

Sarella refused to bristle at Arianne's proclamation. They had played together as children and the princess was one of the ones who never truly understood Sarella's interests and the only one who said so, quite loudly at times. Calling her bookmouse was perhaps meant fondly but Sarella never could discern the truth of that.

"What an interesting color you're wearing, cousin," Arianne went on, unperturbed. "Tyrell green suits you, considering how much time you spend in the Reach."

Sarella smiled thinly. "Well met, cousin," she replied. "Though I came here from Darry, not Oldtown. I bring news from the north for your father the prince."

Arianne waved vaguely. "Yes yes, the lion, the wolf and the stag are all trying to kill each other," she sniffed. "We have heard all about it by now. It is no concern to us."

Oh, if only it were that easy, cousin. "I suppose none of them care much for Dorne, nor Dorne for them," Sarella said cautiously, "but that isn't the only news I bring. I'm sure you've heard the stories about what happened at the Red Keep?"

The princess laughed gaily. "Oh yes, the witch! Why, not a sennight ago a bard came to Sunspear singing of a Dornish girl bearding all the lions in their den with powerful magic. Such a wonderful tale! It never happened of course, but—"

"I was there, Arianne," she interrupted whatever frippery the princess was about to go off on. "It happened."

Something changed in Arianne's eyes and she gave her a suspicious glance. "You," she said flatly. "I thought you were at the Citadel rubbing yourself on the old books."

Sarella bristled, just a little, then ignored the jibe. "She visited the Citadel and I was offered to assist her in some research. Events transpired and I find myself... apprenticed, I suppose, to her."

Arianne laughed. "Just like Uncle Oberyn's brood to find themselves in such circumstance," she said. "And I suppose you tagged along like you always do?"

"That... would not be how I would say it, but it isn't inaccurate," Sarella shook her head. "My princess, in my journeys the last half-year I've learned some very dangerous things, things your father and mine as well need to know."

"Have you?" Arianne said, one dark eyebrow raised. "I suppose what the bards say about King's Landing is true, then? The dead walk and dark magic returns to Westeros?"

This was going all wrong. She'd seen the captain talk about this almost a dozen times over the last turn of the moon and she was messing it all up. "I've seen them," she said quietly. Obara blinked and looked at her like she'd never seen her before. Perhaps she hadn't. "I've fought them. Killed one with my own hands. This isn't some grumkin tale, cousin. Dorne is imperiled and we must act now lest we fall."

Arianne pretended to look thoughtful, the same pretense of consideration she gave Sarella when they were young. "Well, Father will find some amusement in your tales of humiliating the Lannisters, I suppose," she said. "And more intelligence on the witch girl would be useful. Still, I doubt that you have anything more worthwhile to add to the situation. Dorne put no stock in old wives' tales before, after all; we are well protected from any folly to the north. Be at ease, cousin."
In a rush she was back in that dark hole with the wights, only this time instead of a ragged wildling boy it was Elia's face she saw with mottled gray skin, eyes glowing an unnatural blue and bony fingers reaching for her throat. "No!" Sarella's hand came down hard on the table, shaking the thick oak and causing some of the oranges to fall to the marble floor.

Arianne jumped at the outburst, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "You forget yourself, cousin," she hissed.

"Would that I could," Sarella whispered, then fixed the princess with a glare of her own. "I do not speak as your cousin, Princess Arianne Martell," she said coldly. "I am an ambassador of the Federal Starfleet and I must speak to Prince Doran immediately." She shrugged her pack from her shoulders, set it on the ground and pulled the jar from it. The jar she set down, with a bit more force than she intended, on the table before the princess. "Whatever foolishness the other lords are up to may or may not concern Dorne, but this is a concern greater than any of them." So saying, she ripped the cover off the jar holding the wight's head, showing it to the princess, her sister and anyone else in the room.

Princess Arianne's frightened shriek as the head began to gnash at her filled Sarella with no small part of vindictive pleasure. Perhaps she was more her father's child than she thought at times.
Even in war, there was routine. As he had most mornings, Davos rose from his bed, dressed, ate a sparse breakfast of salt fish and eggs before attending lessons with Shireen. The princess was a harsh taskmistress when she put her mind to it, and so Davos would spend some time squinting at little scribbles in books trying to decipher their meaning until either she or he were called away to other duty.

That morning, the duty was his, to attend his king. Davos made his way to the room of the painted table where the king, his council and Lady Melisandre stood around Aegon's table, adjusting the markers as news of the mainland came in.

"The green witch has met the old lion," Melisandre announced as Davos came to his spot near the edge of the lords. "The Lannister rebuffed her, and so she strove to break and scatter his army."

The lords muttered and whispered amongst themselves at this news. The king merely nodded and asked the important question: "Did she succeed?"

"Not as well as she might have hoped," the shadowbinder replied. "Men of the west fear lions more than witches. Some have deserted and others will soon, but the bulk remain wrapped in Lord Lannister's fist."

The king grunted in reply. "Desertion happens in war," he said. "Even my own pitiful army loses men, drip by drip, every day. Has Lannister changed his tack?"

Lord Velaryon shook his head. "All our spies and outriders agree that Lord Tywin continues to march on the North. Even if the witch managed to put the fear of the gods into some that's a fearsome army."

"And yet he does not drive along Cracklaw Point to attack my banners, nor does he invest the riverlands or turn to strike at my brother," Stannis mused. "North, north, always north. Why?"

"Mayhaps the Lannisters were more moved by the Ulthosi's plea than we thought," Andrew Estermont said with a faint air of mockery.

The king's jaw set at Ser Andrew's tone. "I doubt it," he said shortly. He might have gone on to say more but for the steward knocking on the chamber door. "Enter," the king commanded.

A steward poked his head inside the chamber. "Sails, Your Grace," he panted. "They bear your banner and the banner of the wolf."

Stannis rubbed his beard. "At least there are some in the realm who do not forget their obligations," he said. "Ser Davos, meet them in my name and escort them here. I would meet with the men Eddard Stark deigns to give me."

Davos did as he was told, disengaging from the lords and knights and making his way to the docks. Ten galleys, led by his son's Wraith, slowly entered the harbor. Dale's sails were emblazoned with the black stag of the Baratheons, but his ship and the others were festooned with banners bearing sigils Davos had never seen, or only rarely, in his time at sea. This then is the muster of the North, he thought.
Wraith slid into the dock with the grace Davos had taught all his sons. As soon as the gangway was down Dale came across leading a procession of men in furs and rugged but fine clothes. Dale hurried forward and embraced his father. "A good journey?" Davos asked.

"The weather was mostly fair," Dale said with a smile. "An easy enough trip all told."

"Easy enough he says," complained one of the northmen, a man bigger than any Davos had ever seen. "That's the last fucking time I ever set foot on a boat, by the gods. I'll walk to Last Hearth if I have to!"

The giant's companion, a man barely out of boyhood with red hair and the faint beginnings of a beard, laughed at his misfortune. "Then just pray we don't have to go home on the lady's sky-ship, Smalljon," he said. He nodded to Davos. "Robb Stark," he introduced himself.

Davos couldn't quite keep the surprise off his face. The agreement the Ulthosi had hammered out between Lord Stark and the king said the North would send men to support his cause, but in no way had Stannis expected the heir to Winterfell would be the one sent. "Welcome to Dragonstone, my lord," Davos said with a quick bow. "Ser Davos Seaworth, at your service. King Stannis offers his welcome and would like to speak with you in chambers as soon as possible."

"Of course, of course," the young lord said.

Davos brought the Stark and two of his companions to the king. Stannis seemed a little surprised at Lord Robb's presence, but nodded sharply. "And your companions?" he asked Stark.

"Lord Jon Umber and Lord Domeric Bolton," Stark said, gesturing first to the giant and then to a man of average build with long, dark hair. Something in the darker man's eyes unsettled Davos. They were pale and flat, looking at everything around him like a butcher might eye a carcass, noting the joints for dismemberment. Davos had seen eyes like those many times in his life, in men who went to sea looking not for coin or glory but to sate darker appetites. The pale-eyed man bowed and smiled, but the smile did not quite reach his eyes. "Many of us volunteered," Stark went on. "A thousand of the North's finest fighters sailed with us for Your Grace's army."

"I see," Stannis said. "Very well, Lord Robb. Come here and see the state of the war. No doubt you have not heard much on your voyage."

"We haven't," Stark replied. "When we boarded the ships at White Harbor we had word that the Lannisters were putting together an army."

"That army is now quite together," the king said dryly. "Ser Andrew, inform our allies of what we know."

Ser Andrew cleared his throat and pointed at the painted table. "Lord Tywin is currently in the field," he said. "Around eight and twenty thousand men, horse and foot. He has this army marching north along the kingsroad. Based on our latest intelligence," he said with a glance towards Melisandre, who remained an aloof red shadow on the edge of the conversation, "we think that Lannister intends to force his way through Moat Cailin and engage the North."

"Force the moat?" Stark said, his voice thick with disbelief. "That's madness."

"Is it?" The king's voice had an edge to it. "The castle is a ruin by all accounts."

"That's true enough, Your Grace. But the walls are still strong where they matter," the young lord replied, shaking his head. "My father has the road garrisoned with half a thousand bowmen. The crannogmen will be watching the road. The barrow lords will have their levies close at hand as well.
It's not impossible; Lannister might well push through if he spends men like water, but he'll lose half or more of his army battering against Cailin's walls if he did. What survives that slaughter would drive right into the jaws of fresh northern armies."

"If I might interject, my lords," Bolton said mildly. "There may be opportunity here. Lord Robb is quite right about the moat's strength, but there is another thing to consider. The Neck itself is largely impassible by armies save by the kingsroad. A narrow path through many leagues of mire with few places to change course for even a small party of travelers, let alone eight and twenty thousand men at arms."

Melisandre's eyes looked down to the map. "In yon straight path a thousand may well be stopped by three," she murmured. Bolton looked up from the table, interest in his eyes.

"Yes, exactly," he said, offering the shadowbinder a small smile. "An interesting bit of doggerel, my lady. Your own invention?"

The red woman blinked. "Ah, no," she said smoothly. "The Lord of Light speaks, but only sometimes do we truly hear."

"I see," the Bolton said, returning to the map.

The king looked at Bolton with narrowed eyes. "A dangerous proposition, Lord Bolton," he said. "Tywin Lannister is not a man easily fooled."

The Bolton's pale eyes gleamed yellow in the torchlight. "Perhaps, Your Grace," he said in reply. "And yet if he is truly marching upon the North rather than preparing to meet your fleet in Blackwater Bay, or your brother's army in the Reach, then I believe he has fooled himself quite nicely." The man extended a long, tapered finger that gently brushed against the Neck. "Once Lannister enters the causeway he can only go north or south. The North will deny him or destroy him; all we needs do is block the road behind him and he is neatly trapped. Five thousand men can kill a hundred thousand in such a place, if the need arrived."

"They would disperse into the Neck," the king said.

"An army in the Neck is doomed," Stark said. "The terrain is open but it's no place for horses or heavy foot. Between the swamps, the lizard-lions and the crannogmen no army could stay together off the causeway. One man or a small party might be able to cross back into the riverlands off the road."

The king rubbed his beard, grimacing. "You have given us interesting intelligence Lord Stark, Lord Bolton," he said finally. "See to your men; we will continue this discussion after dinner." The northern lords bowed and departed, shortly followed by the rest of Stannis's lords. The king stared at the table and the little markers depicting the Lannisters, deep in thought.

"It's a bold plan, Your Grace," Davos offered.

"Aye," the king said slowly. "Bold only as the young can be. Bolton's strategy is sound enough; we have not the men to face Lannister on his own terms, so we must make him come to ours. And better to break their best general now, lest we face him in front of King's Landing." He turned away from the table. "I will think upon it. The opportunity exists, we would be fools not to seize it."

The red woman stared at one of the lit torches along the wall. "Perhaps," she said.

"You disagree, Lady Melisandre?" The king said.
Melisandre looked troubled. "I cannot say, my lord," she replied. "I have seen the shape of this within the fires. R'hllor will grant his champion the victory, but there is a lurking shadow within Lord Bolton's words. This victory may not come without cost."
The worst part was the wind. It never seemed to cease when north of the Wall. It blew constantly through the trees, from the east and the west but more often than not from the north. The wind would curl up against the Wall and scatter breezes in every direction, thin little lances of cold air that scraped and poked at every bit of exposed skin on a man. If the wind was this bad everywhere beyond the Wall then it was no wonder the wildlings were half-mad, Jon thought irritably as he stood guard over the first batch of wildlings the King-Beyond-The-Wall had promised to bring to Castle Black.

The wildling camp was much bigger than he'd thought it would be. Not perhaps as big as Mance Rayder had claimed, there was no host a hundred thousand strong hugging the foot of the Wall, but there were still easily ten wildlings for every man in Castle Black. More trickled out of the woods every day; a hunting party here, a family there, all drawn by some hints of ineffable rumor: the Others walk the woods, Rayder has spoken to the Watch, they will shelter us in the south. One by one the snowflakes landed and added themselves to a great drift.

The wildlings took little notice of the Wall looming mute and white above them, going about the normal business of any large group of people. For all that they were dressed in furs and skins and squatted in crude huts made of sticks and more skins the whole scene reminded Jon of the winter town outside Winterfell's gates. Men and women tended to their belongings and abodes, talking quietly amongst themselves. Near the center of the camp someone was roasting a haunch of venison over an open fire. Children chased each other through the narrow lanes between huts, calling out and laughing as they did. And all of them avoided the nervous men in black cloth who stood watch over them.

Every man in the Watch was painfully aware that they were outnumbered, to the point where even women and children could swamp them in numbers if they had to. Jon's brothers in black kept wary eyes on the encampment, hands always at their blades and twisting and turning at shadows. The wildlings kept equal watch on the brothers; large, fierce men dressed in hard leather and carrying bronze and steel blades stood not far from the Watch, glaring at them at every hour of day and night. The other wildlings kept a wide berth between their warriors and the Watch. And thus peace, or at least some semblance of it, was kept.

Jon padded silently around the camp's perimeter, trying to keep his focus outwards. The others could watch the wildlings just as well as he, but they were simply wildlings. Jon had been there when Othor's corpse had tried to murder Lord Mormont. He'd seen the wight's head Lady Jade had brought from her ranging, he'd heard the warnings. Every fiber in his being itched to be ranging north, hunting the Others and their undead monsters. Perhaps even learning of his uncle's fate.

Instead the Night's Watch, the sword and shield of the realms of men, were spread out overseeing a gaggle of terrified savages in skins while evil stalked the land. North and south, if the rumors are right, he thought.

"This isn't what I thought I'd be doing with my life," he remarked to Ghost. The direwolf huffed quietly and panned alongside him.

"Is the poor little crow sad?" a high, mocking voice sang out to him. Jon's head half-turned and he beheld his wildling counterpart for the day. Today he'd been graced by a spearwife, a girl his age or possibly a little older with brilliant red hair. "Too bad your crow lord won't let you spit us all on your
sword, huh?"

Jon flushed and shook his head. "Nothing like that," he said. "I just thought, well... the Others are out there. We know they're there, you know they're there. I thought maybe we'd be taking the fight to them?"

The girl blinked hard, then laughed. "Ye stupid damn fool," she gasped. "'Take the fight to them,' really? If it was that simple don't ye think we'd have done it already instead of runnin' here and hopin' that the kneeler lords let us through and don't just slaughter us like deer? Yer just a crow chick," she sneered. "What do you know?"

Jon regarded the wildling girl silently for a moment, then looked back at the camp. "Considerably less than I thought I did," he admitted.

The girl blinked again, seemingly taken aback by his admission. "Oh," she said. "Well... good. At least you can say that. Still, you're just a boy, crow," she added. His hackles rose a little at the false sympathy in her voice. "You've not seen the white walkers up close. I have. I saw a witch strike them down with magical flame and even she had trouble keeping up, so you and the rest of your flock—"

"You know Lady Jade?" Jon blurted. The girl's mouth snapped shut and she fixed him with a glare so hard he thought he might catch fire right then and there.

"What, are you going to say that you know her too?" she replied acidly.

"We saw the falling star in Winterfell," Jon said. "My father, my brother and I rode out into the wolfswood, following the track it carved in the forest. Not too far from the forest's edge we saw the ship for the first time, and her not much long afterwards." The sight of Lady Jade and the direwolves sitting by the fire outside the sky-ship was engraved upon his memory, a thing he wasn't likely to forget any time soon, if ever.

The girl's eyebrows, just as red as the rest of her hair, rose a little as he told the tale. "Sounds like she made an impression," she said knowingly. Jon's cheeks heated a little.

"You could say that," he muttered. "How about you, when did you meet her?"

The girl snorted. "Came across her when she was hunting wights and walkers. That damned fool Rattleshirt thought he could take her and got us all slapped down by her little magic pets for the trouble." She shook her head in clear exasperation. "Then when all of us were groaning on the ground she up and surrenders. And got that old bastard Halfhand to go along with it too."

Jon blinked and tilted his head. Ambush a wildling raiding party and then surrender? "Aye," he said slowly. "That sounds very much like something she might do."

"Well it surprised the fuck out of us, I'll tell you that. Explaining it to Mance was the worst thing I've ever done. Woman could've cut all our throats or turned us into stoats or something and she fucking surrenders. Mad. Fucking mad."

"But if she hadn't surrendered, would you be here grumbling at me," Jon noted, "or would we be trying our best to kill each other while the Others watched?"

The glare returned. Jon felt a little warmer. Maybe the girl's travels with Lady Jade awakened some kind of magic in her? "Stop bein' fucking reasonable, crow," she groused. "Yer ruinin' all my expectations of the Night's Watch."
Jon bowed in exaggerated fashion. "As my lady demands," he drawled, remembering Theon at his oiliest. She drew breath to retort, but then Ghost's head snapped up and to the northwest of camp. The young direwolf bounded away from Jon and into the woods at full speed. "What the—?" Jon blurted.

The girl was already running right behind Ghost, pulling a short spear from her back. "C'mon, crow, keep up!" she called. Jon cursed and hurried behind her.

"Where are we going?"

"Dunno. But if a direwolf starts running in one direction, it's best to find out what it's running towards," the girl replied. "That's a thing the crows won't teach ye!"

Wolf, wildling and Watchman plowed through the thick brush, shaking off summer snow everywhere they went until Ghost skidded to a halt near a clearing, ducking low with hackles raised. Jon and the girl had just enough time to slow down and start creeping up towards the crouching direwolf. Ghost's head poked just into a heavy bush, teeth bared in a silent snarl. Jon took advantage of the cover to look over the wolf's shoulder and saw a thin form standing motionless in the trees. "Fuck," Jon breathed.

The girl was suddenly right next to him. He could feel her breath hitch as she saw the wight. "Fuck," she echoed him, then looked around wildly. "Is it cold?" she whispered.

"What?"

"Is it cold?" she hissed furiously. Jon stared at her; the girl's face was almost as white as the wight's, and stark terror was building in her eyes.

"Of course it's cold! We're in the north beyond the Wall, it's always bloody cold up here!" he said as quietly as he could.

The girl's fear didn't recede. "Is it colder here than it was at the camp?" she asked. Jon blinked.

"No... I don't think so," he replied. The girl relaxed visibly. "What was that all about?"

"It gets colder whenever the white walkers get near," she said, color returning to her face. "If it's just a wight, then we might get out of this with our hides intact."

"And if it's not just a wight?" Jon asked quietly. The girl seemed to think it over.

"With my spear, and your sword and wolf... we die," she said.

"Oh."

The wight had seemingly taken no notice of them or Ghost, continuing to stare towards the south. Jon frowned. Something about the situation seemed off to him. "What's it doing?" he murmured.

"Waiting, watching," the girl said. "It's lookin' right at the camp."

"The camp's hundreds of yards away through the trees," Jon objected. "You can't see it from here."

"We can't," the girl countered. "Doesn't mean it can't." She frowned. "They're watching us but not
striking at the camp. Even with the crows we'd be easy meat for them, so why are they just watching?"

Jon struggled to remember something Lady Jade had said once. "Perhaps it's the Wall?" he said. "Lady Jade said something about there being magic laced through the Wall. What if they can't get close, or they have to focus to get close and the Others can't control enough wights to win an attack?"

The girl nodded. "Aye, could be. Either way, they're too fuckin' close for comfort right now."

The wight moved, swaying slightly on its feet before turning—for one heart-stoppingly terrifying moment almost looking directly at them—and retreating back deeper into the woods. They crouched behind the bush for what felt like an eternity, waiting for other wights to attack or for the Others to make their presence known, before Ghost sat up, shook and padded back towards the camp.

"We need to get back," the girl said in a commanding tone. "Mance needs to know this straightaway."

"Aye, so does Lord Commander Mormont," Jon replied. "Er," he said, faced with the sudden realization that he'd gone the whole encounter without ever so much as learning the wildling girl's name. He could feel Robb's snickering bouncing around his head as the moment struck him.

The girl just chuckled. "Ygritte," she said. "Ye've earned that much, crow—"

"Jon," he said hastily.

"—so don't forget it."
Moments In Transition V - What We Do in the Shadows

CERSEI

King's Landing was under threat of siege, or at least that was what everybody continued to tell Cersei. It was odd that the city felt no different with the threat than it had the first day she arrived as queen. Men patrolled the walls, goldcloaks—presumably—went about collecting food and storing it as well as they could before the rebels arrived whilst attending their other duties. And yet the city was no less crowded and pungent, and the day's court no less full of flatterers and sycophants than it was before the war began.

The queen regent sat on her chair at the foot of the Iron Throne, switching between watching the courtiers and watching her golden lion as he handled the king's business with a deftness and surety that her oafish husband could never have mustered. Her uncle sat on the king's left as acting Hand, providing words of counsel and occasionally stepping in when someone dared to bring forth a subject too petty for Joffrey's notice. Little lords begged for favor, or clemency, or for a resolution to some ancient grudge between houses too insignificant to matter to anyone man or god.

Cersei sipped daintily on a goblet of Arbor gold as her son dealt with the parade of nobodys and parasites. Her ears pricked a little when news of the war came from a crownlander house: Renly Baratheon was taking his army to Storm's End, it seemed. No doubt to unite with his house forces before striking at King's Landing. The court shifted uneasily at this news, but her proud lion was energized by it.

"My father and grandfather took this city from the Mad King," Joffrey declared, drawing his sword. "And if my traitor of an uncle thinks he can take it from me he'll have a fight on his hands!" Cersei nodded accordingly, watching the crowd to see who agreed... and who didn't. Having said his peace Joffrey sheathed his blade and nodded to let the next petitioner step forth. From the crowd emerged the pointed beard of that scheming ponce Littlefinger, fresh from his trip to the Eyrie. One wonders what the mockingbird brings, she thought idly. "Lord Baelish," her son said, bidding the man rise with a negligent gesture. "What news do you bring from the Vale?"

"Your Grace, I bring good news and ill. I have spoken with Lady Arryn and her son regarding her loyalties," Littlefinger said, then coughed. "The northern witch arrived before I had," he admitted, causing Joff to frown thunderously and the court to murmur. "However, her attempt at an embassy failed. The Vale will not join with the usurper Stark nor your treasonous uncles."

Joffrey's frown evaporated like mist on a summer morning. "That is good news," he replied. "This witch hasn't swayed another of my loyal lords. But you said you had ill news as well?"

Littlefinger nodded gravely. "Though the Vale will not join the North, Your Grace," he said. "Neither are they willing to join the Iron Throne in battle. Lady Arryn is quite concerned for her son. Something in the witch's attempt at diplomacy unsettled young Lord Robert; his mother believes that the witch cursed him." Which was the purest of nonsense, so far as Cersei was concerned. She had met the Arryn boy before, to say that Robert Arryn had ever been anything but feeble in body and mind was delusional. "Regardless, the boy is unwell and his mother has decreed to seal the roads until the war is decided."

Joffrey's frown returned, strong and deep this time. "The knights of the Vale would be a great help to us in this time," he mused. "We cannot allow this woman to keep them from aiding their king."

"Perhaps if I returned to the Eyrie as your envoy, Your Grace?" Littlefinger's expression never
wavered, his voice never expressing more than mild concern. "Lady Lysa and I are childhood friends. Were I to return and possibly persuade—" Whatever his thought was ended when Joffrey waved a regal arm.

"No, Lord Baelish. Your embassy was well-done and I thank you but this will require more than honeyed words, I think. I believe I must remind them who they serve. Perhaps a contingent of soldiers to hold Gulltown in the name of the Iron Throne."

Her uncle started at the suggestion. "Your Grace, that may not be the wisest of courses with the city preparing for a siege," he objected. Joffrey looked at Kevan, nodding thoughtfully.

"Perhaps, uncle," he allowed. "And yet it wouldn't do for us to look weak."

"The Lord Hand wouldn't engage the Vale like that," Kevan said.

"Grandfather isn't here, I am," Joffrey snapped. "I am the king, Ser Kevan, and I intend to do the king's work." Cersei nodded regally, warmth blooming in her breast at her golden son's words. "Gulltown is full of merchants and smallfolk, nothing that could possibly cause good knights difficulty. Send half a thousand men to occupy the town until Lady Arryn regains her good sense and bends the knee. Now," he turned away from the acting Hand. "Is there any other business? Lord Euron, you look grave today. Perhaps you may break the spell the witch has placed on my loyal lord?"

The master of magic looked thoughtful. "Spells can be broken," he said slowly. "Though not easily from afar. I would need to see Lord Arryn with mine own eyes before I could say otherwise, Your Grace. As for what darkens my mood..." Greyjoy frowned and looked away. "I should not say, Your Grace. This is a delicate matter, not for the open court."

If the Greyjoy was trying to keep things quiet, that was a dismal failure. The court's murmuring only grew louder as courtiers, knights and lords debated what kind of delicate matter might so unsettle the master of magic. "Very well," Joffrey said. He rose from the throne. "I would speak with the small council."

Cersei followed her son, the Kingsguard trailing behind them as they left the throne room and entered the small council chambers. Not terribly far behind the king's party the members of the small council filed into the room. "Now then, Lord Euron," Joffrey said once the small council had been seated. "What have you to say for yourself?"

Greyjoy looked uncomfortable. "Your Grace, my sources do not fly as far nor as high as the master of whisperers," he nodded towards the eunuch, "but they are informative in their own way, and through them I have heard terrible rumors about your uncle, the Lord Commander."

Cersei's heart froze in her chest. What terrible lies—or worse yet, terrible truths—was he about to reveal to the king? Her Joffrey's eyes narrowed as he stared at the master of magic. "And what rumors are those, Lord Greyjoy?" he said icily.

"That at some point he... consorted with the Stark's witch. That one seduced the other and they carried on an affair under your father's nose. That the violence she dealt Ser Jaime in the throne room was vengeance for turning against her."

"Impossible!" The word fell out of Cersei's mouth unbidden. The very idea was absurd. Jaime had been with her, had never so much as given a passing glance to another woman in his entire life. What game is Greyjoy playing?
"Her proud golden lion drummed his fingers on his chair. "I can't help but agree with my mother, Lord Euron," he said. "Uncle Jaime is of the Kingsguard, the greatest knights in the realm."

"Even the mightiest knight can fail, my king," Greyjoy said gently. "It may be that some foul sorcery has ensnared Ser Jaime, or that there is no truth to these rumors at all. Yet..." he trailed off, leaving all manner of terrible calumnies hanging in midair. "I know not the truth, Your Grace, hence why I was unwilling to voice it in court."

"Of course, my friend," Joffrey replied. "It was wise to wait until the small council had gathered before saying this. I don't know if I believe it, my uncle is one of the greats. But they said the same things about the Dragonknight, didn't they, and they might've even been true but he was still one of the greats regardless."

"Your Grace, if I may?" The powdered fat man interjected softly. "What the master of magic has said is troubling indeed, but it might be useful." The eunuch's face twisted with mild distaste. "If one felt a need to discredit the Ulthosi sorceress, one might do so by spreading this story."

Again Cersei jumped into the fray. "You would shame the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard by suggesting he lay with a foreign peasant girl?" she demanded. "If Jaime was here he'd cut you to ribbons for even suggesting such a foul thing!" This was insane, it couldn't be happening, it wasn't happening and it was all just a bad dream.

The eunuch looked pained at her outburst, but continued patiently once her initial roar had expended itself. "Ser Jaime's reputation would be, ah, tarnished slightly by such a tale, yes," he said far more calmly than he should have been. "And yet by rephrasing the lady of Hasegawa's threats of doom as a lover's tiff used as pretext for rebellion—or as a woman using herself as coin to try and sway a loyal knight—we might yet take away the sting of her words. Introduce doubt, and our enemies may destroy themselves."

Joffrey was still frowning. "Destroy themselves," he murmured. "Aye... you make an excellent point Lord Varys. I still want her head, but if we may take her friends away first..." He straightened in his chair and looked directly at the master of whisperers. "Ser Jaime is my beloved uncle and Lord Commander of the Kingsguard," he said and Cersei's heart sank. "His honor and nobility will survive a few specks of mud. Lord Varys, begin spreading a tale of how the witch tried to seduce Ser Jaime. Let's see how the bitch responds."

Cersei saw red. "What have you done?" she hissed. The master of magic looked amused. "Why, I've done Your Grace a service," he replied. "If your son and all the realm are convinced that your brother was fucking the Ulthosi whore, then they're less likely to believe all the other stories about where Ser Jaime was keeping his manhood, hmmm?" He smiled like a slit throat as Cersei paled. "And besides, who's to say they aren't true?"

"He wouldn't," Cersei said. "He would never." Jaime was loyal, her reflection, her other half. There was no possible way he would...

The Greyjoy's blue eye twinkled. "Are you so sure about that?" he said. "How many times was he alone with her on your excursion to Winterfell, or in the Red Keep afterwards? How many times did
he come to you late, blaming the king for his absence? Was it the king's fault, or was he throwing the Ulthosi up against a wall and having his way with her?"

To cast you down and take all that you hold dear. "He wouldn't," she repeated. She knew her twin like she knew herself. He would never betray her like that, it was simply impossible.

"Perhaps," Greyjoy said, then sighed. "It is such a shame, Your Grace. A woman of your beauty and majesty has been so ill-treated by the others in your life. I hope that I may alleviate the great burden that has been thrust upon you, if only for a moment." He bowed extravagantly and left, leaving Cersei behind to wrestle with her thoughts.

He wouldn't. He wouldn't. He wouldn't.

Wouldn't he?
The Art of the Possible

TYRION

If he had known how much irritating busywork went into being the Lord of Casterly Rock, Tyrion doubted that he would have ever asked for his birthright. Ever since he had returned from King's Landing he had been surrounded by paper and petitioners, all clamoring for a slice of imp pie while his father was away tending to the realm and the war. He couldn't even drown his woes in wine, or forget a while between the legs of a willing whore, as Lord Tywin had set his uncle Stafford as his steward. Or say rather "minder," he groused as Ser Stafford thumbed through a stack of raven scrolls.

"Another raven from our man in the Citadel," Stafford grunted. "The maesters are up in arms about the changing of the seasons, of all the bloody things." Tyrion nodded and made a note inside his head.

"Something to worry about when the white raven arrives," he said absently, eyeing a beautiful illuminated copy of The History of King Tybolt the Thunderbolt that cruelly held itself just out of reach. "Does our man have anything more than arguing maesters?"

"They're talking more and more about the Ulthosi," Stafford replied, scowling. "It sounds like the King may have to root out more treason in the Reach even after he's done with Highgarden."

"One thing at a time, uncle. On that note, how fares the war?" A bell chimed elsewhere in the keep, probably one of his many distaff relations calling for wine.

"Our forces should be at or past Darry by now. Lord Tywin will no doubt send a raven to King's Landing, and from there to here, when he departs if nothing else. From last reports Renly is still mustering, Stannis is hiding on his rock and the capital is preparing for siege."

"Hm," Tyrion said in reply. Punishing the North, well, it was necessary. Whatever the truth around Stark and his accusations, he couldn't be left to hide in his frozen domain. That much was truth. Attacking while the Baratheons assembled their armies and were still on the field though... Tyrion had never seen his father as angry as he had when they crossed paths on the goldroad. Is this the witch's fault, he wondered. Her attack on Jaime seems to have lit wildfire beneath Father's arse.

Suddenly there was a peculiar knock on the door, five quick taps, a pause, then two more. Tyrion looked at his uncle, puzzled. "Another raven?" he wondered.

Ser Stafford blinked. "Enter," he commanded.

The door opened and in strode the witch of Ulthos smiling all the while, surrounded by half a dozen of her ball creatures and her big Myrish sworn sword right behind her. "Lord Lannister," she said smoothly, as if she hadn't just strode uncaring into the enemy's camp. "A few moments of your time,
if I may?"

Tyrion gaped at the woman’s sheer audacity. He wondered if this was how Joffrey felt when she did
much the same thing to him in the Red Keep. He opened his mouth to speak—exactly what he
wasn’t sure—when his uncle grabbed the bell on his desk and rang it, bellowing "Guards!" at the top
of his lungs.

The smile slipped off the witch’s face. In all the times past Tyrion Lannister had encountered the
strange creature from Ulthos (or Yi-Ti, or the moon or wherever in the seven hells Acidalia was) she
had almost always been smiling. Very much like Jaime, he thought at times. It was halfway
endearing. Now the smile was gone and the witch’s expressionless face turned to him. Tyrion had the
distinct, cock-shrinkingly terrifying impression that he was facing an avatar of the Stranger, carved
from polished wood with eyes like green fire.

The sound of armored men running filled the hall behind them as the witch stared at Tyrion and his
uncle. "Lord Tyrion," she said slowly, "I have had a very long couple of days and I am one hundred
and ten percent done with your family's flailing shenanigans. There are things you need to know that
I have to tell you. Are we going to be able to talk about them like adults, or are you going to
be difficult?"

"Are you threatening us, witch?" Ser Stafford said, grasping the exact wrong thing to say at the exact
wrong moment with lightning speed. Lannister men spilled through the open door, swords drawn
and ready for action. The Myrman turned to face them, hand on his sword. The witch turned her
gaze to Stafford, looking almost disappointed.

"Difficult it is then," she sighed. Left hand passed over right, revealing white metal. The swarm
around her buzzed and she raised her hand towards his uncle—

"Stop!"

He didn't know when he'd gotten on his father's desk, but there he stood, hands out. The witch
blinked, her hand dropping just a little. Just enough, he hoped, to deescalate the situation before it
went too far. "All of you, return to your posts. No, wait, you," he pointed at the nearest guard.
"Fetch a servant, bring us bread, salt and wine." The man looked at the near conflagration, sheathed
his sword and ducked out as quickly as he could.

The other guards didn't relax, but neither did they try to attack. "I said return to your posts," Tyrion
repeated with a little more steel. "The woman isn't going to harm us here."

Ser Stafford looked torn between outrage and the sudden relief that comes with seeing death pass
right by your head. He nodded jerkily and the guards finally backed down and left. Tyrion let out a
great sigh of relief as the door closed. "I am sorry for that," he said to the witch. "You've come all
this way, it would be impolite to not at least listen to your speech."

"Tyrion!" his uncle spluttered. "Have you gone mad? We could have had—"

"We could not and you know it," Tyrion replied sternly. "If you thought otherwise you would've
countermanded me. Thankfully you didn't."

"You're offering guest right to a traitor! We should have her bound and sent to King's Landing!"

Captain Hasegawa stilled just a little, her gauntletled hand lifting a little. "An interesting suggestion,
uncle," Tyrion said quickly. "And yet I wonder, who exactly has the good captain betrayed?"

In any other circumstance the look of pure outrage on Stafford's face would have delighted him. It was a look meant to be savored, like a good Dornish sipping wine. With the witch bearing down on him, however he had to put aside such pleasures. "The king—"

"Offered, and was refused. The lady has sworn no oaths to the Iron Throne, so why would we call her traitor? And even if you're right and we should do this, do we truly have the force necessary to do so? Most of Casterly Rock's best men are with my father on the campaign, along with my brother. Joffrey's hound is leagues away. The Mountain is dead. No, uncle," Tyrion concluded, shaking his head, "the best solution here is diplomacy, not force."

"Your father would be ashamed," Ser Stafford said.

"My father is perpetually ashamed," Tyrion snorted. "At least I won't compound the shame by provoking an angry sorceress into demolishing my family's seat." A nervous servant girl scurried into the room with a tray of bread, a bowl of salt and a jug of wine with two golden goblets in her hands. "Ah, excellent. Please take a seat, my lady. There's no need for us to be uncomfortable about matters."

The tension in the sorceress' posture relaxed, just a little, and she sat down. Taking a piece of bread, she dipped it in the salt and deliberately took a bite. "Thank you for hearing me out, milord," she said.

"Of course." Tyrion smiled. "Might I interest you in a rematch, Captain? There aren't many Westermen who play cyvasse, and most of those who do would rather not play the lord's son."

"Tyrion—"

"Thank you Ser Stafford, that will be all." Tyrion said before his uncle could utter another sound. He dared not look at the man's face for fear of laughing. No matter how priceless the expression it wouldn't do to laugh, not now. The older man shifted a little, then he stormed out of the solar with whatever dignity he could still gather around himself. "My apologies for my uncle's behavior," Tyrion said, and meant it. "He's heard all the tales currently floating about you like your little grumkins, but I don't think he actually believed any of them before this moment."

"Well let's be fair, I'm not sure I'd believe most of the ones I've heard," the captain replied. "I heard one the other day in Riverrun where I'd blown up the whole of King's Landing and left everyone standing outside in their underwear." She shook her head. "Amazing how these things mutate so quickly."

"Stories are tricky things," he replied gravely, pulling the cyvasse board out and clearing some of the papers off his father's desk so they could play. "There are tales about me out there I could tell, but they are not fit for mixed company. Or any company at all, in truth. Still, I think they're quite fascinating."

"Maybe one day you'll find a story you can share."

"Oh, I think I have the beginnings of one right now. One summer day I was in my father's solar when a witch from a far land strolled in. Naturally, I did the only thing I could and challenged her to a game of cyvasse." The captain laughed at that, and pulled in a little closer, the better to see the board as Tyrion set it up. It was an excellent board, ivory and green stone from somewhere around Tyrosh according to the merchant who brought it to Lannisport. Not much gold on it, but one couldn't have everything in life.
"Before we begin," Tyrion said as he set up the board, "I ought to address the matter of the insult done our house. Why did you injure my brother as you did, Captain?"

Hasegawa blinked. "Really? You're more worried about what I did to Jaime than everything else that happened in King's Landing?"

"The king has his own methods of redressing insults," Tyrion replied. "Besides, Jaime is my brother. I have a more vested interest in him than Joffrey, king or no."

"Ah." Hasegawa shrugged. "I told him to step back. He didn't. It could've ended there but then he got back up."

"A knight of the Kingsguard must do his duty."

The sorceress raised one raven-black eyebrow. "Really? I thought the Kingsguard were supposed to defend the king. I made no aggressive moves toward Joffrey; hell, I was leaving when everything went crazy. All he had to do was stay down after the first hit and he'd have gotten off with dented armor and bruised pride." Hasegawa shrugged again. "When he got back up, well, we have a saying in Acidalia: 'play stupid games, win stupid prizes.'"

Tyrion nodded thoughtfully as he arranged the pieces. Jaime's pride was always a sore point for him; to be bested in one stroke by a woman... "I believe I understand your position, Captain," he said. "Though I doubt my father and siblings will. I daresay Jaime will keep holding a grudge for it."

"That's lovely for Jaime," the sorceress replied. "I'm sure it'll help keep him warm at night when he's away from Cersei." Tyrion blinked. "Ah, of course."

"You believe Stannis' tales, then?" he said, arranging his forces. This time he'd chosen a more defensive formation, not quite as tight as the Ulthosi did on their first tilt. The captain slowly arranged her pieces into an odd looking formation, clumps of foot and horse surrounding a single elephant with the king protected by the dragon and the remaining foot.

"Do you?" Captain Hasegawa countered, moving one of her little blocks forward.

"No," Tyrion half-lied. It would not surprise me in the slightest, he carefully didn't say. Cersei and Jaime have always been close, and Cersei has always been... possessive.

"I'm sorry, that was inconsiderate of me." She hummed tunelessly. "I think that Stannis' evidence would convince people he's right; it's strange to my understanding of things but I don't have the skillset necessary to say he's wrong one way or the other," she said finally. "I said something about it to Jaime when we last met; even if I didn't believe Stannis Jaime's reaction told me the truth."

Tyrion moved his forces closer, intent on crushing one of the captain's packets. "You've spoken to him recently?"

"I met with him and your father on the road north. I was hoping to get Lord Tywin to turn around and maybe not invade the North." Hasegawa gave him a wry look. "That didn't go as well as I'd hoped."

"I daresay it didn't." Tywin Lannister was a hard man on the best of days; trying to speak to him when the bit was between his teeth was a fool's errand at best. "He at least gave you an audience?"

"Only to ignore me." The captain moved swung another packet around Tyrion's formation, trying to poke at his underbelly. "Insult to repay insult. Or that's what my cultural advisers" she jerked a thumb upwards at her sworn sword "think. Personally I think he's too pissed to think straight."
"I assure you my lady, my father is not one to drink to excess."

"Hm? Oh, right, different slang," the sorceress replied. "Not pissed as in drunk, pissed as in angry."

"Of course." _And also probably correct about that_, he mused. "Still, anger or not the war's on, and we must fight it."

The captain winced as his heavy horse rode down one of her packets in its entirety. "Must we?" she asked. "We don't necessarily have to, and in all honesty we really shouldn't."

"Ah yes, this is the part where you tell me all the things you told Joffrey," he said. He moved his formation forward towards her king, who fell back in good order. "I won't say they're grumkin tales meant to frighten the simple, but you must understand that this all seems very... pat. Right as the new king is crowned his passed-over relatives rebel, but never mind all of that; legendary enemies are beginning to stir and coincidentally one of the rebellious kingdoms needs our help to defeat them."

The captain's king kept falling back. "True. But then you'd think that the new king would grasp the opportunity for unity this brings, wouldn't you? Like you said, the king’s subjects are rebelling but _never mind that_, there's legends to be fought. We all must make a stand, or else perish." She shook her head. "But fighting isn't what I had in mind for this, Tyrion. Is there an opportunity to throw down? Sure. But that's more likely to get people killed than anything else. Right now the only weapons I can trust will kill the Others are mine, and I don't have enough of them for every man in Westeros... and even if I did, I would _never_ give them away like that. Some cures are worse than the disease."

"What then would you have us do if not fight?"

"Prepare. The Others can control the climate to some extent. I wouldn't be totally shocked to find out that Planetos' squirrely seasonal cycle is their fault... maybe the Builders' fault when they set all this nonsense in motion." The captain stared at a point somewhere over Tyrion's head, lost in thought for a moment, then blinked. "Doesn't matter for right now. Anyway, most of the damage that they do isn't with swords or spears or even with their zombie minions, it's with _cold_. Most of the wights I've encountered probably were frozen or starved to death before they were reanimated." She suddenly let loose her dragon against Tyrion's skirmish line, burning away a chunk of his foot. "Every person south of the Wall who's warm and fed is a person that won't become part of the Unbidden army for another day. That's all I can ask you to do, so it's all I've _been_ asking you to do."

"And who fights away the Others whilst we huddle in our castles and huts?" Tyrion asked. He pulled his army back a little, only to run straight into Hasegawa's packets, now arranged in a column and crashing into his rear lines. "The Night's Watch certainly, that's the oath they swear when they're not otherwise providing shelter for the worthless and criminals, but who else? You?"

"If I have to," Captain Hasegawa said grimly. "I don't know the full story, not yet, but these beings... they scared what you would call gods. Hell, what _I_ would call gods. If they get the chance they'll kill everything on this world, and I can't let that happen."

"This isn't your country, Captain." Tyrion objected halfheartedly. "This isn't necessarily your fight until the Others cross your borders."

"You're not the first person to say that," she replied wryly. "But you're wrong for two reasons. First, they know I'm here and I have things they want. Even if I don't fight they'll chase me to the ends of the earth for that. Second... I swore an oath to protect the rights and lives of sophont life wherever I found it and I intend to do just that. Even if I'm the only one who can, even if you hate me for it, even if I die in the attempt, your world is worth fighting for. All worlds are worth fighting for." Her
column tore through his defenses, shredding his horse and barely missing his king.

Close, but not enough my lady. On impulse he sent his dragon forth, ripping open her remaining defenses and catching her king and dragon off guard. "Speaking of, death in two I believe."

Hasegawa looked over the board. "Nicely done," she said with a small smile. "I concede."

"An interesting strategy this time around."

"Thought I'd mix things up a bit. Can't rely on just one strategy all the time, after all. Alleras called it a Dothraki gambit when I tried it out on him."

Tyrion replayed the game in his head. Interesting. "Hm, aye," he said. "I can see the resemblance. You know," he added as he collected the pieces, "it occurred to me well after we parted the last time that I had seen your art of war before. The Dornish used similar strategies against the Targaryens when the dragons tried to complete their conquest."

"Well, it's not a new invention," the captain demurred. "How did they respond?"

"Aegon the Conqueror used his dragons, of course." Tyrion smirked, just a little. "Every time the Dornish would abandon a castle the dragons would set it and everything around it afire. Quite the neat and elegant solution, wouldn't you say?"

Hasegawa smiled without humor. "How did that work out for him in the end?"

"Not as well as he'd hoped," he admitted.

"Just so." The captain paused. "What do you have to say about my speech?"

Tyrion thought it over. "There's little I can do, even as the Lannister of the Rock," he admitted. "If I stray too far my knightly minder of an uncle will fight me. The lords of the west follow my father, not me. Should I do anything at all that seems like it might be giving what you say credence I might see stubbornness, perhaps outright defiance. If Father has already dismissed you then all I ought to do is the same thing."

The captain seemed to deflate a little, shoulders slumping in defeat. "I'd been afraid you'd say something like that," she sighed. "Dammit. Well... thank you for your honesty, Lord Tyrion." She rose from her chair, Tyrion rising with her. "I don't suppose physical proof would change your mind?"

"Like the proof you gave Joffrey? It would make for an interesting conversation piece to be sure—t'would no doubt give my uncle fits—but I need little convincing. There's only one Lannister who actually matters in Casterly Rock, and if he will not listen to you..." Tyrion shrugged helplessly. "I am sorry, captain."

The sorceress drooped once more. "I'll leave you a head, then," she said. "I wish this could've gone better."

"As do I. Do you need a way out of the castle?" As he said it the walls shook subtly and a low humming sound filled the air. The sorceress smiled a little at his surprise.

"My ride's here," she said with forced lightness. "There's a window at the end of the hall, that'll work for an exit." She bowed stiffly. "Thank you for hearing me out."

Tyrion returned the bow with one of his own. "I wish you better luck with the rest of the stubborn
bastards who rule the Seven Kingdoms." Captain Hasegawa merely nodded, turned and left, her shield in tow. The low hum peaked and faded away to the sound of bells. Tyrion turned back to his desk and saw a package about the size of a small cask covered by a simple white cloth sitting on the cvasse board. He peeked under the cloth and discovered it to be exactly what he thought it was.

"Well," he said to himself. "That was interesting." He drummed his fingers on the fine wood, refilled his goblet and drained half of it in one long pull. *I'll need all the mental lubrication I can get for this next part.*

A ring of the bell brought Ser Stafford back into the room. "You let her go," he said as he entered.

"We could not keep her, and to try was to risk the Rock going the way of Harrenhal," Tyrion replied. "But now she's gone and we're still here. Diplomacy works, uncle." He clucked sadly. "Amazing, really. The woman has so much power but is still so trusting. A kind ear was all it took to get all sorts of interesting things out of her."

Stafford's disapproving gaze faltered, just a little. "What did she say?"

*Now for the tricky part.* "Oh, all sorts of things but I think the one we need to be most interested in is this: apparently Renly is dividing his forces. A little more than half will follow Renly to King's Landing, but the rest will follow Randyll Tarly down the Ocean Road to here."

"That's madness," his uncle replied. "Why would he do that? Tywin would crush him!"

"If Father was at the capital, yes," Tyrion said. "But he's above the Trident by now. Renly is still in the south, and he has enough men to besiege King's Landing and Lannisport if he feels a need. And need I remind you that most of our levies are with Father?"

Stafford's face paled. "Gods. This is a disaster."

"Mm," Tyrion hummed. "We should thank the gods the witch is so free with her speech." A pause. "Renly will still be organizing his muster—all the Reach's levies can't move quickly together—so we should send word to our banners: get the smallfolk preparing for siege. Harvest and plant what we can, get it stored together. We also might suggest the same to the lords along the Tumblestone; Hoster Tully's an old campaigner and knows weakness when he sees it. Should Renly come at us from the south he may well send men up the river to attack from the north. Best to secure the whole Westerlands."

"Aye," his uncle replied. "Aye, that's... good thinking Tyrion. I'll have the ravens sent at once. If that popinjay thinks he can poke the lion then we'll paint the hills red with Tyrell blood!"

Tyrion nodded absently, sipping at his wine. The deception pained him a little. It would have been nice if he hadn't had to lie to the captain, to his uncle, to the lords he was tricking into doing the smart thing. Sadly *nice* and *Lannister* had never worked well together, and so deception was the only real ploy he had here.

*The woman is willing to die for ungrateful shits like us,* he thought. *Even if she never figures it out, that is a debt a Lannister has no difficulty repaying.*

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 243**

I am so very tired of Lannisters.

Okay, the embassy went better than the one at Darry, so that's good. Tyrion Lannister's the one
currently holding down the fort and he's sharp enough to see the threat. Problem is, he apparently only has as much authority as his father gives him, and that's not a whole hell of a lot. Thoros tells me that he's also not well-liked by pretty much anybody not into debauchery... which is most of the lords sworn to Tywin. Man *did* strike me as a humorless asshole, so that doesn't surprise me in the least.

I'm half-tempted to try something stupid and risky with Tywin; remove him from play and see if that gives Tyrion freedom to act in his best interests. Thing is, if Thoros is right that might just destabilize things even more. Tywin might be a load-bearing noble, so pulling him would certainly harm Joffrey's war effort but it might also cause all sorts of havoc I can't afford right now.

Gripping hand, I might have to try it anyway regardless. Stark is pretty sure that his forces at Moat Callin can fend off any army that tries to force it, but if he's wrong and the Lannisters break out into the North... above all else I can't let them run loose while Stark's men are preoccupied with keeping the free folk and the northerners from killing each other and reinforcing the Watch. So that's my hard line: if Lannister breaks through, I go loud.

At least I got a good game out of it. And I know that Dothraki tactics don't work as well in *cyvasse* as they do in reality. Oh well, next round pays for all.

Anyway, so much for the west, it's time to head south and see what Al's relatives have to say for themselves.
Not Quite the Happiest Place on Planetos, But Close

SARELLA

After all the rushing about aboard Carefree Victory, the chance to stop for a moment and not worry about things felt like a long-lost luxury. Arianne hadn't meant for that, of course; the moment she'd recovered her wits she had Sarella placed in an apartment well away from the court and the prince, house arrest in all but name. So far as Sarella was concerned though, that was the princess' problem, not hers.

She had done what she could, albeit rashly. The captain would arrive shortly and then she would take the reins. Things may not have proceeded smoothly, but they were proceeding nonetheless.

Whilst waiting Sarella took the time to catch up on her studies. At the Citadel, the maesters taught that there was no one 'true' history to be told. Men were fallible, their accounts blended with exaggeration and time caused both to fade and mix together until one could not be determined from the other. All tales had to be viewed with skepticism. Unless one had a witness that was not a man to verify the tales.

Jade's familiars filled that purpose for her; in Westeros they had the weirwoods.

Sarella sat at a writing desk carved from solid weirwood, an extravagance fit for kings. Her eyes were closed, one hand gently dancing over the white wood, the other hovering over a fresh sheet of paper, pen in hand. She let her mind stretch out and play across the weirwood's memories. Images drifted past her closed eyes, scraps and fragments of things that happened near the desk, wherever it might have been. When something caught her attention she would focus, bring the image into greater clarity and then her pen would go to work, scratching out notes on who and what she saw.

Time passed in the world outside, but Sarella paid little heed. She ate, slept, used the chamber pot as needed but for a night and a day the desk was the whole of her world. What amazing things had happened in its presence! The archmaesters would scoff and tug at their masks nervously—as usual—but what she had learned so far would rewrite half the history books of the last hundred years. Sarella paged through memories and idly dreamed of turning her notes into a book and returning in triumph to the Citadel to ram it down the conclave's throats, possibly even literally...

"Sarella?" The voice came from the outside. Sarella blinked, detaching from the web of memory and coming back to the room. The apartment was noticeably darker than it had been the last time she checked. I have been too engrossed, she thought. Lord Rivers was right; I should be more careful on these expeditions.

"Your lady arrived this morning," Prince Oberyn replied slowly. "She's been in conference with Doran since. It's almost time for dinner, and your presence is requested."

She nodded, hand still stroking the white wood. "Of course," she replied. "Arianne has lifted my sentence, then?"
"More like her father overrode her, at least while your friend is in the Water Gardens." He gave her a warning look. "I would avoid Sunspear while Doran remains here, if I were you."

"Just as well."

"Accosting the princess like that wasn't wise," her father noted. "She could very well have had you removed from the Gardens. Possibly off the nearest cliff if you frightened her enough."

"She'd never dare risk your wrath like that," Sarella said. "March me out the gates at spearpoint, mayhaps, but then there are all sorts of ways a determined person could sneak back in." She shrugged negligently. "Arianne would find me a difficult houseguest to remove."

"I wonder, did your new mentor teach you how to be such a pain?"

Sarella looked at Oberyn with innocent eyes. "Why Father, I learned it all from observing you."

Her father let out a single bark of laughter. "A touch! Truly you are of my blood, daughter. Even if your uncle might despair of it at times." His brow furrowed once more. "But what exactly were you doing? You seemed to be napping, but also writing. A curious thing."

"An exercise in some of the more unusual skills I've been learning the last half-year," she said with the Sphinx's smile. "Captain Hasegawa discovered some very fascinating truths about weirwood and I've been... exploring that, you might say."

"Indeed." Father sounded like he was humoring her. It rankled, like it always did, but Sarella let it pass.

"This desk once belonged to Daenerys Targaryen," she said softly. "It was one of the things she brought with her from King's Landing to Sunspear, and then to here. Before the war she wrote a dozen or more letters to Daemon Blackfyre begging him not to rebel on her account. During it she wrote a dozen more, offering him clemency if he would just bend the knee."

Father gave her an odd look. "No such letters exist."

"Likely the Blackfyres destroyed them in their exile, or they were lost when the last of them fell." Or Bloodraven got hold of them somehow, she thought. "Weirwood never dies fully, and it remembers things. The desk remembers Princess Daenerys putting pen to paper, conversations she had with Blackfyre and Daeron II... all of it."

"I see," her father said. He didn't; Sarella could see that quite clearly. "Any other earth-shattering revelations the desk has given up, my dear?"

Sarella stood and concentrated. "Well," she said slowly, "I believe that Uncle Doran was conceived on this desk." Father blinked, more than a little startled. "At least I think so; it certainly looks like the pictures of Grandmother... though I had no idea she was so athletic in her youth." She pulled away from the desk and let the web of memory drop away completely with only a little sadness.

"I shall remember that," Father said, his eyes shining with a certain glee. "But enough of the dusty past, daughter. Let us focus on the now. Like your sorceress." The glee in his eyes shone even brighter. "I approve, by the way."

Sarella felt her cheeks begin to heat. "I," she said, then stopped. She wanted to explode in furious denial, but at the same time having her father's approval felt incredibly good. "How fared the meeting?" she asked instead.
If her father noticed—which he certainly did—he paid it no mind. "About as well as could be expected," he replied. "Doran took her news like Doran always takes things. He wants to return to the topic after dinner."

"Does he believe?" Sarella asked. So few had, at this point.

"Perhaps. It's hard to tell with Doran."

"Will he help?"

"That, I know not. Not without concessions certainly. Perhaps if Elia's avenger would aid us in finishing the job..."

"Clegane is dead," she replied cautiously.

"The Lannisters yet live."

_Oh gods damn everything, Father._ "Do you expect her to kill them for you?"

Oberyn scowled. "I would much rather kill them myself and not hide behind her skirts like a child, but if she has the power then why not?"

"The captain would say that live Lannisters are more useful than dead ones," Sarella replied. "All killing them achieves is chaos, and the last thing any of us need right now is more chaos. Not with the seasons changing and the Others coming south."

"I would see Tywin and his spawn dead as justice for my sister and her children." her father said after a long moment. "Your sorceress dangles justice before me like a scrap of sweetmeat on a string, then pulls it away should I try to snatch it. Doran may be willing to wait; I am not."

Something tightened in Sarella's throat at that pronouncement. "I would not advise striking as the viper does," she said with forced lightness.

"Why daughter, you wound me," he said, feigning shock. "I would never break guest right like that."

"You misunderstand, Father," she countered. "Ellaria would be quite cross if I had to break your arms and legs if you even _thought_ about doing something rash, but I'm sure she would forgive me in time."

Her father turned to face her, face blank with surprise. "You would do that?"

"You want vengeance for your sister, my aunt," Sarella said in reply. "I want to keep my sisters, my father, my mother, my uncle and all those I care for alive." She looked into his eyes, searching for something. Possibly understanding, or at least acceptance. "The dead can wait, Father. Concentrate on the living." _Please._

Oberyn's expression was unreadable. "It is a hard thing you ask of me," he murmured.

"I ask nothing more than what's asked of me." Sarella closed her eyes, feeling the ghost of winter's wind on her face. "In my dreams I see everyone I love before me, pale, rotting and walking towards me," she said tightly. "We have been given a chance to avert this, we _must_ take it."

Her father's face could have been carved from the hard stone of the Dornish cliffs. "And if we refuse? What will you do then, daughter?"

"I will defy you." The frank answer seemed to surprise him even more. "I'll defy Uncle Doran, every
king in Westeros and the gods themselves if I have to. Captain Hasegawa has taught me that, if nothing else. A little defiance is good for the soul," she added with a hint of impishness.

Oberyn closed his eyes, and the blank hardness left his face. "They grow up so fast," he said, with a melancholy in his voice Sarella had never heard from him before. "I can only pray to the gods that you and your sorceress know what you're doing, Sarella, but I will tell you this: no matter what my brother decrees, you have my spear should you need it."

"Knowing what we're doing would be nice," Sarella mused. "But we'll manage regardless."

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 245

Got to admit, I like the Water Gardens better than a lot of the other castles I've been to so far. I suppose it technically isn't a castle, more like a glorified resort like New Odessa with a wall around it, but whatever. It's got nobles in it and a wall, therefore it is a castle.

The really nice thing about it so far is that the reception has been much more cordial than I've gotten since... Riverrun, really. The Martell family didn't exactly roll out the red carpet or anything but I wasn't shunned, insulted or had the guards set on me even once! After the disaster in the Vale and the full Lannister experience, I would've given them full marks just for that.

So anyway, spent most of the morning in discussion with the Prince of Dome (An interesting thing, that; apparently the Martells were princes before the unification and managed to hold onto that title when they negotiated their way into the Seven Kingdoms. Clearly most the diplomatic skill in Westeros is concentrated in the south.) about the overall threat and what it means for his principality. The prince didn't dismiss me, he didn't talk down or even express any sort of vocal skepticism... but at the same time he didn't say he'd do anything about it either.

Doran Martell would be an absolute bastard of a poker player. He's got the face for it.

His eldest and heir, Princess Arianne (Also of interest, Dorne practices absolute primogeniture instead of the male-preference rules set up elsewhere in Westeros.) apparently decided to be skeptical for him. She asked a lot of leading questions, mostly about the Others and what was "really" going on up in the North. Lot of hostility there—when she wasn't doing her best to poke holes in the briefing she sat back and did her best to burn a hole in my head using only her eyes. Which was interesting, if a little unsettling. I'm not entirely sure what that's about, though if I'm reading the room right there's a lot of "that" to go around. Things seem a little tense around Casa Martell; some of it's probably my arrival and Al's preview show, but I'm not sure that's the only thing going on here. The prince and princess seemed very awkward with each other.

Or maybe I'm just projecting, because the prince's brother, also-a-prince Oberyn was there too. I'd heard a fair bit about Oberyn Martell from Thoros and Willas before coming here. According to them, the man was notorious for being a serious hedonist and having an extremely short fuse. On the other hand, he's also Al's father—which surprises the absolute fuck out of me because Al's one of the most levelheaded people I've ever met. (Guess I have to meet her mother at some point, then. Clearly somebody in that genetic relationship had to be the steady one and if wasn't him...) He didn't say a damn word during the discussion, just kept giving me the once-over. Given his rep I almost just told him I wasn't interested, but back at the academy they taught me that blurting out rebuttals to unspoken propositions is kind of a bad thing when in the middle of complex briefings and diplomatic maneuverings.

Al will rejoin us at dinner—something about being "busy elsewhere" when I first got here—which I'm pretty happy about. Finally we'll have the band back together. After dinner we'll see if we can't
finish the discussion we started. Martell might be hard to read, but I think I can convince him to at least get his people ready if not send logistical support north. It ain't much but every little bit helps, and after the Lannister shitshow I'm more than willing to take any win I can get.

SARELLA

Dinner started well enough, for which Sarella thanked all the gods she could think of. The cooks had brought out kid roasted with honey and blood oranges, and a stew of fish and fiery dragon peppers. With it came grape leaves stuffed with dates and white cheese, and loaves of warm flatbread. Strong, sweet Dornish wine flowed like water and she allowed herself to enjoy the moment for the first time since leaving for Oldtown. The Sphinx's mask had been carefully constructed, a necessary protection considering her blood and sex, and even in Jade's company she kept some parts of it over her face.

*But not right now,* she told herself. *Even if only for a moment, I can be only Sarella, not Alleras.* She sipped her wine and enjoyed the stinging bite of the dragon pepper as it mingled with the fish.

"My compliments to the chef," she heard Jade say from the high table not so far from where she sat. "The fish is excellent."

"Truly?" Prince Doran said as he sampled the stew himself. "Most Westerosi don't like Dornish spices."

"Never said I was Westerosi, did I?" Jade replied impishly. "Reminds me a lot of home, actually." Doran nodded agreeably at that and the conversation shifted back toward something Sarella couldn't make out from her position.

Right across the table her sister Tyene lounged in a dress that matched her eyes and probably cost more coin than half of Dorne would ever see in their lives. Tyene deftly cut apart a chunk of kid and delicately dipped it into the orange sauce on the tip of her knife. "You seem happy, little sister," she said.

Sarella considered this. "I suppose I am," she replied. "It's been a strange few moons but... yes. I am happy. I've fallen into very strange dealings, but I'm learning more than I think I ever might've at the Citadel."

"Oh?" Tyene raised one delicate blonde eyebrow. "Do tell."

"The world is so much *bigger* than we thought, Ty!" Sarella's expression was eager, ready to impart even a small fraction of what she was learning to somebody else. "There are places that the Sea Snake never ventured, lands and realms to the south and west where none from Westeros nor Essos have ever gone or *seen* before. And the captain comes from even *further* away! I learned from her histories; her homeland once was a desert less hospitable than the worst parts of Dorne, a cold barren waste where even the air was purest poison. But over the course of generations her people changed it into a vast expanse of forest and plain."

"Truly an impressive feat of magic," Tyene said.

Sarella shook her head. "Not magic, *science*, no more magic than your potions or the blacksmith's craft. Everything she and her people can do can be repeated if you know how. There are things her people are taught as children that would confound the most learned archmaesters, but I've been learning what I can. It's... amazing, frustrating, *humbling* what she knows but she's so willing to teach."
Tyene smiled a quiet little smile. "Your witch has been good to you, Sara," she noted.

"She's not my witch," Sarella grumbled.

"Oh? Not for lack of trying, I hope." Tyene said. Sarella carefully didn't look at her sister, examining the fine cloth covering the table, the bowls of meat and fruit, just keeping her eyes elsewhere. "Oh Sara," Ty sighed.

"You are almost the last person on earth I ever expected to have this conversation with."

Ty tittered, just a little. "Be thankful Nym is still in Skyreach, she'd have demanded details." She sipped her wine delicately. "I on the other hand am far more capable of acting as your confessor."

"Confessor?" Sarella said, perplexed. "I have nothing to confess."

"And isn't that such a shame," Tyene sighed. "We're not blind, little sister," she added with a gentle smile. "No matter how much you deny it. I've only seen the two of you together for a few moments but I can tell. I can only hope that she proves worthy to be the companion of a Sand Snake. Felling the Mountain was a good beginning, but there's more to life than feats of arms."

"Father approves," she said without thinking. Her sister blinked, then took another delicate bite of roast kid.

"Well, that's a good thing," Ty replied. "It would certainly ease Obara's fears if nothing else."

Sarella felt a sudden sinking sensation in her gut. "I'm almost afraid to ask," she said.

Tyene shrugged. "She'd heard the tales of the witch's hour in King's Landing, and thought she might have to challenge the woman to a fight. To ensure that she was capable of keeping you safe, you see."

"Mother above all." Sarella could see how that would play out in her mind's eye: Obara would make the challenge, Jade would laugh it off, Obara would get angry and force a confrontation and then the captain would release her familiars and her gauntlet and only due concern for Sarella's sister would keep Obara from a fate just as dire as the Kingslayer's. "Please tell me you managed to convince her otherwise," Sarella pleaded.

"Don't fret, little sister," Tyene laughed. "T'was just a passing fancy, nothing more. Obara wouldn't let her temper get that much the better of her. Besides, as your elder sisters we're allowed to be a little protective of you. Nym did much the same for me, and you'll do the same for El and Obella when they start courting."

Sarella drooped. "Gods, can this get even more ridiculous?" she wondered.

Just then the conversation in the hall lulled at the right moment for her father's voice to boom out from the high table where he, her uncle and Jade were seated across half the bloody hall: "So!" he said cheerfully. "I understand you've been fucking my daughter."

Ty blinked, hastily grabbing her cup. "As a rule," she said mildly, "you shouldn't ask the gods questions you don't want answered."

Sarella froze solid, completely unable to move or even breathe as the captain very carefully put down her goblet and explained, in a very calm and steady voice, that no, she was in fact not bedding Sarella. To which her father looked outraged and returned with "And why not? Is she not good enough for you?!"
What sin did I commit to deserve this? She wanted to die; let the Others freeze her solid, let Joffrey chop off her head, or dragons eat her face. She should've stayed back on the ship, or mayhaps even Oldtown…

"I wouldn't say that," Jade replied, taking another drink. "I'm not exactly looking to get, um, entangled at the moment. Too much to do, not enough time to commit to it." Tyene reached across the table to pat Sarella's hand consolingly. "On the other hand," she continued, "if I put together a list of people worth that kind of time… well. Who knows what the future brings, your highness?"

Oberyn's black eyes glittered with faint amusement. "A diplomatic answer, captain," he said. "Forgive my impertinence; my daughters are dear to me, and I would see them happy if I can."

"And if you could forgive my impertinence," Prince Doran interjected to Sarella's relief and eternal gratitude. "We have heard from the minstrels' tales that you are something of a singer yourself, my lady. Would you be so kind as to grace us with a song or two?"

"Sing for my supper, eh?" Jade said wryly. "I'd be honored, your highness." She stood, one of her familiars hovering above her shoulder and humming with a sound that reminded Sarella of the captain's guitar. "Here's a song from a very long time ago and a place far, far from here. But from what I know of the Dornish, I think you'll appreciate it." The familiar strummed quickly, and the captain began to sing:

**Come ye knights and come ye pilots**
With your ships and sabers shining
Come and stop your children's crying
Come and join the Jedi Queen!

Come with might and come with glory
Set your dreams on wings a-soaring
Hear the ancient hidden story
Come and join the Jedi Queen!

"(An interesting song,)" Ty whispered as the captain sang her song about rebellion.

"(Aye,)" Sarella muttered in return. "(This one is new to me, I confess.)"

Tyene smirked, just enough to break the innocent facade she enjoyed so much. "(Dornish look, Dornish palate and Dornish voice. I rather think I agree with Father's assessment. Sara. I shall light a candle to the Maiden for your happiness.)"

"(Stop. Helping.)"

"(Shant.)"

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**A PRINCESS OF DORNE**

They reconvened in Father's solar just after dinner, the lord of Sunspear hobbling slowly into the room on his stick, his beloved daughter beside him for extra support. Arianne carefully helped her father lower himself into a chair before the fireplace, then sat down at his left. To his right Uncle Oberyn took the next seat.

Squatting in a chair in the corner, half-hidden by the shadows streaming off the Martells, was the fat man from Pentos with the dyed-yellow beard. Her father's mysterious visitor from across the narrow
sea, here to discuss what Arianne knew not, but it had kept him from her for a day and a night before her cousin arrived with her dubious gift. Arianne swallowed a scowl at the thought of Sarella, bookish, quiet Sarella, slamming that monstrous thing down before her with a look of malicious triumph in her eyes.

_The girl wanders off to the Reach and comes back so full of herself, she thought savagely. I would have removed her entirely from the Gardens had Uncle not been here._ As she thought it the door opened once again and the witch strolled in, her cousin and the large Myrman in red behind her.

"Captain Hasegawa, thank you for attending me this evening," Father said in greeting.

"Going out on a limb here," said the witch, "but I'm probably not going to like what you've decided, right?"

Father came straight to the point. "Dorne will heed your warnings, captain," he said gravely. "However beyond that I fear that there is little we may do to aid you in the wars to come. Our spears are just enough to defend ourselves should the Baratheons or the Lannisters cast their gaze in our direction."

"No, that's fair. I'm not asking for more men. We may need them before this thing is done but right now between whatever volunteers and voluntolds heading there now and the free folk we're probably hitting the logistical cap at the Wall as it is," agreed the witch. "The important thing for you and your lords is to get the people ready for the harshest winter you possibly can. When this thing hits it's going to hit hard."

Arianne lifted one delicate eyebrow. "Dorne has always been mild in winter," she noted. "Summer has always been our bane here."

"Oh sure, this is a subtropical region and mostly desert," the witch replied. "I can imagine most winters here aren't too bad. I can't stress enough that this is not most winters, though; the Others aren't just going to bring winter along with them, if what we've learned about the Long Night is right they're controlling the season and they've weaponized it to boot. If the Others get past the Wall, expect freezing conditions at noon even here." She shook her head. "This could get very ugly very quickly, so be ready."

Arianne wasn't sure about that. The whole thing still smacked of snarks and grumkin tales, the sort of thing that littered stories from the Age of Heroes before the house of Nymerios sailed across the sea. There was a hook here, something the witch wanted beyond her croakings of doom, something she could see dimly glinting in the shadows just out of her grasp...

"As for the matter of the Iron Throne," Uncle Oberyn took up the cause now, speaking from the opposite side of her father's chair. "Dorne will remain neutral. Even if we had the men to make a difference in the fight, we will not side with the current claimants."

The witch nodded. "I expected as much," she said.

"We owe you a debt of gratitude for killing Clegane," Father said quietly. "But our gratitude can only stretch so far. I will not raise my spears for the boy-king in King's Landing, but neither will I do so for the prig of Dragonstone or his popinjay brother."

"Hm." The witch was silent for a moment, gazing into the fire. "Allow me to propose a hypothetical," she said. "Let's say, for argument's sake, that I can bring all of the sides in this fight together without violence. Something like the councils you used to determine who would be king in previous succession crises. If that were to happen, could I count on your attendance? I'm not asking
for a specific vote, just... show up and have your voices heard?"

Uncle laughed without much humor. "Sorceress you may be," he scoffed. "But to do that? Truly you must be the Crone and the Father made flesh to accomplish such a thing."

"I don't think it's that tricky," the witch protested, looking thoughtful. "Stark would be easy enough to bring to a council, he just wants the whole thing over with so he can concentrate on the Wall. Tully will follow Stark if it comes to that. Stannis might take some convincing, but I've got an angle. Renly might not be swayed but the Tyrells could be, and without the Tyrells Renly's just a pretty face and a horse... On the other hand the Vale's locked down, which presents difficulties. King's Landing would be tricky, I don't know which way Joffrey would hop. I doubt I could get Tywin to come to the table but maybe one of the kids? And then of course the Greyjoys but I haven't talked to them yet. Yeah, no," she concluded, nodding to herself. "Kind of an uphill climb but not a miraculous one."

The fat Pentoshi in the corner made a noise for the first time that evening, coughing in a way that Arianne presumed was supposed to be delicate. "You've certainly put thought into the idea, my lady," he said. "It may not go as well as you would think."

"True, but on the flipside it'd be pretty difficult to fuck it up any more than it already is." The witch cocked her head. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've completely forgotten your name since we were introduced, ser...?"

The fat man chuckled, making his yellow forked beard wobble in a disturbing way. "No ser, my lady. Illyrio Mopatis, a humble merchant and magister of Pentos, at your service. You've certainly talked to most of those who claim the Iron Throne, but have you spoken to all of them?"

The witch looked confused. "So far as I know?"

Mopatis leaned back in his chair. "I see," he said. "As one foreigner to another, may I ask what you know about the war that put King Robert on the throne to begin with?"

"Ah, let me think," the witch's eyes unfocused. "As I understood the summary version the previous king sort of went crazy, started burning people alive and the lords decided they'd had enough of his shenanigans so they rebelled. Something like that, anyway. It was a bit too recent history for me to do more than just file away for later study."

"Just so." Mopatis nodded in a fashion that he probably thought regal. "When the mad king and his heir died there were two more members of House Targaryen still living, a young boy and his infant sister. They fled across the narrow sea and lived there ever since, hoping that one day they might be able to press their claim as well."

The witch raised an eyebrow. "Interesting, so there's more people out there. I don't suppose you know how I could, you know, actually find them?"

Mopatis sighed in dramatic fashion. "Alas, no. The boy Viserys was killed most cruelly by the Dothraki horse-lords some moons ago, but that is the last I know of them. His sister Daenerys I presume still lives as wife to one of their chieftains, but my eyes and ears are not everywhere, I fear."

"Huh. Well, that's interesting if not terribly useful intelligence. Thank you, magister. I think."

The cheesemonger waved a chubby hand. "Think nothing of it, my lady. Just a reminder that there are more things at play here than you might suspect at first. Those of us foreign to Westeros must look out for each other, after all."
"Well," the witch said finally. "Thank you for listening and believing, your highness. I understand that it's probably hard to grump but still."

"After all the roads you traveled to reach Dorne, I could do nothing else," Father said with a smile. "I invite you to spend as much time in the Water Gardens as you like. No doubt you have many more places to go before the war's end; if we can be a source of respite it is the least we can do."

The witch sighed mightily. "I'm not going to say it isn't nice here," she replied. "We might even spend another day or so here, but we've got places to be and things to do, Prince Doran. The Others are still on the move and I can't lollygag around too long. The offer is appreciated, though."

"Of course," Father said. "If you will excuse me, I wish to speak to my friend Illyrio in private before bed." He rose, grasping his stick tightly in one hand. Arianne, Oberyn, the witch and her companions all rose with him, and as Father limped painfully towards a side room with the cheesemonger and her uncle in tow, the others made to leave the solar.

Arianne carefully made sure that she was besides the witch before stopping just before the verge. "May I speak with you?" she said carefully. "Alone?"

The witch stopped. "Right now?"

"If you would please," she replied.

"My lady?" her cousin asked, concern writ plain on her face. The witch waved her off. "It's okay, Al. You and Thoros head back to the ship and crash out. I don't think I'll be that long."

Arianne took a deep breath and focused on the hurt she felt when she read Father's letter to Quentyn. The hurt spread out from her breast and into her face. "I am Prince Doran's eldest child," she began. "By right and law I should be the one to inherit rule over Dorne. But when I was younger, I learned that my father decided to disinherit me, to give Sunspear and my rights to my younger brother. Even now, he still considers Quentyn his true heir, though I manage Sunspear in his name when he retreats here."

The witch's face was carefully blank in the face of Arianne's misery. "I'm very sorry for you," she said neutrally. "But I still don't see where I come into this."

"The stories of Lord Stark's witch from afar precede you, my lady," Arianne said, the words tumbling out in a great rush. "They say you are a great sorceress; your ship proves that much. They say your speech is strange but fair and wise, that you counseled the king and might have convinced him of the threat had not the Lannisters killed him. That you humbled Joffrey and the Kingslayer with ease, then pulled the Hand's tower down as you escaped from the Red Keep. You convinced that stubborn mule Stannis of your truth and cowed Renly with a gesture. That no lord, high or low, can hide from your metal dragon should you wish. You hold the Tyrell heir as hostage against the Reach turning against you! You are mighty, my lady, and I would wish your might is on my side."

"Convince my father to restore my rights, and I will set all of Dorne against those you call enemies."
Our spears are few, but there are other ways to win a war. My cousin Tyene is skilled with all manner of potions and knows the ways of the Faith like few others; would you prefer to deal with the Imp over his father? Tyene could sneak into his camp and poison his drink in ways no maester would ever detect. Remove Joffrey and put his brother or sister on the throne? Or mayhaps eliminate all of them? Dorne could do that, if you wished. There are many obstacles on your path that we may clear, if you support my claim to Sunspear." Arianne stepped forward, pressing as close as she dared to the witch. "You could even have me," she breathed in the low, hungry voice she used to drive men in the direction she wanted them to go. "If only for a little while, but I could give you so much more than my mannish twig of a cousin ever could. All you need do is speak to Father."

The witch stepped backward, still stone-faced. "That's a very generous offer, your highness," she said gently. "But I think I'm going to refuse."

Arianne blinked. "Why?" she asked. "Do you not understand what I am offering?"

"I understand it pretty well," the witch said dryly. "And, seduction aside, I won't say I'm not tempted. Having extra options would be nice. But there's two things stopping me. First of all, I may not follow Westerosi law but I have my own to worry about, and that law says that I don't play kingmaker. Whoever ends up running this circus—in Dorne or in Westeros—is your affair, not mine. I won't play favorites any more than I already have."

She was surprised by the reaction. Most men, even many women would have fallen at her feet for less. "And the second reason?" she demanded.

The witch's face grew even colder. "You shouldn't have suggested killing the children," she said flatly. "There are lines I will not cross and that is one of them."

Arianne's head swam. She'd never expected the witch to be squeamish on top of all her power. "You may not have a choice in that matter, captain," she said. "And if you turn me down you may find Dorne less welcoming than you think, the next time you come here."

"We'll see," replied the witch. "Until then, regretfully I must decline your offer." She bowed shorty. "Good evening, your highness," she said, then left the princess stewing alone outside her father's solar.
The Third-Least Happiest Place on Planetos

THE DROWNED MAN

The witch's ship was an abomination, of that much Aeron was certain. The water roiled and churned around it as though shoved away by invisible oars whilst the ship lay still at dock. No ship should spurn the holy sea like that, making a mock of the Drowned God's hold over all that sailed upon his domain. Some machination of the Storm God his drowned men might say; it was the easy conclusion, and they might well be right.

Aeron stroked his wet beard thoughtfully. Such a ship could well be of the Storm God, but the metal hull sported wicked burns along the prow, as if the ship had been struck repeatedly by thunderbolts. Perhaps, just perhaps, this witch-captain Hassey-gawa stole the abomination from the Storm God and uses it to spit in the eye of the storm and the sea at once, going where she pleases.

It reminded him of the Crow's Eye. The witch and his brother were likely to be at odds, if they weren't already, the green lands all in uproar and the ironborn off to the side. A dangerous situation, he thought.

"Look at you," a soft voice crooned to his side. Aeron turned and saw Balon's wild daughter standing before the abomination, staring with adoration at the thing. She reached out towards the hull. Her fingertips grazed against it, gingerly at first then with more assurance she stroked the white metal. "Aren't you a pretty thing?" she murmured. "Such a pretty thing..."

"Asha," Aeron said sternly. "Take your hand from that ungodly thing."

"Ungodly, uncle?" his niece replied. "It's a ship."

"A foul machination of the Storm God is what it is," Aeron said. "No boat should churn the waters like that at rest, and no boat should be able to fly."

"What if we could, though?" Asha asked, a queer light coming into her eyes. "What if the ironborn had ships and boats like this one? No other ship could stand against something like this. With ships like this we could reave anywhere: Westeros, the Free Cities, Slaver's Bay, even the far-off lands of the Summer Islands, Yi-Ti and Asshai couldn't mount a proper defense. If we could take to the skies..."

"If is a dangerous word, Asha," Aeron growled. The Storm God's honeyed promises had slipped inside her mind, he knew. The thought of invincible ironborn reaving at will across the world was tempting, but there would be a terrible price to pay for it. "We are ironborn, the Drowned God's children. From the sea we came and to the sea we return. Do not ask for things that god cannot provide." He shook his head. "Now come, niece. Your father has finished speaking with the witch in his solar, and now requests your presence with the other captains."

The other captains had come to Pyke at the demand of the Lord Reaper, not long after word came of Robert Baratheon's death and the accession of his son to the throne. Not long after that came rumors of a struggle in the Red Keep, and the Baratheon's brothers tilting against each other and the boy-king to see who would take the Iron Throne. Balon called the Iron Fleet back to port to weigh his options. Lordsport was filled with ships now, the fleet alongside merchant ships Balon would not let leave so the green lands knew nothing of his plans. Many among the captains thought the Lord Reaper would crown himself king once more. Aeron favored this; the Iron Islands were to be ruled by ironborn, not greenlander boys or stags who claimed crowns without the god's favor.
Aye, or witches for that matter. Aeron took the horse provided for him and rode south to Pyke, Asha alongside him. The witch's news was unnerving. The still-moving head was an ugly thing, a mock of the Drowned God's power and a clear warning. Whatever the full truth behind the outlandish tales the witch spun was, it was clear that these Others belonged to no god worshiped in the islands or the green lands, nor any of the far countries beyond the narrow sea. Balon had listened, then sent him to fetch his daughter from Lordsport so that all the fleet would hear his decision.

The two entered the great hall to find most of the captains already there, milling about in mild confusion. Asha went to find the crew of her Black Wind, and Aeron moved to find a place near the Seastone Chair.

The witch stood off to one side with a tall young lord with a melancholy cast to his features, engaged deep in a conversation. "You must come to the Lonely Light someday, Lady Hassey," the lord said. Aeron realized that the man was a Farwynd, a queer folk who held the scattered isles beyond Great Wyk. Those of the Lonely Light were queerer than the rest, they said; unholy creatures that could take on the forms of sea lions and walruses. No coincidence that the witch would find company with such.

"Thank you for the invitation, Lord Gyles," the witch replied. "I don't know if I'll be able to take you up on it, so much to do before the storm hits after all. Still, I would be fascinated to hear more about your family's voyages to the west."

What more the witch and the man from the Lonely Light might have had to say to one another Aeron knew not, for in that moment a single bell tolled through the great hall and conversations stilled as Balon Greyjoy, gaunt and hard as the rocks upon which Pyke stood, strode into the hall and took his place upon the Seastone Chair.

Balon raised a hand, and the crowd fell silent. "Captain Hassey-gawa," he said. "You have come to Pyke to speak your warning, the same warning you gave the boy in King's Landing. I have heard this, now I will ask a question, and you will answer: what do you want from me, woman?"

The witch cocked her head. "Want, Lord Greyjoy?" she asked.

"Aye, want." Balon rasped. "You've come with your croakings of doom. What is it that you want the Lord Reaper to do with this knowledge? Do you expect me to send my ironborn to the Wall, to fight these Others of yours? Are we to bend the knee to Stannis or Renly, or you perhaps? Will you demand my sails be sent to Lannisport as your catspaws? What do you want of the ironborn, witch?"

"I want you to prepare for winter, Lord Greyjoy," the witch said evenly. "It's likely to be a hard one, and I think it's going to arrive much faster than you're used to. The more your people are ready for winter conditions the more survive. That means harvests, firewood and shelter need to be ready as soon as possible. As for the rest of it," the witch shrugged. "I would ask neutrality, nothing more. Your people are fierce warriors—probably—but this isn't a war that will be won by warriors. Those who wish to test their mettle against the Others are welcome to join in the fight. Beyond that? Keep to the islands, maybe show up if I manage to talk our way out of the succession crisis on the mainland, and get ready for winter is all I ask."

Balon chuckled, a dry, mirthless thing. "You expect us to cower on our rocks, woman?" he said. "You expect us to act like greenlanders? We are ironborn! We do not sow!"

"Do you fish?" the witch snapped. A ripple of whispers went through the assembled captains. "These islands have some of the most ridiculously productive fishing grounds I've ever seen," she went on. Aeron nodded to himself; the god provided well for his people so long as they kept to the old ways. "You have enough ships out there that if you put half of them to work with nets you'd
catch enough fish to last three years just from the waters around Old Wyk alone."

Balon glared down at the witch. "You presume," he growled.

The witch nodded. "I do that a lot," she replied. "Right now I'm presuming you have an interest in the future of the ironborn, and that future is going to depend on whether or not you listen to me."

"You ask very little of me, witch," Balon replied. "Yet you ask more than you know. Had you demanded my sails and swords I would have thrown you from the keep to the Drowned God. I should be angered by your impertinence; I am not. Ned Stark owes me a debt for my sons and I would gladly take his in payment, but I will not do this. Birds come almost daily from the boy in King's Landing demanding my fealty, but my brother Euron now sits in the boy's counsels and I will not bend the knee to any king who has the Crow's Eye whispering in his ear.

"For now, captain, the Iron Islands will stand aside," Balon declared. The captains murmured as he continued. "I will sit in my chair and fish, as you say. Stag, wolf and lion shall have nothing of the kraken they already do not have. For now, at least."

The witch bowed slightly. "Thank you, Lord Greyjoy." Balon nodded regally in reply.

"There is one more thing." Asha strode boldly forward, hand on her axe and staring right at the witch. "I would like your ship."

The witch blinked, cocking her head to one side slightly as she regarded Balon's daughter. "Really," she replied. "Points for asking first, I guess. But do you think I'm just going to give it to you?"

Asha smiled wickedly. "No," she said, taking the axe from her hip. "I don't. I claim the iron price." The witch's attendants shifted uneasily at this, but the witch merely blinked again.

"Really?" she echoed, looking back at Balon upon the Seastone Chair. "Right here, right now? I didn't think your people went for that."

Balon considered it. "Asha is my daughter, and has claimed the iron price," he said. "If she can take it, your ship is hers."

The witch sighed mightily. "Well okay then." She motioned her men away, then began to pace deliberately around to Asha's left. Asha followed suit, the two circling like spotted whales around a school of fish. "So," she said idly, never taking her eyes off Asha, "what do you plan to do with it?"

Asha laughed. "Why, I plan to use it as my own, of course! I'll sail the skies from Lonely Light to Yi-Ti, raid where I like and take what I want! With your ship, the ironborn are invincible!"

"Uh-huh," grunted the witch. "Do you know how to fly it?" Her pace did not change, but Asha's faltered just a little. "This isn't a longboat, kid," the witch said. "Did you think you could just walk onboard and take command?"

Asha's pace quickened, twirling her axe in her hand. "Then I guess I'll just have to leave you alive," she replied. "Qarl would appreciate the gift, methinks." Something in the witch's eyes went hard and cold as the sea, and she stopped pacing.

"Okay then," she said. "Come on if you're coming."

With a shout Asha hurled herself forward, axe raised high. She was upon the witch in heartbeats, and the witch twisted away from the blow, letting the axe pass through empty air. Asha spun and threw the axe at the witch's unprotected back, only for the axe to halt in mid-air, caught in a spray of blue
"What the—" Asha blurted. Her hand went to her belt, drawing a long steel dirk. "Put away your tricks and fight!" She lunged at the witch, only for her to turn aside at the last second. Again and again Asha would try to strike and the witch would dodge and weave around the blade. It was like a finger-dance but with deadly intent. The assembled ironborn watched, some cheering for Balon's daughter, some jeering at her inability to subdue a woman from the green lands. Aeron stood like a weathered rock on the coast, watching his niece's frustration build with each passing moment, and wondered what would happen when the wave finally crested.

"Fight me!" Asha roared. "Damn you, fight me!"

"No," replied the witch. Asha snarled and drove her dirk down towards the other woman's heart, only for it to bounce off a pearlescent shell of light well away from the witch's tunic. "Why would I fight you like you want me to?" The witch held her ground as Asha slashed away at the shell of light again and again to no avail. "I'm not ironborn, I'm not a warrior. I mean, just like you and everybody else in this goddamned country have been saying—"

The witch raised her right hand, now covered in a gauntlet of white metal. A humming noise filled the hall, then the sudden terrible clap of thunder as a bolt erupted from the woman's hand and struck Asha square in the chest. His niece flew backwards, skidding across the hall and coming to rest before Aeron.

"I. Am. A. Witch!"

Aeron was stunned; the witch had clearly stolen more from the Storm God than just her ship. He crouched low and shook Asha's shoulder. "Niece?" he whispered urgently. "Asha? Can you stand?" Asha's legs twitched and she moaned weakly. "Get up, niece," he said grimly. "Whatever foul magic she stole from the Storm God cannot defeat the ironborn. Get up before—" but then the witch was already on them, gliding forward like some monstrous green shark, her demon trailing behind her, bending over to examine the fallen girl. The little metal demon's eye flashed green and the witch nodded.

"Okay then," she muttered. "Round two." She straightened and swept the hall with her gaze, staring hard at the assembled ironborn. Balon sat in the Seastone Chair, a figure carved from ivory and driftwood.

"I am Captain Jade Hasegawa of the Federal Starfleet Ranger Corps," she announced to the silent hall. "I came here on a mission of peace and friendship, to warn you of a threat bigger than anything you've ever faced, and in return I'm attacked and threatened with slavery. It seems that you don't understand or accept any message that doesn't involve force or fear. If that's the way you want to play, then I can play. Everybody ready?" The witch pointed her hand at the ceiling and let off another thunderbolt. Dust and broken stone rained down on the hall, drudges shrieked and ironborn swore. "Now fear this!

"The Others are coming; whether you believe me or not doesn't matter because they will come and if you aren't ready then they will kill all of you. Ready your people for a hard winter. Beyond that your affairs are your own. Aid in the defense of Westeros, stay here, whatever you do I don't care... except for one thing." The witch's eyes turned to Balon, who met them with no fear. "If you decide to attack the coast, interfere with the defenses in the name of whatever pride drives you, I will come back here. And if I come back here I'll leave every single last one of you sonsobitches bruised and moaning on the floor of your castles—just like her," she jabbed a white-clad finger down at Asha. "So if you want to know what the smart move here is, boys, it's this: Don't. Make. Me. Come. Back. Here. Message ends." The witch whirled and stalked towards the doors, her attendants swiftly
returning to her side as the ironborn parted before her.

"Captain," Balon said abruptly. The witch stopped and turned to look back. The Greyjoy pointed at his daughter, still limp at Aeron's feet. "Your thrall."

The witch's face went blank. "My what?"

"Asha wagered herself against your ship and lost, therefore she is now yours." Balon shrugged. "If you must think like a woman from the green lands, consider her your hostage. Should my ironborn displease you, you may exercise your displeasure on her."

"She's your daughter," the witch protested. Aeron blinked at this; surely the witch was not this naïve.

"Aye, she is," replied Balon. "And at the least I know you will not make her a greenlander, as Ned Stark did to my last son." He rose from the Seastone Chair and left the hall.

All eyes turned back to the witch, who seemed at a loss. "Goddammit," she said to no one in particular. "Thoros." The big Myrman picked Asha from the ground, wordlessly slung her across his shoulders like a side of beef and left the hall behind his mistress and the reedy maester.

A dangerous situation indeed, Aeron thought. Caught between two storms, the Crow's Eye and this witch. May Balon have the god-given wisdom needed to steer us through before we founder.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 247.1

Have you ever won something, only to feel like it's not a victory in the slightest? I think that sums up my experience with the ironborn quite nicely.

Of all the people I've met over the last few weeks of my sojourn through Westeros bearing zombie heads I think I can say without a doubt that the most disagreeable ones so far have been the ironborn. And yes, that includes the Lannisters and the Arryns. The ironborn are rude, crude reactionaries, proud of it almost to the point of absurdity and they're the only culture in Westeros that openly practices slavery to boot. They don't call it that, of course, but anybody with eyes knows damn well what the ironborn call thralldom and salt wifeing is slavery. Hell, ironborn culture seems to be based on the normalization of piracy well beyond anything in the historical examples. Maybe —maybe there's something in the early Andorian histories that matches this practice, but I'd be shocked if it wasn't some sort of weird historical hyperbole.

If I had a corvette and two platoons of redshirts at my back, I'd have been sorely tempted to roll back in there and engage in some really egregious violations of General Order One. Probably a good thing for my future that I don't have them, all told, but still the impulse is there and my patience with postclassical and Westerosi shenanigans is pretty much at an end.

I'd just about managed to get through it all diplomatically when out of the fucking blue Greyjoy's daughter challenged me for my ship right in the middle of the fucking court and nobody so much as said "take it outside." There's no good way for me to say this: I was at the end of my rope and, well... I went for the show of force. I already had everything I honestly wanted but just to make sure I slapped a woman down hard and then intimidated a shitload of other people into thinking I was some kind of annoyed war goddess.

I mean, I suppose at this point I kind of am, but that's besides the point.

There were a dozen different ways I could have talked my way out of that situation, or gone for minimal force, or even just fucked off and left, but I didn't do that. I got loud, flashy and stupid just
like the fucking ironborn. I may have won that fight, but it doesn't feel like a win.

I should've been better. I have to be better.

Anyway. The ironborn now know about the Others and the coming winter. What they're going to do about it... I'm not entirely sure. Greyjoy doesn't have much interest in joining hands with the rest of Westeros in facing the Others—from what I'm given to understand the man holds grudges the way others collect knickknacks. Officially he's said he's going to turtle up on the Iron Islands, which is probably the 100% best-case scenario and fine by me. The ironborn seem to be mostly marine warriors, dangerous individually and in their element but probably not much use in a massed battle scenario or patrolling the Wall and policing the free folk. Neutrality in the succession crisis is also probably the best outcome here; a good-sized fleet of Vikings could cause havoc anywhere in Westeros with a little imagination, so them staying put helps keep things from boiling over. I hope, anyway.

Internally things might be a little dicier. The islands don't have quite enough arable land to be fully self-sufficient and there's a strong taboo against agriculture in ironborn culture. That's not to say they don't do it—see all the references to slavery above—but culture plus lack of good farmland equals potential trouble down the line. They have a lot of fish in their waters, and not as strong a fishing culture as I'd expect; probably the whole ironborn we-take-what-we-want thing getting in the way there. The other traditional method of obtaining food in tough times is to go raiding on the mainland which... I'd say it's about 50/50 odd that Greyjoy orders his fleet to start throwing nets, or go sack a few towns for food when the going starts to get tough. Greyjoy claims that he'll just stay at home and fish, but there's enough of a caveat there to make me worry.

The only backstop I have against this is my newest acquisition. So remember what I said about Greyjoy's daughter? Well, that fight didn't end the way she expected it to, obviously. But now I have a new member of the crew. Lady Asha Greyjoy is officially my hostage, a way to enforce Greyjoy's good behavior through threats against his daughter. That bothers me more than I want to admit; I know diplomatic hostage-taking is a thing in medieval societies, that it works more than it doesn't and it's likely to keep Greyjoy at least a little restrained, if not forever then for a little while. But goddamn it was unsettling for him to suggest that if he got out of line I could do all sorts of shit to her as retribution. Worse, when he made the offer he called her "my thrall," and it took all of my remaining self-control to keep the poker face up and not blast him back into his creepy stone barcalounger.

I hate this, I hate the casual cruelty and violence and treating people like they're things. I hate that I think this place is getting to me, but more than anything I hate that the only thing I can do here is keep people alive because the dead can't change their minds. Everywhere I go I see this horrible mindset at work and I have to tell myself to leave it be, I can't change the world by myself, I can only save it.

The only consolation I have right now is that the main part of the diplomatic mission is finally done; there are no more high lords or would-be kings to talk to, everybody knows the score and whatever they do with the knowledge I can't influence at this point.

…

Hold that thought. Proximity sensors just lit up. Considering that's not a thing that should be happening anytime soon, I ought to go check on that.

THE KRAKEN'S DAUGHTER

Witch. Witch witch witch you damned fool. You let your greed get ahead of you and sauntered into a
fight you couldn't win. And for what? A ship and a woman you couldn't control even if you had won.

Everything hurt. Asha Greyjoy's arms and legs felt alternately like they had been shoved into a hearthfire and into icy water. Her body felt like a whale had been gnawing on it. Her head swam with the sound of thunder, bells and her own recriminations.

Arrogance; there was no better word for it. She wanted the ship and she thought she could take the sorceress. She looked the part of a woman from the green lands, all soft skin, fine clothes and ignorant smiles. An axe at her neck and she would have submitted like any other greenlander. There was nothing to suggest otherwise when she first took the woman's measure. But she remembered the witch's eyes, cold and furious when she said she'd gift her to Qarl as salt wife and in that moment realized she'd judged ill.

Asha twitched and dreamed of her humiliation before her lord father and the ironborn. It had been a gamble and she'd lost. Presumably her men had collected her and returned her to the Black Wind, or perhaps her father's men returned her to her rooms in the Sea Tower to recover. There would be all manner of hell to pay later no doubt, Balon would be furious—

Her eyes fluttered open and she awoke to an unfamiliar cot. There was no pain in her limbs, only a faint irritating tingling. She lay on a mattress firmer than straw or goose feather, but more comfortable than either. She was surrounded by panels of white and gray metal, and the air filled with the roar of the sea.

No, the sea doesn't roar like that. It's something else.

"You're awake, I see," a man's voice said. She twisted and saw the sorceress's sworn sword sitting in a chair too small for his bulk, carefully eyeing her.

"Where am I?" she demanded, but there was only one answer that made sense. The man's eyebrows quirked up and she knew she was right. "Why, then?" Her thoughts suddenly went wild with panic. Had the witch plucked her from her ship, or from Pyke, to continue her punishment? Had she done another witch's hour before the Seastone Chair? Was Lordsport still intact or had she reduced it to rubble whilst Asha was unconscious?

The man raised his hand. "Your lord father released you into the captain's custody as a sign of good faith," he said. Hostage, he didn't say. He didn't have to. That was how the game was played, and none would say Balon Greyjoy was unwilling to play it.

Asha tried to raise a hand, only for the hand to stop abruptly. Her hands were bound to the cot by thin strands of shiny rope, not steel. Nothing that a good knife couldn't part... if she still had her knives. "No steel?" she wondered.

"Captain doesn't believe in fetters," he said. "The binding was there to make sure you didn't leap up and do something rash on waking, is all."

Reasonable, she thought. And yet... "Soft," she scoffed.

"Because she doesn't wrap you in chains? Mayhaps," the man replied mildly. "She's quite reluctant to harm. Perhaps because she can do so so easily. You're part of a small company of people she's raised her hand against, and the even smaller company of those who've lived to tell the tale." He rose from the chair and moved over to the cot, unbinding her wrists. She sat up at once, rubbing her wrists.

"My thanks."
"You may not thank me later, depending on what the captain wishes."

Asha eyed the man. "You're not Westerosi, but I'd wager you're not part of your captain's original crew."

The man smiled thinly. "I am Thoros, late of Myr," he said with a nod. "I joined the captain in King's Landing, not long after she returned with King Robert."

"What's it like?" she asked, unable to contain her interest a moment longer.

Thoros considered her question. "In some ways it's very much like sailing on the sea," he said at length. "I've no head for sailor's work, so I wait in my cabin or on the bridge waiting or praying. But in other ways... watching the ground roll beneath your feet, faster than any bird. The ship diving through clouds only to emerge into clear blue sky on the other side." The big man smiled. "It's quite the thing to experience. You'll see it soon enough; we left Lordsport not long ago."

Asha's eyes went wide. She was already flying and hadn't known it until Thoros had said so.

At that moment an odd bell went off somewhere in the walls. Thoros frowned. "Odd," he said to no one in particular, then slapped the wall. A door almost impossible to distinguish from the smooth metal wall opened and the sound was louder, paired with the clunk of swiftly moving feet.

The sorceress, looking absolutely none the worse for wear after their duel, stopped in the door. "Thoros?" she asked.

Thoros jerked his head back towards the sitting Asha. "Lady Greyjoy's awake," he said. "What is happening?"

"Proximity alarm," the sorceress said. "Headed to the bridge to find out what." With that she walked past the corridor. Thoros stared after her, then motioned to Asha to follow him.

They passed through the narrow curved corridor and arrived at another door with no handle. Thoros made to go through and the door opened with a whisper. Asha followed.

Upon reaching the ship's bridge she realized that, her dreams and boasts aside, there was no chance of her ever commandeering the ship. No captain's wheel or tiller awaited her, just more white and gray metal, desks and mirrors of smooth—and presumably magical—black stone. The only true window in the room stared out at an expanse of white light.

The sorceress stood to one side of the bridge, looking at a magic window embedded in the wall. Seated before the window was the thin dark form of the young maester who made up the other part of the ship's crew. "So what have we got?" the sorceress asked.

"Working on it." The maester boy's hands swept back and forth across the window, the strange symbols twisting and turning as he did something with the ship's magic.

The sorceress looked at the maester suspiciously. "You reconfigured the interface," she said.

"Mn," the maester hummed idly as he worked magic.

"Where did you learn to do that?"

"It's not that difficult when you get right down to it," replied the maester. "I watched you work with your familiars, then looked up some of the instructions in the ship's library." The sorceress looked pleased and quite impressed at this news.
"Nicely done, Scopes," she said. "What do you have?"

The maester puffed up a little at the praise. "'Tis no ship, that much I know" he said as a red smudge appeared in the window, framed by blue and white lines. "It's glowing in an odd way... I don't know what some of this means but I think that's why the ship saw it."

Asha blinked. "I've seen that," she said. The sorceress looked at her. Her green eyes were very hard to meet, but she was the kraken's daughter and would not quail. "A fortnight ago I sailed Black Wind to Lordsport, and at night we could see that comet flying over the Islands. Some of my crew thought it a sign that my father would crown himself. And he still might."

"Hm," the sorceress said, turning her gaze back to the red comet. "Interesting color there..." she mumbled, "don't usually see red in comets. Moving fast too, and apparent magnitude of minus ten? Already? This thing'll be visible in broad daylight in a week or two. And look at that psi output! There's something there, alright." She tapped the window, deep in thought. "Victory: extrapolate an orbit and period from current observations."

Something around them chimed once, and the view from the magic window changed, the red smudge of the comet shrank and became a line around a circle. Is that supposed to be the sun? The line looped out far from the circle and then dove in close, again and again.

"Okay," said the sorceress. "So a nice regular pattern, almost parabolic trajectory with an estimated period of eight... thousand." She looked up from the window. "Welp."

"That can't be coincidence," the maester said.

"I've stopped believing in coincidences when it comes to the Builders." The witch straightened. "Right. Okay. One thing after the other. Before we do that let's take care of this." She turned to face Asha directly, those damnably bright green eyes boring into her soul. Damphair would kill for eyes like those, she thought. "Now, what am I going to do with you?"

She went to one knee. "My lady." No man has ever died from bending his knee. "Allow me to sail with you. I will attempt no escape."

The sorceress hummed, her metal demons adding their voices to the chorus. "Because if you escaped you wouldn't have another chance to take my ship?" she said dryly. Asha winced; she wasn't wrong about that.

"I'm a skilled sailor and still young, my lady. I've sailed across the narrow sea and know people and places all over the known world. I could be of great value if you're willing to forgive my impetuous behavior."

"You could. On the other hand I don't know if you're worth the effort if I have to worry about you trying to shank me every time I turn my back." The sorceress tapped at her cheek with one long finger. "I'm tempted to take you back to Winterfell and drop you with the rest of the misfit toys," she said and Asha's heart sank.

"I swear on the Drowned God and my honor as a Greyjoy that I will not mutiny if you make me part of the crew," Asha said hastily.

"Greyjoys have honor? When did such a momentous thing happen?" the maester said with venom. Asha glared at the boy.

"Al, hush," the sorceress said mildly and the boy's mouth clicked shut. "Pinky: separate from hive and prep for independent action." One of the demons floating over her shoulders drifted away and
faced Asha. "Recognize target AG, place under class two security watch. Open access to living quarters and hold, access to bridge and user cabins only when accompanied, no access to engine room, transporter room and command cabin. Level three stun if attempts are made to circumvent watch. Confirm." The demon sounded a bell and floated over Asha's shoulder in odd mimicry of the sorceress.

Asha looked at the demon. The little round thing looked back, and she could almost see something gimlet in its blank gaze, like a hawk sizing up a rabbit. "And this is?" she said bemusedly.

"Your minder. So long as you're with the ship, Pinky will be keeping an eye on you. And in the event you get out of line Pinky will zap you. You know what that feels like," the sorceress added matter-of-fact, "so I don't imagine you're interested in a repeat."

The horrible tingling feeling swept over her arms and legs again and she forced down an impulse to rub her goosebumped skin. "Aye, that's true enough."

"Well, in that case welcome to the party. Now, Lady Greyjoy," the sorceress said. "Tell me what you know about Essos."

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 247.2**

I know where I'm going next.

First, Dragonstone. There's a few things I need to know before we set out. Then, to go north we're going to have to go east.

The Builders started this mess, maybe in the east there's something that'll let them help me clean it up.
Go East, Young Witch!

THOROS

"Why are we keeping her aboard?" The words fell from Alleras' mouth the moment the Greyjoy woman was out of earshot. The captain's familiar had led the ironborn back to her cabin—presumably to stare out the window like a woman possessed—allowing the three of them a moment's counsel.

The captain weathered her apprentice's outrage with calm surety. "I've got my reasons," she said, absently fiddling with the ship's controls.

"She's ironborn," Alleras all but hissed. "They cannot be trusted."

Jade paused in her fiddling, peering over her eyeglass with one black eyebrow raised. "Really," she said mildly. "Is that determined fact by the Citadel or just your opinion, initiate?" The young maester blinked in shock, her jaw setting in stubborn fashion as she tried to work out a retort.

Thoros took the moment to step in before either one said something they might regret later. "Your pardon, my lady," he rumbled. "Young Alleras isn't wholly wrong about the ironborn. Or Greyjoy, for that matter. Those who live on the Iron Islands have a history of caring naught for laws and lords not their own. If the throne is weak, the ironborn reave; it's been that way for as long as there's been kings in Westeros. Balon Greyjoy is that kind of man, one who wishes to do as he pleases when he pleases and only overwhelming force can stop his. I'd say he taught those lessons to his daughter too."

The captain nodded. "Kinda got that part when she decided to jump me," she said dryly. "Hence Pinky."

"Aye," agreed Thoros. "She's a headstrong one. That said, I'd wager Balon also taught her how to make a pretense of cowering when trapped. He bent the knee to King Robert so fast I'd have thought somebody chopped his leg off when we took Pyke." He thought back to that day when he witnessed the would-be king bow before the true ruler of Westeros. "Greyjoys are survivors first and foremost. It's how they managed to live through the Hoares and every time they went wild under the dragons. I doubt Lady Asha will try again, at least not soon."

"Which brings me back to my original question: why are we keeping her here?" Alleras demanded. "Why not send her back to Winterfell? We all know she wants the Victory, keeping her aboard seems imprudent. The longer she stays in contact with the ship is she not more likely to be tempted to attack you again? Or attack one of us to get at you?" She shook her head, frustration plain on her face. "What does Greyjoy have that we need her aboard for?"

"Well," the captain hummed thoughtfully. "For one thing she claims to know things and have contacts in Essos. Having a guide would be helpful, considering."

"Thoros is from Myr."

Which was true enough, and yet. "I've not been back to Essos since before you stopped sucking your mother's teat, lass," Thoros said gently. "Things change, even there. The contacts I had are old men, died or moved on. Even the priest who sent me to Aerys' court has gone to the flame eternal by now. If Greyjoy's been raiding or trading in the Free Cities or even further afield she'll have a better idea of where things stand now as opposed to when I left twenty-odd years ago."
"If we can trust her information," Alleras countered. "Even if she does not lie to us all she may have are sea stories and the drunken ramblings of other sailors. We could get those from any port in the world if needs be."

"You're not wrong," Jade noted. "There's a risk in trusting anything she has to say. But we need a place to start and sea stories are as good as anything else at this point. Hell, this whole thing started because of some scratched runes on a wall and an overly-loud tree and look how far we've come since then. Even the wildest story can have just enough truth to it to act as a beginning."

Thoros rubbed his scalp, feeling the prickles of stubble against his fingers. He have to shave it again in the next little while. "What are we seeking?" he asked. "The embassies are done, so I'd have thought we would be heading north again to resume our hunt for the Others. Why east?"

The captain leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "Something Mel said the last time we were on Dragonstone, that I'd have to head east and uncover something before heading back past the Wall again. She told me specifically that the time would be right 'when the bleeding star split the skies.'" She added the last bit with a hooked-finger gesture.

"The comet," Alleras said, realization dawning. The captain nodded.

"Too red to be natural, and a period too synced to the old legends about the last time the Unbidden got loose. I don't know how it's connected but there's definitely a connection, and if Mel saw it coming then Mel will at least know where we start."

"And Greyjoy?"

"Will either know enough about where we're going to play tour guide, or she can hang back and look menacing with Thoros. Either way, she'll earn her keep."

Alleras still looked mulish, but finally sighed. "As you say, my lady. I'm not sure I agree with your reasoning, though. The Greyjoy's lust for the ship may overcome her good sense again."

Jade shrugged negligently. "Maybe," she said. "But Pinky's watching her and I've got good people watching me. It'll all sort out okay."

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SHIREEN

The sea was gray flecked with white, always churning around the island. It reminded Shireen of the tales Maester Cressen would tell her of Shipbreaker's Bay, a place she had never been but learned all about. Cressen told her that the winds pushing north from Dorne and west from Essos would crash into each other there, creating mighty storms and great crashing waves that clawed at the shore like furious dragons.

The seas surrounding gloomy Dragonstone were much calmer than the things she'd heard and read about her father's home. For all that the water looked unfriendly the waves never crashed on Dragonstone the way they said it assaulted Storm's End. Instead the water seemed to creep up against the gargoyle-infested cliffs, only occasionally hitting the dark stone with a sullen *splat* and spray of foam. It was almost like the water feared offending a dragon's roost.

Shireen could sympathize. Dragonstone was not a friendly place; even when the Targaryens had ruled in all their splendor the island likely never had been welcoming to any but a dragon.

Ever since Father and Ser Davos had left she'd taken to looking west from the battlements, waiting for... something. She knew not what she was waiting for—an early return would mean nothing but
bad things—but there was an irresistible urge to spend at least a little time every day looking west. It
might've been something to do with magic; Shireen had taken Lady Melisandre's lessons to heart and
practiced when she could, and every now and then she felt the faint hints of some great power,
hiding in the corners of her eyes just out of sight. So she took the time, sometimes with Patches
loyally in tow, sometimes not, to look west and wait for something to show itself.

One day, something showed itself. The wind was strong that day, whipping against the dragons and
the gargoyles so hard she could barely hear herself think, let alone hear the deep rumble of the sky-
ship singing. Some unknown flash of instinct made her look up from the sea in time to see the white
shape soaring against blue sky. The sky-ship's rumbling grew louder and louder, overtaking the wind
as it roared up over the shore.

Shireen waved wildly, a wordless cheer swallowed by the sound of the ship's song, as the great bulk
of the thing passed directly overhead and looped around the castle's towers. She sprinted off back
down the battlement to let Mother know that the mysterious sorceress had finally come back.

Mother and the remaining court met the sorceress in Dragonstone's great hall. Court had never been
terribly large, often just a handful of sworn men like Ser Davos, but with Father away the hall felt
emptier and colder than it ever had before. Most of Mother's favorites stayed behind to guard the
castle. Many wore red in one way or another, a sign that they favored Lady Melisandre's god over
the other gods of Westeros. Maester Cressen always looked pained as more and more red appeared
in Mother's courtiers, but he never quite explained why in a way that made sense to Shireen. Though
she did concede that many of the men Mother favored didn't seem all that bright.

Lady Jade swept into the hall like a whirlwind made of green and black, her maester and sworn
shield following behind as always. The courtiers fidgeted as she passed, causing Shireen to smile.
This slim girl in green strode forth like a hero from the old stories, and nobody (save Father and Lady
Melisandre) seemed to know quite how to handle it.

"Queen Selyse," the sorceress bowed deeply. "Princess."

"Welcome back to Dragonstone, captain," Mother said regally. "If you wish to speak with my
husband, I am afraid he is attending to the war on the mainland."

"That's a shame," the sorceress said ruefully. "I'd hoped to let him know how the tour went, but I
guess it can't be helped."

"Give your report captain and we shall ensure it reaches His Grace's ears as swiftly as possible."

The sorceress took a quick breath. "Okay, long story short: the Vale and Dorne are sitting it out, the
ironborn are probably sitting it out, Riverrun has no objection but would like help removing the
Lannisters from their territory, Highgarden is sandbagging until Renly makes a decision and the
Lannisters don't care. But we knew that last one already. All in all, about where I expected things to
fall but not much worse."

That made sense to Shireen, but something in the way the sorceress said it made Mother frown. "A
pity," she said. "Still, I imagine the king will be content that the situation hasn't gotten worse." she
absently touched the large red gem Lady Melisandre had placed around her neck. "R'hlor will
provide no matter what the bastard boy and his grandfather plot. No man may withstand the Lord of
Light." The courtiers surrounding Mother all nodded, but the sorceress suddenly looked wary.

"As you say, Your Grace," she said in a funny kind of flat voice.

"Have you any more to say?"
"Say? Not exactly. I do have things to ask, though. I was told to come back at a specific time and I think that time has finally come."

Maester Cressen stirred in his chair. Through most days at court Shireen's second-favorite teacher often dozed when talk turned to simple things that didn't need his judgment. Now, though, he focused on Lady Jade like a hawk eyeing a rabbit. "What makes you think that, captain?" he asked.

Shireen thought she knew. "Is it the comet?" she asked, then regretted it as suddenly it felt like every eye in the hall had turned towards her. "I just, I thought," she babbled.

But the sorceress smiled faintly, a little like her teacher would when she got something right. "It was the comet, Princess," she said. "I know a few things about comets, and this one's a strange one. Very curious. Suspiciously curious in fact. And it turned out that I got advance warning. So, Your Grace, if I may borrow Lady Melisandre." A pause. "Wait no, that came out wrong. If I could have an audience with the lady and learn what I need to learn then I can be on my way."

Mother's lips twisted sourly in a way that rarely happened when she spoke of Lady Melisandre, like she'd thought of something she didn't approve of. "Unfortunately," she said in an equally sour tone, "the priestess departed with the army and is not currently on Dragonstone."

"And won't be back until the king is done fighting," the sorceress concluded. "Yeah, should've figured it wouldn't be that simple." She hummed to herself, the little ball creature she brought everywhere humming in harmony with her. "Finding the army would be easy enough, I suppose, but getting down there without letting the whole countryside know I'm there would be tricky..."

Cressen coughed, attracting the sorceress' attention as he rose slowly from his seat near the throne, his hand darting into his robe. "Lady Melisandre is not here, captain," he said, pulling a small envelope from his robe and holding it forth. "However, I was entrusted with this message should you come to Dragonstone and she was not present."

The sorceress took the letter with a faint bemused look on her face. "I feel like I should be annoyed," she remarked, "but honestly if I was precognitive I'd probably pull stunts like this too." She glanced down at the letter, taking in the contents swiftly and in silence. "Huh," she grunted. "Okay. That's... sorta informative but also really unhelpful."

"Perhaps I can assist?" Cressen volunteered.

"Well, it's a location of some kind but I don't have the context to parse it. 'Behind three walls astride the jade gates, on the street with no windows is the hand that rules ancient glory.' Does that ring any bells?"

The old maester looked thoughtful. "Three walls astride the jade gates," he mused. "The city of Qarth sits on a strait called the Jade Gates, where the Summer Sea connects to the Jade Sea. It's also said to have three mighty walls, one of the nine wonders made by man."

"Qarth, huh?" The sorceress hummed. "How far is that?"

"Near the far edge of the known world, my lady," replied Cressen. "Beyond Qarth is the empire of Yi-Ti and the wastelands beyond it that no man knows."

"Any ideas on the street?"

"I have no direct knowledge, but Qarth is said to be a city of wizards and warlocks second only to Asshai-by-the-Shadow. It is old and decadent, and if any place on this earth holds ancient glory it would be Qarth."
The sorceress exchanged a look with her maester and sworn shield. "An ancient city full of wizards sound fun to you?" she asked. "I'm intrigued against my best interests here."

The young maester (with the Summer Islander name Shireen couldn't remember) shrugged. "You did say that Melisandre would have a starting point for us," he noted.

"I did at that," the sorceress laughed. "Well! I guess we're off to Qarth next. Maester Cressen, thank you for holding onto that for me. Your Grace, thank you for extending your hospitality. If you'd like we can stay overnight, but we must be going by dawn. Time and tide wait for no witch, as they say."
Melisandre threw another precious log into the flames and gazed deeply. Images of war and chaos shimmered in the heat; a proud man in golden armor standing before a ruined keep; a storm with one black eye slowly gathering, trees with red leaves and tangled roots swaying in its wind; the fallen star stalking down a dark, dusty hall, following a girl barely out of maidenhood; golden skulls floating upon the sea; the great wall of the First Men slowly cracking; the fallen star wreathed in smoke. Above it all, the tower of blue and gold glaring down at the warm lands with infinite hate and lust.

The visions were becoming clearer with every passing day, though the meaning of the whole remained ever-elusive. A slight angry noise passed her lips and immediately she felt shamed; it was not her place to show frustration before R'hllor. And yet, and yet every time she sought clarity she found only haze.

A different fire may be needed wandered through her head, and Melisandre considered this. The days she spent staring into the churning furnace of the Ulthosi sky-ship had brought greater clarity than she had ever experienced before. The visions were crisp, clear and unambiguous then, and the decisions she made there would carry her through to the end. The glorified cooking fire she used now was so much lesser, more's the pity.

A man coughed quietly behind her, the noise almost lost in the crackling flames. Melisandre turned and found Domeric Bolton standing at a discreet distance behind her, clad in leather dyed a Bolton pink. "Your pardon, Lady Melisandre," he said with a quiet voice that brooked no argument. "The king has commanded we break camp and return to the march."

"The army will not be pleased," she said absently. Nor was she, to be honest; Melisandre of Asshai had endured many hardships in her time on earth, but the difficulties of a soldier under Stannis Baratheon were a new and uniquely unpleasant set of circumstances.

"Aye," agreed Bolton, "but that's an army's lot. Better they moan about hard marching now than be caught by the Lannisters in the open later."

Domeric Bolton intrigued her. Not in any mean way, rather in the sense that his presence was something unexpected. The house had an ill reputation amongst the northmen, that much she knew from camp gossip, and her seeking in the fires seemed to bear that out. In the labyrinth of the fires she saw a man of cruel appetites not unlike Bolton standing against Azor Ahai once, twice, a hundred different times. Domeric himself was a much rarer sight, and usually only paired with the other man.

"Is there something I may help you with, Lady Melisandre?" Bolton said politely. Melisandre blinked and realized she had been staring, just a little.

"May I ask a question, Lord Bolton?" she asked, carefully smoothing her red velvet robes as she turned fully away from the nightfire.
Bolton smiled thinly. "Of course, my lady."

"Are you your father's only son?" she asked quietly. "I have seen you in the fires many times, meeting with a man with eyes like yours but rougher. Angrier. Wilder."

Bolton's pale eyes hardened. "I had a brother," he said, tone deceptively light. "Baseborn, not terribly younger than I. None of my siblings lived past babehood and so I had no brothers and sisters. The idea of having a brother… intrigued me, so when I learned of his existence I defied my father and sought him out." He shook his head, black hair swirling around him like smoke. "We disagreed on many things, not the least of which being his fitness to be called a Bolton. Disappointing."

"In the fires, I saw him feed you poison," Melisandre noted. "A drawn-out death, the better to become your father's only son."

"As I said, disappointing," Bolton snorted. "He had the passion of my house to be true, but none of the iron that made the Red Kings the last to stand against the Starks. I would have very much liked to call him brother, but blood only goes so far." He sighed mightily. "But this is not why I am here," he said in a far brisker tone. "The king wants to hear any more news before we break camp. Our scouts think that the Lannisters have left the riverlands, but they've yet to sight the army properly."

"Tywin Lannister has entered the causeway," she said with a dismissive wave. "Then we have him," Bolton said with satisfaction. "The moat will break his charge, and we will trap him in the Neck. The gods truly are with us."

"Do not be so quick to proclaim such things, Lord Bolton," Melisandre warned. "There will be a great victory of arms soon, but it may very well be a victory that cannot be afforded. The king is needed in the north, not distracted by mad lions. That what you call gods are not so mighty that they can see all ends."

"Oh?" Bolton's eyes never changed, still hard like river stones, yet his voice had a teasing note to it. "Are you going to tell me that I am a degenerate tree-worshiper? I certainly hear that enough from His Grace's men."

Melisandre shook her head. "I do not doubt their reality," she replied. "I have seen enough to prove that much to me. Whatever lurks in the weirwood trees is old and powerful, I do not deny that. It is worthy of respect, like any other old and powerful thing. But whatever they are, they are not gods, any more than the carved statues the Andals carry are gods." She gestured to the nightfire roaring away behind her. "There is only one god, skinner lord, and there is his temple."

The northman considered that, then discarded that with a swiftness and surety that rankled Melisandre deep to the bone. "As you say, my lady," he said mildly. "Is there any more news to impart?" The priestess turned back to the fire, letting the flames consume her attention once more. In the process, she saw a flash of white metal against blue sky.

"Yes," she said absently, focusing in on the sky-ship. "The green sun sinks beneath the eastern horizon in search of sorceries old and new. She will return in time, but for now all of Westeros is beyond her sight." She turned to the skinner lord. "Let us hope that we may manage in her absence, for if we do not then many things will be lost."

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 249

We are currently en route to the city of Qarth, where hopefully I'll be able to get some more data on
what the hell the Builders left behind and how I might be able to use it to put the Unbidden back in their hole. In the meantime, I decided to take advantage of the route and the altitude to launch a probe in the general direction of the comet. That was a bit of a stir, since I haven't powered up the launcher once since I left Canaveral so my auxiliaries haven't seen it yet. Al seemed to be pretty happy with the whole thing, especially after I explained to her the whole point behind the probe. Greyjoy seemed a little poleaxed by it; probably worked through some of the implications of having a shipborne catapult that could throw something so hard and fast that it never comes down. Definitely a mind in there despite the whole yarr-woo-viking thing she's got going on.

So the probe's away and hopefully it'll rendezvous with the comet in the next week or so. I set it to make a moderate pass and then follow if nothing immediately disastrous happens. Assuming there isn't some sort of defense mechanism or sleeping space beastie that'll wreck the probe if it gets too close I should have some better idea of what (if anything) the comet has to do with things on Planetos.

Which, to be honest, I really need soon. The background count is starting to spike. It's environmental, just noticeable on sensors but I can feel it starting to spark around me, almost like static cling that refuses to ground out. Which is a terrible simile but honestly I don't have any better way to describe the feeling. When I landed things were still pretty passive, but now that the comet's shown up it's going active in some way. Is it related to the Unbidden? Could be. In fact, it might even be exactly that; the prison starts to fail so more psi energy starts leaking into the baryonic universe. "Magic" comes back to the world, and so do the Unbidden.

(I swear to fuck there's an ancient-ass movie or something about exactly that, I think Dad brought a copy home from a cache hunt once. Shadowheart or something like that, I dunno. The similarity kinda jumped out at me. Anyway.)

"The hand that rules ancient glory" was the note Mel left for me. I wish she'd be less succinct and maybe a little clearer but if prophetic visions were properly documented then things would be a lot easier. So the hand—and presumably the person attached to it, but that's not 100% solid—is in Qarth, on a street with no windows. Nobody seems to know exactly what that means (presumably nothing good) but even in a large city like Qarth a street without windows ought to be a pretty distinct landmark. I figure we have a decent shot at finding the place at which point hopefully our mysterious hand will make its presence known.

If that falls through, well, there's always the libraries. The city's supposed to be one of the oldest and wealthiest parts of local civilization. If there's any place in Essos that has any hard data on the Builder era or the last time the Unbidden got loose it'll be Qarth. Getting into those libraries might be a little difficult, but what's life without a little challenge?

To be fair, I wouldn't mind a little less challenge these days. Just for the novelty value, you understand.

ASHA

Qarth claimed to be the queen of cities, the center of the world. Seeing it laid out before her from above, Asha could well believe it. Carefree Victory slowly circled the city like a wheeling gull, and from that vantage it seemed to be a great confection of jeweled lace, fragile white buildings surrounding stones of many colors. The great port of Qarth was packed with ships of all sizes scuttling in and out, carrying cargoes of gold and spices that could make a reaver wealthy beyond all measure if they could pay the iron price.

"Busy place," Captain Hasegawa mused. "Not really seeing any good anchorages. Any suggestions,
Ms. Greyjoy?

Asha knew a leading question when she heard one and racked her brains for everything she'd ever heard of about Qarth. She'd never managed to make it quite so far east in her travels, but she'd dealt with Qartheen merchants and their spice ships before in the Free Cities. "The portion of the harbor furthest from the city is reserved for ships from the Free Cities and Westeros," she said. "I don't know if the quays are large enough to handle the Victory, though."

The captain hummed. "There's a couple nearer the center of the bay that could handle her," she noted.

"Not wise, my lady," Thoros rumbled. "Those likely belong to the richest of the Qartheen trading guilds. Landing there without leave would make us powerful enemies, I'd wager."

Asha scoffed. "The Qartheen make for poor enemies. The greenlander fops from Highgarden have more steel in their spines than the average Qartheen merchant. They will snivel and whine, nothing more."

"Mayhaps they will, at sea and pressed by pirates," Thoros said with a dark look. "We are not attacking a lone galley with naught more than slave oarsmen and a handful of sellswords for defense, girl. This is the seat of their power, and Qarth has been here for a very long time. We must be cautious." Asha huffed and turned away; the Myrman had the damned audacity to be right about such things. Some small treacherous part of her wanted to draw steel on the man for questioning the captain… but then she was not a captain. Not here, not now. Perhaps never again unless she reunited with her crew and the Black Wind.

The maester boy hummed without tune, staring out the window. "Why not ground properly?" he asked. "The gates to the northwest seem to be clear, no tilled land, just flat earth heading off into the desert."

"Not the worst idea," the captain said thoughtfully. "Anybody else have a better one?" After a moment's silence the captain turned to work the tiller. "Okay then. Get ready for touchdown."

*/* Theology / Civilization * Basil Poledouris Conan the Barbarian (1982) */*

The city looked much more solid from the ground outside the walls. Men beat gongs and stared warily from atop the walls as they disembarked. A wordless sound from the captain and the ramp quietly rose back up, sealing away the ship's interior from passers-by. The captain's familiars swarmed around them, quietly chiming to themselves and each other like curious birds as they approached the copper-banded outer gates.

The gate swung open just enough to let the party pass through and between the outer wall and the middle wall. Again they approached and again the gate opened to let them pass through to the final gate. Asha's eyes flicked up to the black marble walls and she noted that the tales were true, Qarth's walls did indeed depict fucking in every possible combination. Thoros and the maester kept their eyes fixed hard on the gate, while the captain paused to soak in the tableaux.

"Interesting juxtaposition," she mused. "I wonder if it was meant as irony or as a statement of intent to the outside world."

Alleras's tore his eyes away from the gate. "Eh?"

The captain smiled thinly. "Something along the lines of 'we're going to fuck you, and this is how we'll do it.'" she replied. "I don't get the sense that the people who built these walls were particularly
Inside the final gate there was a sudden hush in the air. As the party strolled down the wide street it seemed that conversation would die as they approached and would only restart once they were past. The Qartheen watched them from shadowed spots on the street and from delicate balconies that looked too frail to support their weight. Everywhere there were tall, pale shades with measuring eyes tracking their every move. Behind them, tongues wagged in a language that sounded vaguely like Valyrian.

The captain hummed to herself. "Interesting, nice to see the coincidence doesn't spread that far," she said.

"Qartheen," Thoros noted. "It's been far too long since I spoke it. Do you know the language, my lady?"

"No," the captain smirked. "But I will shortly." A quick whistle brought one of the familiars out of the cloud around them. "Wakko, hook to mainframe and fire up the translator." Asha spied a particularly frail-looking man in a beaded silk skirt doing his best to pretend he wasn't eavesdropping and grinned fiendishly at him. The man paled even further and stumbled backwards, making a peculiar warding gesture.

"Be nice, Greyjoy," the captain said without looking. "We're not here to fight the whole city. We can go back to Westeros if we want to do that." She nodded towards a Qartheen woman in a gown of saffron yellow that left one breast bare. The woman looked at her like a lion on a leash and turned away quickly. "Interesting fashion choice, that," she said idly. "Not sure if it's all that practical, though."

"(I don't know, I think you'd look good in it,)

Alleras murmured just off the captain's left. She stopped mid-stride and turned ever so slowly to look at the boy, who flushed even darker than before. "Ah. Um, I'll... just be... back over here if you need me, my lady," he stammered.

The captain shrugged. "If you say so," she said. "Though fair's fair, I think you've got the legs for those kilts," she added with a teasing tone. Alleras's eyes went wide, then snapped shut.

Asha had a sudden thought: Qarl should be here. Combined with another, less useful thought: I ought to get this boy and Qarl drunk together, and see what happens.

"Well, this is Qarth," the captain said, spreading her arms wide. "Where do we start?"

"At the beginning," a low voice said in the Common Tongue of the Seven Kingdoms. Asha whirled, hand going to her dagger, to find a woman in black robes standing near where the pale man had been. Her face was covered behind a mask of deep red lacquer, hiding everything but her large, dark eyes. "You have come far," the woman said, as though commenting on the weather. "Further than any other voyager to reach Qarth."

The captain eyed this strange creature warily, her familiars drawing in close and buzzing in warning. "One of these days I'm going to stop being surprised when people seem to know stuff like that instinctively," she noted. "But for now I'm just gonna ignore that and move the hell on because that question is a rabbit hole I don't have the patience to fall down. So, with that in mind, who exactly are you, mysterious masked woman?"

"I am Quaithe of the Shadow," the masked woman said. "I come bearing an offer and a warning. You seek for knowledge here in Qarth, things that might be put to use in the sunset lands, and you are not the first exotic stranger to pass through the gates these past few days. You may not find what
you hope to here, but the first step on the greater journey can be found within the walls of the queen of cities. This I know, and I would be of further assistance in our quest."

Alleras tugged on his mistress's elbow. "Careful my lady," he said lowly, pitched only so the party could hear. "This may be a trap of some kind." Asha held her peace, but approved of the boy's suspicion; he may have been a greenlander through and through, but he had good instincts.

"Of course it's a trap, child," Quaithe said blandly, as though Alleras had shouted their secrets at the top of his lungs for all men and gods to hear. "The world is beset with traps for the unwary, and it is our choice whether we spring them while aware, or blunder into them. Have you not already seen one such trap before the gates of the rose lord's palace?" Alleras stiffened at this, and Thoros shifted his bulk into a stance ready for fighting. The exact reasoning passed Asha by, but she followed the Myrman's lead and prepared to draw.

The captain merely placed a calming hand on the boy's shoulder. "You're well informed," she said.

"I try to be," Quaithe demurred.

"Is that your warning, then?"

"Merely an observation. My warning is this: beware all in this city. Your arrival drew the eyes of every man, woman and child and there are those who will lust after what you have and what you represent."

"And what is that?"

"Power. Knowledge. Change. There are those who claim Qarth is eternal, but there are those who understand that the city's strength is always uncertain, and they may seek you out." Quaithe's eyes flicked towards Asha. "Not all of them are as easily dealt with as iron reavers. If you let them, they will have you."

Asha averted her eyes; there was something queer and dangerous in those wide, wet eyes. Something that reminded her of childhood memories of her uncle's gaze.

"Keep your guard up, creature from the stars, and wait. Three days from now you will be summoned. Attend and your path from Qarth back to the sunset lands and beyond will begin. Or not, and let the city gnaw at you until there is nothing left. That is your choice." Quaithe nodded sharply, turned and vanished into the swirling mass of humanity in the streets of the queen of cities.
"All the great of the east come to pay homage to the Mother of Dragons," announced Xaro Xhoan Daxos. "But today I have arranged for you to be the seeker, my golden heart."

Dany looked up from the breakfast her handmaids had set before her. "Truly?" she said. "And where shall I go to find this curiosity?"

"Never fear, light of love; the curiosity shall come before you." Xaro smiled in a satisfied way. "Recall three days past, when thunder sounded from a clear sky and a great ship of silver and ivory sailed through the air above Qarth's topless towers?" Dany nodded; the strange rumbling drone had unsettled her dragons, and the sight of something so large flying without wings had set tongues wagging within her own bloodriders and Xaro's people. "This ship has been the topic of much discussion among the wise and learned of the east. Some say that it is from the lands beyond the Golden Empire of Yi Ti and the Grey Waste; others claim that it comes from the south, from a kingdom of sorcerers carved out of the green hell of Sothoryos. The red priests claim it to be the chariot of their fire-god that fell from the moon."

"An interesting tale," said Dany. "What is the truth of the matter?"

Xaro's eyes glittered in the morning light. "A question for you to pose, my queen. I have arranged for the ship's master to be brought here to speak with you. The captain is a woman of strange affect, who may very well be a maegi of some kind. And," Xaro added with relish, "so the story goes the woman was in your lost homeland not long ago."

Dany started from her seat. Westeros. The home the Usurper had taken from her, the one her brother had told tales of in those years when they ran from house to house avoiding Robert Baratheon's knives in the dark. She had not heard tidings from the Seven Kingdoms since she and her sun-and-stars had left Vaes Dothrak.

"I've heard these stories as well, Khaleesi," Ser Jorah noted. "They say that this woman is the Usurper's pet."

"Or perhaps the other way around," Xaro countered with an amused smile. "The truth of the matter may be determined by your wisdom. I have sent for this mysterious creature to be brought here where you may question her to your heart's content."

"This is unwise, Your Grace," the knight said. "Whoever this woman is may bring the Usurper's knives with her."

"Perhaps," Dany noted. "But you and Jhogo can guard me, and I am curious, about this woman and her ship. I will meet with her, Xaro. Please have her sent to me."

Xaro bowed low. "It shall be done, my glorious love."

It was near noon when her handmaid Irri came through the silken curtains to inform her that Xaro had returned with his curiosity. "Send them in," she commanded.

When they entered, she was seated on a mound of cushions, her dragons all about her. A bowl of dates and other sweetmeats on ivory skewers had been set before her. Jhogo stood to her left, Ser Jorah to her right. Both men had their weapons ready to be drawn at a moment's notice.
Xaro entered first, a smug smile plastered beneath his jeweled nose. The maegi followed behind, a woman who wore a green shirt and black trousers more like what men would wear in the Free Cities than anything womanly, and had skin the color of polished oak. Her eyes were hard to see, hidden behind small panes of glass that reflected the gleaming walls of Xaro’s home. Around her floated five silver balls with blue eyes, bobbing gently like flowers in a pool. "Mother of Dragons," Xaro said grandly, "I bring you the Green Witch of Ulthos."

The maegi bowed deeply to Dany, hands pressed hard to her sides. "Captain Jade Hasegawa, Federal Starfleet Ranger Corps," she said smoothly in the Common Tongue of Westeros. "A pleasure to meet you." The woman smiled easily, but Dany remained wary; Mirri Maz Duur had soured her on those who played at sorcery. And this one is said to have favored the Usurper, she thought.

"You stand before Daenerys of House Targaryen," Ser Jorah said roughly in the same tongue. "Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Andals, Rhoynar and the First Men. Do you serve the usurper Robert Baratheon, woman?"

And I would know if you are here to kill me was left unspoken.

"I am sworn to the Federal Starfleet," the green woman said simply. "I was before I ever came to Planetos, and I will be when I leave it." Xaro shifted slightly at this pronouncement, but it made little sense to Dany. Planetos was a name given to the world by the learned. Viserys had told her that much when she was little. But the world is everything; how could one come to the world and then leave it? "Perhaps more to the point," she continued, "I'm pretty sure that in Westerosi culture oaths of loyalty expire on death, and, well…"

Dany was inclined to agree. The Usurper's shadow had lain across her since the hour of her birth, when she came forth amidst the storm to a world she no longer had a place in. And now the shadow had vanished thanks to this maegi.

"The boy sits the Iron Throne now," Ser Jorah said.

All my life running from his assassins and poison, yet I live and he is gone. Rhaegal stretched out his neck and gently nipped at her ear. "What was the manner of his death?"

The maegi shrugged. "Well, that depends," she said. "Officially it was a stray arrow in a hunting accident. If you believe Lord Stark there was very little accidental about that arrow. I'm not sure that matters, though."

Dany was inclined to agree. The Usurper's shadow had lain across her since the hour of her birth, when she came forth amidst the storm to a world she no longer had a place in. And now the shadow had vanished thanks to this maegi.

"The boy sits the Iron Throne now," Ser Jorah said.

The maegi wagged a hand. "Sort of," she replied. "Joffrey has the capital and the throne and the land around the city. Also the Lannister territories. But Robert's brothers have declared against him, and each other," she added with an aggrieved huff. "So that's basically a huge mess right now."

And there are bigger things to worry about right now, anyway."
"Bigger things?" echoed Dany. "What could be more important than the Usurper's dogs fighting amongst themselves and my realm bleeding?" She was unsurprised that Robert Baratheon's pack of traitors had turned to rip each other on his death. The same thing had happened when her Drogo died, and his great khalasar shattered like cheap pottery.

The woman's eyes returned to Dany. The light had changed and what was hidden was now visible. They were very green, and seemed to reach deep down and gaze upon her heart. Dany met the maegi's gaze without fear. She was the blood of the dragon, and she had gone through fire and returned unscathed. "Well, why not?" the maegi murmured, almost to herself. "If you're going to put in your claim to the throne, Your Grace, then you might as well know. Of course, if I'd known I was flying to Qarth to meet another claimant for the throne I'd have brought another party favor."

Xaro clapped his hands. "Wine!" he called out to his servants. "And a chair for the mighty sorceress!" He bowed low again before Dany. "Forgive me, light of my heart, but this sounds like a long tale and one that calls for refreshment."

Three of Xaro's slaveboys approached, one bearing a tray with a porcelain jug of wine and silver goblets upon it, and two carrying a gilded seat encrusted with fine gems. The seat they set down before the maegi, the wine they set beside the bowl of sweetmeats. One of the boys, young and fine-featured, poured out wine and offered a goblet to the maegi. The green woman looked the boy over and accepted the offering with a frozen smile, then drained her goblet in one long pull. Afterwards, she continued to look past Dany towards where the boy had scurried off. The silver goblet quivered in her hand.

"Is something wrong?" Dany asked.

The maegi let out a long hiss, dragging her free hand across her face slowly. "There are a great many things wrong," she said in a low, angry tone. "This place makes me itch every time I set eyes on it, and I need to finish what I started before I go and do something drastic."

"Qarth is the queen of cities, mighty sorceress." Xaro sounded offended by the venom in the maegi's words. "Its greatness is known across the entire world; none other since lost Valyria can match it for glory."

"Or misery, I'd bet," the woman said softly.

Xaro waved a dismissive hand. "Such is the way of the world," he said idly. "There are those who serve and those who are served. It has been this way since the beginning of days and it will always be such. Why then should such as we concern ourselves?"

Dany frowned. She had seen much misery, running from the Usurper with her brother. Xaro's indifference towards suffering nagged at a part of her heart that remembered a house with a red door. As if agreeing with Dany's innermost heart, the maegi turned her very green eyes to look upon Xaro Xhoan Daxos, and the milk man flinched as if struck.

"Or perhaps you've grown so fat on horror you think there's no other way," she said in that soft, deadly tone. Then her eyes returned to Dany, dismissing the Qartheen like a disobedient page. "But we're straying from the topic. Before I begin, I have a question for you."

Black Drogon hissed on her lap, letting out a thin line of smoke that rose between them like a veil. "You may ask."

"Daenerys Targaryen, why do you want to rule the Seven Kingdoms?"
"My father sat the Iron Throne before he was killed by the Usurper's dogs. My brother Viserys was the true king, but he died in exile when my lord husband Khal Drogo killed him with a crown of molten gold. I am the last of the blood of the dragon; the Iron Throne is mine by right."

The maegi's brows lifted. "Is that all?"

"Is that not enough?"

"No." Those eyes were very green and very cold. "It's not enough, Daenerys Targaryen. You can claim the right all day long but that doesn't mean you are the right person to claim it."

Ser Jorah growled and took a half-step forward. "You would speak to Her Grace in such a way?"

"This is not your conversation, boy." The maegi's voice was soft and mild, but her little ball creatures buzzed like angry bees when she said it. Dany risked a glance; the knight looked murderous but stepped back, hand on his blade. "The question is why you want it, Lady Targaryen. I've asked this of every other idiot who's gotten involved in this rolling clusterfuck of a civil war. Joffrey thinks like you do, that it's his by right of blood. He might be wrong about that, but he doesn't know it and wouldn't listen if you tried to tell him. Renly wants it because he's never been denied anything in his life. Stannis thinks of it as a burden forced on him by his brother, but he'll shoulder it because he thinks he has to." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "So let me ask again, Lady Targaryen, would-be queen, mother of dragons: why do you want to rule Westeros?"

Dany would not, could not quail under the maegi's fierce gaze. Hers was the blood of the dragon, the blood of Old Valyria and her mighty ancestors. Why? A simple question that pierced through all things. Beyond the freezing bonfire of the maegi she could sense Xaro's eyes on her with undisguised interest. Viserys wanted vengeance for our father and brother, she thought. He wished to see the Usurper ground beneath his feet. But Robert is dead, his dogs fighting among themselves. He tried to kill me and my unborn child, but I survived. Rhaegal and Viserion shifted uneasily on her shoulders, claws poking through the fabric of her gown and prickling her skin. Viserys is dead. Drogo is dead. My son is dead. My khalasar almost died in the Red Waste. So much death around me. Dany closed her eyes. Why do I want this?

"You've never actually thought about the why before, have you?" the maegi said, her voice surprisingly gentle for all the words stung. Dany refused to answer, unwilling to trust the words coming from her mouth. "Forget about questions of right and blood and family and all of that and ask yourself, why are you intent on going to Westeros?"

The answer, when it came, was simple enough. "I want…" Dany whispered, barely unable to speak until she opened her eyes again and looked at the maegi. Her eyes were not so cold now. "I want to go home," she replied. "I was exiled from Westeros the day of my birth, and I want to see it again. I want to make it a place where my people can live free of fear, free of knives and poison in the dark. I want… to make everything better."

The green woman said nothing, leaning forward in her seat, those terrible green eyes burning into her. Drogon hissed a warning beneath Dany's hand. The silver balls floating about the maegi's shoulders made a sound like a hundred little bells all chiming at once. "My dearest treasure, mighty one, please," Xaro said weakly, his voice sounding distant in Dany's ears. "There's no need for violence within this house."

Finally the maegi sat back. "Better than some, worse than others," she said at long last. "Alright then, Lady Targaryen. I'll tell you."
THE LOYAL MAN

The war was finally here.

Outriders wearing Reachman sigils had been spotted in the kingswood, less than a sennight from King's Landing. It was only a matter of time before Renly and his Tyrell armies reached the gates. In Kevan Lannister's estimation, the city was about as ready as it was ever going to be for a siege. Five and twenty thousand soldiers from the Westerlands augmented the original garrison, thankfully allowing the goldcloaks to return to their usual habits of pretending to keep order in the city and whoring whilst their betters manned the walls.

There were few knights available; most of the Westermen had gone with the Hand and the Lord Commander north to deal with the Starks. That at least had not seriously impacted the preparations yet. The walls of King's Landing now sported a forest of scorpions and catapults, ready to drive off any invader who dared get close to the walls. The royal fleet stood ready to keep the Blackwater open should Renly or his brother attempt to close off the river and the bay. Stores had been built up and were ready to feed most, if not all, properly. The city was likely ready.

Kevan wished he could say the same about the Red Keep. The king had withdrawn over the last fortnight, preferring to stay in his chambers consulting with the master of magic over being seen presiding in court or the small council. The king's withdrawal as the war started to become real for the city led to tongues wagging. The horrible rumors spread by Stannis seemed to be everywhere, and though most scoffed there were always a few who didn't. Greyjoy's suggestion, to spread counter-rumors regarding the Ulthosi whore who'd insulted House Lannister and lived to laugh in their faces over it, worked for a time but Kevan wasn't sure if those tales would hold properly.

With the king unavailable the queen regent often led court in his stead and Cersei… her temper had yet to completely get the better of her but thrice in the last few days it had been a close-run thing. If Kevan had not intervened three of the king's sworn swords might have been given over to the black cells instead of out on the walls where Kevan needed them.

The city was ready, but it felt like the household was on the edge of a precipice and Kevan Lannister lamented that he was there and his brother was not.

He was in the Hand's solar, going over the latest reports from the kingswood, when Lord Varys came to call upon him. "What news do you have, Spider?" Kevan's patience for the simpering eunuch had grown thin, particularly as more and more distressing dispatches came from the south and west.

"Renly continues to march northwards, but slowly. Whether that is because of the size of his army or he is simply taking his time, I cannot say. Much of Stannis' fleet has left Dragonstone; my little birds sing that some of his galleys were seen sailing past Maidenpool but that is uncertain. The North has not moved."

Kevan's eyes went to the great map of Westeros tacked to the table. "Tywin and our forces will have entered the Neck by now," he mused.

"More than likely," the Spider agreed. "Though I cannot say when they will return. Or if."

"Eight and twenty thousand knights and men-at-arms is no small force."

"No. But even the Conqueror hesitated when it came to sending his army through that mire."

Kevan whirled on the eunuch. "If you have something to say, Lord Varys, then say it and be done
"If I may be so bold," Varys began cautiously. "I have seen many Hands in my time at court. The clever and the foolish, the great and the weak. Lord Tywin is many things, but it seems to me that when roused his anger is… all-consuming. Would you agree, ser?"

Kevan thought about the Reynes and Tarbecks. About the whore who claimed his mother's jewels on his father's death. And how Tywin dealt with problems such as those. "Yes, I can see that," he slowly replied.

The eunuch nodded agreeably. "Then perhaps, if sufficient insult was granted to his house—slander and assault upon his favored children, possibly? In such a circumstance might not your brother be blinded by his wrath, to the point where he might behave… rashly? Especially if provoked?"

It was possible, if only just. Kevan was no fool to think Tywin perfect. He had his flaws, just like any other man. And yet. Tywin Lannister favored the sharp lesson delivered without anger. To react so forcefully was unusual. But if provoked… "Provoked how?" he asked, suspicious.

"The right word in the right ear, meant to dig the thorn just that little bit deeper. To ensure that he cannot allow the slight to his house be to deal with more practical matters. To convince him that so long as the Starks and the Ulthosi remained free he would be seen as weak." The Spider put hard stress on the last word. "If His Grace and the queen regent were to think him so, what would that drive him to do?"

Kevan stared at the Spider. It made sense, after a fashion, but who would do such a thing? Who would provoke his brother into taking half the army and charging north whilst the larger and more dangerous armies to the south still remained? "Greyjoy?" he ventured.

Varys shrugged. "Perhaps," he said. "I suspect the seed was planted along when Lady Hasegawa planted her heel in Ser Jaime's manhood. All Greyjoy had to do was water it sufficiently until it sprouted."

"What do you know of his plans?"

"Very little. Greyjoy does not speak of his doings to others, and his servants do not speak at all." The eunuch's face darkened as he spoke. "I can say this: whatever he plans, it is dangerous and not for the good of His Grace or the realm. You must be cautious, Ser Kevan. The master of magic still holds the king's favor; moving against him would set your house against itself." The master of whisperers gave a little bow and departed, leaving Kevan reeling. His eyes kept falling on the map, the long thread of the kingsroad coursing through the Neck. Gods. This is a disaster. Tywin, gods be with you and bring you and the army back as quickly as you can before the Tyrells envelop us, before Stannis blocks the bay, before Greyjoy manages to succeed in his plan.

"Ah, Ser Kevan!" Pycelle's thin wheedling voice broke his anguished reverie. Kevan looked up to see the man standing in the door, hands wringing.

"Grand Maester forgive me but I am quite busy at the moment." He tried to close the door on the old man, but he seemed unwilling to budge from his spot.

"I have important news, Ser Kevan," he whined. "I must tell you—"

"Later, Grand Maester," Kevan said sternly. "I have duties to attend to. The city's defenses need my attention, as well the other tasks I must accomplish. I will send for you later, or perhaps speak to me after dinner but for now I am needed elsew—"
"The white raven has come."

Kevan's attempts to push Pycelle out of the solar stopped. "What?"

"I received word from the Citadel some moons ago; the conclave were of the opinion that the ravens would be sent at year's end, but the raven arrived scarcely an hour ago. The Long Summer has ended and autumn is beginning." Pycelle's hands continued to wring, his expression anxious. "Too soon, too soon!"

The seasons were changing. Everything was in flux and Kevan Lannister found himself the man in the middle instead of his brother. Tywin should be here. "It matters not," he said, shaking his head.

Pycelle looked fit to protest. "Ser Kevan, summer has ended sooner than it should have," he argued. "The archmaesters are in an uproar over it. The Ulthosi witch warned us that something like this may happen; is it not possible that her other predictions—"

"Enough!" Kevan's shout was enough to startle the Grand Maester into silence. "We are at war, Pycelle," he seethed. "Renly's men are scouting in the kingswood. This city will be under siege within a moon's turn, if not before. Half the bloody army is in the North dealing with the rebellion. And may the gods let them win. "What the seasons do is beyond my reach. If we live to see the next moon's turn, perhaps then we will be able to do something about it."
"Madness!" Ser Jorah Mormont's outrage rang like a great bell inside the manse. Xaro Xhoan Daxos watched them with a close, calculating expression on his face, his jeweled nose glittering in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Dany had kept her eyes on the maegi as she spoke of magic and monsters from the uttermost north of the world. She was not the best liar in the world but her life had acquainted her with lies very well, and the maegi's eyes never shifted, her tone never wavered in the ways liars would. If this was a lie, it was buried so deeply that the teller believed the tale.

Like Viserys, the thought bubbled up. Her brother believed many things, some of which she still hoped were true. Ser Jorah's summation could have been correct; the woman was clearly a maegi of some kind, with her floating balls and flying ship, but she could also be quite mad.

The maegi regarded the exile knight with a curious expression. "I'm not going to say that I haven't heard that one before," she noted. "However, it is the first time I've heard that from a Northman. Generally your people were a lot more, shall we say, accepting of the idea than others."

"The Others are dead," Ser Jorah snapped. "If they ever existed in the first place."

"Not dead; trapped. There is a difference. But whatever it is that keeps them locked down is broken and they're wandering free, in penny packets at least. The longer this goes on the more get out and soon enough the whole planet is going to be neck-deep in ice demons and their zombie minions. I mean, just so we're clear here," the maegi said sternly. "This is the situation that is developing. I'm here hoping that I can find something useful against them, because right now all I have—all Westeros has—is brute force and ignorance and that is not going to cut it."

Ser Jorah turned to face Dany, anger writ plain on his face. He spoke in the bastard Valyrian of the Free Cities instead of the speech of Westeros. "My Queen, the woman speaks of myth and legend in terms of dire threat. This is a trick of some kind, a way to worm her way into Your Grace's confidence. She cannot be trusted."

"You know," the maegi commented in the same liquid syllables, "if you really wanted to keep the conversation private you could've just waited until I was gone." Dany's ears pricked at the way she spoke; it was almost as if she was reading from a book, despite the casual nature of the words.

Mormont's eyes went wide. "You understood me?"

The maegi rolled her green eyes and wiggled her fingers in the knight's direction. "Maaaaaaaagic," she taunted. Jorah flushed, hand going to the pommel of his sword.

"Ser Jorah, enough!" Dany commanded. The knight pulled his hand away but continued to glare death at the unrepentant maegi. "Captain Hasegawa," she stumbled a little over the strange name "please do not antagonize my Queensguard."

"Yeah, no, that's on me. My apologies, been kind of a stressful year." The maegi waved a negligent hand in the knight's direction, which seemed to be as much as she was willing to give.

Dany nodded, her dragons bobbing their heads along with her. "You claim to be searching for knowledge to use in your fight against the Others of legend," she said. "But I'm confused; why did
you come to me?" Hers was the blood of the dragon, but the Valyrians had only rarely come to Westeros before the Conquest.

"Well," the maegi rubbed the back of her head in a suspiciously sheepish manner. "I got some helpfully unhelpful advice from a friendly priestess that brought me to Qarth, and then once I got here I got some more helpfully unhelpful advice from a woman in a red mask—" Dany's eyes went wide. Quaithe. The Asshai'i woman had met her outside the city, and apparently still meddled. "—and that brought me, eventually, here. In all honesty," the green-eyed woman admitted, "I didn't think much would come of this, but I figured that humoring some of these overfed motherfuckers might give me an in. It sort of worked with Robert at least."

"Is that what you were doing in the Usurper's court?" She was curious. The maegi seemed to care very little about such things, so why would she even bother with the Iron Throne?

"Pretty much, yeah. Show up once in a while and act all foreign and exotic, then I'd be free to run around doing what I needed to. He never even tried to cop a feel, too; shows that he was smarter than he looked." The speech was odd, but the intent behind the words glowed bright as day. "But, it got me an apprentice… or a couple of apprentices maybe? Not relevant. It got me where I needed to go."

"And are you humoring me now?"

"I was humoring him more than anything," the green-eyed woman jabbed a thumb at the still-watching Xaro. "But yes, I was. A little. I've been humoring a lot of people the last little while, kinda gotten into the habit of it." The maegi settled back in her chair and regarded Dany with a stonelike expression on her face. "So."

"So?"

"Where do we go from here?"

That was a very good question. Her realm was bleeding and under threat from more than just angry dogs, and Daenerys Targaryen was still in Qarth without ship or swords to bring order. "I do not know," Dany admitted. "The comet led us both to Qarth, but for what reason? I had hoped to find my army, so that I may sail to Westeros and reclaim my throne, but it seems that will not be. You hoped to fight legends; will you find what you seek?"

"I don't even know what I'm looking for," the maegi grumbled. "A street and a hand, but what that means I have no idea."

Dany shrugged, her dragons squawking a little at the disturbance. "It would seem as though we're both lost then," she said, and the maegi chuckled at that. "Would you aid me?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Would you aid me?" The impulse was foolish, dangerous perhaps. The maegi seemed unassuming enough compared to the ornamentation of Pyat Pree and Quaithe, but she had thought the Lhazareen godswife to be little threat and that cost her both a son and a khal. "I have no army, no swords to fight in my name nor ships to carry them across the sea to Westeros. My dragons will not be old enough for war for years to come. But my realm needs to be united if it will survive. Humor me in this, Captain Hasegawa, and in return I shall grant you unlimited access to what you need to keep my people alive. All the swords of the Seven Kingdoms, the libraries of King's Landing and Oldtown, whatever scraps of wisdom and power might remain throughout Westeros you shall have if you aid me."
The maegi’s eyes were wide and flicked from her, to her Queensguard and back again. "That's a very, very big thing to promise, Lady Targaryen," she said.

Dany spread her hands. "I have little else but promises," she replied. I am crowned, but still a beggar. She hated the feeling, but the fact was plain. Without swords and men to back her, all she had were her bloodriders and her dragons and neither were enough. The maegi though, her magics and her ship would turn the tide of war in her favor. Dany was certain of that. "But I will promise to listen to your counsel and to give you whatever you need to defeat this enemy you speak of. As queen, I can do no less."

"I," the maegi said, then stopped, her very green eyes boring into Dany's purple. For a moment it felt like time itself had stopped, then the maegi sagged and all Dany could see was an ordinary woman in peculiar clothing, tired and worn. "God, if I'd met you three months ago I might've actually jumped," she murmured to herself, then looked up at Dany. "I wish I could just say yes and get on with it, I really do," she said with a wan smile. "But I've spent the last couple of months running around Westeros like a lunatic talking and cajoling and debating and yelling at people so they'll actually listening to me and… we have something approaching an agreement. Not between all parties, not anything terribly solid, more like a fragile web holding the Seven Kingdoms together based almost entirely on my neutrality.

"The civil war's been pretty mild so far, not much in the way of actual fighting, just people parked on various castles yelling nasty things at each other. The longer I can keep it that way, the better but if I pick somebody to because-I-said-so onto the throne, if I pick a side... that web will snap and the whole continent will dissolve into chaos. And then the Others' chances of winning increase, because every dead woman, man and child in Westeros from now until we put an end to it becomes theirs."

The cold feeling of despair started to settle into Dany's belly again. "You will not help me, then?" Viserion crooned on her right shoulder and she reached up to stroke him. The little pale dragon leaned into her touch, his scales rubbing up against the golden bracelet her sun-and-stars had given her in Vaes Dothrak, what seemed like an eternity ago.

"Not in this, not directly." The maegi's voice sounded genuinely sympathetic. "Though if we're both here for a reason maybe we can help… each other?" The woman trailed off as she looked at Dany's bracelet, as if seeing it for the first time that day. "Interesting bit of jewelry you've got there," she said in a carefully neutral voice.

Dany continued to pet Viserion, cocking her head in puzzlement. "It was a gift from my lord husband, Khal Drogo," she said. "I believe it to be Valyrian."

"That's Valyrian!?!" the maegi blurted. "Holy shit!" The neutrality in the woman's voice had vanished, replaced with a queer excitement. "May I?" Dany pulled her hand away from the dragon and held it out; the maegi leaned in, one of her little demons floating beside her casting blue light on her arm. "Oh now that's interesting," she mumbled. "Can't tell if this was part of a larger device or if it was made to order. Cold-forged, maybe? Or somehow the circuitry was capable of resisting casting or hot forging? I'd say that's impossible but anybody could do that it'd be them…" She paused, glancing at the inscription. "Oh. Oh."

Oh? What about her bracelet would cause a maegi to say oh like she'd been slapped in the face? "Captain?" Dany ventured.

"Do you know what this says?"

Dany shook her head. "The glyphs are ancient Valyrian, I think, but the language only resembles Valyrian a little. Perhaps it was crafted by the dragonlords of old."
"Oh, I know who made it," the green-eyed woman muttered. Her gaze shifted from the bracelet (Dany lowering her arm gratefully) to Drogon sitting in her lap. The black dragon returned the look. "Aren't you cute," she said. Drogon hissed at her. "What do they eat, exactly?"

"Meat, of course. Though it must be charred by fire before they will touch it."

The *maegi* hummed without tune for a moment, then plucked a skewered date from the table before Dany. Holding it up, she whistled sharply and one of her silver demons cast blue light across the date until it smoked, shriveled and blackened. That done, the *maegi* held out the burnt fruit and offered it to Drogon. The little dragon sniffed suspiciously, then snapped the date up as eagerly as it would a gobbet of meat.

Dany blinked, then glared down at her Drogon. "It would have been nice to know that earlier," she said, annoyed. Drogon finished swallowing and gave her a defiant look.

"Son of a bitch!" The *maegi* shouted, leaping from her chair and pointing at the black dragon. Dany yelped and pushed back, startled, her dragons screeching at the sudden movement. Xaro Xhoan Daxos near fell over in his chair, the close look on his face replaced with shock. Ser Jorah and Jhogo both went for their weapons but did not draw. "Of course! It makes sense now! Holy shit that's part of the puzzle and I missed it!"

Xaro was the first to recover his wits as he steadied himself. "Great lady," he said, "I fear that I do not understand what you mean…" he trailed off.

The *maegi*'s hands clawed at the air, grasping for something Dany couldn't see. "Something just came to me," she said. "Look at it like this: I'm a Builder. I just called up what I can't put down but it's contained. Sealed away nice and tight but that's not going to last forever. A lock, a door, a wall… they're all static structures. Unchanging, but vulnerable. Entropy *always* takes its cut: one year, ten, a million years can pass before it does but it doesn't matter because it *always wins* in the end. The locks will start to fail, containment will degrade and something will escape.

"So I need a security system, a warning bell and something that can pick off strays," the woman ramble. "I can build machines to do that, but even the best machine has the same problem as the prison itself: it's fragile over time, entropy will gnaw on them the same way and they're dependent on repairs I can't be sure I'll be around to make. Technology is *useful* but I can't *rely* on it past a certain threshold. Long-term solutions for the prison can't be simple machines. It has to be locally aentropic, something self-maintaining and self-renewing over *geological* periods of time if necessary. Something *biological!*

Xaro's eyes were full of confusion, as the *maegi* paced to and fro before Dany as if in a daze. She was sure that the Qartheen merchant's eyes were mirrors of her own. "What?" Xaro croaked.

"The weirwoods are the first component of the system," the *maegi* said, half to herself and half to the others in the room. The manner reminded her of Viserys in an unpleasant way. "The trees are the monitor, the warning bell and the command and control part of the equation. They're intelligent and sensitive enough that if the prison starts to crack they'll know what's going down and why. But they're a passive system—they're *trees* after all, they can't move against a threat in any real sense. There needs to be an *active* system in the loop. The singers probably fulfilled that need for basic maintenance and observation, help keep the trees safe from non-Unbidden threats like humans. Maybe there's machines involved too but if you use the same logic that turns the weirwoods and the singers into part of the defensive line then for the offensive line you need something purpose-built to kill things that don't like extreme heat and that is where *you* come in, you magnificent little pieces of bioengineering!" She whirled and pointed at Dany's dragons, a savage grin splitting her face. Rhaegal cocked his head and looked curiously at the woman's outstretched finger. "Your metabolism
is perfectly tuned to keep you alive in deep cold without any need for insulation. When you're grown
your flame is hot enough to turn anything you want into charcoal; hell, you might be preferential
carnivores but when you get down to it I'll bet anything you want that you're an obligate carbovore.
You're willing to eat anything as long as it's been burned down to carbon first.

"You're perfect for what I need. You can roost, breed and hunt literally anywhere on the planet. If
anything gets loose, or there's a second incursion, the trees will see it, point you at it and you can just
burn it all down and eat the ashes for cleanup." The maegi smiled. "With the right tweaks your line
will breed true for a million years or more, and even when Darwin starts messing with you
eventually you might be smart enough to deal with the problem on your own. It's deviously brilliant."
She seemed to run out of fire at this statement, returning to her seat. "Oh man, the picture is starting
to clear up again."

A rough voice cleared his throat from Dany's side. "Forgive me, captain," Ser Jorah said roughly.
"But are you suggesting that dragons have something to do with the Others?"

The maegi looked up at him. "Well, if they don't have something to do with them it's a hell of a
coincidence," she replied, still smiling. "And I don't believe in coincidences when it comes to the
Builders anymore."

"But there are no dragons in the North," Ser Jorah said, and the smile slipped from the woman in
green's face.

"Aaaaand just like that the picture gets foggy again," she mumbled. "I know there's none now, but
back in the old days? Really? No dragons in the North at all?"

Mormont grew stubborn. "None of the tales I learned in my youth spoke of the Builder and
dragons," he stated firmly. "Dragons were unknown in Westeros at all until the Targaryens came."

"Builders, not Builder," the maegi said absently. "The plural's important. Not at all the same guys…
though maybe that's not entirely true?" Her voice softened and she looked at something no one else
could see. "I mean, maybe they called him zhdane too? Make a note to ask George at some point."
She blinked and quivered like a large, wet dog shaking itself free of water and going on in a much
firmer tone. "Okay, might be interesting to follow up on that but not relevant at the moment.
Unbidden are moving, live dragons, background count spiking, none of that's a coincidence. More
information, we need more information." She turned and regarded Xaro, who watched
the maegi warily while trying to remain languid and disinterested as he could. "Daxos-san, as one of
the local rich people I'm guessing you know the city well?"

Xaro puffed himself up a fraction. "I am a merchant prince and member of the Thirteen, mighty
sorceress," he said with pride. "I know the Queen of Cities better than a lover knows his love's
body."

"And I'm sure your mother is proud," the maegi said dryly. "I was told to find a street without
windows, does that sound familiar to you?"

Xaro's great jeweled beak of a nose dipped as the man frowned. "Great one, it is familiar to me," he
said. "But I urge you, do not go there."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"It is the abode of warlocks, clever one. The House of the Undying they call it; a palace of dust and
failure is more like it. The warlocks of Qarth were as mighty as you, noble captain of the skies, but
now they are faded and withered, hiding their faces from the sun and trying to lure the unwary into
their nets. Already one of their number, a creature named Pyat Pree, has tried to steal away
the Khaleesi from her people."

"Pyat Pree extended an invitation to the House of the Undying," Dany admitted at the maegi's
questioning look. "I have not replied."

"You see? These dust-ridden fools seek to sink their hooks into the young queen," Xaro cried, tears
flowing from his eyes and staining his fine robes. "I beg you, light of my love, great and powerful
sorceress, do not go to the House of the Undying. They have naught to give you and will avail you
naught." He rose and left the room, weeping as he went.

"Well," the maegi said quietly. "That was… less than useful." She eyed Dany and her loyal guards.
"The House of the Undying, eh?"

Dany eyed the green woman and her silver demons back. "You will not aid me in seeking the Iron
Throne?" There was still a little hope in there, the queer light in the maegi's eyes had yet to dim.

But the woman shook her head. "Like I said, not directly, not now. We might be able to help each
other as this thing goes but I won't intervene directly. I can't unless the whole thing falls apart."

"And if it does?"

"Well..." the maegi gave Dany another probing look. "We'll burn that bridge when we get there. For
now, maybe we can work together on saving the world, then sort out the throne? You said you had
an invitation to the house of scary warlocks. Mind having me as your plus one?"

Dany nodded. She was unsure, but perhaps she could persuade this strange jabbering woman when
no other king in Westeros could. "Ser Jorah," she said. "Come the morrow, you must go to Pyat
Pree. Tell him that I and the Witch of Ulthos desire an audience."

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ELSEWHERE

The probe was not intelligent—not in any way the people of Planetos would understand at any rate.
It was driven by simple rules and lines of code, a stripped-down copy of the virtual intelligence
system that commanded its parent ship Carefree Victory. The probe's VI was remarkably clever in
some ways, but it could not think the same way an organic brain could, or even like the digital
general intelligences created by advanced sophonts everywhere else in the galaxy.

It was designed to seek for its target and learn everything it could about that target, transmitting that
information back before returning, running out of power or otherwise ending the mission. That was
its purpose, and it would doggedly continue to pursue that mission until completion or destruction.

The probe had been launched—after some hasty modifications by Captain Hasegawa—to examine
the unusual celestial body currently in the FSC-29294 system: a comet whose coma was a brilliant
and very uncometlike red. A quick systems check indicated that the unit had sufficient fuel for a
close approach and possibly taking up an orbital position within the next few days. While the comet
would soon be behind the sun compared to the position of Planetos, subspace communications
ensured that no data would be lost or need to be stored at any point during the encounter.

Already the data received on passive sensors had proved to be enlightening: the jury-rigged
asynchronous field sensors showed incredibly strong psi output coming from an object buried deep
within the comet's crust, and that it was this flow that had turned the comet's coma from the white of
ice to scarlet. Unfortunately for Captain Hasegawa, the raw outpouring of psi energy effectively
blocked the longer-range passive systems from determining any more than that; more information would have to wait until the object was within range of the high-resolution active scanners. The probe continued to scan dutifully, recording the subtle shifts of color within the coma as it danced from almost orange to deep into the infrared, marking bands and interference patterns along with changes in the psi fields and packaging it all for review by the ship's commander.

*Carefree Victory*'s VI saw all of this as it came in and stored it in the long-term memory for future reference. The VI was an order of magnitude more intelligent than the probe, though still nowhere near sophont, and was capable of simple routing and redirection as needed. The psi field readings and the crude "heatmap" scans were flagged for sophont review—by Captain Hasegawa or the new Level-3 user tagged Alleras—at the first available opportunity. Copies of the raw data were compressed and prepared for transmission onward as per Starfleet protocol; the subspace link established with the Starship *Kongou* and its escorts was still very thin, barely adequate for limited text-based communication let alone the bandwidth needed to undertake a raw data dump. But the ship was not capable of resignation. It would continue to follow orders so long as the necessary components were functional.

The probe drifted closer to its goal, slowly readying for the encounter. The ship continued to watch and record. The comet flew on as it had for thousands of years, ignoring what followed in its wake.
After enough association the astonishing could become mundane. Thoros had gotten used to the captain's casual use of magical windows; just another miracle that the woman took for granted, and the longer he stayed with her the more he took them for granted as well. Seeing the world like the wizards of Valyria did through their glass candles seemed almost a trifle compared to some of the other things Jade Hasegawa could do—had done—using her ship. But those were miracles of her world. Floating in the air before him were miracles of his.

The room was filled with the ghosts of dragons dancing above the wardroom table, the first time in over a century such a thing had been seen in the world.

"God," murmured Asha Greyjoy, though whether that was because of the dragons or because she was less inured to the casual use of magic he knew not. "They're real."

"That's actually a good question," Alleras said from across the table. She was poking at the slate she'd "borrowed" from the captain which now never seemed to leave her hand. "Are they real dragons? There are dragonkin still living, wyverns and the like, from Sothoryos. An unscrupulous man convincing a Targaryen that wyverns are dragons sounds like the sort of jape the lords of Qarth would appreciate."

Thoros shook his head. "Wyverns cannot breathe fire," he said, pointing at one image where the larger black dragon the Targaryen girl held in her lap had smoke streaming from its mouth. "I once saw a man in Lys try such a deception by using a wyvern with its jaw wired shut and a small brazier placed beneath its tongue."

The captain gave him an uncertain look. "That's... pretty fucked up."

"It might have worked if the beast had held still for a minute; instead it thrashed around until the wire broke, spat out the brazier and soothed its mouth on the fool's blood." Thoros shrugged. "Some people's cleverness outstrips their wisdom. Regardless, this creature looks like it has a hearthfire jammed down its throat and shows no sign of discomfort. If this is a ruse, it's a more cunning ruse than any devised since the end of the dragons."

"Yeah," the captain nodded. "I got the story of how they hatched out of Lady Targaryen. It sounds like a major psionic event of some kind, maybe two months ago. So, dragons they most likely are, popping back into the world right at the same time the Others start moving with serious intent."

"The will of the gods, mayhaps?" Greyjoy said with deep and sincere sarcasm.

The captain shrugged. "Maybe? Will of something possibly; too many coincidences building up too fast. And I'm pretty damn sure that these things are connected to the Others somehow. Do we have anything on dragons in Westeros?"

Alleras tapped at her slate with faint irritation. "We have very little, my lady. Most of the records we copied from the Citadel were about the pre-Andal north, and few of those tales involved dragons. There are stories of ice dragons lurking in the white wastes, but those seem to be very different beasts altogether."

"Could be a holdover from the last time the Others got loose," the captain noted. "We know they can
animate and puppet dead humans, no reason they couldn't do that to a dragon."

"True enough. I pray that those have rotted into nothing, though. A fully-grown dragon under their sway would be... bad." The maester's shoulders quaked. "There are stories that date roughly back to the Age of Heroes of dragons, mostly about warriors killing them of course. The pattern is fairly similar: a dragon lairs too close to a village and starts feeding on the livestock or the villagers, the hero arrives, learns of the people's plight and then runs off to destroy the dragon. Sometimes they go through three or four warriors before the true hero arrives. Most of the First Man heroes the maesters believe to be from after the Long Night have at least one dead dragon to their name, and all of these tales seem to have been in circulation well before the Conquest—though they fell out of favor everywhere but Dorne afterwards."

"You greenlanders have little sense of history," Greyjoy scoffed. "The ironborn still remember the Grey King's defeat of the sea dragon Nagga."

"Yes, well, nobody cares about the Iron Islands when they're not reaving all over the place."

"Children, enough," the captain groaned. "Regional pissing contest aside, given that we know dragons are real we can presume that there's some truth to the inciting incident, even if it's just a variation on the same story. I mean, these things can get big, they don't seem to be choosy about their food and killing a big one probably takes more effort than most people can handle."

"Perhaps," Alleras said thoughtfully. "But there were no dragons in Westeros when the Andals invaded, and none between then and the Conquest..." She swiped furiously at her slate.

"You've got something?"

"I'm not sure. I had the ship collect a book on impulse out of Pycelle's library before we left for the Wall." The slate chimed objection as the young maester handled it roughly. "Maester Patryk's A Collection of Lays of the Ancient Heroes notes that all the stories of dragons and dragonslayers in Westeros are attributed to the grandsons or great-grandsons of the foundational heroes. The great-nephew of Lann the Clever killed a dragon that had been preying on lions in the western mountains, or the great-great-grandson of Garth Greenhand killed a dragon and used its bones to lay the foundation of the Hightower, that sort of thing. But then the tales stop appearing. Names might change, First Men warriors become Andal or Rhoynish knights, but the stories remain the same. After a certain point there's no new tale of dragonslaying." She looked up from her slate, eyes wide. "Patryk also notes that this is around the time Valyria rises from the Fourteen Flames, conquers Old Ghis and becomes synonymous with dragons."

The captain tilted her head, wheels turning behind her eyes. "Dragons fall out of the Westerosi mytholexicon at the same time Valyria becomes dragon central," she mused. "That's a hell of a coincidence."

Alleras shook her head. "They had to have done something. What I can't say but even if the timing is off by a century it's too close to be unrelated."

"They say that Old Valyria was the domain of some of the greatest warlocks in the world," Thoros added. "Second only to Asshai-By-The-Shadow in their mastery of the dark arts, and dragonlore was their greatest secret. If any race could have done such a feat t'would be them."

"And that brings us to this particular mystery." The captain waved a hand and the dragons vanished, replaced with an image of Daenerys Targaryen's left hand and arm. The girl wore a ring of blue stone veined with gold on her middle finger, and the ring was joined to a bracelet of similar material by fine golden chains. "This bit of jewelry was apparently a gift from her late husband, a piece of
flotsam from the wreckage of Valyria. On the surface it looks like a nice, if simple, bit of stonework, right? But under the hood is a very different story." The image changed, the disembodied hand and arm vanished and the blue stone was replaced by a lattice of lines twisting and curling in ways that made Thoros's head hurt.

Alleras looked up at the strange picture, her eyes almost crossing as she tried to take it in. "What in the gods' name is that?"

"That, my dear apprentice, is Builder technology." The captain said it firmly, pointing at the tangle of lines, some of which now glowed green. "I'm not sure exactly what it does or how it works, but it's part of a larger system. See these bits here? They're supposed to connect to something else. And this bit right here?" Another section of the lines glowed purple. "This seems to have a passive link to Targaryen's nervous system."

"Wait, wait," Greyjoy interjected. "Are you saying that this chit is one of your grumkins? The same ones that chained the Others and created the gods of the North and all the rest of the whaleshit you've claimed?"

"That'd be nice, wouldn't it? A live Builder would potentially solve a lot of the larger problems we've got to deal with." The captain shook her head. "No, the Builders are all gone. Daenerys is human alright, and so were her Valyrian ancestors. I'm thinking they inherited the technology, or maybe it fell off a cart somewhere. The bracelet and the ring have both been reworked, and then somebody cut this into the surface." The lines vanished and were replaced with a set of Valyrian glyphs, with a translation into the letters of the Common Speech below them:

ZLALDIMANDENAK ZALZEH NILAR PEHSEHBH BIHZIHSN MBIREDBH

Thoros knew not the words, and yet it seemed oddly familiar to him. As though he had heard something like it. "The glyphs are Old Valyrian," Alleras said with an equally confused expression on her face. "But the words are gibberish. Familiar gibberish but..."

"The last time you heard it a dead man was yelling at me," Jade said softly. Alleras blanched and hunched over her slate. Thoros swallowed an oath to the Lord of Light. "It's Builder, or maybe a devolved Builder; the grammar's weird and some of this doesn't translate out according to what I have on the language." She waved again and the strange words were replaced by others:

[UNTRANSLATABLE] [POSSIBLE TRANSLATION: "GUIDE/STEER/NAVIGATE/DIRECT"] [UNTRANSLATABLE] FIRE [WORD NOT IN LEXICON] [POSSIBLE TRANSLATION: "KING-CONSORT"] NIGHT AND NOON FOLLOW [DEFINITE ARTICLE: "THE"]

"As you can see, not much better," the captain said wryly. "Whoever wrote this out sort of knew what the Builder symbols meant but not how the actual language worked." She blinked up at the words. "And now that I think about it..." the words vanished and the original Valyrian glyphs reappeared next to a set of scratched lines that looked vaguely similar, like a child's flattery of a master artisan. "These are old First Man runes carved into the stonework at Winterfell. The language is simpler to an extent but it comes from the same root form."

"I don't remember this," Alleras noted.

"From before we met, Al. This was one of the very first things I found, like my second or third week in Westeros. So we have a chain going: the Builders influenced the First Men through the weirwood trees and the Valyrians through a cache of some sort. The First Men built the Wall and founded the Watch while the Valyrians tamed the dragons. If the containment collapsed the First Men would man
the static defense while Valyria rode the dragons to the rescue."

Thoros frowned. "Valyria riding to anyone's rescue seems unlikely," he said. "Even their own."

"Well, it's a work in progress," the captain admitted. "But it fits what we have."

"So the Targaryen girl's important, then."

"Potentially, yeah. The dragons at least could be serious game-changers given time; right now they're not close to fighting condition but a couple years from now it'll be an entirely different story." Jade shrugged mightily. "The defense grid's trying to wake up as best it can, maybe? I don't know; might see what the fleet has to think about the situation. But… yeah. The dragons in and of themselves are a big chunk of this mess, even if they're not combat-ready anytime soon."

"And what of the dragon princess?" Thoros asked. "Where does she fit into the war?"

The captain dismissed all the ghostly images, leaned back and sighed. "I think," she said slowly, "that she was put here by a malicious god to test my resolve."

Alleras's eyebrow went up in imitation of her mentor. "Isn't she a little young for you?" The words were light but Thoros heard a twinge of acid at the end. Greyjoy's eyebrows went up at that and her eyes flicked between the captain and the maester. Well, there's that secret gone, he thought sourly. He would have to have a quiet word with the Greyjoy later, just to ensure there were no misunderstandings.

"Not like that," the captain protested with a mild glare. "She's… like, she's young but not so young as to need a regency, sharp, idealistic, maybe a little naive but tempered by her experiences. Doesn't know much about Westeros except from old stories from her exiled advisers but she's willing to learn. With the dragons she's got the totem of a united Westeros, and totems have a lot of power in these situations. She's got the ambition, the drive and more importantly she's got more compassion in her than most of the other candidates. It's… frustrating. Aggravating."

"I'm sorry my lady, I don't see how that makes the girl such a trial for you."

Jade smiled without humor. "Don't you see, Al? If I wanted a proxy ruler I'd want somebody who wasn't just dependent on me to hold their position, I'd want someone I could also mold while I was using them to rule Westeros. Use them as the vector for changes I thought the society needed. Daenerys Targaryen's an idealistic teenage girl who's seen some of the uglier bits of the world and wants to make it better. I could nudge her in the direction that I wanted Westeros to go and she'd be a thousand times more receptive than men who've grown up immersed in the privilege of their position. And she would be dependent on me; she has no preexisting support base in Westeros, all she has is her dragons, her Dothraki… and if I wanted to, me. All I have to do is say 'yes' and I have the perfect queen for my purposes."

Thoros nodded solemnly. It would take time, perhaps time they did not have, to pacify the other claimants and convince men like Ned Stark to bend the knee but a live Targaryen with equally live dragons was just as powerful a symbol as the captain said. "It could work," he said. "Daenerys on the Iron Throne and then, I presume, you as Hand?"

Jade shrugged. "Or back as master of magic maybe," she said with forced lightness. "She promised me open access to the whole of the Seven Kingdoms, unlimited authority and anything I needed to save the world if I promised to back her. That's a hell of a carrot to dangle."

"But as you said, she has neither support nor army in Westeros," Greyjoy said. "The smallfolk may
be willing to raise a banner for a Targaryen, especially if the Baratheons and Lannisters keep squabbling over the throne, but without soldiers that support will vanish like fog. She can promise you the royal treasury, the Red Keep and the cocks of all the gods if she likes, but you would have to pay the iron price for her kingdom."

"Yeah, that's kinda the main sticking point. If I'd known she existed when the king died I might've made some very different decisions. Hell, it's still tempting." The captain shivered. "Get thee behind me, Satan," she growled.

"Where does that leave us?" Alleras wondered. "Do we try to bring the girl into our… auxiliaries? Bring her with us? I doubt she's willing to abandon her khalasar to travel aboard ship, and we certainly don't have the space to carry them all. Point her at Westeros and hope nobody kills her?"

"I'm not sure," the captain replied. "Right now we're still waiting for the wizards to agree to meet with us, and that might point us in a new direction, I don't know. Right now though, I think we're going to work on the assumption that getting Daenerys Targaryen and her little firelizards to the North is maybe not top priority but it is a priority. Copy?" Thoros and Alleras nodded; Greyjoy shrugged. "Right then. Good talk. Let's go find some half-decent wine and figure out how we're going to make that happen."

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 254

I've never been a huge fan of waiting.

I know, that sounds weird considering that long-probe missions tend to be "fly to destination, do things, fly back" and I'm basically off the clock for however long it takes me to get from Point A to Point B. But even in the doldrums of a long flight there's stuff for me to do; routine flight engineering, course corrections, logging alerts on the long-range sensors… you get the idea. A lot of it's bullshit and busywork, sure, but it's bullshit and busywork that I can deal with on my schedule. I'm not stuck sitting on my rear waiting for others to get off theirs.

Which is where we come in here. Lady Daenerys Targaryen—the most recent entrant in the Iron Throne Sweepstakes—has a standing invitation to a place with the incredibly cheerful name of the House of the Undying, which is apparently where the aristocrats of Qarth store many of their vaguely terrifying magic people when they're not otherwise in use. She has asked for an audience, and graciously allowed me to tag along.

This may have been a mistake, because I get the feeling that the House would much rather have Lady Targaryen turn up alone than with company. Especially somebody with a flying ship and god-alone-knows what kind of weird magic on her person. Last time I visited Lady Targaryen's lodgings I spotted a really pale bastard with blue lips who looked like he was either trying to muster up the courage to ask me out or he was trying to hate me to death from a distance. As Klono is my witness I'm not sure which choice is more disquieting.

So we're on some enforced downtime, which is annoying because I'd much rather be getting proactive than stuck in halfway across the damn planet. I have some fresh new biological scans to look over, and they're absolutely fascinating even though I don't have the exobio training to really make more than a simple evaluation. They were definitely engineered organisms, and the work was done very similarly to the weirwood trees. My snap guess is that they're part of the defensive grid the Builders set up to watch over the Unbidden's prison and the readings seem to bear that out. I'm sending the data on to Kongou to see if their blueshirts can glean anything more from them. Maybe figure out a way to hatch more dragons? I vaguely recall that dragon eggs were somewhat common on Dragonstone at some point, even though most people thought they were fossils. But then Lady
Targaryen's eggs were supposed to be fossils too right up until they weren't.

And that's also a thing that needs addressing. Targaryen is potentially a very dangerous part of the civil war puzzle for all that she's not on the right continent and only has a very small band with few actual fighters on her side at the moment. She's bound and determined to go to Westeros and claim her birthright, even though technically that right was tossed in the garbage the same year she was born.

I like the kid's moxie, heaven help me. But if she pushes too hard she's gonna get herself killed and so long as she's got the dragons that's not a win condition for anybody. So I've got to figure out how to keep this girl alive and on-side while waiting for the creepy wizards to deign to talk to us (and hopefully not kill us). I've got two candidates for "the hand that rules ancient glory" and I figure the upcoming meeting will narrow that list down to one, one way or another. Where we go from there, I don't know.

Even when it's boring, there's never a dull fucking moment in this business.
A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

According to everything she'd been able to scrape up, the city of Qarth was one of the great cities of this world. The main trading port between the wealthy empires of the east and the equally wealthy remnants of the Valyrian Empire, Qarth was a cultural admixture in the truest sense of the word. While the pale Qartheen held a majority, people from dozens of different cultures all stopped, stared and hastily got out of the way as Jade trundled down the streets on an ATV, four drones hovering in a protective box around her.

It was only somewhat faster than walking—Qarth was a big city, and even if the people were cooperative the draft animals didn't always react quickly, or in a manner that would get them out of the ATV's way. Still, it afforded Jade a chance to see the city. More importantly it gave her a chance to record everything she and the drones saw for future analysis, by her or by Starfleet in the event they ever needed to come into Qarth for some reason. The Qartheen stared from their stalls and balconies and whispered as she rolled on towards the House of the Undying Ones.

Jade kept her eyes on the road, weaving between litters and wagons. "Victory, status check," she said, touching the unobtrusive bud in her right ear.

"In position, low-observation mode engaged," the synthetic voice of the ship's faithful VI said, then a note chimed and the VI was replaced by Sarella. "I can see you in the scrying window, Captain. Are we needed?"

"Just checking the connection, Al. If you're watching then you'll know if and when I need you. Hasegawa out." Jade smiled ruefully to herself; as much as she wanted her ship nearby in case something went sideways, there really didn't seem to be any good way to park it inside the city without causing property damage and hurt feelings. So instead of landing, Jade decided to keep the ship overhead, hidden in one of the many picturesque clouds dotting the Qartheen sky. It wasn't a perfect solution, but having the ship above her and ready to come down was better than it grounded on the other side of town if a quick exit was needed.

And if things got nasty beyond salvaging, well... Sarella still had user access and knew the score. She might not have every advantage Jade did, but she could keep the fight going until the fleet arrived at least. I haven't even seen the damn place yet and it's already getting to me, she thought. The closer she got to the warlock's citadel the more she could feel its presence; a subtle pricking on her skin as her discount psi ability started pinging on whatever the hell it was the Undying Ones were broadcasting. It didn't feel quite like the Unbidden's flat imposition on the background count, and it wasn't the same as the enveloping that the weirwood trees threw out. It was subtle and foreboding and everywhere in Qarth, but especially right ahead.

Most of the buildings in Qarth were either faced with expensive-looking carved stone and looked rich, or were wood-and-brick constructs that looked poor. The House of the Undying defied both of them, a long, low building of gray stone curving through a sinister-looking grove of black trees with blue leaves. "The weirwoods apparently have evil twins," Jade hummed to herself. "I wonder if they know that? Questions for later." Nothing except the trees stood near the building, as if nobody wanted to get anywhere near the place.
Lady Targaryen's party was already waiting at the street entrance as she rolled up. Daenerys was standing besides a large palanquin done up in the I-am-a-very-rich-person Qartheen style, alongside her Dothraki bodyguards and the exile, Ser Something-or-Other. Of the dragons, only one seemed to be present today, the larger black one perched on her shoulder like a scaly parrot. The ATV's motor wasn't particularly quiet, so all of their eyes were on her as she drew closer. The Dothraki's eyes were wider than the others, their hands drifting towards the wicked-looking sickles on their belts.

Jade nodded regally in their general direction as she dismounted. "Lady Targaryen."


Jade gave her a tiny smile in return. The little queen had a hell of a poker face, all things considered. "It works well enough for me," she said idly. "And before you ask, not for sale."

The oldest and burliest of the three Dothraki rumbled something. The universal translator chewed on it for a second, and spat out "A witch's cart is still a cart, and not worth as much as a good horse."

Jade snorted and wagged a finger in his general direction. "I like you," she said, and meant it. "So! Here we are." Jade turned to regard the dilapidated wreckage of the House of the Undying. "I guess this is where they store all the extra creepy when nobody's using it."

"Your Grace, what power could these creatures have if they live in that?" the exiled knight whose name Jade still couldn't remember—couldn't remember if they'd even been properly introduced—said quietly in not-quite-but-close-enough Federal Standard.

"Heed the words of your counselors, my dear queen," Xaro Xohan Daxos' voice came from inside the palanquin. "Warlocks are bitter creatures who eat dust and drink of shadows. They will give you naught."

"Khaleesi, it is said that many go into the Palace of Dust, but few come out." The burly Dothraki had his eyes on the building, watching it carefully like it might come to life and attack. Jade wondered if that might actually be possible. "We are blood of your blood, sworn to live and die as you do. Let us walk with you in this dark place, to keep you safe from harm."

Daenerys shook her head. "Some places even a khal must walk alone."

"Indeed," a voice said from inside the trees. "Queen Daenerys must enter alone, or not at all." Jade's eyebrows went up as a thin, bald and pale man with blue lips (Some sort of stain, she thought. Possibly cosmetic?) emerged from beneath the trees. "Should she turn away now, the doors of wisdom shall be closed to her forevermore."

Jade hummed under her breath. Well, that speaks to their priorities. "I'm sorry," she said politely, "but I was under the impression we'd booked an appointment for two." The pale man's eyes flicked in her direction and Jade gave him a winning smile. "Jade Hasegawa, of various places," she introduced herself, watching the man's eyes harden a little and the corners of his mouth get just that little bit tighter.

"Yes," the pale man said after a pause that was just a beat too long. "I am aware of who you are, witch. The Undying Ones are most interested in meeting with a… colleague."

"Well then!" Jade said brightly. "Shall we away, my good sir?"

The warlock glowered. "Very well. If the queen shall take my arm, you may follow one step behind
as I lead you."

Daenerys carefully took the man's arm, and Jade obediently fell into step, keeping as close as she dared. Two of her four drones stayed behind to guard the ATV, just in case, while Yakko and Wakko drifted into a guard position similar to Daenerys' dragon. The unsettling feeling coming from the House seemed to extend a pseudopod out around the pale man, setting off a tingling sensation inside Jade's skull. She touched the earbud and said, as quietly as she could, "Victory, comm check."

"Communications online, recorders functional," the VI replied. Jade let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Copy, comms online and tape rolling. Message for Alleras: Things are about to get weird. Keep a weather eye out."

The black trees were remarkably good at keeping the sun out, throwing everything into deep shade, and the path from the street to the door seemed to be longer than Jade had estimated. About two thirds the way from the street the warlock stopped and pulled Daenerys to the side.

"Why have you stopped?" asked the dragon queen.

"The front way leads in, but never out again," the pale man replied. "Heed my words, my queen. The House of the Undying Ones was not made for mortal men. If you value your soul, take care and do just as I tell you."

Daenerys agreed to listen, and Jade nodded invisibly behind him, taking mental notes all the while. "When you enter, you will find yourself in a room with four doors: the one you have come through and three others. Take the door to your right each time you enter a room. If you come upon a stairwell, climb. Never go down, and never take any door but the first door to your right."

"And when I leave, the opposite?"

"By no means. Leaving and coming, it is the same. Always up. Always the door to your right. Other doors may open; within, you will see things that disturb you. Visions of loveliness and visions of horror, wonders and terrors. Sights and sounds of days gone by and days to come and days that never were. Dwellers may speak to you as you go. Answer or ignore them as you choose, but enter no room until you reach the audience chamber."

"I understand."

"When you come to the chamber of the Undying, be patient. Our little lives are no more than a flicker of a moth's wing to them. Listen well, and write each word upon your heart."

"Question," Jade said, making the pale man jump. "Can I get some paper and a pen? It's easier to write with than using my heart."

The warlock glowered. As glowers go, it wasn't terrible: it would've cowed a younger and more callow Jade Hasegawa pretty quickly. "Your mockery will not serve you well with the Undying, witch," he said. "I would recommend you learn to speak more softly ere you risk their wrath." Jade just smiled back at the pale man until he turned away and escorted them the rest of the way down the path.

"That wasn't wise, Captain," Daenerys scolded her. Jade shrugged.

"Maybe not, but it is me."
The door to the House of the Undying was a tall oval mouth, set in a wall fashioned in the likeness of a human face. Jade idly wondered if the warlocks of Qarth were deliberately trying to be as unsettling as possible, or if they honestly thought this was a completely sane and rational architectural decision. On the threshold there was a very small man dressed in fine blue and purple velvets, holding a silver tray with a crystal flute of thick blue liquid. "Take it and drink, my queen," the warlock urged.

Jade hummed a low note, instructing Yakko to take a quick scan and forward to results to her HUD. The drone's sensor eye flashed green, and only long practice kept her from wincing at the absurdly long list of psychoactive chemicals that scrolled through her vision. I ought to get some of this for my next big party, she thought absently.

"Shade of the evening," Sarella's voice hissed quietly. Apparently the scan had gone through to her console as well. "Archmaester Marwyn knows of it. It's supposed to be a Qartheen wine used by sorcerors to enhance their powers."

The dragon queen had a different question: "Will it turn my lips blue?" Which showed that Daenerys had some more, and possibly better, context for the drink.

"One flute will serve only to unstop your ears and dissolve the caul from off your eyes, so that you may hear and see the truths that will be laid before you." Translation: We're going to get you tripping so many balls that we can play football with your brain and you won't be able to say no.

"Only the one glass," Jade noted. "Are we supposed to share?" The warlock took his eyes off Daenerys and gave her a flinty smile.

"Of course not. As a sorceress of power in her own right, your mind is already unclouded." The pale man's voice was mild with a hint of venom. "Surely you can tell by now? The Undying Ones' curiosity as you approach their domain?"

"As you say." Jade dipped her head in acknowledgment. Touché, asshole. Daenerys took the glass in her hand and, after one hesitant sip, downed the entire thing in one long pull. Jade's opinion of the queen went up by one-quarter notch.

"Now, you may both enter," the warlock intoned. Daenerys strode forth without fear, and Jade had to accelerate a little just to keep up.

They found themselves in a bare stone antechamber with four doors, one on each wall. The room looked just as worn down and barely functional as the outside of the building. "First door on the right then, Lady Targaryen?" Jade said. There was no reply. She turned to face the dragon queen. "Lady Targaryen—oh what the hell. At some point in the few seconds between them stepping into the building and Jade speaking, both Targaryen and her dragon had vanished from view.

The door on the right lay conspicuously open, but still there was no sight of the girl.

Jade's hand went to her earbud. "Scopes, I've lost eyes on Targaryen, what've you got?"

"C—n—rl isn't t—ay, no mor—e ya—s f—ur po—uld b—le t—er."

"Victory, comm check. I didn't hear any of that, please repeat."

The VI's voice came out choppy and strangled: "Pri—nica—tems o—nal, no f—ed."

Jade blinked, tried to parse that, failed, then sighed. "You cheating motherfuckers," she grumbled. "Al, listen close. I didn't understand a damn thing on those last transmissions. They've either got
some kind of jammer up or they're fucking with my perception. Maybe both. I'm going to keep the channel open but from here on out I'm probably not talking to you. Just keep an eye out and be ready to land if I give the signal."

On the next transmission the words were barely distinguishable, but the worry in Sarella's voice was plain. "C—n, what ab—e sh—ment?"

Jade smiled thinly. "I think I got that one," she said. "I'm giving them one shot to play nice, then I start playing it my way. Hasegawa out." Jade stepped through the still-open door and found herself in an identical chamber to the first. Again she opened the right-hand door and found herself in yet another small chamber. Another right door and the room was identical to the first three. Alright, fucking with me it is.

The next room was a perfect circle, walled in rotting wood rather than stone. Six doors led out from it instead of four. Jade took the rightmost and entered a narrow stone hall with a ceiling almost so low as to brush against the top of her head. Along the right side a line of bronze arms holding lit candles marched down the hall into the distance, but all the doors were on her left.

"Cheating motherfuckers," she repeated.

The hallway had at some point been pretty well decorated with inlays and rich carpeting, but years of neglect had turned it into a ruined mess. Water dripped down the walls and puddled in stagnant pools. The smell of mold and rot permeated the hall. Faint sounds came from the walls, the clicking and scrabbling of rats in the walls. Other sounds, thumping and clanking and shrieking, came from behind the closed doors. Jade walked on, taking it all in as best she could but not reacting.

This is all part of their game, she told herself. They want me to react, to jump and twist and scream like the heroine in a terrible horror vid.

Some of the doors were open. Okay, Jade thought, let's see what they want me to see here.

Biter cold billowed from the first open door she encountered, filing the space around the door with a thick freezing fog. Jade peeked inside and through the fog she could see four little men wrestling in a snowdrift. They looked similar to the servant who'd been waiting at the front door, with pinched faces and small hands. The little men punched and kicked each other as they grappled, their blood tinting the snow pink. They continued to roll around as Jade watched and the snow grew ever higher around them.

"Subtlety, thy name is the Undying," Jade's mouth engaged before anything else. The four men stopped fighting, looked at her and lunged for the door. She jumped back only for the door to slam shut before the men—apparitions—could reach the threshold.

A little further down the hall she came across a room that was a blackened ruin overlooking the remains of a battle. Arrows studded the burnt wooden supports, long streaks of soot climbed up the stonework and smoke tinged with the smell of burnt pork filled the air. In the one undamaged corner cowered a lion wrapped in golden chains that glowered balefully at Jade as she passed by.

Sunlight filled the next open door she came to, a cool, slightly muted light different from the strong, harsh light of Planetos. A light that was achingly familiar to Jade's heart. She looked in and found a small bedroom with nice, wide glass windows placed well up an apartment tower overlooking Viking Bay's wine-dark water and the purplish sky of Mars at sunrise. Home. Jade closed her eyes and she could hear the sound coming from adjoining rooms: her father and mother's bantering about some obscure bit of academic minutiae, or maybe just what to have for dinner that night. Her little brother talking on the comm with his boyfriend. The faint sound of music from her baby sister's
educational programming. It was so real it hurt.

Jade's eyes screwed shut. *Not real,* she told herself. *It's not real, just a stray thought they grabbed and are using to mess with you. You can't leave that way; even if it were possible it's not that easy. Miles to go before you sleep, Hasegawa. Focus.* But before she moved on, she took one last look at her old bedroom.

The long hall kept going and going, always doors to her left and only torches to her right. After long enough Jade estimated that the hallway was longer than the House of the Undying looked from the outside. Possibly longer than the city itself. The doors seemed endless, every one of them different from the next. Some remained closed, some were open but Jade kept walking at a brisk pace, determined to find the end of the damned hall.

A plain wooden door banded with iron swung open as Jade approached, and she stopped at the faint sound of sobbing coming from inside. Jade saw two old men, one in maester's grey and another in priestly garments, attempted to care for a weeping girl who lay naked in a tub of ice water. The girl's skin was red all over and dotted with weeping lesions. Jade's skin crawled as she recognized the source of the girl's injuries. *Radiation damage; gamma and delta burns, like a warp core accident. What the hell happened to this girl? "Jesus fuck me,"* she whispered.

"We are cursed," the girl said between cries of pain. "We never should have bound them."

"Princess," the priest said softly, "I can give you something for the pain…"

"No poppy's milk can make this stop, Septon," the girl replied. "It's my penance for my sin. For the sins of Valyria. We never should have—" She stopped and grabbed the septon's arm with sudden ferocity, leaving prints of blood and skin on his white robe. *"The fire is banked but not extinguished,"* she hissed. *"The embers must cool. The birthright must pass on to the new inheritors."* The fierceness left her eyes and her bloody arm slipped back into the cold water. "Tell Aunt Elissa I'm sorry," she murmured. "I should've waited for her. I should've gone to her. I so wanted to see the other side of the sunset…" The voices faded to a low murmur, and Jade moved on.

*There is an end to this,* she thought, setting a mental countdown. *There's an end and I will find it."

"Hello, little gull." A man's voice called out from an open door, bringing Jade to an abrupt halt. The room vaguely resembled every single castle in Westeros she'd ever been in, though this one seemed less well-lit than the others. A fire was roaring in the fireplace and standing before the fire was a tall man with dark hair, half-cloaked in shadows. "I wondered when our paths would eventually cross."

This was new. "Do I know you?" Jade asked.

The tall man smiled and bowed. "I am Lord Euron Greyjoy, little gull," he said. "Your replacement in the court of His Grace Joffrey of House Baratheon, first of his name and so forth. I'm sure you have questions."

Something pricked at Jade's senses. This entire conversation was too… interactive. "I thought this whole business was supposed to be a show and tell, not Q and A," she said, to Greyjoy, to the Undying, to whoever was running this operation. She took a cautious step back from the door and Euron took a step forward.

"Oh? Not dreaming, then? You must be in a thin place." Greyjoy tapped one long finger against his cheek in mock thought. "Not within Westeros, I'd wager. The abode of the faceless? No, they wouldn't dare admit one such as you. Some conclave of Asshai'i set up by the shadowbinding bitch? Perhaps… but I doubt it." He grinned. "Qarth. You went to Qarth to find the tools to defeat me? Oh
"Defeat you?" Jade blinked. "I barely know who you are."

Greyjoy's face darkened, literally: the room seemed to dim and the lit half of his face vanished into shadow. "You think that," he said with a snarl. "And yet you treat with the Undying. A foolish bird you are, little gull. They Undying care for nothing outside their walls. They will drink you and spit your remains out on the street if they decide to." The shadow of the man's face was split by a line of very white teeth bared in a feral grin. "Perhaps if I ask nicely they'll give me what's left of your body and soul."

Okay, we have officially reached unacceptable levels of creepy. Jade deployed her repulsor gauntlet and pointed it directly at Euron's hidden face. "I wouldn't," she warned, backing up. Greyjoy chuckled, a dark sound like clanking metal.

"I thought you thought this wasn't real, girl? You cannot touch me here… but I can touch you." All of a sudden Euron Greyjoy was in the hallway with her, well within her personal space. One long finger reached out and brushed against an almost invisible line on her cheek, the spot where months before a fragment of an Unbidden's crystal sword had tagged her.

The pain was sudden and incredibly intense, almost like the injury had split open all over again. Jade swore and recoiled, her back slamming up against the wall and her gauntleted hand snapping up and letting off a blast at full power. Greyjoy roared—with anger or laughter, she wasn't sure—and flew back into the room, dust and bits of rot rained from the ceiling and the entire building seemed to shake. The door, once open, slammed shut with the grinding clang of a blast door closing.

Jade leaned up against the wall, breathing hard. Her uncovered hand went to her cheek. The injury didn't hurt as much, but her hand came away wet with blood. Probably psychosomatic, some dry part of her mind narrated. Possibly illusory, but no way to tell at this point. Panic response. Recenter and move on.

"Fuck. You." Jade whispered harshly to the closed door, then turned on her heel and marched away.

It felt like hours of walking—it could've been much less, but the hall had a way of messing with Jade's sense of time—but eventually she reached the end. The hall ended in a steep stone stair that spiraled off into a black void. There were no doors on the right side of the hall.

"Well that's just fucking lovely," Jade said. There was a gust of wind and a faint whooshing sound behind her. She turned and saw that the torches were going out, one by one. Only a few dozen were still burning, and as she watched one after the other guttered and died. Darkness slowly crept down the hallway, and in the darkness she could hear something singing a jaunty tune:

"Little gull, little gull, where have you flown?"

"Shit." The torches kept going out, and Jade looked for an exit. All of the doors had been to the left, so theoretically there was no escape there…

…but from the opposite end, the doors were now all on the right. Jade threw open the last door on the left—now the first one on the right—and stepped through. Beyond was the anteroom she'd started in, what seemed like a million years ago. The mouth-door to the outside was open, and the warlock was standing in the grass beneath the black trees. "It would seem that the Undying are done with you," he sniffed in dismissal.

"I haven't seen hide nor hair of one at any point in this odyssey," she protested.
Again the warlock sniffed. "If they wished not to meet you, then you will respect their wishes. Come, I shall escort you to the street."

The same something about Greyjoy made the hair on Jade's neck stand up. "I think not," she said slowly. "They may be done with me, but I am definitely not done with them. I played their game, I jumped through their hoops and now it's time for them to pony up."

"Stubborn woman. You dare to challenge the Undying Ones? You will be be lost and never found."

The countdown in Jade's head reached zero. "Let's test that, shall we? Wakko, *finite incantatem.*" The warlock shrieked, his face melting into a pale, wormlike thing as the little drone chimed and let out a pulse of orange light. The room dissolved into an empty stone room with only two doors in and out as Jade's first try at a portable psionic shield broke the illusion. She immediately went to her earbud. "Haesgawa to Victory. Scopes, where the hell am I?"

"Oh thank the gods, Captain!" Sarella's voice was filled with relief. "You are about a third of the way into the building, but you've been walking in circles for... a while now."

Walking in circles. Of course. "Targaryen?"

"About two thirds of the way in, perhaps a hundred yards or more from your position. I can find a path if you need me to—"

Jade tried the door in front of her. It opened easily, half coming off rusted hinges at the slightest pressure. "No need. Victory: feed me a position marker on target Dejah Thoris. I'll make my own road."

Stripped of the illusion, the House of the Undying was easy enough to navigate. Jade stormed through the building, crashing through empty room after empty room until she came at last to a slightly more stout door of old grey wood. She took a deep breath and opened it.

A long stone table filled the room. A human heart the size of a human head floated above the center of the table, pulsing with purple light and a burst of infrasound on every beat. Around the table, apparently, sat the Undying Ones.

They were ancient, withered creatures that resembled the dead things Jade had fought in the country north of the Wall more than any sort of powerful wizard. Their skins were blue, lips and nails almost black. Even the whites of their eyes were the same blue color, almost as if they'd been carved from some kind of colored wax.

And at the foot of the table stood Daenerys Targeryen, eyes wide, lips moving but otherwise not so much as twitching. Her dragon was still on her shoulder, wings outstretched and long neck bobbing up and down in obvious threat posture.

Jade cleared her throat. One of the Undying Ones turned its head, the effort seemingly almost too much for degraded muscles. Blue-on-blue eyes swiveled in their sockets.

"Zhdane," it rasped. The word seemed to do something to the rest of the Undying, as they all turned away from the dragon queen to regard Jade. Daenerys gasped, swaying and clutching the back of the chair as the warlocks' attention shifted.

Jade had a really bad feeling about this.

"Zhdane," the party of corpses hissed as one. "Zhdane, zhdane, zhdane zhdane..."
"Oooh, fuck no."

Chapter End Notes

Plagiarism Note: The bulk of Pyat Pree's dialogue in this chapter is taken verbatim from Daenerys IV, *A Clash Of Kings*. I tried to rework it but ultimately decided to just use the source since it's mostly infodump anyway.
Then the visions froze, quivered and vanished like morning dew. The indigo murk faded and Dany gasped as though she had just emerged from beneath water. Blinking away the fog she found herself in a bare stone hall filled with dust and rotting fineries and the withered blue bodies of the Undying Ones seated around a table. The corrupt and rotten heart still floated above the table, beating quickly and fitfully.

To Dany’s left was the maegi Hasegawa, one hand out in a gesture of peace, the other fiddling with something sheathed at her hip. One of her familiars shone with orange light that filled the room, forcing the murky sorceries of the Undying back into the corners.

“Now that’s enough of that,” the maegi said entirely too calmly.

“You already had your knife at my neck,” Hasegawa retorted. “I’m just leveling the playing field. Now can we talk business, or are we just going to sneer at each other?”

The Undying seemed to find that amusing. A rattling, jacking noise came from the withered warlocks. … such passion … devotion … so like us in our youth … ask your questions …

“You know why I’m here.” The maegi’s voice was flat and hard.

“You already had your knife at my neck,” Hasegawa retorted. “I’m just leveling the playing field. Now can we talk business, or are we just going to sneer at each other?”

The Undying seemed to find that amusing. A rattling, jacking noise came from the withered warlocks. … such passion … devotion … so like us in our youth … ask your questions …

“What can you tell me about them?”

… the cold ones … the hungry ones … the usurpers of your throne at the end of the world … you seek to end their reign forever …

A tiny smile came to Hasegawa’s lips. “Well, I suppose if you aren’t the paragons of knowledge everybody claims you are I could always just leave you be,” she said idly. The Undying stilled for a moment.
… we know … know … know much of your failure … your kin failed to understand … the thieves of fire failed to understand … but we know … know … know … The blue heart pulsed quicker, a strange heat coming into the whispery chorus. … the city was young … magic still mighty … we searched … we sought … we found the path …

An ugly light came into the maegi’s eye. “The path?” she asked.

… there are many little ways through the shroud of night … the Undying boasted. … many ways … to small for the cold ones … too small for the fire … but we could see … we could hear … and we learned …

“Fuck me running,” Hasegawa whispered, rocking backwards. “What did you do?”

… we learned, zhdane … learned … there are so many … so many … in the shroud … we learned of your failures … of the crimes of the fire thieves … the secrets of eternity …

“You spoke to the Unbidden,” the maegi said with horror.

… the cold ones are rage and hunger … The Undying seemed to sniff. … they are of little account … there are others whom we pried secrets from … the worm that waits … the rage of the end … little gods and great ones … they taught us many things … how to bind and loose … how to live forever … ever … ever …

“Uh huh,” Hasegawa said in a flat voice. “Clearly that’s working out well for you.”

… foolish child, you know nothing … nothing … nothing … these shells are nothing … our true selves live in the shroud … the shroud protects … the shroud nourishes … the shroud is all …

The maegi leaned in close, examining the warlocks’ blue features. “And yet you’re still here,” she mused. “I wonder if life on the other side’s all that cracked up to be?”

… you presume …

“Yeah, I do that a lot. But we’re getting off track. So, you being mighty warlocks learned to listen to the beasties in the Shroud and, I’m guessing, got a lot of your magic from them. You do know what happens if they manage to get here all the way, right?”

There was a soft rustling noise as the great warlocks of Qarth displayed their indifference. … we care not … why should we … our lives are secure … and why should you care, zhdane … your race comes and goes like gods … what worth are a few brief mortals compared to the likes of us …

“Everything is worth fighting for,” the maegi whispered.

The warlock nearest them, an ancient woman dressed in rotten pale silk, turned to face them. Her mouth twisted in a grotesque parody of a smile … if you believe so … we will make an exchange … we will teach you the secrets of the shroud, zhdane … the things we wrested from the voices in the dark … that you need to destroy your enemies … if you give us the girl …

“What?”

… the girl … the girl … the last of our enemy … let us sup from her … we will aid you as you wish … the warlocks of Qarth will be your sword … give us the girl …

Dany’s breath caught. She dared risk a glance at the maegi, only to see the woman’s hand snap up grasping something like a small crossbow and pointed right at the rotten, pulsing heart above the
“Yeah, how about no,” Hasegawa said with venom. “Even if I trusted you further than I could throw this building, I’m not in the habit of sacrificing innocents for the greater good.”

… innocent … innocent … the girl is no innocent … The darkness struggled against the maegi’s orange light. … slaver … conqueror … burner of cities … the dragon plants no trees … we have seen her story already writ …

Hasegawa’s aim never wavered, her glare unchanging. “The future isn’t written,” she said. “I’ll bet you had no idea I was coming until I came, did you? Whatever you think you saw doesn’t matter; change is coming.”

… you are a child with trinkets … the Undying’s hiss filled the room, louder than it had ever been. … we allowed you to pretend to have advantage … and we are finished with pretense …

*/ “Palabra mi Amor” Shaka Ponk The Geeks and the Jerkin’ Socks (2011) /*

The orange light coming from the maegi’s familiar suddenly guttered and died, the indigo gloom flooding back into the room as the metal creature dropped to the ground with a pitiful warble. Hasegawa snarled an oath and fired her weapon, thunderbolts lancing into the dark heart and ripping away chunks of rotten flesh. The Undying laughed their horrible rasping laugh as the gloom filled the chamber yet again. Fragments of visions tore at Dany’s mind; images of lions, stags, wolves, birds, dragons and a thousand other things buffeted around her. Cold, bony fingers grasped and tore at her garments. Over all of it she could hear the maegi roaring curses.

Then indigo turned to orange once more, and the Undying’s laughter turned to screams. Heat washed over her as Drogon spread his wings and shrieked fire into the faces of the warlocks. The rotten heart shivered and smoked under the assault, and the Undying howled as they burned. They staggered and writhed and spun and raised blazing hands on high, their fingers bright as torches.

Strong, warm living hands grabbed her arms and hauled her to her feet. “Time to go,” the maegi said. “Victory: execute exit strat two!” Dany wanted to know what the nonsense words meant but the rotten finery was burning merrily and the room nearly completely ablaze by the time they reached the door.

“Drogon!” Dany called, and he obediently flew to her through the fire. Outside the chamber a long dim passageway stretched before them, lit by the glare of the fire behind them. The maegi grabbed Dany’s wrist and they ran, the maegi using her thunder weapon to reduce doors and walls to splinters and rubble if they proved too much trouble. The floor seemed to move slowly under her feet, writhing as if to trip her.

… do you think you’ve power here … The air seemed to shake with the harsh whisper … you will never reach the way out … Dwarfs with pointed faces and pink hands leaped out at them from hidden alcoves. Drogon snarled and burned them, and the maegi’s surviving familiar used bolts of blue light to send them reeling … you belong to the House of the Undying …

In the far distance Dany could see a small blot of light that looked like an open door. She turned to run towards it but the maegi held her back.

“I can see the way out!” she protested.

“You’re seeing what they want you to see,” Hasegawa replied with a shake of her head. “We can’t trust it.”

The sound of distant thunder came to Dany’s ears. A storm? The sound grew louder and louder,
causing the very stones of the warlock’s palace to shake. The looming darkness drew back into the twisty walls in apprehension.

“Victory NOW!” The maegi grabbed Dany and Drogon, throwing them to the floor and throwing herself atop them as the roll of thunder grew to a mighty roar. Light and noise exploded above them: a sound louder and more violent than any dragon, the crashing of cracked and ruined stone, a horrible screeching from the Undying Ones and their servants, Drogon’s panicked cries and her own screams as the world came undone around them.

When the noise finally abated Dany could feel the warmth of the bright sun on her back. Gingerly she stood up, Drogon climbing back on her shoulder and flapping his wings. The whole front of the Palace of Dust had been reduced to smouldering wreckage, and thin tendrils of smoke wafted through cracks in the ancient walls behind her. Above them was the maegi’s great white sky-ship, drifting just above the tallest branches of the warlocks’ black trees and rumbling a quiet song without melody.

The maegi had rolled to her knees and brushed gray dust from her coat. “When in doubt, never be afraid to make your own exit,” she said with a cheeky grin to Dany. “Basic rules for Rangers.”

Dany nodded, suddenly bone-weary after the day’s events.

“Despoilers!” Pyat Pree shrieked at them, voice high and unnatural. “You’ve ruined everything!” Howling in some unknown tongue, he drew a knife and danced towards the maegi. Hasegawa’s familiars let fly bolts of blue light that knocked him to the ground. Ser Jorah Mormont came to her as she left the wreckage and put his arm around her shoulder.

SARELLA

She was on the ramp before the end had even touched the earth. She darted past the palanquins, past the two Dothraki and the man with the jeweled nose who were staring stupidly at Carefree Victory and strode towards what was left of the House of the Undying, only allowing her heart to beat again when she saw the two disheveled figures stumbling from the smoking ruin.

The captain looked like hammered shit, covered in dust and bruises. Sarella said as much, fiddling with the medicine kit she’d taken from the ship’s surgery. “You should see the other guys,” Jade joked halfheartedly.

Sarella’s brows went up. “I presume they didn’t have the roof fall on them,” she noted, poking at a tender spot and observing Jade’s responding wince.

“No, but they probably got set on fire, so it all balances out.” Jade coughed. “You can—ow—stop that now, by the way.”

“I don’t know if I should. You may need more reminders of your mortality.”

“No, Al, seriously—ow—my sense of mortality is—ow!—pretty damn active.”

Sarella sighed. “Well, despite your best efforts you seem well enough,” she said, relenting. “As your maester I recommend tea, clean air and rest for a day and a night before engaging in another running battle with dread sorcerers.” A small, worried smile tugged at her lips. “And next time you bring us with you so we may guard your back better!”
Jade smiled sheepishly and put her hand on Sarella’s shoulder. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry I scared you like that,” and Sarella felt a weight lift from her back. “Next time it’s a team effort. We’ll even let Greyjoy break some shit, keep her sweet.” She whistled, and her remaining familiars swung into position around her. “I’m going to run some scans on what’s left, see maybe if I can find some salvage,” she said. “Go check out Targaryen. I think she might’ve taken it worse than I did.”

She nodded and turned to the dragon queen, who was a surprisingly small figure in tattered white samnite half held upright by a tall Westerosi knight. “Your Grace?” she ventured. “I am Alleras; my lady has asked that I ensure that you are well after your ordeal.”

“Eh?” Targaryen said, distracted, then her violet eyes focused on Sarella’s robes. “You’re a maester!” she exclaimed.

Sarella nodded gravely. “I am an initiate of the Citadel, Your Grace, though my chain is not yet complete.”

The knight supporting the queen gave her a suspicious look. “And what is a man of Oldtown doing traveling with a witch?” he asked in the rough tones of the North.

“Oh, we’ll travel with just about anyone if it means learning something new,” Sarella replied breezily. “I may have set my formal education back some by taking this mission, but I reckon I’ll be able to forge a dozen entirely new links and my own mask by the time I’m done. Your Grace, if I may?” She extended a hand, examining the dragon queen’s body. The poor girl was covered in scratches from head to toe. Most were light abrasions, uncomfortable red lines that would fade by morning. A few, particularly on the lightly-tanned skin of her arms and her pale breast, were more serious, welling up blood in a way that looked more like knife wounds than anything left by fingers. “Hm. These will have to be taken care of. I believe I have just the thing…” she rummaged through the medicines, selecting a sterilizing spray. “This will be quite unpleasant, Your Grace, but it will clean out the worst of these cuts.”

To her credit Targaryen didn’t flinch or cry out when the spray touched her wounds. Sarella followed the spray with a selection of small linen bandages with sticky edges, to keep dirt for further working its way back in. “You didn’t exactly answer Ser Jorah’s question,” Targaryen said. “How did you come to travel with Captain Hasegawa?”

“I was of assistance to her when she came to Oldtown seeking knowledge of history.” Sarella shrugged. “The archmaesters came to an arrangement with my lady; in exchange for my continued presence my lady gains access to certain things only those who take up the chain would receive.”

The northern knight’s eyes narrowed. “A spy in her ranks.”

“Nothing so crude, ser. We are all seekers of knowledge, and knowledge seeks freedom when it can find it. The archmaesters receive reports when I am in a position to send them on; I tell them nothing that my lady would be loath to let them know, and what I give is oft beyond their reckoning. They believe I am still loyal, and perhaps that is true,” she lied. “It works out nicely for all involved.”

The dragon queen nodded. “Thank you, Alleras,” she said. “Is there anything else?”

“A night and a day of rest before you go running off to conquer Westeros,” Sarella replied promptly. “The bandages may be removed after the fourth day. There may be scars but they will be faint at worst.”

The dragon queen nodded. “Thank you,” she repeated. “It is… good to know that my people still hold to the old traditions, regardless of the Usurper.” Sarella nodded absently, packing up the
medicine kit. That was a phrase fraught with difficulty that she had no interest in getting into at that moment. Or ever, if she could help it.

“Alleras…” the Targaryen heir hesitated. “How may I sway your lady to my cause? I feel like our paths may be bound together, but I know not how to make her listen.”

Sarella froze. Marshaling all the powers of the Sphinx she made as careful a reply as she could. “I know she thinks highly of Your Grace, but the situation in Westeros is… fraught. It is entirely possible that the whole realm will be at war in truth the next time we set foot there, and my lady has made arrangements that could cause things to fall further into chaos should she break them.” She shook her head. “Things will have to change dramatically for her to even think of shifting her alliance.”

And the sky lit up with a million different colors. Sarella looked up and saw billowing streams of yellow, purple, green and orange light streaming through the afternoon sky from the place where the red comet had been trailing the sun. The light danced through the blue sky, creating strange dappled shadows in between the blue-leaved trees.

“Something like that, perhaps,” she went on, trying to sound as casual as possible.

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