The Westerosi

by Mal3

Summary

Being an account of the Green Witch, the Fallen Star, known also as Captain Jade Hasegawa, Federal Worlds Starfleet Ranger, who crash-landed in the North of Westeros in the year 298 AC and what she did there afterwards. Feudal lords, ancient aliens, terrible threats and snarky heroics: all in a day's work for the Starfleet Rangers.
The Falling Star

Once upon a time, there was a great kingdom in a faraway land that stood on the brink of disaster. Many songs would be sung of deeds great and terrible during this time of crisis, songs of ancient evils and ancient wonders. This song begins with a falling star...

BRAN

His mother hated it when he scrambled across the rooftops, but for a boy of seven namedays the roofs of Winterfell were the greatest playground imaginable. From his perch above the castle’s everyday life Bran could see everything, above and below. He carefully clambered up the rubble of the Broken Tower, aiming for the very highest point. Beneath him Winterfell sprawled like a great grey tree with tangled roots, and above the sky shone a brilliant blue.

Around him the North stretched around him like a vast green carpet. Bran peered out, imagining that he could see the whole of the North, if not the whole of Westeros from his vantage point. His eyes strained to look north, searching for the vague blue haze that marked the Wall, or the vague green haze of the Neck. Beyond that, Bran fancied he could see a tiny flash of red-gold an impossible distance away marking the site of King’s Landing.

Bran looked to the east, trying to see far Essos with his eyes and fancy, but instead saw a tiny, bright speck of light high in the sky. At first he thought it might be a star, but it was nearly midday. Furthermore, the speck seemed to grow nearer as he watched it. Whatever it is, it’s coming towards Winterfell.

Bran’s eyes widened as he realized what it must be. A falling star! He’d seen brief glimpses of falling stars before, out his bedroom window deep at night, never before in the day. The minstrels often sang of the Daynes in Dorne, how they found a falling star and made the legendary sword Dawn from the metal in its heart. Maybe we can find this falling star and have some star-metal of our own. A sword fit for Father, or for Robb, or maybe I could take it and do something great out there, in the lands beyond Winterfell...

As he watched, the star blazed overhead, a great fire in the sky trailing smoke, almost close enough to touch. Bran reached out to touch it but could only feel the heat of its passing in his fingers and face. The star continued to fall westward towards the wolfswood. Behind it came the faint rumble of thunder and a thin moaning sound just on the edge of perception.

MELISANDRE

Candles burning around her, the red priestess gazed deep into the hearthfire. The Lord of Light’s visions taxed her strength to receive, and her wit to interpret. Lord, Melisandre prayed, show me your will so that I may do what is required of me. Must I turn away from your instrument? Was I wrong? I had been so sure...

Visions danced in the flames, looping and whorling across each other. She saw towers of glittering black crystal rising from a red wasteland, and men with steel limbs contending against one another.
She saw a pale creature with eyes the color of old ice glaring hatefully from a tower of blue stone and gold. The enemy? Have I seen the Great Other?

In the spaces between the flames, she saw stars spinning endlessly in the night. One star detached from the others and fell to earth trailing smoke and burning feathers. The fallen star touched the ground with a mighty blast. The image blurred and resolved into a woman with stars in her hair and eyes the color of wildfire.

*This is not Azor Ahai,* she thought. *And yet… the enemy, the star and the woman. My Lord would not show this to me if it did not mean something.* Melisandre rocked back from the hearth, sweat pouring from her brow. She mopped the sweat away with a stray scrap of cloth; the visions had been harder and harder on her these past few weeks, and it would not do for a priestess of R’hllor to show weakness.

She turned back to the fire and summoned her will for one final effort. *Show me my path, Lord.* The fire surged, and she saw war, death, suffering, sorrow and darkness reflected in the flames. Behind it all, the tower of blue and gold gleamed with malevolent, pale light from the very summit of the world. She saw the hazy figure of Azor Ahai framed in that baleful light, and the wildfire-eyed woman calling down the stars.

Melisandre tore herself from the vision with a cry and fell to the floor, spent.

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**THE THREE-EYED CROW**

Tangled within the weirwood’s roots, the last greenseer watched with mingled concern and curiosity as the flames around the falling star faded, revealing a great metal dromond which tore a swathe through the wolfswood, shattering trees and ploughing a furrow through the forest soil until it came to rest, its prow barely an arm’s span from an ancient and forgotten heart tree.

*Well, that’s new.*
First Contact

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 1

Goddammit. Just... goddammit!

I’m going to die on an alien planet. Always figured that was going to happen, but I’m actually kind of pissed that it’s happening now. I don’t even know why I’m recording this, or for whom. Maybe some bug-hunter will find it thirty years from now, or Starfleet. Maybe I’m just putting this down so I don’t just stick my head in the reactor core. Who knows.

Anyway, for the record, everything was fine on my last planned check-in on Flight Day 612, so I didn’t just vanish into subspace. I made it to my destination and that’s when everything went wrong. I’m still not sure what happened, the logs were partially corrupted during the crash and my memory’s... fuzzy... about the whole thing, but instead of doing an orbital survey like usual the Carefree Victory lost control and I ended up falling into the atmosphere like the Queen of All Idiots.

My next check in is in a week. A month past that and I’ll be listed as “overdue.” Six months after that and no sign of me, Starfleet will officially write me off as lost. It will be very sad, there’ll be a nice memorial service, I’ll get my name and maybe a picture on the memorial wall and life will go on. Jade Hasegawa, one of many glorious martyrs of the exploration of space.

And I’ll still be here for however long it takes for this planet or existential despair to kill me.

How to begin?

Starfleet. The mission: seek out new life and new civilizations, boldly going etc. The guys in the big ships with the big crews and the shiny uniforms get all the publicity, but they stick close to home for the most part. They run patrols around Earth, Planet, Yushan, Shamballa and the like, sometimes they’ll survey the systems on the nearer fringe of Federal space. The real interesting work is done by me and my buddies in the Starfleet Rangers. We’re... a looser group than average, not quite freelancers but not as tightly controlled as the fleet boys and girls. Rangers go where angels say “I’m not getting paid enough to do this,” and sometimes we find some pretty amazing stuff. Sometimes we don’t come back. A lot of the time we don’t come back. Fuck.

Moving on before I get depressed again... I was chasing a lead from the Tanis Map. The Map’s an artifact left behind by a civilization we call the Builders, because they were into making shit and just leaving it all over the place. It’s an annotated catalog of somewhere around a million stars relatively close to Earth. Pretty much the biggest and most awesome treasure map in the galaxy so far. I love it to bits. Every Ranger tries their hand at a Map location once or twice in their career, because the potential payoff is amazing.

My target for this run was catalog designation FSC-29294, a system way the hell out on the far edge of the Map a good seven hundred-plus days flight one-way from Mother Earth, further out than almost anybody else has gone. I picked it because the Builder annotations intrigued me: we’ve finally started to get a decent handle on the Builder language, so we can actually read the notes left behind, great stuff. FSC-29294 was tagged with the glyphs for “sanctuary,” meaning that this was a place the Builders wanted to protect, and “watch” which was something we hadn’t seen on any nearby system. Sanctuary worlds tend to be good places for artifact finds, and an all-new glyph meant there was something there the Builders were interested in, so I decided to check it out.
My ship was... is... the FWSC Carefree Victory, AGS-3172. She’s a Triumph class, a specialized deep-penetration scout vessel based off the old Archer class. Like the Archer, the Triumph has the classic Starfleet flying-saucer-with-outrigger-pontoons design, though she’s so small that she can actually land on a surface with relative ease. Unlike the Archers, which actually had a pretty large crew for a ship so small, my Victory is a singleship, designed and built to be operated by just one person. Well, just one person and a host of non-sapient virtual intelligences. Not the greatest company, but they keep things running. Victory and I have been together for about ten years now, we’ve been all over known space and done multiple deep missions together.

I hope I can fix her. I really do. Even if I can’t get her all the way home, if she’s unrecoverable I don’t know what I’d do.

Victory dropped out of subspace on Day 614 and we started the basic survey of FSC-29294. The star’s not that exciting, just an everyday old G-type. Eight planets, couple dozen minors, nothing too dissimilar from Sol. The third planet in had signs of a decent environment, so we coasted in to take a closer look and... I don’t know. Maybe it was a collision, maybe something else. All I know is that one second we’re fine and then we’re falling.

The last thing I remember seeing is a whole lot of trees suddenly in my glide path.

I awoke to a massive headache and the feeling of a gentle breeze. Which when you’re on a spaceship is never a good sign. My face was covered in blood—I must’ve faceplanted into the controls on landing—the mains were offline, automatic systems killed the power to prevent any surges, the emergency lights were glinting dull amber and I could smell vegetation. The good news is, the planet’s capable of supporting Earth-type life: I know thanks to the fact that I’m still breathing. I pried myself out of my seat and half-stumbled back to the overstocked first-aid station I call a medbay to clean off my face. That, thankfully, turned out not to be too bad, just a few nasty scrapes that bandaged up nicely. The console held up (Starfleet engineering stronk!) so I didn’t have to pick perspex or switches out of my face. Which, you know, is a definite bonus.

From there I headed to the engine spaces, to get main power back online so the VI could do a diagnostic and tell me how fucked the ship was. The reactor was still intact, so that was just a question of resetting the breakers. The computer went through boot-up and I sneaked a look at the FTL drive.

The FTL was slagged. The main unit was half-melted and the rest of it was turned into blackened junk. Right then I realized that I was fucked. Once the VI was back online it confirmed everything for me: even if I could repair the main unit inside the hull (I probably could, I’ve got enough spare parts to maybe put one together inside a month or two.) the warp coils in the nacelles were fused. That’s shipyard work. Worse, the VI told me that whatever slagged the FTL took out the primary and secondary ansible communications arrays. The ansibles are wonderful things, giving me reasonably fast communications with Starfleet and civilized space no matter how far out I stray. If the comms were still working I could call for help and then just sit tight as one of my fellow Rangers came out to get me. Without them... for all intents and purposes I just vanish into the black.

So, yeah. That’s the situation: ship’s down, I’m alone on a planet hundreds of light years away from anything, no comms, and unless I can fix things that are by definition unfixable I’m totally screwed.

Fuck this, I’m going to go howl at the moon for a little bit. At least this rock has a moon to howl at.
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 1.1

Howled at the moon, feel much better now.

Taking stock of the situation, I don’t think I’m quite as deeply fucked as I thought. Victory no doubt took a lot of damage on impact, but the frame’s still solid. Rangers are tough to kill, and so’re our ships. If the VI is right—have to do a visual inspection to check—the hull took the worst of it. There’s a whole lot of panels out of alignment, popped seals and whatnot. Resetting panels is easy enough, and I can fix damaged seals with what I’ve got on hand. If there’s actual damage like torn plates that’s a different story, but depending on where the damage is I can rig up some cheap replacements. Space is off the menu for now but by sealing the right compartments I might make it work eventually.

Supplywise I’m doing alright for the moment. None of the food rations were compromised and the medbay’s still stocked. I’ve got three years of tube rats to sustain me physically, which I am simply overjoyed about as you can clearly see. The ship’s autofac is functional and the feedstock tanks are intact, so I can make more tube rats, essential tools and the like. I’ll have to keep an eye on the tanks; the more I make the more I’ll have to scrounge to refill them, and some of the rare-earth elements are going to be an utter bitch to restock.

(At least one person reading this log is going to ask “if the autofactory is operational, why don’t you use that to fix the FTL or the ansible?” Well, first of all Victory’s autofac is too small to build an FTL coil worth anything. Second, I’d have to disassemble the engines to get at the wrecked coils for raw materials, which would mean ripping even more of the ship apart and I really don’t want to do that if I don’t have to. Third and most importantly, drive coils and ansible cores require some pretty involved calibrations in order to not implode when powered, much less work properly, and that requires equipment I a) don’t have, b) don’t have the autofac blueprints for. It’s a nice thought, but yeah.)

The stuff in my cabin didn’t take the crash all that well, which sucks but it’s not the end of the world. I had the pleasant surprise of finding my guitar still intact despite the shambles. (Holy shit that case was a godsend! I should send in a testimonial: “Guitar survived violent crash on an alien world, A++ would buy again.”) Most of the gear in the cargo bay was secured properly, and the rest of it’s pretty light so everything survived with a few dents and not much else. Of course I can’t roll out the ATVs, the drones and the flight pack and give them a proper checkout yet, but I’ll get there. The weapons locker’s okay, too, so just in case I need to chase off velociraptors or whatthefuckever I can do that.

The good news is the main reactor, the impulse engine and the repulsors all still work properly. The crash knocked them all offline but getting them back in order should be a day’s work, maybe two depending on any external damage. Reactor’s already back up at 10% power (don’t really need more for the VI and basic environmental controls) and the next step is the repulsors. If I can get Victory out of this spirits-fucking ditch and level her it’ll make repairs a hell of a lot easier.

Didn’t mention that, did I? Right, when Victory finally skidded to a stop in the middle of this forest she came to rest bow-down at about a nine degree angle. I’m guessing that the forward scan array caught the dirt like a gigantic plow and just dug in as we slowed down until the momentum was just enough to push the nose in deeper. So everything’s off-kilter which makes doing basic stuff like walking aft or taking a shit kind of an interesting adventure.

The best news right now is that between what’s left of the ansibles, the FTL drive and what I can crank out with the autofac I should be able to fix up a way to contact Earth. Subspace radio is old tech, the sort of thing that used to come standard but has since depreciated in value. I’ve only got one
because *Victory* is an older-block ship and my aunt impressed on me a need for all the backups at a young age. The transmitter came loose in the crash and is broke to shit, but the antennas are still good and the transmitter is *probably* fixable. It’ll take me somewhere around the high side of forever, but I should be able to send a message to the nearest Fleet repeater eventually.

So, order of business: Get the ship righted and out of this hole, and fix the damn radio.

Time to get to work. This place wants to kill me it’s gonna have to work at it.

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 2**

There is a *face* in a *tree* right outside the ship. What in the absolute fuck?

I only just noticed this when I went outside to check up on the ventral hull plating. The damage wasn’t quite as bad as I feared, paint’s shot to shit but the popped plates aren’t so badly deformed they won’t pop back into place. Still enough torn plates that I don’t want to risk high-altitude flight for a while yet.

I also wanted to check out the path *Victory* dug through the forest on landing, as I was too unconscious to appreciate the mayhem as it happened. It’s pretty impressive, really. We must’ve started at the edge of the woods and then just tore a hole a good six, seven kilometers long. Nothing but stumps of trees and turned dirt closer to the final stop. I walked around to the bow to see how badly we were stuck in when I saw it. The face-tree (what the hell else do I call it?) was maybe a meter away from the bow. It’s big and white, a surprising lack of color compared to the other trees around the crash site. It’s got red leaves—which must be an adaptation of some kind, because none of the other trees have turned yet—and red sap streaking the trunk.

Oh yeah, and it’s got a *face* carved into it. The face is pretty humanoid, though how much of that’s exaggeration I can’t say. Whoever or whatever carved it made sure that the sap welled up in the right spots, because the thing looks like it’s *crying blood*, which is an artistically freaky touch. Hammer Films gives it three thumbs up.

And there’s something else in there.

*Asynchronous quantum field effects* is what they call it in the science journals. Everybody else calls it *psionics*—or *fucking magic*—because that’s what it *is* for anybody who doesn’t have advanced degrees in subspace theory. Some microscopically tiny percentage of the population has the ability to manipulate psi fields with their minds, one of which I happen to be related to. Unfortunately I’m kind of useless at manipulating them, even when being able to smite something with my brain would be really handy. I *can* sense the fields if they’re there though. My inability to use the fields dashed Mama’s hopes but the sensory boost helps a lot in my chosen profession: a lot of Builder artifacts use psionics, and a lot more just sort of emit them almost like background radiation.

The tree is emitting like a goddamned champ. I can feel the thing almost like it’s a heat lamp glowing in the background. I think it’s a node for something, feels like the control system at Tannhauser Gate, connected to something big and really powerful. And, I think, asleep. I hope so anyway; pretty sure I don’t want to wake this thing up and find out it’s cranky.

Right, okay. Weirdo magic trees come later, need to finish the damage survey first. Get sorted, then
we can start unravelling the mystery of the face-tree.

Worry about it later.

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 2.1**

After noticing the face-tree, I took a closer look at my surroundings. This forest isn’t that different from Earth-normal. In fact, it’s a hell of a lot closer than other forests I’ve been in. And the whole place is thick with psionic power. The air’s almost *greasy* with it.

The Builders had this place marked down as a sanctuary.

I wonder if I’m not alone here?

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 3**

The face-tree might’ve been pareidolia or Builders fucking around, but now I have *photographic proof*. People live here!

Where did I get photographic proof, you ask? I got it from the survey array. The ansible’s dead and my subspace radio isn’t working yet, but the old-school radio transmitter still works. Always have a backup, even if that backup is useless beyond three light-years. The survey array is a cluster of microsats *Victory* uses to do a comprehensive mapping of any inhabitable planets we come across. Drop them off at the beginning of the survey, let them orbit for a couple weeks then pick ’em up just before departure. Nice and simple. I’d just managed to drop them off before everything went weird.

Earlier today the array finally came back into radio range, and it wanted to talk. Bereft of any better conversation (tree-face outside is sympathetic but a better listener than a talker) I initiated the download and started looking at my new home. I was *expecting* to see forests, plains, deserts, marshlands… you know, the sort of thing you normally find on a garden planet. Maybe some Builder ruins, those can be hard to spot but I’ve got plenty of experience looking.

I sure as hell wasn’t expecting farms, villages and even I-shit-you-not *castles* all over the damn place! It looks like the continent I landed on and the one directly to the east are pretty heavily settled. Nothing obviously industrial (dammit, would’ve solved a lot of problems) but pretty well-refined High Postclassical by the looks of things. The resolution isn't good enough to pick out individuals, so I still have no idea what the locals look like. But they’re there. And odds are good somebody noticed me.

Going to have to think about this a little.

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 3.1**

Thinking about it still. So, there’s inhabitants. Awesome. Now I at least have some company during my exile. Assuming I ever get close to them, that is.

It’s the old Prime Directive dilemma, that thorny philosophical issue every Starfleet cadet be they Ranger or Fleet scrub gets to chew on in the academy. Standard policy is we don’t contact aliens who haven’t at least spotted us and figured out a way to contact us. The idea, so far as my instructors explained it, was that the level of knowledge necessary had to be enough that the aliens wouldn’t
lose their shit entirely at the prospect of not being alone in the universe and all that good shit. And sure, that makes sense. Stay away from the guys armed with sticks, no problem.

(Used to be there was a purist faction that said we shouldn’t do anything to “disrupt the natural evolution of a species,” even if that meant sitting back and watching them all croak from a rogue asteroid. Thankfully smarter heads prevailed over that sort of ludicrous decision-making process. Some people, man, I swear. Anyway.)

Now, the thing here is I don’t have the luxury of sitting in high orbit watching the preindustrial mortals scurry about their daily lives. I have to assume that somebody saw my descent, or they saw the epic track Victory cut through the forest, and they’re going to follow it right to me. So I have choices to make. The repulsors are working well enough that I can raise ship and I’ve got one-twelfth impulse power, not very fast but fast enough to outpace searchers. I was going to move the ship anyway, get out of this fucking ditch at least and put her on the landing legs, but do I move away from the crash site or do I stay nearby?

Do I want to be found?

Victory’s still mostly intact, the subspace radio’s a work in progress. I move off, I leave behind an inexplicable hole in the ground. I stay and I have to tell the truth or I work out a story. Maybe some balance between the two, try to recontextualize my experience with what a bunch of low-tech people would know. I wish Mama or Vivi were here, this sort of mythologizing is right up their alley.

You know what, fuck it. I want to be found. I may well be stuck here for the rest of my natural life, and I flat out fucking refuse to be a hermit if I don’t have to be.

First, though, some howling. I need to howl.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 4

All the repairs I can make to the repulsors are done. So, time to see if she’ll lift out of the hole. I’ve scouted a clearing not too far from the edge of the forest to put her down in, right alongside the giant skidmark we made on the way in. Might as well make it easy.

More once I know one way or the other if she’s going to move.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 4.1

Well, good news is the repulsors worked like a charm. Fired them up and Victory lifted out of the trench and floated up over the trees. Bad news is the impulse engines are in worse shape than I thought. Must’ve been feedback from the FTL that damaged the focusing coils. I’ve got maybe 2% impulse power tops before I risk burning out the engines completely. Call it a top speed of… five, six hundred kilometers an hour. Getting anywhere distant is going to be a chore, and orbit is right out without repairing the coils.

Always something. Going to go howl for a bit, then crack a tube rat and celebrate not sleeping at a weird angle for the first time this week. Rangers know how to party.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 5
Finished the hull inspection now that I can see the whole thing. Plating’s pretty badly chewed up along the bow, just like I expected. Some of it’s patchable, but there’s a few hull panels that took damage I don’t have the autofac volume necessary to repair. I figure I can cut up what’s left of those panels and feed them to the disassembler, then use the extra hullmetal to shore up the patches. It’s not perfect, but it’ll do.

Spent some time going over the survey pictures, looking for something approximating a steel mill. All I need is a dozen square meters of rolled steel sheet to cover the damage until I can get Victory back to a drydock. I’d accept the same in plate steel, pig iron or even bronze if it was available—it’s not great, but at least it’d provide some protection to the inner hull. Unfortunately it doesn’t look like the locals have that kind of industry set up yet.

On that not-entirely-encouraging note, I’m putting off hull repairs for the moment. I’m a Starfleet Ranger, a professional space explorer. I ought to be out there in the big wide world exploring things! Seeing the sights, taking a recce, noting important landmarks and all that stuff. More importantly, I think it’s time I had something other than a tube rat for dinner for the first time in a year and a half.

Hunting time!

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 5.1

So yeah, that happened. Let me tell you about my hunting trip…

I grabbed a couple guns and ATV 1 and headed off into the woods to bag me a bandersnatch. Mmm, roast bandersnatch. I drove out five or six kilometers from the ship before ditching the ATV and heading further in on foot. Dirt buggies are handy for driving around but they’re noisy and even assuming the local wildlife’s never seen anything like them they’d still be wary of the big noisy thing running around the forest.

The forest was pretty nice, actually. Old-growth, lots of really old trees. This wasn’t a place that had been logged or otherwise touched by the inhabitants in a long time, if ever. If I closed my eyes I could almost be back near my grandparents’ place.

A couple hours of tracking later and I saw what this planet had to offer in terms of animals. They were deer. I don’t even know what the hell is up with that, but okay. Deer aren’t the sort of thing I expect to find hundreds of light years away from Earth, but there’s one thing I know about deer: they’re damned tasty.

Deer being deer, they hadn’t noticed my creeping up on them, which worked out quite nicely. Then things got interesting, because while I was focused on my dream of barbequed venison somebody else was creeping up from the other side. I’d aimed at one of the smaller does when all of a sudden the biggest goddamned wolf I’ve ever seen in my life burst out of the undergrowth and pounced. The deer scattered, I said something along the lines of “motherfucker!” and went for a kill shot on the nearest one. I got lucky and managed to drop it, while my competition hadn’t managed to down her dance partner, this impressive buck that managed to run off with a few claw marks on his flanks.

Guns 1, tooth & claw 0.

When I got to my prize the wolf had padded over and was sniffing the carcass. She probably didn’t know what to make of the lack of arrows, or the smell of the cordite. I grabbed the deer and signaled the ATV to come get me. The wolf gave me this weird look, and I noticed that not only was the wolf
huge, like horse-sized, she was pregnant. Which explained why she’d taken the jump and her lack of success, I guess. She just kept looking at me until I sort of lost patience.

“Look, lady,” I said. “This is my kill. If you want you can come back to the ship with me and you can have some, but don’t try taking it off me. Clear?” I felt like a huge idiot talking to a giant canid like that, especially one that could cause some serious chassis damage without thinking about it. But—and this is definitely something I’m going to have to research further—she just looked at me and sat down like she’d been domesticated. She sat like that until the ATV arrived, was a little wary of the engine noise but plodded along after me all the way back to the ship.

And that’s how I made a new friend. She’s snacking on some organs while I wait for the steak to finish cooking. I think I’ll call her Moro. Moro the giant fucking wolf who lives in a forest with face-trees and deer that could’ve come from Earth.

This place is just fucking weird.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 6

Congratulations, Jade! You’re an aunt!

Moro delivered six puppies this morning, everybody’s in good health. Between the wolves and the face-tree it’s nice to have company again. I’m going to give her a couple days to recalibrate and work out the next step in the meantime.

I’ve already decided that I want to initiate contact with the local species, the only question now is how and where. The survey found a pretty big fortress less than two hundred kilometers east of my landing site that looks like it’s still in use. There’s also what looks like a farm or a small village considerably nearer by.

The fact that I’ve been here almost a week and nobody’s come investigating what must’ve been a really exciting show suggests that the village isn’t a good prospect for contact. Hate to stereotype and all, but a funny-looking alien emerging from the woods probably won’t get a warm reception from a bunch of Late Postclassical dirt farmers. To be fair, it’s not like whoever runs the fortress would be any different but at least there I might be able to talk fast before falling back to hitting and shooting things...

So the fortress is the best bet, or it’s at least the nearest decent bet. The next question is how. I could just fly Victory straight up to the gate and say “take me to your leader” just like every Ranger dreams to. And to be honest that’s not the worst option, just being straightforward about it.

I don’t know, I’m not going to come up with a brilliant idea tonight. I’ve still got to brush up on the care and feeding of juvenile Thisplacian Giant Fuck-You Wolves.

(Which reminds me: I need to ask somebody what the planet’s name is. It’ll probably be something like “Earth” in the local lingo but whatever. Better than “Thisplace” or “Bob” anyway.)

JON

“Gods be good!”

Seven days after the falling star had blazed over Winterfell and thirty-five leagues of hard riding
behind them, Lord Stark and his party came to the spot where the star fell to earth. Riding through the wolfswood in the direction the crofters had pointed them, they first noticed when the light started shining a little more strongly through the dense canopy. Looking up, they could see the tops of the tallest trees had broken and fallen down to the forest floor, almost like a giant had come and plucked them like summer flowers. The trail of damage continued on into the forest, the trees growing shorter and shorter along a straight line.

They came at last to a great trough a dozen yards or more across, covered with the smashed remains of ancient fir and spruce trees mixed with ploughed earth. The trough plunged on deeper into the wolfswood, carving an arrow-straight scar into the forest as far as Jon could see.

“I can see why the crofters didn’t want to go further,” his brother Robb said, looking down the path. “The star came down almost right on their heads. I’m surprised there wasn’t a fire.” Jon looked around at the destruction.

“There was,” he said. “Look at the trees still standing.” He pointed at a white fir marked with bare branches and ugly black scars on its trunk. “It looks like the trees near the edge were scorched by the heat.”

“Good eye, Jon,” Robb replied. “So the star came down behind us, touched earth here and kept going that way,” he pointed down the long cut. “It had to stop eventually, right?”

“You don’t know that,” the Greyjoy countered. “It might have just skipped back out of the wood, like a flat stone on a pond.” Jon stifled a disbelieving snort. Really, Theon? Do you believe that or are you just being contrary for fun? Robb didn’t bother hiding his skepticism.

“I’m... fairly certain that falling stars don’t act like skipped rocks, Theon,” he said.

“Oh, and you’ve seen how many falling stars?”

“Enough,” Lord Stark said quietly but firmly. “We’ll continue down the trail a while longer. If the end isn’t in sight by the time we start losing daylight we’ll return to the crofter village or set up camp.” Robb and Theon glanced at each other and nodded.

The wolfswood was silent. The tall straight trees loomed over them as they followed the trail of splinters and churned soil deeper into the forest, scorched trunks and bare branches marking the fallen star’s passage. The only light came from the slot carved by the star, leaving the trees beyond cloaked in dappled shadows. Jon could hear the rustling of small animals along the edge of the path, and sometimes a faint bird call from somewhere beyond the blackened trees, but the wolfswood seemed to swallow all sounds save those made by the party.

“By the old, the new and the Drowned,” Greyjoy complained, “where in the hells did this damned thing stop? We’ve been at this track for an hour and still no sign of it!”

“Patience, Theon,” his father cautioned, and Greyjoy had the decency to look abashed.

“Forgive me, my lord. I just... I wasn’t expecting such a chase from an inanimate object,” Theon replied. Jon and Robb chuckled. Just then a pair of scouts returned to the party, riding hard.

“My lord,” the lead scout reported breathlessly, “there’s a clearing up ahead, looks like, and signs of a fire from a distance.”
Jon looked thoughtful. “It can’t be the star, else the whole wood would be ablaze by now.” *Are we not the first to follow the track?*

“Looks like a campfire from the smoke, my lord,” the scout said to his lord father.

“Not the crofters, they wouldn’t have lied to our faces,” Robb said.

“Oh they might have about anything else,” Theon said cynically. “But they were too scared of the star to seek it out. Bandits, perhaps? Using the star as a way to mask their presence?”

“Whatever it is,” Lord Stark said with finality, “we will go and find out. Carefully now, no swords drawn until I give the word, is that understood?” Jon nodded weakly and fingered the hilt of his blade nervously. If he had to draw his sword today it would be the first time he’d ever done it outside of practice bouts.

Carefully the party crept up along to the edge of the clearing. As they drew near, they could hear the faint sounds of music coming from the clearing. “Not exactly hiding, if they’re bandits,” Robb muttered as they drew close to the forest’s edge. The tall dark trees gave way to a carpet of green heath and wildflowers covering the earth in great rolling mounds. They could see the smoke from the singer’s fire more clearly now, and at the center of the clearing was something the likes of which none had ever seen before.

A great bulbous shape of silvery-white metal gleamed in the afternoon sun, looking not entirely unlike a ladle or a serving dish used in feasts at the great hall of Winterfell. Two smaller hulls like longboats jutted out from masts to either side of the dish-shape. Theon tilted his head. “It looks a little like a ship,” he said quietly. “A barge of some sort, perhaps. But why would you make it from metal, then drag it all the way from the sea?”

Jon’s mind whirled and the realization hit him like an arrow to the forehead. “That’s the falling star!” he blurted. Theon scoffed quietly, but without much heat.

“We won’t learn more from here,” Lord Stark said. “Let us go and see this falling star.” The party formed up around their lords and rode out into the clearing. As they grew nearer the singing grew louder. It wasn’t a song that Jon knew, and he felt like he knew most of the songs in Westeros, or at least all the songs people cared about.

*He climbed cathedral mountains, he saw silver clouds below*  
*He saw everything as far as you can see*  
*And they say that he got crazy one and he tried to touch the sun*  
*And he lost a friend but kept a memory*

The melody was strange, the words were stranger but the voice kept on singing without a care. The party rounded the metal ship, keeping a good distance from the falling star as a caution. Opposite them the singer had lit a fire, a haunch of venison roasting merrily in the flames. Sitting against a great mound of furs the singer strummed an oversized lute. She seemed to be Dornish, or near-as, darker of face and hair than most northmen and dressed in a tunic of fine green cloth and ill-fitting black hose. Her eyes were closed and she apparently took no note of the party as her song continued.

*Now he walks in quiet solitude, the forest and the streams*  
*Seeking grace in every step he takes*  
*His sight has turned inside himself, to try and understand*  
*The serenity of a clear blue mountain lake*
She was, as far as Jon could see, the most beautiful woman in the world.

The closer they got to ship and singer, the more it seemed to Jon that the mound of furs she rested against wasn’t made of multiple hides. The moment the party got within five yards of the fire the pile grunted and shifted, revealing a massive head that peered at them through the flames. The woman’s singing broke off and she peered at them through the flames. The flames glinted off panes of Myrish glass she wore on her face, and Jon could see the tiniest hint of brilliant green from behind the glass.

The giant wolf’s head growled at them, and Lord Stark pulled up short. The men swallowed oaths at the sight of a wolf the size of the lord’s charger growling at them. “Gods be good,” Robb said under his breath, “that’s a direwolf.” Jon only nodded, his throat suddenly gone dry.

The singer seemed not to notice their shock, only putting her hand against the direwolf’s jaw. “Easy, Moro,” she soothed. “Let’s not start anything with the kids here.” The direwolf grumbled and laid its head back down, adjusting position so Lord Stark and his men could see that the direwolf was in fact direwolves, a mother with a litter of pups. The singer got to her feet—she’s very tall Jon noted absently—and turned to face them, a small smile on her face fading quickly into plain and open confusion as she studied them.

“Er,” she said gracefully. “Um. Well. Hello there?”

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LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 8

What. The hell.
Learning the World

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 11

Spent the morning deep in conversation with the local guy-who-knows-everything, possibly more confused than I was when I woke up. This is probably not going to change anytime in the future.

Maester Luwin was a font of knowledge, and to be honest he pretty much knows everything you could expect a preindustrial scholar to know. I’m honestly impressed; there’re polymaths who’d sell their grandmothers to have the depth and breadth of skills his order requires for his rank. All they really need is calculus and Newtonian physics and they’d be fucking terrifying.

My problem is that very little of what he could tell me lines up.


When we made first contact the local lord rattled off of very impressive-sounding titles that I honestly had no idea what to do with, so Luwin was very happy to give me a quick course on local geography and history. There’s a lot about both subjects that Luwin and his fellow maesters don’t know about, but the stuff they do know is pretty well-documented and I can follow along with the survey photos.

To sum up the geography, I’ve landed on a continent called Westeros, there’s a larger continent to the east called Essos, a third to the south of Essos called Sothryos and then a region on the other side of the world called Ulthos, which I gather is maester-speak for “here be monsters” or “haven’t a fucking clue, sorry.” For the time being I’ve decided to claim to be from the furthest reaches of Ulthos. “That sounds like the best approximation of where I’m from as any I can make,” is what I told Luwin.

(As an aside: I wanted to know what the name for this planet was, so I asked Luwin. I was expecting something like “Earth,” since that’s generally what people call the world if they’re pre-spaceflight and arrived there naturally. As far as they know anyway, stupid ancient astronauts. But whatever. According to Luwin, most folks call it “the earth” or variations thereof on the incredibly rare occasions when anybody thinks about it but maesters and wise men use the name… wait for it… Planetos.

No, seriously. Apparently it’s derived from an obscure word for “sacred soil” or somesuch. I’m not going to judge—pre-spaceflight culture, nothing in the folklore about coming from elsewhere so why not? And hey, the Centaurians still hold the grand prize for unimaginative names, since they don’t have either of those excuses. And it’s got a certain ring to it… Westeros, Essos, Sothryos, Ulthos, Planetos. I love it when a naming scheme is nice and consistent. Anyway.)

Westeros, as it turns out, is actually united, which surprised me considering the size of the damn thing. Or at least it’s mostly united, there’s a significant chunk of the far north under the control of “wildlings” (as good a name for barbarians as any) and is literally walled off from civilization (holy Hadrian, Batman!). Everything else seems to be united in a feudal monarchy, with the high king’s seat somewhere to the south of here. As it turns out my current host is one of the major overlords on Westeros.
And they said I could never function around high society. Ha!

Anyway, how all this happened is where we got into the history lessons. Luwin and his people have somewhere around two to three thousand years of written history with oral history going back possibly as far as 12,000 years. Obviously we have to take this with some serious salt—Luwin sure does—but that’s not entirely impossible. Most of this history involves the various noble houses fighting amongst each other until about three centuries ago when invaders from the east—apparently this is a real thing—dragonback came and unified Westeros under their banner. The invader’s dynasty was overthrown about a decade and half ago, with a new dynasty taking over rule over the entire continent. So the realm is maybe a touch politically unstable.

And then we get to the weather. The climate on this planet is weird just like everything else here. Everything depends on the summer-winter cycle, which sounds familiar, but the summers and winters can last years here. And okay, Ranger here, I’ve seen some planets with radical climate shifts like that. It’s rare for a garden world but not impossible. Except Luwin’s records and his own experience says that the cycle isn’t regular. Summers and winters shift according to their own logic, which no maester has managed to figure out on their own. Apparently they’re just starting to come off a nine-year summer, the longest in memory.

That’s just downright unnatural. “I wonder if the psi’s responsible,” I said when Luwin showed me the record. Just loud enough for him to hear, so there was a moment’s confusion. After explaining that psi was the Ulthosi term for magic (Part of me wonders, if and when these people contact Far Ulthos on their own, how badly stories of my visit are going to fuck their perceptions up. Ah well, water under the bridge.) I was solemnly informed that capital-M Magic was officially gone from the world, had been for years in fact.

I just sort of blinked and said something along the lines of “Really? You mean you can’t feel that?” The ambient psi energy levels are strong enough that somebody ought to be feeling it. There’s no way in hell everybody on this continent is 100% psi-blind. Luwin just shook his head in an oh-aren’t-you-a-silly-dear sort of way (or maybe a I-don’t-know-how-to-respond-to-that sort of why) and changed the subject as quickly as he could.

By the by, I should point out that this entire conversation happened in English. I haven’t had to learn the local language because what they call “common speech” is basically English, or close enough to English my not-a-linguist ear can’t tell any serious difference. The vocabulary has a lot of common English words in it even loanwords from other languages that shouldn’t exist in Westeros and RARGH NONE OF THIS MAKES ANY GODDAMNED SENSE!

The existence of human life on a planet so far from Earth is… it’s not impossible. We’ve run into a couple examples over the years. So the Builders or somebody grabbed some of our ancestors and resettled them. Okay, fine. But a transplanted human society should’ve evolved on its own away from Earth norms, like the differences between China and Rome, or Spain and the Inca. Hell, Earth and Planet are pretty fucking divergent and they were out of contact for less than 200 years! The level of parallelism I’m seeing here is way, way beyond tolerances.

Faced with the evidence... eppur si muove, as the old Italian said. Which leads to the question the old Russian asked: cui bono? This can’t be natural, somebody very carefully groomed this place to be like this, like some kind of cultural bonsai tree.

Why?
For what seemed like the hundredth time in the last few days, the lord of Winterfell stared moodily out at the new addition to his castle. The Ulthosi sky-ship dominated the courtyard between the smithy and the library tower, the metal hull reflecting the late summer sun and brightening the castle walls. Around it the servants and banners continued their normal routines, though they tried to give the great vessel a wide berth.

Though not everybody avoids the ship. He watched as his youngest daughter capered about in the shadow of the sky-ship, happily playing with one of the direwolf pups. Direwolves south of the Wall had been the least surprising thing they’d found that day, considering, but the wolves had happily accompanied the northerners and the sorceress back to Winterfell and seemed to have no interest in leaving. The pups had all attached themselves to his children, while the mother seemed to divide her attentions between himself, his wife and Lady Jade. “They’re pretty friendly for giant predators,” she’d said the day they met.

“Aye,” he’d replied, “it’s said that many years ago the Stark family had direwolves as constant companions, but they’ve been extinct south of the Wall for many years.” The sorceress made a small interested noise at that and let the subject be. Which perhaps had been for the best, considering they had been flying back to Winterfell aboard the *Carefree Victory* at the time.

Flying. By the gods, flying without dragons.

Ned had sent a raven to King’s Landing almost immediately after returning to Winterfell, of course; the King needed to be informed of foreign maegi and strange doings in his realm. A reply might be expected in a fortnight or two, depending on how long it took His Grace to respond. There were rumors of trouble at court, and Robert had never been the most prompt correspondent.

Ned watched Arya and her direwolf play under the sky-ship. The children had accepted these odd events with surprising grace. The direwolves had helped, no doubt, but the sorceress had an arsenal of songs and stories which she happily shared with any man, woman or child who expressed an interest. It didn’t hurt that Jade seemed to be of an age with his eldest boys and Theon Greyjoy, too. Ned laughed quietly as he remembered Jon’s awestruck face when he first saw her clearly. *Smitten at first sight, even as he tried to hide it from everybody! Oh to be young again.*

The thought of Jon’s infatuation turned his thoughts back to Ned’s own youth, to Harrenhal and violet eyes and everything that happened after. Ned sighed. There was no use in dwelling on the past, no matter how often he kept coming back to it. *Jon will find another woman to moon over, or he’ll take the black and have a fond memory to keep him warm on the Wall. Either way, it will come to nothing and there’s no reason to fret over might-bes now.*

“My lord?” Maester Luwin said softly from the door.

Ned turned away from the window, the sky-ship and all the difficulties it had brought along with it. “Luwin,” he greeted the maester. “Has our guest made any more outrageous statements of fact from her faraway country?” He smiled a little as he said it, but the smile was strained.

Luwin chuckled. “Not yet, my lord, the lady is still in the library tower devouring my books—
metaphorically, not in truth,” he added hastily. “I’ve just come from the rookery. A message from King’s Landing.” He produced the letter, still sealed.

“Already?” Ned said, surprised. “The raven we sent south about the star only left a few days ago. Or has Ulthosi magic made the ravens fly faster?”

Luwin shook his head and looked grave. “I doubt that, my lord. No, I think this raven was already on its way when it crossed paths with ours.”

“Well, I wonder what His Grace needed to tell me.” Ned broke the seal and quickly read the contents. What good mood he retained drained away in a flash as he read the words in the King’s own hand. Oh, Jon…

“My lord?” Luwin asked in concern. Ned sighed heavily and placed the scroll on his desk.

“Jon Arryn is dead,” he said. “Jon is dead and the King is coming north.”

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 13**

Been catching up on my reading since my last talk with Luwin. It’s slow going: all the books are handwritten and the script they use is just far enough away from Federal Standard to be an absolute pain in the ass to decipher. I’ve taken to imaging some of the tougher passages and letting the VI sort out what’s what. So far I’ve read a history book, a general guide to the North and a book of ancient tales of the “First Men,” which seems to be the local name for the original population of Westeros.

I’ve found what might be my first trace of Builder influence in the general population: the book of First Men legends has a set of runes that look awfully familiar. Simplified of course, all the better to carve on rocks with crude tools, but the First Men runes show a familial resemblance to Builder glyphs. Victory is running them through the database right now looking for matches. It’s possible that by comparing our data with the maesters’ translations we might be able to add some more to our understanding of the Builder language.

Even if I don’t run into another Builder artifact on this rock (and I highly doubt that) the language data was worth the trip, if not the stranding.

In other news today, I learned that a) Westeros uses messenger ravens for long-distance communication, which is a neat trick, b) that the current grand vizier to the high king is dead and c) the high king himself is coming north to Winterfell.

Luwin filled me in on the details later: apparently Lord Stark and the king were boyhood friends fostered by the late vizier and it was the three of them that kicked off and won the most recent civil war. Fascinating stuff. I’ve gathered that the king’s coming north to (probably) name his old buddy to the vizierhood (is that even a word?), which seems to have the nobility in a bit of an uproar. I expect to be asked to move Victory outside the gates at some point to make room for the king and all his stuff. That’s fair, I suppose. But that won’t happen for a while yet with the king a couple thousand kilometers to the south and the crappy state of postclassical roads.

Ah well, this at least makes things somewhat easier. I was going to ask Stark for a letter of recommendation to the king, then make my way south to keep studying this culture but now the king’s coming to me. Handy, that.
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 14

I am not a Connecticut Yankee. I have to remember that.

When the fleet finally shows up, I’m going to spend a good year or so in inquiries about my conduct while on a planet with a pre-industrial civilization. Just being here and interacting with the natives is going to cause all sorts of changes, and once the admiralty is done patting me on the back for surviving they’re going to roast me over the coals in order to find out what damage I did to these people in the process. There might even be Senate hearings about my activities when all is said and done. Dad will be so proud.

So I have to try and keep my interference with the good people of Westeros to a minimum. I already made the decision to not just hide out in the woods like a hermit. And living large...ish in a culture not too different from Postclassical Europe has given me a new appreciation for all the little things that make life back home bearable. I thought Ranger training had beaten the fastidiousness out of me but then I tried living in the castle proper for two days before I decamped for Victory again. Some things you just take for granted.

The temptation is there, to remake Winterfell and everything around it in the Federal image, not so much for power but for comfort. I could do it; I have the knowledge. The tools are a little lacking, but any Ranger worth her salt knows there are ways around that. I could jailbreak the autofacs, dismantle the ship to build myself a wizard’s tower, spread that to Winterfell properly. Build some things to spread around Stark’s demesne: plumbing, lights, black powder weapons, give him a leg up and me a reason to keep meddling…

Depending on human factors, it wouldn’t take very long. A couple hours for the jailbreak, a couple weeks for the teardown and then a few more weeks to rebuild. Then another six months to get the castle up to Federal standards of living. Probably a year or three to get a minor industrial revolution rolling across the North, then Westeros and then… well, sky’s the limit. Barring accident I’ve got at least a good 250 or so years left before I have to go in for backup or rejuvenation, plenty of time to bootstrap up a society capable of building a ship to get me back to Federal space.

But doing that is tantamount to giving up on going home. I can’t tear down Victory, even if I was inclined to do it, because that would mean stopping work on the radio. And in the event the fleet found me anyway, they’d throw me in the deepest, darkest prison in space for unauthorized enlightenment and de facto planetary conquest.

I’m not a Yankee. If I ever want to go home, I can’t be a Yankee. Until I know help’s not coming for me, I can’t give in to the impulse.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 14.1

Moving on from the moral and philosophical issues of my stay here to the practical.

Getting the ship from the forest all the way to Winterfell told me that I need to get those missing panels patched before I try any sort of serious high-altitude flight. All the seals held, but if I try to move faster than a hundred knots I get way too much aerodynamic pressure on the inner hull. Also the missing panels leave bits exposed to the elements I don’t really want exposed. If I ever want to (or have to) leave Winterfell in a hurry it’d be good to not have to worry about max-Q blowing the seals out in the galley. Clearly a solution is needed.
Luckily, I think I’ve got one. I can’t rebuild the old panels with my autofac, but I can use the material to create a frame for a cover. Sheet steel or nickel alloy would be ideal but Westerosi metalworking isn’t quite up to that level of snuff just yet. But I’m not going to space, at least not at any velocity where I need that kind of support. At most I’m going to be flying at low transsonic speed, so all I need is a material that can handle that.

I’m thinking a Watney blanket is the best solution here. I can use what’s left of the damaged panels to fabricate a frame so the blanket snaps in properly, the autofac can cook up a batch of plastic resin that I can apply to just about any kind of fabric in a sandwich. I’ve got bedding, I could swipe some uninteresting wall hangings from the castle, fab up extra cloth if need be… all I need is enough textiles to soak in the plastic, sandwich it together and let it cure under a heat lamp in the hold. I wouldn’t want to try atmospheric entry on it, but for basic flight it’ll hold.

Of course, if I fuck up the formula the blanket will fail, leading to severe damage to the ship at high velocity, possibly dooming me and whatever poor bastard happens to be directly beneath me when I come crashing down from the sky. But what’s life without a little risk?
Witchy Thingies

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 17

Swiped a couple of the uglier tapestries from Winterfell with Lady Catelyn’s blessing. The king’s impending arrival works out in my favor once again: I need fabric and she wants them gone. They’re soaking up resin down in the cargo hold right now, along with a few meters of canvas and the spare sheets from my bunk. I’ll probably get some weird looks from the fleet scrubs when they finally get here but what the hell, it’s not like anybody ever accused me of having good taste. But right now I have bigger issues on my mind.

I’ve declared myself a witch, so I ought to have some witchy things going on. Eventually somebody’s going to challenge my credentials—the big spaceship parked in the courtyard notwithstanding—which means that I’m going to have to prove myself, and possibly defend myself. Straight-up defense isn’t a serious issue with the weapons locker; I’ve got enough guns to re-fight the battle of Agincourt and come out on top. The problem is that rifles and blasters while handy aren’t very flashy. And they’re also kind of permanent. I can shoot to wound, maybe, but armor deflection and bad luck… that’s just not something I should trust.

So I need something visually impressive and preferably non-lethal that I can use to wow the punters. I have a limited supply of electronics feedstock and I need to keep as much of that as possible for the radio and fixing any system faults I come across. If I run out, I have to start cannibalizing the ship or sift through a million tons of ore for twenty grams of technetium. Either way is not a winner, so big isn’t an option.

A solution presents itself, maybe: I have three hazardous environment suits sitting in the garage, clearly since I can breathe down here I don’t need all of them for anything. The suits have basic maneuvering systems built into them, not enough to lift my weight in one gee but one thruster could hold something light in the air almost indefinitely. They don’t take much power, either. And the suit deflector would be useful… it wouldn’t hold off a determined attacker forever but bouncing slings and arrows would be enough to discourage people.

I think I may have a plan of attack.

THREE OLD MAESTER

Maester Luwin had a very set routine for mornings: wake up, perform all necessary bodily functions in the privy then tend to the ravens before joining the Stark family in the great hall for an early meal. The routine was simple and comforting, everything an old maester could want from life.

The last few days had seen an unforeseen and, if Luwin was honest with himself, exciting change in that routine. Now, instead of simply breaking his fast with the Starks he would join Winterfell’s newest resident and spend much of the meal talking, which would almost inevitably lead them to the library tower or his quarters where they would continue the discussions.

And what discussions they were! Lady Jade’s knowledge of the known world was sadly lacking, but what she gave in return was exhilarating. Luwin had filled page after page of notes and details on “Ulthosi” society, a land where ships the size of castles sailed through the sky and the streets were filled with things that would baffle even the most jaded resident of Qarth or Asshai. He’d already sent two reports to the Citadel and was preparing a third, this time with a handful of refinements the
sorceress had suggested to existing techniques: the use of shallow glass dishes, sweetened water and baker’s yeast to grow bread mold without needing bread was particularly ingenious. Luwin rolled out of bed feeling like a much younger man these days, where the world was brighter and everything was still fresh and new.

This morning, it appeared that Lady Jade hadn’t joined the household for breakfast. The children were puzzled by their guest’s absence, while the lord and lady of Winterfell were more disconcerted by the missing sorceress. “I’m finding our guest much like my children,” Lord Stark confided to Luwin over salt fish. “Charming, but I feel much more secure when I know where she is on any given hour.”

Luwin replied, “With your leave, my lord, I shall inquire at the Carefree Victory after breakfast. I suspect that the lady may have simply overslept. The ship is still here after all, and I doubt very much she would leave it behind were she up to mischief.”

He’d only had cause to enter the ship once since it had landed in the courtyard that fateful day, but he could easily picture the smooth white metal walls of the interior, the soft white glow that lit the halls and the near-indescribable thrumming noise that sounded both mechanical and like the heartbeat of some great beast. Luwin stepped aboard and into the metal stable, drinking in the strange sights and sounds.

A bell chimed from somewhere in the ceiling. “Good morning, Maester Luwin,” said the sky-ship’s commanding spirit, a bit of bottled magic the lady called a “veeye.” “Captain Hasegawa is currently in the shower and will meet you in the workshop. Please follow the blue line, thank you.” Luwin smiled internally; politeness never hurt, especially when coming from a thing like the veeeye.

The old maester made his way to the workshop and looked around the chamber with mild puzzlement. Bits and bobs of strange devices littered the long tables, centered around a trio of small metal balls and what appeared to be a thoroughly dissected suit of armor. Luwin stepped forward and took a closer look at the armor; it was composed of a material that was hard to the touch and yet unlike any stone, metal or glass he had ever seen. He noted that the entire assembly had been painted a brilliant white with red accents at one point, though time and rough handling had dulled and worn the finish considerably.

“Maester Luwin,” the ship’s captain broke through his examinations. “Ship said you’d come in. Welcome to the workshop.”

“Good morrow, Lady Jade,” Luwin said with a nod. “I trust your evening was productive? Lord Eddard was concerned when you didn’t appear for breakfast this morning.”

Lady Jade looked a little rueful. “Story of my life, really,” she said wryly. “Get an idea and all of a sudden it’s dawn and you’ve got a bench full of stuff just lying about and no idea how it got there.”

Luwin chuckled. “Oh aye, indeed, ’tis the lot of young maesters everywhere.” He gestured towards the tables. “I was admiring this suit of plate you had pulled apart. It’s quite interesting make. Your father’s, is it?”

The Ulthosi woman shook her head. “No, it’s mine. One of mine anyway. And it’s not armor, leastways it’s not armor as you’d understand the idea.”

Luwin blinked. The thought that Lady Jade would carry armor for her own use had not once crossed his mind, armor was meant for fighters, knights and sellswords and Jade Hasegawa was clearly none
of those. Hers ways are not our ways, remember that. Keep your senses sharp and your mind open, Luwin. “Ah, forgive me,” he said. “I had not thought you would carry armor. But… you said not armor as I would understand?”

The lady had at least pretended not to notice his lapse. “Mm,” she replied. “It’ll probably stop an arrow or a blade, but the suit’s designed to protect the wearer from the world outside.” Jade tapped the full helm. “When sealed up, the suit will keep you alive where the air’s too thin or too bad to breathe, it’ll protect against intense heat and deep cold. You could even take a nap at the bottom of a lake in this thing and not drown.”

Luwin looked at the helmet. On closer inspection, what he’d taken for a normal eyeslit was in fact covered by small panes of clear glass, and the neck piece seemed to have attachments where it could fit snugly into the collar. “Fascinating,” he breathed. “And you wear this into places where such protection is needed?”

“When I have to… which is to say a lot of the time. Rangers don’t get the easy, clean jobs.”

“Well, you’ve impressed me Lady Jade,” the maester said. “Though I confess I don’t understand why you’ve torn this one apart. Surely armor like this is more valuable intact?”

The sorceress shrugged. “I have spare suits, which is why I dismantled this one. Suits like this all contain particular devices that I can use for other purposes. Like these,” she gestured to the metal balls sitting next to the suit. “These are, um, let’s call them familiars for lack of a better word. I can control them, and they’re linked to the ship’s library and a few other things. They can provide me with some extra hands when I’m out and about.” She whistled sharply and the three balls quivered. Luwin stepped back as the balls rose from the table and wobbled uncertainly towards her.

The old maester gaped and Jade smiled as the familiars settled into position before her, forming a triangle in the air. “Excellent,” she said. “Okay gang, display systems diagnostic.” The familiars chirped and panes of light sprang into being. Luwin could clearly see letters and figures displayed in the panes, but they changed too quickly for him to read, dancing across the open air like flickering flames. The sorceress hummed thoughtfully as she examined each pane in turn. “Looks good,” she said finally. “Okay then… Yakko: watch mode. Wakko: perimeter map of the castle, avoid detection. Dot: recognize Maester Luwin and watch mode, twelve hours.”

The topmost familiar bobbed and flew slowly out of the workshop. The one to Luwin’s left drifted closer to Jade, stopping at a point just slightly in front of the sorceress and to the left—a position fit for a sworn shield—while the familiar to his right did much the same thing in front of him. “This is… unexpected, my lady,” Luwin noted, examining the familiar more closely now that it was right off his nose.

“It’s a test, of sorts,” Jade said. “I want to make sure the units can recognize certain people and stick to orders. It knows who you are by sight, so that’s a good sign, and it should stick to you until a little after sunset. I think, anyway, I’m still not certain about the length of day at this latitude.” She shook her head. “But yeah, if this works out you’ll have limited access to the familiars and they’ll be all over the place looking at stuff when I’m busy. It’ll be easier to contact me through them than to go banging on the door.”

Luwin could see how the familiars were made with overlapping sections instead of perfectly solid spheres. The familiar in front of him bobbed gently in the air, gleaming silver in the diffuse light. “Indeed, that would be most useful should it be needed,” he said absently. A flash of brass amidst the silver caught his eye. Reaching out, he gently touched the familiar and gave it a quarter-turn. In one
of the plates he saw a feather wreathed in flames etched in brass on the bare steel. “A maker’s mark?” he asked.

Jade looked a little sheepish. “Something like,” she explained. “I was thinking about how Westerosi are all about sigils, so I thought I’d make one up for myself. It’s a phoenix feather, a legendary bird from my homeland. Seemed appropriate, or at least it did in my head.”

Luwin nodded. “Most sigils start out as no less, my lady. And what’s this besides the feather?” He pointed at a small squiggle near the tip of the quill, something many would likely dismiss as a mistake but the old maester picked out clearly as writing of some kind. Jade chuckled slightly.

“No that’s a maker’s mark,” she said. “My family on my mother’s side has signed our work with that for I don’t know how long. It’s a word from mother’s language: hane. It means ‘feather.’” The sheepishness returned to her expression. “Probably where I got the idea for the sigil, in fact.”

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 18**

Somewhere between my last entry and this one the day changed over when I wasn’t looking. Time flies when you’re having fun!

I’ve come up with a couple little bits of wearable magic that I can keep on or near me whenever I’m not in the ship. First off, I built a set of basic assistant drones using the suit’s boot repulsors, part of the secondary tractor-pressor rig, a set of spare survey sensors, the tertiary hologram projector system and a couple simple aluminum shells I fabbed up. The results are three nice and compact drones about the size of a baseball capable of recording data, playing it back and holding small stuff if I need them. The best part is they’re easy & cheap to fab given my limited feedstock, so if I need more I can just load the template into the autofac and boom, drone rush.

I also ripped out the suit’s power cells, the deflector rig and one of the hand repulsors. The cells and the deflector are going into a very stylish belt/waistcoat combo that will provide me with a nice, invisible shield against the slings and arrows of outraged locals. I haven’t tested it yet, but I think the deflector will block all but the hardest sword blows straight out and at least slow arrows down so they won’t get through my clothes; that’s going to require some testing before I trust it 100% I think. The hand repulsor I’ve rebuilt into a blaster weapon with some good hard kickback to it. Ought to knock a man in full armor on his ass, assuming I can hit him, and at higher levels it might even be able to punch through plate armor though that’s what the proper blasters are for. When it’s not running I can collapse the gauntlet down into a nice, unassuming bracelet.

Variable-yield and concealment, what more could a witch ask for?

And of course I have the blasters. I pulled my favorite blaster pistol, good ol’ Mr. Zappy, out of the locker and I’ve taken to wearing it in a hip holster when I’m outside the ship. It’s been awhile since I’ve had to walk around armed, but it’s like riding a scooter. Nobody’s commented on my accessory yet—I suspect none of them actually know what it means, and I’m happy to keep them in the dark until I need to pull Mr. Zappy. But I can now say that barring pulling one of the point-defense lasers out of the ship and carrying it around like a video game character I am pretty much capable of handling whatever feudal military nonsense this planet can throw at me.
A GATHERING OF FLAMES

Volantis. An ancient city wrapped in the humid heat of its own decay. The red priestess had never been fond of the city—too many memories, all of them unpleasant, wrapped up in the eldest of the Daughters—but found herself there regardless. The greatest temple to the Lord of Light in all of Essos stood in Volantis, and Melisandre had business to conduct with the red priests and her god. She spoke to her brothers and sisters in the faith, gazed into the temple’s great hearthfires and received R’llor’s wisdom as he saw fit to give.

Not long after her last communion, one of the red priests sought her out in the temple’s itinerant quarters. Unlike many of R’hllor’s followers in this city, most of whom had the coloration of Valyria to some extent, Moqorro was tall and dark as pitch, an effect only highlighted by the orange flame marks on his face.

“Sister,” he said. Melisandre inclined her head in greeting and welcome.

“Brother Moqorro, be welcome in my chambers.” She stepped aside and allowed the red priest into her room. “How may I be of aid to you this day?”

“The Lord of Light bid me seek you out, sister. He has shown me some of your designs.” The red priestess’s heart soared; perhaps now, finally, she could persuade the high priest to sanction her quest.

“You have seen him then, brother?” she said eagerly. “Azor Ahai, born amidst smoke and salt as the darkness looms and the Great Other stirs?” Moqorro held up his hand placatingly.

“I have not yet seen Azor Ahai, sister,” he replied. “But I have seen you seeking him far from Volantis, in salt, smoke and darkness, and I have seen things come to ruin because of that. I have also heard the decree of the High Priest, that Azor Ahai will come to us when the moment for his return is right.”

“Does our Lord hold Benerro so high in his counsels,” Melisandre sniffed, “or is it he wishes not to disrupt his own power? My visions are clear, brother: the Lord wishes me to go west, to the sunset kingdoms, and seek for Azor Ahai.”

“Aye, I don’t doubt that one jot,” Moqorro replied. He stepped closer to the fire burning in the priestess’s chamber. “But that’s not all the Lord has shown you in the sunset lands, is it?” Melisandre thought to deny, to protest, but hesitated and he pressed on. “Azor Ahai’s time draws near, this much we know true, but things are changing beyond old prophecies and R’hllor points us where we must be. What else did he show you, sister? What did you see?”

“I saw...” Melisandre licked her lips, recalling the strangest of her visions. “I saw a tower of blue and gold wrapped in ice, at the very end of the earth, and eyes like stars lit with the purest hatred staring out from a window at the tower’s peak.”

Moqorro nodded, as if he had expected that. “I saw those eyes, along with a tall twisted thing with
one black eye and ten long arms trailing blood and shadows behind it. Then the Lord showed me something else, a great bird made of white and red fire landing in a forest, a wreath of stars melting away ice, and ships the size of palaces floating in Slaver’s Bay.”

“I saw no bird, but a falling star that touched earth and became a woman with stars in her hair and eyes like wildfire. I saw her call the stars down upon a field of ice and laughing as she did.” Melisandre shook her head. “Azor Ahai was beside her, beyond that I cannot say. The visions were... stranger than I am used to. I saw a city of adamant and black glass in a place like the red waste, but no such city exists in the wastes.” She frowned. “Turnips were involved as well, though why I know not.”

“Some mysteries R’hlhor does not see fit to clarify for us,” Moqorro said sagely, with half a smile. Melisandre scowled at the patronization.

“And yet we see the same things, or near enough,” she said. “The Great Other and his agents are moving, and Benerro expects us to stand still while the enemy advances? No, brother! We cannot be complicit in this! I must go to the sunset kingdoms, seek out Azor Ahai and bring him to his destiny. R’hlhor has shown me this in the flames and I must do his bidding.”

The red priest’s hand found itself to her shoulder. “In that we are in agreement, sister Melisandre,” he said. Melisandre’s eyes widened in surprise. “R’hlhor has shown your path to Benerro as well, and he sent me to help you start your journey. The High Priest would have you seek out this fiery bird, your starry-haired woman, and learn her place in the fate of the world. She is connected to the coming war, I believe as an ally, but we know not in truth. And if you were to... stumble upon Azor Ahai in your quest,” he continued on blithely, “then Benerro would not be upset if you provided aid to him as well. But the red bird must come first, sister. We may trust our Lord to keep Azor Ahai safe until the promised time.”

The red priestess’s mind swirled like the hearthfire with possibilities. It was not the official sanction she craved from the High Priest, not quite, but the prospect of having aid from the temple was very tempting indeed. Though mayhaps there’s a catch. “And you, brother?” she asked. “Will you be joining me on this quest?”

Moqorro shook his head. “Nay, my journey leads me only as far west as Pentos, not the sunset lands. Not yet. Our roads are long and difficult, but they may join again if the Lord wills it. And we must now move quickly sister. As you say, the enemy stirs and the time for action is now.”

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 24**

Status report on the subspace radio: things are considerably more broken than I anticipated. Everything *looked* intact when I first broke it down, but previous attempts to get the transmitter working failed across the board. Microscopic inspection of the components revealed microfractures in the circuitry. Looks like a combination of crash damage and cumulative end-of-life damage; the thing was pretty old after all, and since it wasn’t in heavy use it wasn’t a priority when *Victory* was in for refits.

There’s a certain dark irony there.

All the damaged components have gone into the recycler, and I’ve got the autofac working on building replacements to spec. A *painstaking* inspection of the subspace antenna coil over the last two days revealed no faults, which is good because replacing that would be three or four bitches in a
row. It’ll take a week, maybe a little longer, for the autofac to churn through and rebuild all the components. Then it’s inspection, reassembly, fix anything I missed on the first pass, switch it on and pray.

For now though, I have between seven and ten days of enforced downtime while the autofac works. This seems like a good time to catch up on some research.

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**SANSA**

If Sansa was being truthful to herself, seeking out Mistress Hasegawa—*such a funny name!*—was an impulse she kept trying to suppress. The mysterious woman from Ulthos fascinated her utterly. Not like she fascinated her bastard half-brother, who tended to stare like a dazed deer whenever the sorceress was near enough, always provoking a scowl from Arya and some mildly amused titters from Sansa and her friends. Rather, it was the way Mistress Jade comported herself that had Sansa’s attention. The woman clearly knew nothing of courtly manners or dress and yet she held herself with almost lordly composure and politeness. The blending of rough and smooth was strange and alien to both north and south, and Sansa watched and tried to understand how Mistress Jade made it work.

She didn’t *mean* to seek out the sorceress, it just happened. She and her wolf pup were only crossing the courtyard near the broken tower when they came across Mistress Jade crouched near one of the old fallen blocks. According to Old Nan, when the tower burned and crumbled only the blocks in the way of wagons were moved, the rest were left where they fell. The sorceress seemed to be concentrating intently on the stone, a tiny broom in her hand. Lady barked once in recognition, ignoring Sansa’s attempt to sush her.

The Ulthosi looked up from her examinations and blinked. “Oh! Hello there, you two.” she said. Her hands were covered in dust and shredded mosses, and she looked supremely pleased with herself. One of her familiars, the funny metal balls, hovered above her shoulder and made a chiming sound Sansa presumed was a greeting.

“Good day, Mistress Jade,” Sansa said politely. “What are you doing today?”

“Hm? Oh, you mean with the stone? Just poking at it, trying to figure out its mysteries.”

“What sort of mystery is there in a fallen stone?” Sansa asked. The sorceress’s eyes gleamed behind the Myrish glass and she smiled. Sansa’s heart sank; she recognized the smile as the same one Maester Luwin or Septa Mordane would get before they launched into one of their more impenetrable lessons.

“Oh, there’s all sorts of mysteries about any stone you’d care to name,” Mistress Jade said happily. “Where it came from, how old it is, what it was before it was stone... but *this* stone in particular is helping with a totally different mystery.” She paused. “You remember your lessons, right? What do they say about how Winterfell was made?”

Sansa recalled everything she’d learned from Luwin, Mordane, and especially Old Nan, about the building of Winterfell. “They say Brandon the Builder made Winterfell with the help of giants,” she recited dutifully. “And that he wove spells into the stone so the walls would never fall.”

“Mm, yes, that’s right, full marks. That’s what all the legends I’ve read so far say,” Jade replied. “But then you look around Winterfell, and you know what you don’t see? Spells!” Sansa blinked and looked up. The walls of Winterfell loomed all about them, grey and featureless. “If Brandon put
magic on the walls, and I don’t doubt he did, where are the spells? There’s all sorts of carvings inside the halls and whatnot, but the outer walls and the towers are bare. So where’s the spellwork?”

Sansa caught herself nodding along. It did make sense, from a certain point of view, but she could think of another explanation for that. “Mayhaps the maesters are right,” she ventured, “and the stories about the Builder are just stories?” It would be a terrible shame if that were true, the stories of Winterfell’s founding were some of her favorites as a child.

“Maybe,” Mistress Jade conceded. “But—all due respect to Luwin and his peers—I’ll bet a two hundred fifty meter tall wall made of ice against the maesters being right about this. But that just brings us back to the question, doesn’t it? If the spells aren’t carved on the wall, then where are they?”

Sansa thought about it. Where would you put a spell on a wall? If no one need see the spell, then mayhap it’s hidden? But what part of a wall is hidden? “Perhaps,” she ventured carefully, “perhaps they’re buried in the foundations?”

Jade’s eyes widened. “Oooh, that’s a good idea,” she said. “There might be some there, too. I’d go digging but I suspect your father wouldn’t be pleased.” Sansa considered the idea of the sorceress running about digging up the castle’s foundations, then considered the possibility of her siblings—Robb, Jon, Bran, Rickon and gods forbid Arya—following suit. “In lieu of that I’ve found something else. Come take a look.” She beckoned and Sansa followed, Lady close behind. The stone had lain where it fell since the days of her great-grandfather, but the sorceress had cleaned off all the dirt and moss that naturally covered it, leaving it fresh and clean as if it had been fresh-carved from the earth.

She could see faint etch marks in the face, almost like... “Are those runes?” she asked.

“They are indeed,” Mistress Jade said. “I’ll bet every single stone in Winterfell is carved like this. All the stones are laid with the rune faces touching, then a thin crust of mortar keeps the weather out. Protected like that, the spells would last for a hundred thousand years... or until somebody invents artillery and brings down the entire wall but, you know, can’t predict that sort of thing.”

Sansa reached out and traced the thin lines with her fingertips. In her mind’s eye she could see Brandon the Builder carving every stone just right, the giants lifting them gently into position and placing them down just so. “Can you read them?” she asked softly.

Jade beamed. “That’s the next step,” she said. “Wakko, scan and clarify.” The familiar made another chiming sound and a beam of blue light shot forth, running back and forth across the stone. The familiar chimed again and a pane of ghostly light appeared before them, showing the runes strong and clear as day.

“I know a few of these,” the sorceress said. “And the maesters know more, so I think we might be able to work out a good translation pretty quickly.”

Sansa shook her head. “I don’t know anything about the runes of the First Men,” she said. “Maester Luwin only teaches us the things we need to know like our letters and numbers.”

“To be fair Wakko’s going to do the heavy lifting here,” Jade admitted. “But you’re young and bright, and if you’re interested in this sort of thing don’t let what you need to know get in the way of that. Besides,” she added with a smile, “everybody needs at least one weird hobby, helps keep us interesting.” Sansa laughed. “Right then, Wakko, run translation matrix alpha.”
The familiar chimed a third time, a jumble of words appeared under the runes and in moments the jumble cleared revealing the nature of the Builder’s spell:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{PERSONAL POSSESSIVE: MY} \quad \text{WARMTH} \\
&\text{FUTURE TENSE, NEGATIVE MODIFIER: WILL NOT/WILL NEVER} \quad \text{FAIL AGAINST} \\
&\text{DEFINITIVE, PROPER NOUN MARK: THE} \\
&\text{TRANSLATION IN DISPUTE} \\
&\text{POSSESSIVE MARK: 'S} \quad \text{COLD}
\end{align*}
\]

“‘My warmth will never fail against the... something’s cold.’” Jade read aloud. “Well, as spells go it beats ‘cursed be he who disturbs my bones’ but it’s still lacking something.”

“Translation in dispute?” Sansa asked, confused. “What does that mean?”

The sorceress hummed tunelessly at the words. “Means that my records say one thing and the maester’s say another. Interesting, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, very,” Sansa agreed. “But what does it mean? The rune, I mean?”

“Easy enough to ask and find out. Wakko, show us the conflicting definitions.” The familiar chimed agreeably and the translated spell vanished, replaced by the disputed rune and words beneath it.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{CITADEL (STANDARD): WINTER} \\
&\text{NIGHT’S WATCH (ALTERNATE): OTHERS} \\
&\text{TANIS ARCHIVE: UNBIDDEN}
\end{align*}
\]

They both stared at the ghostly image a long moment. “Well,” Mistress Jade said, “that actually makes sense. The castle was built as a fortress against the Others, right? You’d want spells to keep them out built into the walls.” But Sansa’s attention was focused on the last word in the list.

“Unbidden,” she said, trying the word out on her tongue. It felt odd, strangely alien but not in the pleasant, cheerful way the Ulthosi magics sometimes felt. Was that what the Others were called in Ulthos? Did the Others actually travel so far as Ulthos in the days of legend? The very thought was enough to make Sansa shiver in a sudden chill.

\begin{center}
\underline{LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 25}
\end{center}

The word of the day is “unbidden.” Without the ansible I don’t have access to the entire Tanis archive, just the Map and a basic translation matrix. Said matrix now updated with the information I’ve gotten from the maesters, which is a godsend but still not wholly complete. I only have a minimal idea of what “unbidden” meant to the Builders, mostly based off how the Westerosi First Men used the glyph to name a race of legendary ice demons.

I’m not really expecting cuddly teddy bears at the end of that rainbow.
A search of the Map shows me a couple things. First, the glyph for “unbidden” isn’t on the entry for Planetos, so somewhere between when the Map was made and when the First Men learned the Builder glyphs “unbidden” weren’t a target priority for this world. Second, the glyph shows up once on the Map, in a system we haven’t charted yet, so no good leads there.

More data. I need more data if I’m going to make sense of this.

Chapter End Notes

6/20/16: An illustration of Jade and Sansa looking at the fallen tower block, commissioned from Mary Carman who, it turns out, googled the story while working on the piece & is now following along. Hi!

10/2/16: Another illustration of the scene (because why not), commissioned from Fictograph at Nan Desu Kan 20.
The One Where Jade Talks To A Tree

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 27

Still waiting on the autofac for the radio repairs. The transmitter housing is sitting there, empty, mocking me. I can hear it crooning, “I’m not fixed yet Jadey, why don't you fix me? Fiiiiiiiiix meeeeee!” So, to keep me from beating the housing to death with a machete or spend the rest of the week screaming at the autofac to make it go faster, I'm distracting myself with further research into the history of Planetos and how/where the Builders come into it.

Luwin's library (technically the Stark family library but let's not quibble, we all know who it really belongs to) has been very helpful in this regard. The information he has on the world outside Westeros is sketchy, naturally, but it helps confirm a few things. For one, the level of parallelism that's been nagging at me ever since I got here drops off the further into Essos you go. There seems to be China-equivalent called Yi Ti at the eastern edge of the map which I suspect might be a parallel to Westeros but everything in between is much less convergent. I can't say that I'm unhappy to know that Planetos isn't completely a managed copy of medieval Earth societies, but the fact that Westeros is just makes it that much more confusing.

So what makes Westeros so special?

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 27.1

Still putting the pieces together re: Westeros and its special snowflake status. The more I look at the compiled records and my own observations, the more it looks like the answer is in the weirwood trees. The weirwoods—or at least the trees with faces—all seem to be part of a forest that at one point covered all of Westeros and maybe parts of Essos. The trees apparently last forever: the wood is incredibly durable, cuttings don't seem to rot, they'll burn but it takes more effort to set one on fire than most other trees. They're sacred to the First Men, and they learned the rites from the Children of the Forest. In fact, according to the oral history the Children made peace once the First Men adopted their gods.

I double taked when I first read that, because it's very different from how it usually goes.

See, normally when a conquering population comes into an area and displaces the locals, the conquerors don't adopt the indigene culture. Using a Westerosi example, take the Andals: when they came across the ocean and displaced the First Men as rulers of Westeros they displaced the previous culture almost entirely in most of the continent. Sometimes a fusion will develop: Rome was famous for co-opting local religions into their own as a control measure. Or again using a Westerosi example, the Rhoynar, Andal and First Men cultures seem to have developed a creole down in Dorne. Oftentimes the conquerors will keep their own ways while paying lip service to the locals as need be. The British did that during their colonial phase, and the Targaryens apparently did it here until the uppermost nobility went native.

But not the First Men. They arrived in Westeros thousands of years ago and displaced the Children of the Forest to the point where they aren't even an ethnicity anymore, just a legend. But so far as the maesters know there doesn’t seem to be a pre-migration First Man religion. They arrived here, won the war against the Children and then just dropped whatever the previous faith was and started worshiping the Old Gods just like the Children.
Why would they do that?

The only connective tissue I can find are the weirwoods. They're psionically active and they're clearly alien in a way that most Westerosi life isn't. Figure out the weirwoods and that's another piece of the puzzle snapped into place.

ARYA

The mighty huntress prowled through the godswood, her loyal packmate by her side. They crept through the trees avoiding the sight of the huntress’s natural enemy, the dreaded Mordane beast, which sought them out to cage the huntress and force her into the unbearable tortures: the Needlework, the Comportment Lessons and the dreaded Gossip. Escape was needed, huntress and direwolf evaded pursuit and found refuge in the comforting shade of the godswood.

She spotted the sorceress from the trees, the woman in her funny green doublet and black hose pacing to and fro before the heart tree. Nymeria whined a little as Arya’s steps slowed, keeping to the dappled shadows. What is she up to? Arya wondered with no little irritation; the Ulthosi had been a strange and not-entirely-welcome addition to the household for the last moon turn. She couldn’t hate the woman—not least of which because she’d brought Nymeria along with all her magics—but that didn’t mean she had to like her, and she misliked the sorceress’s effect on her parents and siblings even more.

“I’m kind of running out of options here buddy,” Mistress Jade said, apparently to the heart tree. “I mean, all of this has to be engineered somehow. The magic, the climate, the Children, the Others… you. It’s not a coincidence that this place was on the map. The builders were involved with this place, and they expected us to find it. They had to have, right? But I’m missing a piece.”

What is she talking about? Does she mean Brandon the Builder? Intrigued, Arya crept a little closer. The sorceress had stopped pacing and was talking directly to the face carved into the weirwood in a friendly tone. “I assume they built you,” she said to the tree. “If only because I don’t have any better theories. A continent with magic trees all over it isn’t really their style, but it’s not outside the realm of possibility. But you’re here first, and then the Children are here and then the First Men supplant the Children and then there’s that big mess with the Others then the Andals and the Rhoynar and the Valyrians all come here one after the other and you’re still here.”

Mistress Jade’s friendly voice slipped into a frustrated noise. “What does ‘unbidden’ mean when it’s at home? Why did the First Men conflate it with the Others?” The tree remained stubbornly silent. “Everything’s coming back to you and the other trees; you’re all connected to each other and to the rest of this mess but I don’t know how!” the sorceress threw her hands up in exasperation. “There’s a piece missing, but I don’t know what it is or even what it looks like! The least you could do is throw me a fucking bone here, man!”

Arya snuck a little closer as the sorceress ranted to the weirwood, trusting the shadows to keep her out of sight until Jade said, without turning, “You know, if you’re really curious you can come on out.” Arya blinked and, somewhat shamefaced, stepped into the light. Nymeria bounded happily past her mistress to accept a scratch behind the ear from the Ulthosi. Traitor.

Green eyes flicked towards her for a moment. “Huh,” Jade said. “I expected one of the boys to be with you.” Arya scowled. Of course you did!

“Of course you did!” she snapped. The sorceress blinked, and Arya realized her mistake.
“Wow, hostile,” Mistress Jade said lightly. Arya could feel her face growing hot. “So what’d I do to earn that?”

Just like that, her embarrassment switched back to anger. “You’re trying to take my brother away!” she replied hotly. “He’s already in love with you and he’ll marry you and go away and I’ll never see him again and it’s all your fault for falling out of the sky!”

“You mean you think—?” Mistress Jade looked genuinely surprised, then laughed. “Oh, kid, no. C’mere for a second.” Arya folded her arms and gave her the best impression of Septa Mordane’s unhappy look. “C’mon, I’m not going to bite you, and even if I tried Nymphadora would bite me for it.”

“Her name’s Nymeria,” Arya huffed.

“Even so, she likes you more than me.” She remained silent, and finally the sorceress sighed. “Arya, I’m not going to steal your brother away in the night, I’ll swear that on whatever you want me to swear it on. Even if I was inclined, he’s still just a boy, and I prefer actual adults.”

“But… you’re not that much older than Jon, aren’t you?” Arya asked, confused. The sorceress looked not much older than some of the servants, certainly younger than her lady mother. That alone explained why Jon—and Robb, if she was going to be honest—gave her funny looks when they thought nobody was paying attention.

The sorceress looked a little confused, then let out a sharp bark of laughter. “You know what,” she chuckled, “just for that I’ll tell you a secret.”

Arya quailed a little inside. “What kind of secret?” she asked. Is she going to tell me my future, like a witch in the stories? I don’t know if I want to know my future!

The sorceress’s smile was quick and a little wry. “I’ll tell you something about myself that nobody else will know except you. Well,” she amended, “your parents and Luwin might’ve figured it out, but they haven’t said anything about it. This’ll be just between you and me and Nym, not Sansa and especially not Jon and Robb, okay?”

Arya nodded once, sharply. Mistress Jade leaned in and whispered the secret into her ear. Arya’s eyes widened. What? “You mean you’re—?”

Jade nodded. “I am.”

“And you aren’t—?”

“Haven’t been for a long time now.”

The little wolf’s astonishment faded and her scowl redoubled. She aimed a savage kick at the sorceress’s shin, who took the blow with a yelp. “What was that for?” she said, rubbing at her leg.

“That was for being mean to Jon!” Arya said.

“I’m not, I mean I wasn’t… oh hell.” Jade dropped to the soft ground. “Honestly, I don’t mean to string him along or anything. I just figured he’ll grow out of it, you know? He’ll figure out what he wants to do with his life, and I’ll be gone in a few months and that’d be it.”
“Then why don’t you say something?” Arya demanded. That the sorceress had been toying with her half-brother by accident seemed to make it even worse.

Jade shrugged helplessly. “It’s a secret,” she replied. “People underestimate me if they don’t know, especially here because I’m a woman. I can use that to my advantage and I need all the advantages I can get.”

“Oh.” Arya said. She understood it, a little anyway. She knew what it felt like, wanting to do the same things her brothers got to do and not getting to do them because Mother and Septa Mordane forbade her. “You should still tell Jon,” she grumbled.

The sorceress sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. As soon as I can figure out how to get him alone and tell without his brother or the lanky idiot finding out, I’ll tell him, okay?”

“Okay.” The three of them sat there before the heart tree for a while saying nothing, Nymeria rolling her head between Arya and the sorceress for petting, until Arya’s curiosity finally overrode her grudge and she asked the question she’d meant to ask. “What were you doing before? Were you talking to the old gods?”

“Not really… well, maybe,” Jade answered. “I was talking to myself a little, and I don’t know if any gods old or new were listening. I was mainly talking to the tree.” Arya supposed that made a little sense, if you stood on your head and squinted a little.

“Why?”

“I’ve got questions, and the tree has the answers. It’s got a mouth, maybe it would’ve said something.” Arya stared and the sorceress rubbed the back of her head. “That… sounded better in my head than out loud, yeah. Fair cop. But still, there’s so much that’s strange about Westeros I’m trying to get my head around, and it’s all tied up in things that Luwin and Mordane don’t want to talk about, you follow?”

“I… guess?”

“It’s okay if you don’t. I guess I’m just… hell. I’m a long way from home and stuck in the middle of a whole bunch of mysteries, and I can’t abide mysteries. Like that stupid thing.”

“The heart tree isn’t stupid,” Arya retorted.

“I suppose it isn’t, but it’s… hang on, you feel that?” The sorceress climbed to her feet and stared at the heart tree. Arya didn’t feel any different than a moment before, maybe a bit warmer now that she’d been sitting in the sun rather than shade.

“Feel what?”

“There’s something here,” Jade said slowly, reaching out towards the white bark. “I think… it might be waking up? I’d swear there’s something watching—” her fingertips brushed against the tree.

Hello? Is this thing on?

–OUTLANDERWELCOME–
“Jesus fuck me!” Jade yelped, snatching her hand back. She stumbled backwards, almost tripping over Arya before landing in a graceless heap at her feet. Jade looked at the girl, eyes wide with shock. “Holy shit! Woof! Did you hear that?”

Arya stared back. “I didn’t hear anything, you just touched the heart tree and yelled,” she said.

“I, that was, I mean holy shit.” Jade shook her head to clear it. “Okay, new rule: no touching the heart tree.” She wagged a finger in the tree’s general direction. “But don’t think this is over, my son. Oh no, I’ll science your secrets out, I will.”

The only reply was the croaking of ravens. Lord Stark’s youngest daughter stared at her as if she’d gone mad. Perhaps she had, but then who would know?

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 29

So, the tree talks. Probably should’ve been expecting that. I knew the damn things felt like some kind of network node, I just thought it was like all the other Builder artifacts we’ve run across and it was offline or on standby. Touching the heart tree in Winterfell’s sacred grove today proves that it’s not just live, it’s thinking. There’s another intelligence already connected to that network. Or maybe the network itself is intelligent? Too many variables, not enough data for a conclusion yet.

The upside is, it didn’t seem to be hostile. It didn’t have much in the way of volume control, almost blew my brain out the back of my head when it started talking, but I didn’t feel any malice about that. It might’ve been a hardware compatibility thing, just a guess really but lacking any better hypothesis I’m going to stick with it for now. So the next step in figuring out what the fuckis going on with this planet is to put together a tree-to-Jade translator, or even just a signal modulator so I don’t fry my brains the next time I try to make contact.

I wonder... I need to get a sample of weirwood and some lab gear.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 30

Went looking for something to use in a tree translator, managed to scavenge a stray weirwood twig wedged up in Victory’s bow, probably clipped it off of that tree we nearly hit coming down. Ran the twig through my horribly inadequate bioscience suite and yes, Virginia, weirwood shows up with half a dozen different markers for Builder tech. Judging from my own experience with the stuff, I’d say weirwood’s been engineered to act as a kind of psionic transmitter using some sort of nanocell midichlorian bullshit. The tree’s genetics also look like they’ve been tweaked a little to support it, too, no surprise there.

The twig itself seems to be inert, or at least the nanocells aren’t responding to any of my prodding. I think that might be a safety interlock: the cells need to be part of a living tree in order to be active. Which I think makes sense--if you’re a Builder you don’t want the psionic bonsai garden to accidentally go rogue and infect the ecosystem, right? But this isn’t my field at all, I’m just going by what reference books I have in the computer and guesswork. If Starfleet was here… I’d be on my way home with a hell of a story and a mojito in hand and let the qualified bioengineers and Contact Service do all the work. Yeah, that sounds nice…

Anyway. I think I can work with this. The twig doesn’t work but I think I can use the nanocells as a resonator, sort of like an old crystal radio. If I can get some readings from the tree, figure out the right psionic frequency, I might be able to build something to make the twig transmit and recieve on that
wavelength, then use what’s left of the ansible’s control interface to filter that transmission into something I can understand. It’d be a tricky bit of work, probably a couple weeks’ worth of effort minimum, and right now my priorities have to be elsewhere.

Just throw it on the ever-expanding list of things I need to get done, I guess.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 31

I’ve shelved the heart tree translator for the moment. Still thinking about it, but the radio has priority and it’s not like I don’t have plenty of time for other projects once it’s done. I’ve also been thinking a lot about the Builders.

What do we know, really, about them?

That’s the question that keeps the big brains up at night. Aunt Deidre’s devoted her life to figuring out the mystery aliens, and there’s still so much we don’t know about them. There are three things we do know for certain, though:

First, they liked megastructures. There’s the wormhole generators at Yggdrasil, Arda, Arcadia and Coyote, the planetary shield array at Overdrive, all sorts of weird structures and platforms found all over the place. The Builders liked to build big.

Second, their technology is stupidly advanced but it’s remarkably similar to ours. Even the technology that uses exotics like psionics or antimatter is still rooted in the same basic principles of subspace and quantum gravity manipulation we use. It’s only (“only,” she says) on a bigger scale and more elegant implementation. Every time we learn how the Builders did something, our understanding and tech base increases exponentially. It’s why I’m here, why Rangers get carte blanche on treasure hunting: every scrap of data, every trinket we bring back brings us that little bit closer to mastering Builder tech.

Last and certainly not least, they left clues. They had no good reason to leave behind a near-indestructible stellar archive like the Tanis Map behind, much less enough information for us to piece together a language that has to be nearly thirty thousand years dead. But they did. They wanted somebody not just to find their remains but to follow in their footsteps.

Naturally, everybody’s got a theory: it’s a gift, it’s a trap, it’s a warning, a message in a bottle for future generations, a floor wax, a dessert topping… you get the idea. I honestly never really thought all that much about why. I figured that the only way we’d ever know why was if we ever found a Builder and just asked her, and they’ve been gone too long for that to be a viable option.

Right now I’m reconsidering that. The weirwood trees are the first Builder system—or at least the first artifacts using Builder technology—we’ve found that isn’t just a dumb terminal working off an eons-old program. The trees are intelligent, maybe even sophont. Whatever’s there, it wants to talk, it needs to talk. The humans on this planet seem to have been placed here and their society groomed for a specific purpose. The heart trees are (ha) at the heart of it all. They’re a key piece of the puzzle.

Because there is an answer to all of these questions, I just need to find it.

Tomorrow. Or the next day. I’m going to need all the help I can get to figure this out, which means the radio comes first. The autofac should be done fabbing replacements tomorrow. Time to get to work in earnest.
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 41

According to my estimate, sometime yesterday Starfleet will have listed Carefree Victory, and by extension me, as officially overdue. I'd say that sometime around three this morning Westeros time an officer—hopefully a Ranger or a redshirt or even an active-duty Fleet guy and not some Admiralty cubera—gave my family the news. I've had to do that before, tell a fellow Ranger's family that they're missing and likely not coming back. It's the single hardest thing I've ever had to do, worse than when I was seven and I had to explain to my father why I had to break that bully's nose because he kept calling me a stupid ruster.

And now it's happening to me.

“I'm sorry, Ms. Hasegawa, but your daughter disappeared over the edge of explored space and probably fell into a black hole. We'd promise to bring her back but the chances of ever finding her body, much less finding her alive, are so astronomical that it's pretty much impossible.”

I don't want to think about that. I can't think about that.

I was up most of last night on top of Victory, howling at the moon. Of course Moro and the pups joined in, because hey, good clean fun for the entire family right? Stark was decidedly unhappy with me this morning, but a) at this point I don't really care and b) I managed to convince him it was a magic thing and it wouldn't happen again anytime soon.

I hope, anyway.

Today. One way or another, I'll find out today.

JON

Ice. As far as he could see, the world was covered in flat ice. The only light came from the moon, silver light glinting dully against the landscape. The wind blew hard, almost hard enough to knock a man flat on his arse and cold enough to freeze him body and soul. Over the roar of the wind he could hear a keen moaning, the sound of hundreds, mayhaps thousands of wolves all howling at once, somewhere far away and yet right in his ear. He tried to move, to go somewhere but the wind kept him pinned to the spot and there was no landmark to aim for anyway. The wind got colder and colder and the howling grew so loud his ears were like to burst—

Jon Snow fell out of bed with a unceremonious thump. He sat up, blinking as the first light of dawn burned off the remaining scraps of dream and his direwolf tried to get his attention. “The hell was that all about?” he asked no one in particular. Ghost just nudged him again. “Alright, alright I'm up boy. I'm up. What was that all about last night?” The direwolf just looked at him. Jon sighed. “Fine. Let's go get something to eat.”

The mood in the great hall felt particularly sour that morning. His lord father sat at the high table as usual, though instead of his usual calm Lord Stark seemed a bit put out. Lady Catelyn was her usual self though, barely noticing as Jon slipped into his seat and picked out a rasher of bacon and a mug of ale. “...This can’t be a regular thing, Ned,” he heard her say to her husband.
“I know Cat, I know,” Lord Stark sounded tired for so early in the morning. “I’ve already spoken with her and she says it was just a passing dark mood. I’ve asked her to put some distance between her and Winterfell if it happens again. Hopefully that will keep the direwolves from joining in.”

_That doesn’t sound very good._ Jon thought. Any further thoughts on the subject were interrupted by the arrival of his brother and Theon Greyjoy. The Greyjoy seemed in perfectly fine form, while Robb looked much like Jon figured he did, eyes all ringed and bloodshot. Looking around, Jon noted that the rest of the family looked just as underslept: Sansa’s habitual smiles were forced, Arya was glowering at her breakfast, Bran looked grimmer than any boy of seven had any right to and Rickon clung to Lady Catelyn, totally unwilling to leave her presence for an instant. “Hard night?” Jon asked.

“Aye,” Robb grunted. “Bad dreams and Grey Wind kept howling all bloody night.”

“All the wolves were howling last night,” Theon added. “Heard them when I was coming back from the winter town inn. And I’d swear Lord Stark’s witch was leading them in song, too.”

Jon nodded. “Ghost doesn’t howl,” he said, “but he was restless all night. And then there were the dreams…” he trailed off, trying to remember the dream but only feeling a moment of chill. “I overheard Father,” he confided. “He said something to Lady Jade about it, I think.”

“Mad bloody woman,” Theon grumbled without much heat. That was the end of breakfast conversation as the three dug into their food. Once their bellies were full and they were on their way out of the hall, Jon broached the subject of the Ulthosi sorceress and her sky ship.

“You want to go to the ship?” Robb said, puzzled. Jon shrugged.

“We haven’t seen Lady Jade yet today,” he replied. “She usually takes breakfast in the hall with us. Mayhaps she knows why the wolves were restless last night.”

“Also you want to stick your cock in her,” Theon added cheerfully. Jon started nodding, then realized exactly _what_ the boy had said and glared.

“Shut up, Greyjoy,” he growled.

Theon looked smug. “Make me, bastard.” he sneered. Jon took a step forward, intent on giving Theon at least one good hard crack across the face.

Robb sighed. “Enough, the both of you,” he said, raising a hand. Jon backed off, as did Theon. “Jon’s got a point, Theon: if she was the one howling last night and she didn’t show up for breakfast, mayhaps there’s something wrong?” Theon rolled his eyes.

“Just because you want to fuck the girl too,” he started.

“Oh give it a rest, Greyjoy,” Jon said. “We all know she turned you down in front of all the castle and the gods already. Don’t put your frustration on the rest of us.” It had been one of the most amusing things he’d ever seen: Theon Greyjoy wasn’t unhandsome and had no problem charming any maiden or matron he felt like, but Lady Jade had simply patted him on the cheek like a wayward babe, said “That’s lovely, dearie” and went about her way. The sheer humiliation on Theon’s face was glorious.

_Though, would she do the same to me if I pressed a suit?_ That nagging thought kept him up at night.
Theon sputtered and Robb chuckled. “I’d say that settles that,” he said. “Let’s go check on the lady, shall we?”

_Carefree Victory_’s ramp was down when they approached the courtyard, an unusual occurrence for this time of morning. Carefully the three walked up the ramp into the metal room she called the _garage_. “Lady Jade?” Robb called. There was no answer, only the faint unsettling hum of the ship’s magic around them.

The far door opened and the sorceress stepped out. Like Jon and Robb, she was clearly not in the best condition that morning. She blinked blearily at them, then her face split open in a wide smile. “Oh hey, it’s Groucho, Harpo and Zeppo,” she said. “Shappening, boys?”

Robb looked at Jon, as if to say _well, it was your idea to come here._ Jon looked back. _Yes, but you’re the leader of our pack._ Robb sighed and turned back to Jade. “We missed you at breakfast, my lady,” he said politely. “We were worried that something might be amiss.”

“Amiss? Oh, no!” Jade said quickly. “There was a bit of trouble last night and I haven’t gotten any sleep yet so that’s a thing I need to fix but right now I’m actually kind of wired and honestly I could use an audience please come with me!” She turned on her heel and marched deeper into the ship. The three of them stared, then followed with a mutual shrug.

They found themselves in an area none had seen before, where the white metal walls had been stained with soot, and recently too. Lady Jade stood in front of one of her arcane devices, this one a box or chest with a set of dials on the front. “What’s this?” Jon asked, intrigued by her regard for the device.

“This is a subspace radio transmitter… which means nothing to you I know,” she replied. “Think of it as, hm, call it a magical raven. Once it’s working—if it works—I’ll be able to send a message to my people, let them know I’m alive and I need help.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

Lady Jade’s face cracked for the briefest of moments and Jon could see a deep pain underneath the smile. “If it doesn’t… then we’ll burn that bridge when I cross it. But it _should_ work. It will work, I’ve spent the last month rebuilding it from the ground up. It _will_ work.”

Robb and Theon gave each other uncertain looks. “As you say, my lady,” Jon said confidently.

“Okay. Okay.” Lady Jade took a deep breath. “Last throw pays for all. Initiating startup procedure… _now_.” She touched the device and it sprang to life, lights glowing a brilliant red as arcane symbols appeared in the air above it. “So far so good,” she said. “Beginning boot, connecting to main antenna array, SCE set to auxiliary.” The symbols shifted and the device chimed once more. “Work, work, _work_ damn your eyes,” the sorceress mumbled under her breath as the magic danced in the air. “Come on come on come on for the love of fuck just get this one fucking thing right…” Her mutteredings trailed off into inaudibility as the device’s color shifted from red to yellow.

Jon watched the sorceress work, sparing a glance for Robb and Theon, who seemed to be equally mystified. “Lady Jade?” he ventured.

“The system’s working,” she said immediately. “It’s powered, it’s looking for faults, making sure everything’s operational and then it’ll…” The device shifted from yellow to green, then to a steady...
blue glow. Lady Jade poked it gently with her finger. “Is that?” she said, less to Jon and the others than herself. “Are you?” Another poke and the box chirped.

“Subspace transmitter fully operational,” the ship’s magic voice said blandly. The sorceress shot upright, both arms above her head.

“WOOF!” she cried. “Yes! Yes yes yes yes YES!” She grabbed the box, stroking it and making disturbing cooing noises towards it. “Ooh, you wonderful little bucket of bolts, what a good radio you are mommy loves you yes she does—"

Theon let out a sharp bark of laughter at the sudden shift in the sorceress’s mood. Robb looked startled, then perplexed, and then just dumbfounded at the way she petted the device. Jon didn’t think he looked any less dumbfounded as his brother, but he managed to rally a little. “Ah, Lady Jade?”

“—you’re going to call all of mommy’s friends and they’ll come get mommy and they’ll bring science and diplomats and proper booze—"

“So, er, it seems you’re preoccupied…"

“—and mommy will get to go home and tell everybody all about the feudal overlords and the giant wolves and the psychic trees—"

“So we’ll, um, just let ourselves out. Good day, my lady.” Jon finished with as much grace as he could muster. The only reply was a giggle as the sorceress cradled her magic box. By some unseen communication he, Robb and Theon disengaged and fled for the exit.

Lady Catelyn caught the three of them descending from the ship. She gave Jon a quick dismissive glance, then noticed the expression on Robb’s face. “Are you alright, son?” she asked. “You look… not exactly well.”

Robb looked at Jon. Jon looked at Robb. They both looked at Theon, who returned their blank stares with one of his own. A faint cackle of mad laughter drifted down from Carefree Victory’s interior. “I’m… fine, mother,” Robb said finally. “I just think I saw a side of our sorceress I, ah, wasn’t expecting and hope not to see again anytime soon.”

“(And you still want to stick your cock in her?)” Theon murmured to Jon. Jon blushed and looked a little sheepish.

“(It’s endearing?)” He mumbled in reply. The Greyjoy clucked.

“(Hopeless,)” he said. “(Hopeless and besotted.)”

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 41.1

I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it I did it (EDITOR’S NOTE: 150 repetitions of the phrase “I did it” omitted)

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 41.2

Sorry about that last entry, was feeling a little manic and sleep-deprived at that point. I’m going to
keep it in the log, though. Took a nice long nap and now I can think clearly about today’s exciting development.

As much as it hurts to think about Mom and Dad and Mama and the rest of the family worrying about me right now (or worse), I can cut that short because the motherfucking radio is finally fucking working! Hal-le-fuck-ing-la-jah!

I can't tight-beam the transmission, but that's okay because I don't need it to be tight. All I need is to hit a Fleet comm buoy with subspace radio capability. The nearest buoy I know of that can handle the old emergency subspace frequencies is in the direction of Cervantes. It's not ideal, but without ansible I'm screwed for speedy response times anyway. Communicating with the fleet is going to be a lot like pre-subspace space exploration when we were limited to light speed communications: everything is going to take hours and days for one-way travel, and I'm not going to be able to send a lot of data per transmission.

A transmission to Cervantes will take something like twelve days via subspace radio, shorter if it gets picked up by a ship or a starbase on the frontier, longer if it has to get all the way to Earth or Planet or Vulcan or something before anybody receives. Either way, once someone picks it up it'll get flash-relayed to Ranger Command on Ceres and then the wheels of rescue will start turning. So, with a little bit of luck sometime in the next two weeks everybody will know I'm still alive!

Unfortunately they won't know much more than that. Like I said, the subspace radio is pretty bandwidth-limited, so naturally I get stranded on a rock with a human civilization, psi-active trees and Builder influence up the wazoo. I would love to send all my logs, sensor records, recorded conversations with the maester, the septa and the kids and all the rest of it along with the distress beacon. Something that big doesn't just ensure rescue, it'd have the entire First Fleet and half the contact office rushing out here at full throttle. For now though, I'm going to have to stick to a simple 140-character message on repeat:

STILL ALIVE NO FTL PLANET INHABITED BY HUMANS & FRIENDLY + PSI + BUILDER TECH NEED EXTRACTION BUT NOT IMMEDIATELY RESPOND? HASEGAWA AGS3172

I'd love to send more but that gets the key points across I think. I'll keep repeating it until I get a reply. Hopefully that'll come sometime in the next month.

Step one in Operation: Get The Fuck Outta Here complete!

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 42

Radio fixed, distress signal on the way, my mood is greatly improved & I finally have time to burn on other projects. The weirwood translator is up there on the list, but there's a few other things I want to take a look at first.

First off, the survey array's tireless efforts have paid off with a very nice photomap of Planetos's surface. It's about 90% complete by my lights, some bits the array hasn't had a chance to fly over yet and one very interesting anomaly that I'll get into later. Luwin was over the moon (so to speak) when I first showed him the globe—there's actually a lot of the globe that apparently nobody has even sketchy maps of. Sothoryos in particular fascinated him; the most anybody knew about the place was that it was very hot and the bits accessible from Essos weren't particularly hospitable. Turns out there's quite a bit of non-equatorial Sothoryos that looks not only pleasant but quite civilized.
I am reliably informed that if I can translate my globe into navigational maps, the Sealord of Braavos would happily sell me anything and everything my heart desired for a working trade route to Sothoryos… and it's likely the Summer Islanders would give me twice as much to not give it to the Braavosi. Sadly for many would-be imperialists none of them can give me what I want most, so I'm going to keep this one under my hat for now.

Moving on from the commercial to the archaeological, I went over the photos looking for Builder artifacts and didn’t come up disappointed. There’s three sites I can find that scream “preindustrial humans didn’t build me!” One is the nearest to me, the 1,700 kilometer-long ice wall that's apparently been standing for several thousand years in defiance of climate and physics. The next-closest is an apparently abandoned nonhuman city in the north-central part of Sothoryos. The last is as impressive as the ice wall: five stone arcologies connected by a defensive wall just about as long as the Westerosi one in central Essos.

Interestingly enough, these sites are all on Luwin's list of “famous stuff we know about.” The Wall (capitalized, of course) is probably the most famous bit of geography on the continent, the city in Sothoryos he thinks is called Yeen, and is known for eating explorers by the bushelful. Whether that's because northern explorers aren't suited for the environment or some sort of innate “curse” defense mechanism in the city I don't know. The arcologies are known as the Five Forts, defending Essos from something in the tundral plains to the immediate north and east of their defensive line.

Which sounds suspiciously similar to Northern legends to me.

And that brings me to the anomaly. Most of the areas where I’m missing coverage are over what looks like open ocean—I think Planetos is maybe 5-10% wetter than Earth on average, it’s hard to tell—so there’s probably not anything beyond small islands hiding in the gaps. However, there’s a large blank spot up in the 80N latitudes that continues to elude my all-seeing eyes. I can see what’s north of it (ice) and what’s south of it (ice and rock) but the cameras aren’t picking up anything in a specific spot. Isn’t that interesting? Somebody doesn’t like peeping Jadeys.

Hypothesis: whatever the Builders were doing here on Planetos, the centerpoint of their activity was up in that blind spot. Secondary hypothesis: there’s an active defense mechanism up there that blinded the survey array and crippled Victory.

Questions: If it could blind my sensors why not hide until I’d completed my survey and left? If it could wreck the FTL core why not simply destroy the ship? Either way no record of its presence would reach civilization, leaving me alive and reasonably intact is inefficient.

The trees might know more, but the translator is going to take some time. In the meantime, it might behoove me to take a bit of a field trip…

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**THE SPIDER**

With the king and most of the royal court winding its way northwards, King’s Landing was blessedly quiet for once. Not to say that it wasn’t a reeking pit of violence and intrigue, far from it; the remaining courtiers were quite busy plotting and sharpening their knives while the royal family was away. It was simply that the intrigue continued at a more comfortable volume when King Robert’s overbearing presence was absent.

As befit the name, the Master of Whisperers always did prefer the soft tone. All the better for lulling the target before the strike.
Today’s business involved a packet of letters from Essos, among other places. The little birds didn’t flock quite as well across the narrow sea, but every little bit of information was useful. Not to mention (especially in the Red Keep, never mention such things where others might be listening) his other agents. A note from one of those men crossed his vision: a report on the wedding of Daenerys Targaryen. Varys allowed himself a brief nod of satisfaction at the news. That particular plot seemed to be doing reasonably well. There was the chance of something going wrong—there was always that possibility, the eunuch knew too well the gods liked to make mockery of the plans of men—but so far, so good.

Then there were the songs from the North. Tales of falling stars and sorcery, vouchsafed in at least one account by the Warden himself, which made the rumors all the more intriguing. That particular raven had missed the king by a day—*such a pity*—but more had come from his own little birds, filling in details Lord Stark had left out.

*And now Eddard Stark has his own sorcerer, at least for a little while. How does this change things, I wonder? Add to this events in Pentos and Volantis, plus the royal family’s absence from King’s Landing...* hm. *For now, things are secure, but should that change...*

A knock on the door disturbed Varys’s reverie. Somewhat annoyed, he smoothed his face back into its usual obsequiousness and rose to answer the door. “Grand Maester,” he said, “what a pleasant surprise, how may I be of service to you this fine morning?”

“Ah, Lord Varys,” Grand Maester Pycelle wheezed with practiced sincerity. The eunuch and the old gray rat had never been fond of each other, but to admit open dislike was to admit weakness. “I have another raven from Winterfell, as well as one from the Citadel.” The maester produced both scrolls.

“For me?” Varys said, affecting some surprise.

Pycelle chuckled. “Oh no, no, forgive me, age leans on me heavily today. No, Lord Stark is no doubt sending a report on his new pet. And the Citadel wants to know more about this so-called ‘sorceress’” Pycelle’s tone dripped acid on the word “in the North. I wondered if you might have any more information on the subject.”

*Ah, of course.* “My little birds do sing in the North, Grand Maester,” Varys informed him. “And so far they corroborate everything Lord Stark has reported.”

“Pah,” Pycelle scoffed. “Your little birds are easily taken in by a mummer’s play, Lord Varys, if you believe that. Just like Eddard Stark.”

Varys raised an eyebrow, or would have if he had any eyebrows. This was an interesting piece of information. “You don’t believe, then, Grand Maester?”

“I do not. Falling stars? Ships that sail the sky? Mysterious women with powerful magic? Folly, I say. *Folly,* Lord Varys! Magic has been gone from the world since the dragons died, and with the Targaryen bloodline almost dead all that nonsense will die with them. Clearly this is some sort of trick played on ignorant northmen, likely by some Dornish conspirator.”

“Oh no doubt, no doubt,” Varys said absently. His mind flicked back to a long-ago day filled with pain and blood and a great booming voice that he would remember until the day he died.*How little you know, old rat. How little you pretend to know, even.* “Well, the King will arrive at Winterfell in not much longer than a fortnight. No doubt we will learn more when he does.”
That Is A Yooj, Luxurious Wall

EDDARD

“You’re leaving, then?” The question filled Ned with an anxiety he hadn’t expected. On the one hand, the Ulthosi sorceress was more than a little disruptive of his household and having her gone would be a relief. On the other hand, King Robert would arrive at Winterfell shortly and not having the sorceress on hand could prove difficult. Even when she does what I want most, the woman manages to be vexing.

Lady Jade didn’t pause in examining the arcane devices in her ship’s hold while replying. “Only for a few days. The trip north won’t take more than an hour or two, and unless another tree starts talking to me I don’t expect the Wall to provide any serious answers this time around. This is more of a getting to know you visit; I’ve seen the thing from orbit, and I’ve heard stories about it but I need actually see it close up too.” The sorceress looked rueful. “I need to give it a good kick or two.”

Ned gave her a puzzled frown. “Kick it?”

“A long time ago, a philosopher in my country was told that the world was just an illusion, and there was no way to prove otherwise. The philosopher replied by kicking a stone—” Jade kicked at a box, which responded with a dull clanking sound “—and exclaimed ‘I refute it thus!’”

“I see.” And in truth he did. The Ulthosi had spent her time in the wolfswood and in Winterfell reading and talking. Knowing the Wall existed was one thing, experiencing it was another entirely. “Only a few days, you say?”

“Shouldn’t be more. Get some samples, get some scans, talk to a few of the veterans. Maybe yell at a wierwood or two, I don’t know.” She paused, seemingly lost in thought. “That’s weird, isn’t it?” Ned had no good response to that. “Anyway, yeah. I promise to be back before the king gets here, and I also promise to land outside the castle.”

THE MASTER-AT-ARMS

The castle was in an uproar. Had been in an uproar for the past moon’s turn, if Ser Alliser Thorne was going to be honest with himself. The whole sorry mess had started with the falling star to the south that half the new brothers were fascinated by and half the veterans were convinced was some portent of doom. Then the rumors started filtering to the castle. The star had fallen near Winterfell, or the star had fallen on Winterfell and destroyed it. Lord Stark had rode out hunting for the star and found a great chunk of sky-metal, or a clutch of dragon eggs, or a sleeping live dragon, or Bran the Builder reborn and a cache of magical First Men weapons... and on and on it went.

Aye, and snarks and grumkins and Others as well, no doubt. But then the raven came from Winterfell bearing Stark’s seal, informing the Lord Commander that some of the rumors were true, most were false and the subject of those rumors, a witch from the furthest reaches of Ulthos, was due to arrive at the Wall shortly. Stark also cautioned the Watch to “watch the sky for her arrival,” which Ser Alliser puzzled over. The road to Castle Black was well-marked if not well-traveled—damn it all—but why the sky? Were they expecting a dragonrider?

That at least seemed to be the consensus of the summer children, as well as some fools who ought to have known better. Work at Castle Black ground to a halt for the next two days as half the Watch
spent their time staring at the southern horizon.

“I’d almost say Stark was having a jape at our expense with this nonsense,” he grumbled. Lord Commander Mormont grunted. “I’ve known Ned Stark since he was a boy, and he’s as much a jester as you, Ser Alliser. The Stark of Winterfell knows better than most what the Watch means; he would not have been so specific in his message for a jape.”

“Perhaps,” Ser Alliser allowed. “Yet specific is not the word I would use for his message. A warning to watch the sky for ‘you will know when you see?’ See what? Dragons? Griffons? Flying snarks?”

“Whatever it may be,” Jeor Mormont replied thoughtfully. “It must be distinctive.” Ser Alliser didn’t bother to pursue the point; he was no better informed than the Lord Commander and the argument had been done to death a hundred times over by everybody in the castle. And while we wait for Stark’s grumkin and argue, work doesn’t get done and our vigilance slips. With patrols missing and rumors of wildlings massing in the Haunted Forest, to boot. Damn Stark for his distractions. Ser Alliser scowled, his head throbbed at the aggravation, a disgruntled humming that sank down into his bones...

Wait. “Do you hear that?” he asked the Lord Commander. Mormont blinked and shook his head. “Aye, I hear it, but what is it?” And further reply was forestalled as one of the new recruits, a fat little craven of a Reacherman, rushed into the Lord Commander’s office as quickly as his legs could move him. “Lord Commander, Ser Alliser!” he panted. “It’s here! The witch is here!”

The humming grew into a low rumble, a constant roll of thunder overlaying the steady moan of wind. Mormont was first out of his seat and Ser Alliser close behind, brushing past the recruit—a Tarly if he remembered right, how the gods had cursed a man like Randyll Tarly with a son like that was a mystery—and rushed to the southern windows. The rumble grew into a roar, and Lord Commander and master-of-arms alike crowded into the narrow opening to see just what in seven hells was going on outside.

A great ship made of white metal, its prow blackened and scorched in spots, drifted a good three hundred feet in the air where ships were not supposed to drift above Castle Black. Brothers and servants stood at windows and in the courtyard, transfixed by the sight. The ship turned gracefully above the castle and began to drop, thin legs emerging from its belly as it lowered itself to a landing outside the castle’s gate. “Gods be good,” the Lord Commander breathed. “A true metal dragon!”

Ser Alliser nodded. “Aye, I’ll not hold Stark’s words against him now,” he said. How could you describe anything like this in a raven’s scroll? “I’ll whip some of the men back into working condition; we’ll need an honor guard.” The Lord Commander nodded, not taking his eyes from the ship. Ser Alliser swept back down the tower steps, his scowl clearing the way for him. Approaching the courtyard door he started braking orders, snapping the gawping men of the Night’s Watch out of their reverie and getting them to fall into some semblance of order. Their discipline hasn’t utterly failed them yet, he thought. Good. He and his men fell in behind Jeor Mormont as the Lord Commander emerged from the tower and strode in good order towards the gate.

They reached the gate as the great sky-ship lowered a gangway from its stern, and from the inside of the ship emerged a dozen slightly dazed men in Stark colors. Clearly Lord Stark had sent a guard of his own, to lay claim and protect his grumkin, no doubt. The Stark men assembled in front of the gangway as three more people descended. The first was a young man wearing the Stark sigil with the air of a lord about him. Stark’s eldest, I’ll wager, Ser Alliser thought. The second was another bannerman, though one with more of the Stark look to him than the other. The third was, undoubtedly, the witch Lord Stark had written about, an unprepossessing slip of a Dornishwoman in
green. The Stark boy and his banner approached them with open hands, while the witch stopped at
the edge of the gangway, caught staring at the Wall in all its midday glory.

Ser Alliser allowed himself the tiniest of smiles at the sight. *At least we can pay back a little of what
she did to us with her arrival.* “So,” Jeor Mormont said with a smile of his own. “You must be Robb.
Welcome to Castle Black, my lord.”

“Aye, Lord Commander,” the Stark boy replied, clasping Mormont’s arm. “I am Robb Stark. I bear
some messages from my lord father, but I also bring our latest guest, Captain Jade Hasegawa of
Ulthos.” He gestured to his side, then blinked as he realized that the Ulthosi witch wasn’t beside him.
He turned and Ser Alliser’s eyes followed back to the end of the gangway, where the witch was
crouched, poking at the turf. “Lady Jade?”

“There’s no melt,” the witch said. “I beg pardon?” the Stark boy replied. The woman stood, brushing
soil from her fingers and pointed straight at the Wall. “That’s ice,” she said. “The air temperature is
above freezing and the sun’s shining directly on it. It should be melting, there ought to be pools of
water at the base, streams rolling downhill, the ground ought to be saturated with water, But look at
it! It’s not even *glistening* in the sunlight!” Ser Alliser turned to look and sure enough the Wall
looked as it always did, in summer or winter.

“Captain Jade,” the Lord Commander said carefully, “the Wall has stood for thousands of years.”

“No no, I get that bit,” the witch interrupted. “But it’s summer, and it’s not melting. I mean, haven’t
you ever looked at that great big block of ice and then looked at the, um, mostly green ground that
goes almost up to its foot and wondered why?” Jeor Mormont looked at Ser Alliser, and he could see
his own blank look reflected in the Lord Commander’s face. The witch smiled like a sword, sharp,
bright and dangerous. “Oooh,” she said. “Is that a psychological thing, or an active effect? A notice-
me-not? No, couldn’t be or I would’ve been caught in it. Something to note for further examination.”
She looked past Ser Alliser and focused on the Lord Commander.

“Lord Commander, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Jade Hasegawa said. “But I’d also like to meet your
maester, meet your library and I’d also like to get on top of that damn thing as soon as I can.”

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**JON**

So far, the Wall had been nothing like he’d expected.

A good part of that was the company: Jon wasn’t sure exactly why he’d agreed to accompany Robb
and Lady Jade to Castle Black, but winging their way north in the *Carefree Victory* was a
completely different experience than riding a horse along the kingsroad. A week’s ride was done in
bare hours, and they were landed in the castle. The men of the Night’s Watch were more than a little
overawed by their presence, much like Jon had felt when they found the fallen star in the wolfswood.
The Lord Commander and his master-of-arms, a hard-looking man with a humorless smile, had
greeted Robb graciously enough, even if Lady Jade’s behavior was... well, Jon was used to it by
now.

He supposed those who hadn’t been at Winterfell the last moon’s turn might not be.

From there Jade was a green-eyed whirlwind, rushing to and fro across the castle’s grounds,
examining and inspecting everything her gaze fell across. She spent several hours locked in the
maester’s quarters, interrogating the old man about the history of the Wall and the Watch. Then she
was out in the old lichyard, her three familiars bobbing along in her wake, looking at the old stones marking the resting places of fallen brothers.

And then, true to her words, she was going to the top of the Wall. And, to his surprise, she’d asked Jon to accompany her.

A hundred scenarios flashed through his mind, each one more detailed than the last, and he fought to maintain his composure long enough to agree. Something must have shown in his face: an expression crossing amusement and sadness flickered across her features for the briefest instant before she tossed a heavy pack to him and they made for the winch.

The ride up on the winch was only a little terrifying, it might have been worse had he not just flown in the Ulthosi sky-ship. The men of the Watch going with them were distinctly nervous having a stranger and a witch in the cart with them. Lady Jade remained fearless, looking up and down as the winch slowly cranked them into the sky. “This is some impressive work,” she noted. “Beats all hell out of walking up, that’s for sure.” The black brother nearest them gave her a baleful look then proceeded to pretend the sorceress didn’t exist for the rest of the trip up.

Stumbling out of the winch at the summit, they found themselves on a wide expanse of rough ice, the green of the North in summer to the south of them and the deeper green-blacks of the land beyond to the north. “A hell of a view,” Jade said happily. “And the ice is just as solid up here as at the base. Interesting, isn’t it?” Jon nodded, taking in the long white line of the Wall marking the edge of the world. “Hm, Dot, library access” she commanded the familiar. “Do we have Zhou’s paper on psionic terraforming?” Her familiar chimed once. “Only the abstract, huh? Damn, that’s too bad. Ah well.”

Jon tore his eyes away from the world around him, took a deep breath and stepped up to Lady Jade. “How may I help?” he asked. “Well,” she replied, “hand me the pack for one, then you can hold some of this crap while I get some samples.” She pulled a small glass phial from her pocket and, stooping, scooped a bit of loose ice into it.

Jon’s face fell a little, but he managed to hide it before the sorceress looked at her again. So much for that hope. He dutifully did as she said as they walked back and forth across the Wall, Jade stopping to look at bits and pieces that Jon either couldn’t see or didn’t understand the significance of. Once or twice a brother of the Watch would approach, but Jon would subtly place himself between them and the distracted sorceress.

Some time passed this way, as Jade went about her magical business and they strayed further from the winch and the staircase back to the ground. It felt almost like they were the only two people anywhere, walking along a road caught between two worlds, the green and the black. Jade finally looked up, the black brothers had vanished back down or dispersed to their posts and none could be seen nearby. “So,” she said, pitching her voice lower. “I suppose we should talk.”

Ah. Jon had been waiting for this moment for days now. If it wasn't the one thing, it would be this. “This is where you turn me down, then?” he said woodenly. He turned his face, looking at the lands beyond the Wall, searching for something in the woods and meadows that wasn’t the sorceress.

“Not quite how I expected it,” he heard her say behind him. “But... yes. You’ll make someone really happy one day, Jon, I’m sure of it. But it won’t be me. It can’t be me, I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Jon winced, the word came out almost as a whine, far too plaintive for his taste. He could almost feel Jade’s wince. “There’s a lot of reasons,” she said, “but the big one is, eventually, I’m
going to leave Westeros. Not today, not tomorrow, not in a month or even a year but I’m not going to stay here forever.”

“I could go with you.” There, I said it. He turned back from the horizon to face her, to find a small, sad smile playing across her lips.

“You could,” she agreed. “But assuming you managed to handle life in my world—bear in mind,” she said before Jon could interject, “that what you’ve seen of me so far is just the barest edge of things—you wouldn’t be allowed to come back. This isn’t like joining the Night’s Watch, where there’s a chance you might be allowed to go south once in a while on business. You’d be effectively dead to your family if you came with me. You could never come back, Jon, you couldn’t even write letters home. Cut ties, now and forever... and if you come with me it’s more than likely you’ll outlive all your family. Is that something you want, really?”

Jon thought about it. Do I want that? Could I go through with it? He thought about Father’s approval, Robb’s friendship, Arya and Bran’s laughter. He thought about sailing through the skies with Jade by his side, seeing far Ulthos and whatever else there was beyond the edge of the blue sky. And then he thought about not being able to share his stories, unable to tell Robb about his adventures, or watch Arya, Bran, Rickon and even Sansa get wide-eyed at tales of faraway lands.

“No,” he said slowly. “I couldn’t do that. Not really.” Jade nodded. “I didn’t think so,” she said. “Which honestly is a bit of a relief, because otherwise I’d have to dodge your sister’s wrath.”

Jon blinked. “My sister’s what?”

Jade looked suddenly sheepish. “For such a tiny girl she knows how to use her instep,” she said ruefully. “She didn’t want me to steal you away and well, things proceeded from there.” Jon blinked again.

“Aye, that sounds like Arya,” he said. “If I ran off she’d hunt me down again if it took her two lifetimes.” Jade laughed at that, and the grim mood lifted a fraction. Jon appreciated the Ulthosi’s smile a little, then sighed. “I cannot say I understand all your objections,” he said. “But... thank you for telling me. You could have just let me pine forever, or humiliated me like Greyjoy.”

“I could’ve,” Jade agreed easily. “But that would’ve been made me a real asshole, and I only try to be an asshole to people who deserve it.” She reached out and pulled him into a quick, tight embrace. “If anybody ever doubts that, just tell ‘em you have a prophecy from an authentic witch, so there.”

After that, the rest of their time went like a blur. Lady Jade collected chunks of ice and snow from the Wall, mumbling to herself the whole time whilst Jon acted as porter and bodyguard. The black brothers manning the lookouts kept their backs to them, apparently hoping that the witch and her companion would soon leave them be. Soon enough they were on their way back down, the winch just as precarious as the trip up, and they returned to Castle Black.

Robb, of course, managed to isolate him as soon as he could. “So,” he said with a hint of a lecherous grin, “have an enjoyable liaison on top of the Wall?” Jon restrained from rolling his eyes at his brother.

“In fact,” he informed Robb, “the lady decided to decline.” Robb’s eyes widened in shock. “That was not what I expected when she asked you to join her,” he said frankly.
Aye, you and me both but Others bugger me if I ever admit that. “I think she just wanted a chance to talk without prying ears,” he said with a mock glare. “But no, I had no more chance than Greyjoy, and she’s quite adamant on that.”

Robb deflated. “I’m sorry, Jon,” he said. “When I asked if you wanted to accompany me I’d hoped, well, for a better outcome than that.” Job nodded, that sounded like Robb’s reasoning. And yet...

“It wasn’t a total loss,” he replied. “Aye, it hurts a little,” or more than a little “but I’ve not lost her respect. And I got a prophecy out it, too.”

“A prophecy?” Robb looked intrigued. “What kind of prophecy?”

Jon held back a smug smile. “That would be telling.”
Lo, The King Approacheth!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 54

Winterfell’s gone into panic mode, and it’s not my fault! This time!

The King of Westeros is due to arrive in the next couple days, so everybody’s busy getting ready, remembering court manners, dusting off the good china etc. so that everything looks nice and shiny when he gets here. I’ve moved Victory out of the castle courtyard to a nice flat spot near the eastern gate at Stark’s request, and I’m prepping for the royal visit in my own special way.

Since getting back from the Wall I’ve set the autofacs to build me another set of drones to complement Yakko, Wakko and Dot. It’s put a bigger-than-I’d-calculated dent in my electronics budget (note to self: going to need more gold for wiring soon) but Pinky, Brain, Slappy and Skippy are now all online and running to spec. I’ve got enough eyes to watch front, back, left, right, up and down and still have a few drones handy for appearances.

Speaking of appearances, I’ve dusted off my old dress uniform for the first time in… oh hell, since the big ceremony at Starbase Yorktown maybe? I don’t know, a long while anyways. But hey, meeting a king for the first time, so I might as well go all-out and the dress uniform looks damn good on me. Ranger green was always my favorite color, she said dryly. I think I’ll leave some of the baubles off; it’s not like anybody in Westeros would understand my salad bar and the Fleet insignia might be a tad too shiny to wear out on my chest in a culture like this. Then again I am technically the Starfleet and Federal Worlds representative on this planet for the time being. Seeing as I’m meeting high authority, I ought to be repping, right? Oh whatever, I’ll work it out when I get there.

So, meeting a king. I’ve never actually met a king before, they’re not exactly common currency on the galactic stage. The Academy puts us all through mandatory diplomatic training—you never know what you’re going to find, after all—but this is the first time I’ve come into a contact situation with actual nobility. Feels weird. But it’s a good weird! Ten years flying as a solo Ranger and now this! I’d only be happier if I had a starship or two at my back.

(Speaking of, my message should reach Cervantes in the next day or two, if it hasn’t already. That thought has brightened the last couple days considerably. Any day now…)

Talking with people about the king, I’m getting some mixed signals. Stark clearly thinks the world of the man, but hasn’t really been in regular contact with him for years. The locals don’t have anything against him but also don’t hold him in any high regard, which is an interesting detail. Apparently something of a well-known hedonist with an interest in exotica… which I was told with very significant looks a number of times.

So yeah, that ought to be fun. I pulled a slap-taser out of the weapons vault and stuck it in a quick-release arm holster. That ought to discourage any wandering hands. If not, well… that’s what drones are for.

TYRION
Winterfell was ahead in all its dubious gray glory. Tyrion Lannister might have reflected on the contrast between the plain stone of the Northern stronghold and the more ornate castles to the south, but his arse was well and truly tired from long days of riding. Philosophizing was simply too much effort at this point. “Cheer up, Tyrion,” his brother Jaime said when expressed his disgruntlement aloud. “Not much further till we reach the castle, then we can enjoy Stark’s warm kennels and only the finest Northern gruel!”

“I’d rather mulled wine and a pretty Northern girl in my bed,” Tyrion grumbled. “I dare hope there’s a brothel in the castle town, else this entire trip has been a waste of my time and talent.”

Jaime clucked disapprovingly. “You spend too much time drunk and abed, brother. I had thought that this Northern mystery might have pricked your interest. It seemed like madness and mummeries to me, but you’re more of a maesterly bent than I.”

Tyrion nodded absently. He’d read the messages from King’s Landing, frantically relayed northwards as the king’s party made its way up the kingsroad. “Oh,” he said, “I admit to be intrigued by all this business. Falling stars are rare enough, and for one to contain a witch from Ulthos of all places! Hearing of the world beyond the Jade Sea… don’t think for a moment I’m not interested, Jaime. I’m simply too tired and sore to put much thought to it.”

Jaime laughed. “And no doubt you’ll charm her with your winsome smile and get her to tell you all about it… provided that the king doesn’t beat you to it.”

“Oh, no doubt, no doubt,” Tyrion snorted. “I suppose we’ll have to see.” They passed through the tiny winter town—Tyrion noting the brothel’s location for future reference—and as they came out they saw the fallen star squatting on the road between the town and the castle gate. It was enormous, easily the size of any galley in the Lannister fleet, made of gleaming white metal with accents painted in deep black and brilliant scarlet. King Robert and his vanguard had all stopped to stare at the ship in astonishment.

“Gods be good,” Jaime breathed. “That’s something I’ve never seen before, to be sure.” He pointed at a spot on the prow where the white metal had been replaced with something dark and painted. “What’s that?”

Tyrion tilted his head and peered at the dark patch. “I think it’s a representation of Theon the Hungry Wolf’s reaving of Andalos,” he said. “Not a very good one, though,” he added in an offhand tone. Jaime grunted; mystery solved and the sky-galleon not doing much of anything his attention wandered back to the king’s party.

King Robert stared at the sky-galleon for a long moment, hand outstretched as if to touch the thing. I’d wager that Robert didn’t believe the dispatches until this moment, Tyrion thought. He then shook like a great shaggy dog and spurred his horse to enter the gates, the rest of the party behind him. The Starks were waiting inside the gate, and Robert clambered heavily off his horse to greet them like long-lost family. Which, Tyrion supposed, wasn’t too far from the truth, given the stories the king liked to tell when in his cups.

The initial pleasantries done, the king returned to Lord Eddard and clasped him on the shoulder. “There’s things I need to do,” he said, “but first, I see you’ve made a new addition to Winterfell, Ned.”

Stark nodded and not-quite-smiled at the questioning tone in Robert’s voice. “Aye, that’s one way of putting it,” he said. “You’ve received my messages?”
Robert grunted. “Some of them, passed up and down between keeps. I imagine every castle, inn and rookery along the kingsroad knows by now. All snarks and grumkins I thought at first, but seeing that bloody thing sitting outside, well. So where’s the witch?”

Lord Eddard gestured back towards the gate. “Still inside the vessel, Your Grace,” he said. “We agreed that she might have been a bit… disruptive if she was here for our first meeting.”

“Oh?” Robert said, brows raised. “We’ve met, and piss on disruptive. Let’s see your sorceress, Ned.” Stark looked like he wanted to argue the point, but sighed and led the king back towards the gate. Tyrion hesitated, but curiosity overcame tiredness and he decided to tag along behind the party. They walked around to the rear of the metal ship, underneath the two metal longboats attached by buttresses to the main body. *Shore boats? No, there’s no sign they’re supposed to detach from the main body. Some sort of float, then? I believe the Summer Islands have ships like that. Fascinating…* 

“So where is she?” the king demanded.

“Inside,” Lord Eddard replied. A moment later, a soft hissing sound came from the belly of the ship and a line appeared in the unblemished metal hull. The line resolved into a hatch, the hatch became a ramp, and the ramp dropped slowly to the ground with a groaning, humming sound Tyrion had never heard before. Robert and Ser Boros stepped back involuntarily; the ramp touched the earth near enough them that the two came close to having it fall on their toes.

“Impressive,” Robert said.

“Arigatō,” a new voice said. At the top of the ramp stood the ship’s captain, a long-limbed woman, vaguely Dornish in her coloring by Tyrion’s practiced eye, young but not especially beautiful, dressed in a green coat and black trousers of a cut he’d never seen before and Mryish glass wrapped in steel on her face. Over her heart she wore the oddest sigil Tyrion had ever seen in Westeros, a badge of pale jade with two crescents inlaid in gold, giving the appearance of a bird crossing the thin limb of the moon, flanked by bright silver seabird’s wings. Beneath that badge the witch wore a more recognizable sigil, a golden feather wreathed in flames on black.

*Two sigils,* Tyrion mused. *One for her house and one other? And which is which?*

The witch descended the ramp, four silver orbs revolving around her slowly as her boots tapped gently against the metal. She blinked at the array of people waiting for her, and Tyrion swallowed a most inappropriate laugh. *And why not? The king, the royal family, Lord Stark, three Kingsguard and a dwarf. All we need is a fool to complete the mummer’s show.* The king cleared his throat.

“You’re Ned’s sorceress, then?” he asked.

“Ohatsunomi omenikakarimasu, Robāto denka.” She bowed stiffly at the waist, arms pressed firmly to her sides. “Watashi wa Wakuseirengō Uchūgun no Anrakushōri no senchō, Hasegawa Jeido taisa to moshimasu. Igō omishirioki o.” Robert clearly had no idea what to make of this babble and just stood there awkwardly for a moment.

“Ah!” The woman smiled brightly, but Tyrion could see wheels spinning behind those bright green eyes. “Ohatsunomi omenikakarimasu, Robāto denka.” She bowed stiffly at the waist, arms pressed firmly to her sides. “Watashi wa Wakuseirengō Uchūgun no Anrakushōri no senchō, Hasegawa Jeido taisa to moshimasu. Igō omishirioki o.” Robert clearly had no idea what to make of this babble and just stood there awkwardly for a moment.

Neither, it seemed, did Lord Eddard, who stared at the sorceress like he’d never seen her before. Tyrion noted with great interest that Stark seemed just as surprised by this outpouring of words as everybody else in the king’s party. *Our little mystery has deepened, it seems.*

“Ah, gomen—I am sorry,” the sorceress said, this time in the common speech overlaid with a thick
and distracting accent. “I am Captain Jade Hasegawa, mistress of the Carefree Victory. It is an honor to be a guest in your lands, Your Grace.” She bowed again in the same stiff style.

With a greeting he could understand, Robert managed to rally. “Captain Hasegawa,” he said, stumbling a little over the foreign name, “I, Robert of House Baratheon, first of that name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Protector of the Realm and so on welcome you to the Seven Kingdoms.” He finished with a bow of his own, less stiff than the sorceress’s and not as deep thanks to the thick layer of fat the king carried. “I’m told you come from Ulthos, Mistress Jade.”

A shadow briefly crossed over the woman’s face. “Ulthos is a word on a map, Your Grace,” she said. “My homeland is... not on any map you would have in Westeros, and people find comfort in familiar words. So I am from Ulthos, and it is easier on me than being from somewhere utterly unknown.”

“I see,” the king replied. Tyrion rather doubted that. “Still... would you not say where you’re from, truly? I would like to know what land makes ships and women like you.” The sorceress tilted her head a fraction, her hovering orbs drawing in closer. Lord Stark tensed a little at the action. The Kingsguard responded in kind, ready to throw themselves between the royal family and what blasts of sorcery were coming.

The tension held in the air for a thick moment before Hasegawa smiled again. “My home is the eastern tidelands of Acidalia, far across the sea of stars.”

Tyrion’s tired mind whirled with possibility. The mysterious sorceress claimed to sail the sea of stars, not the Sunset or the Jade Seas. And why not? If her ship can fly, then the whole sky is her sea. Sea of stars indeed! Wherever this Acidalia was, it was clearly not known as such by any maester or wise man in Westeros. He wondered if perhaps he could wheedle out charts from the sky-galleon’s captain, something that would let him sail there. The dwarf who sailed the sea of stars, now that would be a song worth singing.

Robert put on his most winning smile. “I would be honored to hear you speak of your homeland, Mistress Jade. Mayhaps later, after the feast tonight?” Lord Eddard looked pained, and Tyrion risked a glance at the queen. His sweet sister’s face had frozen in a polite, dismissive smile but he could see the anger in her eyes. Apparently the sorceress had seen what he had in Cersei’s face, for she shook her head in the negative.

“Apologies, Your Grace, but I must decline.”

For his part, Robert seemed unfazed by this rejection. “Then sit with us at the high table tonight.”

Captain Hasegawa considered this. “You honor me, Your Grace,” she said carefully. “But I would prefer to sit at the lower tables this evening, especially with such an illustrious company at the high table.” Tyrion could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on. She thinks she’s being helpful. I need wine. Cersei’s face, momentarily unfrozen at the sorceress’s first rejection of Robert’s advances, now took on a slightly offended cast.

Robert for his part seemed oblivious to all this byplay and asked with bluff honesty “Why is that?”

“Perspective,” the sorceress replied immediately. “It never hurts to see the world from as many different angles as you can. Only then can you get a true picture of the world about you.”
For the record, Jade's no-doubt-terrible Japanese in this segment is not her fault, it's entirely mine and Google Translate's. Anyone who has a better translation can feel free to leave a comment. ~ The Mgt.

UPDATE 5/23/17: Many thanks to SpaceBattles user Jesus for providing Jade some non-garbage Japanese. ~ The Mgt.
SANSA

The evening of the king’s arrival, Sansa’s lord father had ordered a great feast in celebration. The tables were piled full of the finest food Winterfell’s cooks could make, roasts and pies and salad with ingredients coming from all over the north and even from as far away as Dorne. It was the finest meal she’d ever eaten at the high table; not even her name day feast was as sumptuous. In between rounds of food Sansa nibbled on little lemon cakes and talked happily with the royal guests.

To Sansa’s delight, she had been seated next to Prince Joffrey at the high table. Joffrey was charming like his father and gracious like his mother. Sansa spent much of the evening telling him about life in Winterfell and the North. He would listen attentively, asking questions here and there and she happily answered them. Eventually the subject turned towards the fallen star, and she spoke of Mistress Jade’s odd little errands. “She’s always poking about the castle, or running back to the library to look at old books then poking about,” she said. “Her and her familiars have gotten into everything and everywhere.”

“You seem quite taken with this witch, my lady,” the prince noted. Sansa couldn’t help but blush.

“She’s fascinating, my prince,” she replied. “Mistress Jade’s ways are foreign, but not in any way I’ve ever heard of. She can play the hellion and the lady from one moment to the next. Sometimes at the same time. And she knows so much, even things the maesters don’t seem to know!”

Prince Joffrey considered this. “She sounds like quite the addition to your lord father’s court,” he said. “Do you think he would mind if my father asked her to come to King’s Landing? The Iron Throne could use a court sorceress.”

Sansa considered this. Mistress Jade had spoken at length about going south at some point, though she continued to keep her ship near Winterfell. “Father will do as the king asks,” she said slowly, “but Mistress Jade…” she trailed off, uncertain as to the answer.

“She would refuse a royal command?” The prince asked, a note of surprise and anger in his voice. Sansa honestly didn’t know if the sorceress would refuse or not. *Her ways are not our ways, that’s what Maester Luwin says, but King Robert is ruler of Westeros. But she has her ship, she could leave Westeros for the Free Cities or Old Ghis or the far edge of the world if she so chooses.*

“I don’t know, my prince,” she said truthfully. “Mistress Jade has talked about going south—”

The prince was all smiles again. “Well, that’s settled for now, my lady,” he said cheerily.

“Ho! Witch girl!” King Robert’s voice boomed out across the hall. The noise of revelry dropped to a dull murmur as the sorceress emerged from one of the further low tables.

“Yes, Your Grace?” she said, as if being called on by a king happened to her every day.

“Do they sing in your homeland of Acidalia?”

Mistress Jade considered this. “We’ve been known to, Your Grace,” she said in that funny accent.
“Do you sing?” the king thundered. Firelight bounced off the sorceress’s Myrish eyeglass.

“When the moment calls for it,” she replied, the faintest hint of a smile on her lips. “Does His Grace have any requests?”

The king waved his hand impatiently. “Something with some life to it,” he said. “Something that isn’t the bloody Rains of bloody Castamere for the hundredth bloody time. Well, girl?”

The sorceress looked at the rafter, pursing her lips in thought and humming tunelessly. “I believe I have just the thing, Your Grace.” She graced the king with an odd little smile, picked up her odd-looking lute—the thing she called a “guitar”—and after a quick experimental strum broke into song.

*When I was young my friends all fought*  
*Like fools to get a seat*  
*On an outbound ship to the endless void*  
*Of the Federal Starfleet*  
*But I left home at nineteen years*  
*A Ranger true to be*  
*Now I can outfight any four Fleet men*  
*And outdrink any three!*

The king let out a great bellow of laughter at that verse, and nodded happily along as Mistress Jade sang a cheerful brag about the Rangers, a group she’d mentioned once or twice and apparently had some love for. Sansa didn’t understand some of the words—*where is Rigel and how did it have more than one moon?*—but her voice was strong and clear. She finished with a staccato flourish, and the king and guests pounded the table in appreciation.

“What and minstrel,” Prince Joffrey said to her underneath the applause. “She would make a wonderful addition to my father’s court.”

“If she agreed,” Sansa noted. The prince’s eyebrow twitched a little, then he nodded.

“Perhaps you could make an introduction, my lady?” he said warmly. “If someone high in her esteem helped my father and I to make the case…” Sansa’s cheeks warmed. She ducked her head and nodded quickly. Joffrey favored her with a half smile.

“ANOTHER!” The king bellowed, drowning out the room. The sorceress shrugged, picked up her instrument and began anew. She played three more times, each song different from the one before, spinning tales of adventures and beauty in far-off lands. The final song she played was one Sansa had heard snatches of before, a long tale about a nameless horse-tamer’s daughter and her war against slaving wizards from the east.

At the end of the song, Mistress Jade begged reprieve and the king granted it, calling for a round of “The Bear and the Maiden Fair” from the bards her lord father had assembled for the welcoming feast. Afterwards, the feast began to die down and Joffrey touched her gently on the hand. “My lady,” he said quietly, “would you be so kind as to make an introduction to your Mistress Jade? I fear my curiosity has overwhelmed me.”

Sansa blushed at the feel of his fingers. “Of, of course my prince. I would be honored to.”

They found her still at the low table, deep in discussion with a rough-looking bard. “The tricky bit is really the strings,” she was saying. “Hair and gut work well enough but to really get good sound out
of an instrument like this you need metal. I usually use steel, but if you can get your hands on bronze wire that works pretty well too… oh, Sansa, hi.” The sorceress greeted them with a broad smile. The prince stared hard at the bard for a long moment. The bard returned the stare fearlessly for a second, then ducked his head, mumbled something and quickly turned away.

“Mistress Jade, may I present Prince Joffrey, King Robert’s son?” Sansa said formally. The sorceress blinked, stood and bowed.

“A pleasure, young prince,” she said. “Please, take a seat.”

“At the low table?” The prince said in faint disbelief. Jade shrugged.

“A seat is a seat, high or low.” A mischievous spark flickered in the sorceress’s eyes. “Fear not young prince, the lower class wood won’t taint you.” Sansa flushed with embarrassment. The prince’s face darkened, then he smiled in a funny way that didn’t quite reach his eyes and he sat on the rough wood.

“Singing, japes and witchcraft,” he said, still smiling that odd smile. “You could be my father’s witch, minstrel and fool all at once.” The sorceress raised an eyebrow at that statement.

Sansa helpfully jumped into the conversation. “The king is considering asking you to join his court in King’s Landing,” she added.

Mistress Jade hummed tunelessly. “Is that so?” she said absently. “I do need to go south, there’s records there that aren’t available here. Oldtown, yes, King’s Landing too. Maybe the septons have something hidden away in a catacomb. There’s not enough information available here or at the Wall…”


“Because it’s five hundred kilometers long, two hundred fifty meters tall and made of ice that doesn’t melt in summer nearly as much as it should, for one,” the sorceress replied. “That’s interesting, isn’t it?”

“But the Wall’s always been there,” Sansa said. “Is this like the runes on the broken tower? A thing that’s always been there, but we never see it?”

“Could be,” Jade agreed. “I can’t be the first person to ever think about it, though. I figure somebody from the south, a maester or a septon or somebody ought to have gone through the same thought process before and written it down. And I’ll bet that there’s more information on the weirwoods and how they tie into all this business in the Citadel or King’s—”

“Why didn’t you kneel?” Joffrey interrupted, gazing through slitted eyes at Jade.

The sorceress tilted her head slightly. “Pardon?”

“This morning,” he pressed, “why didn’t you kneel before my father? He’s king of the Seven Kingdoms. Why didn’t you show him respect?”

“I did show him respect. Twice, even.” Jade replied with faint puzzlement. Sansa looked between the two of them in confusion and growing alarm. To her sudden horror, she realized that she’d
started a conversation with the sorceress and then simply forgotten about the prince. She opened her mouth to say something but Joffrey beat her to it.

“But you didn’t bend the knee,” he said slowly, as if talking to a child. “You should’ve bent the knee, if you’re going to stay in my father’s realm any longer.”

Something flickered in the sorceress’s eyes, and Sansa blanched. But the moment was gone before Joffrey noticed and Mistress Jade smiled gently. “I am not Westerosi, young prince,” she said, that strange accent of her thickening by the word. “I bowed to honor him as I might to a king in my homeland, and your father the king accepted it. You accepted it not a moment ago when Lady Sansa introduced you. Did we all err?” Joffrey’s eyes narrowed further.

“That’s as may be,” he replied, “but then you refused his offer of a place at his table. Why?”

“As I said to your father, perspective. Also, with yourself, your siblings, your parents and your guards the high table seemed crowded enough as it was,” she added with a wry smile. Sansa wanted to laugh—it was true enough, sometimes the high table felt crowded even when it was just her family there—but the jest didn’t seem to mollify Joffrey.

“What perspective?” he demanded.

Mistress Jade considered this. “To be a lord is to look down at the world from on high,” she said. “I wanted to see what the world thought of him, looking up at his high spot.”

“And?”

She shrugged. “They seem to like him.”

Whatever it was Joffrey was searching for, the blithe statement seemed to satisfy him. “Then please forgive our… misunderstandings, my lady,” he said warmly. “Mayhaps you would be so kind as to educate us more on the quaint customs of your homeland?”

Jade returned the smile, but then that something flashed through the green again. “I’m always happy to teach, Prince Joffrey,” she said just as warmly. “Don’t be afraid to stop me and ask questions.”

The prince stood abruptly. “Lady Sansa, Mistress Jade, I believe I hear my bed calling for me. Please excuse me.”

Sansa stood alongside him. “My prince, may I show you to your chambers?” she asked.

He waved her off. “Thank you, my lady, but Ser Meryn will know the way,” He strode off, Kingsguard in pursuit, leaving Sansa behind with the sorceress slightly baffled and embarrassed.

“Well,” Jade said, still seated at the bench, “that was something.”

“I, Mistress Jade—” she started to say something, an explanation, an apology, something, but Jade laid a hand on her sleeve.

“It’s okay, Sansa,” she said softly. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I can’t not worry about it,” she admitted. Jade chuckled.
“I know, still… do me a favor and be careful around that guy, okay? He doesn’t look like the type who hears the word ‘no’ very often.”

Sansa’s mind whirled. Why would the sorceress tell her to be careful around Prince Joffrey? Was there something wrong? Was this—? “Is that a… prophecy?” she whispered. She’d heard talk about how her bastard brother had been given a prophecy at the Wall, but didn’t really believe it until just now.

Jade shook her head. “Just a bad feeling,” she replied. “But I trust my instincts. So be careful, okay? I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

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LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 57

King of Westeros arrived this morning, just getting back to bed after a very long day. Kind of tired of being a tourist attraction if I’m going to be honest, but needs must as the devil drives as Dad likes to say.

I decided to play up my foreign tendencies in the initial meet, hopefully to keep a little more distance between the court and me. It caught Stark off-guard, so he had some very pointy words for me when we had a kingless moment between us. He really doesn’t like the idea that I’m keeping things from the king—which would be funny in any other circumstances because I’m keeping all sorts of things from the both of them. If anything he’s probably more upset that I’m not the completely guileless foreigner he thought I was. I can’t really say I’m sorry about that.

Anyway, impressions: of the court I’ve only really met the king and his eldest son so far, though I expect to meet much of the court before they finally return south. King Robert reminds me a lot of people I’ve met in Fleet: very big on eating, drinking and being merry and not so much on leadership, administration and all that jazz. To be fair, I might be selling him short. He did just get here after all, and today was all about the big welcoming party so eating, drinking and being merry was the order of the day. I certainly hope I’m selling him short, royal patronage (or at least royal approval) would be a big help in figuring out this whole weirwood mystery.

The king’s kid Joffrey is… there’s something off about him. He’s handsome enough for a kid, and he seems charming but it’s all surface. There’s something hiding under that veneer of personality and I’m not sure I like what it is. Normally that wouldn’t be my business but he’s taken an interest in me—as has the king, apparently. Our initial meet wasn’t long, but he really wants me to be part of the royal court, as a curiosity or just to keep Stark from having access or what I don’t know. It’s enough to keep my guard up: patronage is one thing but being beholden to Robert or Joffrey doesn’t sit right.

Also, the prince has taken an interest in Sansa. I’m really sure I don’t like that. I may set up a drone to keep a discreet watch on her.

The royal court seems a bit tense. The castle grapevine tells me that the majority of courtiers belong to the queen’s family, not the king’s, and that king and queen don’t like each other very much. Yeah, political marriage, that makes sense. I’m not entirely sure why Queen Cersei came all this way, she clearly wants to be anywhere but here. (Which, you know, I can empathize with, but I’m better at covering.) I get the sense I might’ve annoyed her, though I can’t think of how or why. Hopefully I’ll get a private interview with her at some point; I really don’t need to worry about being accidentally partisan if I have to swim in court politics.
Hopefully. I don’t need that kind of bullshit in my life right now.
Thoughts on Strange Aliens

THE LEGENDARY BARD

By the time he managed to extricate himself from the feast hall, the moon had long since risen. The bard slipped carefully through Winterfell’s gates and made his way down the road to the winter town. His steps slowed as he neared the sky-ship. A queer enough thing in the daylight, in the night the sky-ship stood as an eerie spot of light in the darkness. The white metal gleamed under lights that neither flickered nor faded like torches, flashes of green and red flashed against the hull and in the quiet of night the bard could hear the thing hum softly, like a dragon singing to itself.

Mance Rayder sighed. At first he wanted to see a witch, then he had wanted to see a king. Now he had seen both. The king was unimpressive, a fat man riding on old glory with a cold wife and spoiled son. He might have been great once, but time and the southron lifestyle had taken their toll. Mance’s mind wandered to the task he had set himself, if he managed to unite all the tribes and become King-Beyond-The-Wall in truth, would he end up like that? Victorious in war but defeated by peace?

Perhaps. Though more likely I’ll end up dead and still walking. The bard shook his head. Kings in the lands beyond the Wall did not have much in the way of life expectancy, one way or the other, so thinking about might-bes years down the line was idle fantasy he could not afford.

And then there’s the witch. Mance knew witches. The free folk had their fair share of them, and they all tended to be the same kind of person. Capable with potions and powders like the southron maesters, not women worth crossing if a man valued his life. This witch, though, this woman from a fallen star... there was something deeply unsettling about her. For the life of him, Mance could not quite put a finger on it. She called herself a ranger—a word that plucked a string deep in his soul—and seemed to be part knight, part maester and part bard all rolled into one slim woman in green. For a man raised by crows and run away to the free folk, the combination was almost intoxicating.

It’s almost too bad, he thought, gazing up at the sky-ship’s white metal. We could make some beautiful music together, if she weren’t a kneeler.

The bard dipped his head to the softly singing bulk of the witch’s ship. He had to get back to the winter town, recover his horse and make his way home to the lands of the free folk. Things were in motion beyond the wall bigger than any one man or witch, and he had to get his people through them.

And yet...

“I’ll be back for you,” he vowed, then turned and walked away.

THE FLAMING SWORD

The Mended Drum was not, perhaps, the most charming inn in Aegon’s great city, less tumbledown than many if not a place for the respectable of Westeros. However, its position between the Street of Steel, the Street of Silk and the Red Keep made it excellent lodging for a man with interests in all three places. Thoros of Myr found the inn years before, fresh off the boat from Essos when he’d come at the behest of the priesthood to convert old King Aerys to the faith, and had quartered there ever since.
The evening at the Mended Drum began much as any other, with Thoros placed at his customary table by the fire, a flagon of wine and a plate of the inn’s best food on the table, and one of the comelier serving girls attending to his needs. Some nights Thoros would draw a crowd of admirers and he’d spend the evening telling tales of his time at court or of the Greyjoy revolt or parables of R’hllor. This night the red wizard sat alone, nursing his wine and alternating between staring into the fire and staring at the door. The regular inhabitants paid him no mind, until the door opened.

Through the door came a woman, tall, proud and beautiful, dressed in red robes like the ones Thoros draped himself with. The room’s activity dropped to a low buzz as she wove her way through the crowd, evading leer and grope, until she found herself before the red wizard. “Brother,” the red woman said in greeting. Thoros’s lips split into a broad smile. It was just as the priest’s letter had said.

“All men and women are brothers and sisters in R’hllor’s light,” the red woman said smoothly. “Though some of us are more so than others,” Thoros added. “Now off with you, Dyanna, and don’t forget the wine!”

The serving girl looked at his new guest, puzzled. “This is your sister, milord?” she asked.

“Not at all, brother. The Lord and the temple both guided my path.” Melisandre looked around the dim, smoky room. “Even after the Lord showed me I wasn’t expecting something so...”

“Low?” Thoros said helpfully. “Run down? Flea-bitten? Aye, not exactly the Free Cities to be sure, but it’s home enough. The Lord provides.”

Melisandre spread her hands, favoring the red priest with half a smile. “As you say, brother,” she murmured. “I believe Benerro thought your place in court higher, though, if this is home and not someplace closer to the king.”

Thoros coughed. “Benerro is a good servant of our Lord,” he said carefully, trying not to step on any perceived offense to the high priest. “But he doesn’t understand the Westerosi. The king appreciates my company in his tourneys and in his cups, and my sword is sworn to his service, but I am still Myrish. Without some great deed to ennoble my foreign blood, this is as far as I might go, and even that has its limits.” He shrugged. “Despite my lodgings I still hold the king’s favor. It balances out.”

The red woman nodded. “And do you still spread the light of our Lord? Or is your time spent drinking, fighting and whoring?”

“Aha!” Thoros laughed. “I spend only a fraction of my time drinking, fighting and whoring. A third, perhaps, no more. I still preach when I am able; my status as one of King Robert’s men gives me that leeway, at least.” His mouth twisted into a wry little frown. “I will not claim any great success. Certainly no hightborn, and few enough of the smallfolk have joined our Lord’s ranks for all
my years of effort in King’s Landing. A hard-headed folk, these Andals. Stubborn. Even the poorest
men in Flea Bottom are unwilling to give up their seven for the One. Still, the Lord does not set us
tasks we are unequal to; the fat old septons still grumble about Essosi witchcraft, I still preach and a
handful will listen and believe.”

Melisandre leaned in closer. “It is witchcraft of another kind I wish to speak of with you, brother,”
she said in a low tone. Thoros nodded thoughtfully.

“Aye,” he said slowly. “The letter from Volantis said as much. Visions of a bird made of fire
touching earth in the sunset lands, magic and miracles and the approaching dark.” He leaned back in
his chair, hands on his generous belly, and looked at Melisandre. “I envy you, sister,” he said. “I
truly do. I get by on sword and guile and faith, while R’hllor speaks to you more clearly and more
often than ever he spoke to me. To be guided by the Lord’s own fiery hand...” The red wizard
shook, violently. “But no more of that. To the matter at hand. The red bird Benerro describes in his
letter, you have seen it as well?”

Melisandre nodded. “Not as a bird, but as a star cast down to earth, in the form of a woman,” she
replied.

Thoros blinked. “Well, now that is interesting, sister,” he mused. “Not quite two turns of the moon
ago I, and much of Westeros no doubt, saw a falling star cross the northern horizon at midday. Only
for the briefest moment, mind.”

“The northern horizon,” the red woman mumbled, eyes far away.

“Aye, and then things get stranger yet. Since then the Red Keep has received a steady stream of
ravens from Winterfell. The streets are full of rumor of strange sorcery afoot in the north; that the star
was some sort of chariot or ship and the gods walk among mortals. Fantastic tales with very little
truth to them, if any, but the fact remains: the star fell in the North, and Winterfell is connected to it
somehow.”

“Winterfell,” Melisandre stated, sounding hopelessly tired. Thoros felt a twinge of sympathy in his
breast for the priestess. “Thank you, brother. If you will allow me to impose on your hospitality for a
night, I shall find transport to Winterfell.”

“Of course, sister, of course,” Thoros said. “Though I urge you to stay; it’s been too long since I’ve
had the chance to speak with a fellow servant I didn’t convert myself. As well, I doubt the Lord sent
you here simply for my poor counsel.”

“If the falling star is in the North, then I must go to it,” Melisandre argued. Thoros’s eyes twinkled.

“Ah, but if the star instead comes to you? Consider this, sister: shortly after the star fell over the
north, King Robert and much of the court began a journey to Winterfell. They knew not what
Winterfell had found, Lord Stark hadn’t yet sent word of what they had found in that cold waste. It’s
likely that the king find our red bird waiting for him at Winterfell, and knowing the king he may
persuade it to return to the city with him.”

“And when she comes, we shall be here waiting for an audience,” the red woman finished, the hint
of a smile on her face. “Your counsel is not as poor as you say, brother Thoros.”

Thoros answered her with a small smile of his own. “I have my moments. Now, let us have some of
this good Reacher wine and plan out how we shall get you an audience with the red bird...”
Jaime Lannister had expected cold and boredom when he came to the North, and the first few days of the king’s visit to Winterfell had been filled with both. Too much time following the fat fool around, not near enough time in close proximity to his sweet sister, and even in summer the air was dammably cold and dreary. The only novelty in the experience was the unexpected appearance of the fallen star and the witch it carried; that at least had befuddled Fat Robert as well as him.

Now, Jaime stood at the top of Winterfell’s highest tower in the freezing dark whilst the witch, Cersei’s two youngest and two of the Stark whelps looked at the stars through Myrish glass. What on earth this was supposed to accomplish, Jaime knew not, but the children seemed excited. *Excited by the small things, that’s the way of children I suppose.*

“I see… ears!” Princess Myrcella exclaimed. “The Father has big ears like elephants!” The witch laughed at this.

“They’re not ears, they’re rings,” the Stark girl, the homely one—*Arya*, he recalled vaguely—said, giving the princess a not-unfriendly shove.

“They look like ears to me,” Myrcella retorted. Jaime chuckled, then stifled a yawn. *Up far too late with no action to keep me awake. Gods save me from this nighttime duty again.*

“Lady Jade says they’re rings,” Arya said. Her brother—*what was his name? Brad? No, Bran*—nodded in agreement. “Tell her!” The witch laughed again, then ruffled the girl’s hair to her obvious displeasure.

“Arya’s not wrong, little princess,” she said. “Think of it like, oh, a great big circle of cloth with a hole in the middle, draped around the Father’s waist. That’s what you’re see when you look at it through the glass.

“But why do they look like ears?” the princess asked.

“Because at this moment the way the Father is pointed at the world makes the ring look like ears. Sometimes they’ll look like funny little arms, and sometimes you can’t see them at all. It all depends on when you look. Everything is in motion, little princess.”

“Does that include the earth, my lady?” Jaime called, casting out for something to take his mind from the ever-present cold. The witch looked up from her charges and met his eyes. It was hard to see but he imagined a faint glint of challenge in the woman’s eye.

“Oh of course it does, Ser Jaime,” she said cheerfully. Nothing stays still for long, just ask the maesters if you don’t believe me.” Jaime held the woman’s gaze for a long moment before settling back into a more languid pose.

“Forgive my impertinence, my lady,” he drawled, “I was merely curious.”

The witch shrugged. “No harm done, good ser,” she replied. “Always willing to help people learn new things.”
“Lady Jade,” Prince Tommen said suddenly from his perch near the parapet’s edge, “what’s that?” The witch moved over to him, the others following in her wake. Tommen, spyglass in hand, pointed at a fat spark of light on the western horizon, drifting slowly higher into the sky.

The witch hummed one of her incessant tunes. “Well, I’m not entirely sure,” she said. “Hand me the scope would you, there’s a dear.” The prince obediently gave her the glass and she pointed it at the spark. “Well, it’s not a planet, close enough that it’s obviously not a star and it’s kind of… lumpy?” She pulled the glass from her eye and gave it a look of amused disgust. “Amazing how useless these things can be for some work. Hm. Maybe Victory can pick it out.”

“Your ship has eyes?” Bran Stark said curiously.

“Of course! Can’t rely on just my own eyes, after all. And I think the castle isn’t blocking line of sight, so…” She whistled sharply. From behind Jaime, one of the damnable little balls she called familiars shot up the stairwell, over his shoulder and darted to face the witch. “Skippy,” she ordered, “link into ship’s sensors, give me a short-range visual scan on designated target and display here.”

The familiar chimed like a bell and suddenly the air before it unfolded into a window of blue light. Along the edges of the pane words and figures curled like elaborate scrollwork, and in the center of the pane he saw… “Well,” the witch said. “Hello you.”

“Krakens!” Tommen and Bran shouted at the same time. And so it was: in the pane Jaime could see five great creatures drifting in the night sky, long tentacles streaming behind them, stirring gently like a squid in a current. He had never seen a live kraken, but he knew his sigils and if those weren’t krakens he’d eat his breastplate. “What are krakens doing in the sky?” the prince asked, eyes wide and fixed on the image.

“Tiyanki,” the witch corrected. “They look a lot like krakens, but they’re actually very different. They live out there,” she waved at the speckled darkness above them, “between the stars, mostly.”

“Are they dangerous?” the Stark girl asked. “Theon likes to spin tales of krakens devouring entire fleets of ships.”

“Well I wouldn’t want to get too close to one, they’re pretty big and not very bright. But on the whole tiyanki are pretty harmless. Kind of like, oh, really big cows with tentacles.” The children giggled at the thought of that. “For Rangers,” the witch continued, “tiyanki are actually a charm of sorts. If you see a pod that means you’re bound to have good luck on your journey.”

“Really?” Tommen said.

“Yuh-huh. Of course,” she added with a rueful tone Jaime didn’t think the children could hear, “I saw a pod leaving home on my way here, so… well.” The witch frowned. “Come to think of it, it’s a little weird to see a pod in orbit here. They usually stay away from inhabited planets.”

“Mayhap more good fortune is coming your way, my lady?” Jaime offered. “Since the last time you saw these sky-krakens you graced us with your presence.” The witch looked up at Jaime. Her eyes narrowed, and his smirk widened just a little.

“One does wonder, Ser Jaime,” she said lightly.

Just then, the familiar buzzed like a hive of angry bees and the image of the sky-krakens vanished,
replaced by a smaller window of red light with the words INCOMING TRANSMISSION blinking in purest white in the center. The children looked confused, and Jaime not far behind. The witch however stared at the words blank with shock.

“Oh my god,” she whispered, then swiped at the window. The words faded away and were replaced by new ones:

MESSAGE RECEIVED. WE’RE COMING TO GET YOU, HASEGAWA.

The witch stared at the message, face pale. “Oh my god,” she whispered. Her hand reached out and touched the familiar’s window, the words curling around her fingers like smoke. She fell to her knees with a choked sob. She knelt there, quivering in the moonlight, making small hiccupping noises. Myrcella and Tommen stood there awkwardly, unsure what was going on or what to do. Bran Stark knelt beside the witch.

“Are you alright, Lady Jade?” he asked, tugging on her sleeve. “What’s wrong?”

“I did it,” she replied, looking up. Tears streamed from her eyes, and her lips split in a triumphant, terrifying grin. “I made it through. They got the message, Bran. They’re coming.”

“Who?” the boy asked, obviously confused.

“Starfleet! My people, Bran! I sent a message and they received it! They’re coming for me!” The witch’s voice rose to a roar. “I’m not a castaway anymore! Starfleet is coming!” She whooped with unholy glee, leapt to her feet and grabbed both Starks in a tight embrace. “Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes YES!” she cackled, dancing around the top of the castle in in a mad frenzy.

Beneath them, Jaime could hear wolves howling in time to the witch’s joy.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 68

I am an idiot. And I was so happy last night, too.

Recap: Starfleet got my message and sent a reply. It’s not much because my bandwidth is lousy, but it’s enough. They know I’m out here and they’re coming to get me. More than enough to celebrate—or break down crying in front of small children, which I can do because I’m an adult and I can be honest with my feelings.

But (and there’s always one of those, isn’t there?) there’s a problem.

I still don’t know what dropped Victory out of orbit. And I need to know, as soon as possible. Assuming they sent the message as soon as they diverted a ship—hopefully I’ll get some follow up messages regarding who’s coming and from where—I have between five and seven hundred days until the rescue expedition gets here. I won’t have reliable real-time communication with the rescue ship until it gets to within the Planetos system’s Oort cloud, which would be the last six to eight hours of the trip, depending. I have roughly that amount of time to determine what happened. Based on the evidence, it wasn’t a random micrometeorite or cosmic ray event that fragged the FTL and the anisbles.

Something deliberately crashed my ship; Victory is too damaged in exactly the right way to keep me grounded, but not badly enough to abandon, to be accidental. And if they shot me down, that means
anybody else who gets too close to the planet might be in the same sort of danger.

I won’t have my saviors stranded on this damned rock with me if I can help it.

The weirwood trees and the riddle of Planetos’s Builder connections just went to the top of my priority list. Added to the list of questions to ask once I’ve got a tree translator working is, why wasn’t this place marked as defended on the Tanis map? The Builders were pretty good with annotations, you’d think that they would’ve added a “approach with caution” tag or something. But more to the point, if there are active defenses running (clearly yes) I need to know what they are, how they’re operated, who’s operating them and how to shut them down.

And I need to do this before Starfleet gets here in a year-plus. So, you know, no pressure.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 70

The word that Starfleet is coming has spread around the castle. I suppose getting the message in the middle of a late-night astronomy session with the royal kidlings helped that move faster than it might’ve. The general take on the situation seems to be polite congratulations followed by benign indifference. I can’t say I’m surprised, really: the whole stranded-cosmonaut thing is pretty out of context for a bunch of postclassical lords and knights. They don’t quite get what it means that Starfleet is coming for me.

To be fair I’m not sure I quite get what that means, either. This entire trip has been one long string of first contact SNAFUs, one after the other. Once the fleet arrives I’m going to have a lot of explaining to do but since I can prove the inciting incident wasn’t my fault I’m not too worried about what happens to me. What happens to Planetos, on the other hand… this is something of a new situation for us. We’ve seen planets with native populations and active Builder relics before, but generally those were either pre-civic populations that didn’t live near the relics (so we could examine them without worrying about mucking up the contact) or they were advanced enough that we could make contact without getting imperialist about it. Planetos’s mix of medieval society and Builder-influenced weird is something Contact Service has gamed out but never seen in the wild, as it were. It’ll be interesting to see how this shakes out, assuming they let me near this planet ever again.

Anyway, since my priorities have shifted thanks to getting the message, my educational activities with the younger children are getting cut back. The kids are disappointed but the adults don’t seem to be too put out. The king and queen, at least, certainly don’t seem to give much of a damn. Odd, that. I’d had the idea that Queen Cersei spoiled her kids, so I’d expected a royal command to keep entertaining them or something. So far, nada. Ah, whatever, I’m sure that’ll change once Myrcella and Tommen try to puppy-eye her to death or something.

Work on the tree translator continues. I have four separate designs for a weirwood resonator that ought to work, which means that at least one of them will work. I’ll start construction on the first design today, and with luck I’ll have it ready for testing in the next two or three days. I’ve commandeered a room in the old abandoned keep to act as a workshop—it’s not perfect by any means but it’s closer to the godswood than the ship is, and hauling a portable generator and the gear up the stairs is less of a hassle than having to run all the way across the castle to test things. It also gives me a space to store all the books on Northern and Westerosi history I keep borrowing from Luwin, and gives him the security that I’m not just going to raise ship in the middle of the night and steal all his books. Not that I would do that, of course. Though sometimes, it’s tempting. So very tempting. Yes, my precious books…
I’d make copies and give them back, of course. I’m not a *savage*.
Interlude: Meanwhile, Back At the Ranch...

***FLASH TRAFFIC***

TO: KIRK, Cpt. Winona, cmdg FWSS Kongou CA-314
FROM: AL-XU'FFASCH, Adm. Idris, cmdg Federal Starfleet Ranger Command Ceres

Cpt. Kirk you and your command are hereby relieved from current duty and ordered to proceed to Starbase Canaveral to join SciRon 47 and then proceed at best possible speed to Tanis Catalog system FSC-29294 to recover Cpt. Jade Hasegawa SRC and FWSC Carefree Victory AGS-3172. Carefree Victory encountered an anomaly in the FSC-29294 system that grounded the ship and impaired communications. Cpt. Hasegawa has successfully established limited communications via the Cervantes subspace relay, and has reported discovery of a human-transplant civilization as well as Builder artifacts that may still be active.

Recovering Cpt. Hasegawa and Carefree Victory are the priority goals of this mission. Once recovered Kongou will provide assistance to SciRon 47 while it undertakes a detailed survey of FSC-29294 to determine the nature of Builder operations in the system. At this point you will return to Starbase Canaveral for formal debrief.

Updates to these orders will be transmitted via anisble in the event Cpt. Hasegawa is able to transmit more detailed information to Ranger Command.

Al-Xu'ffasch

***FLASH TRAFFIC***

TO: KIRK, Cpt. Winona, cmdg FWSS Kongou CA-314
FROM: AL-XU'FFASCH, Adm. Idris, cmdg Federal Starfleet Ranger Command Ceres

UPDATE TO ORDERS PREVIOUSLY TRANSMITTED

Cpt. Hasegawa has transmitted the following message to Cervantes relay:

STARFLEET BE ADVISED FSC-29294 III POSSIBLY GUARDED BY ACTIVE DEFENSES @ <1000KM LEVEL. CONTINUING TO INVESTIGATE OPTIONS. HASEGAWA AGS-3174

The nature of communications between Cpt. Hasegawa and Ranger Command is by necessity limited. That said, this suggests that the Builder artifacts/presence in the FSC-29294 system is considerably more active than any Builder site encountered before. Caution on final approach to the system is advised.

Subspace protocols for communicating with Carefree Victory have been attached to this message. You are authorized to modify mission parameters based on communications between Kongou and Cpt. Hasegawa, provided that priority goals are not compromised.

Al-Xu'ffasch
BRAN

The man looked over at the woman. “The things I do for love,” he said with loathing. He gave Bran a shove.

Screaming, Bran went backward out the window into empty air. There was nothing to grab on to. The courtyard rushed up to meet him...

His fall stopped with a jerk and a lance of pain running up his leg. He swung wildly, bouncing off the wall hard enough to see stars.

“Bran! Bran!” Someone was calling his name, but he couldn’t figure out who. “Look at me, kiddo. C’mon, up here Bran, look up for a second.” He looked up. A tanned hand was firmly affixed to his ankle. The sorceress dangled upside-down from the tower. “It’s okay,” she said soothingly. “I’ve got you, I’ve got you.”

“You’ve got me?” Bran squeaked. “Who’s got you?!”

“One thing at a time, risu-kun.” Lady Jade pulled and the pain in his leg jumped sharply. Bran cried out, and she relaxed a little. “Okay,” she said. “That’s not going to work. Can’t go back the way I came so we’re going to have to get creative and I’m going to need both hands to make this work.”

Below them a great commotion started, shouts and cries and wolves howling. Between the noise and the pain Bran could scarcely think. “Okay Bran,” Lady Jade said, “I’ve got a plan but I need your help, okay? You need to climb up on my back, can you do that?” She held out her free hand.

“I think so,” Bran squirmed. Every movement made his leg feel worse, but he managed to fold himself and grabbed her hand. Gingerly, he pulled himself up and threw his arms around her waist. The moment he had a tight grip she released his ankle. The pain in his leg lessened.

“All right, alright, that’s good,” she said. “Now for the next bit. Hang on tight, kiddo.” Bran closed his eyes. The sorceress tensed, then pushed off the rock. The people below screamed as for a moment the two were back in open air. Bran tumbled for a moment, then found himself clinging to Lady Jade’s back, arms and good leg wrapped around her.

Bran whimpered. “It’s okay, honey,” Lady Jade said quietly. “The really hard part’s over, now it’s just getting down. We’ll have you down on the ground in a jiffy.”

“We?” he asked weakly. The sorceress made no reply, but he could hear a buzzing and chiming all about them. He risked opening his eyes. Around them Lady Jade’s familiars hovered like winged bells. The familiars glowed with blue-green light, like sunlight through the glass garden. It tingled.

Slowly, deliberately Lady Jade began to climb down the broken tower, Bran on her back and the familiars pacing her. The pain in his bad leg started to get bad again, and the stars danced in his eyes. “Almost there, Bran, almost there,” she said.
Near the ground, she took one giant step and the familiars caught them, lowering them gently to earth like a babe into a cradle. Jade gently plucked Bran from around her neck and pulled him around. His mother stood there next to Maester Luwin, both of them white-faced.

Bran smiled weakly at his mother, then the pain in leg and head overwhelmed him and darkness closed in. Overhead crows circled, cawing for corn.

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CATELYN

My son is alive.

The lady of Winterfell felt her son’s forehead as he turned restlessly in his bed. The master said that Bran had swooned from the shock of the fall and the injury done to his leg during his rescue. The leg was already splinted and made fast, and Luwin reassured her that he would recover quickly enough. “Young boys are quite resilient when they need to be,” he’d said.

It didn’t feel like reassurance. Every time Catelyn closed her eyes for a moment, she could still see Bran dangling like a rag from the broken tower, one leg clutched in the sorceress’s hand. Every movement she expected the green witch to lose her grip and Bran to fall, or for the both of them to come free and land in a bloody heap at the tower’s foot. My son fell, and he’s alive, thanks to her.

The door opened and her lord husband barged through, still dressed for hunting. He swept her up in a crushing embrace. “Cat,” he said, “what happened here?”

“I know not exactly what happened,” she replied. “Bran was climbing the walls again—” Ned scowled at this news “—and he must have slipped and fallen from the tower.”

Ned looked at his sleeping son, white with horror. “Gods,” he whispered. “Is he?”

“He will be fine,” Catelyn replied firmly. “Your pet sorceress caught him before he reached the ground. His leg was broken, but Maester Luwin has already set it and given him milk of the poppy to ease the pain. He’ll be fine, Ned.”

Ned gazed thoughtfully at Bran. “An accident,” he half-asked. “And where is our pet sorceress? I owe her my thanks for this.”

Catelyn wasn’t sure. The moment after Bran had fainted and the sorceress handed him to her and Luwin, she had apparently vanished. Only the great white bulk of her sky-ship outside the gates showed that the woman was still in Winterfell. “Stay with Bran, love,” she said, “and I shall find her.”

Mistress Hasegawa turned out to be surprisingly easy to find, though she had help from an unexpected source. The mother direwolf found Catelyn in the great hall and silently led her up to a chamber near her lord husband’s solar. The sorceress perched in the window, looking out at the setting sun.

Catelyn stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “How is he?” the sorceress asked.

“A few bumps on the head, and Maester Luwin says his leg was broken,” she replied. The sorceress’s face twisted at the report and she turned back to the dark sky. “He will recover, in time.”
“Good, that’s good,” she said, then sighed. “M’sorry.”

Catelyn blinked. Of all the responses she’d expected, that was certainly not on the list. “Sorry?” she said.

“For hurting him,” the sorceress said. “Shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry.”

“If not for your actions, my lady,” Catelyn said hotly, “I would be mourning my son right now. You have nothing to apologize for today. If anything Winterfell is in your debt!” The sorceress looked at her oddly, and laughed lightly.

“You know,” she said, “I think that’s the first time you ever called me that. I don’t know why I noticed that.”

Catelyn smiled, just a little. A little bit of the tension she’d felt since the woman had delivered Bran into the maester’s arms lessened. “A slip of the tongue, nothing more,” she said. “Rest assured, Mistress Jade, it will not happen again.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” the sorceress laughed. “And… if Luwin needs help, I’m not much of a healer but…”

“I’m sure Maester Luwin will ask if your aid is needed,” Catelyn said. She gave the sorceress a speculative eye. The sorceress fidgeted under her gaze. “You’re a strange creature,” she said finally. “If anyone else had done what you did today, they would tell tales and sing songs about it all night long. Yet here you are, brooding in a window.”

Mistress Jade sighed and looked back out the window. “I don’t like seeing children hurt,” she said. “I really don’t like hurting them myself, and I especially don’t like hurting them when I’m trying to do right by them. I know,” she went on, holding up a placating hand, “it’s not really my fault. Up here,” she tapped her head, “I know that it’s gravity and inertia and bad luck that hurt Bran. But down here?” she tapped her breast. “Different story.”

Catelyn shook her head. “I am afraid, Mistress Jade, that you must put aside your brooding for now. My lord husband wishes to thank you personally for your heroism, and it’s likely His Grace will have something to say as well.”

The sorceress looked longingly back out the window, then slowly swung off the windowsill. “Well, far be it from me to disappoint the lord of the house, milady,” she said, “Lead on, and I shall endeavour to endure gratitude, song and wine to the best of my ability.”

The door opened, and one of the castle servants entered, looking around nervously. “Your pardon, milady,” the poor girl said, “but Her Grace wishes to speak with the witch-woman in her chambers at once.”

“Or not,” Mistress Jade said amiably.

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**CERSEI**

The queen of the Seven Kingdoms paced like a caged lion. Her mind whirled with recriminations. *Damn Jaime and his impulsiveness! Damn the boy for getting too close! Damn the witch for keeping the boy alive!*
Why had the witch been in the keep? Was it all some sort of Stark ploy, to have the boy spy on her, then take what he found to Robert? Why would the witch use the boy and not one of her damnable creatures? The things seemed to get everywhere in Winterfell, it was only the gods’ grace that they hadn’t already seen her and Jaime.

And what would the witch receive in return for her information? It was clear that the woman had no interest in Robert’s cock, no matter how he tried to press the thing against her. Perhaps she was some sort of female sword-swallower—Cersei had heard tales about that sort of thing. Or perhaps this is all a ploy as well, she thought. Worming her way into Robert’s confidences and bed after revealing our infidelity…

Cersei considered the notion. It was compelling, and yet it lacked something. The witch seemed to take no interest in the game of thrones, concerned solely with her ship, the castle and the Northmen’s stupid trees. No matter how her fat fool of a husband or her sweet son wanted the woman at court, she seemed disinterested. There was something else hiding under the surface, something driving the witch that Cersei couldn’t quite grasp.

No matter. The queen would learn the truth from this foreign witch and then decide what to do with that knowledge.

Someone rapped on her door. Cersei slowed to a halt before the fireplace, the image of Lannister grace and composure. “You may enter,” she said loudly enough to carry through the oaken door.

The opened and the green witch stepped through. She bowed stiffly, the same way she had the day of their arrival. “Your Grace, how may I be of service?” The words were smooth and practiced, even in that funny accent.

“How is the boy?” Cersei asked lightly. The witch’s face twisted in a perfectly-constructed mask of concern. The queen had to admit that the other woman was an excellent mummer if nothing else.

“Still asleep at last report, your grace. He had a difficult afternoon, after all.”

“Mm. Did he speak on what caused his accident?” Here was the heart of it: had the spy reported, and what did he tell? Cersei held her breath, waiting.

“He’s not been awake long enough to say one way or another, Your Grace,” the witch replied. “In fact, he may not remember the incident clearly one way or the other.”

Cersei exhaled discreetly. This seemed to be almost too good to be true. Perhaps another plot?

“Truly?” she said, not pretending to hide the surprise in her voice.

The witch shrugged. “I’m not a doctor—ah, a healer, forgive me—but I know a few things. The mind is a funny thing, your grace. Some things it remembers with perfect clarity and others not so much. It’s possible he won’t remember, I couldn’t say one way or the other with surety.”

“Of course, of course,” the queen said. “The gods must have sent you, to be in such an… isolated position at the right moment to catch young lord Stark as he fell.”

“Dumb luck I was close enough to the window to dive out after him, really,” replied the witch. “But I’d been up there for the last ten days. Did Your Grace not notice?”
Cersei’s eyes widened. Truly, she hadn’t noticed that the witch was taking up a room in the old keep. She and Jaime had used the tower several times for their liaisons and she never noticed… “An interesting place for one with her own ship, Captain. Why haunt a place such as that?”

“It’s got plenty of space,” the witch said. “And it’s closer to the godwood than I can park the Victory.” Wildfire eyes met Lannister green. “If one was looking for a great deal of privacy it’s the perfect place to work without interruptions.”

*She knows, she knows she knows.* “Ah,” Cersei said weakly.

The witch shrugged again. “But that’s just me. I’m content to be left alone, so long as there isn’t an epidemic of injured children. *Then* I’d have to get involved.”

Cersei composed herself to the best of her ability. The witch knew, or at least suspected, but would take no action? Did she think the mere knowledge would give her power over the queen? Over a Lannister? Or was it just… unimportant? Did the queen of the Seven Kingdoms truly mean so little to her? Either thought was infuriating, but Cersei did not show it on her face.

“I see. Thank you, Mistress Hasegawa, for informing me of the situation.” *I will remember this, little witch.* “If I may be of help to you or the maester, please let me know.”

The witch bowed in that stiff fashion again. “I shall, Your Grace. Did you require anything else? I believe your husband and Lord Stark wished to see me as well.”

Cersei waved. “No, you may return to… whatever it is you do.” *I must send a raven to Casterly Rock. Father may know something more, how to control a creature like this. Steps must be taken.*

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 78**

Rescued a prince from certain doom, managed to get tangled up in local politics as a result. I’m really starting to regret not staying in the freakin’ woods with the wolves.

Right, okay, so Starfleet drills into us that we’re not supposed to get involved in local affairs when we’re neck-deep in a first contact. That’s First Contact 101: don’t get involved because you have *no freakin’ idea* about how the locals operate and getting involved will make things more difficult in the short, medium and long term.

It’s a great idea in theory. In practice, it’s a bit stickier. Especially when you’re operating by yourself on a pre-industrial planet without the benefit of a starship or five in orbit.

I’ve come to accept that at this point I’m pretty much stuck into Westerosi politics. There really isn’t any good way to escape it *and* still accomplish my goals. That window closed for good once the king’s party arrived, hell it probably closed when Stark and his men found me in the forest. I’ve established myself as the enigmatic foreigner unfamiliar with Westerosi ways (true enough) but my existence, and the power inherent in my technology, will provoke interest. I think the fact that Starfleet is coming to my rescue might’ve finally percolated down through some of the quicker souls in the king’s party, too: it’s not *just* me, there are *more* people like me and they’re going to be here in a year and a half, give or take.

I am now a valuable commodity. Imagine my joy.
Naturally, this is the moment in time when I do something noble and reckless which may cause significant problems down the line.

Today I caught a kid who fell out of a window. (Yay, heroism!) Problem is, I have a suspicion that he didn’t fall so much as he was thrown out. (Boo, villainy!) I have suspects, but… they’re politically connected. And the kid in question is one of Stark’s, to boot.

Fuck it, this log’s secure. I’ll just say it: I think Queen Cersei has something to do with this whole thing. I don’t know what, exactly, but she demanded my presence not long after and all but insinuated that I knew something (I didn’t), she knew that I knew (ditto) and that she would make my existence as miserable and short as possible if I spilled the beans. That last bit’s got me more than a little worried, to be honest.

Based on what Cersei said, I think she has a piece on the side and she was up in the top room with this as-yet-to-be-named-piece when Bran Stark fell off the tower. I’m guessing he saw them in flagrante and they panicked, or maybe he got curious and hit a loose patch, I don’t know. Bran’s the only one who could say one way or the other, but the maester has him out cold for right now.

If it comes out that that’s what happened, then things get interesting. The Stark and Lannister families don’t seem to like each other all that much, and now I’ve gone and potentially saved a Stark from Lannister treachery. Keeping Bran from going splat has raised my portfolio substantially within Winterfell, but the Lannisters are effectively co-rulers of the damn continent at the moment. The crown prince is half-Lannister after all; if I raise a hint of this it could not only fuck me over, it could start a civil war.

And then there’s the affair business, which almost certainly would start a war. To be fair I can’t blame Cersei for sleeping around. I’ve met her husband, after all; if I was trapped in a marriage to that hot mess I’d be having orgies every other Tuesday, queue forms to the left. And I can’t really blame her for being even a little paranoid about the whole deal. King Bob is a guy who clearly enjoys his violence, and this is a medieval society. If he even suspects that the queen has been unfaithful things could escalate very quickly and bloodily.

On the other hand, she really needs to pick her paramours for smarts if they think throwing kids out windows is a good way to keep quiet about their shenanigans.

I’ve made some conciliatory mouth noises in Cersei’s direction and she’s backed off with the implicit threats for now. I don’t expect her to start anything unless she needs to make a quick exit, or her or her idiot boyfriend try and mess with Bran.

In an ideal situation, anyway. I’m not nearly that lucky, so I’m keeping my shields tuned, my drones nearby, my sensors on full and my blaster warm.

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**BRAN**

Bran fell through the darkness.

*Fly,* a voice whispered in his ears, but Bran did not know how.

The ground was so far below, a thousand miles away, a patchwork of green and brown and blue and white like on Lady Jade’s magic maps. It was cold in the darkness, only the ground and the dark and the whispering voice. He wanted to cry.
"Not cry, fly."

“I don’t know how to fly,” Bran said.

*Are you sure? How do you know if you’ve never tried?*

The voice was high and thin. Bran spotted a crow spiraling down with him, just out of reach, following him as he fell. “Help me,” he said.

*I’m trying,* the crow replied.

“Are you really a crow?” Bran asked.

*Are you really falling?* The crow asked back.

“It’s just a dream,” Bran said. “Just a dream. I’ll wake up when I hit the ground.”

*Maybe,* the crow said. *Or maybe you’ll die when you hit the ground.* Bran looked down. He could see mountains, peaks white with snow, and the thin ribbons of water snaking through dark woods. He began to cry.

*Now now, I already told you that won’t do any good,* the crow chided. *I told you, the answer is flying, not crying. How hard can it be?*

“You have wings,” Bran pointed out.

*Maybe you do, too.*

Bran felt along his arms, seeking for feathers.

*There are different kinds of wings,* the crow said.

Bran’s head swam. How had he gotten here? He tried to remember. A face emerged from the mists, shining with golden light. “The things I do for love,” it said.

Bran shrieked. The crow cawed. *Not that,* it cried at him. *Forget that, you do not need it now, put it aside, put it away.* It landed on Bran’s shoulder and pecked at him, and the shining golden face was gone.

He fell faster than ever, the earth rising to meet him. “What are you doing to me?” he asked fearfully.

*Teaching you how to fly.*

“I’m not flying, I’m falling!”

*Every flight begins with a fall,* the crow said.

*He’s not wrong,* a new voice said. Bran and the crow blinked, then looked up to see another had joined them in their lonely plunge through the night. The newcomer was a great gull, broad and gray with wings longer than Bran was tall. *A great man once said,* the gull said idly, spinning around boy and crow in a wide circle, *that flying is the art of throwing yourself at the ground and missing.*
What the… the crow said slowly. What is the meaning of this?!

Is there a meaning to this? asked the gull. I’m just enjoying the flight. It pivoted, and Bran saw that one wingtip hung uselessly, even as the rest of the wing caught the air. Don’t get to fly like this very often. It’s actually pretty fun.

I, you, the crow sputtered. Bran felt even more confused than he was when all this started. You shouldn’t be here! What in all the gods’ names are you doing here?!

The gull cocked a confused eye at the crow. What am I doing here? What are you doing here? I’m pretty sure this is my dream.

Before today, Bran had no idea that crows could look murderous. Damnation, woman, this isn’t your dream, it shrilled, leaping from Bran to flap in the gull’s face. This is delicate business and you have no part in it! Leave!

Woah hey hey ow ow ow knock it off what’s the matter with you hey ow ow hey!

Out out out out out GET OUT!

The gull spiralled off with an indignant squawk. Fine! I know when I’m not wanted! Good luck with the flying, kiddo, and remember to miss! The gull plunged back into the mist, vanishing with a flash of green.

“What… was that about?” Bran asked timidly. The crow gave him a look, then hung its head.

A reminder that I shouldn’t put on airs, I think, it said finally. But enough of that for the moment. You need to learn to fly, or did you forget already?

Bran looked down at the rapidly approaching ground and whimpered.

THE BROKEN-WINGED GULL

Jade bolted upright in her bunk, blurted “Football practice!” and tumbled to the deck, tangled in her sheets.

“Okay, what the hell was that?” she asked no one in particular, once she’d managed to extricate herself. She’d been in the middle of a dream, pretending she was a bird, there was another bird and a boy and they were all up somewhere high over Westeros and… Jade shook her head, the dream was fading fast and the more she groped for details, the less she could remember. Groaning, Jade reached out to climb back into bed for another blessed hour of sleep.

Her hand closed around something small and wooden. Jade blinked. “What the?” she said.

In her hand was one of the weirwood twigs she planned to use in her psionic resonator. Knew I’d forgotten to put something away when I went to bed, she thought absently. She idly rolled the twig between her fingers, then froze.

When she’d first plucked the twig from its resting place in Carefree Victory’s bow, it had been stripped bare. Now, looking at it Jade could see a small red leaf erupting from a bud near the end.
“Well,” she said. “That’s new.”

Chapter End Notes

All fanfiction is plagiarism, but some things should be noted in particular: the italicized sentences at the beginning of this update are taken directly from *A Game of Thrones*. Likewise, Bran's dream sequence is heavily adapted from the same sequence in the original novel.
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 82

I am now the proud owner of a bonsai weirwood. I feel like I should be more alarmed by this development than I actually am. Clearly this planet is getting to me.

Over the last few days, one of the weirwood twigs I’ve collected for the translator project has spontaneously revived, sprouting tiny leaves and a basic root system. I’ve potted the thing in a bit of local soil and so far it’s growing quickly. I’m no botanist but based on current growth patterns I wouldn’t be surprised if I have a fully-grown (if tiny) weirwood in the lab sometime in the next couple weeks.

I will hug it and pet it and call it George. Well, probably not hug and pet it, but you get the idea.

On the one hand, this simplifies the translator project considerably. The big problem I kept running into was getting the inert Builder nanocells in the weirwood twigs to activate long enough for me to actually resonate. George is a live plant that will actually fit inside the resonator chamber, and when he’s grown will be several times the mass of the original cutting which gives me that much more active nanocells to ping off of. So that’s a good thing.

On the other hand, I still don’t know how the twig budded. Plants can be resilient as all hell but this wasn’t a fresh cutting or anything. The twig had been snapped off at some point when Victory plowed through the forest and was jammed up in the hull space for weeks before I finally pulled it out. It was seriously dead wood when I found it, examined it and started experimenting on it in the resonator. Now it’s not. Which implies some interesting things about how the weirwood works; maybe the reason the wood doesn’t seem to rot is because it never actually dies to begin with. Maybe cuttings and the like just go into some kind of stasis until the larger network sends a signal for them to start budding again? I’d swear I read about something like that involving Centaurian xenofungus once.

(Since I’ve acquired George I’ve also been more aware how much weirwood is used in the general vicinity of the Westerosi nobility. The wood seems to be prized for certain applications, which makes sense considering its properties. A little bit of me kind of wonders what would happen if, say, the weirwood chairs in Winterfell’s great hall started flowering. It’d be interesting…)

Gripping hand, I think George can be considered a message from the trees. I think they’re already trying to reach out psionically. My dreams the last few days have been… odd. I’m not really one to remember my dreams in general, but the last week or so has been full of some very strange imagery that may be coming from an outside source. And—pause for dramatic revelation—it was on one of those nights that I spotted the twig-that-would-be-George had sprouted. That would seem to indicate that the trees want to talk, so I might as well oblige them.

Right now the resonator is roughly 85% finished, the last few components are getting rendered down and rebuilt in the autofac as I speak and I’m waiting for George to reach full growth before I start running calibration tests. With a little luck I’ll be able to feed whatever I get from the trees directly into the translator matrix and get something resembling human language out of it. Probably not going to be that lucky, though. If push comes to shove I can rig up a simulspace unit to the translator and that ought to give me some level of two-way communication.

In the meantime, I’ve got a week or so of operational downtime while the autofac finishes up and I’m starting to evaluate options. Barring proximity to the trees, I think I’ve pretty much exhausted all the
available research at Winterfell. All the key books in the library have been scanned and are now sitting happily in the ship’s databanks for the VI to correlate as I need it to. All the empirical work I can do on the castle, its residents and the local environment has been done: I probably know more about Winterfell than anybody else in the world right now, a weird feeling considering I’ve been here less than three months. Time to move on.

I expect I’ll be heading north sooner rather than later—the Wall needs more investigation, especially as it seems to be connected to the era of weirwood supremacy in Westeros—but the Night’s Watch records are pretty sparse, at least the ones available to the current watchmen. There might be more hidden in the abandoned castles, but that’s going to be considerable effort to dig out. Right now, all the things I need to dig through are going to be in libraries in the south, so that’s where I need to go next.

As it happens, the king and his retinue are planning on leaving in the next few days. It would appear that Stark is going to take up the vizier position the king offered him, and is planning to take at least some of his household south with him to the capital city. He doesn’t seem very happy about it—okay, Stark’s not a particularly happy guy in general, conceded, but he’s grimmer than I’d have expected for scoring a major position in the royal court. Part of it might be about leaving an injured kid behind: Bran Stark was out for two and a half days before he finally woke up. After the adventure of the tower his leg was pretty badly jacked up, probably going to walk with a serious limp for the rest of his life, poor kid.

(Incidentally, Bran claims that he doesn’t remember what the hell happened between starting the climb and waking up with his leg splinted to hell and gone. Certain faces in the crowd appeared to be more relieved by that than anything else. Something else I need to keep an eye on, I expect…)

Anyway. So the king intends to leave soon and is taking Stark and some of the family with him. I need to head south to see what I can learn about Westeros from there. And as it turns out King Bob has been very curious about Victory the last few days—a welcome change from him trying to get in my pants the first few days. I think I will extend his majesty an offer…

TYRION

“Would His Grace be interested in flying home?”

All conversation at the evening feast died down at the witch’s words. Tyrion looked up from his wine and blinked blearily in the woman’s direction. In the near moon’s turn the royal party had been in Winterfell, he—to say nothing of others!—had tried time and again to get inside the sky-ship moored (Was that even the right word, he thought. Beached, perhaps?) outside the walls. The thing did fly, according to the Starks and the winter town peasants, and Tyrion had no reason to doubt them. Not after watching the witch puttering about in the courtyard with her miracles.

King Robert rose, slowly and wobbling, to his feet. “An interesting question, Captain,” he said. “How exactly do you mean that?”

The witch met Robert’s gaze with a trace of a smile. “I am given to understand Your Grace will soon leave for King’s Landing. As it happens, my business in Winterfell is… not quite finished but I can pause it for some time, and I believe there are things worth pursuing in the south. Therefore, I offer my services to take you home, on a considerably faster route than the kingsroad.”

Lord Stark looked a little alarmed at the suggestion. “Your offer is quite generous, Mistress Jade,” he said, “however—”
The king stopped Stark with a wave of his hand. “Let me finish, Ned,” he said with surprising mildness. “You’re the Hand but I’m still king, damn it.” Robert eyed the witch curiously. “Would you take all of us back to King’s Landing?” he asked, gesturing to encompass all the knights, servants and courtiers that made up the king’s party.

The witch tilted her head. “Doable,” she said at length, “but it would not make for a pleasant trip. No, Your Grace, I would carry your household, Lord Stark’s party and your guards south. The rest of the party would have to return home the way they intended to.”

“Your Grace,” Stark interjected, “perhaps we could finish this conversation after the feast?”

‘Oh, all right Ned, all right,” the king grumbled. “Captain, I’ll meet with you and Ned afterwards.”

The witch nodded and returned to her seat. The hall grew merry again. Tyrion tapped his cup thoughtfully, then waved over one of the prettier servants to get it filled with small beer. If the king and the witch were to come to some sort of meeting, he had to know what was going to happen there and for that sobriety was best-advised.

After the feast, Tyrion slipped into Winterfell’s corridors and silently made his way in the direction of Lord Stark’s solar. Winterfell was unlike the Red Keep, or Casterly Rock that he loved and knew best, but a moon’s turn of coming to and fro gave him an idea of the better eavesdropping spots. The nearest one to the solar was a nicely shadowed cubbyhole. Too small for a whole man but more than enough for half a one, he smirked. Outside the door two Kingsguard stood watch while the witch, Robert and Stark spoke. Thankfully, Robert’s voice was as loud as ever.

“How long would it take for us to get back?” the king demanded.

The witch’s voice was lower, a bit more muffled by the heavy door but clear enough from Tyrion’s listening perch. “Not long at all,” she said. “If we left Winterfell after breakfast we’d be in King’s Landing just in time for supper.”

“Gods!” Robert exclaimed. “Even the Black Dread couldn’t fly that fast! What a song that would be, eh Ned? The king who raced the sun! This sounds like a grand adventure, Mistress Jade, I would be honored.” Tyrion couldn’t help but agree. He’d dreamed of flying on a dragon his entire life, and now here was a chance. Of course, journeying on the sky-ship would mean missing the Wall, and another day’s travel in close company with Cersei. Ah, temptation!

“Your Grace, we cannot just drop everything and leave in the good captain’s ship,” Stark argued. “Messages need to be sent to King’s Landing before we set out, otherwise what will the city think when the ship drops out of the sky?”

“I’d agree with that, Your Grace,” the witch said firmly. “My first arrival here caused something of a stir. I’d hate to see what Carefree Victory would do to a city so much larger than Winterfell.”

“Aye, you’re both right about that,” the king said grudgingly. “I’ll have ravens sent to the Red Keep, let heralds announce their king returning on wings of steel and magic and whatnot.” The king paused, and Tyrion strained to listen. “And what do you get out of this, my lady?” he asked finally.

There was an even longer pause. “Access,” the witch replied. “To the capital of course, but also… my studies of Westeros are steering me towards Oldtown and the Citadel. Maester Luwin has been an excellent teacher, but he admits that the maesters are not the most welcoming of people to outsiders, especially women.”

“I would think your ship would make for an excellent letter of passage wherever you decided to go,
“my lady,” Stark noted. Tyrion could almost hear the witch’s shrug.

“Maybe, but some men are more rigid than others. The king’s permission would help open doors that might remain closed even with my, ah, *exotic background.*”

*I wonder,* Tyrion thought hard. *I should write Father at the first opportunity. We Lannisters have influence in Oldtown, and Casterly Rock is of a similar age as Winterfell. Perhaps Father would agree to let the witch run riot in our libraries in exchange for some minor trinkets? Phrasing the offer would be the difficult part, but not impossible.*

“Done,” Robert said with finality. “Take me, my family and Ned’s back to King’s Landing and I’ll have a warrant written up that allows you to go wherever you feel like in all the Seven Kingdoms.”

“My thanks, Your Grace,” the witch said in reply. “I have a feeling I’ll need it.”

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**SANSA**

The day of their departure from Winterfell was the oddest day in Sansa’s life. It started more or less the way the day always did, waking then going to breakfast in the great hall with her family. King Robert and his family were there as well, of course, and the hall was packed with bannermen and courtiers who would also be leaving Winterfell.

Not all of them would be leaving in the same fashion, however. Most of the Baratheon and Lannister banners, along with a hundred Stark men, would depart for White Harbor and return to King’s Landing by boat. In the meantime, the King and his family, along with her lord father, herself, Arya, a handful of loyal courtiers and guards and the Kingsguard, would be traveling directly to the Red Keep by air.

Sansa’s father had done it, once, when he had found Mistress Jade in the wolfswood and brought her to Winterfell. Robb had done it once more, flying to the Wall and back. Now Sansa and Arya were going, all the way south to King’s Landing. She wondered what it would be like, flying over the whole of Westeros.

They departed Winterfell surrounded by banners. Stark, Baratheon and Lannister men lined the short path between the castle gate and the place where Mistress Jade’s sky-ship sat, armor polished and banners snapping in the morning breeze. Her mother and siblings stood at the gate watching them go.

“No need to look back, my lady,” Joffrey said at her side. Her betrothed took her arm and guided her towards the sky-ship. “Winterfell will still be there when you come again.”

“As you say, my prince,” Sansa replied.

At the back of the ship the others filed slowly up the ramp into the ship’s belly. The noble party would board through a door high on the side of the ship, reachable by a quickly-built staircase. Sansa climbed the stair behind her father, then with one last look back at home entered the ship.

Up until now her brief visits to *Carefree Victory* had always taken place in the hold, where the ramp led. That was a world of unadorned metal and strange smells. The sky-ship’s upper deck was very different, not unlike the difference between Winterfell’s stables and the great hall. The walls were still metal, but the metal was bluish-white and gleamed like the Kingsguard’s breastplates. The air was cool and dry, and the curving corridor through which they walked shone with purest sunlight.

“Remarkable,” Joffrey said quietly. “My father shall have to commission some of this magic for the
Red Keep.” Sansa kept her peace; she didn’t think highly of the king’s chances, as Mistress Jade was quite reluctant to make that kind of magic for others. *A violation of my people’s law,* she’d said at least once to her lord father.

The sorceress waited for them at a door set at a bend in the corridor. “Welcome friends to the *Carefree Victory,*” she said. “Behind here is the bridge. In a moment we’ll be going in, and after that we’ll be on our way.” Somewhere, bells chimed. Mistress Jade nodded, then opened the door.

The bridge was a small, domed room made of the same metal as the corridor with a large window at the end opposite the door. In front of the window was a funny-looking writing desk and a large padded seat. Arrayed behind it were seats not quite as large nor as comfortable-looking but enough for all the guests on the upper deck. “It’s a little crowded,” the sorceress apologized, “but it has the best view in the ship outside my bunk. Also,” she added in the direction of Ser Meryn and Ser Jaime, “you boys need to take a seat too, at least until we’re airborne and in level flight.” The two Kingsguard looked at each other, shrugged and took seats flanking the king.

“No much of a view,” the king noted, looking around at the white metal walls. The sorceress smiled and snapped her fingers. Magic hummed around them and instantly the walls vanished. Prince Tommen and Arya gasped at the display. They could see Winterfell, the winter town and everything around the ship clear as day.

The king poked at the vision, his finger touching air and stopping like it had hit something solid. “Gods,” he said. “Can the people outside see us?”

“No,” Mistress Jade replied. “The magic only works one way. The ship’s own eyes see everything and cast it onto the walls… more or less, anyway. It’s an inexact description, but good enough for now.” She took her own seat at the writing desk and waved her hands. The desk began to light up, blue and gold streaks appearing on the black stone face.

“What happens now, Lady Jade?” Arya asked.

“Now?” Jade said with a little grin. “Now it’s time for the *fun* part.”


The entire ship shivered like a sleeping dragon just starting to wake and the indescribable hum of magic in the air grew a little louder. A thin whine echoed through the halls, and the king’s party all looked around nervously. Sansa risked a glance at the queen, who looked out through the magic window with complete serenity.

“This is your captain speaking,” Jade said casually, “and welcome aboard Starfleet Airlines flight zero-zero-one direct nonstop from Winterfell to King’s Landing. The flight should take around four and a half hours, weather depending, and we please ask you to stay seated until we’ve reached our cruising altitude. Sit back, enjoy the ride and thank you for flying Starfleet.”

The sky-ship rocked a little as the sorceress worked her magic on it. “Okay, repulsors in the green, impulse engines engaged, throttle limiters set, atomic batteries to power, turbines to speed…” she said.

“Did you understand any of that prattle?” her betrothed whispered. Sansa shook her head.

“And a *one* and a *two* and a one two *three!*” With the feel of a boat rocking gently on a pond, the ground started to fall away. A cloud of dust rose beneath the ship and obscured the view for a second, but then *Carefree Victory* was free of the cloud and Sansa could see the land surrounding...
Winterfell spreading out around and beneath them.

Is this what Bran sees, when he climbs?

The sky-ship turned gracefully, making a wide climbing circuit around the castle. Sansa watched the mighty walls of her home grow smaller and smaller in her sight. From his chair beside the king, her lord father gazed wistfully as the ship climbed and the castle fell away. Sansa’s stomach twisted a little at the sight of home—and Mother, and Robb and Bran and Rickon—shrinking to smaller than a child’s toy and becoming lost in the broad tapestry of brown, green and white.

Ahead of the ship was a mighty wall of white cloud, and she could see whorls and patterns in there that she never could have seen from the ground. Carefree Victory plunged into the clouds, and the world vanished in purest white.
The grand maester was getting nervous. The Master of Whisperers took no small pleasure in Pycelle’s twitching as they stood in the Red Keep’s courtyard awaiting the king. The pleasure was beneath him, perhaps, but he savored it nonetheless.

“Preposterous,” Pycelle grumbled. “Simply preposterous, all of this.”

“Perhaps,” Varys said mildly. “Or perhaps there is more to this than you are willing to believe just yet.”

The old gray rat shook his head. “This Dornish trickster has fooled nearly everyone with her games, the King, the Citadel, you of all people. I shall eat my chain before I am so swayed, Lord Varys.”

“I’d pay good coin to see that,” Lord Renly commented absently.

Varys sighed. “Grand Maester, your skepticism is honest, and quite entirely unlike you, but it does you no favor here. All the reports from Lord Stark, your man in the north, my own sources and the King himself all tell the same tale. The simplest explanation is that the accounts are accurate… within reason, of course.”

“Reason,” Pycelle scoffed. “Reason tells us that ships cannot fly, man! Why should we trust that to be accurate when it goes against all sense?”

Renly took this moment to jump into the argument. “Well, Grand Maester,” he said with a little smile on his face, “my brother mislikes being fooled no less than any other man, and to claim flight is quite the trick. If this were a jape, the jester would likely be swinging from a Winterfell gibbet by now and we will have wasted an afternoon waiting.” He looked up into the cloudless sky. “Still, the sun is strong and the air is decent enough for King’s Landing, only the hint of pigshit today.”

Pycelle launched into a tirade regarding the impossibility of everything they had heard from the North. Varys had heard variations on the same issue a dozen times before, so he ignored it with grace and dignity as the Master of Laws weathered the assault. The maester’s voice faded to a dull drone—appropriate, that. Just on the edge of the spider’s perception he could hear a distant sound, thunder mixed with a note he’d never heard before.

“How do you hear that?” he said. The others looked at him curiously, then cocked their heads.

“I hear nothing,” Pycelle said.

“Mm, now that you mention it, sounds like a storm coming in from the north,” Renly said lightly.

The noise grew louder, “Aye,” the grand maester said, “I can hear something now, curse my old ears. As you say, Lord Renly, thunder from the north, but…”

“But?” The younger man prompted.

The maester hesitated. “But storms never come to the city from the north, always from the sea or
from the south,” he said reluctantly.

The rumbling noise grew loud enough to shake the earth, and all conversation stopped as a great hulking shape of white metal soared above the Red Keep’s walls. All eyes were fixed on the shape as it slowly circled above Maegor’s holdfast, stopped, turned on a copper and gently lowered itself to the courtyard.

Here I am scolding the old rat, Varys thought ruefully. I read all the reports and even still there was a small part of me that didn’t believe. He spared a glance at the rat in question; Pycelle’s face was grayer than his robes, and he clutched lightly at his chest. Apparently the sudden validation of everything he’d heard was a bit much for the old man. Varys felt very little pity.

Legs unfolded from the sky-ship’s belly and it touched earth with a thunderous roar and a blast of wind and dust. The assembled nobles, knights and servants scrambled to protect their clothes and faces from the onslaught. Lord Renly cursed quite imaginatively as his finery took a direct hit from the dust. Varys simply adjusted his robes, letting the silk keep the dust out his face.

“Gods,” Pycelle wheezed. “Gods. What manner of witch can make something like that?”

“You’ll get your chance to find out soon enough,” Varys replied through the dust clouds.

The sky-ship, as it turned out, landed with its stern—or at least what Varys assumed to be the stern—facing the welcoming party. As the dust settled, the ship let out a whirring groan, the hull split open and a part dropped to the ground, becoming a ramp into the interior. Out marched a selection of the King’s men, along with Stark and Lannister guards, all looking wary and baffled. Without a word they all marched to the side.

The small council looked at each other, puzzled. Where was the King?

A horn sounded from the depths of the sky-ship, and King Robert appeared at the top of the ramp with a flourish. The Queen and Lord Stark, as well as their households, followed behind, blinking in mild disbelief at the castle walls. For his part the King looked giddy.

The onlookers knelt as one, and His Grace waved them back to their feet. “Brother!” he said, striding over to Renly. “How fares the realm?”

“As it always does, Your Grace,” Renly replied. “The Red Keep is yours again.” He looked at the sky-ship, now singing softly to itself in the afternoon sun. “An interesting new mount you’ve found, brother.”

“Not mine,” the King chuckled. “Belongs to the witch, where did she go? Ah! There! Captain, come here!”

The crowd from the sky-ship parted to reveal a slight woman in green shirt and black pants. Her stance was somewhat timid, her steps tentative, but her eyes were clear and darting to and fro, seeing everything. Bobbing above her shoulder was—Pycelle choked when he spied it—a small metal ball clearly flying with no means of support. Varys caught her eye for a brief second, then she was back to looking around the castle. Interesting. “Renly, this is Captain Jade, mistress of the sky-ship. Captain, my brother Renly.”

The witch bowed stiffly. “An honor, my prince.”
Renly’s ever-present smile grew a little strained. “Not prince, my dear captain,” he said lightly. “Robert is the only royal in the family, I fear. I and my dear brother are but humble lords.”

“Ah, forgive me then my lord,” the witch bowed again. “Westerosi titles are a bit confusing to me.”

The king grunted. “Mm, that reminds me,” he said. “Captain, I would like to see you in the throne room.” The witch blinked, then nodded once.

The trip to the throne room didn’t take long, and Varys spent most of it puzzling over the new arrival. Clearly this Captain Jade was not Westerosi, but neither was she Essosi. If any of the Free Cities had anything like the sky-ship available to them then Essos would have fallen to Valyria reborn years before. Wherever she and her ship were from it was far enough from the known world that they had no interest in conquest. Possibly. A new element had entered the juggler’s pattern, and now it was up to the juggler to regain his rhythm, or fall.

Upon entering the throne room, the witch stopped short at the sight of the Iron Throne. Eyes wide, she looked at the imposing bulk of metal, mouth working soundlessly. “Well,” she said weakly, “that’s... impressive?”

The King took no heed of this, continuing on to the throne and then waiting for the rest to filter in behind him. The Kingsguard took up their stations beside him, loyal as always. “Captain, step forward,” he boomed, his voice filling the cavernous room. The sorceress looked puzzled, but did as she was ordered, standing before the Iron Throne.

“Kneel, my lady,” Robert commanded. The sorceress’s confusion deepened, but again she knelt. The small orb hovered over her, blue light coming from a gem set into it. The king laid his hand on her shoulder. “I, Robert of House Baratheon, King of the Andals, Rhoynar and the First Men, King of the Seven Kingdoms,” he said with great solemnity, “declare this woman, the lady Jade of House Hasegawa, to be our ambassador plenipotentiary to the lands of Ulthos, name her Master of Magic and an advisor and friend to myself and the realm.” He withdrew his hand from the sorceress and smiled. “Rise, my lady, and be welcome in King’s Landing.”

The sorceress rose and bowed. From his position Varys could see surprise and annoyance lurking behind the woman’s polite smile. “You do me great honor, Your Grace,” she said.

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 91

Fucking hell. Next time I have a bright idea I need to remember to keep my fucking mouth shut.
One Witch, Two Witch, Red Witch, Green Witch

A SERPENT AMONG SHEEP

For weeks, the Citadel had been abuzz with rumors from the North. The maester of Winterfell was sending regular reports back to Oldtown about a mysterious visitor from a far-off land who claimed powers and abilities far beyond any since the mythical Age of Heroes. The archmaesters did their best to suppress the stories floating about, to little effect. Novices and maesters who had just earned their proper chains were the Citadel's primary labor source after all, and the people who tended the ravens and copied the messages tended to be more informed than the masked archmaesters and the elders.

Alleras had heard all the rumors, and had even seen a glimpse of one of the messages from Winterfell. Despite all the talk of magic and miracles and knowledge beyond even the Citadel's ken, one word in all the rumors stood out in Alleras's mind: she. The mysterious foreign maegi was always referred to as a woman. Never as a man.

Alleras found this quite intriguing. Father thought her current endeavor a grand jest on the maesters, perhaps an amusing flattery of his own time in Oldtown, but Alleras wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of disguising herself to amuse Father or annoy the masters. She wanted to learn, the joy of knowledge drove her. And the stories of a woman who not only knew more than the archmaesters but also flaunted that knowledge openly snuck into her mind and tinged her dreams.

Then, word came from both Winterfell and King's Landing: the northern witch had been accepted by the royal court and given permission to travel the Seven Kingdoms in search of “mysterious and arcane knowledge” as the scroll put it. The archmaesters were notably unhappy about the message, clustering together in public and muttering darkly about dangerous superstition taking root at court and what was that old Lannister lackey Pycelle doing about it. The novices thought the whole thing a grand adventure, as clearly the newly-named Master of Magic would make an appearance in Oldtown with all her miracles in tow and then they would be able to see how she did it all.

It turned out that Alleras slept through the maegi's arrival. A bit too much wine, a bit too much song and returning to bed a bit too late to see the sky-ship fly out of the rising sun, circle the Hightower and then land near the Citadel gates. Rising from her bed with a monstrous headache, Alleras quickly downed one of her sister's less lethal but still effective concoctions and went to learn her duties for the day.

She heard the commotion from halfway across the Citadel. It was likely that even Lord Hightower and his mad daughter could've heard it from their roost in the top of the Hightower. Curious, Alleras slipped through the halls towards the library ante-chamber to learn what the fuss was all about.

A crowd of novices and younger maesters were gathered around Maester Edwyn, the library's seneschal. Edwyn stood full in the entryway, blocking a woman in green in black from coming any closer to the library.

“So,” the woman said patiently, “I do believe I have permission to go in here. I even have a very polite note that says so.”
“That note could be a forgery,” Edwyn countered. “No women are allowed beyond the Scribe's Hearth.” Alleras suppressed a mocking smile at this bold claim. “Frankly, how you got past the gatekeepers is beyond me.”

The woman smiled slightly. “I suppose my ship speaks for itself.” The crowd of novices murmured, and Alleras took another look at the woman. This, then, was the maegi of raven and rumor? She looked a little Dornish, perhaps with some Yi-Tish blood in her, but aside from her mannish dress and the frames of glass over her eyes the maegi seemed unremarkable. Alleras felt an odd disappointment; she had been expecting something more wild and exotic.

Maester Edwyn for his part paled, but was otherwise unmoved. “R-regardless,” he said, “you may have the king’s warrant but without the permission of the conclave I cannot let you into the lib—”

“Is something amiss, Edwyn?” The maester jumped a little at the interjection, and found Archmaester Marwyn standing off to his left, watching the proceedings with the calm of a man watching a stream for fish.

“I, ah, no, Archmaester, only a small issue,” Edwyn replied. “This... person has requested entrance to the library, and I felt it prudent to wait for the conclave's approval.”

“Well, I’m here now.” Marwyn said mildly, turning his attention to the maegi. “So you must be our visitor from far Ulthos, hm? Archmaester Marwyn, at your service,” he said with a short bow.

The maegi replied with a bow of her own. “Jade Hasegawa, Starfleet Rangers,” she said, “and apparently Master of Magic,” she added with a rueful smile.

“Welcome to the Citadel, Lady Jade,” Marwyn replied. “May I ask what part of Ulthos you’re from, my lady? I have a passing interest in geography, you see.”

The lady’s smile slipped a little, her eyes becoming a little more guarded. “I was born in the eastern tidelands of Acidalia, but I haven’t seen my homeland in quite a few years,” she said.

“Interesting. You know, I spent near a decade traveling across Essos,” Marwyn said thoughtfully. “From the Free Cities all the way to Asshai-By-The-Shadow and all the places in between. And yet I dare say I have never heard of your lands before.”

The maegi’s smile returned, a bit more rueful than the last. “I would be very impressed if you had heard of it before, Archmaester,” she said. “Perhaps at some point we should... compare notes? For the sake of expanding knowledge?”

“That sounds delightful, my lady. But first, you have business in the library, yes?” Marwyn held out his hand.

“My warrant, Archmaester.”

The lady handed the note to Marwyn, who examined it carefully. “Yes,” he said finally. “This is indeed the king's seal, as well as the Grand Maester's. You must have impressed them rather a lot to get them to both sign.”

The maegi shrugged. “King Robert was impressed well enough in Winterfell. The Grand Maester, well, I understand he needed a day of bed rest after my arrival at the Red Keep. Apparently shocking a man to near-death is the way to earn his respect? I'm new to Westerosi traditions, you see.”
Marwyn laughed, a deep rumbling chuckle that reminded Alleras of her father. “That’s not the preferred method, but if it works. Now, Edwyn, get out of the door and let the lady through, there’s a good man. Hm. It occurs to me that you might need an assistant, to find what you seek.”

“I came with my own assistants,” Lady Jade replied. At her words, three small silver balls emerged from the rafters and drifted down to float gently above her shoulders. The crowd shrank back a little at the display, though Marwyn seemed unfazed.

“Of course, of course, but it’s easier to search if you have an index. So… ah! Alleras!” Marwyn pointed straight at her. The novices around her drew back, leaving her no easy escape route. “Yes boy, I saw you there all the time you little book-rat, don’t think you’re so sneaky yet. Now, would you be so kind as to assist the king’s Master of Magic in the library?”

Alleras swallowed. “Of course I would,” she replied in her smoothest voice. The maegi’s eyes flickered towards her. “If I may be allowed to assist, my lady?”

The maegi gave her a long look, then nodded. “We’ll see,” she said. “A friend of mine likes to say that you never know until you try. So I’ll give him a shot.”

Marwyn nodded. “Very well, then,” he said. “Enjoy your reading, my lady. When you’ve finished for the evening, please join me for some informal discussions at the Quill and Tankard. Alleras knows the way.” On that, the archmaester turned and disappeared into the crowd of novices. The maegi blinked, shrugged and entered the library, Alleras hot on her heels.

Lady Jade opened the doors and stopped cold, staring with wide eyes and open mouth at the stacks of books arranged in the Citadel’s greatest hall. *Much like I did when I first arrived,* Alleras thought.

“Oooooowwwweee!” The maegi squealed. “Momma likes!”

“Where do we start, my lady?” Alleras asked politely.

“At the beginning,” Lady Jade replied. “Where else?”

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 96.1**

Arrived at the Citadel early this morning to begin my research as (pause for sigh) Master of Magic. It seems like a nice place, but I don’t think I’m going to be able to stay here too long. The maesters have been pleasant enough but it’s pretty clear that they don’t like having me hanging around their club. I’m not entirely sure if it’s because I’m a woman or because I’m claiming to be a freakin’ wizard; some of the material I picked up from Luwin gives off a distinct anti-magic vibe. I’m going to have to pace my visits to the library, just to keep the stink-eye to a bare minimum.

Initial results of my research have been, maybe not *encouraging* but better than I’d feared. The Citadel does indeed have a sizable collection of material on the First Men and the weirwoods, more than Luwin had at Winterfell or the Watch had at Castle Black. Unfortunately it looks like a lot of the collection is made up of copies of books I already have. It’s a medieval library, really should’ve expected that. So the task at hand is to sort through the stacks, figure out what’s new and what’s a copy and hopefully find some information that I don’t already have.

To this end the archmaester has handed me an assistant, an initiate by the name of Alleras. I suspect
either the archmaester has a keen sense of irony or the universe does, because young Alleras is pretty clearly not who she says she is. I’m betting on the universe, if I’m going to be honest; none of the ranking maesters seem to have much in the way of a sense of humor.

(As an aside, I wonder if that’s a thing for upper management in the Citadel? Must be this much of a humorless ass to ride? It would explain why some of the brighter souls I’ve met in the maester community aren’t ranked higher. Anyway.)

So yeah, I have an assistant maester who’s very much trying to hide that she’s a she from the rest of the gang—and not doing a bad job of it either, considering she’s been here for more than a few months without anybody commenting—and we’re about to start working our way through the stacks of First Men lore. We’ve already found one thing of interest: a far more detailed account of pre-Andal religious practices than the Winterfell library had. It’s anthropological gold in its own right, but the explanation of how sacrifices were made to the heart trees has some interesting implications.

I have a tiny weirwood, and I have plenty of blood. I’m going to remove myself to the medbay and do some tests…

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 96.2

Testing the hemovoric characteristics of weirwood tissue. Results are very interesting and potentially have implications for the tree translation project.

To sum up, I took a few blood samples from myself, Alleras and a bit from the medbay’s emergency blood substitute and sprinkled them on George. The artificial plasma didn’t seem to have any effect on the weirwood, but the tree rapidly and readily absorbed the whole blood samples.

Close examination of the tissue using the hyper-res scanners was really interesting. It seems that the Builder nanocells actively seek out the DNA in the blood, absorb it and literally incorporate it into their function. The composition and the structure of the cells changes every time a new genetic sample comes into contact with them.

The trees are adapting themselves to humans with every drop of blood!

I suspect that the psi-active parts of the network have also changed over the years of worship. The weirwoods were here first, as some sort of weird Builder experiment maybe, then the first humans arrive in the form of the Children. They see the trees and assume they’re sacred, start sacrificing to them and that genetic material lets the trees adapt their psionic network to the Children’s brains. Once the Children have direct connection to the “gods,” they keep it up and the trees continue to adapt more and more to the human norm. Once the First Men arrive, they’re converted to the native Westerosi religion because who wouldn’t convert if your god is literally right there talking to you in the tree?

All wild speculation, of course, but it’s a start.

In other news, I probably have another three days or so to knock around the Citadel until the rank-and-file get too restless at my presence. Between me and Alleras we should be able to make some headway through the stacks before I need to return to the capital. We had a not-quite-a-conversation after watching George drink our blood; certain things were left unsaid but I think I’m going to have a talk with the archmaester before I leave, see if we can arrange a work-study program. It’s nice to have an intern to lug around on this nutty adventure.
MELISANDRE

For the first time in a very long while, she felt nervous. Her hands fluttered uselessly, plucking at the red velvet robes searching for flaws and imperfections. Her guts roiled like she was a young initiate come to sacrifice at the high altar for the first time.

_Calm yourself, she thought. You are the Lord of Light's chosen, he will not let you fail at this. Be calm._ Brother Thoros, always faithful, placed his hand on her shoulder. Melisandre willed herself calm again. She’d placed immense trust in Thoros of Myr when she first arrived in Westeros, and despite his drinking and wenching the priest-gone-native had rewarded that trust handsomely. Loyal Thoros _wielded_ his vices like a weapon, as a regular companion of the king during his visits to the winesinks and brothels, and convinced the man to let him near the court’s pet sorceress. The whole process went quite swiftly, and soon enough they stood on a wooden platform outside the city walls, waiting for the sorceress to return.

And most decidedly _not_ fretting.

“You know, His Grace was a bit put out by all this,” Thoros said casually, as if waiting for ships to descend from the sky was something he did every morning. “He wanted to throw a tourney to celebrate the new Hand, but instead ended up using the tourney ground as a sky-ship berth.”

“Really,” Melisandre said absently. She’d heard this before, of course, but Thoros’s prating helped keep her mind off the upcoming meeting.

“Oh aye, indeed. Lord Stark’s a stiff man, but he’s got some cunning to him. His Grace was quite upset the last time we spoke, but then Stark put the thought of a new field somewhere off the Gate of Gods in his head and that seems to have improved his mood.”

Melisandre hummed. “And that the Northman might not have any interest in tourneys—?”

“Never crossed his mind,” Thoros finished. “I’ve heard all the stories of their fosterage, you’d think the man would know his friend better… hang on, look to the west. I think that’s it.”

She looked to the west and saw a small whitish dot in the sky, too large and too swift to be a bird. A distant rumble and a strange, soothing humming sound drifted past her ears. The noise grew louder as the sky-ship approached, rumbling overhead like a storm. They turned to watch its passing, the sky-ship swinging out over the Blackwater, making a long loop around the Red Keep and then returning to the old tourney grounds in almost stately fashion.

“I’ve seen this thing thrice now, and it doesn’t get any less strange,” Thoros murmured. Melisandre couldn’t help but agree. The combination of steel and magic was alien to any experience she had in her rather eventful life in Essos, but there was something else about the ship that gave her pause.

“There’s something here,” she said quietly, as the ship rumbled to a stop and lowered itself before the platform. “I can feel the Lord’s presence in the ship.”

Thoros gave her a look. “A hearthfire?” he asked. Melisandre shook her head.

“Not… exactly. Stronger than a hearthfire, but not used for communion. But the Lord of Light certainly has a place there.” The feeling was strong, almost strong enough to blank out the outside world but Melisandre clung to the here and now. Thoros offered no further comment, these things
being far outside his understanding, and simply waited, a rock of stability.

The round door in the ship’s side opened, and inside a small antechamber they saw a comely young man dressed in the simple gray of the Citadel. The maester tilted his head, then bowed graciously. “Ah, you must be the R’hllorites,” he said. “Welcome to the Carefree Victory, friends. I am Alleras, the Lady Jade awaits you in her research chambers. Please follow me.”

“A maester? Has the Citadel already laid claim?” Thoros asked. The maester smiled.

“No, I am but a humble initiate tasked to assist the Master of Magic,” Alleras replied. “The lady requested my continued service when she was done with the Citadel, and Archmaester Marywn was kind enough to agree.”

Alleras led them into the ship, down a looping hall of white metal and white light. Melisandre could feel the Lord’s presence grow stronger inside the ship, a throbbing pulse of light and power that moved in time with the thrumming of magic through the walls. The strangeness of the unadorned walls made it that much harder to stay rooted, to not get lost in the light.

It didn’t take long at all for Alleras to lead them to a plain door. “My lady, your guests,” he called.

“Bring ‘em in!” another voice called back. The door opened, and the three entered. The room wasn’t very large, no more so than any space aboard a ship, and it was filled with devices neither of them had ever seen the like of before. The sorceress had her back to them, apparently fussing over a small plant with red leaves. “Welcome aboard,” the sorceress said, still poking at the plant. “Sorry to be a little rude, just wanted to make sure George here was doing well.” She turned, and Melisandre’s eyes met the brilliant wildfire green of the sorceress’s eyes and—

The armies of the dead milled about outside the ship. It was bitterly cold out there in the lands beyond the Wall, and that cold seemed to seep through even Carefree Victory’s well-insulated hull. The sorceress looked bone-weary as she stared out at the wights surrounding them.

“I should go out there,” she said. “Talk to them, find out what they want.”

Fear gripped Melisandre’s heart. “That would be… unwise, my lady,” she said, gripping the green witch’s coat. “The Great Other only desires the death of light and warmth. They haven’t been interested in parley before, why would they now?”

Jade sighed. “I don’t know,” she said. “But they’re not mindless beasts. They’re capable of reason, emotion, self-awareness… this place is so inimical to them I can’t imagine they even want to be here. Maybe there’s a compromise, a way to close the path before any more people die.”

“You’re serious,” Melisandre said in disbelief. “You really want to do this?”

“I have to at least try.”

“They will kill you, Jade!” Melisandre hissed. The green witch gave this some thought.

“Maybe,” she replied. “But if it’s going to happen, if I have to die, then I’d rather die trying to fix an ancient mistake and saving lives than be another soldier on the battlefield taking them. Life’s a precious thing, Mel, and it all matters. I have to try reasoning with the Unbidden first, same as the rest of them.”
“What of us? If you die, what becomes of us?” She hated to say it, she hated to even think it but if the Other killed the green witch, they would be stranded in enemy territory with no way out.

Jade paused. “If something goes wrong the ship will take you back south,” she said. “Find your savior, tell Starfleet what happened. Be as safe as you can.”

All words abandoned her as the green witch embraced her. “You’ve been a good friend, Mel. Thank you.” Jade released her and straightened out her green tunic. “One way or another this won’t take long. Be back in a minute.”

“—hey, are you okay?” Melisandre snapped back to the present. She was halfway off her feet, leaning heavily against Thoros. The sorceress and the young maester looked at her with concern in their eyes. “We were in the middle of introductions and you just,” the sorceress waved her hand. “Kinda went away for a second there.”

“I,” Melisandre started, paused, then started again. “Forgive me, I was… overwhelmed by everything for a moment.” The Lord’s presence was still there, still as strong as she’d ever felt it but the immediacy, the throbbing had vanished. “I am Melisandre of Asshai, my lady, servant of mighty R’hllor, Lord of Light, and we have much to discuss.”

The sorceress bowed in return. “Pleased to meet you, Melisandre,” she replied. “And while I admit I’m interested in learning more about Essos in general, I’m not sure what else we have to discuss?”

Melisandre smiled enigmatically. “Prophecy,” she said. “The Lord’s faithful have seen you in visions from here to Slaver’s Bay. The Lord of Light has picked you out as important to the future of the world, Jade Hasegawa of Ulthos, and he has sent me as your guide.”

“What.”

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BRAN

Ever since the day he fell, not long before Father left for King’s Landing, Bran’s dreams had become strange and fey. Flashes of seeing things from a great height, or peering at the world through a dark cloak, sometimes running through the woods on all fours like a hunting wolf.

Tonight, Bran dreamt of stone and sun. He walked through harsh red mountains towards a distant tower. The sun beat down on the land, but it only seemed to warm him. I’m dreaming again, he thought, followed quickly by is this Dorne? The country looked much like what the maester had said Dorne was like, but of course he’d never actually seen it with his own eyes.

Bran decided to take a moment to sit down and get what bearings he could. Finding a nice rock he bent over and a voice cried out, What do you think you’re doing?!

Bran jerked upwards and turned around. Right where he was about to sit there was an orange and black snake stretched out on the warm rock. The snake looked at him balefully. Mind your manners, boy, it said. Watch where you’re sitting, or you’ll get your arse full of my venom.

“I’m sorry,” Bran apologized. “I didn’t see you there.”

Well, I am very good at being hidden, the snake replied. My father taught me the art of hiding in plain sight, and there are few better in the world. Bran thought this was an odd thing to boast of,
being hidden, but held his tongue. *If you wish to continue talking, please move a little, so my tail is in your shade. Mmm, yes, like that. So... what brings a little northern boy like you to this country?*

“I’m not sure,” Bran said slowly. “I think I’m supposed to go to the tower? This has been a very strange dream. Is this Dorne?”

*Oh, aye, you’re in the Red Mountains now, about halfway across the Prince’s Pass I think. I traveled this way once, on my way to Oldtown. The snake stretched out on the flat rock. Not my favorite place, I must say—I prefer Oldtown to this red stone. But at least the sun is warm.*

A flashing shadow passed over them and resolved into the form of a crow. The same crow, in fact, that Bran had met and seen in his dreams for many days. *Ah, there you are,* the crow said, perching on Bran’s shoulder. *Interesting that you chose here of all places to wander.*

“I didn’t choose it,” Bran protested. “I just started dreaming here, and then I met the snake and we started talking.”


The snake blinked lazily at the crow. *Problem?*

*You’re one of hers,* the crow said with a sigh. *She managed to snare another one into this bloody great mess. I’d swear she’s doing this just to annoy me.*

Bran looked confused, and the snake wasn’t much better off. *I have no idea what you mean, good crow,* it said. The crow let out a small croak of frustration and hung its head.

*No, of course you don’t. Damnable woman and her madness. Ah well, so long as you’re here... would you like to learn to fly, little snake? A winged serpent isn’t quite a dragon, but it’ll do in a pinch.*
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 100

I have been informed that, apparently, I am a subject of global interest.

I really don’t need this kind of crap right now.

It’s my own damn fault, if I’m going to be fair. I’ve been so wrapped up in Westerosi mysteries and keeping my head above water in this political craziness that I managed to forget the rest of the world is out there, too. Add to that how saturated this continent seems to be with psi-based phenomena, and it stands to reason that Essos and Sothryos at least are similar. My arrival triggered some sort of defense mechanism, so I’m guessing that set off some sort of pulse that drew attention? Or maybe it’s me, a low-level sensitive who’s not from around here? Maybe some combination of the two? I don’t know.

Anyway, it would seem that psi-active individuals all up and down western Essos—at a minimum—have been getting visions that relate to me since my arrival in Westeros. My source for this is a pair of wandering religious figures from Essos who were waiting for me in King’s Landing when I got back from the Citadel. R’hllorism is an interesting faith in its own right; sort of a semi-gnostic faith with a broad similarity to Mazdayasna or early Christianity, especially in how it seems to be a major faith in the Essosi underclasses. I’m doing my level best to get some decent data on mythology and doctrine for the ship’s records; hopefully there’s a comparative theologian in the rescue party, they’ll love this. Of more immediate interest is, apparently, the R’hllorite priests are trained in the use of psionics.

At least that’s the goal: one of the priests I’ve met so far, Thoros of Myr by name, is psi-blind. It doesn’t seem to have hurt his standing much—he was sent as an ambassador of the faith to the previous king’s court and has since fallen in tight with King Bob—but I get the sense he doesn’t expect to climb much higher in the church hierarchy without direct communication with their god. His companion on the other hand, who was sent here from the largest R’hllorite temple in Essos on a specific mission to find me and don’t I feel special, she’s psionic as all hell. Melisandre of Asshai radiates almost like an active weirwood tree she’s so goddamn strong. It’s almost like standing next to a heat lamp.

(She’d probably appreciate the comparison, considering R’hllor is a god of fire and light. Might have to drop that one around her… and then explain what a heat lamp is.)

Melisandre tells me that just about everybody with a drop of magic in Essos probably had an idea that a) I was here and b) was important in some fashion. The R’hllorites all saw my atmospheric entry in a metaphorical fashion, but she apparently was the only one to have seen me. I’m not sure how to take that, really. In any case, Mel was charged by the high priest across the ocean to find me and, I quote, “guide me to my destiny.” When I inquired as to what that destiny was, Mel said that she wasn’t entirely sure but that it probably involved fighting ultimate evil. I said something like how fighting ultimate evil wasn’t exactly on my to-do list today or, well, ever and she replied “of course not, but it can’t be helped.” Very Gandalf-like, if Gandalf was a smoking hot redhead with a thing for rubies.

Not gonna lie, I dig her style.
Melisandre has been very insistent that she stick with me as a spiritual advisor, and since honestly I think the only way I can get rid of her is to stun her and drop her off on a desert island somewhere I’m not going to push the issue too much. So yeah, new intern. It’s always nice to have a backup, just in case Alleras comes down with a nasty case of explosions. Thoros was invited, but he begged off claiming prior service with Robert. Which, you know, I can empathize with. On the other hand I expect to be away from the capital on a regular basis, so having him in King’s Landing keeping an eye on things could be extraordinarily useful. I’ll make a note to make sure to introduce him to Stark at some point, too.

I was going to set up the spare bunk in Alleras’s room, but Mel has instead claimed a bunk up in the engineering spaces next to the warp core. She seems to be very interested in the warp drive, though her attempts to explain why are going completely over my head right now. I suppose that as long as she keeps the area clean and doesn’t try flipping all the switches—and I’ve rerouted all the main linkages from Engineering to the bridge & activated biometrics just in case—I suppose I can cope with her eccentricities. Hell, maybe I can even teach her some basic grease-monkey stuff if she has an interest beyond the spiritual.

So yeah, long story short I now have roommates aboard for the first time in years. Weird as it might sound, for somebody who has some minor antisocial tendencies (joiners don’t get the deep-space solo missions after all) it’s nice to have company around again. It doesn’t hurt that they’re all really attractive people, either. Seriously. I mean, Thoros is built like a barrel with more barrels filled with bears nailed together and he’s still pretty. It’s just nuts. It has to be something in the water because every person I’ve met so far on this little adventure, peasant or noble, either are or clearly were at some point in their lives really good looking.

(Note to self: Remember Jadey, safari rules. Also, cold showers when necessary. Lots of cold showers. Hoo boy.)

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**MELISANDRE**

Royal hospitality left much to be desired. The Westerosi were barbaric compared to the Free Cities of course, that was the nature of the sunset kingdoms, but Melisandre had expected a little more from the Red Keep. Instead it was much like the inn where she had roomed before meeting the green witch, only writ larger and costlier. King Robert set a fine enough table, plenty of meat and drink for all, but instead of pleasant conversation the king preferred drunken revelry and song. For someone who had spent much of her time in contemplation of the divine, a Westerosi feast was a jarring experience.

Melisandre’s eyes briefly met the Hand’s eyes, who she noted was equally uncomfortable with the situation. She nodded briefly, and after a moment’s surprise, he returned the nod in sympathy. *At least I am not suffering this alone.*

“…And with a mighty cry, Zefram spurred his phoenixes onward. ‘Faster, my pretties!’ he cried. ‘We will outtrace the sun if it’s the last thing we do!’ The phoenixes shrieked and beat their wings against the air even harder than before, and Zefram and his chariot flew even faster through the sky!” Lady Jade proclaimed. The king had requested a story from Ulthos, and the green witch had responded with the tale of Zefram the drunkard and his bet against Einstein, the god of light and order. “The phoenix is a creature of the purest magic, and Zefram was the cleverest tinker of his day, and with their magic and his cleverness the chariot began, ever so slowly, to pull even with the ray of light. Rainbows streamed from the phoenixes’ wings and danced around Zefram as he saw the World Beyond for the very first time. The chariot shot past the light like an arrow and Einstein threw down his pen. Zefram won the bet; he was no longer Zefram the drunkard but Zefram the Swift, the
She knows how to tell a tale, Melisandre thought. The king’s guests all cheered at the culmination of her story, as Zefram’s chariot raced to the empire of Terra and reunited there with his long-lost kinsmen as the prophecy that started the story had foretold. The king rose, applauding wildly. “An excellent tale, Lady Jade,” he said. “Tell me, what became of this wizard Zefram?”

“After the race, Zefram lived a long and happy life,” Lady Jade replied. “He had many apprentices, and his work only grew mightier and mightier. He forged the spells that keep our sky-ships aloft with the help of the wizard Banzai, who bested the god Newton and some say was Zefram’s only equal. When he finally grew old, Zefram summoned his phoenixes one last time and flew off into the World Beyond.” She paused. “Some say that, should the empire need him, in its darkest hour Zefram will return to work one last great spell.”

“A life well lived,” the king said, a hint of wistfulness in his voice. “Thank you for the tale, Lady Jade.”

The green witch bowed. “As always Your Grace, it was my pleasure.” The feast went on as the king called for another drinking song and the wine flowed as thick and almost as pungent as the Blackwater. Melisandre repressed a weary sigh as the merriment increased.

“Buck up, Mel,” the green witch murmured as she returned to sit by her companions. “The party’s almost over.”

When the feast finally subsided, they made their way from the hall to the rooms hastily set aside for the Master of Magic’s use. The rooms were in the Maidenvault—Appropriate enough, in a way—and clearly had not been in use for some time before the green witch’s arrival. The old, bare stone walls carried the smell of the boredom of those poor souls who had been condemned to live in it, and the introduction of new furniture and the stray tapestry couldn’t hide that from visitors. Lady Jade had brought some minor magics from the Carefree Victory to make any stay in the Master of Magic’s apartments more bearable, but that only made the heart grow fonder for the sky-ship.

At least the largest room had a proper hearth. Melisandre absently tended the fire while Alleras poured wine and Jade idly strummed her Ulthosi lute. All three of them were not tired enough for sleep, but too tired to do much of anything. “How true was that story you told at the feast, my lady?” Alleras asked, passing a cup of Dornish red over to the witch.

Jade shrugged. “True enough,” she replied. “The broad strokes are accurate: Zefram really was a drunk, and he really was brilliant. Everything else? Enh.” She waggled her hand. “I’d like to think old Zef would’ve appreciated how I told his story, even the bullshit parts. Don’t believe everything you hear, yeah?”

“What do you believe?” The question slipped out of her mouth. Alleras looked up from her wine, and Jade’s fingers stopped playing. Inwardly cursing herself, the wine and the fatigue Melisandre pressed on. “You’ve said much about what you do not believe, or should not believe. But I’ve yet to hear you say anything about what you believe. I’m… curious,” she finished weakly.

Jade’s fingers went back to picking at the lute. The metal strings made a soft plinking noise. “I believe in a lot of things,” she said quietly. “I believe that people are basically good, that good beats evil three falls out of five, that reality is what doesn’t go away when I stop believing in it. I believe that honor, virtue and courage mean everything, and power and money mean nothing. That force is equal to mass multiplied by acceleration, that resistance is equal to voltage divided by current, that energy is equal to mass multiplied by the speed of light in square centimeters.” She stopped and took a sip from her cup. “I also believe this must be very good wine.” Alleras laughed and raised her own
cup in salute.

“Do believe in any gods?” Melisandre asked. Lady Jade looked past the red witch, gazing into the fire.

“Can’t say that I do, really,” she said. “My father raised me to believe in no more than one god, and my mothers raised me to believe in no less than one god. A subtle distinction,” she added to Melisandre’s blank look. “But… well, yeah okay maybe we can talk that one out when we’re less punchy. Anyway. I’ve seen a lot of things as a Ranger, stuff that you could look at and say ‘yeah, sure, that’s a god.’ But it never really is. The Builders did things that I can’t explain, but I know there’s an explanation that doesn’t involve the divine. I’ve seen people who pretend to be gods and demand worship, and they’re universally bastards. If there are gods out there, they don’t seem to be interested in me and I happily return the favor.”

“Even the old gods of the First Men?” Alleras asked curiously. “You’ve spent quite a bit of time and effort to speak with them, after all.”

Jade shrugged. “See, I don’t think they are gods,” she replied. “At least, they never called themselves that. The Old Gods are bound to the weirwoods, and I suspect the weirwoods were here first, maybe even before the Builders. But if you’re somebody who’s just mastered the use of flint or bronze and you come across a tree with freaky powers, what else do you say but ‘hey, the gods must live here?’”

“And where,” Melisandre said slowly, “does that leave the Lord of Light?” A thick silence flooded into the room, broken only by the pops and crackles of the fire.

“Dunno, haven’t met the guy yet.” Jade drained her cup and stood, laying aside her lute. “Walk with me a moment, Mel.” Alleras had the grace to look at least a little worried as the red priestess exited the rooms. They walked in silence outside the Maidenvault, until they reached a place where no torches were lit. “This is a story for you,” Lady Jade said. “I think you’d appreciate it.”

“Another story,” Melisandre murmured, looking apprehensively towards the shadowed walls. “One of the wizard Zefram, perhaps?”

Jade laughed. “For all his other fine qualities, Zef was about as spiritual as your average brick,” she said. “No, this is a story I learned in a far-off country called Bajor, years and years ago. Bajor, you see, is a land with more history than almost any other land I’ve heard of. Bajor was old and powerful thousands of years before the First Men came to Westeros, or Valryia fought Old Ghis, but they never sought to expand their power, preferring to stay safe behind their borders.

“Now, the Bajorans have many beliefs but this one has always been popular, and it’s one I learned from a vedek, a holy man, when I visited.” The sorceress gestured upwards at the dark cloudless sky above them. “Existence, he said, was simple. It’s a game, played between two sides, divided between light and dark. The game is played every moment of every day, above us and around us on that, the Great Board of Lights.”

Melisandre looked up, seeing the stars shining in the night sky. “Everywhere,” Jade said, “you can see the Great Black, and strewn across the board, small, surrounded, vulnerable and brave… is the Great White. Two mighty forces striving against each other.”

The priestess looked at the stars, their light tiny and feeble. The darkness pressed down on her, damping the Lord’s flame burning in her heart. “So much darkness,” she said. The night is dark and full of terrors. “The light seems to be fading everywhere.”

“You’re wrong, Mel,” the sorceress said, her hand touching Melisandre’s shoulder. “Once upon a
time, it was *all* darkness.” The stars weren’t very bright, but she could see them dancing in Jade’s eyes. “We’re winning.”

“Winning,” she echoed, looking back at the stars. The light was cold and distant, but for a moment she thought she could feel R’hllor looking back at her, magnified a hundred thousand times. A faint image of great white ships, like *Carefree Victory* but much larger and grander, sailing through the darkness cloaked in rainbows crossed her mind.

*The Lord does not set us tasks we are unequal to.* “Perhaps we are,” Melisandre said.

Chapter End Notes

Plagiarism note: The story Jade tells Melisandre has a hundred different variants, but the one used as a source here comes from Alan Moore and Gene Ha’s *Top Ten* #8. All respect due to the original authors.
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 103

The last components for the translator are out of the autofac, tested and assembled. Now it's time to start trying to talk to the weirwoods in earnest.

I've decided to make the rig as simple as possible for the first try, that way if anything breaks down or it just plain refuses to work I can chuck the whole mess into the recycler and not be out too much time and resources for the rebuild. George is the only active psionic part, everything else is strictly electronic so as to not introduce too much background clutter. He goes into a nice, simple EM-shielded box where I can pump signals at him until I find the right combination.

Signal matching is the trickiest bit of this, and it's the part where I'm flying mostly by guesswork and intuition instead of something substantial. Weirwoods seems to be capable of direct neural interface, but the one time I experienced it I didn't have anything scanning the damn tree, so I don't know exactly how the DNI works. So, for the first tests I'm going to start with an EM emitter and receiver taped to George's trunk and run it through a series of basic brainwave patterns. Maybe if I emulate somebody thinking really hard at the tree, that will be enough direct stimulation to get the nanocells' attention.

Once—if—George notices and starts trying to handshake, the translator I ripped out of the secondary ansible can take over. Federal translators are wonderful things; it's not an AGI or even on VI levels of intelligence, but give it enough time and it can learn how to talk to just about any kind of system imaginable. If George opens the door for me, I can use the translator to just straight-up talk to the weirwood network in simple language. Of course, that's all based on two base assumptions: a) that everything works correctly the first time, and b) the translator can actually interpret for the weirwoods. Neither of those assumptions are set in stone.

If the brainwave transmission fails to work, then we go to Plan B and use the weirwood's vampiric tendencies to establish and reinforce the contact. I don't particularly like this plan—any plan that involves deliberate blood loss is not a great plan—but based on what we know right now we can make it work. I still hold out hope for the transmission plan, though; it's not like my initial communication with the Winterfell tree involved any blood, just skin contact. I suppose we'll see.

Of course, if the translator fails... the translator is pretty amazing stuff but it's not perfect: there are forms of communication that it can't handle. Sadly, psionic webs tend to be on the “can't handle” list. But even a failure there gives me a better idea on how the network operates. My best guess right now is that it's organized like the Builder computers in Tanis—even if the trees themselves are an evolved lifeform, the Builders created the network using their technology, based on their systems, and I know the translator can communicate with Builder technology.

If I'm wrong and the Builders piggybacked their stuff onto a native psi-web like Centauri xenofungus, well then that tells me how it works and what might be lurking in the background. In the event that the connection works and all I get back is gibberish, what do? Well, that's when I decouple the translator and use the communicator for the other thing I salvaged it for: signal modulation. I know the weirwood can do DNI, and I've got an old simsense helmet that I keep for gaming and porn. (Oh, don't look at me like that. I have needs and it's not like you've never done it, either.) The communicator can handle simsense signals just fine, all the ports are standardized and the like, so if George tries to reply using VR I can let the communicator moderate the signal so my brain doesn't come gushing out of my nose.
It's not an ideal situation, I'd much rather be able to talk to the trees using spoken language, but simsense at least allows me to try and communicate while I'm conscious.

What happens after that, I have no idea.

Should be interesting finding out!

SARELLA

Compared to most Westerosi bastards, Sarella Sand had lived a charmed and extraordinary life thanks to her parentage. Today, she found herself in the bowels of a ship that flew through the skies, watching a witch from beyond the furthest reaches of the world invoke steel, blood and the oldest magics of the First Men... all in an attempt to speak to a tree.

Sarella had no godsdamned idea what was going on in her life anymore, and she loved every moment of it.

Lady Jade's dwarf weirwood tree stood in a box made of steel links finer than the finest chainmail, almost like fine cloth, so tightly wound that she could only see a smudge of red and white where the tree was. The sorceress bent over the box, rummaging, poking and muttering at the tree. “Right then,” she said quietly, “that looks like we're shielded properly, George is secure, the transmitter's all taped up nice and neat...” A thick braid of metal wire (covered in that strange substance the sorceress called “plastic”) led from the interior of the box to one of Carefree Victory's many magic writing desks. “I think we're ready to start the test,” Jade concluded.

Sarella nodded and took her place at the desk. A few deft touches—how easily commanding some of the simpler magics became, once one was used to the novelty—and a pane of light sprang into being above the desk. “Beginning startup,” she said. “What are we looking for?”

Jade pointed at the window. “Right now we're trying to talk to George in a language we think he understands,” she said. “This is, hm, think of it like signal flags or smoke, or flashes of light from a mirror. We're going to start waving our flag and see if he starts waving a flag in response. See the two lines there? The top one is us, the bottom one is George. We'll start, our line will get wiggly and if we're talking the right language, his line will get wiggly in response.”

“Wiggly,” Sarella repeated dubiously. “Is that a proper term for this?”

“Oh yes, very proper,” the sorceress replied straight-faced. “Very technical term used only by the finest scientists.” Sarella refrained from rolling her eyes—again—and simply went back over the task list.

“If it works, what then?”

“Then the translator takes over and we find out where we have to go from there.”

A polite cough came from behind them. Thoros of Myr was leaning up against the workshop door, regarding the scene with slightly bemused bafflement. “So,” he rumbled, “d'ye think this will work, my lady?”

“Absolutely no idea,” Lady Jade replied frankly. “But it's the best idea I've got. And hell, if this doesn't work then we'll go to the next plan.”

“And if that one doesn't work?” Thoros pressed the question, and the sorceress looked thoughtful.
“Well,” she said, “I suppose I start wearing George like a hat until something interesting happens.” She paused, hand to her chin. “I wonder if I could make that into a trend? Imagine all the fashionable ladies of the court wandering around with small trees on their heads.”

Sarella’s mind conjured up a picture of the queen and all the attendants in procession with potted trees tied to their heads by silk ribbons. Thoros evidently had thoughts along similar lines, judging by the sharp laugh he gave. “Oh, I’d give good coin to see that,” he chuckled.

“Well, talk to George first, side project into haute couture later,” Jade said. “Al, hit the green button, please.” Sarella reached out and touched the patch of green light on the desk, and the machinery hummed to life without complaint.

The lines on the window began to warp and writhe, the one of the top maintaining a steady rhythm while the bottom line jumped and twisted without any sense. “Hm,” the sorceress hummed tunelessly, watching the window. “Looks like George is receiving but doesn't quite understand beta waves. That's interesting.” She touched the desk and the lines shifted a little. “Man, I wish my biology classes weren't so damn long ago,” she mumbled. “Okay, yeah, let's try crossfading the beta with some delta, switch from a conscious mind to one that's half-awake. Maybe that will do something.”

The lines continued to writhe, pulsing to some hidden beat until they ever so slowly began to converge, a dance instead of mindless movement. “Better, better,” Jade said. “Almost there... let's subtract some autonomous functions and pump up the volume a little.” The magic hummed, the lines converged and a bell sounded from inside the desk.

Thoros straightened and looked at the window. “And what does that mean?” he asked.

Jade squinted at the window, peering at the two lines that now moved in perfect harmony. “I believe,” she replied, “that is a handshake. We've got contact!” She waved her hands and desk and window shifted a little. “Let's see what the translator picks up.” The lines vanished and were replaced by a blinking box at the top of an empty window.

The sorceress turned to the box where the weirwood stood. “Hello, George,” she said. Sarella stared at the window. The blinking box suddenly began to move.

Hello

Sarella swallowed hard. “Gods be good, it actually worked,” she breathed. Thoros’ eyes darted between the window, the box and the sorceress. Jade looked triumphant, but also a little guarded.

“Do you understand me?” Jade said slowly. The box pulsed again, then more words began to appear.

Left till here away at to whom past.

“Do what now?”

Old had conviction discretion understood put principles you.

Sarella stared at the words in the window. They almost made sense, if you stood on your head or perhaps had a little too much wine, but at the same time... “I don't understand,” she said.

Lady Jade sighed. “I think I do,” she said with growing dismay. “Let me try again: Hello, George. What do you need to say to me?”
The window quivered and words marched from top to bottom faster than Sarella could read them:

```
f0 a3 ce 41 f6 23 a2 77 ea 4a df cc b8 7a e9 9b
rits is entered in to. Rich fine bred real use
14 b1 55 da 5c 9a 57 a2 22 50 ea 58 13 a3 6a 1c
2c b1 55 0a 6a c8 b7 e8 c9 b3 d0 54 e6 45 36 0f
81 23 8e 5c 5b c3 81 1f b5 58 aa f1 98 d3 f8 06
sion favourable any. Unknown chiefly showing to
ab 23 51 71 26 77 b0 c5 9a ce 83 ec 7c 85 2c cf
93 e9 4d 8d 46 dd f0 9e 85 e7 77 d2 ad 68 07 b0
c1 04 16 2f 22 72 dd 67 d7 fd a8 64 5b 86 9b df
style of since world. We leaf to snug on no ne
59 7d f6 3f 71 3b 9e 74 51 26 14 68 b3 b3 fb
d6 16 17 3e 37 e6 a0 be b6 be 2c a4 15 d8 5b dd
ce bed compliment solicitude. Dissimilar admir
dc 7b 16 3d c6 18 5a 7c ef f9 4c 6a 46 58 26 1e
Draw fond rank form nor the day eat.
5f ec e6 ee 38 75 a0 c7 9d b8 e7 3c 9d f5 3c 89...
```

Thoros took in this display. “Nonsense,” he pronounced.

“Mmmmyep,” Jade agreed.

“What does that mean?” Sarella asked. “What does any of that mean?”

“The translator's not working,” the sorceress said, hand to her temple. “It's... almost there, which is way the hell more than I expected from a failure. We're getting actual words, but the translator can't interpret it properly. George is trying to express complex concepts the machine can't handle, and well,” she gestured at the still-moving column of letters and numbers.

Sarella considered this. The old gods—or whatever mind lay hidden behind the weirwoods—seemed quite eager to speak with Lady Jade, if the volume of gibberish filling the window was any indication. However, the first attempt to speak with the tree had failed. “Where do we go from here?”

Lady Jade waved at the window, the nonsense disappearing and replaced with the twin lines.

“Well,” she said, “since we can't seem to talk to George using our language, we can try and talk to him in his.” She reached down under the desk and drew out a silver coronet, with another wire braid trailing from it. Jade gently attached the free end of the wire to the desk and sat cross-legged on the floor.

Thoros and Sarella exchanged a glance. “Ah, forgive me my lady,” Thoros ventured, “but why not start with that from the beginning?”

“A little bit of pride in my engineering skills, to be honest,” Jade admitted. “But also I don't like using this for communication. Shared dreamscapes can get subtle and... I'm not great at subtle. Still, if it's the only way...” Jade placed the coronet on her head and closed her eyes. “Going in, guys. Be back in a few.”
With The Trees

THE THREE-EYED CROW

Once, he walked in the daylight as a sorcerer and adviser to kings. In those days Brynden Rivers had seen much and caused just as much. Now, as a greenseer wrapped in the roots of the earth he saw more and caused less, though his touch was much more subtle and dangerous these past few summers. Between the eyes he was born with and those granted by his arts Brynden had seen most of the world inhabited by men.

But not this place.

Where am I?

He stood as a man, shorn of his preferred guises, under a sky the color of rust. The sun gleamed fitfully, shining down on fields of green-gold grass covering rolling hills. Here and there copses of trees, all slender as reeds, shot into the air.

His first thought was of the Dothraki Sea, one of the few places in the worlds of men where grass stretched from horizon to horizon, but further examination proved that false. Brynden did not know the Dothraki lands well, but he knew enough: the sky and grass were far too wrong, even through the distorted glass of dreams.

Brynden took a quick look at the sun. It wasn't strong, which suggested the far north, but it was higher in the sky than one might see in the lands beyond the Wall. It also wasn't directly overhead, so the rough direction was east. Or west, I've no idea if it's morn or eve right now. There were no recognizable landmarks around him, just grass, hills and boulders the color of the sky.

The wind stirred, a gentle breeze flowing around the hills. Brynden breathed deep, catching the tang of salt in the air. Whichever direction the wind blew from, the sea was nearby. Access to the sea meant the possibility of seafarers, fishermen, sailors, somebody who knew where he was and what this meant.

To the sea, then.

The old greenseer marshaled his power and tried to return to a more comfortable form. His body wavered but stubbornly refused to change. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and put all his effort into the change, willing himself to return to his favored crow self. Again, nothing happened.

Brynden sighed, cocking an eye towards the sun. "If this is meant to teach me humility," he said in the general direction of nowhere and everywhere, "I'm afraid you may be left wanting." No response came, but he wasn't expecting one. The singers weren't the greatest conversationalists at the best of times, and even after half a century in their care Brynden knew little of their ways. "Very well. If I must walk, then walk I shall."

Thus resolved, Brynden Rivers set off across the rolling plain towards the sea.

His first steps felt oddly light, in fact they were almost too light, for instead of a steady gait he bounced through the grass like a young boy. The feeling was exhilarating at first, then his sense of confusion deepened. Wherever in the waking world this place was—if indeed it existed there—was truly no part of the world he had ever heard of, and someone surely would have told tales of a country where men felt lighter just by standing on its ground.
Brynden continued to walk, finding a long, loping stride that allowed him to cover ground quickly whilst retaining enough of his dignity. Climbing over and around the hills, he found himself surrounded by ponds and lakes of all sizes, each one perfectly round and surrounded by a high embankment. *Interesting, that,* he mused. *Why go to all the trouble to build such large damworks in such a haphazard manner?* It was an interesting question, but one he could reexamine at some other point: in the middle distance he could see the unmistakable gleam of sunlight on the water.

It took him close to an hour in perception before he passed the last of the ponds and reached the sea, or rather a long bay not unlike the Blackwater’s mouth with long sloping hills covered in grass, short brush and tall trees that seemed to him far too thin to be so large. The water was the color of Dornish wine and lapped gently against a shoreline of red sand. Between him and the sea lay a city of white Valyrian stone and glass. Towers higher than any works in Westeros save the Hightower or the Wall sprouted alongside wide streets lined with trees. Overhead he could hear gulls calling and circling around the docks.

“Huh,” a distinctly female voice said from his left. “Now that’s a thing I didn’t expect.” He turned and, as he half-expected, half-dreaded, sure enough *that damned woman* was standing there, looking at the city with fond confusion. “I wonder, am I generating this? Or did George? The imagery has to be coming from me, but was it an unconscious interest in having familiar ground to stand on on my part, or is it George grabbing this out of my mind to make me more comfortable? Could go either way, really…” she muttered.

Brynden felt a very familiar eyebrow twitch coming on. He cleared his throat, the woman’s mumbled diatribe broke off and she jumped, turning to face him. Brynden put on his best sardonic smile and bowed. “My lady,” he drawled.

“Woof!” She blinked hard, then gave him a considering look. “Wasn’t expecting *guests* either,” she said finally. “And you are—?”

“Just a humble traveler who found himself lost in a strange land, my lady,” he replied. “Do you happen to know where we are?”

“Oh sure, this is Acidalia. Well, okay, technically *that’s* Acidalia,” she said, waving at the sea, “but the old planum’s been underwater for a hundred years or so. This is Pathfinder Bay, the mouth of the River Mawrth at the eastern edge of the Viking Gulf, and down there is the town of Watney’s Crossing. My hometown, as a matter of fact,” she added with a faint smile.

“This is… no place in the world I know of,” Brynden replied. The words were familiar—the woman had been using the name Acidalia in waking life now and again. And yet, having a place to the name didn’t make it any more recognizable.

“True enough,” the woman replied. “But there are other worlds than yours.”

Brynden felt his eyebrow twitch again. “That explains very little,” he said.

“Not arguing that, but then I’m not here to argue at all,” she replied. “I’m here to talk to a tree. So, George, what gives?”

*What?* “What?” he said.

The woman looked at him strangely. “Winterfell? You know, the moment where I touched the heart tree and you guys yelled so loud my head almost exploded? The one where I spent the last three months trying to put together something that’d let us talk without that happening? You… do remember that, right?”
Brynden looked baffled. “My lady, I… have no recollection of this.” The woman had been skulking around Winterfell, true, interfering with his plots and ploys though not enough to cause true injury, but the heart tree? “I fear there may be some misunderstanding between us.”

The woman gave him another close look. “You’re…” she said, “not George, are you?”

“Alas, my lady, the name my mother gave me was Brynden.” She sagged a little, hanging her head and laughing ruefully.

“Well,” she said weakly, “that one’s on me. Though to be honest, if I was going to gijinka a weirwood you’re pretty much what I’d come up with. Maybe dye the hair red, though.” Brynden had no idea what any of that meant. “Okay, so if you’re not George, that means George is still around here somewhere. So… next step: find George.”

“How would George be?” Brynden asked.

“Let me explain,” the woman said, then paused. “No, that would take too long. Let me sum up: there’s a miniature weirwood in a box on my ship named George. I’ve connected myself to him by being fiendishly clever, and now I want to know what, exactly, George and his buddies need to tell me so goddamned urgently. Instead of giving me a straight answer, George has dragged me and an albino—that’s you—into a representation of the town I grew up in and is hiding around here somewhere. Clear?”

“Not quite,” Brynden said, “but I’ve worked with worse intelligence before. So once we find your stray weirwood, what happens next?”

“I talk to it, hopefully it talks back and I get something approaching a straight answer.”

“And if you don’t?”

“Then,” she said darkly, “I get mad.” She stalked off down towards the empty city, greenseer in tow. *That might be worth seeing... from considerable distance,* Brynden thought. The walk into the city was eerily silent; no sound of people moving about, only the wind, the sea and the gulls far above. “Weird to look at the place like this,” she said, looking around the glass-walled towers. “I keep expecting to see foot traffic, or bikes or something. The Crossing’s a small town, but it’s never this quiet in daylight.”

“A small town, she says,” Brynden muttered, looking up at buildings to rival Harrenhal.

“Hey, it’s true,” she said with a shrug. “There’s only fifteen, twenty thousand people living in the Crossing, really. It’s not a big center like Sheffield or Noctis, to say nothing of a place like New York or Shir’Kar.”

“I see,” he said. Thinking it over, he supposed that if an edifice like this, half the size of a reasonable city like White Harbor, could be small then the large cities would be impressive indeed. “An interesting place to grow up in,” he ventured.

“It had its moments,” she said absently. “Now… if I were a tree-like intelligence, where would I be? Assuming George wants me to find him; he wouldn’t just hide in a corner somewhere. No, it’d be a place that I’m likely to look for him… somewhere I’d know. And if I was going to stash a tree around here…” she trailed off. “I think I know where we’re going.”

The woman led him down through the empty streets towards a large open square covered in greenery, surrounded by four glass towers. At first he thought it might be something like a tourney ground; the square was wide enough to support one, but the ground was covered in flagstone and
plants growing in neat rows. Almost like… “Vegetables?” he mused.

“Yeah,” the witch replied. “Soil outside of town is… tricky to grow food in, so there are garden districts all over the place.” She pointed at one of the glass towers. “Most of the heavy lifting is done in those, but the public gardens out here have been a thing since before the domes came down. But enough of ancient history, we’re looking for a tree and look who I just found!”

The weirwood was in the exact center of the garden, a splotch of white and red against green grass and pink stone. “In the real Crossing there’s a fig tree here,” the witch said. “I spent a lot of time as a kid hanging out under it. Now I’m really wondering if this is George being puckish or my subconscious having a deep sense of irony.”

“(I do wish you would start saying things that made sense,)” Brynden muttered. The witch paid him no heed, striding over to the weirwood and walking around it until she found the face. The carved image was impassive as always, red sap dripping from the old wounds and staining the bark.

“Well,” she said, spreading her arms wide. “I’m here, George. You wanted to talk? Let’s talk.” The weirwood remained stubbornly silent. “Oh come on!” the witch cried. “We’ve all gone to a lot of fucking trouble to get this far and now you’re not going to say anything? What the fuck is this, some sort of joke to you?”

—outlander—

The voice was thin and whispery, almost hidden in the wind. Brynden’s eyes snapped to the tree. In his time as a greenseer he had communed with the dreams of men, the last few singers and the souls of greenseers within the weirwoods. This voice was something he had never conceived of as possible before, the voice of the weirwoods themselves. “Yes!” the witch exclaimed eagerly. “I’m here, I’m here.”

—welcome outlander—
—not outlander, welcome zhdane—


“Zhdane?” Brynden asked.

“It’s a word from a language thirty thousand years dead,” she said. “It means ‘maker of wonders.’ My people translate it as ‘Builder.’” She spoke again to the tree: “George, I… I’m not a Builder. They’re all gone.”

—outlander-not-zhdane inheritor? —

The witch hesitated. “I suppose? We found their works, tried to understand what they were doing…”

—that will be enough—
—needed aid, inheritor approached, brought inheritor to us—
—apologies, inheritor—

Brynden blinked. The old gods were powerful to bring the witch’s ship to earth? The witch for her part was thunderstruck. “You did this,” she said flatly. “You crashed my ship, you stranded me here. Why?” The old greenseer’s blood ran cold.

—UNBIDDEN—

The word echoed like thunder through the air, causing the whole world to shake. Witch and
greenseer recoiled from the tree in shock as the Acidalian seaside began to crumble and was replaced by the snow-filled landscapes of the lands beyond the Wall. The weirwood now stood before a semi-circle of heart trees in a forest clearing.

“The hell is this place?” the witch said.

“A grove fifteen leagues north of the Wall, in the haunted forest,” Brynden replied. “There’s another like it within sight of the Wall, the northern brothers swear their oaths in it.”

“What?” said the witch. “Wait, shit, no!”

“No no no goddammit I didn’t spend this much time on this damn thing for you to wimp out now George come on!”

The world began to fade away, and the witch shrieked in frustration. “Fucking Christ, I’m getting tired of this cryptic shit!” she yelled into the void, then whirled to face Brynden. Green fire shone in her eyes. “Do you have any idea what the hell that was supposed to be?” she demanded.

The last greenseer swallowed hard, emotions he hadn’t felt in a very long time rushing to the forefront. “I believe I do, my lady Hasegawa,” he said reluctantly. “And it is not a pleasant thing, I’m afraid.

Winter is coming to Westeros, and worse things follow in its wake.”

SARELLA

“Be back in a few minutes,” Lady Jade had said before putting on the coronet. Almost two hours later, she still sat on the floor before her machines, eyes closed, only the rise and fall of her chest showing any signs of life. Lady Melisandre had joined her and Thoros in their vigil; it was highly unlikely that any physical harm could come to the sorceress inside her own ship, but none of them thought of leaving the workshop.

The sorceress twitched, the sudden motion surprising all of them. With a low groan, Lady Jade unfolded her arms and plucked the coronet from her brow. “NnnnnnnnnnFuck,” she said.

“Are you alright, m’lady?” Thoros asked.

“ Mostly, I think,” Lady Jade replied. “How long was I under? Feels like a week.”

“No more than three hours,” Sarella said, glancing at the ship’s timepiece. Jade nodded, then made to stand up. Her legs wobbled and buckled under her, almost dropping back onto the floor before Thoros grabbed her arm.

“Okay yeah, should’ve seen that coming. Thanks,” she said.

Melisandre cleared her throat. “Was your scrying successful?” she asked.

Jade sighed. “Yes and no. I found some of what I was looking for, and a lot of what I wasn’t looking for.” Her eyes met the priestess’s eyes, and something Sarella couldn’t grasp passed between them.
Melisandre looked alarmed, then looked away.

The sorceress surveyed her little band. “Guys,” she said grimly, “we have work to do.”
They reconvened in the dining room on the upper deck, where Alleras poured cups of wine and Lady Jade told them of her experience inside the weirwood. She told them of meeting Brynden Rivers—a man even the Essosi had heard of over the years, the Bloodraven had a long shadow—their all-too-brief conversation with the trees and then Rivers's own revelations. About the darkness stirring in the far north.

At the end of this tale, the lady sat hunched over at the table, both hands on her chin, staring at some point in the middle distance. Young Alleras's dark complexion was noticeably paler than usual, her face warring between confusion and outrage. He could feel for the girl: anyone of a maesterly disposition would likely react the same way, and she was still young enough to believe everything her teachers told her. Melisandre lounged in a seat next to Thoros, her posture aloof as always but he could see the small twitch in the corner of her eye, the faintest subtle movement of her hands.

It was the first time he had ever seen his compatriot in R'hllor appear to be truly frightened by anything. That, more than anything else, unnerved him.

The silence between them stretched and thickened, before breaking as the war inside the young maester finally came to a conclusion. “I cannot believe we're actually talking about this,” she said.

Lady Jade blinked. “Hm?” she responded. “What do you mean?”

“I mean this madness!” Alleras snapped. “The Others aren't real, they're just tales told in winters past to glorify some misbegotten chieftain's damned foolishness!” Her voice rose to a furious shout. “Why are we speaking of Others and the long night that never ends as anything more than a godsdamned myth?”

Jade took in this outburst without raising an eyebrow. “Myths are funny things,” she said mildly. “A lot can get lost over generations of retelling, lots more gets changed, distorted over the years... but the heart of the myth doesn't change that often. And the Long Night is a surprisingly consistent myth, Al. Moreso, it’s consistent over a lot of cultural boundaries: the Rhoynar and Yi-Tish have stories roughly concurrent with the Westerosi myths about a time of unending darkness when monsters threaten the survival of everything until a hero, or a group of heroes, beat back the darkness. You can see the same thing in the Azor Ahai myth cycle,” she said, with an appraising glance at Thoros and Melisandre. “The level of congruity suggests these all have some sort of central unifying event behind them.”

Thoros didn't quite grasp some of the language the sorceress used, but the gist was fairly simple. “You've put some thought into this,” he noted.

Lady Jade nodded. “History and folklore's one of the family businesses, so to speak,” she said. “And learning to find the truth beneath the tale's a useful skill.”

“So this means we should take Bloodraven's tales at face value?” Alleras said acidly.

“Of course not,” the sorceress replied. “I'm not going to say it's all a hundred percent accurate. Hell, it likely isn't, and we don't know what's true and what's not yet. But I know this much: whatever is going on behind the stories, it's got the weirwoods spooked enough to shanghai me to solve their problem for them. That alone tells me that this is more than an issue with some backwoods nomads,
or anything specifically *human.*”

Thoros frowned. “About that,” he said. “Putting aside what Bloodraven said, do you believe the *tree’s* claim, Lady Jade? Are they truly that powerful?”

Jade hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose I do,” she said. “There really isn’t much out there that could disable the engines *and* the ansibles without turning the rest of the ship into mangled scrap. A focused telekinetic strike could do it maybe, I’ve never heard of a psionic who could pull that off but it’s possible.”

“If they have such power,” Alleras said thoughtfully. “Why would they need you? Forgive me, my lady, but…”

“No, no, it’s a fair question,” Jade said quickly. “That’s one of the things we don’t know. Maybe they need hands?” Thoros chuckled and Alleras rolled her eyes. “More serious: I wouldn't be surprised if the weirwood network burned through reserves they can afford to burn to bring me down. This whole thing smacks of a desperation move… George called me *zhdane,* I think they thought I was a Builder. Creations looking for aid from the creator, possibly.”

“Builders,” Alleras replied. “Where do they come into this, I wonder? When you first said that word, I thought you meant the legendary Stark king, but you’re speaking of more than one. Who *are* the Builders, Jade?”

The sorceress's gaze returned to the middle distance. “That’s a very complicated question,” she replied slowly. “The short of it is, they were a people who lived thousands of years ago, before almost any civilization we’ve ever heard of. The Builders were, well, they were as far beyond my people as I might seem to be beyond the lords of Westeros. They spread out across the stars, creating wonders wherever they went. Then they vanished, and we don’t know why.”

“And their connection to the old gods of the north?”

Thoros didn't consider himself a great mind, but he saw where this was going. “They created the weirwoods,” he said quietly.

“That, or they meddled with them,” Jade agreed. “The truth doesn’t matter here, the trees think the Builders created them. So they went looking for the nearest thing that looked like a Builder for help.”

“Which brings us to the question we seem to be avoiding,” Thoros rumbled. “What are we going to do” *And Lord help me, I have no fucking idea what that might be.* Nobody else seemed to have much of a thought, either, as they sat there silently.

“We need… we need more information,” Alleras said finally. “We have to sift through the tales and determine what’s true and what’s false.”

“All’s not wrong,” the sorceress said. “We need to know more about what we're facing before we can have any serious plan of attack here.”

The young maester hummed. “I need to report to the Citadel soon, mayhap they have something closer to the truth we’ve yet to find? If I tell them about your findings…”

“Aye, but will they listen?” Thoros rather doubted it, given Alleras’s first reaction to the sorceress’s account.

“That, I know not. The Grand Maester might, the archmaesters… Marwyn likely will but the others?*” Alleras shrugged helplessly. “If they can be of help, it is worth the effort. More hands lessen
“We'll be going north too, sometime soon,” Lady Jade said. “Winterfell might have more data I missed the first time, so will Castle Black. Also, George showed me a weirwood grove north of the Wall: that's likely going to be our next contact point when I try and talk to the trees again.”

“What about the king?” Alleras asked. “Do we tell the king what we've found?”

Lady Jade hummed. “Some, but not all,” she said. “I have to figure out how to phrase it properly, the wrong word and things could get out of hand very quickly.”

“Assuming he believes you,” Alleras noted. “Remember, my lady, we are speaking of things thought to be legends for thousands of years. His grace might be no more willing to believe than the archmaesters.”

“Mm, that could be a problem in the long term. Not as much in the short term, but…”

“It might be worse if he does believe,” Thoros said. Witch and maester turned to him with questioning looks. “The king… well, it's no secret that he's not fond of sitting on his throne and ruling. If he took the warning seriously, it would motivate him to get out of King's Landing, call the banners and march on the Wall without thinking it through.”

“And with us still in the dark on what we're up against, much less Robert… yeah, that would be less than ideal,” Jade replied. “Okay, we need to keep the king updated, but we also need to have somebody sit on him until we know more and we're ready to move.”

Thoros nodded. “The Hand can see to that,” he said confidently. “Stark will keep the king from acting rashly if needs be. He's a northerner too, no doubt he will see the danger more clearly once you tell him.”

“That seems like a plan, or at least something approximating a plan,” Jade said. “Something else I need to do but… Mel?” she asked, looking at the priestess who had remained silent through the entire discussion. “You have anything you want to add?”

Melisandre blinked, eyes unfocused, then locked back onto the sorceress. “I, ah, forgive me my lady,” she said. “I fear I may need to leave the company for a time.”

The sorceress blinked in turn. “What? Why?”

“I have not been… wholly forthcoming with you about my purpose here,” she said, glancing at Thoros and sighing. “The high priest in Volantis sent me to find you, but before that, R'hllor himself came to me and bid me take on another quest. I have put off that quest for too long waiting for you, and now I must continue.”

“Oh?” said Lady Jade, puzzled. “Where're you going?”

Melisandre smiled enigmatically. “I will tell you… perhaps another time,” she said. The sorceress simply rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“Alright, fine, if you're going to be that way be that way,” she said. “If you need a lift to wherever you're going let me know.” Melisandre nodded assent. “Anybody else want to split the party? Just out of curiosity? No? Okay, so we've got a plan… mostly, and we know where we're going next. So on that note, everybody go grab some food and some sleep. The days aren't going to get any shorter from here on out. If anybody needs me I'll be on the bridge.” The sorceress rose and they all rose with her.
“Something we might be able to assist with, my lady?” Thoros asked.

Lady Jade shook her head. “No, something I need to do myself. A great man once said, if you have any trouble you can always write a letter to the right people…”

***FLASH TRAFFIC***

TO: AL-XUFFASCH, Adm. Idris, cmdg Federal Starfleet Ranger Command Ceres
FROM: KIRK, Cpt. Winona, cmdg FWSS Kongou CA-314

We have received the following message from Cpt. Hasegawa:

URGENT: SITUATION FLUID, POSS. UNSTABLE. BUILDER PRESENCE MAY REPEAT MAY REQUIRE INVOKING GO1 SEC3, WILL KEEP YOU UPDATED. HASEGAWA AGS-3174

For the record, Cpt. Hasegawa has not yet invoked General Order One, Section Three, but apparently wants to hold the option in reserve pending future research. I have formally acknowledged this message in the ship's log, as well as placing an encrypted copy in the ship's data vault.

A message asking for further clarification has been sent; given bandwidth limitations it's unlikely we will get the full story until we are closer to FSC-29294 III.

—Kirk

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 104

There's an old saying that goes back to the twentieth century every Starfleet cadet memorizes, because it sums up the job perfectly: “The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world.”

Today I find myself standing foursquare in the wrong place. Planetos is shaping up to be an even bigger clusterfuck than I ever imagined it could be. Am I the right woman? I don't know.

I'm going to have to hope I am, because right now there's no one else to take the job.
Ser Kevan Lannister adjusted his cloak against the wind. High on the summit of Casterly Rock the west wind blew constantly, drafts swirling around the great stone fortress of the Lannisters, and every man who lived there knew its bite. Today it seemed a storm was gathering force over the sunset sea, the wind its herald. By supper no sane man would be anywhere except inside the walls or deep within the Rock itself.

Ser Kevan paid the wind little attention, a lifetime of living in the Lannister’s stronghold gave him the skills to evade the worst of the wind and endure the rest. He crossed the courtyard with the snapping lion pennants and entered the keep. Inside he found his brother Lord Tywin Lannister brooding in his solar, frowning at a pair of letters.

“Brother,” Lord Tywin said without looking up. Ser Kevan silently closed the door behind him.

“My lord,” he replied. “What have you decided?”

Tywin looked up at his brother. “It would seem,” he said dryly, “that two of my three children have gone mad.”

Kevan winced. “As bad as all that, truly?” he asked.

Tywin’s eyes narrowed. “In truth, I know not,” he said, picking up one letter and waving it about. “Had Tyrion gotten a pox of the brain from all his whoring, I might have expected fancies like this. A witch-woman from beyond Asshai, magics unlike anything seen in Westeros before, flying ships! I would dismiss it as madness, and yet... the creature's words are measured and sober, his reporting precise.

“Worse yet, Cersei's claims agree with Tyrion's in the broad strokes. She sees some sort of threat implicit in this witch and her ties to the Starks—she is annoyingly vague about that—but she does not dispute that the witch is a witch. Magic has been dead in this land since the end of the dragons, a thing to amuse and frighten decadent Essosi barbarians. But now it seems to have returned to the Northmen's benefit.

“And meanwhile Tyrion suggests we try and purchase the witch's favor.” Tywin shook his head. “I do not like this. Strange things are afoot in the north, the balance of power is shifting, I cannot see where it is going and I do not like it.”

Ser Kevan knew his brother well; he was the only one still alive who understood Tywin Lannister’s moods, and the sheer frustration in his brother’s voice reminded him of the years of their lord father’s misrule, when the Reynes and Tarbecks ran riot over the west, or of the days when King Aerys delighted in tormenting his former friend and Hand. A pity that I must add to that frustration. “I fear I bring more news of witchcraft,” he said, producing a pair of sealed letters. “Dispatches from King’s Landing.”

“Hn,” Tywin grunted. “Pycelle?”

“Aye,” Kevan replied. “Him, as well as a royal decree.” Kevan handed the letters over, Tywin broke the seals with a precise gesture and began to read.

“The madness seems to have spread,” he noted absently. “Still, Pycelle’s not a man gifted with a
great imagination. It would seem that my children may not be as mad as I had feared. As for this decree…” Tywin trailed off, then snorted with disdainful amusement. “Master of magic, indeed! Robert must be besotted with this foreign witch to even think something like that. Though this is written in his own hand and sent from King’s Landing when not two weeks before the royal party was still in Winterfell, according to Cersei’s letter.” Tywin looked curious. “A witch that could cross that distance so swiftly might be worth the dragons, when the time comes. Tyrion’s proposal has some merit at least.”

“More than simple madness, at any rate,” Kevan said cautiously. “How will we proceed?”

Lord Tywin reached for a blank sheet of parchment. “I shall instruct Cersei to keep close watch on this witch, but not interfere yet,” he said. “If we are to bring this so-called master of magic into our camp we will need a deft and subtle hand. Just as well that the creature elected to remain in the north; best not to have him poison the witch’s opinion of House Lannister any more than he already has.”

“As you say, brother,” Ser Kevan said. “And if Cersei is right that the witch is a threat?”

Tywin scowled. “I will not take immediate action,” he said. “But you have a point, brother. Send word to Clegane; he has been useful in the past, and witch or no I doubt any woman could stand against him and live. If Cersei is right, he will be our insurance.”

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**EDDARD**

Lord Eddard stared at the king, his oldest friend, in frank disbelief. “You want to what?” he said blankly. They were both ensconced in the king’s private office in one of the most secure parts of the Red Keep. Robert had asked Ned to come in, like any other day where the Hand was busy trying to keep the realm together, and then dropped this load onto his head. Not even bothering to bring it up with the small council either, just him.

Loyal Ned Stark, the one man Robert Baratheon could count on.

King Robert waved his hand vaguely. “Come off it, Ned.” he said. “I want Varys to commission someone to see to the Targaryens. The dragonspawn have been a thorn in my side for too fucking long, I was willing to let it slide whilst they were penniless exiles, but this marriage alliance with the godsdamned horsefuckers… the Iron Throne can’t abide that.”

“You want them dead,” Ned said. Unbidden, the image of two small bodies wrapped in red cloaks swam across his vision.

The king looked at him strangely. “You were always the smarter one of us,” he said. “Didn’t think I needed to use smaller words with you. Yes, damn it, I want them dead. Viserys needs to die at any rate. The girl’s claim on her own isn’t enough to be dangerous.”


“They’re dragonspawn,” Robert snapped. “They’ll always be a threat to the realm. And now they have thirty thousand Dothraki screamers at their beck and call! What happens when Viserys lands at Maidenpool with that kind of force, eh? How does the realm fare in that case?”

“And who says they will, Your Grace?” Ned said with a calmness he didn’t feel. “Viserys Targaryen is no Rhaegar, nor is he a Daemon Blackfyre. He’s not even an Aerys, for the gods’ sake. I know the stories of the beggar king just as well as you do; if he were truly the threat you believe him to be, he’d have raised an army years ago and tried his luck. Let the boy beg scraps off his sister’s table in a
tent in the middle of nowhere, they're no harm to us.”

“Yet,” Robert rumbled. “For now.” Ned looked at his old friend and saw some of the fire he’d had smouldering under a sullen look. Robert’s brows bunched together in confusion and outright anger that Ned hadn’t immediately agreed with his plans.

“Robert,” Ned said quietly, “we need to be better than the Mad King. You need to be better than him,” he stressed. “Sending men to kill children thousands of leagues from Westeros doesn’t—”

A soft cough came from the door. “A moment of your time, Your Grace?” The master of magic stood in the doorway, a solemn look on her face and a large roll of paper in her hand.

Robert grumbled. “Fine, fine, *this* conversation was getting us nowhere,” he said with a dark look at Ned. “What would you like to yell at me for, Lady Jade?”

The sorceress’s eyes darted between king and Hand. “No yelling at the moment, Your Grace,” she said with a flickering smile. “But there’s… we have a situation, possibly.”

“A situation,” Robert replied. “That’s nicely vague. Come in, my lady, and explain your ‘situation’ to me.” The sorceress strode into the solar and unrolled the paper in her hands into the finest map of Westeros Ned had ever seen, surpassing even the Braavosi maps he’d seen. The king gave the map a glance, then looked back at the sorceress. “Well then?”

Lady Jade pointed at a spot north of the Wall. “My research has gone off on, ha, something of a tangent,” she said. “In the middle of my investigations, I’ve uncovered evidence that *something* is stirring in the far north. Not entirely sure what it is, to be honest, and it’s not moving very fast or very regularly just yet, but it’s likely to pick up steam as the seasons change. Whenever the seasons change,” she added.

The king grunted. “Wildlings, no doubt,” he said.

“Possibly,” the sorceress agreed. “Though my research suggests—”

“Eh, Ned can take care of it,” Robert said, cutting Lady Jade off. “Ned, take care of it won’t you? I’ll be in my chambers.”

“Your Grace, you might want to actually listen to what Lady Jade is saying,” Ned said.

“I *said* I’ll be in my chambers, Ned,” the king growled. “Take care of it for me, won’t you? Shouldn’t take much, the Watch and your banners to root out a few wildlings. Oh, that reminds me: we’ll be having a tourney to celebrate my new Hand and my master of magic in a week or two, the new grounds are almost done. Should be a great thing to watch, glad you’ll both be there. Good day, the pair of you.” Robert heaved himself out of his chair and walked off, Kingsguard trailing behind him, leaving Ned and Jade standing in the empty solar.

“Wh,” Lady Jade said, stopped, then tried again. “What the hell was that?”

“That was the king,” Ned replied. All of a sudden he felt tired all the way down to his bones.

“No, seriously, what the hell was that?” Lady Jade blurted. “I expected a lot out of that conversation but that… was not one of the outcomes I anticipated.”

Ned sighed. “Forgive me, my lady,” he said. “We were in a difficult conversation about matters of state before you arrived. I fear His Grace might not have been in the best of moods, and the fault was mine. Now, you were saying something about wildlings moving towards the Wall?” He turned back
“The northern nomads probably are moving,” Lady Jade replied. “But if they’re moving it’s because something else is starting to move up here,” she pointed at the vast expanse of white that marked the uttermost north of Westeros.

It took Eddard a moment to make the connection. *Something in the Lands of Always Winter? But that would mean… no.*

He could feel the blood draining from his face as he looked at the sorceress. “Is this true?” he whispered.

The sorceress made a frustrated noise. “I don’t know, that’s the problem,” she said. “A lot of the data I have points to that conclusion, but it’s not enough to say one way or another. I don’t even know what is waking up in the north yet—which is why I’m being very careful not to say the word I know you’re thinking of because of the way your face has lost all color and if you’re smart you won’t start using that word just yet either.”

“Lady Jade,” Ned said slowly, trying to process the parade of horrible notions that popped into his head, “if this is… if this is that, then the king needs to know. The whole of Westeros needs to know!” *And on top of this, I’ve not yet discovered why the Lannisters killed Jon Arryn, nor what he and Lord Stannis were so interested in before his death. Why did all of this have to happen now, of all times?*

“I know,” Lady Jade said grimly. “But here’s the thing, we need to know what we’re facing, and we need proof before we can raise the alarm. Running in all directions like headless chickens isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

“What do you need?”

“At this point? Permission to head back to Winterfell and ransack the library if I have to. There might have been something in the texts I missed about what’s really going on. From there, well… I need to head north of the Wall and do some direct scouting, among other things. After that, I guess I’ll figure that out when I get there.”

Ned nodded thoughtfully. “Aye, you and I both,” he said absently, then waved off the confused look. “Never mind that. You have my permission to enter Winterfell, to the extent that you need it. Robb and Bran will no doubt be overjoyed to see you again.” *Come to think of it, things in the south might be getting a little too warm in the next little while.* “How long do you expect to be in the North, my lady?” he asked.

Lady Jade cocked her head. “Not too long, a week or two at the most I’d say. Depends on what I find,” she said.

“In that case I would ask a favor of you.”

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**THE ACOLYTE**

Alleras stood patiently outside the Grand Maester's chambers, doing her best to ignore the muffled sounds coming from within. The Citadel’s order of chastity were more often than not seen as a guideline more than a rule, and plenty of her fellow novices whiled away the time between lessons in Oldtown’s brothels. Though, judging by how long she’d been kept waiting, even the most hot-blooded of young maesters would be hard pressed to match Pycelle’s zeal for the flesh.
After what seemed like an eternity the muffled grunts died away and the door opened. One of the castle’s serving girls scurried out, head down and attempting to discreetly adjust her clothing. Alleras felt a brief spurt of pity for the girl, then mustered her own wits and walked into the room.

Grand Maester Pycelle sat at his writing desk, robes intact and smoothed, almost as if he had been simply working on some puzzle of the mind. The windows were unshuttered, no doubt to reduce the smell of his recent activities. “Eh?” he quavered, looking up from his desk. “Ah! Young Alleras! Please, come in, come in! So good to see an up and coming young maester around the keep. Come, sit yourself my the fire and close the door, there’s a good lad. The draft does my poor old bones a disservice.”

Alleras did as she was told, closing the door behind her and moving to the Grand Maester’s fireplace. As she did, Pycelle stooped form rose and shed its stoop. He stepped out from behind the writing desk and joined her by the fire. The flames cast sharp shadows on the creases in his face. “Well?” Pycelle's normal quaver had vanished, replaced with a smooth, strong and avuncular tone. The doddering old man of court was nowhere to be seen or heard. “What have you to report on this sorceress and her magic?”

Alleras shook her head. “Not magic.” Pycelle's only response was to raise his brows. She idly wondered if this was a mystery one learned as one grew older, or if it was a blood talent. “According to her, it isn't magic,” she amended. “Everything she does is based in the arts we study at the Citadel, only more advanced. Much more advanced.”

The Grand Maester took this in without a visible reaction. “Interesting,” he mused. “How much have you learned so far, if our vocations are so similar?”

“All nearly as much as I would have liked,” Alleras said with genuine frustration. “The gulf of knowledge is too great. Lady Jade has been more than free with explanations, but half of it I can only barely grasp and the rest might as well be Ghiscari or Dothraki. As for the lady herself, well... she makes no claims towards being a teacher, and I have no reason to doubt her.”

“I suppose that means trying to take the ship—for the good of the realm, of course—would be out of the question?” Pycelle asked. Alleras did her level best to not react the way she wanted to. Smothering the old goat and fleeing to the safety of Carefree Victory wasn't the best option here, at all.

Instead she adopted the same rueful expression Father liked to use when Ellaria caught him doing something foolish and said, “The outcome would be very doubtful, Grand Maester. With time, a team of maesters could learn how to control the ship perhaps. But the ship can only be controlled by Lady Jade, or her masters.”

“Yes, yes, this mysterious 'Starfleet' she's mentioned,” Pycelle nodded sagely. “What can you tell us about them? Has she said anything that makes more sense than the stories she enthralls the king with at dinner?”

“All, but not much,” Alleras replied. “I lack the knowledge necessary to understand most of it, much like the secrets of her ship and smithy. But the way she speaks of this Starfleet, it is large and powerful.”

“How powerful?” Pycelle's voice lost the avuncular tone, taking on a sharp edge.

Alleras could only shrug helplessly. “Powerful enough that Westeros, the Free Cities, the nations of Essos are as nothing to them. Even Valyria at its height could not challenge our lady of Hasegawa's people if they came in force. And they are coming, Grand Maester. I cannot stress that highly
Lady Jade has had messages from her people. They are sending ships and men to retrieve her.

“Do you believe they will invade?” The Grand Maester asked.

“I doubt it,” replied Alleras. “According to her, their highest laws forbid interfering in the affairs of others, especially those considered more primitive. Were they to invade, it would only be because...”

Because the ancient people whose maps drew Lady Jade here left something behind that might be the source of all our legends of the Long Night, and that something is moving in the dark once more. “Because of unique circumstances beyond our control.”

Pycelle sighed. “In a way, that is a pity,” he said to Alleras's great surprise. “A race of great maesters would be a boon to Westeros, and if the lady herself is a good example of the breed they'd be gentler conquerors than the Targaryens.” He shook his head wearily. “No sense in wondering about might-bes. Have you anything else to report, novice?”

Alleras hesitated. She had already written a letter to Marwyn and dispatched it using Dornish contacts in court. Once that letter got to Oldtown the cat would well and truly be out of the bag. Revealing Lady Jade's latest intelligence to this old Lannister toady, however, felt almost like a bridge too far. Father would never approve of telling Lannisters anything, but the potential danger outweighed the blood debts her house was owed.

“There is one thing,” she said slowly. “You are aware of Lady Jade's research into the weirwood trees?” Pycelle nodded and made an impatient, get-on-with-it-lad gesture. “Well, her research has produced some unexpected results. She's not sure what it means yet, precisely, but it might be wise to contact the Citadel's astronomers and learn about the next winter.”

“What about next winter?” Pycelle asked, confused.

“It may be considerably more eventful than anybody first thought.”

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 104.1**

Well, that could’ve gone better.

My initial meeting with King Robert regarding the whole tree mess was... well, it wasn’t a total shitshow, which I suppose is in my favor. Sort of, anyway. I had my spiel laid out all nice and neat, just enough information to not waste everybody’s time but stressing that we need more data before we start summoning the legions and whatnot. I expected skepticism. Thoros thought the king might end up getting all gung-ho about the prospect of a big war.

*Neither* of us expected that I’d get the brush-off. Which is exactly what I ended up getting. Bob looked at the map, listened to about the first half-dozen words out of my mouth and then walked off without hearing the rest of it. I’m not entirely sure what the hell was going on there, but it was shall we say an incredibly frustrating experience.

Stark at least stuck around to listen to what I had to say, and... results were mixed. I’m not sure if he believes me when I say something big and nasty is stirring in the far north, but if he doesn’t then he acts the part well. He agrees with me that acting without better knowledge would be rash, and he won’t bring up the O-word (or the U-word, though that one’s staying in-house for now) with the king or the rest of the king’s advisers until I have solid proof that shit’s real.
As a side note, there’s a lot of tension in the air that wasn’t there a week ago. The vizerhood doesn’t seem to be resting lightly on Stark’s shoulders, certainly not as well as he would’ve liked. Stark seems preoccupied with something, not sure what it is and I didn’t ask, hopefully it’s not something that will get in the way when things inevitably escalate out of control. Because they will inevitably escalate out of control—it’s the one constant in the universe. In the meantime, I’m going to do my level best to try and stay out of whatever’s got Stark’s shorts knotted and focus on the potentially-Builder-fueled-unpleasantness currently lurking in the polar cap.

So anyway, the next stop for me is Winterfell again. I need to hit up the castle library, this time looking for more information on the Others and their various proclivities. I’m not entirely sure I’m going to find anything I don’t already have in the ship’s databanks, much less anything useful, but the effort needs to be made. At the very least, getting the VI to index and cross-reference all that crap will make future research so much easier. From there, I’ll be heading north to the Wall to do the same to Castle Black’s library. I’ll also be dropping off a few things: Stark asked me to drop off a few members of his household at Winterfell, including his youngest, and to pick up a few more Stark guardsmen on my way back to King’s Landing—see the note re: tensions above. I’m guessing Stark wants more people he knows are loyal at hand. Smart move.

I shouldn’t be gone from King’s Landing for very long, hopefully. The king’s christening a new tournament ground in the next couple weeks—something about me monopolizing the old one, apparently—and King Bob wants to celebrate his new vizier and court wizard. Attendance appears to be mandatory for the guests of honor, otherwise I’d claim I’m, fuck I don’t know, fighting off a hydra or something and be somewhere else. Not entirely sure I have time for it, but I guess I’m going to have to make time.

No rest for the wicked!
In Dreams

BRAN

After a fortnight, he'd concluded that he would never have any sort of normal dream ever again. The dreams, Bran noticed, tended to be of a few different types. The ones he enjoyed most were the wolf dreams: running through the fields and woods, the sights, sounds and smells of the world outside Winterfell's walls, the sharp hot taste of rabbit or deer blood in his mouth... if he would never walk without pain again at least he could have this in his life.

The tree dreams were just as intense, but more confusing. The crow would be there sometimes, guiding him through a waterfall of sight and pictures that he could never quite make out in full. Flashes of horned lions and winged wolves dancing, or a glimpse of his sister clutching at a small jeweled box, or the sounds of a mighty battle interrupted by a high, keening sound and a terrible blue light. Tree dreams were always changing and never made much sense, but the one thing they had in common was the heart tree. The tree stood like a rock in a stream, everything else in the dream would twist and flow around it while the tree watched, impassive.

Bran wasn't fond of tree dreams.

And then, sometimes, Bran found himself dreaming of stranger sights: drifting in an endless black sky filled with stars, red skies over golden fields and endless halls of white metal. Bran had no idea what to make of any of this, but at least they were more relaxing than the tree dreams.

Tonight was one of the strangest dreams yet. He found himself sitting on a chair on top of a tower taller than anything he'd ever heard of, looking out at a city that curved out and above him on great steel arms. Towers greater than most castles hung upside-down over his head. Bran always thought he had a head for heights, but this bizarre city was making him dizzy.

He closed his eyes for a moment to clear his head, and then felt two skinny, clawed feet rest themselves gently on his scalp. Good evening, young one, the crow greeted him. Bran opened his eyes, and the impossible city stubbornly refused to go away like he wanted. The crow cocked its head and gave the landscape a considering look.

It seems our host is dreaming of home again, it noted.

Bran blinked. "Somebody lives here?" he said blankly, then felt like kicking himself. Of course somebody lived there, it was a city after all. But still, to live clinging to rafters like some kind of giant spider didn't seem like a good way to live.

Quite a few live here, given the size of the bloody thing, the crow replied. It has to be a good ten leagues wide as... well, as I fly. Bran blinked again, unsure if the crow had just made a jest. But oh yes, this would be the place where your friend from the falling star came from.

"This is where Lady Jade came from?" Bran asked. The thought was more than a little stunning.

Among other places. I spent some time here a night or two ago. It was... enlightening.

Bran strained to look. "Is she here?" he said, trying to spot a glimpse of the sorceress's black hair or green tunic from his perch.

She's somewhere down in that mess, the crow said. Even if we search we'll not find her before the dream ends, I'm afraid. Bran felt a keen disappointment at that news. Still, we shouldn't bother the
lady if we can help it. Let her have her dream.

The impossible city slowly faded into a swirling gray mist, though the tower remained solid beneath him. “I miss her sometimes,” Bran said. “Not as much as I miss Father and Sansa and Arya but I miss her. Moro misses her too, I can tell. Is that odd?”

The crow gave this due consideration. Not as odd as you might think, it said. Your lady has something of a commanding presence at times. It comes with the sorcery, I think.

“Oh,” replied Bran.

But fear not young one, you'll have the chance to meet her again soon enough. She will be returning to Winterfell shortly, the crow said idly.

“Wouldn't the king tell her to stay?” asked Bran, confused. Certainly Lady Jade was a great witch, but the king was the king. Even Father did as the king commanded.

The crow looked grimly amused. One of the benefits of being a great sorcerer is that one doesn't always have to listen to kings, it said. In the mists, the image of a cheery castle with clean white walls formed for a moment, then vanished. Witches and wizards come and go as they will, and why not? There are few that can stop them.

Bran frowned. “That doesn't seem right,” he said. The crow shrugged. Mayhaps it isn't. But it is useful. You'll learn that, in time.

SANSA

The night before Lady Jade departed King's Landing was an odd one. Dinner that night had been a bit awkward. His Grace had seemed a touch sullen, an odd tension between himself and Father that Sansa couldn't quite place the reason for. Despite that Queen Cersei seemed to be quite relaxed and cheerful that night, listening as Sansa talked happily about life in the north.

Lady Jade stayed apart from the usual revelry, eating little and strumming idly on her guitar. As usual the king demanded a song from the foreign woman, and Lady Jade sang of a tyrant prince who commissioned a magic sword, only for the sword to run him through the first time he wielded it. Her sweet prince seemed a bit taken aback by the song, but the king only laughed. “If only the mad king had a sword like that and solved all our troubles,” he'd said.

Later, after the feast had ended Sansa and her sweet prince walked towards the royal chambers, talking all the way about the master of magic. “This Ulthosi witch needs to remember her place,” Joffrey grumbled. “If she sang something like that about Father, I'd have Ser Ilyn take her tongue for it.”

“His Grace had no objections, my sweet prince,” Sansa pointed out, only for Joffrey to wave his hand in dismissal.

“Father's always been too kindhearted,” he said in reply. “My dear Lady Sansa, you needs understand that treason is a matter that must be dealt with swiftly and without mercy, before it spreads.”

“Treason?” she said. Joffrey clearly had his thoughts going somewhere, but Sansa couldn't figure out what he was driving towards. “A song about a foreign prince in some far-off land is treason?”
“It's the principle of the thing,” Joffrey replied. “If such a song got into the hands of the smallfolk, could they not use it to stir resentment against my lord father? Or your lord father, for that matter?” Sansa supposed that could happen, but so far as she knew none held any great ill will towards the king or Father. When she said as much, Joffrey looked fit to argue, but then smiled once more and let the matter rest.

And there it rested until they came across an otherwise unused room where the sorceress held court with a group of children. Prince Tommen and Princess Myrcella were seated in the front, with Arya's dark hair standing out to Myrcella's left. Around them a scattering of young pages, squires, children of ladies-in-waiting or the Red Keep's servants all sat on the floor, waiting for the show to begin.

Without hesitation Joffrey stepped into the room, Sansa following in his wake. The sorceress looked up from her guitar and smiled in welcome.

“Lady Jade,” Sansa said in greeting.

“Here I am, paragon of knowledge and wisdom beyond anything in Planetos, and I'm telling stories to children,” Jade mock-grumped in Sansa's direction. “I'd register a complaint but honestly it's my own damn fault.”

“Truly, you only have yourself to blame,” Sansa replied with great dignity. The sorceress's face collapsed in exaggerated grief, and she thought for a moment that she might have taken the jest a little too far.

“Ah well,” Jade sighed. “Might as well make the most of it. Pull up a seat if you're interested, kids.” Joffrey strode forward and tapped Tommen on the shoulder. The young prince scrambled out of the chair and found himself a place on the floor at Lady Jade's feet. Myrcella followed her brother's lead, and Arya went along with them. Joff slid smoothly into the evacuated chair and the sorceress's eyebrow twitched just a little, not entirely unlike Father's did at times. “Well then,” she said, “this will be the last time for a while I get to play royal storyteller, so if you've got a request now's the time.”

“Do you know any stories about dragons?” Tommen asked. The sorceress tilted her head and hummed a little.

“Dragons, eh?” she said, deep in thought. “I have a few stories about dragons, but they aren't the kind you know of in Westeros. In my homeland, dragons aren't animals you ride, they're creatures of great magic and wisdom revered by many.”

Sweet Joff smiled a funny little half-smile at that pronouncement. “Wisdom from beasts?” he asked. “In our lands we tamed the dragons and made them our mounts.”

“And now you have none,” Jade replied absently. “Perhaps there's wisdom to be found there, Prince Joffrey?” Joffrey's little smile dissolved into a frown as the sorceress went on. “Now, little prince,” she said to a wide-eyed Tommen, “let me tell you a tale from my mother's country about two great dragon brothers: the Dragon of the North Wind and the Dragon of the South Wind. For many years the brothers upheld peace and harmony in the heavens, but all things must end...”

Sansa sat enraptured as Lady Jade spun the tale of the dragon brothers and the war between them that destroyed their lands, how the South Wind triumphed over his brother but found the victory hollow and bitter, and how a chance encounter changed his perspective on the world.

“Wait,” Arya said. “So the dragons became human? How do dragons become human?”
The sorceress waggled her fingers. “Maaaagic,” she said teasingly. Arya huffed and turned away. Jade shrugged. “Seriously, dragons can change their shape. Oftentimes they'll walk the world and mingle with the rest of us just because they can.”

Joffrey smiled that funny half-smile again. “Are you a dragon, my lady?” he asked. The question sounded innocent enough but there was the hint of an edge there. Sansa knew from her lessons and what little Father had said that naming oneself a dragon carried great risk and consequences these days.

The sorceress smiled and shook her head. “Oh I'm no dragon young prince,” she laughed, and added in an odd sing-song tone, “just an average ordinary everyday sorceress. Now that's one story done and dusted, I think I've got room for two or three more. Who wants to hear what?”

The rest of the evening continued like that. Lady Jade told outrageous stories about her homeland (“You've long summers and winters in Westeros, but have you ever heard of a place where the sun never set? No? Then let me enlighten you!”) while the children listened, sometimes squealing in glee or fright as the story demanded. Finally, the sorceress cleared her throat and called a halt. With only a little disappointment all the children stood up, dusted their clothes off and milled out of the chamber.

“Sansa, a moment please,” Lady Jade said. Sansa hesitated and Joffrey swept past her towards his chambers.

“Is something wrong, my lady?” she asked. The sorceress hesitated a little, sparking a tiny ember of worry in Sansa's belly.

“Sort of? Maybe? I'm not sure,” Jade replied. “I'm leaving town, and I don't know when I'll be coming back. I'm not sure I like leaving the kids unsupervised for that long.”

“I am sure that Tommen, Myrcella and the rest of the castle's children will be fine without you looking after them,” Sansa reassured her.

The sorceress shook her head ruefully. “Not the kids I was talking about,” she said. “But that's beside the point. I'm going to be away and I need somebody to be my eyes and ears while I'm not here. I thought you'd be a good choice.”

“Me?” Sansa said. “But... I am just another lady in waiting here. Why not ask Father? He's the king's Hand.”

“Which means he has a lot more to deal with,” Jade countered. “I'm already making his life difficult enough as it is, I don't need to pile on. Arya's heading back with me... and honestly while she'd do it in heartbeat she's too young. More importantly, you young lady have this.” Lady Jade reached out and tapped Sansa's forehead. “It's a hell of a thing you've got there. Use it and you'll go far.”

“I... see,” Sansa said. She honestly had little idea what the sorceress meant, but the words sounded encouraging. “If you trust me so much, what would you have me do?”

Lady Jade pulled a small box out of her coat pocket. It was a deep black and like so many of her magic tools made of a hard, shiny substance that was light and somewhat warm to the touch. The front of the box was a golden filigree. “This will let us talk no matter where we are,” she said. “If something happens that you think I need to know about, open the lid and press the blue button. Even if I'm on the far side of the world I'll hear you. Keep it on you as much as you can, keep it secret and keep it safe.”

Sansa took the box from the sorceress and placed it carefully inside her gown. “I... thank you, my
lady,” she said. “I will do as you ask.”

Jade smiled and laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Don't worry too much, Sansa,” she said. “The sky won't fall in the next couple weeks, I don't think. Besides, if something goes wrong just call and then you'll see something really exciting.”

The next morning Sansa stood at her window in the Tower of the Hand and watched from afar as the silver sky-ship rose from the edge of the city and sped north.
CATELYN

The direwolves were restless. They paced the kennels ceaselessly, never making a sound but always in motion, always prowling. Night and day they did this, only stopping to feed and, sometimes, to sleep.

The wolves' pacing seemed to infest their masters, as well. Cat's dreams were filled with a need to be somewhere, to do something that seemed just on the edge of her understanding. The days were not much better, filled with an edge of anticipation that led her on a looping route around Winterfell. Robb worked the house guards with feverish intensity, running drill after drill in the courtyard, fingers always tap tap tapping on the hilt of his sword. Rickon ran about the castle in a blur of activity, poking and prodding and cajoling others into playing with him until he dashed off again in search of what, Cat knew not.

Only Bran, her sweet wounded boy, seemed mostly unaffected by the restlessness, limping about Winterfell on the crutch Maester Luwin had fashioned for him. But even if Bran seemed untouched by anxiety, he still seemed distracted at times, looking up at the sky as if he was expecting something.

For seven days and seven nights this went on, until on the morning of the eighth day the northern quiet was broken by the sky-ship's distant rumble. Cat emerged from the great hall to find Robb ordering the guards back into formation as the ship rumbled over the walls and slowly turned to loop around the castle. “Another mouth to feed, it seems!” he called cheerfully as she approached.

“Did you have word of this?” asked Cat. That the sorceress would come and go was something she had come to accept many moons before, but considering that she had gone to King's Landing with Ned... returning without advance warning felt wrong.

Robb shook his head. “No ravens from Father, if that's what you mean.” The wrong feeling in Catelyn's belly deepened. Ned would have sent word ahead. “Shall we go to meet her, or let her meet us at the gate?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

“I think we should go meet her.” Robb grinned, and Cat was struck by how boyish her son still was, no matter that he was the Stark in Winterfell. So young, too young. “I never get tired of seeing that ship of hers.”

Cat swallowed her worry and smiled, just a little. “Then we shall do exactly that.” The sky-ship had dropped behind the wall near the south gate, just where it had berthed when the king's progress had come to Winterfell.

The sky-ship’s thunder was replaced by a great clamor from the direction of the kennels. Men rushed towards the sound, as did Robb. “Sorry, milord,” the kennel-master said, “the wolves want out all of a sudden.”

“Well then let them out,” cried Robb. “And for the gods' sake, stay out of their way!”
“Robb, is that wise?” Cat said quietly, out of others' hearing.

“They won’t hurt her,” he replied with confidence.

The kennel-master opened the pens and the wolves leapt out, howling joyously. They raced through the courtyard towards the south gate. Behind them, Robb and Cat followed at a more sedate pace. Bran met the little procession at the gate, leaning on his stick with a smile she had almost forgotten he could make on his face. The wolves milled at his feet, waiting.

The gate opened and the wolves launched themselves through the door, the mother leading the pack straight towards the ship. The ship's mistress had descended from the ship and was making her way up towards the gate when the massive wolf jumped and pounced, knocking the poor woman to the earth.

“Agh!” she cried, pinned to the ground by the mother direwolf’s bulk. “Off! Off, you ambulatory shag carpet!” Moro barked happily and moved off, leaving Mistress Jade lying in the summer grass. Ever gallant, Robb offered the sorceress a hand up.

“Are you alright, my lady?”

“Yeah,” she groaned, accepting the hand and clambering back to her feet. “Bruised my dignity is all. Just as well, I wasn't using it for anything.” She shot Moro a baleful look, who responded by sitting down and huffing. “I'd ask what I did to you, but I'm afraid you'd give me an answer.”

Robb coughed delicately. “Welcome back to Winterfell, Lady Jade,” he said. “What brings you here? We all thought you were going to stay in the south for longer.”

Mistress Jade rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah, well, so did I,” she said wryly. “Things kind of... got involved. Also, I'm running an errand or two—”

“Mother!” The cry came from the foot of the ship, jerking Cat's attention from the sorceress to the sight of her Arya running at her, arms outstretched.

“Arya?” Cat said, picking her youngest girl up in an embrace. “What are you doing here? Did you stow away?”

“(Like that, among other things,)” Jade muttered.

“I didn't stow away, Father sent me home,” Arya said breathlessly. “He said I wasn't enjoying myself in King's Landing and I suppose I wasn't and I missed Nymeria so much but still I was going to start catching cats in the Red Keep soon and that sounded like fun but Father decided I should go home and he and Sansa were going to stay even though Joffrey's a little brat—”

“Arya!” Cat said, scandalized. “You shouldn't say such things about your sister's betrothed!”

“But he is!” Arya protested.

“Lady Jade?” Robb asked, cutting into the argument before it could get truly started. “Father asked you to take Arya home?”

The sorceress nodded. “Her and a few others,” she said. “And he asked me to pick up a few things while I was here, too.” She reached inside her coat, froze, then frantically began patting her other pockets. “Shit shit shit I didn't leave it behind did I of all the stupid things oh no wait there we go.” She produced a letter sealed in wax with Ned's personal seal. “For you, I think,” she said, offering it to Robb.
Robb took the letter, broke the seal and read the contents with a frown. “This is... troubling,” he said. “Another score men to the south? We can do that, but it leaves the Winterfell guard a bit short-handed. Ser Rodrik will know who is the best of what we have here.” He looked at Jade. “When does Father expect them in the city?”

“As soon as possible,” the sorceress replied. “Which is more on me than you. If you can get your men assembled quickly I can have them at the gates of King's Landing before dinner.” She glanced at the sun. “Probably before dinner,” she amended. “It'll be tight, but we can make it. Won't be a comfortable trip, though.”

“Soldiers are used to discomfort,” Robb said. Cat hid a smile as he repeated his teachers' words to the sorceress. “And better half a day's discomfort than a moon's turn or more on the march. Now, my lady, Mother,” he continued, “if you'll excuse me I need to confer with Ser Rodrik and choose men to help Father.”

“Of course, Robb,” said Cat. “Get the men you need.” The worry in her stomach turned into a sour stone. There had been time for precious few ravens since Ned had arrived in the capital, and now he was sending Arya home and calling for more men. “Is something wrong?” she asked the sorceress once Robb had gone off with Arya in tow to find the master-at-arms and pick the twenty they would send south.

Mistress Jade shook her head. “No idea,” she said. “The main group of guards finally showed up yesterday, and I know he was glad to see them. Things have been a little weird the last couple days. Beyond that, I haven't pried. If the Hand thinks he needs reinforcements I won't be the one to tell him no.”

That wasn't passing near the reassurance Cat wanted. “Will you be staying in King's Landing tonight?” she asked. The unspoken question will you be there to help Ned? hanging in the air.

“I'll only be there long enough to drop off the troops, then I'm back here for a day or two before heading to the Wall,” the sorceress said. “There's... I don't know what's going on. I really don't. But I can feel something moving around just out of sight, you know?” And the odd thing was, Cat really did know what she felt like. Moro took this moment to shove her head under Cat's hand, a gesture she'd become familiar with over the long days of her husband's absence.

“And you think this thing you're seeking lies at the Wall?” she asked.

“I don't know.” Mistress Jade shrugged helplessly. “All I can do is keep digging and see if I can bring it to light. It's what I do.”

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 108

When I was but a wee lass (she said in a horrible mock-Irish accent) my grandmother told me stories about her life as a road train driver, running the long haul down the Watney Trail through Schiaparelli to Hellas, or leading a train all the way around the world on Route One from Valles-New Shanghai and back again. For a little girl who grew up in the world with shuttleports and the planetary transporter grid, Grandma’s stories of huge processions of trucks trundling down endless worn dirt paths through equally endless fields of boulders for days on end—and all of this just for crap you could make at the local autofac—seemed like the craziest thing ever.

I now have a far greater appreciation for my ancestors’ toil than I did yesterday. Stark called in a favor, asked me to move some people around and damned if I didn’t just spend the entire day doing exactly that. I delivered Arya and a few of his less-essential courtiers to Winterfell, hauled a couple
dozen Stark soldiers to King’s Landing and then returned to Winterfell in the middle of the night for a dinner of tube rat flambé and just enough time to hang a do-not-disturb-violators-will-be-toad sign on the door before I passed out. I thought I knew what boring flying was like; I was so very, very wrong. I have no idea how freight pilots do it.

Anyway.

Winterfell was pleased to see me, which is nice. The Starklings are all as well as they can be—Bran’s still got a nasty limp but he doesn’t seem to hold it against me. Things haven’t changed much in the three weeks or since I left, in fact after being so busy in the south Winterfell being pretty much like I left it feels oddly restful. Also, it’s nice to be somewhere where the sewers are better maintained and not nearly as overwhelmed as King’s Landing. Even with the ship’s filtration systems the smell was starting to infest my dreams at this point. I mean, Jesus.

Young Lord Robb wasn’t expecting me, which means something I haven’t quite yet decoded. Stark’s not a man who does stuff on a whim, so the idea of packing his youngest girl and a bunch of servants back to Winterfell couldn’t have been a spur-of-the-moment decision. I haven’t seen anything in the capital that suggests the situation’s getting that tense as of yet… but then again I’ve been looking at the heart trees and trying to stay out of local politics, so I might’ve missed something, or a lot of somethings.

(Incidentally, when I voice my whole I’m-not-involved thing, Al just gives me this pitying look and Thoros says something along the lines of “you’d be better off demanding water stop being wet.” I really hate it when they’re right about this crap.)

But we’ll burn that bridge when we come to it. I’ve got… roughly fifteen days, give or take a few, before I’m due back in King’s Landing for Bob’s tournament. In other circumstances it’d be an interesting cultural activity; never been to a proper Postclassical tourney before. Problem is, I’ve got bigger things on my mind at the moment.

Cultural enrichment can wait, there’s Science to be done!

First things first, I need to go back over Luwin’s library looking for things I might’ve missed. The first survey was largely general history & the like, this time I need to drill down and look for things specific to the North, the Old Gods and the Others. The Citadel had a lot of theorycrafting but not much in terms of specifics. The Stark stronghold should have more.

So will Castle Black, so once I’m done here we’re off to the Wall. I need to give that damned thing a proper examination with the full suite of sensors. I didn’t spend nearly enough time on the survey the last time I was there, just running a baseline environmental study. The Wall looms large in the Westerosi mythspace… it’s just as key to this polar business as the weirwoods, I think. I need more data… and to talk with Mormont and Aemon again.

If I’m right—if Brynden’s right—they need to know more than anybody else.

And then I have to get back south for a tournament. Joy.

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**THE SPIDER'S TUNNELS**

The meeting was risky, but perhaps also necessary. The last moon's turn of life in King's Landing had been set ever so slightly off-kilter, like a painting or tapestry hung at a subtly wrong angle. On the surface, everything seemed normal enough but there was that ever present hint of wrongness that drew the eye while the mind wondered. At least the journey would be simple enough: Pentos was
close and his friend had many fast ships, most of which carried legitimate cargoes, to race to Westeros aboard.

At the appointed time, the master of whisperers slid from his office in the Red Keep with a grace beiting his round softness, removed the robes and perfume that made him so distinctive and applied one of his more useful costumes.

A burly guard soon enough left his post near the spymaster's quarters and made his way to a quiet place where he could move between the walls unnotice and undisturbed. Truly an amazing place, the Red Keep. Old Maegor and his mad tyranny had build something wonderful, all riddled with hides and holes waiting for just the right person to come along and put them to good use. Down he traveled through passages known only to him and the rats, until he reached a secluded spot near where the hillside reached the sea. Waiting for him was the man he'd sent for not long after reports of witchery in the north started reaching his ears.

Illyrio Mopatis been handsome and lithe, once. That was a long time ago, muscle and vigor replaced by wealth and fat. Jeweled rings glittered on his stubby fingers as he bowed. “My old friend,” he said warmly. No names, of course. Even here there was a chance, however small, of being overheard. “So good to see you after so long.”

“And I you,” Lord Varys said with a gruff note in his voice. “Though I wish the circumstances were more welcoming.”

“Oh? Our last reports said things here were coming along nicely.”

“They were. They still are, in fact. Perhaps too nicely. Lord Stark's investigation is moving faster than I expected. This Ulthosi business has the king distracted, but we cannot hope for that to last... and it has dangers of its own. War is coming soon, I fancy. We have to move our plans forward to meet it or be left behind.”

“Too soon, too soon,” his old friend protested. “What good is war now? We are not ready. Delay.”

“Would that were possible. But even if I could, a delay would not be in our favor.”

“The princess is with child. The khal will not bestir himself until his son is born. You know how those savages are.”

“Then perhaps we must put aside the khal and his princess for now,” Varys replied. “The game is expanding in scope far beyond the original players. Stannis Baratheon and Lysa Arryn are beyond my reach, and the whispers say they are gathering swords to their sides. The Knight of Flowers plots to make his sister the new queen with Lord Renly. Littlefinger... the gods only know what game Littlefinger is playing. And Lord Stark... he has the bastard, he has the book and soon enough he'll have the truth. If the queen even suspects Lord Eddard knows, she will make her move. Wolf and lion are already snarling at each other across a divide, what happens next will send them leaping across the chasm, fangs bared. And into all of this comes our mysterious visitor from far Ulthos. An element we didn't see and didn't expect. It concerns me.”

Illyrio raised an eyebrow. “Truly, old friend? The noble houses of the Seven Kingdoms are but balls to be juggled, and one foreign woman with a wain full of queer devices troubles you?”

Varys shook his head wearily. “Juggling balls is one thing. Juggling knives is a different thing altogether, and I fear Robert's pet witch may well be one knife too many. Consider, my friend: the Lady Hasegawa has no swords but she has influence. She has the king’s interest, whether she likes it or no, and the Hand owes her a debt which cannot be repaid for his second son's life. Furthermore
she has been gathering allies in unlikely places, from the Citadel to the red priests of Volantis to House Martell—though I doubt she knows that last one yet. She's been content to chase after the northmen's gods for now, but when things come to a head?

The fat man stroked his beard thoughtfully. “An interesting problem,” he said. “Perhaps a matter for the skilled men of Braavos?”

“I had considered it,” Varys admitted, “but her defenses are uncanny enough that I doubt we could afford the cost of such a thing. Besides which, it would be in our interest to keep the woman alive and, if possible, favorably viewed towards us.” A radical suggestion to be sure, given the sorceress's ties and what little he knew of how she viewed the world. And yet he plunged on. “You must understand old friend, this woman is no exile seeking succor from the Iron Throne. She is a castaway biding time whilst waiting for rescue. Lady Hasegawa says her people will come—are coming—for her, and I see no reason to doubt that.”

“A compelling argument against assassination,” Illyrio agreed. “But why try and tilt her towards us? Her people will come, take her away and we are free to resume playing, no?”

Ah. His friend had pierced the heart of the matter, and now they strayed into waters Varys had less understanding of. “Her people will come and return her to their lands yes,” he said cautiously. “But listening to the witch I believe that may not be the end of it. It is possible that her people will tarry and treat with those who sheltered their kinswoman in a time of need.”

Illyrio’s hand stopped mid-stroke as he considered the implications. “If whoever sits the throne has treated the witch with hospitality they would be... yes, I see where you're going with this. I like it.” He shook his head violently. “And yet we are still not ready. Less so if we cannot count on the khal. We must delay. We need more time.”

“Time? Time is our enemy now,” Varys said quietly. “The opportunity will not last long at this rate. Delay, you say? Make haste, I reply. Even the finest jugglers cannot keep a hundred balls in the air forever. The swifter we act now the better our chances in the future.”

“You are more than a juggler, old friend. All I ask is for you to work your magic one last time. I will do what I can to accelerate our plans, but quick movement was always going to be difficult. Give us enough time to be ready as you can.”

“I will do all that is possible,” Varys said. “I will need gold, and fifty new birds.”

“So many? The ones you need are hard to find... so young, to know their letters... it will be difficult.”

“Even a sorcerer requires his tools to work, my friend.”

“Humph. Very well, I will scrape the barrels clean and find them for you. But remember, delay as much as you can! We will need every moment you can squeeze from the hourglass.”

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**TYRION**

When they arrived at Castle Black, the ship was waiting for them. It wasn’t a complete surprise: that morning as the party of recruits and their dilettante tagalong broke fast, thunder rumbled above them. Jon Snow’s direwolf perked up at the sound, pointing his head to the sky and barked. Tyrion had just enough time to look up and see a tiny white object, too fat and distant to be a bird, shoot across the sky. Snow’s gaze followed his own, and he looked thoughtful and graver than usual that morning. Sure enough, riding down the kingsroad some hours later they saw the white bulk of the Ulthosi sky-
The ship had gone south, then returned to the north in the same time it took the party to struggle up the kingsroad from Winterfell. “I feel vaguely cheated,” Tyrion muttered to himself. Not quietly enough though, as Stark’s bastard turned and gave him a funny look. “What?”

“You could’ve gone back to King’s Landing with the king and his party,” Snow said in reply. “They all took a trip on Carefree Victory.”

“Aye, I could have,” he agreed. “But that would have meant missing out on the Wall, and I’d regret that to the end of my days.” Not to mention that I’d already spent far too much time with Cersei and Joffrey on the journey north as it was. Not that he’d ever say it aloud, of course: Lannisters were a united front to the world, no matter how complicated things were elsewhere.

That statement drew a bark of laughter from Benjen Stark. “You sound like a black brother already,” he said. “Are you sure you don’t want to join the Watch, Lord Tyrion?”

Tyrion chuckled politely. “What good would a dwarf be to your noble order?” he asked. “I suppose I could caper about and amuse the wildlings to death… but if we’re going to be honest my capering’s never been that good and I doubt they would appreciate my wordplay.” He spread his hands to encompass the whole of the castle. “Better I stay with my books and young, strapping lads like Snow here take up swords to defend the realm.”

Stark raised an eyebrow. “Wit’s more useful in the lands beyond the Wall than you might think otherwise, my lord Lannister,” he said mildly. “You may think of wildings as savages, but you don’t survive winter in that country by being stupid savages.”

“I defer to your experience and wisdom, my lord Stark,” Tyrion said. “Besides, we have much more interesting things to talk about than my fitness for the Night’s Watch. Like this ship! Remarkable, isn’t it?”

“Aye,” Benjen replied. “I was out on a ranging when the ship first came here. It was all anyone could speak of when I returned.” He turned to Snow, who was alternating between looking at the Wall and the ship. “You flew in it with Robb, didn’t you Jon? What was it like?”

“It was…” Jon trailed off. “There was very little sense of motion. It quivers a little, but if I wasn’t looking out the window I would have had no idea we were moving. Nothing like a horse or a wagon.” He shook his head. “It was unlike anything I’ve ever done before.”

Tyrion had no good reply to that. Instead, as the party drew close and then past the sky-ship he contemplated getting into the vessel himself. He still had plenty of gold for the journey home, and it wasn’t as if he was bereft of charm. If nothing else, learning more about the girl and her plans would be a golden opportunity. I wonder how long she intends to stay at the Wall, and where she’s off to next?

Entering the courtyard, they found the sorceress standing off to one side, apparently deep in discourse with one of the little machines she called familiars. A cluster of black brothers gathered opposite the side, watching her closely. Some of the men looked wary, while others combined that wariness with a naked longing that Tyrion was intensely familiar with. He idly wondered if the sorceress understood what a woman walking around the Watch’s stronghold unaccompanied was doing to some of the brothers. Or even if she cared.

The sorceress looked up from the familiar as they approached. She blinked, then looked at Jon Snow with more than a little surprise in her eyes. “Jon?”
Snow nodded his head a fraction. “My lady,” he said evenly. It seemed that some unspoken communication passed between the two of them in that moment. The sorceress sighed and nodded.

“Made your choice, huh?” she asked quietly. Jon averted his eyes.

“I had no future at Winterfell,” he said simply. “Lady Stark made that very clear to me. At the Wall I may at least do something useful with my life.”

“There is that,” she replied. “Though if you’re going to try and sandbag my prediction like that, that just means I have to work harder,” she added with a teasing note. Jon’s cheeks reddened, though Tyrion couldn’t quite grasp why.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he muttered. The sorceress just smiled.

“Try me, kid,” she said. Jon got even redder and stared at the nearest tower.

Benjen coughed. “Ah, excuse me my lady,” he said. “I believe we met briefly during the King’s visit. A pleasure to meet you again.”

“Benjen, right? Ned’s brother?” Jade said. “Good to see you again too… keep yourself handy, we may be talking again pretty soon.” The sorceress’s eyes turned to Tyrion. They were, he noted, almost Lannister in their color, perhaps a shade too bright a green to be part of the family. “You were with the king’s party,” she said to him. “I don’t think we were ever properly introduced, though.”

He could feel the smirk crawl across his face. He’d kept his distance during the stay at Winterfell, content to skulk about and listen in when he could, secure in the knowledge that Cersei would do her best to keep him away from anything important. “I do have a tendency to be hidden against a backdrop. Someone must have forgotten to introduce me. A regretful error on my sweet sister’s part, no doubt. Tyrion Lannister at your service, my dear captain,” he said grandly, sketching a brief bow.

The sorceress returned his bow with one of her own, not quite as stiff nor as deep as the one she gave Robert. “A useful skill, keeping a low profile like that,” she said. “Never was very good at it myself. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Tyrion.”

“I find myself simply bursting with questions,” Tyrion said, waving his hand towards the wagon. “The first of which being, are you in need of a drink? I daresay Castle Black doesn’t have much of a wine cellar, but I have brought a few skins of Arbor gold along with me…”

“The offer’s appreciated, milord,” Jade replied, “but I’m in the middle of something at the moment. Perhaps this evening at dinner?”

Not quite a yes, but still not a no. Further than Robert got at a stroke, at least.

“If I might be so bold my lady, Benjen said, “what exactly are you doing here?”

“Research,” replied the sorceress. “I’m seeking the hows and the whys and the wherefores of Westeros, and where else to start but the top?”

Jon looked a touch confused. “But, wait, you were already here,” he said. “Why visit again?” A fair question, that.

Jade laughed. “That was just a preliminary,” she said. “Confirming that yes, it really was there. But now the game’s afoot. I’m onto it now, it won’t outfox me this time.”

“I’m surprised His Grace let you out of his sight so quickly,” Tyrion put in. “It’s not been quite a full
“Ah, of course. Forgive any unintended slight, I beg you.” The moment passed and the woman was all cheer again.

“No worries,” she said. “In any event, I’ve seen some fascinating things so far. Spent a few days in Oldtown; wonderful library there at the Citadel, though getting in was a bit of a pain. I even picked up—” At this moment a maester burst out of the far gate and ran towards Lady Jade.

“My lady!” the maester called, waving some sort of small puzzle box in a thin dark hand. “My lady!” The maester—no, not a maester, he thought, he has no chain. An initiate, perhaps—skidded to a stop, panting, then straightened himself and presented the box to the sorceress. “I took the readings in the tunnel like you suggested. Look at this!”

A pane of light erupted from the box, causing the First Ranger to recoil back in surprise. “Gods,” he croaked. Tyrion for his part was no less surprised, but held his astonishment better as the light resolved into an image of blurry dark lines in a fog of blueish gray.

The sorceress looked intrigued. “How far back are they?”

“Three, possibly four yards from the tunnel wall,” the novice maester said promptly. “See how they’re spaced at regular intervals? I only looked at the first twenty yards, but if it keeps up…”

“I see it,” Lady Jade said quietly, then grinned. “There are no weirwoods at the Wall, my entire ass,” she crowed.

By this point Lord Benjen had recovered from his shock and was looking at the ghostly image with deep fascination. “My lady?” he half-asked.

Lady Jade pointed at the window. “I wanted to know more about the Wall’s internal structure,” she said. “So I asked Al to take a scanner into the tunnel you use to get to the other side. This is what we found: weirwood posts set into the ice every five meters or so. There aren’t any weirwoods near the Wall because they don’t need to be near it, the whole damn thing is built on weirwood.”

“I… am unsure if that means what you think it does, my lady,” Benjen said cautiously. “There are no heart trees near the Wall, true, but there is plenty of weirwood in the area. The armory is full of weirwood bows taken off dead wildings, for one thing. If the Builder truly did use weirwood posts to raise the wall, well, I shudder to think of how many trees it took but I fail to see how that means anything.”

Sorceress and initiate shared a look. “Well,” Jade said, “this is maybe heading into a discussion we shouldn’t have out in the open, but I’ve learned recently that weirwood is only as dead as it wants to be.” The image in the pane changed; the dark lines were still there, but now they could see the base fully and, instead of holes in the earth where the sorceress’s supposed posts were planted, the lines combined into a wild tangle of roots.

Jon stared openly. Benjen gave the picture a look, then gave the sorceress a more considering look. “Not in the open,” he repeated.

The sorceress nodded gravely. “I started a conversation with the Lord Commander when I arrived
“this morning,” she said. “He and I, along with you, Maester Aemon and Ser Alliser I think need to finish that conversation.”

“Aye,” Benjen replied. “I am at your convenience, my lady.”

The lady waved vaguely. “I’m here for a week or two, until the king needs me back in the Red Keep for something or other. Just stick close and keep an open mind, yeah? Things… might get a little weird.”

SHIREEN

Her first glimpse of the red woman came the day she arrived. It was pure happenstance that Shireen had been at a point overlooking the docks when the ship from King’s Landing had come in. She saw the woman in her red robes step onto the dock, and for a moment felt like she was being watched. Shireen turned to see, but there was no one behind her, and when she turned again the strange woman was gone.

She turned up again sitting near the high table at dinner. Maester Cressen looked disapproving, Mother seemed a bit awestruck and Father was… Father, she supposed. He asked the red woman questions about King’s Landing, the new Hand and most of all about this mysterious “master of magic” the ravens had told of. The red woman answered his questions, but that only seemed to make Father graver than usual.

The next day, Shireen asked Maester Cressen who she was. “The Lady Melisandre is a priestess of R’hllor,” he told her. “The red god of Essos, worshiped by slaves and the unfortunate. They’re quite well-known in the Free Cities, the red priests. It’s said that they see things in their fires. Some even claim to have greater power.”

“Is Lady Melisandre one of those?” Shireen asked. Maester Cressen looked troubled.

“She claims the fires led her here. How true that is I know not,” he replied. “I’m not sure I like her trying to be close to your lord father, though. This bodes poorly.”

“Why?” asked Shireen, but Cressen would not answer her.

The next few days it seemed that the red woman was everywhere on Dragonstone. Shireen saw her walking the castle grounds, standing quietly off to one side as Father inspected his guards, kneeling before the hearth in the great hall. She spied her speaking quietly to Mother near the sept the morning of the third day, only for them to duck around a corner before she could hear what they were speaking of. One night, unwilling to sleep, Shireen snuck out of her chambers and quietly padded through the silent halls until she heard the sound of voices coming from Father’s solar.

“I recommend sending the woman away, my lord,” she heard Maester Cressen say.

“Nothing would give me more pleasure,” Father grumbled, “but she has valuable intelligence from King’s Landing. Robert would sooner take the black than tell me anything, and my own men within the city are too few or compromised. This Essosi shadowbinder knows things, things I need to know.”

“Through visions,” Cressen said flatly.

“Aye, through visions. What of it? If the knowledge is useful does it matter where it springs from?”

Shireen might’ve tarried to hear more, but then she heard something clanking down the hall and she
fled back to her room, mind whirling.

At sunset on the sixth day since the red woman had arrived Shireen stood near one of the friendlier dragons near the top of Dragonstone, looking out at the sea and wondering what was going on. Father had come back from the city grimmer than usual, more and more guards were arriving every day and now this red woman had come and upended things again. It was strange and worrying, worse yet that nobody, not Father nor Cressen nor good Ser Davos would tell her a thing about what was going on.

“Are you well, my lady?” The red woman was beside her, suddenly, staring at the sunset. Shireen jumped at the sudden noise.

“Aye!” she yelped, then smoothed out her nerves and went on much more like Father. “I am well, thank you Lady Melisandre.” The red woman favored her with a small smile and went back to examining the setting sun. “I was just wondering what Father was doing,” she went on, if only to fill the silence. “He’s been so busy since he came back from King’s Landing, I’ve barely seen him.”

“Lord Stannis is preparing for war, my lady. He stayed silent to keep you from worrying. Of course,” the red woman said dryly, “he did not expect you to find his silence worrying as well.”

If nothing else, that sounded like her father’s reasoning. Shireen forgave it instantly. Still, the thought of war was unsettling. She was far too young to remember the Greyjoy Rebellion, the last time her father had gone to war, even though she’d heard the story from Maester Cressen and (sort of) Patches. “Who is Father going to fight?” she asked. The ironborn again? Or mayhaps the Targaryens?

Lady Melisandre looked grave. “Your lord father believes he knows what the coming war is about. He is wrong. This will not be fought over who wears a crown or rules a land, it is much greater than that. This will be a war of justice against injustice, kindness against cruelty, love against fear, warm against cold… spring against winter.” He gaze turned to the first stars appearing in the twilight glow. “We all have our parts to play in the war to come. I, your father, your uncles, the lions, the wolves, the green witch…” She looked at Shireen, a sharp gaze that seemed to burrow down into her very soul. “And you.”

“Me?” she squeaked. The red woman loomed over her like the stone dragons, her hair glowing like a bonfire in the sunset light. She wanted to shrink back, to run away from this dragon in woman’s shape lest she devour her, but her father’s blood roared in her veins. Father would not shrink back, and neither will I. She quailed only a little and asked, “Wh-what part do you mean? I, I don’t…”

The red woman held still, her hair still flickering in the dying light. Then she sagged, the dragon fading away and leaving behind nothing more than a woman with sad, tired eyes. “We declare our war,” she said, almost as if to herself. “We spend so long preparing to fight for spring, knowing we are in the right… but the seasons change a day at a time, and without noticing we find ourselves adrift in the snow.”

“My lady?” Shireen said.

“I know not what your part will be, Lady Shireen,” Lady Melisandre said with a great sigh, “but I will help you fulfill it. The Lord of Light illuminates the path we must walk, and it is a difficult road to be sure. But we are the ones who choose the steps we take. Neither god nor mortal can choose that path for us.”

Shireen felt herself at a total loss. “I don’t understand.”
“You will. In time, you will.” The tiredness left the priestess’s eyes, replaced by a hard look that reminded her of how Father had looked ever since he’d come home from King’s Landing. “I shall teach you what you need to know. If my colleague can take an apprentice, then I shall take one as well and we will all walk this path together.”

In the distance, she could hear Patches singing softly. “In the sky, in the sky, feathers fall a-burning from the sky. Red sun and red moon, green sun and green moon, into the dark they go. Down in the dark where the dead are dancing they go, they go.”

Chapter End Notes

Plagiarism note: the conversation between Varys and Illyrio is of course taken (and adapted) from Arya III of A Game of Thrones. Similarly, Melisandre’s little speech at the end is adapted from a monologue in Al Ewing and Travel Foreman's Ultimates 2 #3. My sources are diverse.
Dinner that evening was hardly an opulent affair, as to be expected from a place so remote as Castle Black. The tables were laden with roasted lamb, loaves of black bread and tankards of dark Northern ale. The meal was largely a silent affair; though some of the servants played a little music and here and there a few of the black brothers conversed amongst themselves, most were content to eat quietly. Half the castle’s complement had been put through a series of grueling drills by Ser Alliser, leaving them exhausted and not particularly good dinner company.

Whatever the good captain had had to say to the Lord Commander certainly put a fire under his arse. Tyrion drank his ale and contemplated the woman of the hour. Tonight Captain Jade had the attention of the castle’s old blind maester, talking with him in low tones about something he couldn’t quite grasp. What faint scraps of the conversation seemed to suggest they were talking about the Wall and the role of weirwood in its construction.

Tyrion wasn’t particularly surprised by that. The woman seemed obsessed with the damned trees, and for reasons that he didn’t understand. The weirwood trees in the south had been cut down or burnt long ago, symbols of a faith long-forgotten by the southron peoples, and the few that remained standing as reminders of a lordly house’s pre-Andal heritage. He had never been a godly enough man to pay much attention to the trees, and now he wondered what it was the Ulthosi had seen that everybody else had missed. Or perhaps not missed, but forgotten. Tyrion swirled his ale and wondered what secrets the trees held that Captain Jade saw.

Someone said something and he blinked, realizing that at some point in his contemplation the captain had ended her discussion with the maester and was now looking at him expectantly. He raised his eyebrows in query.

“Contemplating the mysteries of the universe, Lord Lannister?” she asked. “Or are you busy staring at my teats?”

Tyrion coughed less than delicately. He’d been so caught up in his reflections that he’d been staring at her in rather boyish fashion. “Can’t it be both?” he replied once his composure returned. “I mean no offense my dear captain, but your garments aren’t terribly flattering.”

The woman looked down at the greenish fabric of her shirt. “Comfortable, though.” The hint of a grin crossed her face. “Besides, I’ve always been a big believer in the thrill of the unknown.”

“Thankfully, I have an excellent imagination.” Which he put to work picturing the Ulthosi captain naked, and found the results satisfactory.

Captain Jade raised her ale in a mock salute. “You’re an interesting man, Lord Tyrion,” she said. “I appreciate that.”

Tyrion returned the salute. “You do me much honor, Captain.”

“What brings you to the Wall? You don’t seem to be joining up, and Westeros doesn’t seem to be all that big on tourism.”

“Tourism?” He rolled the unfamiliar word around in his mouth a little. “I was curious, I suppose. I wanted to see the edge of the world and piss off the top of the Wall. I even put off a chance to fly in
your magnificent ship to see it… and apparently the gods took pity on a poor dwarf and brought you here the day I arrived.”

“Chance is a wonderful thing, isn’t it?” The captain said, taking a drink of her ale.

“Quite. And now I have to ask: how did a lady of your qualities find yourself washed up on our fair shores? And what kind of land makes women like you?”

Captain Jade’s mouth twitched, just a little. “The first question is easier to answer,” she said. “I followed a map older than civilization all the way here, and ended up landing thanks to chance. I honestly had no idea Westeros was here, only that something was and part of my job as a Ranger is to hunt for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Sometimes you find the gold, other times…” she waved a hand. “But it’s been interesting so far.”

Tyrion nodded. “And the second question?”

“That,” she replied, “I could talk about my homeland for days and not cover all of it, and honestly you’d have a hard time understanding more than half.”

A glimmer of possibility stirred in his mind. “Perhaps you would join me for a game of cyvasse to round out the evening, and you could speak more on your homeland? I don’t mean to pry of course, but I do pride myself on being an excellent listener.”

Captain Jade gave him a considering look. “I suppose I could manage that.”

“You’ve played before?” he asked.

“Learned the rules in Winterfell.” The captain shrugged. “To be honest I haven’t had a lot of time to play, or a lot of people to play against. Al’s been kind enough to let me test my skills, but that’s about it.”

The smirk crawled up Tyrion’s face again. “I would say that I would be kind in the game, but I fear that would be a horrible lie.”

The maester’s fat assistant fetched the board from the maester’s tower, and they played at the same table where they dined. A handful of the black brothers and the captain’s own chainless assistant gathered around to watch dwarf and foreigner face each other across the board. Tyrion arranged his forces as he usually did, while Captain Jade set her army into a tight defensive formation, dragon and elephants protecting the king with horse and foot arranged in a simple skirmish line. Cautious, if a bit unconventional.

He let the captain have the first move, but she simply shuffled her foot a little and sat back, waiting for him to advance. “It’s considered poor form not to make any advance on the first move,” he said.

She smiled guilelessly. “And give away my advantage? Wars aren’t won by the first move, Lord Tyrion. Only by the last.”

Tyrion made a feinting move with his light horse. “An interesting bit of wisdom, that. Are you Ulthosi not bold warriors?”

“Wisdom from experience, you might say. We’ve fought a lot of wars over the years. The bold stroke might win a battle, but that’s not the same thing as winning a war. And there is such a thing as too much of a good thing.” Jade retreated from Tyrion’s feint, and he followed up with another push.

“You don’t seem to be the warrior type.”
“Well, I’m not,” she agreed. “There’re some among us who consider themselves warriors—I’ve known Andorians the king would get along well with—but we’ve gone a good hundred and fifty years without a major war. Tends to reduce the number of warrior types lying about, you know.”

Tyrion thought about that. “If you’re trying to make me feel jealous of your peace,” he said, “I daresay you’ve succeeded. I doubt Westeros has ever had a peace that lasted so long. Even the dragons only managed less than a hundred years between Maegor’s fall and the Dance… and there were still small wars fought then. The gods don’t seem interested in giving us peace for too long.”

Another small smile flickered across the captain’s face. “You’ll get there,” she said with conviction. “We’re all human—mostly—and war is part of our heritage. It’s instinctive, but the instinct can be fought. We can stop it, we can admit that we’re killers… but we’re not going to kill today.” Her king and elephants fell backwards in good order, screened by the light horse.

“Just like that?” Tyrion said dubiously.

“Of course not. But that’s the first step: knowing that we’re not going to kill today.” Jade moved her heavy horse into a flanking position, though one too far away from Tyrion’s lines as to be of much use. “It helps that we’ve spread the process of governance out a little. Wars are easier to get into when it’s one man with wounded pride calling the shots. Convincing a million people that war is the only option is a considerably trickier position.”

“Is that how your lands are ruled?” Tyrion asked. “I don’t recall you saying much about it when we were Lord Stark’s mutual guests.” He split off his light horse to counter her flanking maneuver. “But then again I don’t recall you saying much about lords in general either.” He chuckled darkly. “My dear nephew seemed a bit put out by some of your choices of song, though. Evil princes receiving justice at the hands of commoners… the selection didn’t appeal to him.”

The captain looked a little pained. “That was me being diplomatic, or at least me trying to be diplomatic,” she said. “We don’t really have kings or lords in my homelands anymore. A lot of my songs are about evil lords getting overthrown by the people because, well, that’s more or less what happened.” She shrugged helplessly. “King Robert didn’t seem to have an issue with the selection at least. I mean, I’ve still got my head.”

Jade’s light horse slipped through the forest and made another feinting attack against his foot. “There’s still a few nobles kicking around. A few still have their titles but it’s all mostly ornamental at this point, reminders of who we are and where we came from, that sort of thing. And once they were out of power nobody really cared all that much about the old families so most of them survived to the present.” She smiled fondly. “My grandfather liked to claim that our family descended from old Tlatoani Moctezuma himself. It might even be true, even if we’re about as noble as dirt. But to answer your question, in terms of who actually runs things… that can get more than a little complex but the quick version is that everybody does. Every man and woman has a right to a say in how the Federal Worlds are run, and a duty to exercise that right as needed.”
Tyrion circled his dragon and thought about it. The idea seemed passing outrageous. The Free Cities might claim no lords of their own but any fool could see that true power fell into the hands of a few families and stayed there. Volantis was ruled by the Valyrian-blooded, and even proud Braavos only accepted those who had the wealth to impress the Sealord and the Iron Bank. “I have trouble imagining how that would work,” he said in complete honesty. “Letting the smallfolk have a say in the affairs of the realm? Most lords in Westeros or Essos would call it folly. Mine own father would call it madness.”

Jade perched her dragon in nearby mountains. “You can’t say it doesn’t work for us, though,” she said mildly.

“I suppose I can’t. But how does it work?”

“Funny thing is, my lord, you’ve got a good example of how it works right here.” The captain waved at the hall and the black brothers crowding around them. “In the Night’s Watch, everybody here starts out as equal in the eyes of the brotherhood. When you go to the Wall, blood ties, titles, wealth, all of that goes away.” She looked ruefully at the Watchmen. “Of course it doesn’t quite work that cleanly in real life. Can’t exactly erase thousands of years of culture with one oath, and since the Watch is a lifetime commitment nobody can go home and filter the egalitarian ideals back into the greater society. Still, the Watch shows that a society, even a nation of sorts, can be run without resorting to lords.”

Tyrion filed egalitarian away for further questioning later. “And yet the Night’s Watch is a thousand men spread out over a hundred leagues,” he countered. “Even at its highest point the Watch had less people in it than Oldtown. But you propose to let millions rule themselves? It seems so terribly… inefficient. Does it not make more sense to have men of noble blood rule the lands?”

Jade peeled off her heavy horse and danced them out of the way of his elephants. “What you should really be asking is, what makes blood ‘noble’ in the first place? If you go back far enough in anybody’s family history you’ll find someone who scratched at the dirt for a living. Grandpa might like to claim descent from Moctezuma, but Moctezuma’s ancestors started out as glorified bandits. And we all started out like that, king or peasant. One of the things my people’ve learned, and it’s something we’ve had to relearn at considerable cost more than once, is that the things that divide us are often less real than we think. Titles, wealth… they’re all artificial. We create these things to call ourselves superior to others, but at the end of the day we’re all still human. Robert calls me a noble for courtesy’s sake, but my family are farmers, teachers and builders… no matter what my grandfather’s pretensions are. I would happily put my common blood up against any other you’d care to name.”

Tyrion moved his heavy horse forward once more. He thought of Harren the Black, Maegor the Cruel, and Mad Aerys, and other lords he’d read about in his books. He thought fleetingly about what little his lord father and uncles would say about the late Lord Tytos Lannister. “You may have a point there,” he said. “Though I am curious about how the smallfolk are supposed to remain interested in abstract matters of state. Most of the smallfolk in Westeros are perfectly content to live their lives while the lords rule, and I imagine it’s much the same in Ulthos. Why would a farmer care who ruled what, so long as the harvests remain good?”

Captain Jade stared pensively at the board, moving her dragon from roost to roost. “You might be surprised how much a farmer cares about who’s ruling him, even when the harvests are good. And when they aren’t good… well, if armies start running around the countryside willy-nilly, or Lord What’s-his-ass starts taking too much in taxes because his mistress needs new sheets, that interest is going to increase. Abstract matters of state can get very solid very quickly, and when they do the ruled aren’t going to be at all shy about letting the rulers know their displeasure.” She nodded to
herself, then moved her elephants in a direction Tyrion hadn’t anticipated. “I’m a little surprised I haven’t seen more examples of that in the Westerosi histories I’ve read. I guess your nobles are pretty good at not scaring the horses with their shenanigans.”

“Truth, when things go ill in the realm the smallfolk can be roused,” Tyrion agreed. “But that only happens in times of great stress. The great spring sickness, say, or the Blackfyre rebellions. And in times when the lords have failed… mine lord father would disagree but I can see the sense in it. But what happens in times of peace and plenty? How do the commons remain invested in politics then?”

“Some are like your notional farmer, they won’t get involved unless they’re impacted directly. And that’s fine, there’s always people like that and not everyone can live and breathe politics. But even they ought to know the basics of how the system works, and for that you need education. Not just the nobility or the wealthy, every woman, man and child needs to be educated on how the country is governed and how they can affect the world around them.”

Tyrion moved his dragon across the fields. “A costly endeavour.”

Jade continued falling back. “It can be, though still less than you think. The average person’s smart enough to understand a lot of different things. It’s just a question of giving them the tools and the opportunity to prove it.”

He made a faint tsking sound. “You’re far more forgiving of the nature of men than any I’ve ever met, Captain.”

“And women,” the captain pointed out. “Discounting half the population seems more foolish to me than obeying somebody simply because they’ve got the right last name.”

“Oh, of course,” Tyrion nodded in acknowledgement. “And that might be the greatest sticking point of them all. Removing some of the king’s power over Westeros is one thing. I daresay the greater lords would appreciate having the royal nose less in their business. But allowing women a full say without some stipulation? Wars have been fought to keep queens off the Iron Throne.” He shook his head. “It could never happen.”

“Never is a very strong word,” Jade replied lightly. “There’s a lot of things out there that the very wise would tell you could never happen, or would never happen again.” The light tone took on the slightest of edges. “Generally that’s right before they blow up right in your face. Never is a dangerous statement, Lord Lannister.”

Tyrion advanced once more, backing Jade’s king and retinue all the way up to the edge of the board. He smirked and flew his dragon across. “Ah, forgive me Captain. Your king is trapped. Death in four.”

Captain Jade looked bemused. “Funny, I was about to say the same thing.” Her dragon launched from its roost and flew towards his king. “Death in three. Shall we die together?”

The black brothers whispered, and Tyrion blinked. He had her trapped, it was plain there on the board. But then he saw the rest of her army had arranged itself along his flanks and waited for him to finally reach the point of triumph… which would let her close around his king before he could finish the job. “A trap,” he muttered. “I fell right into it.”

The captain’s smile was neither triumphant nor mocking, which made it feel all the more worse somehow. “You expected me to play like a Westerosi or Essosi,” she said quietly. “I played like who I am, who my people are, traded ground for time and used my king to draw you out. If this was a real battle you’d kill my king, but I’d kill yours and have your army trapped. It’s like I said: wars are won
by the last move, not the first.”

“That’s a cold thing to do,” he said accusingly.

“A bit,” she conceded.

“If this is how you fight, my lady, then I’m frankly terrified of your warriors.”

She considered this. “You’re probably right to be,” she said.

Tyrion paused. “Another game?”

Jade grinned. “You’re on.”

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 111.2**

Note to self; need to get some more cyvasse time in when possible. Also I need to get more game time with Tyrion Lannister if I can; he’s a sneaky bugger. I admire that.
Growing up, Sarella Sand had no appreciation for the concept of cold. A child of Dorne and the Summer Isles, she spent the beginning of her life in the warm sand and seas of her parent lands, where winter barely showed its face save for a bit more rain than usual in Sunspear. Even moving to the Reach to pursue her maesterly goals didn’t change that much; Oldtown wasn’t that much more north of Dorne and winters on the sunset sea were often mild.

Only after six nights in the Wall’s shadow, did Sarella truly understand the meaning of cold. And even moreso did she appreciate the company she kept these days. Carefree Victory’s hull kept the cold out completely… as long as the outer hatches were sealed, anyway. The upper deck was kept nice and warm, a right and proper temperature for a serpent. Tucked safely away in her nest, Sarella slept.

It was the alarm that woke her, a soft, urgent chiming that pried sleep from her mind and levered her upright. Sarella quickly wrapped herself in a robe and left her quarters. The alarm wasn’t the harsh horn that demanded everybody flee the ship—indeed, it seemed that the chiming hadn’t even managed to rouse Thoros from his slumber—but it continued nonetheless. Sarella made her way up the long curve of the central passage towards the bridge. Whatever was happening would be clearer there, and likely Lady Jade would already be working on the problem.

Opening the bridge door, Sarella paused on the threshold. Lady Jade was seated in front of the ship’s communication device. So far as Sarella understood, when working properly the device could let two men speak as if they were standing together even if they were on opposite sides of the world. As it was, the device could send messages smaller than a raven’s scroll.

“The comms will work better the closer they are,” Lady Jade had said once when she’d asked. “Right now it’s not very useful for much, but if somebody finally gets in range, well watch out.” *Does that mean somebody is in range? Have her people finally come for her?* She didn’t think that was likely, the sorceress seemed to have a good idea on how far away her rescue was, and how long it would take for them to arrive in Westeros. *So who then are these people?*

“Come on, come on,” Lady Jade mumbled, working the controls on the communications device. “This is the Federal Worlds scout *Carefree Victory* calling unidentified ship, please respond. Say again, this is scoutship *Carefree Victory*, Starfleet registry alpha golf sierra three one seven two calling unidentified ship, please respond.” No reply came, and the sorceress sighed.

“This is the deepship *Fesarius,*” rumbled a voice from the speakers. Sarella couldn’t tell if the voice was a man’s or woman’s, but it sounded as if it came from deep inside a well, with a metal cover. Or two. “What are you doing on this channel, brightlander? You’re disturbing others using it to more important purposes.”

From her spot at the door Sarella couldn’t quite see Jade’s face, but her back seemed to go taut at these words. “*Fesarius,* this is Captain Jade Hasegawa, Starfleet Rangers,” she said, a bit more iron in her voice now. “What are your intentions towards the FSC-29294 system?”

“Our intentions?” *Fesarius* seemed slightly amused. “We intend to survey the outer system for a mining outpost. What are your intentions, Ranger? We know the third planet has primitives on it; we have no need for brightlander savages.”
Jade took a deep breath. “Fesarius be advised there’s more than the locals down here. This was a Builder project of some kind, it grabbed my ship when I came in close on a survey mission.”

The voice laughed, not harshly but not with much humor to it. “And? If you’re so willing to risk death, Ranger, best that us shadow-folk leave you to it. Or are you asking for rescue?”

“No,” Jade replied. “Starfleet knows I’m here, they’re sending a rescue ship.”

“Then our communication is over—”

“Wait!” Jade blurted. “Wait, please. You’re the first person from civilized stars I’ve had a chance to talk to in forever. I’m not asking you to come in closer to the planet—hell, I was going to tell you to stick to the outer system, I’m not sure the defenses are done collecting outsiders—and… maybe ask you a favor.”

The voice was silent for a long time, long enough for Sarella to believe it had departed before it finally said: “We don’t normally do favors for brightlanders, captain. You should know this.”

“I do, believe me I know,” Jade said, a note of pleading entering her voice. “And normally I wouldn’t ask anything but… this isn’t about brightlanders or shadow-folk right now, it’s just two travellers in the night a long way from home.”

“What would you ask us to do?”

In the time Sarella had been with the master of magic, she had heard the sorceress happy, angry, concerned, even a little melancholy. Now, for the first time the largely-unflappable Lady Jade sounded very small and meek. “Could you… send a letter on for me? For my family. I don’t have the bandwidth to send it via the fleet and they’d probably redact the shit out of it anyway. I’m not asking you to walk it all the way up to their doorstep on Mars or anything, just… make sure it gets to where it needs to go? Please? One traveller in the long dark to another?” Her breath hitched. “If something goes wrong before the fleet gets here I don’t want them to not know.”

Again the voice fell silent, and Jade's shoulders slumped. She moved to shut off the device and the voice spoke once more. “Transmit your message, captain.”

Jade’s hands blurred against the controls. “Message sent!”

“Received.” Another pause. “I know someone who knows someone in the Federal core. They’ll get your letter where it needs to go.”

“Thank you.” Jade’s hand shook, and Sarella could see faint damp spots on her green tunic. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“Good luck and may the great bird of the galaxy aid you in your mission, Ranger,” Fesarius replied. “We’ll be steering clear of this area for a while. We might see you—”

“But I’ll never see you again,” Jade whispered. The ship chimed as the connection cut, the mysterious voice vanishing back into the darkness from which it came. The sorceress sighed, a deep, ragged sound on the edge of a sob, before looking back towards the door.

“So,” she said in a voice that was entirely too controlled. “How much did you hear?”

Sarella froze. Caught eavesdropping on a sorceress in the seat of her power. Father would be furious, or delighted. Possibly both. She tried to stammer out an explanation, how the alarm woke her and she came to find out what was happening, but nothing came. “I, I, I’m—forgive the
intrusion, my lady,” she said “I shouldn’t have stayed here. I’ll leave you in peace.” Bleakly, Sarella tried to figure out what it would cost to return to Oldtown on what assets she had. *Or should I even bother? Mayhaps I should return to Sunspear and rejoin the princess and my sisters.*

“Al, no,” Lady Jade said. “It’s… it’s okay, Al. I wasn’t expecting that… but I wasn’t expecting a lot of things that’ve happened to me over the last few months. Come on in all the way and pull up a seat, I’m sure you have questions.”

Sarella came into the bridge. She certainly had questions, more questions that she could possibly elaborate: who the voice was, where they were, what they meant by “brightlander” and “shadow-folk,” but one question burned brightly in her mind, and that was the one she gave voice to. “Could you tell me of your family, my lady?”

Jade’s eyes widened in surprise, then she smiled softly. “I’d be happy to,” she said. “If you’ll tell me about yours.”
JAIME

The sky-ship unnerved Jaime. It had unnerved him when he first saw it squatting outside the gates of Winterfell, it had unnerved him when he boarded it for the voyage back to King's Landing with King Fat and Stark, and it continued to unnerv all the woman's every time the witch flew it to and from from the old tourney grounds. Give him a length of steel and white armor and Jaime Lannister was perfectly at ease, no man was his equal then. Confronted by a thin, half-mad Dornishwoman surrounded by magic that defied comprehension and he was out of his depth, his sword and armor weights dragging him further into the deeps.

He wondered sometimes in the small hours of the night alone in the White Sword Tower—or lying next to Cersei in her chambers—if the woman was no mere witch but some shadow of vengeance, the shade of Elia Martell come back to bedevil them all for their transgressions. His imagination was as playful as it was morbid, in its own way. *If Lady Martell accused me, would I stay silent? I did my duty as Kingsguard.*

Any thought of Seven-divined justice he put out of his head as *Carefree Victory* carefully lowered itself to a grounding right where the lists used to be. He stood at the end of the gangplank waiting for the witch to emerge, a wheelhouse and squad of goldcloaks and redcloaks standing ready to escort the master of magic back to the Red Keep.

The door opened and the witch stepped through, her two constant companions right behind her. “Ser Jaime,” the witch bowed in her odd fashion. “Here to escort us back to the castle?”

Jaime nodded languidly. “His Grace wanted to make sure you were not waylaid on the trip through King's Landing.”

The witch looked thoughtful at that. “Oh, I don't know,” she said idly, “somebody brave and dumb enough to try something with us might be worth adding to my team.” The big Myrish sellsword chuckled at that.

Jaime gave the witch a polite laugh. “As you say, my lady,” he noted.

“Am I included in that estimation, Lady Jade?” A new and very familiar voice said. Jaime blinked as his brother stepped out from behind the Myrishman and looked up at the witch.

“Your choice, milord Tyrion,” the witch replied smoothly. “Are you brave or dumb?”

“An interesting question,” Tyrion considered. “I dare say I'm not one for bravery, so I must puncture my importance and admit to foolishness for once in my life. A pity my sweet sister isn't here to see it.”

“Tyrion?” Jaime said, puzzled. “I thought you were at the Wall.”

“I was,” replied his brother. “An amazing place, Jaime, you really should see it. I found it quite beautiful in a bleak, horribly uncomfortable sort of way. And to my surprise, who should be there waiting for our party when we arrived at Castle Black but the master of magic and her companions!” He grinned boyishly. “We spent a lovely time together, and when the lady was ready to depart I
persuaded her to allow me passage on her remarkable vessel.”

“Always nice to have someone new to talk to,” the witch said, sharing an odd glance with her maester. “It was a pleasure to have you aboard, Tyrion.”

“The pleasure was all mine, I assure you.” Jaime had no doubt that was true. It may not have been on dragonback, but Tyrion had achieved a goal he’d had since he was small. Well done, brother.

“Where are you headed next, brother?” Jaime asked.

“Home to Casterly Rock I suspect,” Tyrion replied. “Though not for some time. I understand His Grace has set up a tournament in honor of Lord Stark and Lady Hasegawa, I thought I might at least stay for that.”

“It... will be good to have you around the keep, brother.” Jaime said.

The witch looked at him, looked at Tyrion and on some unseen signal she and her companions mounted the wheelhouse. “We'll go on ahead,” she told Jaime. “You two can catch up.”

“My lady,” Jaime protested, “the guards are my men, I should lead them—”

“Sorry can't hear you too noisy today somebody really ought to do something about those birds we'll meet you at the gate have a nice time you two!” The witch called as the wheelhouse and the guards turned out of the old tourney grounds towards the city, leaving Jaime alone with his brother.

Tyrion broke the silence first: “She does that sometimes.”

“Aye,” Jaime grunted. At least there was still a horse for Tyrion, even if he hated riding them it was a long walk back to the Red Keep otherwise. At least this gives us a chance to talk without anyone else around. “So?”

“So?”

“How was she?” Jaime asked.

Tyrion gave this some thought. “Pleasant company,” he said finally. “An excellent conversationalist, quite skilled at cyvasse which surprised me a little—”

“You know what I mean,” Jaime said with a broad smile. “How was she when you got her into your bed?”

Tyrion turned, a funny light coming into his mismatched eyes. “I didn't know you cared about such things, brother,” he said.

“Don't give me that,” Jaime waved in dismissal. “Are you going to answer or not?”

Tyrion looked at him, almost long enough for Jaime to feel uncomfortable, until he finally turned and looked back out towards the city. “I wouldn't know,” he said. “I never did get her to share a bed.”

“You didn't?” Jaime half-asked.

“I did not.”

“You were at the Wall with her for—?”

“A fortnight, give or take.”
“You mean to say you spent a fortnight with the girl,” he said, “and you didn’t fuck her?”

Tyrion looked a little nettled. “A man can spend time with a woman without putting his cock in her, you know,” he grumbled.

“Aye, but this is you. A fortnight with a pretty girl and you never fucked her?” Jaime tilted his head. “Are you truly my brother Tyrion, or did the grumkins abduct him and leave you in his place?”

His brother sighed mightily. “If you must know, brother,” he said. “I did try. Once. I was disappointed at first, but afterward... I daresay I had quite an agreeable time with our lady sorceress even though I never got her clothes off.”

Jaime chuckled. “Truly ’tis an age of wonders indeed, if your appetites are satiated by talk.”

“Don’t be like that, dear brother,” chided Tyrion. “My mind is a finer asset than my cock, and what good’s a weapon if it isn’t honed once in a while? The master of magic is a fount of fascinating intelligence if you can get her to speak freely, and it so happens I managed to get her to elaborate on many topics over our stay at the Wall.” He paused, lost in thought. “Much of what I heard was... difficult to believe.”

“Oh? Snarks and grumkins and all the other absurd things she sings of at the king’s demand, no doubt.” Jaime snorted. “Tales to fascinate drunkards and the simple, that’s all they are.”

Tyrion shook his head. “I doubt that very much, Jaime,” he said. “Even if you dispute the tales the fact of her abilities remains.” He gestured towards the sky-ship moored behind them. “What I heard at the Wall, well... I need to compose a letter to Father about all this business. I sent a message from Winterfell suggesting he treat with Lady Hasegawa, but thinking it over I know not if that would work.” Tyrion laughed suddenly. “We Lannisters have wealth, power, everything a man of Westeros could ever want, and yet it’s worth nothing to a self-named peasant woman. A funny old world, isn’t it?”

Jaime frowned. “Father’s already sent Cersei a raven about the witch. He wants her to get the witch into her good graces.” Cersei had not taken the instruction well, but she seemed willing to play.

Tyrion laughed again, this time long and loud. “Oh yes, that’ll work splendidly,” he chortled. “Our sweet sister dislikes the witch—perhaps not as much as she hates Robert or I, but a blind man could see it—and meanwhile Lady Jade treats her like every other lord and lady she meets, which only deepens Cersei’s ire.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Jaime said honestly. His own interaction with the witch had been polite enough, but she’d been distracted by Robert or the children more often than not. Cersei hadn’t seemed to have any real issue with the woman aside from her being young, somewhat attractive and far too close to Robert. Even that had vanished after the witch had rebuffed the king’s advances, though after that last time in Winterfell she had been wary of the witch’s presence. The things I do for love. “If anything she gives Cersei the same deference she does Robert.”

“Exactly!” Tyrion pronounced. “Our master of magic pays the same deference to His Grace as she does to Cersei... or to Lord Stark, the exiled lords on the Wall, Stark’s bastard even! Seven hells, she treats her Myrish sellsword and her chainless maester with the same deference. She treats them all equally, brother. It’s as much part of her upbringing as Casterly Rock was ours.” He shook his head. “Can you imagine our dear, sweet Cersei accepting equality like that? And now our lord father wants her to flutter her lashes and play nice? Better if he ordered you to seduce the woman; it’d be more entertaining with less chance of violence.”
Jaime considered this. “Do you think she'd go for it?”

“Absolutely not. She would turn you down gently and go about her merry way. But as I said, there would be less violence involved. I shudder to think what might happen if she turns Cersei down at the wrong moment.”

SANSA

Sansa rode to the tourney with Septa Mordane in a litter with curtains of fine yellow silk that turned the whole world outside golden. Beyond the city walls a hundred pavilions had been set up at the edge of the kingswood, and the common folk came out in their thousands to watch the games. The splendor of it all took her breath away; the banners snapping in the wind, the shining armor, the shouts of the crowd and the knights most of all. The finest knights in Westeros had assembled to celebrate her father’s appointment as Hand, and they had all turned out in their finery astride magnificent horses.

*_It is better than the songs_* , she thought as they made their way to the place her father had provided for her among the high lords and ladies. To her surprise, she espied Lady Jade standing nearby watching the assembled knights with a keen eye. Three of her familiars hovered around her, watching the crowd as she watched the parading knights. Behind her a dark young man in maester’s robes stood silently, apparently uninterested in the spectacle before them.

Septa Mordane’s lips twisted downward as she beheld the sorceress and her companion. “Lady Hasegawa,” she said, “should you not be with the king?”

“Oh, probably,” Lady Jade replied with a shrug. “I’ll get there eventually, no doubt. I figured this was a decent place to stop and take a look around.” She observed the knights riding out onto the fields of honor. “Quite the shindig the king’s put on.”

“Indeed,” said a new voice. Sansa turned to see a short, slender man with dark hair and a pointed beard standing behind them all, smiling at them. “His Grace spared no expense for this tourney. What better way to celebrate his new Hand… and his new court magician as well?”

Lady Jade eyed the stranger. “I don’t think we’ve met before, ser…?”

The stranger chuckled. “No ser, my lady. I’ve not the aptitude to be one of the great knights. Lord Petyr Baelish, master of coin, at your service my dear lady. We’ve only met in passing, I fear; the treasury keeps me busy more often than not.”

Lady Jade bowed in her Ulthosi way. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Petyr.”

“Indeed,” the master of coin said. “I do hope you’ll be staying longer in the Red Keep this time around. I would love to have the chance to speak with you at length.”

The sorceress and her maester exchanged glances. “That… might not be possible,” Lady Jade said carefully. “We’re kind of on a timetable here. Important magic stuff, you understand. I probably shouldn’t even be here but His Grace insisted and, well…”

“Of course, of course,” Lord Baelish said. “Such things are important, after all.” He then glanced at Sansa, and looked a little surprised. “You’ve the Tully look,” he said to her. “You must be one of her daughters.”

“I’m Sansa Stark, my lord,” she said.
“Of course you are,” Lord Baelish murmured. “I knew your mother, once upon a time. You look quite like her. I’m quite glad to meet you, Lady Sansa.” Horns sounded as the knights retreated to their pavilions so the tourney could begin. “Ah, but it would seem that festivities are about to begin in earnest. I should get to my place in the stands.” Lord Baelish bowed briefly and vanished back into the crowd of nobles.

“What an eccentric performance,” Lady Jade mused, turning back to the field. Her face brightened as she spotted the massive robed form of Thoros of Myr riding alongside the knights. She stuck two fingers in her mouth and blew a sharp whistle. “Good luck out there, big guy!” she called. The warrior priest turned and raised a hand in salute before leaving the field on his red destrier.

“Lord Baelish seemed like a nice man,” Sansa noted.

“Mm,” Lady Jade replied, then said no more.

The jousting went on all day and into evening, the hooves of the great warhorses pounding down the lists until the field was nothing more than torn earth. The crowd cried out every time riders crashed together, lances exploding into splinters. Lady Jade watched, never taking her eyes from the scene but sometimes flinching and wincing when riders were unhorsed or the collisions were especially violent. Sansa watched battered knights fall without flinching. A lady knew how to behave at tournaments.

The most terrifying moment of the day came during Ser Gregor Clegane’s second joust. “The Mountain That Rides,” Septa Mordane called him, and he seemed unstoppable, riding down one foe after the other in charge after charge. On one of these charges Ser Gregor’s lance rode up and struck a young knight from the Vale with such force that the tip punched through the shiny gorget and into the poor man’s neck, killing him instantly. The youth fell not ten feet from where Sansa was seated, his life’s blood pumping out in slow pulses. His cloak was blue, the color of the summer sky, trimmed with a border of crescent moons, but as his blood seeped into it the cloth darkened and the moons turned red.

One of Lady Jade’s familiars flew over and inspected the youth. The master of magic looked green in the face as the familiar’s blue light played over the bloodied armor. “Well,” she said more to herself than Sansa or anyone else. “Fuck.”

Sansa sat with her hands folded in her lap, watching with a strange fascination. She had never seen a man die before. She felt like she ought to be crying, but no tears came. It would be different if it had been Jory or Ser Rodrik or Father, she told herself. The young knight from the Vale was nothing to her, some stranger whose name she’d forgotten as soon as she heard it. And now the world would forget his name too, she realized. No songs would be sung for him. That was sad.

The wind shifted a little and the smell of blood came to her nose. For some reason, it made her hungry.

After they carried off the body, a boy with a spade ran onto the field and shoveled dirt over the spot where he had fallen, to cover up the blood. Then the jousts resumed.

That evening, the king’s company feasted. Sansa ate roasted beef and mutton and let sweet Joffrey speak to her about all sorts of things. The odd flat quality to Joff’s eyes seemed to be missing tonight, replaced with a green gleam as he spoke about how magnificent his uncle and the Kingsguard were on the field. Sansa smiled and laughed as a lady should as her sweet prince went on, and all thoughts of blood and hunger fled her mind.

Until the king requested a song from the master of magic, and Lady Jade provided. Strumming her
guitar idly, she sang a quiet, sad song about a young man off to fight in a noble war, only to be cut
down in his first moment on the field. Sansa started, remembering the youth in shining armor and
blue cloak cut down by Ser Gregor’s lance. *Someone sung a song for him,* she thought, and wept a
little. Only a little, as befit a lady.

Her father, the king and some of the older knights seemed affected by Lady Jade’s song, all of them
staring gravely into their cups as she sang. When the song ended, the king pulled himself to his feet
and thanked her, and for once asked for no more songs from the sorceress. Lady Jade nodded and
sat, returning to some conversation with her maester and the priest Thoros.

The tourney resumed the next morning. Septa Mordane felt ill that morning, so Sansa went down to
the lists with her father. Again, she found Lady Jade already there, taking in the sights. Two familiars
were perched on her shoulders like absurd fat ravens. Her father nodded to the sorceress. “My lady,”
The sorceress nodded back. “Lord Stark.”

“Enjoying yourself?”

“Enh.” The sorceress waggled a hand. “It’s been *interesting* but I wouldn’t say enjoying is the right
word. There’s things I need to be doing right now instead of watching knights smash into each
other.” Her eyes narrowed as the horns sounded for the first tilt of the day. “We need to talk later;
you, me and the king.”

Sansa took little heed of this as the knights took the field. Sandor Clegane’s drab bulk contrasted
against the Kingslayer’s gilded finery as the two took position, couched the lances and rode against
each other. Ser Jaime scored the first hit, neatly slamming his lance into the Hound’s breastplate but
fell on the second charge. His lance shattered and the golden Kingsguard fell from the saddle with a
most ungolden *clang.* The Lion of Lannister sat up and pulled the battered helmet from his head. The
Hound took no notice of this, clearing the field without so much as a backward glance.


Ser Gregor Clegane was next to enter the lists, his massive bulk astride an equally massive stallion.
Sansa had never seen a man so large before; even Walder would be small compared to the Mountain.
Her father eyed the man warily.

The Knight of Flowers entered next, and the entire crowd murmured. “Oh, he’s *beautiful,*” Sansa
whispered as the slim Tyrell boy clad in immaculate silver armor rode forth on a slender gray mare.
Sansa’s heart clenched in sudden fear. “Father, will Ser Gregor hurt him?” she asked.

“Those are tourney lances,” he replied. “They make them to splinter on impact, so no one is hurt.”
But the words sounded hollow in Sansa’s ears, and the fear would not leave her.

Ser Gregor was having trouble controlling his horse. The stallion screamed and pawed the ground,
shaking his head. The Mountain kicked at the animal savagely with an armored boot. The horse
reared and almost threw him.

Ser Loras saluted the king, rode to the far end of the list, and couched his lance. Ser Gregor brought
his animal back into line, fighting with the reins. And suddenly it began. The Mountain’s stallion
broke in a hard gallop, while the mare charged forward gracefully. Ser Gregor wrenched his shield
into position, trying to handle lance and his unruly mount at the same time whilst Loras Tyrell
smoothly moved his lance into position, placing the point of his lance *right there* and in the blink of
an eye the Mountain fell. He was so huge that he took his horse down with him in a tangle of steel
and flesh. The crowd around them broke into applause, cheers, whistles, gasps and mutters. Above it
all, Sansa could hear the harsh laughter of Prince Joffrey’s Hound. The Knight of Flowers reined up at the far end of the list. His lance was not even broken. He raised his visor, smiling. The commons went mad for him.

“My sword!” the Mountain called to his squire, and the boy ran it out to him. By this time the stallion was also back on its feet. Without hesitation, Gregor Clegane killed the horse with a single blow of such ferocity that the animal’s head had come almost half off. The crowd’s cheers for the Knight of Flowers turned to cries eerily like the stallion’s dying scream.

“Stop him!” her father shouted, but it seemed that only Sansa could hear him. The Mountain advanced down the lists, bloody sword in hand. Ser Loras turned to face him, calling for his own sword but Ser Gregor was almost on him…

Thunder echoed across the field. Thunder with an odd, high note to it.

Ser Gregor Clegane stood stock-still in the middle of the lists, his advance halted, staring stupidly at his empty hand. His mighty greatsword lay in the grass behind him, a wicked black mark marring the steel halfway up the blade. The crowd’s cries dropped into a stunned silence, then a confused murmur.

The master of magic stood like a pillar of stone besides Sansa, arm pointed towards the Mountain. Blue smoke curled gently away from the tip of the thing clenched in her hand. Her familiars circled her like a crown made of crows, buzzing angrily. Sansa shied back, bumping up closer to her father.

“Enough,” Lady Jade said, clearly and firmly. Ser Gregor’s great helm turned away from his hand to the sorceress. He bellowed, a sound more like an aurochs than anything human, and charged. Two steps into his advance and another blast of sorcery caught him in the shoulder, knocking him off his feet.

“I said enough!” the sorceress snapped. Ser Gregor seemed to pay her no heed as he pulled himself to his feet, fingering the black mark and large dent the blast had left on his pauldron.

“Cunt,” he rumbled.

“Too right,” Sansa heard the sorceress say under her breath, before raising her voice and saying loudly, “Are we done?”

The Mountain’s massive fists curled, and he roared with fury. Even in the stands Sansa could feel the rage rolling off him in great sheets of fire. He took one step towards the stands—towards the master of magic—then another, then a third.

Lady Jade’s weapon spoke once more, sending the knight crashing to the ground a second time, smoke coming from the opposite shoulder.

“The next shot takes your head off,” the sorceress said dispassionately. “Stay. Down. Final warning.”

At that moment, the king’s voice echoed like a dragon’s roar across the field: “STOP THIS MADNESS, IN THE NAME OF YOUR KING!”

Lady Jade’s weapon vanished back to… wherever it had come from… and she held up an empty hand. Ser Gregor’s head rose, and at last he came to his senses. He clambered back to his feet, glaring at Lady Jade, King Robert and the guards surrounding them. Wordlessly, he turned and stalked off, shoving past Ser Barristan. “Let him go,” the king said, and just like that it was over.

Lady Jade tilted her head. “Does that make me the champion?” she asked. Her father gave the
sorceress a funny look, then chuckled. The king laughed, and the crowds cheered.

Loras Tyrell was waiting for them when they got out of the stands, his shining armor replaced by a simple doublet. He smiled at Lady Jade and presented her with a perfect pink rose. “I owe you my life, my lady,” he said. “I wished to thank you for your swift action in stopping that brute Clegane.”

The sorceress looked at the rose with bemusement before taking it from the Knight of Flowers. She seemed at a loss with what to do with it, before settling on sticking the flower in a coat pocket. “I don’t normally consider bisectings a proper afternoon’s entertainment,” she said wryly. “So you’re quite welcome, Ser Loras.” Her face darkened a little. “Too bad I didn’t catch what he was going to do fast enough to save the horse, though.”

Ser Loras sighed. “A pity, that,” he said. “Ser Gregor always did pick excellent horses, and they say he’s always been… impulsive. Still, better a horse than a knight.”

“Mm,” Lady Jade hummed. “Now that you’ve reminded me, though…” She whistled sharply, and one of her familiars dropped out of the circling formation above them to hover obediently next to her. The Knight of Flowers edged away from the display, eyeing the familiar with wary interest. “Boo, locate and track target designated ‘That Asshole,’ 96 hour watch, full A/V recording and sting him if he gets out of line.” She smirked. “And make it conspicuous.” The familiar chimed agreeably and drifted off in the direction of the pavilion tents.

“Quite the watchdog,” Ser Loras said idly as the familiar floated away.

“It has its uses,” replied the sorceress. “And just to head off the discussion, they’re not for sale.”

Ser Loras’s eyes twinkled. “Not even for all the wealth of the Reach?” he said with a teasing note.

Lady Jade’s smirk broadened. “Even if you offered me a cartload of riches and a strapping young Tyrell to haul it, the familiars only answer to me. So I win in both directions.”

“Just as well,” the Knight of Flowers sighed dramatically. “Father would never approve if I sold you Willas or Garlan. If I cannot beg a device from you, my lady, then mayhaps you would grant me some wisdom I can take back to Highgarden with me?”

“Well…” Lady Jade gave the young knight a considering look. “I can give you a little wisdom, if you’re interested.”

“Of course.”

The sorceress gestured for Ser Loras to come closer, then whispered something in his ear. Whatever it was she said, the genial smile drained off Ser Loras’s face, replaced with a pinched, flat expression that reminded Sansa of looks she’d seen fleetingly on her prince’s face.

Lady Jade raised her brows, looking innocent as a maid. “Wisdom, no?”

“Yes, of course it is,” Ser Loras said tight. He nodded swiftly to Lady Jade, then to Sansa and her father. “My Lord Hand, Lady Stark… Lady Hasegawa, by your leave, I believe my squire needs some instruction. Your pardon, my lord and ladies.” He turned and departed swiftly, never once looking back.

“What did you say to him?” Sansa wondered.

Jade gave her a half-smile and ruffled her hair much like her father might have. “Maybe when you’re older,” she replied.
“Do you have any idea what this is about, Ned?” Robert was a little disgruntled. Perhaps it was the lateness of the hour—having only just gotten back to the Red Keep from the tournament. Or perhaps it was the lack of wine and women in the vicinity, Ned couldn’t and wouldn’t say.

“I know not, Your Grace,” he replied. “Only that Lady Jade requested a meeting with us both.”

“Only a moment of your time,” The sorceress said as she entered, closing the door behind her. “Things are moving quickly and I need to keep you up to date.”

“Speaking of moving quickly,” Robert replied, eyeing the sorceress and her familiars. “What in seven hells were you thinking, attacking one of my knights like that?”

Lady Jade looked puzzled. “Am I not remembering it right, or was Clegane not about to chop the Tyrell boy into tiny pieces when I intervened?”

“Aye, he was,” Robert conceded, “but then you drew his attention towards the stands, where I was! Where Ned and his little girl were! What would’ve happened next, eh?”

“One step.”

“I beg pardon?” Ned said. In the heat of the moment he’d appreciated the master of magic’s swift action in stopping Ser Gregor’s rampage, but in cold hindsight her actions seemed… considerably more rash.

Lady Jade gave him a grimly bemused glance. “If that asshole had taken one more step towards the crowd,” she said with conviction, “they would’ve been picking shards of his helmet and skull out of the grass for years to come. When it comes to threats like that, I don’t fuck around.”

Robert barked an approving laugh. Ned wasn’t as pleased. “Ser Gregor will not forget today, my lady,” he warned.

“Oh, I don’t expect he will,” the sorceress sighed. “Maybe he’ll reevaluate his life choices after today, but I kind of doubt that, too. Probably ought to have cut the son of a bitch down but fuck it. Not who I am. If he comes, he comes.”

“Well put, Lady Jade,” the king said. “But you asked to speak with me, and not to hear Ned and me scold you about tweaking the Mountain’s tail. What do you need to say?”

“I have information,” Lady Jade said, sounding graver than Ned had ever heard her before. “The situation in the north is getting worse. The Watch is losing patrols—they’ve been losing patrols for over a year now but they thought it was just wildling activity. Now, I’m not so sure.”

The king gave her an odd look. “Not wildlings, eh? And where did you get this information, Lady Hasegawa.”

Lady Jade took a deep breath, held it, then said, “The trees told me.”

“The trees told you.” Robert replied flatly. The sorceress nodded.

“I’m sure Lord Stark’s mentioned my interest in the heart trees, right?” Ned nodded. “Well… there’s something there, something very old and powerful, and it’s what diverted me to Westeros in the first place.” She paused, but the king had nothing further to add, so she plunged on. “I don’t know what’s
going on, Your Grace, but whatever’s happening up there is serious enough that the trees reached out and found the first outsider with any power they could latch onto to aid them. Whatever this threat is, it’s real and it’s serious and we need to start talking about preparations.”

For an instant, Ned thought that Robert might have believed. He was on the edge of believing himself—he knew all the stories, even if he never thought they were true. But the moment passed and the mulish look came back into the kings eyes and he snorted. “Pfah, nothing but snarks—”

“And grumkins, yes.” Lady Jade finished. “Fuck me blind, I’m getting tired of hearing that phrase come out of people’s mouths. I know, believe me I know that I’m talking about myths and legends. But I’ve survived a long and exciting career in Starfleet by knowing when to take legends seriously and not ignoring the warning signs and right now? Those signs might as well be written in letters of fire a thousand feet tall saying ‘something bad is coming, prepare your asses!’”

“You have no proof,” Robert said.

“You’re right, I don’t! I have nothing to point to and say ‘this is real.’ You’re absolutely correct about that, Your Grace. But that’s why we’re talking right now.” The sorceress leaned in over the table, almost seeming to loom over the king. “If you need proof, then I’ll find that proof for you. Give me leave to go beyond the Wall hunting monsters, and I’ll bring back something to show you, the court, King’s Landing and the whole of Westeros if I have to.”

Robert scowled like a thunderhead about to burst. “And if I refuse, woman? What happens then?”

“Oh, I’ll go anyway,” Lady Jade replied calmly. “But then it’ll be all awkward between us. Understand, Robert Baratheon, I’m asking you out of respect for your position and the kindness you’ve shown me during my stay here. Burning that bridge would be counterproductive for you, me and Westeros as a whole.” Her eyes flashed, just a little. “But if I’m right about this, I’ll burn that bridge if it’s the only way forward because there is some shit that I can’t just let lie because you like having me around the place.”

“What happens if you’re wrong, my lady?” Ned asked.

The sorceress sighed. “In that case, I’ll happily hang out in King’s Landing until my people come to pick me up. I’ll sing songs and tell stories at your feasts, entertain the children, amuse your guests and I promise not to shoot any more knights that don’t have it coming. Fair?”

The king grumbled. “If I wanted a woman to lecture me into the grave, I could have spent time with Cersei, Others eat your eyes,” he said. “Fine. Go amuse yourself with the snarks, grumkins and wildlings. I’ll be here waiting for your proof.” Robert bit on the last word as if it were sour.

Lady Jade offered the king a small smile. “You won’t regret this, Your Grace.”

“I’m regretting it already. Just get to your hunt, Lady Hasegawa.”

The sorceress turned to leave, but Ned stopped her. In a voice that only she could hear, he asked, “Are you wrong, my lady?”

The lady’s voice was just as quiet. “I hope I am,” she said. “But I doubt it.”

THOROS

The Kingslayer kept smiling at him. This was not quite the last thing Thoros needed at this moment, but it was something he neither wanted nor desired. Thoros of Myr had spent more than enough time
at court to know Ser Jaime Lannister’s moods, and those moods were almost universally some degree of mocking. Right here and now, standing outside the chamber where the king, the Hand and the master of magic were in counsel, he didn’t need Ser Jaime’s constant attempts at japery at his expense.

“You did well in the melee today,” Ser Jaime said offhandedly. Thoros grunted and shifted his shoulders. “There are few that can stand against that flaming sword of yours.”

“True,” Thoros said. “I’ll be feeling it in the morning, though.” Age hadn’t yet caught up to him, but every tourney he went through the joints seemed a little stiffer afterwards and the bruises persisted a little bit longer. *Perhaps it’s time I consider retiring, set up a small temple somewhere in the city and devote myself more fully to the Lord.* The thought was cheering, though if Thoros was honest with himself he still had years to go before he matched Ser Barristan’s age, and the old man seemed nigh-unstopable.

“Oh?” The Kingslayer sounded curious. “I would have thought your new mistress would gift you with potions and powders to make you hale and hearty.” This was true enough; Lady Jade’s *autodoc* contained quite a few marvelous medicines, but the supply was limited. Thoros refused to answer, however. No matter how free the lady might be with her explanations her secrets were not his. Ser Jaime took this silence in, and his smile broadened. “I see,” he said. “Does this mean she prefers you ridden hard and battered?”

Thoros turned to look at the Kingslayer in his golden armor and white cloak, looking all the world like a boy trying to wheedle gossip out of the stablehands. “Or mayhaps she’s passed on you,” Ser Jaime went on. “It wouldn’t surprise me if she preferred the small, weedy type like that maester who seems tied to her hip.” His brows lifted in mock-thought. “Or do you share her?”

Thoros of Myr shifted, just a little, his hand drifting towards his sword. “I’d watch that tongue of yours, Kingslayer,” he said.

Ser Jaime laughed. “Do you really think you can take me, priest? Your sword isn’t afire right now.”

Now it was Thoros’s turn to laugh. “I don’t have to. If you spread calumny about a sorceress, she’ll avenge her own honor.” The thought of the Mountain struck down at the tourney crossed his mind, and he smiled cruelly. “As you saw, she can be quite thorough in bringing wayward knights to heel.”

The Kingslayer’s face reddened, and he might’ve said something further but the doors slammed open and the master of magic strode out. “Come along, Thoros,” she called. He quickly crossed to her side as she walked swiftly from the hall towards the courtyard.

“Where are we heading?” he asked.

“King’s given us the warrant,” she replied. “We’re on our way back north, up past the Wall. We’ve been on the back foot for months; it’s time we went on the offensive.” She paused. “Do you still have the stuff you used at the melee?”

Thoros’s gait faltered at this. “Aye,” he said cautiously. “I still have a small amount on hand. But, and forgive me for saying this my lady, I remember you were adamant about not wanting wildfire aboard ship. *I distinctly* remember quite a bit of gesturing and foul language about it, too.”

“Yeah, well,” the sorceress said with a mighty sigh, “I don’t want so much as a drop of that crap on my nice clean *Victory*, but needs must as the devil drives.”
Plagiarism note: this chapter cribs heavily from Sansa II and Eddard VII in AGOT. All respect to the original author etc.
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 149

Tomorrow we set off for the Wall, then we're headed north of there for the first time.

I am nowhere near ready for this.

At this point I've effectively exhausted all the knowledge resources available to me in the south; everything that Al or I have deemed relevant has been scanned, translated into usable text and dumped into the memory banks to simmer. When all's said and done I've got a summary of everything Westeros's brightest know and remember about the Long Night.

It's a depressingly short summary. Worse, there doesn't seem to be anything new and useful in the huge mass of text. A specialized team of blueshirts could probably glean some critical detail. That would be nice. And while I'm wishing for shit, I'd like a functional warp drive and a pony. You know, nothing special.

Moving off that depressing track... onto another depressing track! I'm just a font of cheer today apparently. The weirwoods haven't tried to reach out since that last time with George, no matter how I fiddle with the translator rig. I guess they weren't kidding about the link being weak. They left some sort of indirect connection behind, though: ever since they tried to speak through George I've felt a... let's call it a certainty that I need to find a specific spot where the weirwoods are stronger if I want to talk face-to-phloem again.

I'm also getting the sense that time's starting to run low, and I need to stop faffing around in the capitol and get my ass up north right now. I haven't heard from Brynden in several days—that's another thing that's changed since George, I remember a lot more of my dreams than I used to—and I'm not sure if that's good or bad.

So, north I go, beyond the Wall to the land of giants, wolves, giant wolves and barbarians. Thankfully I don't have to go north with just a pocketknife, gumption and a loyal gardener. I've got all sorts of neat little toys to bring on this expedition, not the least of which being Carefree Victory herself. I've also dug into my autofac reserves to crank out more drones, bringing my total count to two dozen. That should be enough to provide total sensor coverage and security if I need to be away from the ship for extended periods. Mr. Zappy's powerpacks are all charged, same with the emergency deflector belt. And I've added a couple special toys just in case we need a lot of heat.

Remember wildfire, that incredibly nasty chlorine-fluorine-nitrogen azide compound the local alchemists somehow managed to discover without dying instantly? Thoros has a supply he uses to coat his sword with when he's in the middle of combat. Which admittedly is way crazier than I thought Thoros was capable of, but that's a side issue. Anyway, he didn't have a lot of it, less than a hundred grams total, but I don't need a lot. Long story short, I have three incendiary grenades that will burn down literally anything that can burn outside of a fusion reaction. So if there's a section of the forest that offends me, I can make it go away. Fear me puny mortals, I am become Trogdor, burninator of worlds!

Right, okay. Calm down Jade, put your nascent arsonist tendencies aside and focus on the job at hand. So I am equipped with many things that will hopefully make this job more efficient if not easier. The next step will be to stop at the Wall, to drop off a communicator with the Lord Commander (well, Maester Aemon really) and maybe pick up a couple extra troops for the job. Highly detailed satellite photomaps of the region are nice, but having one or two people who actually
know the land would be helpful.

I'm probably deluding myself if I consider seeking help from the local nomads, but you never know, right? It's an option worth pursuing if it comes up. I guess we'll see.

So that's pretty much it. I've said all the goodbyes I need to say in King's Landing. I've finally gotten used to the place, so it's a little weird to be leaving. As long as it's still here when I get back, I don't suppose it matters much.

Besides, like I said to Thoros, we've been on the back foot for too long. Others, Unbidden... whatever the hell is lurking up there where my sensors can't penetrate, it's time we found out. I want to know what's got a powerful psionic network like the weirwoods so goddamned afraid, what Brynden's up to, and who the adversary really is.

Huh. Maybe I'm more ready for this than I thought.

Operation COLD MISER begins at dawn. We're heading north, and we ain't coming back until we got what we came for.

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**THE GRAND MAESTER**

Every other evening, the Grand Maester preferred to spend the evening after dinner with a skin of wine and perhaps some companionship from the Street of Silk. This evening, his companion awaited him in his bedchamber whilst he went through another report from his spy in the master of magic's camp.

Young Alleras had proven an apt pupil and an effective agent, though how much of that was down to his skill and how much to the witch's own looseness Pycelle wasn't sure. His reports arrived on stacks of perfectly cut fine white paper lined with neat handwriting and occasional sketches of things inside the sky-ship or described by the master of magic herself.

Pycelle considered himself a wise, learned man, and he could only barely make heads or tails of anything Alleras reported. Some of the mathematics made a little sense: Alleras's notes on the forms the witch called algebra reminded him of something some savant in the Free Cities had developed for handling complex numbers. Likewise, some of the geometry Alleras passed on could revolutionize any number of disciplines at the Citadel. He imagined monuments like the Hightower or the Wall, built without the need for magic, only the pure simplicity of mathematics and the iron will of man.

And yet, other parts of the reports were considerably more troubling. He flipped through the magnificent white paper, coming to a particular point:

> "Lady Jade disagrees with the Citadel consensus that magic is dead in Westeros, and events appear to justify her conclusion. Though she is loath to call it 'magic,' instead using the word 'psionic' which is apparently a term her people use to describe such things. She also uses two aphorisms quite a bit when discussing magic. The first she calls Clarke's Law: 'Any sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic.' The second she called Heterodyne's Law: 'Any sufficiently analyzed magic is indistinguishable from science.' In so far as I understand it, the lady means by this that anything that can be studied by science becomes science."

Pycelle thought that it was an interesting way of looking at things. Most of the conclave would disagree, perhaps murderously, to the idea that magic could be studied the same way the earth and
sky could be. But perhaps that was the problem. If the maesters—save that rogue Marwyn—considered the thing beneath their notice, was it not possible that it could cause difficulty if left unchecked? Alleras's reports all tended to end on the same note, maddeningly vague hints that something dark was emerging from those places the Citadel pretended didn't exist. Pycelle could feel the initiate's frustration with the situation through his handwriting, along with the second-hand frustration the master of magic no doubt felt at the same time.

The maester's reveries were interrupted by a gentle cough. He looked up from his writing desk and beheld his companion for the evening standing naked in the door to his bedchamber. She was quite the prize, a golden-haired beauty from... somewhere, he didn't quite recall where exactly, and by some miracle the king hadn't caught wind and claimed her first. “Are you coming to bed, milord?” she asked shyly, batting her lashes in just the right manner.

He smiled fondly at the display. “Only a few moments more, my dear, please make yourself comfortable,” he said. She nodded and vanished back into the bedchamber. Putting aside the report for now, he picked up a letter bearing the seal of the Citadel. He broke the seal with a swift motion and went through the contents. Like most communications from the archmaesters, it was short and to the point: Our observation of the skies agree with what the initiate had passed on. The seasons are beginning to change; expect the white raven at the new year if not before. Archmaester Vaellyn believes the coming winter may be long and harsh as the witch predicted. The conclave is still skeptical about the other information passed on, but if the witch is correct about the seasons it is not impossible she is correct about other matters. Continue your observations.

The old maester snorted. The archmaesters were all like him, wise, learned men completely out of their elements dealing with this matter. Even Marwyn and his obsession with the occult had little to guide him here. Pycelle wasn't better than any of them, he'd admit that freely, but his position in King's Landing gave him more perspective on the matter than the old men safely hidden away in Oldtown.

“Bloody fools, the lot of them,” he mumbled. The damned witch was right about the seasons, old Vinegar Vaellyn himself agreed with her on that much. Was it really such an impossible thing that she might be right about other things as well? Her people built ships that could fly, using science beyond the Citadel but not so far beyond that the younger generation like Alleras couldn't learn it. Even if the conclave ignored everything they had learned about the woman and her people so far, they couldn't ignore the possibilities, the potential in learning this entailed.

Pycelle reached for a scrap of parchment. Lord Tywin needed to know about this, he decided. A storm was coming to Westeros, and the old lion's hands were the only ones capable of steering the realm through the gale. Pycelle wouldn't shirk in his duty.
Much, much later, when Jon had a chance to look back at it all, the whole thing started when the brothers convened in the hall for dinner. As usual, dinner was a simple affair compared to the evening meal at Winterfell, consisting of stewed mutton and whatever vegetables the cooks could find in the storehouse. They were just getting into the meal when the doors opened with a great clanging sound and Lady Jade strode in like a conqueror.

“I need men!” she proclaimed. A hundred of the brothers leapt to their feet, waving hands and shouting. The din made it impossible to understand it all, but Jon could pick out suggestions that started at lewd and escalated from there.

The sorceress waited patiently for the noise to subside a little. “Let me rephrase that!” she said. “I need a specific group of men willing to head into wildling territory hunting monsters from your darkest nightmares!” The shouts died away, leaving the men of the Watch to look at each other warily. “Oh, come on, really?”

“Lady Hasegawa,” the Lord Commander said, rising from his seat. “Welcome back to Castle Black.”

Lady Jade bowed. “A pleasure, Lord Commander. Sadly, I’m on more urgent business than I was last time I visited.”

“So I see,” Lord Jeor said dryly. “Perhaps we should discuss this more thoroughly in my solar, after dinner?”

The sorceress tilted her head. “I suppose that's fair,” she said.

“Hunting monsters,” the Lord Commander said flatly. He, along with his maester and master-of-arms had squeezed into his small solar along with the party from Carefree Victory. They sat around the small table looking at—or vaguely in the direction of, in Maester Aemon’s case—the sorceress expectantly.

“That's the plan,” Lady Jade agreed.

“Monsters that may or may not exist,” Alliser Thorne said acidly.

“One of the best ways to find out if something's real or not is to go looking for it.”

“Ser Alliser, please,” Maester Aemon said. “Lady Hasegawa, if you could possibly elaborate on your reasoning?”

The sorceress sighed, placing her hands flat on the table. “Gentlemen, we all know there's something going on to the north. Hell, you know that better than I do at this point. I told King Robert that I'd go out there and find out what's happening out there and bring back proof it was real. That's what this expedition is all about.”

Thorne snorted. “Like the usurper would ever do anything, even if you're right.”
“Peace, Ser Alliser,” Lord Mormont's eyes fixed on the sorceress. “The last time you came to us, my lady, your intelligence was vague at best. Has that changed in the last turn?”

“Yes and no,” Lady Jade grimaced. “The information's no less wibbly than it was before, but there's... a certainty to it the longer I let it go.” Her head shook in frustration. “There's no good way to explain this without sounding madder than usual, but I've got to start hunting before things spiral too far out of control.”

The Reacher knight still looked skeptical, but Maester Aemon nodded. “My family is not unfamiliar with such things, Lady Hasegawa,” he said. “My older brother, for one. Dreams such as those are powerful, and dangerous. Take care not to follow them blindly.”

“We are straying from the topic,” the Lord Commander said. “My lady, what exactly are your plans for this ranging?”

Lady Jade nodded in Sarella's direction. “Al.” Sarella pulled the device from her robe and laid it on the table. The lady's wondrous technology became easier and easier to manipulate every time she used it, and with only a few swift touches to the controls a glorious map of the lands beyond the Wall sprang into life, painted in shimmering light.

“Gods,” Lord Mormont breathed.

“This is the ship's map of the continent north of the Wall,” Lady Jade said. “Ah, right. Sorry, Maester Aemon...”

The ancient maester accepted the half-apology with a wave of his hand. “Think nothing of it, dear girl. I regret my blindness, but there's nothing your magic could do about that.”

“If I was a doctor and not a Ranger, you might be surprised,” the lady said wryly. “But anyway. I've labeled this thing using maps from Castle Black and points south, just for reference.” Another touch and names appeared over places on the map.

Ser Alliser peered at the map. “Remarkable,” he said. “Does this map have wildling camps on it as well?”

“Resolution's not quite good enough to pick out small camps, and if they're in the forest the canopy hides pretty much anything from view. Anyway, ideally I'd like to do a full loop of the haunted forest, just run along the foothills then come back along the coast but I don't think that's the smartest move. The further north we get, the likelihood of running into something we can't handle approaches one. I want to stick to within 400 kilometers of the Wall, at least for this fishing expedition.

“My plan is to take Victory north-northwest along the Milkwater,” Lady Jade said, pointing out the route. “Up to this old fort, then dogleg east across the forest to Storrold's Point, then back to the castle.”

“Do you plan on entering the forest?” Thorne asked.

“Every hundred or so klicks up the Milkwater I'm going to ground the ship and do a probe into the forest.” Lord Mormont replied. “I can't take the ship into the forest without finding a clearing big enough to ground her... or making one. Making a clearing is entirely possible but that'll be really loud, really obvious and probably scare our quarry away in the process. Leaving the ship for a day or three is the better option.”

“And if you find your monsters away from your ship?” The Lord Commander said mildly, almost as if he were commenting on the weather and not the possibility of terrible death.
Lady Jade smiled, just faintly. “She comes when I call,” she replied.

“How would you do your ranging?” asked Lord Mormont. “Horses? We have horse here, but for the Watch only...”

“I have my own ground transport,” the sorceress said. “Call them mechanical horses for lack of a better word.” She frowned. “If you agree to send some men with me, they can bring their own horses. I’ve got enough room in the hold for a few, don’t know how okay they’ll be with the prospect, though.”

“Something to discuss later,” Mormont said. “How many men did you want?”

“No more than seven, I think. Especially if we're going to be bringing horses along too. I could probably haul another twenty or so along, but they’d have to walk and that’d slow us down something awful.”

“Mm,” Lord Mormont said. “A pity Benjen’s already gone out on ranging, he and his men would be perfect for this. I believe I can find some men for your mission, my lady.”

Lady Jade nodded. “All I was looking for, Commander. Thank you.”

“One last thing, Lady Hasegawa,” Ser Alliser said. “You're hunting monsters, but you're likely to find wildlings instead. What happens then?”

The sorceress looked puzzled. “I talk to them, of course,” she said. “What did you expect?”

“They may not be interested in talking to you,” the master-at-arms cautioned. “They've never had much interest in talking to the Watch even in the best of times.”

“Well, I've got a few advantages,” she replied, raising a finger. “First, and with respect, I'm not you guys. Second, I apparently have a knack for talking my way out of scrapes. Third, if I'm right we've got bigger concerns to bother us. And fourth and last...” she snapped her fingers and a pair of familiars floated through the solar's door and took up station above her shoulders. “I do carry a pretty effective deterrent wherever I go.”

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**JON**

“I wish I was going with you,” Jon grouched.

Lady Jade shook her head. “No kid, you really don't,” she replied.

“I'm not a kid,” Jon protested. “There's nothing goaty about me.” The complaint sounded weak even as he said it. *This must be how Arya feels* floated into his head for the briefest of moments.

The lady sighed. “I know, you think you're ready for this, but you aren't. I did the same damn thing when I was your age, lo those many years ago.” He almost laughed, not quite managing to turn it into a cough before the last second. Lady Jade caught it and went on with a grin. “Seriously, Jon, your job right now is to learn. Listen to your teachers and try to understand what they're telling you. It isn't to go tear-assing off into the howling wilderness on a fool's errand.”

“That's your job, is it?” Jon muttered.

Jade shrugged. “Well, when one is on a fool's errand, one must uphold the honor of fools by completing the errand.”
“Well... be safe on your fool's errand, will you? I would hate to have to write Robb that you were eaten by snarks beyond the Wall, with me nowhere nearby to save you.”

“That's fair. Don't fall off the Wall.”

“Oi! Lord Snow!” Ser Alliser roared from across the courtyard. “Enough getting your fortune told and back to work!” Jon stiffened at the hated nickname, then bowed to the sorceress and sprinted back to his practice.

Everything in the courtyard stopped when the sky-ship's strange rumble sounded and the sliver-white bulk lifted over the castle grounds, climbing higher and higher until it cleared the top of the Wall and vanished to the far north.
The stories came from over the Wall, and nobody believed. Mance Rayder himself went over to see and came back with tales of the magic ship outside the gates of Winterfell and still nobody believed. A metal boat that could fly through the skies? Madness, or some odd trick of the kneelers.

This is what Ygritte thought, right up to the point when reports came of a metal dragon slowly poking its way up the Milkwater. Mance seemed not terribly surprised by this turn of events. “She was bound to come poking sooner or later,” was all he said when he sent her along with the Lord of Bones to follow the dragon’s trail.

That meant ten long days of sneaking along the edge of the forest, watching the dragon float in the air in a way that metal, boats and even dragons should not float. The little scout band was starting to get restless. Every other day or so, the dragon’s crew would vanish into the forest on horseback or little metal carts. And every time they left, the party would argue about what they ought to do next.

“There's nobody aboard, or not many anyway,” Rattleshirt would inevitably say. “We can take the dragon, and wouldn't that be quite the catch?”

“Oh aye? And how would ye steer the damned thing?” Rogdel shot back. Rogdel was Mance's man through and through, which was the main reason he was in the party to begin with. “I can ride a horse and paddle a coracle. Sailing a boat that flies through the air is beyond me.”

“Ye fucking craven,” Rattleshirt sneered. “I’d stab you through the gullet and leave you for the white walkers if I thought Rayder wouldn't ask after you.” Rogdel growled and almost went for his knife, before settling back.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Rogdel said calmly. “If we want to learn about the boat, we need to find the witch responsible. She went into the forest with the crows... so let's follow and see what they're looking for.”

“Not much left in this part of the forest these days,” Ygritte muttered. And so the next time the witch and her crows went into the forest, the free folk turned and followed them at a safe distance.

Shadowing the witch and her party turned out to be more interesting than they'd thought. The crows had decent enough woodcraft—probably rangers or veterans, not raw recruits—but the witch plunged into the wood on her metal steed with only slight regard for what she was crashing through. For all that headlong energy there were none better than the free folk at navigating the woods, and eventually they passed the witch and found themselves at a small clearing.

Ygritte felt her heart sink at the sight. Somebody had been hunting here, judging by the supplies strewn around the clearing. And something had been hunting them in turn, judging by how scattered and destroyed the camp was. Another party taken by the walkers, damn them. How many lost ones out there now, I wonder? Rattleshirt swore softly at the sight, and Rogdel offered up a quick prayer to the gods for their fellows.

Any further reverie was disturbed by the whirring, whining sound of the witch's steed coming from behind them. “Into the trees,” Rattleshirt hissed and like smoke they fled into the cover of the woods. The whirring stopped, and they watched silently as the witch and her party stepped into the clearing.
The witch, clad in a thick coat of deep green, was followed by three crows and Qhorin fucking Halfhand himself. All of them stared at what was left of the campsite. “Well, that's not good,” the witch said. “What d'you think?”

The Halfhand’s gaze swept over the ruined tents and scattered wood. “Hunting camp most likely,” he said. “Looks like they were attacked in the middle of cleaning their catch.” He pointed towards a dead deer and a pile of furry bodies near the clearing’s edge. “Based on the snow I'd say... perhaps a fortnight ago? Not much longer than that.”

Ygritte's blood turned to ice. _A fortnight? They might still be near. Too near._

“Mm,” the green woman hummed without a tune. “Wonder who did it?”

“Beggin' your pardon, my lady,” one of the other crows, a younger, weasel-faced man, put in, “but wildlings all squabble like cats in a sack. It could have been another tribe looking to steal their sticks or their women, or it might have been a fight between the hunters.”

“Mm,” the witch hummed again, looking around. “Where're the bodies?”

Halfhand grunted. “Noticed that too, did you?”

“Couldn't help notice it,” the witch replied grimly.

“Bodies?” The weasel-faced crow sounded confused.

The witch swept out a hand, gesturing grandly at the clearing. “These people here were tending camp when they were attacked,” she said. “The ambush was fast and violent, enough that they were probably mostly killed in the fight. And they're hunters, so it's not impossible they scored a few hits on their attackers. So this happens, and whoever survives leaves.” She paused. “Do wildlings bury or cremate their dead?”

“Depends on the season,” said the Halfhand. “They've been burning their dead more often than not, the last couple of years.” _And if you'd seen wights like we had you'd burn your dead too, Ygritte thought savagely._

“Just so,” the witch nodded. “Ground's too hard to dig effectively, and there's no signs of a cairn or a cremation fire. So if anybody from the camp survived they didn't come back and take care of their friends.”

“Probably wanted them for the meat then,” Weasel-face said. A faint creak coming from the right told Ygritte that Rattleshirt was just about to leap into the fray and slit the crow’s throat for that. Halfhand sighed and turned to give the man a look, and weasel-face shrank back.

“Have sense, boy,” he said. “This isn't Skagos, wildlings in this part of the haunted forest don't eat their dead unless there's no other recourse. A starving band wouldn't take the men but not the catch too.”

The witch nodded. “So we're left with the question we started with: where are the bodies?” She turned and her eyes—her terrifying, bright green eyes—met Ygritte's. “Good thing we're not the only ones looking for them,” she added as Ygritte's surprise curdled into sheer panic at the realization that the witch knew they were there.

That was when Rattleshirt leapt from the woods, axe in hand and a battlecry on his lips, Rogdel and Darold not far behind him. Ygritte held frozen for a moment, pinned in place by the witch’s gaze. Then she snarled, grabbed her spear and charged.
And then everything went wrong. There was a snapping sound, like thunder but smaller, and Rogdel and Darold went crashing to the ground, twitching. Rattleshirt roared, swinging wildly at the crows when the snapping sound came again and he dropped to his knees. Ygritte heard all this but ignored it, aiming to wound the witch and perhaps stop her magic when the snap sounded again and her entire world became pain. She dropped to one knee, using her spear to steady herself. Everything hurt, her limbs were heavy and on fire, her heart raced and it was hard to see straight, much less do anything more than stay right there and try to breathe.

The witch walked calmly over to Ygritte and grabbed her chin with a gloved hand. Tilting her head up, she could see the woman's eyes glinting behind faint panes of... glass? Who wore glass on their face like that? “You didn't drop all the way,” she said. “You and Charley Bones over there, that's impressive. I'm impressed.”

Rattleshirt struggled to his feet, panting like a dog. “Ye think you can put down the Lord of Bones that easily you kneeler cunAAAAIGH!” The snapping noise came again and Rattleshirt jerked, flopping into the snow like a landed fish.

“Manners,” the witch said mildly. Darold moaned and rolled over on his back. The witch looked around at the groaning bodies around her and whistled. From out of the forest behind them a collection of little metal balls floated out of the woods and pooled around here. Witch, witch, witch sounded in Ygritte's head. Mance, I ought to kill you if I get back for not telling us about this, ye damn fool.

“Well!” the witch said brightly. “I suppose that means we surrender!”

“Ygritte blinked. Darold looked up from the ground in incomprehension. The younger crows looked just as confused. Old Halfhand gave her a funny look, then shrugged. “Aye, I reckon you're not wrong about that.” He held up his hands.

Weasel-face squawked. “You what!?"

“Well hey, we're clearly outnumbered, outclassed and at a massive disadvantage here,” the witch replied, making an odd little rolling gesture with her free hand. “So, y'know, in order to prevent more senseless violence we should surrender and see what their boss wants to do with us.”

The crow looked murderous. “Fuck that! We've got them helpless and if you're too craven to kill them then I'll cut all their fucking heaAAAA—” One of the little metal balls around the witch had drifted close to weasel-face and flashed blue, and the crow toppled forward with a confused, betrayed look on his face.

“Alas, alack,” the witch deadpanned, “our compatriot has swooned to injuries. Qhorin, you want to help me make sure he doesn't become a problem?”

“As my lady commands,” the Halfhand sighed. Ygritte knelt there, watching in faint disbelief as the witch and one of the deadliest crows alive carefully examined weasel-face, then trussed him like a sheep and dropped him off back where, presumably, they'd left the horses.

The witch returned to Ygritte, offering her a hand up. She took the hand, climbing to her feet even though every muscle in her legs screamed in protest. “So what d'you say kid?” the witch said. “Take me to your leader?”

“You're mad,” Ygritte hissed at her. The witch smiled.

“Not the first person to say that,” she replied in a cheerful voice. “Won't be the last, either.” The sky
darkened, thunder rolled and Ygritte looked up to see the metal dragon now floating over the tiny clearing. “Oh hey, our ride’s here,” the witch finished.

Ygritte just closed her eyes and wondered why she’d volunteered for this scout party in the first place.

The witch landed the ship not far from the main encampment, just out of easy sight and hearing. Leaving the ship in the care of a thin, dark man in grey robes and a huge, burly man in red robes, “captors” and “captives” left and walked along the trail towards where the free folk made camp. Mance was there, thank all the gods, tending his fire when Ygritte led the party out of the woods. He stood to welcome them back, his words dying on his lips when he saw exactly what was coming back to camp. Ygritte was the only member of the scouting party reliably on her feet; Rogdel and Darold were on horseback, but swaying like they were like to fall off. Rattleshirt was out cold, draped over the hindquarters of Rogdel’s horse. And on foot with Ygritte were the witch and Qhorin Halfhand.

“There's a story here, isn't there?” he said.

Ygritte tried to figure out how to explain the last day or so. “They're,” she started, failed to continue then before she could start again the witch got there first.

“We're her prisoners!” she chirped. Mance's eyebrows went up and he looked at Ygritte.

“I don't want to talk about it,” she grumbled, putting hand to temple.

Halfhand and the witch both stared at Mance. The old ranger seemed quietly furious, as she might've expected. The witch on the other hand seemed more surprised and amused. “Huh,” she said. “Did you ever find those strings I mentioned?”

Mance returned her stare with a smirk. “Not much call for wire like that beyond the Wall, I'm afraid,” he replied.

“Pity, it really does make for some excellent sound.”

“I remember.” He paused. “I imagine we've got a lot to talk about, Mistress Jade.”

The witch barked out a laugh. “Oh, you have no fucking idea.”
“If you're hunting monsters, you've come to the right place,” he said to the witch. “Half the bloody woods are filled with wights, among other things.”

The witch hummed tunelessly. Something of a pity, that; he'd have liked to hear some more songs from the woman. “We've seen their aftermath,” she said, “but not much else.”

“You'll not see much of them in the day,” Mance replied. “They don't like the sun overmuch. Though if you've been going into the forest...” he tapped his axe thoughtfully.

“Could they be avoiding us?” the witch asked. “We're not exactly being subtle in our movements.”

“Doesn't sound like the wights or the walkers.” Mance gave the green woman a considering look. “Why are you rushing headlong into this? You could stay with the kneelers and never have to worry about things creeping in shadows beyond the Wall.”

The witch sighed. “There's a long story behind that,” she said with a glance at the chainless maester at her side. “And maybe we'll live long enough for me to tell it. To shorten it, I was given... a warning, one I believe is accurate. And now... I need proof.”

“Proof.”

“That this is all real.” She pointed out at the cold lands beyond the tentflap. “Something that will prove to the king and his lords that bad things are coming their way and they need to get their shit moving and prepare.”

Mance smiled. “Would the testimony of my people, sworn before the gods, be enough?” It was folly to even offer the suggestion, Mance knew that. But the witch at least seemed amenable to the thought.

The Halfland had spent the entire meeting glowering at him, only now speaking. “You know better than that, Rayder,” he growled. “No southron man would take the word of a wildling.”

“Then you're going to need something more... physical,” Mance said.

The witch looked grim. “Something the king can poke with a stick. Dreams, visions and reports aren't going to cut it. We need physical evidence, enough to rub their noses in if necessary.”

Mance nodded. “A dangerous task, but a necessary one I suspect. I will help you in your mission, Ulthosi.” He held up a hand. “But at cost. I am King-Beyond-The-Wall, for the moment anyway, and I need your help to protect my people. Will you aid me, if I aid you?”

The witch raised an eyebrow, and for a moment the firelight glinted off the panes of glass before her eyes, hiding them. “I can try, that's all I can promise for now,” she said.

Mance felt a great weight lift from his heart, not very far, but enough.
I've been north of the Wall for two weeks now, and all I've got to show for it is a bunch of wildlings. Wait, no, strike that: all I've got to show is a bunch of free folk. There we go, full marks for Professor Jade's cultural sensitivity seminar.

Okay, so it's not all that bad. The free folk have been reasonably helpful so far in keeping us apprised of where stuff is. It is their country, after all, so by rights they ought to know what's where. Most of them are a little skittish; considering I showed up with a couple people from the Night's Watch in tow, that doesn't surprise me.

I probably wouldn't be getting as far with the free folk as I am if I hadn't already met their king. I'd say that's a hell of a coincidence but in reality it really, really isn't. The current king of the free folk jumped the Wall—a neat trick if you can pull it off—and visited Winterfell while I was the witch in residence. Apparently he wanted to see what his southern counterpart was like and I was just a bonus. King Mance is a pleasant enough guy, all told. Got a good singing voice, too.

So the bad news is the free folk can confirm that nasties are in fact roaming in the forests north of the Wall. Most of what they've seen have been some sort of undead creature they call “wights.” On an academic level I'm actually pretty curious as to how that works: clearly there's a psionic component to it, but is there more? Does it require some sort of implant, or maybe a psi-active nanite like what the Builders did to the weirwoods? The other thing they've seen, only at distance so far apparently, are the instigators of all this. They call those the “white walkers” and they don't sound like pleasant people. This is me, making my overjoyed face.

Whatever the hell they really are, tracking them is taking more time than I'd expected. We've been following minute changes in psionic field strength, whenever the ship's sensors can pick it up or if I can feel it. So far that's brought us to the aftermath of a lot of encounters, but no actual encounters. Mance doesn't think they shy away from human contact, because they're pretty confident they can kill any of us if they feel a need to. That's encouraging, just thought I'd mention that.

But so far, nothing's tried even a probe at either the away party or the ship. I don't know what to make of that yet. It could be that all my Starfleet gear, the drones, the RVs, the camping gear, it's all just alien enough to make them shy away. I've seen that in effect—maybe not quite as dramatic but still—down south. Or... they could be keeping their distance for another reason. That suggests quite a bit of thought, not some kind of mindless devouring swarm.

I don't know which thought is least comforting. That's always fun.

Mance has agreed to help with this little hunting expedition—I don't know if he's hoping for more bodies to throw against the enemy or what—but he's got a price. As a king he wants to protect his people, which in this case means he wants his people on the other side of the Wall from the zombies and the Others. That's entirely fair, but that means I have to convince Stark that he needs to find space for somewhere around a hundred thousand people.

(Incidentally, that's a goddamn lot of nomads for a place like this. I suspect a lot of Mance's followers might be displaced from more permanent settlements. That suggests things about subarctic Westeros that nobody, even the Watch, knew about. In literally any other circumstance this would be downright fascinating socio-political information but right now it's a sidebar. Onwards!)

I should say that I need to convince Stark and King Robert but let's be honest here, Bob will sign just about any damn thing anybody puts in front of him, and especially if Stark puts it there. Stark's the local hegemon, so I need him to agree to house the free folk on his land, convince his sworn lords to not massacre them while prepping for a long and nasty winter. And in order to do that I'm going to need something tangible to convince him, and the king, and all the other lords.
Time to get back to work, then. That proof ain't going to find itself.

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**SARELLA**

“Nothing,” she said. “The fifth camp in as many days, and no sign of our quarry.”

The hunting party were in the Frostfangs now, several days ride north of the wildling king's camp and getting nearer to the old fortress the Watch called the Fist of the First Men. The mountains loomed gray and cold over them. The harsh landscape reminded Sarella of home a little. In the earliest morning light the bare rock of the Frostfangs glinted redly and for a moment she could forget the biting cold and believe she was still back in Dorne. The moment would then pass and the cold would gnaw its way back into her bones, but the memory helped keep her warm.

The party stood in the ruins of a small mining camp next to a cavern entrance. Lady Jade pointed out a thin ribbon of stone exposed on the cavern's mouth, next to a destroyed lean-to. “Tin, I think,” she remarked.

One of Rayder's men glanced at the stone. “Aye, this was a bronzeworker's camp all right. I saw some copper in their packs.” He shook his head. “Poor fuckers.”

Lady Jade hummed a little, examining what the wildlings had left behind. “Don't suppose bronze has any special properties against these things, right?” she said idly.

The wildling snorted. “That'd be nice.”

“Ah well, it was worth asking.”

Sarella felt uneasy. The wind picked up, and it seemed to be blowing colder than usual, pricking at every scrap of exposed skin. The hair on her nape tingled, almost as if... “Do you feel that?” she asked.

Lady Jade stopped going through the abandoned goods and looked at her sharply. “Feel?”

“There's something in the air,” she replied helplessly. “I know not what it is, but... I can feel... it's like something has an eye on me.”

Lady Jade gave her another hard look, then closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her eyes snapped open, filled with worry. “Shit, that's not good,” she breathed, the turned to shout. “Qhorin! Darold! Walder! Weapons out, boys!”

The familiars drew close around the party, humming with anticipation. The young Watchman Walder turned to look at the sorceress. “What's going on?” he asked.

“Fields are changing,” Lady Jade replied grimly. “We're not alone.”

Walder blinked. “Th'fuck are you talking about?”

“Long story, we don't have time for it, now get your fucking sword out and be ready,” Lady Jade snapped. She took another deep breath and faced east, towards the densest part of the forest.

“Coming from that direction, close.”

Sarella pulled her own dagger. A parting gift from her father, made of fine Volantene steel in the pattern of the knives carried by her mother's people. Compared to the swords and axes held by the wildlings and the Watch it was a paltry thing. She hoped it might be enough.
“Alright you bastards,” Lady Jade called into the forest, “come on if you're coming, then.”

In response, the wind howled and the spaces between the trees were filled with eyes like blue stars.

The Watch's men swore as a dozen or more dead men stepped out of the forest. They made no sound save the crunch of snow under their feet as they advanced on the party.

“Shit.” Jade exclaimed, drawing her own weapon. The weapon looked small compared to what the others had, even compared to Sarella's dagger, but she knew full well what it was capable of. “Stop right the fuck there, all of you,” she ordered.

The wights paid no heed, walking forward without any sign of hearing her. Walder the Watchman raised his sword. “For Robert and the realm!” he roared, rushing forward to meet the dead.

Not to be outdone, the wildling Darold hefted his axe and cried “For Mance and freedom!” before making his own charge.

Both men struck true, Walder's sword cleaving an arm from a dead man whilst Darold's axe cut through a dead woman's torso. “They aren't so tough!” Walder cried, then screamed as the severed arm lashed out and wrapped a gnarled hand around his ankle. The wildling pulled him back before his opponent could take advantage of the man's surprise and tear out his throat.

“Careful, ye damn fool!” Darold snapped. “These things don't die that easily!”

Lady Jade aimed her weapon carefully and fired at one of the wights. The blast of socrecry caught the corpse dead in the heart, blowing its chest into bloody chunks. All motion on the field stopped for a second. The living blinked at the sudden display of sorcery and used the moment to gain some distance.

The wights all turned as one to look at the sorceress.

“Oh that's not good,” Lady Jade muttered.

The wights turned and charged, abandoning the slow walk for a run. Sarella's blood froze and she stared, wide-eyed, at the oncoming dead. Dead men can't run like that, they shouldn't be able to walk, it's not physically possible, her mind gibbered over and over in terror.

“Fuckity fuck fuck fuck into the cave!” Jade yelled, grabbing Sarella by her hood and dragging her backwards. The combination of wildlings and Watchmen covered their retreat, swinging swords to keep the grasping hands of the dead at bay.

Lady Jade stopped at the entrance and waited for the last of the party to get inside. As they crossed the threshold she spread her arms out wide. The familiars responded, circling the cavern mouth and creating a wide curtain of light between them and the familiars.

Darold looked up, panting. “That's a neat trick,” he said.

“Yeah,” Lady Jade agreed. “Too bad I can only do it in one direction.”

Sarella stared at the milling dead men. Most of the wights stopped well short of the curtain but one shambled forward. He had been a man of the Watch, dressed in what was once fine sable but now was as tattered and torn as the rest of him. Part of his face was ruined, but the wight's one good eye glowed a malevolent blue.

Qhorin Halfhand stiffened, then sighed. Lady Jade glanced backwards. “You know him?”
"Ser Waymar Royce, vanished on a patrol some turns ago. I'd wager we know what happened to him, now."

The sorceress studied the wight. "Something's wrong," she said.

Darold laughed harshly. "Woman, nothing's been right about any of this."

Ser Waymar's corpse twisted to and fro, looking at them all with that terrible blue eye, until its gaze fell on the sorceress.

The mouth opened.

"Zhdane," it hissed.
“So,” she said slowly. “If I ken ye right, your red priests heard tales of this dragon king and they sent you to try and bring him round to your fire god? Even though he was best known for burning everything he could get his hands on?”

The big man in red shrugged like a landslide. “It seemed to be a good idea at the time,” he said. “When I arrived in King’s Landing it was clear the high priest had been... misinformed.”

“Misinformed,” Ygritte repeated. “I like that. That's a nice, big kneeeler-like word. I was misinformed when Mance asked me to go and follow this witch and her metal dragon. Shant be a problem, what does some foreign witch know about beyond the Wall, anyhow?”

“Not that you're bitter,” Thoros of Myr noted. She shot him a dark look. “Oh, don't glower at me like that, girl. You think you're the first one waylaid by our traveling companion? This isn't where I saw myself six turns ago; I'd planned to spend the next score years whiling my time away as an ornament of the court and then, well.” The red priest gestured at the metal walls around them.

“Not that you're bitter,” Ygritte said with a bit of a smirk. The priest laughed.

“Oh, far from it,” he replied. “The Lord of Light puts us in the place where we're needed and gives us the tools to make our marks. What happens after that is up to us.”

Ygritte shook her head. “Sounds mad to me.”

“I admit it's not a life meant for everyone,” Thoros agreed. “But at least it's interesting.”

Horns sounded from the walls, a harsh, grating clamor the likes of which she'd never heard before. The priest looked up at the noise and frowned. “Not good,” he pronounced.

“What?” Ygritte said, then a voice spoke from nowhere.

“Remote launch procedure activated,” it said pleasantly. She couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman's voice. “Please find secure seating.” Thoros swore.

“Damn it, really not good,” he said. “Girl, if you've got a weapon on you get it loose and ready.”

Ygritte blinked. “Thoros, what the fuck is going on?” she demanded.

The priest's lips compressed into a thin line. “Lady Jade's calling the ship,” he said grimly. “No idea what's waiting for us, but if she called instead of riding back... ’tis not likely to be anything good.”

Her first instinct was to shake in fear. The dead were walking and speaking. It was the stuff of nightmares, of the most terrible of tales she heard growing up. There was no science, no reason to explain it.


Her next instinct was try and understand what the dead man had just said. The words were nothing in
the common speech, but it sounded oddly familiar to her ears. “Valyrian?” she mumbled.

The wildling Darold stilled. “No,” he said. “Sounds more like the old tongue t’m me but... different. Fancier, mayhaps?”

“Are you sure? I’d swear on the Seven it sounds like High Valyrian to me.” The words weren’t quite right, the pronunciation different and the grammar alien, but she could almost understand what the wight had said. And wasn’t that an interesting puzzle? Could the two tongues be related?

Archmaester Gawain had a theory along those lines, that all languages in Westeros and Essos sprang from a mother tongue thousands of years before, that the tongues changed due to circumstances. So if the vocabulary shifted... Sarella shook her head. A pretty puzzle to be solved perhaps, but one to be figured out later, well after they were safe from the walking dead.

If they ever were, a treasonous part of her mind whispered.

“Ah, no hablo Zhdane,” Lady Jade replied. “How about we try something a little more modern?”

The thing that had been Waymar Royce worked its jaw silently a moment, then spoke again. “Who... are you?”

The sorceress beamed. “Much better,” she said. “Captain Jade Hasegawa, Federal Worlds Starfleet Rangers at your service...?” She trailed off.

The wight's head moved in a direction heads really shouldn't. “Star... fleet?” it drew the word out into a long, inhuman sound. “You have come... a long way.”

The sorceress's posture shifted warily. “Kind of an understatement, that.”

“You... Zhdane... will give us...”


“Your ship...”

“Oh no, I don't give that out on the first date. Not even if you buy me dinner first.”

“We will have your ship... we will have freedom.” The wight spat the last word with venom and struck at the pane of light separating it from them. The light flared and sizzled, and the wight was thrown backwards.

Lady Jade stared at the abomination. “What are you?” she said softly. The wight glared hatefully back.

“You know... Zhdane,” it said.

“I really don't, and I'm starting to be annoyed about that.”

“Enough games, Zhdane. We will have your ship... now.”

There was a rustling sound from further in the cave. Sarella turned and tried very hard not to foul her robes as blue eyes glowed from the darkness beyond.

“Seven save us,” Qhorin Halfhand whispered. “Fuckers were in here with us all the time.”

“How many?” Lady Jade barked. Sarella pulled what little courage she had left around her and tried to count pairs of eyes.
“S-six wights!” she said, scrambling backwards and going for her dagger.

“Go for the limbs, impede movement!” the sorceress commanded. The wight outside laughed harshly.

“You will be ours,” it grated.

The wights inside the cave charged. Lady Jade's weapon sounded again, and her ears rang with the sound of thunder echoing off the walls.

The corpse of a stripling boy fell on Sarella with inhuman speed and strength, knocking her to the ground. Hands that had been dead at least half a year reached for her throat. Father's training kicked in and she drove her mother's dagger into the wight's chest to very little effect.

She pulled the knife from the thing's withered chest and slashed it across the eyes whilst kicking at the thing's groin. A shot to the balls might not incapacitate a dead man the same way as it might a live one, but all she wanted was a moment of leverage. Her dagger raked across one of the wight's eyes, putting out that horrible blue light. The wight reacted to that at least, redoubling its efforts to tear out her throat.

The rotting fingers groped along her collarbone, far too close. All I need is a moment... her foot finally found purchase in the rotted stomach and she pushed, rolling the wight over until it was on the ground and she straddling it. The dead thing thrashed and snapped at her as she looked frantically around for something to hold the monster down. There! A sharpened branch, no doubt left behind by the poor souls who'd become these wights, lay just within reach.

Sarella grabbed the branch and jammed it through the wight's chest, clipping through bone and driving deep into the cavern's dirt floor. Pinned, the wight continued to thrash whilst she took the gruesome task of rendering it harmless. Once the deed was done, arms and legs cut away and scattered, she rolled off the dead thing and inhaled a deep, shuddering breath.

“That was neatly done, lad,” the Halfhand said. Like her, he was sitting on the floor next to a dismembered corpse. Scratches covered him head to toe. “If you ever give up the chained life, I'd be happy to have you on the Wall with me.”

Sarella smiled wanly. “I think,” she started to say before her gorge caught up with the past few moments and she ended up emptying her guts on a nearby stone. Over her retching she could hear Lady Jade say something to the wight outside, the monster replying. Then she heard the soft murmur of the ship's engines singing.

“You wanted my ship?” Lady Jade said, a cruel note in her voice. “Well, have fun with that.”

Sarella turned just in time to see bolts of blue lightning rain down on the wights outside the cave.

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**THOROS**

They were still alive when they arrived, R'hllor be praised. All bruised and torn up a bit, but alive. Thoros decided long ago to take his victories where he could claim them, and this seemed like a good place to claim victory.

He spied the sorceress standing over the scorched body of a man of the Watch. Despite the crisping of his skin, he guessed the man had been dead for quite a while before feeling the impact of Carefree Victory's weapons. “Jade?” he said, pitched for her ears as best he could.
“Get the boxes,” she said. “There's one or two bits still useful enough here.”

He turned and whistled to the rangers tarrying near the ship's ramp. “Hoy! Get your cocks out of your hands and go get the cages!” The two Watchmen scurried back into the ship. Thoros leaned in closer to the sorceress. He could smell fresh blood and old rot on her. “Are you well, my lady?”

Lady Jade laughed without humor. “I've been worse,” she said, eyes not leaving the dead man's ruined face. “But I've been far better, too.” She sighed. “It was an ambush. Not a perfect ambush, but a decent one. They've been shadowing us, same as Rayder's people, probably since we first started moving.”

“That's... troubling,” Thoros said.

“Mm,” the sorceress grunted. “We're still too deep in the dark here, Thoros. I don't like it.”

“A pity Sister Melisandre isn't here, we could use her clear sight into the fires.”

“Mm.” She paused. “Do me a favor, would you? Make sure Al gets first crack at the showers.”
Thoros looked over to the maester in training, who stood near the ramp. Her robes were stained and her face as pale as her dark complexion would allow. “And maybe a hug,” Jade added.

He nodded solemnly. “My word as a servant of the Lord,” he said. “Though perhaps you'd be better for giving the hug. I'm more like to crush the poor girl.” The sorceress blinked, then chuckled.

“That's fair, I suppose,” she said.

The rangers exited the ship carrying a set of clear boxes. Jade waved one over, and took one of the boxes from him. “This used to be Ser Waymar Royce,” she said to the ashen-faced man. “I understand he was one of yours. We'll burn the body and return the ashes to Castle Black... but right now we need his head.”

“His head?” the poor man blurted. The sorceress nodded.

“One last service to the realm,” she said. “He'll serve as warning to the king about what's going on out here.” The ranger didn't seem particularly happy about this, but he took out his sword anyway.

“I can take care of that if you'd rather,” Thoros offered, but the man shook his head.

“No, good ser,” he replied. “If it needs done then it's better a man of the Watch do it. We take care of our own.” He brought the sword down on Ser Waymar's neck, and the head came away cleanly.

Lady Jade picked up the head and regarded it. The one good eye swiveled to look at Thoros, then the ranger. The mouth opened and closed silently.

The sorceress placed the head in the box and sealed the lid. “That's one,” she said.

Sometime later, what little remained of the wights in the area had been collected, sealed away, and stored in the ship's icebox. The collection of sorceress, her attendants, men of the Night's Watch and wildlings stood at the edge of the ramp, looking at the blackened ruin that used to be a campsite.

“Is it just me or is it getting even colder?” Lady Jade asked, looking up at the sky. Alleras blanched a little, and the wildlings looked alarmed.

“We ought to be getting out of here,” the wildling girl Ygritte said quickly. “The colder it gets the more likely white walkers aren't far behind.” The sorceress nodded sharply and whistled. All her familiars rose out of the woods and the wreckage and streamed into the ship, with the rest of them
The ramp closed and the ship's bell chimed for takeoff. “We'll overnight in the air,” Lady Jade said. “Should be safer that way.”

“Fair enough,” the Halfhand replied. “Where next, then? Back to Rayder's camp?”

“Don't think so,” the sorceress said. “Ship: set destination waypoint Grove-1, time of arrival sometime in the morning.”

The ship chimed another bell. “Acknowledged,” it said.

Alleras came out her shell long enough to give the sorceress a look. “Grove-1?”

“You'll see.”

The next morning the ship set down in a clearing near a large cluster of old weirwoods. The entire party left the ship in Lady Jade's train, trailing behind as she strode confidently towards the heart tree in the center of the grove. The tree was huge and ancient, bigger than any weirwood Thoros had seen in his time in Westeros. The carved face looked sternly down on them all. The grove was silent, only the most distant calls of birds could be heard, and those likely leagues away.

Lady Jade stopped a few paces from the heart tree. “Hello, George,” she said. “I know, I probably should've come earlier, but it's time we had a talk, don't you think?

“I've met what you're so worried about. I think. At the very least it doesn't seem to like me, so that's a thing. But here's the problem, George: I still don't know what we're up against here. Psychic zombies are... well, okay it's nothing I've ever actually dealt with before but it doesn't seem like anything that requires my skills as a Ranger, or as an inheritor to the Builders, whatever that's supposed to mean.”

She spread her arms wide. “So it's time to come to Jesus, George. And to be honest I'd really like it if you'd share with the rest of the class while you're at it. The time for being cryptic and evasive is pretty much over, don't you think?” Jade let her arms drop and waited. The silence stretched on. Finally, she sighed.

“Just so you know,” she said, “I'm really tired of being jerked around like this. Just remember, I offered you the option of doing it my way first.” She closed the last few paces between her and the weirwood, slipping off a glove. In her other hand she produced a small knife, and with nary a wince sliced her exposed palm open.

Little Ygritte started. “Th'fuck do you think you're doing, witch?” she called, “I am getting some fucking answers,” Lady Jade replied, slamming her bloody palm down on the heart tree, right between the weirwood's carved eyes.
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 178

Well, that was a hell of a day.

I've finally encountered what the weirwoods are afraid of, or at least their proxies. They appear to be some sort of zombie creatures, dead lifeforms animated using psionic energy and probably directed by the same method. The level of control seems to be variable; when we first encountered them they acted mostly like undead out of a classic Romero-school film, but when I took one down they immediately changed tactics and moved with a lot more speed and skill. Towards me, I should add. Whatever was commanding the zombies recognized my threat value was higher and acted accordingly. When they thought they had us pinned, the controller even tried to talk. Or gloat. That was a trip.

So, put it together: the free folk break the “Others” into two groups, wights and white walkers. The wights are the psi-zombies, shock troops mostly. They don't seem to use weapons, even the ones created from free folk warriors or Watchmen. That might be a control issue; using tools, even at Og-smash levels, might require too much effort focused on one wight, leaving the others autonomous or even inert. Teeth, fingernails... pre-human fighting instincts, maybe? I wish I had a proper science ship here to check some of these ideas out, dammit.

The white walkers, they're the controllers. Almost certainly the source of the Others legend to begin with. I haven't actually seen one yet, interestingly enough. According to the legendarium we've assembled, the Others don't like the sun, not quite nocturnal but definitely staying out of direct light as much as possible. The whole “Long Night” phenomena might've been some sort of ecoforming technique to cut insolation... but I'm straying off topic. So the Others have communicated but they haven't shown themselves, presumably there was at least one nearby controlling the wight they picked as speaker but how nearby is “nearby” I wonder? The effective range could be meters, or kilometers.

Actually, I take it back: there were at least two Others at today's shindig. One to control the speaker and the other (oh lord that's gonna get confusing quick) to run the rest of the wights. There were at least a dozen of the damned things, and six pulled an ambush on us while the speaker was still controlled. That means coordination and intelligence, human-level minimum. It also means that they've been tracking us on our trip upriver and along the Frostfangs. They struck at the away party with enough force to force our hand... no, to force my hand. They wanted to see what I could throw at them.

And they wanted Victory.

“We will have your ship, we will have freedom.” That's what the speaker said to me. It can't be the ship as a ship; even assuming there's not a lot of Others about, Victory is too small to move more than like a hundred people tops, and that's if you pack them into the hold like trade goods. It could be the technology, maybe? Pull the ship apart, use the reactors and the warp core as templates to build a new one? Or repair one? Are we looking at a downed ship, maybe? Some other race, psionic extremophiles that got caught up in the same bad situation I did?

But if they're that, then why the mad-on for the Builders? The speaker said the Builder's name for themselves the same way I might say Optimal, or the way the Xindi say Paaska. There's some honest, real dislike there. Recent castaways—even 8,000-year-old castaways—shouldn't have that kind of hate for a species that vanished thousands of years before they arrived. So the Others arrived...
on Planetos roughly the same time the Builders did, there was beef and then... what? That's the last piece of the puzzle I don't have, the last big mystery.

I'm pretty well sick and tired of mysteries.

Tonight we're ascending to 6,000 meters for the rest period, well out of the reach of any psi-zombies. Tomorrow, I'm going to find out the truth. One more piece. That's all I need. One piece and I'll know what I'm doing here, and how to do it.

I hope.

SARELLA

Of all the wonders Carefree Victory had to offer, Sarella treasured the rain baths most. Not only did they provide a constant supply of hot water she didn't have to heat herself or trust to servants to heat, the spray felt wonderful at the end of a long, difficult day. And it was so efficient in doing so: strip down, step in and just let the falling water run down, washing away the grime of the world outside.

Though some grime is harder to be rid of than others. Sarella leaned up against the bath’s wall, her head resting lightly against it as the spray flowed over her, as hot as the ship’s spirit would allow. The water’s heat blunted the bony cold of the wight’s hands as they grasped for her neck—

No, enough of that. She shivered under the torrent of hot water. You are a sand snake, the Red Viper’s daughter. Unbent, unbowed, unbroken, those are your words. It was enough, just, to get her to clean away the last of the stains left behind by the day’s fight. Every stroke of the sponge wiped away the sensation of the thing’s fingers trying to tear open her skin, and she scrubbed until her hands ached.

Exiting the rain bath and pointedly ignoring the dull ache in hands and collar, she towelled off and went to find clothing. The ship had taken her soiled garments—no doubt to feed to the magic compost heap called a recycler—and left behind pristine robes and smallclothes. That, too was a relief, not having to launder robes stained with death and sick. Sarella performed normal routine of putting on her robes, taking special care to bind her breasts properly. Traveling with the Lady Jade allowed her to relax the Sphinx’s mask a little, but so long as she remained on this path there were some things that had to be done ere the mask fall away entirely.

Sarella looked at herself in the mirror. The slim boy she pretended to be looked out, but the face was a little different. Instead of the quiet confidence of Alleras, she saw a boy paler and wider-eyed than usual. “I’m sorry, father,” she said softly to the boy in the mirror. “I guess I’m not as much your child as you thought.”

A chime sounded, and Lady Jade’s voice came through the door. “Al? You decent?”

Sarella repressed a laugh. If they knew who and what I truly was, no man or woman in Westeros would call me decent. “Of course, captain. Come in,” she responded. The door opened and the sorceress stood there, awkwardly balancing a kettle and a pair of cups in her hands.

“Just checking in,” she said. “You seemed a little lost when we got back aboard.” She hefted the kettle. “Tea and conversation?” The scene was just absurd enough that Sarella couldn’t help but laugh softly.

“You can’t be much older than I am,” she said shaking her head, “and you are the most mothering person I’ve ever met.”
The sorceress raised an eyebrow. “Assuming facts not in evidence, Initiate Alleras,” she said. “Or does that mean you don’t want tea?”

“Oh no, by all means.” Sarella replied. The sorceress bustled in, a sight that reduced the young maester to quiet giggles, and set the tea down on the cabin’s small writing table. “It just surprises me a little how a woman without children can act like she’s whelped entire broods.”

“Well, I have a habit of picking up strays,” Jade replied airily. “I mean, been here six months and I’ve got a couple lordlings, a matching set of R’hllor worshippers, a maester in drag and at least one northern nomad at this point. Still got a ways to go before I’ve got the whole set, though.” She handed Sarella a cup of tea. “Besides my collecting tendencies, you’re part of the Rangers at this point, or might as well be. Rangers take care of our own.”

Sarella lifted the cup in sardonic salute. “Despite knowing next to nothing about your people or the Rangers, I feel honored.” The tea smelled like the desert, and like the fleeting memories of her mother’s swan ship packed with spices and sandalwood. She took a cautious sip. “What is this?” she asked.

Jade took a less cautious sip of her own cup. “It’s a Vulcan meditation tea,” she said. “It helps calm the mind and the body. I don’t have a lot of it, usually I break it out when something’s tried to kill me and come closer than I’d like.” She took another sip and shivered a bit dramatically. “The last time I brewed a cup would’ve been a day or two after I landed, actually.”

Sarella took another drink. The tea’s warmth spread out from her belly, chasing away the last vestiges of the cold and the dry fetid smell of the wights. “It’s good,” she agreed, savoring the feeling.

“So, are you okay?” Jade said, putting her tea down and looking at her with concerned eyes. “You still look a little… off.”

“I’ve been better,” she admitted. “Though I’ve been worse off, too. I just…” she trailed off, looking at the day’s events through the haze of the tea. “I’ve seen the dead before,” she continued. “Anatomy and medicine classes at the Citadel, where we cut open the dead to find the secrets of life. And I’ve had to defend myself before against cutthroats and bandits. Some of them died, probably, after I was done with them. But I’ve never fought a foe that a few slashes of my knife or a shot from my bow wouldn’t send running, or had to chop off a man’s limbs to make him—it—him stop attacking me.” She gave the sorceress a wan smile. “This is… monsters and magic and nothing I ever trained for. And yet all I can think of is how shocked I was, and then follow it up with and wouldn’t Father be disappointed? Isn’t that odd?”

Jade reached out and embraced Sarella. “I don’t know,” she said. “For dealing with something so out of your element you did pretty good. I remember my first brush with the deeper weirdness, and I was a lot like you: a smart kid who thought she knew how the world worked. And when the world refused to work right, you dealt with it as it came, you didn’t fall apart, you didn’t freak out until afterwards when it was safe. I think your dad’d be pretty proud of that, to be honest. Not to mention, you know, still being alive.”

“I suppose so,” Sarella replied. Jade hugged her again.

“Trust the old lady,” she said with a wink. Sarella blinked, and chuckled. “You’re tougher than you think, maybe not like the rest of your family but still tough. Now finish your tea and get some sleep. Big day tomorrow.”

“Yes mother,” Sarella said. “Of course, mother.” She paused. “Do you really think the northern gods...
will tell you what you want to know?”

Jade smiled. It wasn’t a very pleasant smile. “If they know what’s good for them, they will.”
He hadn’t meant to fall asleep right after breakfast, it just happened. Even after waking that morning he’d felt oddly sleepy and almost like he’d forgotten something, or he needed to be somewhere but didn’t know where. The whole of Winterfell seemed ill at ease that morning, too: Mother, Robb and Arya had funny looks in their eyes like they had forgotten something. That unsettled feeling spread to the rest of the household, and a morning that should’ve been full of pleasant conversation turned to uneasy muttering.

After breakfast he excused himself and hobbled as quickly as he could to a nook near the broken tower. He might not have been able to climb so high as he used to, but the towers were still his friends. Bran knew every quiet place where a boy might squeeze himself and not be disturbed for an hour or so.

He was asleep the moment he was out of sight.

This time the dream took Bran to the woods, far from Winterfell. For a moment he thought this might be a wolf dream, and he’d soon be hunting. But this dream didn’t feel like a wolf dream, and the place was wrong. To the left and right the forest was much the same as any other place in the woods, but in front of him was a great hole in the woods, like the furrow left by a giant’s plough. Trees lay scattered along the edges of the furrow, broken like twigs and cast aside. The whole scene seemed oddly familiar, even though he’d never seen a thing like this before, in life or dreams.

Good morrow, fledgling, came the crow’s voice as it spiraled down through the broken trunks to rest on Bran’s shoulder. Not your dream, I take it?

“I… don’t think so?” Bran ventured. “I shouldn’t even be sleeping. But it felt like I might miss something important if I wasn’t?”

The crow croaked, offering no further opinion, and took off, flying down the furrow into the woods. With no other options, Bran chased after it.

The furrow ended, quite abruptly, at the foot of an old heart tree standing alone in the depths of the forest. “This used to be a godswood?” Bran asked.

Perhaps, replied the crow. The heart trees were worshipped for years before there were godswoods like your family knows them. Bran looked around, fascinated. Could this have been one of the trees the children of the forest carved? Maester Luwin said the children were gone, if they ever existed, but perhaps, just perhaps…

“Somehow, I’m not surprised,” said a voice behind him. Bran turned and saw Lady Jade standing in the furrow, looking around. “It really does figure that you’d drag me all the way back here.”

“Lady Jade?” he said, confused. The sorceress blinked and looked sharply at him.

“Bran?” she said. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be up and doing stuff?”

If I may, the crow cut in. My lady, we seem to have all been drawn here for some purpose. No doubt that involves you. The sorceress shook her head.
“Yeah,” she replied. “Yeah, I’ll bet it does.” She turned to face the heart tree. “For an ancient intelligence that specializes in cryptic statements, you’re about as subtle as a brick to the face,” she said. “But that’s okay, I’m not all that subtle either.”

“What do you mean?” asked Bran.

The sorceress waved a hand at the furrow. “This is where I landed, Bran,” she said. “Not where your father and brothers found me, this is the exact spot where Carefree Victory came to rest. George here has brought me back to the very beginning.”

_I hear that’s a very good place to start_, remarked the crow. Lady Jade goggled a little, then shook her head again.

“It is, it really is,” she agreed. “So, unless George has any objections,” she paused, waiting for the heart tree to say or do something, then plunged on. “Right. Let’s get started, then.” She cracked her knuckles and the world seemed to flex with her hands.

The crow looked nervously at the sorceress. _Pray, do not break the heart trees my lady_, it squawked.

“Oh, don’t worry about the trees,” Lady Jade replied. “They’re a tough lot. Besides, this is all illusion, right? Illusions can be controlled if you have the skill or the strength. And wouldn’t you know it, I think I’ve got just enough to make things happen here.”

The world shifted again, and the furrow vanished, replaced by the trees and greenery that had been there before the sky-ship came crashing down out of the heavens. Lady Jade raised her hands, and the world flowed backwards. “The thought came to me the other day,” she said idly. “Westeros looks static, but it really isn’t. Change happens but it goes oh so slowly. Like a glacier… or a tree.” The woods around them changed, great trees shrinking to saplings and disappearing into the earth. “But you can still see the traces of what went before if you know what to look for. It’s like a castle: first there was a wood-and-earth structure, then that was replaced by brick, and then that was replaced by stone. If you look closely at the castle’s foundations you can see where the foundations of the stone were placed on the older earthen ramparts.” A clearing formed around the heart tree, huts appearing and disappearing like mushrooms popping from the ground. “The outlines of the past define the present.” The forest thinned and turned black, then a great fire swept through leaving greenery in its wake. “Which brings us to the Others. The Long Night was thousands of years ago, but the Others didn’t just appear out of nowhere. They were here, and they knew the name Zhdane. What’s in their past, I wonder, that keeps leaving marks on our present?” The wolfswood waxed and waned around them, and through it all the heart tree stood strong.

The sun vanished behind red clouds, and color drained from the world. Everything was cast in tones of white, black and red. “You’ve seen so much over the years, haven’t you George?” the sorceress said. “Now it’s time to speak about what you’ve seen.”

—ZHDANE—

The word sounded like a bell tolling in Bran’s head. He looked up and the red clouds had taken on the impression of weirwood leaves, huge red hands clasped together in the sky. The crow squawked and flapped on his shoulder. Lady Jade looked up and smiled.

“Took you long enough,” she said. “Also, not a Builder. We’ve been over this, George.”

—YOU HAVE SEEN—

“I have. But I don’t understand why I’m needed. What are these things that have you so damned
scared, and why do you need me? I’ve heard all the stories of the Long Night; these people managed victory without help from the Builders or outsiders. Why force me down, why slot me into Westeros? I’m tired of trying to play this by ear, George; I at least need to know what the notes are.”

The great voice fell silent, and the clouds scattered into a web of red lines filling the sky all around them. The heart tree shifted, the mouth opening wider and wider until it became a door filled with red and white light.

—WE WILL SING YOU OUR SONG. THERE ARE THINGS YOU MUST KNOW, ERE WINTER COMES—

Lady Jade looked curiously at the doorway. “This opening was made for me, eh?” she murmured, turning to Bran. He stared at the light coming from the door. “I think this is where we part ways for the moment kid,” she said. She stepped to the threshold and poked at the light. It flowed like water, curling around her finger. “That’s neat. Okay! Let’s powwow!”

The sorceress stepped into the light and was gone.

THE WEIRWOOD’S TALE

To Jade’s mild disappointment, Narnia was not in fact on the other side of the glowing portal. Instead, there was a heart tree like just about every other carved weirwood she’d seen during her stay in Westeros. This tree sat in a meadow of reddish grass surrounded by a ring of trees with equally red coloration. Jade dropped to one knee and took a closer look at the grass, examining the shape of the leaf.

“Huh,” she said. “That's different.”

“You were not wrong,” a voice said from near the heart tree. “Westeros has changed, if slowly, over the years.” The reluctant sorceress looked up and saw a small creature standing next to the weirwood. It was humanoid, but clearly not human; too large red-gold eyes were framed in a face that was more feline than simian, skin that seemed to be covered in a thin coat of fur not unlike a deer's and large pointed ears that drooped slightly against its neck. “You stand now in our oldest memory, of the world before the Dawn Age thousands of man-years ago.”

Jade stared at the strange creature in front of her. “That's... great,” she said awkwardly. “Who are you? What are you?”

The creature bowed. “I have no name in any tongue you speak,” it said. “You may call me George, however. Well met, Jade Hasegawa. As to what I am, I am a singer, who men call the children of the forest. I am the eldest of our people still within the chorus.”

The ranger's mouth opened and closed silently for a second. “Sonofabitch,” she swore. “I should've seen that coming and I completely missed it. Your people were never human, that's why the First Men were first. Goddamnit I am the biggest idiot in all creation.”

“Do not feel discouraged, Zhdane,” George said. “Even in the lands beyond the Wall, men have forgotten our nature. We have dwindled over the long years since your ancestors first came to Planetos, war and weariness have taken their tolls on our people.”

“I'm not a Builder, George,” Jade said wearily. “I'm pretty sure we've been over this.”

“Are you sure?” replied George. “You may not be Zhdane by blood, this is true. But you are Zhdane in spirit, and in this place spirit is more powerful than blood ever can be. Child of Mars, you are
closer to our motherfathers than any human has come in eight thousand years and so we name you Zhdane, for your spirit is sorely needed.”

Jade wanted to argue it, she wanted to say that the Builders were on the far side of gods as far as her people were concerned, that they did things that nobody thought were possible, much less how to replicate the results. She wanted to say that for all her claiming to be a witch to impress the Westerosi she was still just an ignorant peasant compared to the Builders. But George already knew that, she thought. Probably just by reading my mind while I’m in the psiscpe.

“Only a little,” George said. Jade sighed.

“Okay, let's say that I'm Zhdane, or a cheap bootleg version of one,” she said. “You still haven't explained what the deal is. Why Zhdane?”

George shook its head. “That is not mine to explain,” he said. “Our elders in the chorus will tell you what the Zhdane's role was, and what your role is.”

Jade cocked her head. “Elders?” she asked. “Didn't you say you were the oldest singer?”

The singer smiled wryly. “So I did,” it replied. “But I am of the junior chorus.”

The little creature stepped back, and the weirwood began to hum. The forest around them hummed in return, and in moments Jade was lost in a sea of low, soft music.

*/ “Eternity, Served Cold” Malcolm Brown, Cherubim (2013) /*

Hear now, sister, the forest sang. O starlost and far-wandering child of our departed motherfathers, this the song of our beginnings. Here on this world where the Shroud lies close to the real we first learned to sing. For years we sang alone without thought, until it came to pass that the younger chorus joined us in song. Our songs blended together and we became as one, the songs of the younger ones passing through us into the Shroud as their material forms withered and ended.

Our harmony continued without change until our motherfathers came from the stars beyond. They were Zhdane, composers of light and wonder, who saw the sparks of music within us and so brought us gifts worthy of those sparks. To the younger chorus, the Zhdane brought wisdom. To the elders, they brought awareness. These gifts came at a price, for the Zhdane knew of the Shroud, and knew that it lay closer to the real on this world than on any other in their empire. In exchange for their gifts, the Zhdane bid us watch and remember all things that happened within our sight, and this we have done even though the Zhdane are long-departed.

The song shifted, giving the ranger the impression of gigantic starships descending from orbit and landing in a far off place. With the Zhdane also came men, their children and servants whom they gifted the dawn lands whilst they worked wonders among our kind. The Shroud was always thin in this land, but thinnest in the uttermost north, where the curtain of light plays over the Lands of Always Winter. The impression changed to a citadel of blue and gold metal standing alone on a field of ice. We watched the Zhdane as they worked their magic on the Shroud, poking and prodding it with their instruments. They desired to encircle it in their science, to use it like metal or stone or even flesh to further their goals.

And so it came to pass that the Zhdane in their zeal and greed to pierce the Shroud and learn what secrets they could from beyond that veil discovered that some things cannot be easily dismissed.

The song changed again as the impression became that of a vast chamber where indistinct forms worked on something Jade could barely make out, only for a swirling ball of bluish psionic energy to
erupt. The Shroud is not an empty place, any more than the dark betwixt the stars is truly empty, and the Zhdane attracted something old and terrible from the far side.

The image cleared into a mess of figures. Some were still indistinct, slightly transparent humanoids, though Jade had the feeling that wasn't some sort of oversight on the trees' part. At the center was a more solid humanoid with chalk-white skin, fine features and glowing blue eyes that seemed to regard everything with idle malice. “The Others,” Jade murmured.

What men would call them in years to come, the trees sang. For the Zhdane they came without leave, and so they called it Unbidden. At first they were shapless creatures of fog and ice and shadow, but they quickly learned to mimic the forms of those around them and became pale copies of their foes. They attacked without warning nor reason, attempting to claim the Zhdane's citadel and summon more of their kind. The Zhdane destroyed their ability to reach the Shroud and sealed most of the Unbidden away in the ruin of their stronghold. We were bid to keep watch over the north, to ensure they slept there for all time. For should they be freed all life on this world would be forfeit, and were they to pierce the Shroud again and regain contact with their brethren all worlds would not be safe from their grasp.

For many long years we held our vigil, until men came from the dawn lands. They warred with the younger choir, destroyed many of our roots until the choir and the First Men came to an accord. The younger chorus began to diminish in these days, and those men who had greensight took up their staves and joined our chorus. Those who could not hear our song called us gods and sacrificed to us, adding more men to our choir.

It was not the song we had sung for many years, but a song nonetheless. But then it came to pass that the seals the Zhdane left began to weaken, and the Unbidden escaped their confinement.

The song became considerably more somber, and the light dimmed. “This is what men and singer alike called the Long Night,” George said quietly. “A generation where the sun was only glimpsed dimly, and the Others ran riot across the world.”

Our power had dimmed since the days of the Zhdane, the trees sang mournfully. But we still had enough to counter the Unbidden, with the aid of men and singers. The shadow of a man holding a burning sword flitted across Jade's forebrain for a moment. The Unbidden were sealed away again, save a few who fled into the wastes and would be killed by men or giants over the years.

“And they lived happily ever after,” Jade said. “At least, until recently.”

The seal fails again, Zhdane. When it failed before the night that never ended we were stronger and the younger singers still walked the earth. Now we fear the seal will break and release the Unbidden in their entirety. Only a small number of the van the Zhdane fought have escaped as yet; soon enough they will all be free. We have not the strength to repair the seal nor vanquish the escaped Unbidden. The Zhdane are our only hope.

“Enter yours truly, following hints the Builders left behind,” Jade said.

George nodded. “A spirit so like the Zhdane, appearing in our darkest hour.”

“But I'm just one person,” she argued. “The Builders were here in force, this must've been a major research station if not an actual colony... what the hell can I do against something they barely contained?”

You are Zhdane, sang the trees, this time louder and stronger than anything Jade had ever heard from the weirwoods before. You will find a way.
Like most free folk, Ygritte had grown up with the understanding that magic was a thing to be feared. Her camp never had a witch in it, at least not in living memory, but others did and the tales always managed to come round. And of course there were the stories of the Dawn Age when the children of the forest still walked the earth and there were more than a bare handful of giants left. All of these tales of magic were half terrifying, half exhilarating.

She really wasn't expecting magic to be quite this boring, if she was going to be honest.

The moment the witch slammed her bloody hand down on the heart tree she froze and just... stood there. Almost as if she'd been carved from weirwood herself. Even when Ygritte finally got curious enough to poke the witch's shoulder there was no bolt of lightening nor blast of fire. Not even a twitch.

If it weren't for the metal dragon raining blue fire down on an army of wights, she'd be willing to declare this witch the most disappointing one she'd ever heard of. Just like a kneeler to take all the fun out of life.

She sighed and went back to looking around the grove. The witch's little metal demons patrolled the area around the weirwoods, ducking around the trees and keeping close to their mistress. While the witch stood there communing with the gods or whatever a collection of crows and free folk kept their hands on their weapons and did their best to pretend the other wasn't there. The only one in the collection who seemed halfway friendly was the fire-god's man in his red robes and that big, ugly sword at his hip.

“How much longer, you think?” she asked him. Thoros of Myr shrugged his massive shoulders. Ygritte idly wondered if the man might be up to wrestling the Giantsbane if and when they made it back to Mance's camp. He had the girth to make it interesting.

“I've no idea,” he said honestly. She appreciated that; the crows didn't talk to her and she wouldn't trust a single word from their mouths anyfuckingway, but the witch's men at least spoke plainly. “Could be moments, could be the rest of the day. All we can do right now is wait.”

Ygritte glanced up at the sky. The sun was hard to see through the forest canopy, but she could spy bits of blue and more gray between the leaves. “What happens if we need to leave quickly?” she asked.

Thoros glanced at the immobile witch. “I hope it doesn't come to that. I know not what happens if we break the link from outside, but I daresay it can't be good. The ship's not more than a hundred paces away though, and after last time the Others might be more wary of getting close.”

“There's more danger in these woods than wights,” she warned. The walkers wouldn't come out until nightfall, that much she knew. Wights might be everywhere but Thoros wasn't wrong about the ship. What she was truly more worried about was another group of free folk coming crashing through the trees. If they were Thenn, or the Weeper's band... the witch was as defenseless as she'd ever seen the woman, and that could get ugly in a hurry.

The metal demons all stopped, quivering and chiming in place. Everybody looked up and grabbed their blades. “Shit,” Ygritte growled. The demons swirled out of their patrol and clustered around their mistress, their white eyes all aglow and pointing northeast. The rest of the party drew up into formation, waiting.
A ragged party of free folk came crashing out of the woods. “Parley!” the leader cried, throwing up his hands. He was just a boy, couldn't have been more than three and ten by her reckoning, and he was leading a group of children and elderly through the woods.

Thoros held up a hand. “Weapons down,” he said, and the crows lowered their blades. Darold shot her a look—when did I become the leader here?—and followed suit after she nodded. “I am Thoros, lately of Myr. You are under the Lord of Light's protection here.”

The boy looked confused, and Ygritte couldn't blame him. He'd probably never heard of the fire-god in his life, to say anything about Myr. “I'm Orik,” he said. “There are wights in the forest! They've already killed the Weeper and his men, we need to get out of here!”

Thoros and Ygritte shared a look. “We cannot leave just yet,” Thoros said. “Our leader is communing with the gods of the woods. Until she's done, we cannot leave her side.”


“How far away are they?” Ygritte asked. The boy blinked, then blushed a bit at her gaze.

“I, uh, half a day behind us? Maybe less. We've been running for two days now.”

Ygritte took that information in and made a decision. “Rogdel,” she commanded, “take Orik and his kin to the dragon, see that the chained boy checks them over and gets them something to eat. Darold, Harmund, get a fire going. The rest of ye, watch yer backs and our witch.”

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**BRAN**

He stayed in the red-and-white world of the heart tree, keeping a careful watch on the pool of light. The crow perched on his shoulder, holding vigil with him.

“What do you think the tree is telling her?” he asked.

*Old and terrible secrets,* replied the crow. *Things even I know nothing of, it would seem.*


*Once, mayhaps. I prided myself that I knew all the doings of the realms of men. A thousand eyes and one, they sang, but those times are long past now.* The crow looked around at the strange landscape. *In all my flights, I have never seen a place like this before. It is... humbling to know some things are still beyond my sight.*

The crow didn't sound all that happy about that. “They are gods, though,” Bran offered.

*True, though how I was unaware how godly they were.* The crow ruffled its feathers. *Ah well, no matter. All we may do now is wait.*

“Aye,” Bran said unhappily. He looked again at the portal and wondered what secrets were laying on the other side. Was it the old gods? Or mayhaps the gods who made the gods? *Could* gods make other gods? Bran supposed it was possible—after all, dogs and cats and wolves and horses and people made more of themselves, so why not gods? He resolved to ask Luwin or Father at some point. Not Mother, though; she wouldn't take it well.

His musings were interrupted when the portal opened once more and Lady Jade stepped out. She looked worried, more worried than Bran had ever seen her in dreams or waking life. “What's
“Wrong?” he called.

The sorceress looked over at him. “You're still here,” she said. “Great, that's what I needed right now.”

“Lady Jade?”

She grabbed him by the shoulders—dislodging the crow, who took to the air with an indignant squawk—and looked him dead in the eye. “Bran, you're going to wake up in a moment,” she said, “so I need you to listen and remember this, okay?” He nodded dumbly. “Good. I need you to tell your mother and your brother that the Others are coming, and they need to get ready. Call the armies, stock up food, whatever it takes because the winter is going to be a hard one for all of us. I'll be back to Winterfell with proof as soon as I can, but in the meantime you need to get them moving, savvy?”

Bran's mind whirled. Old Nan's tales were true, Others and wights and ice spiders, and they were coming. He'd seen some of this in his dreams, blue-eyed demons walking through the snow, and the crow had been guiding his lessons towards a particular direction. Towards this moment. He met the sorceress's gaze fearlessly—like a knight would—and said, “I shall, Lady Jade! I'll let them know.”

Lady Jade smiled faintly. “Then we're not licked yet,” she said. She glanced up at the crow hovering above them. “As for you, keep doing what you're doing. I'm sure if George has anything for you they'll be in touch.”

The crow gave her a mocking midair bow. Your confidence in my abilities knows no bounds, my lady.

“Oh, knock it off,” she said absently. Bran could feel himself stirring back to wakefulness. The red-and-white world started to dim. “Looks like time's up,” she said. “Bran, remember what I said. I'll see you in a couple weeks probably. Good luck and clear skies!”

The world inside the tree faded away and Bran found himself back in his sleeping nook. The first thought through his mind was I must find Mother and Robb. He levered himself out of the nook and ran for the Great Keep. His leg and hip screamed at him but he paid no heed to the pain, his only thought being to relay Lady Jade's message.

He found them in Father's solar along with Maester Luwin, who was holding a raven scroll in his hand and looked grimmer than usual. “Mother! Robb!” he cried as he threw open the door.

“Bran?” Mother said, looking at him. “What's wrong? You look as though you've seen a ghost. And your crutch, where did you drop it?” He realized that he'd left his walking stick behind at the nook, so great was his urgency.

“I've,” he panted, “Lady Jade sent me a message.” Robb, Mother and Luwin looked at each other with surprise. “She said to tell you you need to call the banners and prepare because the Others are coming.”

Mother looked uncomfortable at his message, laying a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Bran, darling,” she said soothingly. “You must have had a bad dream,” she said as if trying to explain it to herself. Bran found that a little odd. “The Others are just a legend.”

He shook his head stubbornly. “No they're not!” he insisted. “They're real! Lady Jade is out there fighting them right now, and she told me to tell you to be ready!”

To his surprise Maester Luwin came to his aid. “While under most circumstances I would agree with you, my lady,” he said, “Lady Hasegawa does have a habit of turning our assumptions on our
“Besides,” Robb said quietly, “with this latest news she's not wholly wrong to call the banners.” Mother and Luwin looked uneasy at that, and Bran couldn't figure out why.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“Not now,” Mother said.

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**THE GREEN WITCH**

Coming out of the weirwood trance was like emerging from the worst hangover of all time. Her entire body ached, even places she wasn't sure could ache hurt like twenty bastards. She pulled her hand away from the tree, flexing it experimentally. The cut she'd made to establish the blood connection was gone, and on further reflection there was no blood on the tree either.

Jade looked around. The away party had apparently missed her return to consciousness, as they were all busy rushing around the grove. Two of the free folk were busy building a pretty impressive fire, the Watchmen were all staring nervously into the forest with their hand on their swords, and Thoros, Qhorin and the little redheaded free girl were all huddled together conferring about something.

*Ooookay then...* “So, what'd I miss?” she said. The three generals all jumped a little and turned to face her. The relief in their faces told Jade more than enough about what was going on.

“Welcome back, my lady,” Thoros said with a slight bow. “Did you find the answers you were looking for?”

_Not exactly, but at this point I'm not going to get anything more._ “Close enough,” she said. “I know what we're fighting at least. What's with all the hubbub?”

Qhorin looked grimmer than usual. “Wildling band, mostly babes and old men and women, came through the trees about an hour ago. Said they were being chased by wights. This one,” he nodded towards Ygritte, “sent them to the ship as a safehold. We were setting up a defense.”

“Right, got it, good move,” she said. “Did they say how many wights?”

The free folk girl shook her head. “Could've been five or a dozen, it's not like they had warriors or hunters in the party,” she said.

Jade hummed to herself. If they were pursued by wights, then there was a chance the drones' sensors might be able to pick them out. As dead bodies they'd be buried in organic clutter here in the middle of the forest, but she'd spent a few hours tinkering with a psi sensor pallet the previous night. The trace was weak compared to some things and Planetos had a higher than normal background count anyway—the Shroud, have to remember that—but it wasn't impossible. “Yakko!” she snapped, and the first of her drones broke away from the protective cloud. “Wide area scan, focus on psi traces.”

The drone beeped agreeably and spun around, letting the primary scanner do a full 360-degree look at the area around them. The sensor feed displayed on her spectacles' HUD, showing the almost whiteout psi signature of the weirwood trees, the less strong but active blips of her traveling companions, and the fainter blips that most likely indicated the walking dead.

Considerably more blips that she'd expected, all around the grove and starting to close in at speed. *Oh that's just goddamn rude._ “Yeah, um, right. New plan, everybody!” she yelled at the top of her lungs. *Back to the ship right now! Now now now now motherfuckers!*"
A hundred yards, that was all.

Years before, a much younger and fitter Thoros of Myr had participated in a small war in the disputed lands. It had been over one damned thing or another; Thoros never could remember any of the particular small reasons the Free Cities had for launching sellswords at each other. The company he’d fallen in with had aimed to take a small walled town in the hills of Andalos, and the town had prepared the battleground in advance. When the sellswords arrived, they found a hundred yard stretch of open ground lined with trenches, pits, stakes to deter horses and every man who could fire a bow lined up on the town wall. He remembered the captain, a beardless brat from Pentos convinced of his genius and immortality, ordering a charge, and he remembered watching a third of the company die trying to cross those hundred yards. Men falling into stake-lined pits, or thrown from their horses when they tried to spur their mounts across too wide trenches, or simply riddled with arrows if they survived all of that. They took the town in the end, and Thoros prayed every year for a forgiveness he did not deserve for that.

Now, many years and leagues from Andalos, Thoros of Myr stared at another hundred yard stretch of land and wondered what was between him and his goal. And how many of the people near him would survive the next few moments.

The woods were unnaturally silent; nary a sound could be heard coming from the dark spaces between the trees. All was in shadow. The party moved into the trees back towards Carefree Victory, weapons drawn and keeping all eyes directed outward. The sorceress's familiars buzzed overhead, throwing rays of white light into the forest to illuminate their path.

The wights were upon them halfway back to the ship. Almost a score of the creatures crashed out of the woods without warning, falling upon the party with tooth and claw. Thoros found himself beset by one of the fresher wights, a blond man with big, watery eyes now crusted over with ice. The man had put up a fight before he'd turned; he could see evidence of claw marks and blade wounds in what was left of the wight's tunic. Thoros blocked the wight's strike with one meaty arm and threw the creature to the ground with the followthrough. His unlit sword flashed and the blond wight's head bounced away into the woods. The body wobbled, then fell over, crawling off in the direction of its head.

Someone screamed. Thoros whipped around to see one of the Halfhand's men—one of the younger rangers, Walder—in close combat with a wight. The young fool had stabbed the thing with his sword, burying it halfway in the dead man's chest only for the blade to catch on the wight's ribs. Walder struggled to pull the sword out, a moment's distraction that let the thing grab him with clawed hands and start pulling on its own. Another wight joined in the fray and dragged Walder to the ground. The man's screams cut off with a sickening crack.

A sound of sorcerous thunder drew his attention, as Lady Jade felled a wight with another shot from her thunder weapon. Her familiars buzzed above them, striking at the creatures with their own magic, to little gain. One familiar managed to light one's clothing afire; the wight shrieked and went up like a newly-tarred torch.

"Fire!" Thoros called. "Use fire if you can!" The ship wasn't far now, only a dozen yards or more.
He could see the lanterns hung on the hull, and the light coming from the ramp. The wights hadn't
gotten that far yet. They crossed the edge of the clearing the ship's bulk filled, battering away wights
that seemed to just keep coming.

"SHIELDS UP!" Lady Jade roared. Instantly the horde of wights stopped at the clearing's edge,
flashes of blue-gold light blocking their path. The handful of wights still mixed in the company went
down quickly to blade and sorcery. Lady Jade leaned panting against one of the ramp's support
beams. "Well fuck a duck," she said. "Casualties?"

"We lost Darold," Ygritte said heavily. "The wights caught him on the first charge, never had a
chance."

"Aye, and Walder too, the poor sod," Thoros noted.

"What th'fuck was that?" the wildling woman demanded. "We've seen wights before, and we've
heard stories from others of wight attacks and they never move like that. Why were they moving so
fucking fast?"

The sorceress sighed. "I'm not sure," she said in a tone Thoros recognized as meaning I have more
than a good notion as to why, but don't want to talk about it just yet. "Let's get inside, get patched up
and then discuss options."

A little later, the party reconvened on the bridge. After all that nobody seemed particularly chatty.
Lady Jade stared out the window, watching as the walking dead continued to mass around the ship.
Unable to pass the magic curtain wall, the wights would stumble up to it, bounce off in a shower of
sparks and then vanish back into the crowd.

"I should go and find out what they want," she said.

All heads turned to look at the sorceress. "You what?" the wildling boy—Orik, that was his name—
squeaked.

"To be fair, my lady," Thoros said mildly, "there wouldn't seem to be much use in trying to parley
with mindless things like these."

"That's just it though," Jade argued. "The wights might be mindless, or might as well be mindless but
the Others themselves aren't. They're capable of reason, emotion, self-awareness just like you or me. We
can talk to them." She looked back out the window, troubled. "The one that spoke to me at the
cave said they wanted freedom. What if they just want to go home? Planetos is so inimical to their
existence that it's hard to believe they want to stay here any longer than they have to. What if this, all
of this from the Builders on down, is just some kind of tragic mistake? Maybe there's a compromise
here, a way to end this before more people die."

The people of the North, wildling and Watch alike, all stared at the woman like she'd lost her mind.
Thoros wasn't all that sure they were wrong, either. "Are ye mad, witch?" Ygritte blurted, giving
voice to their collective thoughts.

"I'm Starfleet," replied Jade with a wry shake of her head. "Which is close, but not quite the same.
There's a risk here, but it's one I'm obligated to take." A quick snap of her fingers and four of her
familiars fell into formation around her.

Qhorin Halfhand raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Obligated," he half-asked. The sorceress simply
shrugged.

"You swore the oath, didn't you?" she responded. The Halfhand stiffened. "I didn't take your oath,
Qhorin, but I took one all the same. If there's a chance for a peaceful resolution then I have to explore the possibility before resorting to open war. That's... fundamental. To betray that is to betray everything that makes me who I am."

Ygritte snorted. "Oh aye, you'll make the white walkers go back to whatever frozen hell spawned 'em, and then you'll bring down the Wall and the kneelers and the free folk will swear friendship and the world will be forever summer, is that what you're thinking?"

"I didn't say it was going to be likely," Jade replied, picking up her thunder weapon and one of the small green balls they'd made together in King's Landing so many days ago. "But if there's a way out of this that doesn't involve us killing each other until only one side's left, then I've got to try to make that work out, even if it's riskier than simply shooting everybody."

"And if something happens to you, my lady?" Alleras said quietly. "What becomes of us?"

Jade looked at her and tilted her head to the ceiling. "Ship, executive command alpha-sierra-victor-nine-six-nine-eight," she said. "Maintain biomonitor on me. On signal loss return to waypoint 'King's Landing' at best possible speed and unlock level three controls for user Alleras." The ship chimed and she gave the young maester a reassuring smile. "What we've got in the hold should be enough to convince Robert," she said. "Level three control will let you keep the ship flying without serious issue. If things go too badly, tell the king, tell the other lords, get everybody ready to make a stand. And... make sure Starfleet knows what happened when they get here."

The sorceress shrugged on her heavy green coat. "Whatever happens next, it probably won't take very long. See you guys in a couple minutes." And like smoke, she was gone.

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**PARLEY**

The moment she stepped off the ramp, all the wights surrounding the ship just stopped. They all stood completely motionless just beyond the shield bubble, all staring in her direction. The effect was, to be honest, a hell of a lot creepier than if they'd simply kept trying to walk into the forcefield.

The wights kept up the stare all the way from the ramp to the shield's edge, hundreds of blue eyes staring balefully. Jade stopped five paces from where the shield met the ground and the wights all stirred at once.

"Zhdane," the entire horde rumbled as one.

Jade rolled her eyes. "Yes yes, Zhdane," she said. "Excellent pattern recognition, gold stars for everybody. Now if we're done stating the obvious I'd like to speak to the manager, please." The wights just stared. "Oh come on, it's not like you're fooling anybody at this point. I'm right here. I know you're out there. Let's have a nice chat and see if we can't come to some sort of accommodation. We can stop this, all we need to do is talk."


The horde stilled again, and the wights in front of her stepped backwards and to the side, like a stage curtain opening. Into the hole slid a gaunt, bone-white figure clad in armor the color of old ice. Behind it were two more figures, these cloaked in white vapor and more indistinct than the leader. The Other stopped just before hitting the shield barrier and looked at Jade.

The temperature dropped another two degrees.

"A pleasure to finally meet you," Jade said, sketching a quick bow. "I've heard so much about your
people… maybe you'd be interested in telling your side of the story?" The Other's head tilted a little, and a wight detached from the horde and shambled right up to the barrier. "Is that a yes or no? Mime was never my strong suit."

"Zhdane," the wight croaked. "We will have your ship… we will have our freedom."

"Right, I got that part," Jade replied. "But why? Why do you need my ship? To repair the portal?"

The Other looked up sharply at that, and it's companions seemed to quiver in… anticipation? Surprise? She wasn't sure. "Didn't think I knew that part yet, did you? That's interesting. Yes, I know about what the Builders were doing up there."

"We will have our freedom," the wight repeated.

"Will you? Let's say, for the sake of argument, I agree to repair the portal. I'll reopen the path to the Shroud. What do you do then, hm?"

The Other glided even closer to the shield's edge. "You can do this?" the wight whispered harshly.

Jade waggled her free hand. "Maybe," she said idly. "I'm a pretty dab hand at fixing things up. But whether or not I can do this isn't the question. The question is what will you do if I can?"

The wight trembled. "We will…" it halted, made as if to speak again, then halted again. "We will…"

Jade leaned in. "You will?"

"We… will feast!" The wight shot forward with a burst of violent motion, only to bounce hard off the shield in a fountain of sparks. Jade jumped back a step as the wights all started to press insistently against the shield, causing it to light up in a hundred different places with their weight.

The Other watched this display with a mocking smile, then drew a sword made of fine, thin crystal. Not metal, some kind of diamond composite possibly. Or psi-reinforced ice maybe, these guys do love their theme, Jade thought. The sword seemed to shimmer with blue light as the Other swept it around in a broad arc, then plunged it right into the shield.

The air flared with light as sword met shield, and the light died as the sword started to pass through. The Other brought the sword down with a vicious downstroke, and a tear opened just wide enough for the Other to enter.

Jade's hand went to her blaster, and she snapped it up just before the Other could step through. The pale creature stopped, eyeing the weapon warily. "We don't have to do this," she warned. "We can end this without any more bloodshed. I can fix this."

For the first time in the entire encounter, the Other made a sound. It laughed, a terrible sound like glaciers collapsing. Then, it spoke: "What would be the point of that? You are, all of you, prey. We will have this world and then…" it bared teeth the same color as its skin. "There are other worlds than this, are there not?"

Any hope Jade had of resolving the conflict peacefully died in that moment. She drew aim and fired on the Other, only for the creature to block the shot with it's sword. The crystal sang and shattered with the force of the bolt, sending shards of whatever the hell it was made of flying everywhere. One fragment cut into Jade's cheek. Whatever it was made of, it was as cold as liquid helium and the freezing sensation hurt more than the cut itself. The Other snarled in a language she couldn't pick out and dropped the broken sword. It drew a dagger made of the same stuff from its belt and moved to advance on the Ranger.
And then the Other's hair burst into flame. The Other roared in pain and fury. Jade yelped in surprise as the creature frantically tried to put out the fire. Its companions rushed to its side, blades drawn and trying to simultaneously deal with their injured comrade and resume the assault on the Carefree Victory.

It was, all things being equal, the best shot Jade was going to get today. She pulled the wildfire grenade off her belt, armed it and assumed her best pitching stance. "Present for you!" she yelled, letting the grenade fly through the shield to land at the Others' feet. Having delivered the last word, Jade Hasegawa turned and ran as fast she could. The world behind her flashed green and hot, the eerie light of wildfire reflecting off the shield and the ship's hull. She could hear the Others' outraged screams as the psi-reinforced chemical fire started burning everything it came into contact with.

"Raise ramp!" She called as her feet touched the metal. The ramp obediently started lifting as she ran up it. "Up ship, altitude 1500 meters, fire disruptors at surface targets!" Carefree Victory's VI chimed once, and she could feel the engines winding up through the deckplates. Jade stumbled over to the nearest wall and slumped down onto the deck, face buried in her hands.

Through the deck she could feel the hum of the belly disruptors as they let loose a volley into the mass of wights below. Jade wondered for a moment if the wildfire had killed the Others before the disruptors hit them or not, then decided she was better off not knowing one way or the other.

"That could've gone so much better," she moaned.

"Aye," a very familiar contralto said in front of her. "But it could've gone so much worse, too." Jade looked up and saw Sarella standing there looking at her with concern. "You're wounded," she said.

Jade reached up and touched her cheek. Her fingers came away bloody, though it didn't hurt much. Adrenaline response, she thought, give it a minute. "That'll leave a mark," she said, rubbing her bloody fingers together. "Have to break out the autodoc."

"You've made a frightful mess of the forest," Al noted. Jade looked at her funny, then tapped her glasses. The ship immediately brought up an exterior visual on her HUD. The clearing was awash in yellow flame, save for one spot that was a bright unnatural green. "Still, I'd wager this means we won't be pursued." Al continued. "Have we completed our task, my lady?" Can we get out of this frozen, zombie-infested hellhole was the question she clearly wanted to ask, but some sliver of politeness kept the trainee maester from spelling it out.

Jade sighed. As much as she wanted to be done with this, as much as they had enough to technically fulfill the requirements, there were still things that needed done. "Not just yet, Al," she said grimly. "Two more things we need to do. First, we need to expand our collection. I want a head for every high lord of Westeros, just to make sure nobody tries to pretend I tricked Robert."

"And the other thing?"

"When we go head collecting, we're going to thin the herd a little."

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**SHIREEN**

Shireen felt the scream more than heard it. The terrible shriek bounced off the inside of her skull like a ringing bell and almost caused her to fall flat on her rump. Instead she bounced off poor, sweet Patches and ended up leaning against the wall, head in hands waiting for the terrible noise to stop. Only when the noise trailed off did she realize what it was.
Something's happened to Lady Melisandre.

The strange woman from Asshai had an… unusual position in her life, these days. Most of the time the sorceress spent staring into flames, trying to glean visions of the present or the future. These visions she'd then report to her father, who would do something with it. What, exactly, Shireen didn't know. Maester Cressen and Ser Davos would grumble and look concerned whenever these things would come up, but they'd decided to never speak of it in front of her, to her great annoyance. Sometimes she would teach Mother and her ladies-in-waiting about the Lord of Light. Mother found it endlessly fascinating, but Shireen wasn't quite so enchanted by the strange god from Essos. "Your father's child," Mother would sigh when she confessed these things, which made her feel proud but also a little sad.

The best times were when Lady Melisandre would take her aside and teach her about magic. In the time since the sorceress had arrived on Dragonstone she had taught all sorts of small tricks to be done with fire and powders, as well as some of the truer magics. Not all of them, nor even any of the stronger ones. Lady Melisandre was quite insistent on that. "Many works are not fit for a girl not yet flowered," she'd said firmly when Shireen had inquired.

"Well then I'll just wait!" Shireen had blurted. The sorceress laughed and patted her head.

"No doubt you will," she'd said.

Now, the youngest of the Baratheons raced across the whole of Dragonstone to the sorceress's quarters, hoping that the terrible feeling in her belly was wrong. Shireen threw open Lady Melisandre's door and found her crumpled in front of the great fire she kept burning night and day. The girl immediately rushed to her teacher's side, seeking signs of life like Maester Cressen would. The woman moaned softly as her hand touched her neck, and Shireen could feel the sorceress's pulse beat a rapid dance under her fingertips. She rolled Melisandre onto her back and gasped. Her face was covered in blood that had poured out from nose and even her eyes.

"Lady Shireen? Is something wrong—gods!" One of her father's guardsmen stood in the doorway, face blank with shock at the sight of Lord Stannis' daughter and his apparently wounded soothsayer on the floor.

"Fetch Maester Cressen," she ordered, trying to wipe some of the blood off Melisandre's face. The guard stood there, as if he didn't know what to do. Shireen scowled and summoned up everything she'd seen her father do when he needed something done right now. "What are you waiting for, you fool?" she snapped in a hard voice. "Get the maester!"

"A-aye, milady!" The guard snapped to and bolted. Hopefully he'd find Cressen and bring him before he snapped out of it. That much accomplished, Shireen went back to trying to remove some of the blood from her teacher.

Lady Melisandre's eyes fluttered open, and she stared blankly at the wall for a long moment before focusing on her face. "Shireen?" she mumbled.

She smiled as best as she could. "Thank the gods, teacher, I'd thought you'd died for a moment there," she said. "What happened?"

The sorceress's eyes darted to and fro. "I saw it," she muttered. "She wouldn't have listened, couldn't have made them talk, needed a moment's space. Had to open up a moment for her." Shireen couldn't make sense of it. Her words sounded almost like Patches on his poorer days.

"You saw it?" she prompted. Melisandre's eyes snapped back to her, then went wide and wild.
Shireen could see all the red where the blood had come from.

"Saw, yes! She went to beard the lion in its den. Foolish, mad, Starfleet… is there a difference I wonder?" Melisandre chuckled to herself. "I saw her, couldn't act. I needed to act ere all was lost. Had to pay the price but it was worth it, the green sun still rises." She blinked and looked around. "Am I on the floor?"

"You cried out and I found you here," Shireen replied gently. "Maester Cressen is on his way, he'll tend your injuries."

"Cressen, yes. Of course," the sorceress said softly, then reached out to touch Shireen on her scars. "I'm sorry if I caused undue distress, my lady."

Shireen blushed. "Stop that," she scolded. "You're not allowed to die just yet, teacher. Father needs your counsel, and you've yet to teach me to summon the moon and the sun and all the stars in the sky." The sorceress struggled up to a kneeling position, and Shireen helped her up, brushing her red and gray hair out of her face so the blood wouldn't get everywhere.

She blinked. Gray? When did that happen? "Lady Melisandre," she said, "your hair's changed!"

"Eh?" Melisandre said, looking around, then she spotted the heavy lock of greyish-white hair falling from her forehead. Her eyes widened a fraction, then she relaxed. "Ah," she said finally, still toying with her hair. "Ash. I had wondered what would happen."

"I don't understand," Shireen said.

The sorceress patted her hand. "All things in magic have a price, my lady," she said. "This… is part of that. Do not concern yourself too much on my account. All will happen as R'hllor wills it."

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**THE KING-BEYOND-THE-WALL**

Mance Rayder observed the bedraggled party as they emerged from the metal dragon. The witch and her companions all looked worn and tired, and the small cluster of people and crows with them looked not much better. A handful of those who'd set out from the camp aboard the dragon hadn't returned, and Mance made a note to say something nice to the gods about them later. Even the crows. Despite the losses, the witch's party had actually grown some: following the crows off the dragon were a score or more of free folk, all looking around in mild wonder at having come so far so swiftly.

"You've been busy," he noted. The witch laughed, but there was no humor in her voice.

"There's an understatement," she said. "We need to talk."

Mance nodded and turned to the new arrivals. "You're more than welcome here," he said to them. "We've meat and mead, and we'll not turn away any of you in need."

One of the newcomers, a boy barely four and ten by Mance's eye, detached from the group and came to him. "You're Mance Rayder," he half-asked.

Mance nodded. "I am."

"I am Orik," the boy said with as much seriousness as he could. "My people were on our way to you with the Weeping Man when we were attacked by wights. The Weeper died defending us long enough to find the green witch communing with the gods."
Mance sighed. "So the Weeper's dead, eh?" he mused. "He was a mighty fighter, and we'll need plenty of those soon enough. On the other hand, the man was a right cunt most of the time. We're probably better off without him." Orrik looked like he almost wanted to object, but either didn't want to speak against the King-Beyond-The-Wall or wasn't disagreeing with Mance's estimation. He waved the boy and his tribe into the encampment. "Go, lad. It's probably not as fine as living on the dragon, but there's cheer enough for now."

Orik's people left to find food, drink and whatever companionship they could, and Mance returned his attention to the witch. Most of her companions had disappeared on errands of their own, but she and old Halfhand were still there. Qhorin looked at him with obvious distaste, but the raw hatred he'd had for Mance seemed blunted, just a little. "Rumors have been flying like ravens these last few days," he said. "We've heard tales of a metal dragon burning out wights and walkers wherever it could find them." He paused. "We can even smell the smoke sometimes, when the wind shifts right."

The witch looked a little pained. "Wights, yeah," she said. "Others… not so sure about that. We've taken out a couple big clusters of wights so far, but I'm not betting on having gotten more than a handful of the actual Others. With a little luck that'll give us some breathing room, but right now we need to get your people south as quickly as possible."

"The thought had crossed my mind," Mance said dryly. "Of course, there's this one thing in the way…"

"Let's not mince words," the Halfhand growled. "I don't like you, Rayder. You're a traitor to the Watch, a killer and a robber. But the Lady Jade's convinced me that having you and your people on the south side of the Wall's a better thing than leaving you for the Others. Even if that weren't the case I don't like leaving any man, no matter how savage, to be prey for those fucking things."

Hope swelled in Mance's breast. "You'll take my case to the Lord Commander?"

"We both will," Jade replied. "We're probably going to have to convince more people before we can start letting you through, and there'll be conditions, I'm sure."

Of course. "Conditions?"

"If the wildlings are going to take refuge in the Gift, you're going to have to keep them in line," Qhorin said sternly. "No thieving, no stealing women, no killing. The Northern lords are going to go spare with thousands of wildlings in the Gift; if you give them an excuse they will kill you all, and we'll be too busy with the Others—" Or don't care to, Mance added in his head "—to protect you."

Mance sighed. Naturally, the lords were going to be a problem. "I can try," he said in bare honesty. "Most will follow me if I can get them to safety. The rest, well… we'll deal with that as it comes."

"All we can ask for," the witch said quickly. "For now though, you need to pack up your people and start moving south as fast as you can. The closer you get to the Wall, the easier it'll be to make this work. As for us," Jade said grimly, "Qhorin and his people need to get back to Castle Black post-haste, and we need to get away from you as quick as possible. The Others know I'm here and I suspect they're gonna be gunning for me in particular at this point. The more distance I keep from innocent civilians this side of the Wall, the better."

Mance thought about that. "Then don't let us keep you, my lady," he said. "Go, as quickly as you can. We'll see you again when we reach the Wall, if not before."

SARELLA
The old bear looked a good twenty years older than he had a turn and a half ago. "Lady Jade, welcome back," he said. "Things have been rather hectic these last few nights."

"So I heard," Lady Jade replied. "The gossip outside was something about a dead man attacking you?"

Mormont shook his head wearily. "One of the men Benjen took with him on his ranging. We found his body not far from the Wall and brought it across for burial. Two nights ago it rose and tried to get into my quarters. Young Snow and his wolf caught it before it could hurt me… I never thought I'd live to see anything like it." he gave the sorceress a shrewd look. "But then you've seen something like it, haven't you?"

Lady Jade sighed. "I've got chunks of a half-dozen of the things under glass in the hold," she said, then hesitated. "And I've met the puppeteers to boot."

"You've seen the Others?" Mormont said, eyes going wide. "Truly?"

"Seen them, talked to them, fought them." Lady Jade replied.

"Gods protect us," the old bear whispered. "Rayder and his wildlings were bad enough, now the Others have come back too. The Watch is at its lowest ebb in eight thousand years."

Lady Jade gave Sarella a sidelong glance. "Yeah, well, about that," she said, then proceeded to tell Mormont about her encounters with the King-Beyond-The-Wall, and what she'd agreed to try and make happen. Mormont looked shocked at first, as the tale unfolded, then angry in a way she hadn't seen the old man get before, then oddly contemplative.

"I don't like it," he said as Jade finished her report. "There is little love lost between the wildlings and the North, especially in the holdings near the Wall. The Umbers and Karstarks especially have grudges old and recent against the people beyond the Wall. Even if I give blessing, such a thing will be… difficult."

"Oh yeah, I knew it'd be a hard sell," Jade replied. "But consider this, every human being south of the Wall is one safe from the Others' clutches, at least for now. Every woman, man and child in the far north is a potential foot soldier for their army. The more we deny them the resource, the harder we make their inevitable march south."

"Mm," Mormont grunted. "I can let them through, but without the agreement of the lords… I might be able to convince my lady sister easily enough, but Bear Island is isolated. You'll need Bolton, Umber and Karstark to agree at the least, and to get them you'll need Stark."

Lady Jade nodded. "My next stop is Winterfell, brief Robb and Catelyn before heading on to King's Landing and get the king and the Hand both up to date on what's going on. If I have to I'll bring Ned back with me to corral the lords into shape."

"As you say, my lady. I shall hope that your efforts are successful." Mormont ushered them from his solar and they went to have a meal of salt fish and herbs. The brothers who had gone with them were surrounded by their fellows, all curious about their adventures beyond the Wall. Sarella and the sorceress quietly found unobtrusive spots in the hall and ate their fish stew quickly and efficiently.

Later, sorceress, priest and maester convened upon Carefree Victory's bridge to determine the next course of action. "Winterfell, then King's Landing?" Sarella asked.

Jade nodded. "Seems like the best course of action. We need to get the ball rolling on evacuating the free folk first, then down to the capitol to convince the king. From there, I suppose it depends on
"Tyrell, Lannister and Greyjoy will be the hardest to persuade," Thoros noted. "Tywin Lannister's a hard-headed man from what I know of him, and Tyrell and Greyjoy have an amazing ability to ignore things they think shouldn't concern them. They're both ambitious, too, that could be a problem."

"I suppose we'll burn that bridge once we're over it," Jade said dryly. "In any event, once we've got the king onboard—"

The ship chimed, and all their plans collapsed when they heard Sansa Stark, sounding small and terribly afraid, whispering in the air: "Lady Jade? Are you there? Everything's gone wrong and I don't know what to do."
On the ninth morning after they came for her father, Sansa finally mustered up the courage to use the device Lady Jade had entrusted her with. She pulled the magic box from where she'd hidden it all those turns ago, opened the gold filigree lid and pressed the blue button, just like the sorceress had said. The box chirped like a little bird, then fell silent. Holding the box close for fear of the guards hearing, she whispered, "Lady Jade? Are you there? Everything's gone wrong and I don't know what to do."

The box remained silent, and for a long moment Sansa despaired, afraid the magic had worn off or that Lady Jade had betrayed her too, just like her prince, before the blue button flashed with light and the sorceress's voice came back, strong and full of concern. "Sansa? What's wrong, sweetie?"

Sansa almost sobbed with relief. "Oh, my lady," she said frantically. "King Robert went out hunting and then he came back hurt and now he's dead and Joffrey's been crowned and the Queen said Father was a traitor and there was so much fighting and now Father's in the black cells and I don't know what's going on and Joffrey refuses to speak to me and I need your help!"

The little box exploded with noise, then a sharp whistle came and the noise vanished. "Not now, dammit," Lady Jade ordered whoever else was listening. "Sansa, what happened to King Robert?"

"I don't know!" she wailed. "He went hunting for a white stag not long after you left, and he came back hurt not a fortnight ago. The castle maids said the stag turned on him and gored him, but one of Father's men said that it was an accident with a spear. Father never told me what truly happened before—" she choked off. "He died two days after coming back to the keep," she finished.

The box was silent. "Well, hell," Lady Jade said. "What happened next?"

"Father went to the Queen about something, it was about Joffrey I think. I... I don't know what happened there, but all of a sudden the Queen's guards and the city watch were at our doors declaring Father was a traitor and we were all under arrest." Sansa shivered. There were so many of them, all in red and gold, surrounding the manse. Father's men tried to fend them off long enough for Sansa and the others to escape. It hadn't worked. She saw brave, brave and poor Jory Cassel fall to Sandor Clegane's monstrous figure. The Lannister men poured into the manse, dragging her away from Septa Mordane. She heard the screams every night since. "They... they locked me away in Maegor's Holdfast. The Queen came to me, she said Father had committed treason against the Iron Throne, that she wanted to know if I truly loved Joffrey, if I'd testify against him. She said if I told her what I knew she'd release Father from the black cells. But I don't know anything!" She was crying now, the tears rolling hot down her cheeks. "I begged Joffrey to release him, that Father couldn't be a traitor. He loved King Robert like a brother! But he doesn't say anything, he just smiles at me when I beg. What kind of man smiles like that at a crying maiden?"

"I'm sorry, Sansa," Lady Jade said through the magic box. "I'm so, so sorry you're going through this. Now, I need you to do three things. First, I need you to push the little green button on the box, okay?" Sansa sniffled and did so. The button glowed a bright, cheery green. "Okay, next you need to keep the box on you at all times. Stick it in a pocket where it won't be seen, just keep it in your hand or as close to your hand, even if they take you out of your room. As long as it's on you I'll be able to hear what happens, even if I'm not talking to you."

"I will," Sansa vowed. Her gown had plenty of concealed pockets, it wouldn't be difficult to stick the
box in one. She stroked the enamel box carefully.

"Third, I need you to keep your back straight and your hopes up, just for a little while longer. I'm coming to get you, kid."

Sansa blinked. "Truly?"

"That's a promise, Sansa. And people from Ulthos always keep their word." There was something sharp and bright in the sorceress's voice, like a knife being drawn or fangs being bared. "It won't be very long now, just keep an eye out."

SARELLA

"So, what now?" Sarella voiced the unspoken question as the Stark girl's voice faded from the main speaker.

"Now we go rescue the princess," Lady Jade replied. "I suppose we can pick up her dad while we're at it. It's the neighborly thing to do."

"Just like that," Sarella replied flatly. The sorceress shrugged.

"Well no, not 'just like that.' But! We do have some time to get into position and draw up a plan first." She turned to the ship's controls and tapped out a command. Horns sounded and the ship rose from its berth outside Castle Black and turned southwards. "Victory: access mapping array, get me a weather report for King's Landing." An image of the crownlands beset by clouds appeared in a window in front of her. "Oh, nice and cloudy. Excellent."

Thoros eyed the picture. "Use the clouds to obscure our approach," he mused. "That would work. Have to silence the engines to get in closer, though. Every man, woman and child in the crownlands knows what this ship sounds like when it gets close."

"We'll be at altitude when we get close," Jade replied. "I don't want anybody to glance up and see Victory before we're ready."

"That still leaves us outside the castle, on the edge of the city unless we want to land on any number of these buildings," Thoros said. "Getting into the Red Keep... even if we can make a stealthy approach, it's likely that the goldcloaks would be at our usual berth and the city gates waiting to stop us or seize us. We'd have to fight all the way across the city to the keep."

Jade smiled faintly. "Getting in will be the easy part," she said. "Getting out might be a bit trickier, but if we do this right it's just a matter of timing." She tapped the controls, and in the space between them and the outside window a perfect image of the Red Keep sprang into being.

*/ "Briefing 1" Keiki Kobayashi Ace Combat 6 OST (2007) /*

"This castle is pretty amazing," she noted. "Especially the number of secret passages in between all of the buildings. Somebody could pretty much walk from the throne room to the king's chambers and back again without ever being seen if they knew where they were going. And thanks to the couple months we spent cooling our heels, we've got a map."

"Gods be damned," Sarella muttered. All the secrets of Maegor's castle were laid out before them, an intelligence windfall unlike anything she'd ever seen. Immediately she set to committing as much of the map to memory as possible.
"Victory: lock onto signal Tracker-1 and display on map," Jade commanded. Instantly a small green light bloomed in the upper reaches of Maegor's Holdfast. "That's where Sansa is right now," she said. "I'll keep an eye on that, it's likely she's moved before we start moving. She said that Stark's being held in the black cells," she tapped a spot down beneath the castle. "So that would be here, I think. Pretty sure they're not going to move him any time soon."

"We'll have to split up," Thoros said. "One group rescues Lord Stark, the other group rescues the girl."

"One other thing we need to do, though," Jade said. "We—or at least I—still need to report to the king about what we found."

Sarella and Thoros both stared at the sorceress. "You what?" Sarella said.

"First of all, whatever bullshit's going on between Stark and Cersei the Others take priority," replied Jade. "Just because Cersei's apparently lost her shit doesn't mean that we can just forget to warn the king. Second, it'll give me a good chance to gauge how the new administration is going to react to events." She paused. "Joffrey... I've got some bad vibes about that kid, and his mother definitely isn't one of my biggest fans. I need to meet with them, see which direction they jump so I can plan accordingly. Third, meeting with the king will keep everybody's eyes on me while the two of you go get Stark."

Thoros nodded. "And since the girl is Joffrey's betrothed she'll be close at hand when the meeting's over. Clever."

"That's the idea, anyway. Might not work out that cleanly, but that's life."

"So how do we get in?" asked Sarella. "Wait until nightfall, then fly into the courtyard?"

Jade smiled again, this time a little sharper. "Come with me," she said.

They climbed from the main deck up to the smaller deck where the ship's engines lay. To one side was a door that had been closed ever since they'd first seen it. Jade touched the door control, and it slid open to reveal a small niches, like open closets or cubbyholes big enough for a man to stand in.

"This, my friends," the sorceress said, gesturing to the niche, "is the transporter. It is probably the single biggest miracle my people ever devised. Using the transporter we can leave the ship for any point within a thousand kilometers instantly and quietly."

Sarella stared. The niche didn't look like much, but that was the way of Lady Jade's science, when one got to studying it. All the clever magic was too squeezed into a space too small to see with the naked eye and covered in lacquer to boot. "I'm sensing a 'however' in that statement," she said dryly.

"You sense correctly," Jade replied with a wry and somewhat sheepish smile. "The transporter only really works in one direction, otherwise I'd just use this to find and pluck Sansa and Stark out of the castle from a distance. Once we leave, we have to make it back to the ship the harder way." She called up the image of the Red Keep again, a little smaller to accommodate the slightly more cramped conditions of the transporter.

"So once we've got what we came for, we meet up somewhere we can barricade long enough for the ship to come get us," Sarella said. Thoros nodded approvingly at her logic.

"Aye, that'd be the smart move," he said. "Maegor's Holdfast would be my choice, it's the strongest part of the castle, easiest to defend against anybody who wants in."
"True, but there aren't any passages leading from the cells to the keep," Sarella argued. "We'd have to move in the open with Lord Stark. Any fool could raise the alarm."

"Tower of the Hand," Jade said, tapping the image of the tower. "There's a straight path from the dungeon all the way to the top of the tower, and there's plenty of routes that converge on the tower. If Sansa's still in the main keep, that might make things a little more difficult but if we need to go loud..." she shrugged. "We'll burn that bridge when we get there."

"Cross that bridge," Sarella corrected absently. "It's 'cross that bridge when we get there."

"Yeah, that too."

"So, Alleras and I take this magic transport to the black cells, then to the Hand's quarters," Thoros said. "From there the ship retrieves us."

Jade nodded, then whistled. "You'll take about a third of the drones with you for backup," she said. "The rest of the boys go with me when I see the king."

"Sounds fair."

"Well!" Lady Jade clapped her hands. "We've got a couple hours to get ready, let's not waste them!"

Sarella went back to her quarters and collected a few things of minor import, knives of various shapes and sizes that might be useful should things get bloody. On impulse she stopped at the ship's apothecary and collected a portable medicine kit. The black cells were notorious, and if Lord Stark had spent enough time in them then he might need the medicine just to move under his own power.

The rest of the time she spent composing a letter to her father and uncle. She outlined what she'd found on her journey, and what she was about to do. It was madness, especially once she put it all down in maester's black on the blank pages. She'd been abducted by a sorceress from beyond the fixed stars, along with a Myrish priest-turned-sellsword and another sorceress from Asshai, taken beyond the Wall and seen the ancient evils of the First Men with her own eyes. And now she was about to venture into the Targaryen's stronghold in search of a northern lord. Madness, madness and treason.

*Father would be so proud as to burst,* she thought with savage pride.

When the ship was in position, they reconvened in the transporter chamber. Sarella stood in the niche alongside Thoros, surrounded by a half-dozen of the lady's familiars. Lady Jade stood in front of them at a control desk.

Thoros eyed the room nervously. "Are you sure this is safe, my lady?" he asked.

"Oh sure, did this thousands of times as a kid," Lady Jade replied flippantly. "Safest way of travel. It can feel a little weird though, if you're not used to it."

"R'hllor guide your hands, my lady," Thoros said.

"Gods watch over us all," she added.


Magic hummed all around them. The world turned blue and yellow. Sarella realized that the sorceress was right: it *did* feel a little weird.
For the first time in what seemed like forever, Jade Hasegawa was completely alone aboard Carefree Victory. She set a mental timer; thirty minutes seemed like enough lead time for Sarella and Thoros to spring Stark and get him moving. Hopefully he was in good enough condition to move under his own power, if not that would just add to the issue.

There’s still time to call this off, a treasonous part of her brain said. She ignored it, busying herself with checking her equipment. Her blaster was fully charged and set for the maximum non-lethal setting. A moment's pause and she dialed it up to full lethal; the drones and her repulsor gauntlet would work for non-lethal options. Better to be ready for all contingencies.

You’ve got more important things to worry about than a simple dynastic dispute. Jade checked the wight's containment system. The ad hoc cooling system was working correctly, well enough that the head ought to last a year or two more so long as nobody broke containment. The transparent aluminum case was nice and clear of frost. What used to be Waymar Royce's head glared at her from behind the panels.

She blew it a kiss. "Now now, Sparky," she said. "No need to be salty, today's your big day!" After a moment's thought she grabbed a spare pillowcase from storage and draped it over the case. A little bit of theatricality never hurt anybody, and the extra psychological shock might be useful.

The alert she’d set on Sansa’s communicator blared in her ear. Her HUD lit up with a display of the Red Keep, the little blue dot that marked the girl's location started moving. Well, that's a wrinkle. Jade summoned her drones, picked up the wight and went to the transporter. Judging by the way Sansa's tracker was moving, she was en route to the throne room. That was almost too good to be true, two birds with one stone.

You can still walk away, Jadey, she thought as she set the coordinates. Jade decided to give it a few more minutes, to make sure Sansa was inside the throne room before she transported out. The Unbidden are a galactic level threat. You heard them, you know what they want to do. A squabbling pack of dirt-scrounging nobles aren't important compared to that. Just let them kill each other back down to sustainable levels and focus on the main problem. Walk away, Jade.

Everything slot into place. Sansa was in the throne room, approaching the big lump of pointy metal they called a throne. There wouldn't be a better time to do this. Captain Hasegawa sighed. "Y’know," she said to the empty room. "I can't walk away. I never really could have."

She took a deep breath. "Let's do this. Energize."

EDDARD

Time moved oddly in the black cells, days could feel like moments and moments felt like an eternity. Ned had lost track of how long he'd been buried beneath the Red Keep within the first day. The only light came from the gaoler's torches, when they bothered to toss food into his cell. The rest of the time it was just the darkness and his regrets.

He had been so sure when he confronted the queen. He had the right, he had the evidence, Slynt was a bought man but he thought he had the right coin, he had enough of his own men... and then it all fell apart. He hadn't the coin to buy Slynt, his men weren't enough without the goldcloaks and the queen... Cersei just laughed in his face before the goldcloaks seized him. Traitor, they called him. Usurper. When all he had done was for the good of the realm.

Sitting there in the dark, the worst part of it all wasn't his own fall. Ned Stark would accept his fate willingly, save that his fall dragged others down with him. Brave men like his garrison from Winterfell, who died defending their sworn lord from a cowardly attack by that smirking devil in a lion's pelt. Or worse yet, his beloved daughter who he'd betrothed to a baseborn monster. All in the name of his friend, the former king.

I couldn't save any of you. Jon, Robert, Sansa... Lyanna. I hope that somewhere there might be forgiveness for what I've done and not done.

He could hear bells in the distance, a faint chiming that rose and fell for a moment. It reminded him of Winterfell in happier times, when his father and brother still lived. His mother learned to play the bells as a girl, and would sometimes play after the summer feasting. He wondered if his mother played the bells now to guide him back to her, Father, Brandon and Lyanna.

The bells faded and were replaced by the sound of two men, talking and walking down the dark corridor outside the cell. The voices were too indistinct for Ned to make out, but they would stop, there would be a clanking noise and a faint crackle before they moved on, coming closer to Ned's cell with each step.

"This had better be the right one," said the first voice, a boy with the sound of Dorne in his words.

"Ah, it's not like there are that many black cells to begin with," said the second, speaking the common tongue with the accent of the Free Cities. The voice sounded familiar, in fact, one he'd heard before and not too long ago.

"Aye, but I wasn't expecting them to be mostly full," grumbled the first voice. "Did the king go on an arrest spree while we were away?"

"Never mind that now, let's see if we've found who we're looking for." A harsh white light came into the room through the slit. Ned winced as the light found his eyes.

"Well?" said the second voice.

"It's him," replied the first. "Just a second, won't be a moment." Rasping, clanking sounds came from the door.

"You know, I think you've been attending the captain a bit too long," the second commented. "You're starting to sound like her."
"Well excuse me for finding ground with an intellectual equal," the boy sniffed. The second voice laughed quietly, and Ned finally put together where he'd heard that voice before. *The tourney, the melee champion from Myr. Thoros, his name was.*

Something clicked inside the door, and it swung open to reveal Thoros of Myr in his customary red robes alongside a dark boy in traveller's clothes. The boy's face seemed familiar as well, but Ned couldn't place it.

Ned tried to get to his feet. The boy went to his side and began to fiddle with the chains holding him to the wall. "Easy there," he soothed. "Just give me a space to work and I'll have you free."

"Who are you?" he croaked.

"I am Alleras, my lord. Lately of Oldtown, if that matters," the boy replied. "I've come on behalf of Captain Hasegawa." *Of course, the sorceress. How did she know? Magic of some kind, no doubt. "My companion and I have been trusted to see you to safety."*

Ned almost laughed. What safety could the boy possibly mean, this deep in the Red Keep's cellars? The boy's long hands worked at the cuffs around his hands and feet. Locks clicked and the chains fell away. "Can you stand, my lord?" Alleras asked. Ned tried getting to his feet. The muscles in his legs burned, but slowly and unsteadily he got to his feet.

Thoros glanced into the hallway. The black cells were lit with unnatural light coming from a half-dozen of Lady Jade's familiars floating in the passage like lanterns. "We'd best be going," he said. "The gaoler's off getting drunk somewhere, but that won't last forever. How is he, Alleras?"

"Weak, but not as bad as I'd feared," the boy replied. "Come on, my lord, no time to dawdle. We've got to get to the meeting point as quickly as we can."

"Wait!" Ned cried. "Sansa! Where is Sansa? We need to—" he stumbled forward, Thoros catching him before his face met the cold stone of the corridor.

"We need to get to the Hand's quarters," Thoros said. "You're in no condition to go tearing about the keep."

"Others take you, man," Ned snarled. "I am not leaving this place without my daughter!"

The boy Alleras laid his hand on Ned's shoulder. "Peace, my lord Stark," he said calmly. "We have no intention of leaving King's Landing without the both of you. Thoros and I were sent to retrieve you; Captain Hasegawa is attending to Lady Sansa personally."

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**CERSEI**

For the first time in a very long time, Cersei Lannister felt something not unlike freedom. Her idiotic sot of a husband was dead at last, victim of an oh-so-tragic hunting accident and safely buried in the crypt. Her beloved golden son, the perfect distillation of her and Jaime, sat the throne. All the pain and suffering she'd taken on when her father handed her to Robert had fallen away, leaving only the queen behind. She stood at the pinnacle of Westeros, beside her son on the Iron Throne as was her right.

No matter how she longed to sit the throne herself, this was as far as she might go for now and it felt good to get there.

She stood beside her golden son in the throne room, listening as Sansa Stark begged for her father's
life, as she had every single day since Joffrey had been crowned. Cersei watched the pitiful little wolf
girl cringe before the king and whine her little pleas. Joffrey listened with the grave solemnity she'd
instilled in him, letting her speak her peace before he would dismiss the wolf back to her kennel. It
was the duty of a king to hear his subjects no matter how treasonous they might be, after all.

*Stark can never be let free.* That much she was sure of. He knew too much, he was dangerous in all
the wrong ways. Jaime might be able to best him in a fight, but he was remembered as one of
Robert's best generals for a reason. If Joffrey released Stark, he would side against them. He would
take away her boy and her power in one fell swing of that Valyrian sword of his. His daughter
would make a fine hostage against Winterfell, for good behavior. Let the wolves bay in their
wilderness, so long as they knew the price of going against the Iron Throne.

Something glimmered in the corner of her eye, and she heard bells tinkling in the far distance. Cersei
looked up from the Stark girl and saw nothing. The court however saw *something*, stirring and
muttering as a figure in green walked towards the throne in long strides.

"*A moment of your time, Your Grace!*" called a woman who was most assuredly *not there* just a
moment before. "*Many things are moving, and the king needs to rise to meet them!*"

Cersei went blank as that thrice-damned witch moved through the parting crowd, two of her
creatures hovering besides her and a package like a covered birdcage in her left hand. None of the
runners she'd ordered to watch the sky-ship's berth had reported in, and getting from the city wall to
the Red Keep in anything less than an hour without causing some sort of clamor was impossible. So
how did the woman get into the city, much less the throne room, without alerting the guards?

The Kingsguard moved forward to block the witch's path. She stopped next to the Stark girl, who
rose to meet her with an oddly hopeful look on her face. The witch touched the girl's shoulder, and
one of the little demon balls drifted over to her. The Stark reached out and embraced the ball like it
was a doll. That done, the witch turned to the seven knights in white between her and Joffrey.

"*Gentlemen,*" she said.

Ser Meryn drew his sword and pointed it at her. "*No further, witch,*" he warned.

The witch tilted her head. "*Really,*" she said. "*You're going to draw steel on me. That's adorable.
You're adorable.*" She patted the bare blade with a hand clad in a green and white gauntlet. "*Step
back, laddie buck. The king and I need to talk.*"

"*Stand aside, Ser Meryn,*" Joffrey said from the throne. "*The lady shall not harm me.*" Reluctantly
the knight sheathed his sword and stepped out of the witch's path. She continued her advance,
coming to the foot of the Iron Throne. Joffrey smoothed out his features and smiled eagerly. "*Lady
Hasegawa,*" he said, not stumbling over the foreign name like the drunken aurochs had. "*We had
thought you departed for your homeland.*"

"*Sadly not just yet, Your Grace,*" the witch said. "*I was on an errand for your father when news
arrived.*" She dipped her head a fraction. "*My condolences.*" Cersei's head swam. The ravens
announcing Robert's death and Joffrey's accession had only gone out a few days before. The news
would only have reached the nearer keeps and holdfasts by now. *Where was she that she could get
the raven's scroll and respond so swiftly? Dragonstone? Storm's End? Highgarden?* The thought of
the witch already colluding with Stannis or the Tyrells filled her mind.

Joffrey nodded to the witch. "*Yes, a great tragedy,*" he said. "*At least he was doing something he
loved when it happened.*" He leaned forward. "*What kind of errand, my lady?*"
The witch met his eyes. There was something in her eyes, a hardness that Cersei associated with Lord Tywin, or her own gaze in the mirror each morning. "Your late father sent me on a mission of utmost urgency and secrecy, Your Grace," she said. "Of late there have been odd omens, signs of things stirring in the darkness. I discovered some of these things in my investigations, and King Robert asked me to uncover the truth."

Joffrey's eyes glimmered. "So you've found more evidence of the Stark treason against the Iron Throne?" he asked.

The witch looked back blankly. "The what now?" she said.

Cersei took the moment to step in. "The King speaks of a Northern conspiracy to usurp my late husband's wishes and take the Iron Throne for themselves," she said smoothly. "If this is the task my husband set you to, then we will happily hear your say at Lord Stark's trial." The Stark chit looked like she wanted to protest yet again her family's innocence, but stayed silent.

"Huh," the witch said, giving her a considering look then shaking her head. "That wouldn't be what I was looking for. I don't really care who's on the throne, just what they do when they're sitting there. No, Your Grace, my mission was… very, very different. Tell me, what do you know of the Long Night?"


"Mm," the witch hummed. "But what do you know of it?"

"What's there to know?" Joffrey snapped. "Northmen fables have no place before the Iron Throne. They never happened, or if they did happen it was so long ago that it doesn't matter."

The witch clucked sadly. "Never discount legends, King Joffrey," she said in a lecturing tone that put Cersei's nerves on edge. "You never know what might be lurking behind the songs and stories. Understand, Your Grace, that when I started on this quest I only had hints and suspicions. Hints and allegations, nothing solid or factual. When I went to your lord father he demanded proof. I had none. So I went north, to the country beyond the Wall, looking for something that would convince King Robert." She lifted the birdcage up for all the court to see, then set it down before the throne. "And after quite a bit of hassle, this is what I found."

She pulled off the cover, and revealed a head in a large glass bottle. The head had clearly seen better days, covered with old wounds and slightly burnt on one side. More murmurs came from the court, and Joffrey came down the steps to look more closely. "A head?" he said scornfully. "Is that all?"

Then the dead man's good eye opened. Burning a terrible blue, it spun around and then fixed on Joffrey. The head opened it's mouth and snarled silently at him. Joffrey turned pale and jumped backwards, hitting the steps and scrambling backwards up them. Someone in the crowd shrieked, and everybody moved away from the obscene thing.

"I, wha, what, what is that thing?" Joffrey demanded.

"His name, I am told, was Waymar Royce," the witch said with feigned sadness. "A ranger of the Night's Watch who vanished on his first ranging some months before my arrival on your shores." She looked up at Joffrey, who had had yet to recover from the shock. "The things in your stories aren't just fables, young king. They're very much real. This is my proof." She pointed at the still moving head. "Waymar here isn't the first, I have no idea how many wildlings living in the far north have died and been reanimated as foot soldiers, but I know there's a goddamn lot of them already and..."
more coming every day. They are coming, Your Grace. The question now is, what are you going to do about it?"

Cersei looked at the witch, standing proud in her green livery before her pale boy. Her face was stern, her back straight as she waited for Joffrey's answer. The court seemed to waver on a knife's edge. That fat fool of a spymaster and the old grey maester were both staring at the head with undisguised fear, the Kingsguard all stood ready to intervene if necessary, and the rest of the rabble milled about like sheep, looking to the witch. *Almost like… a…*

*No.*

Everything fell into place for Cersei at that moment. *No no no, of course it all makes sense now. She knows everything, all it takes is a moment of weakness and she'll denounce us all. They'll take Jaime and Joffrey away from me and she'll use her magic and the Starks and this made-up nonsense about snarks and grumkins to take the throne herself. It's all so clear.* The old woman cackled in the back of her head, like she had so many times in the past. She had to do something, right now, or everything she had suffered and bled for was lost.

"An interesting fable to be sure, Lady Jade," said a new voice. She turned and saw Littlefinger near the edge of the crowd, smirking at the witch. "And quite convenient that you would turn up so soon after His Grace's crowning." The crowd murmured again. She could feel the tide turning against the witch, just a bit. *That one will need rewarding, the snake.*

The witch raised one dark eyebrow. "I'm sorry, and you are…?" she said. Some courtier tittered, and Littlefinger's smirk vanished.

"Lord Baelish raises a point," her proud little lion said. "You have been known to be fond of the Starks, my lady."

"They were kind to me when I first arrived," the witch shrugged. "It would be churlish not to return their kindness, no?"

"Oh, yes yes of course," Joffrey said, smiling slowly. "But with Lord Stark under arrest for suspicion of treason well… it makes your own actions suspicious."

"You'd have to give me credit for imagination, running off to the uttermost north to fetch the moving head of a dead man in order to bolster… something." The court half-muttered, half-laughed at the witch's boldness. Cersei restrained her reaction. *A queen never shows weakness before her subjects. She will not win this. She cannot win this.*

"True, true," Joffrey waved his hand, the smile growing larger. "But there's a simple solution to all of this: swear your fealty to the Iron Throne and all your… faults… will be forgiven."

"I see." The witch gestured to the head, still glaring at Joffrey with its terrible blue eye. "And what about that?"

Joffrey's gaze returned to the head. He looked strangely thoughtful. "I will consider it, as a favor to a leal vassal," he said with great magnanimity.

"Consider it," the witch echoed. She sighed. "You know, history is full of people like you, young king. Men and women too arrogant to see the threat before them and blind themselves to the obvious, then when everything goes tits-up they get dragged into hell, wailing 'I didn't know!' the whole way down."

"Consider it," the witch echoed. She sighed. "You know, history is full of people like you, young king. Men and women too arrogant to see the threat before them and blind themselves to the obvious, then when everything goes tits-up they get dragged into hell, wailing 'I didn't know!' the whole way down."
The witch's glare caught Joffrey full-on. "If that's your answer, Your Grace… you can go straight to hell with them. I will not be bound to the willfully blind and hope they see reason before it's too late."

Joffrey went white, then purpled. "How dare you," he roared. "I am the king!"

"Then act like the king!" The witch matched him roar for roar. She pointed, again, at the head. "Right there is the single greatest threat to Westeros in the last eight thousand years! And you'll 'consider it,' but only if I swear myself to you? Fuck you! Had I brought this to your father, he wouldn't have demanded my loyalty in exchange for action! He would've called all his lords to witness, ordered the Citadel to learn the secrets of the walking dead and the Others, summoned the levies and marched on the Wall to protect the realm! But you? You'll sit on your throne pulling the wings off flies until these things march into the throne room and add you to their number!"

Cersei flushed with fury. How dare this Dornish cunt, this charlatan, rage at her Joffrey like that? The king, still red with anger, snarled back at her. "You're attainted. You'll rise no higher than the smallfolk, woman!"

The witch had the temerity to laugh at her son's proclamation. "Oh deary me, whatever shall I do?" she said mockingly. "Listen to me and understand, Your Grace: you have no real power over me. You never did. Your father gave me a title out of courtesy and respect for my ability, nothing more. If you won't heed my counsel, then consider this my resignation." She bowed deeply and, dismissing Joffrey like a servant, turned to the silent court. "As for the rest of you, I will drag you all—kicking and screaming if necessary—to salvation. Because that is the oath I swore. Whether you stand with this boy or not makes no difference. If it's in my power to protect you, I will. You have my word."

The witch turned her back on the Iron Throne and walked over to the wolf girl. "You can keep the head, by the way," she called over her shoulder. "Plenty more where that came from." She touched the little chit on the shoulder. "Come along, Stark," she said in the hush. "We've got a world to save."

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SANSA

Madness. That was the only word for it. The world had gone mad, and Sansa was left standing in the heart of the storm. Her sweet prince had become a smiling, smirking creature atop the Iron Throne, the queen she had so admired had arrested her father, thrown him into the black cells and locked her away in Maegor's Holdfast. The Lannister courtiers all spoke of dire treason, when she knew well that Father loved King Robert like a brother. How could any of this be happening?

And then Lady Jade came, adding her own madness to the mix. Sansa couldn't take her eyes off the terrible gift the sorceress had brought to the court. It was everything out of Old Nan's tales come true, a wretched dead thing that kept moving, twisting to and fro within its cage. That Joffrey seemed to dismiss it as mummary made her heart sink. What was so wrong with him?

As Lady Jade finished yelling at the king, she touched Sansa on the shoulder. "Come along, Stark," she said. "We've got a world to save." Sansa looked up into the sorceress's brilliant green eyes, and she winked. Sansa didn't understand but she held onto the familiar for dear life.

"I did not give you leave!" Joffrey screeched from the throne.

"And?" Lady Jade replied.

*/ "Did You Forget Who I Am?" Steve Jablonsky Transformers: The Last Knight (2017) */
"Kingsguard! Seize them and bring them to me!" Whatever there was of her sweet prince had fallen away now, leaving a red-faced demon staring at them from atop Aegon's throne. The brothers of the Kingsguard, the finest knights in all the realm, started forward.

Lady Jade had a wry look on her face. "Stick close, kiddo," she whispered, then in a louder tone said "Okay, I guess we're doing this now." The knights all stopped a few paces from them. "One at a time or all together, lads. Don't really care which."

Ser Jaime Lannister was the one who broke the impasse, stepping forward. He was a magnificent sight in his golden armor. His sword sung in the silent room. "T'would be best if you surrender now," he said with an easy smile. "I'd hate to have to damage that pretty face of yours."

"I wouldn't," Lady Jade said lightly. The Kingslayer halted, searching the sorceress's face for something. "That's the smart move, Jaime," she went on. "Just stop right there and let us go. It's easier on all of us if you just let us walk."

"Ser Jaime!" Joffrey yelled from his seat. "What are you doing, uncle? Why have you stopped? Seize them! Your king commands it!" Ser Jaime glanced back at the Iron Throne, at Joffrey's furious face and the queen's waxy expression, then returned his attention to Lady Jade.

"I'm sorry," he said thickly.

"No," the sorceress said in a voice colder than the Wall. "But you will be." She raised a gauntleted hand, pointing directly at him.

The Kingslayer took one more step.

Light flared and thunder boomed through the hall, and Ser Jaime Lannister flew backwards, a wicked dent square in the chest of his golden armor. The queen screamed as her brother crashed against the foot of the Iron Throne with a tremendous clanging sound. For a moment, utter silence reigned as the Kingslayer slumped, moaning pitifully.

Ser Meryn was the first to recover, uttering a battlecry as his sword came free and up in a vicious stroke meant to cleave the sorceress from neck to groin. Sansa shrieked as the sword came down… and then bounced off a shell of light that flared to life between them and the knight. Ser Meryn had just enough time to blink stupidly before Lady Jade pointed her gauntlet at him and another sworn brother went crashing to the floor.

"Next?" The sorceress barked harshly. The other Kingsguard in the room looked at each other and drew their swords. Ser Barristan moved to protect the king, whilst the rest charged.

"Atomic Bonsai" Joren "Tensei" de Bruin Strife! (2011) /*

Lady Jade whistled and from the rafters came all of her familiars swooping down like hunting eagles into the crowd, firing bolts of magical fire and lightning. The courtiers all cried out as one and fled for the entrance, pushing and scrabbling over each other to get out of the battle's way. Knights, goldcloaks and sworn swords toppled over, felled by bolts of sorcery, and all the while Sansa and Lady Jade carefully moved backwards. Jade kept sweeping her eyes over the guards, directing her familiars, while Sansa couldn't tear her eyes off Joffrey, who watched the whole thing with a combination of rage and terror.

"I'm… not done with you yet, girl," Ser Jaime rasped, coming back to his feet. His face was red and his smile gone. His sword was clenched in his hand and murder was in his eyes. "You'll regret that."

Jade sighed. "Should've stayed down, stupid," she said as he launched into a charge. "Boys?
Protocol two, please.” The familiars swarmed around the Kingslayer, a whirlwind of magic and light and he bellowed like a caged aurochs. In between the whirling magic Sansa could see the fabulous golden armor he wore being torn off, piece by piece, until at the end the familiars left him panting, clad in nothing but smallclothes. Lady Jade stepped forward, pushing him gently with her gauntlet. Ser Jaime toppled onto his back. Then as he lay there, she brought her boot down hard between his legs.

The Kingslayer screamed like the gates of all seven hells had opened right in front of him. His howl ended with a quick flash of light from a familiar, then Lady Jade looked back at the king. She bowed, grabbed Sansa's hand and the two of them ran like mad for the door, familiars trailing them.

Just inside the alcove, Lady Jade pulled her in a different direction. "Where are we going?" she panted.

"Secret passage, just a second," Lady Jade replied. She touched the stone wall in one spot, then another, and the wall opened up with only the faintest sound of grinding stone. "Amazing place, this castle," she said cheerfully, pushing Sansa into the revealed corridor. "Come on, this way!"

They ran down the old, dusty corridors. Sansa marveled that all of this had been hiding beneath the Red Keep, no doubt since Maegor the Cruel had the castle built in his reign. They stopped at a crossroad, and Lady Jade whistled again. "Dot, protocol four." The named familiar chimed agreeably and trundled off down a side passage whilst they turned another way.

"Where is that one going?" Sansa asked.

"Contingency protocol," the sorceress replied, and wouldn't say more.

Eventually they came to a long shaft reaching up into the sky. Lady Jade held her hand to her eyeglass, as if looking at something. "Okay, we're here," she said. "Time to climb."

"But where is here?" she wondered.

"Hand's tower, we're going to the top to wait for pickup." Lady Jade said, grabbing onto one of the iron rungs driven into the shaft wall. "Are you okay with climbing? I don't know if I can carry you, but if we have to…"

"I," Sansa hesitated. Climbing was Bran's joy. Half squirrel, Father had called him at times. She could ascend a ladder—she was no invalid—but this kind of climbing felt like a different thing altogether. "I can try," she said. Lady Jade nodded.

"That's all I can ask," she said, gesturing to the ladder. "Ladies first."

The climb felt like it took an eternity, one hand over the other until her arms ached. Every so slowly they climbed up the shaft, surrounded by the tinkling little familiars bobbing alongside. After what felt like one rung too many Sansa finally reached what looked like a small alcove in the shaft, a smallish door cut into the stone. "We're here," Lady Jade said. Sansa pushed open the door and crawled through into a pile of ash. She came out in a cold hearth, and two dark hand grabbed her and pulled her upright.

"There we go, my lady," a low voice said with warm humor. "Safe and sound at last." She looked up and saw a boy in rough clothing, wearing part of a maester's chain around his neck, smiling at her. She blushed a little at the attention.

"Sansa?" a very familiar voice said behind the boy. She looked and saw her lord father standing there, wonder on his face. He looked terrible, pale and bruised and shaking from his time in the black
cells. Sansa let out a wordless sob and darted into his embrace. They stayed like that for a long time, how long she wasn't sure.

"Status?" Lady Jade said, emerging from the hearth behind her.

One of the sorceress's other companions, the large man in red from the tourney, stirred from his watch near the door. "We got out without complications," he said. "We picked up a few things from the solar," he pointed at a bundle topped by a sheathed sword. "But I fear the secret might be out now, my lady; I can hear guards coming up the stairs. Won't be much longer now."

Lady Jade nodded. "That's fine, we don't need much longer," she said. Sansa's ears pricked. She could hear a rumble getting closer. "Like, we're just about ready to go right now."

The rumble grew louder, until it was clearly right outside the walls. The chairs and furniture quivered from the sheer noise it was making. "Everybody away from the outside wall!" Lady Jade shouted. They all scrambled away from the wall. "MAKE A HOLE!" she cried.

The familiars swept forward, launching bolts of sorcery towards the stone. Moving in a circle, they carved a round out of the wall, then with one more mighty blast the round pushed outwards and fell down into the courtyard below. In front of the wall Sansa could see open sky and the white metal of Lady Jade's sky-ship. The ship gently bumped up against the tower, and the door slid open.

"GO GO GO GO GO!" the sorceress called, pushing Sansa and her father forward. Together they stumbled into the opening, followed by the boy maester and doughty Thoros. Lady Jade was right behind them, and as she stepped onto the ship the door behind them burst open. Through the door came the monstrous bulk of Ser Gregor Clegane.

"You!" he roared.

Lady Jade's hands blurred, a streak of blue light slammed right into Ser Gregor's faceplate and his head exploded. The Mountain That Rides swayed for a long second then toppled backwards into his men, crushing them beneath his bulk.

Lady Jade waved to the trapped Lannister men, raising a single middle finger to them. Then the door closed and the ship swayed, pivoting away from King's Landing and back towards home.

Lady Jade pushed past them and made her way to the bridge, with her and Father trailing behind. The entered the bridge and the doors slid shut behind them. Beautiful blue sky and white clouds filled the great window in the front of the bridge. "So, care to explain what the hell all of that was about?" Lady Jade asked. "The queen was ranting about some kind of conspiracy."

Father sighed. "I was looking into the death of Lord Arryn. His wife—my goodsisister—sent a message to Winterfell claiming he had been murdered by the Lannisters. I wanted to know why, and in the process I discovered that the queen had been unfaithful."

"Okay, and?" The sorceress shrugged. Father blinked. "I did meet King Robert multiple times," she added. "I wouldn't have wanted to be married to the man either."

"None of the royal children are of Robert's blood," he replied. "They are all Lannister, no Baratheon in them at all." He grimaced. "Their father, I learned, was the Kingslayer."

Sansa's stomach twisted a little. Joffrey was the son of the queen and her brother? She had thought the southroners to be less... twisted than that. By Lady Jade's face, it seemed that she was of a similar mind to Sansa. The sorceress's mouth was set in an appalled frown, like she'd done a sum and didn't like the outcome.
"Pendejome!" she snarled. "I should've hit the son of a bitch harder when I had the chance." Sansa flinched, remembering the terrible cry Ser Jaime made when the sorceress's boot came down.

"You shouldn't have done that," Father said quietly. The sorceress stilled and turned back towards them.

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"Father!" Sansa blurted. "Don't say things like that! She rescued you from the black cells! She rescued me from that horrible Joffrey!"

"Please, Sansa," he said, holding her tightly. "I know you thought you were doing right but… Joffrey is dangerous. I know not if he'll declare war on the North for this but I wouldn't be surprised if he did. Now, even if Robb bent the knee I doubt Joffrey would see any mercy for my family, or any family that supported us. And if you're right about the Others returning the king must be told, Westeros needs to be united…"

"Father, no," Sansa protested. "Joffrey has no mercy. I begged him and begged him to release you, I said you weren't a traitor over and over and he just smiled at me when I did. Like he was happy to see me begging! Arya was right about him," she said bitterly. "He really is a horrible little boy. Lady Jade told him everything about the Others and the dead man's head—oh Father, it was so terrible—and he ignored it because she wouldn't swear to him!"

"Truly?" Father said. She nodded sharply, not trusting to words. "Then truly you should have left me behind, my lady. I am an acceptable loss, if Westeros is to stand against the Others then—"

"You're right," the sorceress said suddenly. Her mouth was twisted up in a smile, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. There was something hard, wild and angry in those eyes that made Sansa flinch and lean further into her father's embrace. "I should've left you to Joffrey's tender mercies," she said, smiling all the while. "That was the smart thing to do; keep the petulant brat of a boy king and his army busy and off my back while I go around trying to keep the monsters in the north from killing everybody. But I didn't do the smart thing, now did I? Now I've got a brand-new enemy and a civil war to disentangle while simultaneously trying to keep the ice monsters from killing everybody! Isn't that fun?"

"But you want to know the best part, Eddard?" Lady Jade's smile grew even more strained, and her eyes flashed. "Do you want to guess what happens next? When Starfleet gets here—and they will—for what happened today I stand to lose my ship, my rank, my commission and, just to top it all off, I'll likely spend the next fifty years in prison. That's my reward for saving your lives. For saving the lives of everybody on this misbegotten rock you call a world!" Her voice grew to a furious shout. "So you're goddamned right I shouldn't have done that, but you know what? The absolute least you can do, Lord Stark, is pretend to be fucking GRATEFUL!" She all but screamed the last word, eyes filled with green fire, fists balled and ready to strike.

Sansa quailed and hid behind her father, who stood stock-still before the furious sorceress. She could feel his whole body shaking, Then, he said one word. "Why?"

The reply came, toneless and bone-weary. "Because your daughter asked me to," she said. "Now get the fuck off my bridge."

The maester boy gently tugged on Father's arm. "If you please, my lord," he said quietly. "Allow me to check you for injuries. It has been quite a difficult day." Father relaxed, just a little, and allowed himself to be led off the bridge. Sansa followed, with one last look back at Lady Jade. She was staring out the front window, not looking at them or much of anything.
The door slid shut, and Sansa thought she could hear the sorceress begin to howl as they closed.

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**LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 190.1**

Fucking Christ, I can't believe that just happened. I don't... I can't... Fuck.

Just... *fuck.*

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**WALDER**

He was not a very clever man. Walder knew this and accepted it. A man didn't *need* to be clever to serve the Starks, they just needed to be strong and loyal. His Nan had taught him that much, alongside all her stories of long ago. So Walder grew up big and strong, and if he wasn't the most clever man in the Winterfell guard then at least he could stand before Lord Ned and his family and guard them as best as he was able.

Life in Winterfell had gone strange and sour the last turn or so. It was more solemn in the turns since Lord Ned had gone south—everyone remembered what happened the *last* time Starks had gone south at behest of the king, so there was an edge there, everybody waiting to see what happened when the gauntlet dropped. But even then there was a certain lightness to the castle. The young lords were always in motion, doing this or that and trying new things. Walder had the honor of sparring with Lord Robb every few days, so he could work on his tactics against a bigger, stronger opponent. Ever since his accident, Lord Bran had been earthbound in a way that made Walder vaguely sad, though he couldn't quite understand why. But his grounding only gave the boy a bit of wistfulness as he poked around at Winterfell's foundations hunting secrets. Every now and then Walder ended up helping with his investigations, usually moving heavy things out of the way.

Now, though... now things had gone sour. The last raven from the south had young Lord Robb and his lady mother all twisted up. Ravens had gone hither and yon from the maester's tower, to the whole of the North it seemed. And then, the raven that came in the day before had the old maester running full-tilt the way old men shouldn't (in Walder's estimation) across the castle. Word had gone out that all Winterfell's people would be mustered in the great hall the next morning, and reasons for all the strange doings would be given.

Nobody slept that night. Most of the remaining guardsmen huddled around fires drinking ale and wondering what might be going on. Nobody thought it was good, whatever it was. Walder held his tongue, fearing the others making fun, but he decided they were right. Nothing good ever came of the south; better if northmen stayed in the North where they belonged. The direwolves, too, seemed terribly restless, but they'd been restless for days before the last raven.

The next morning, Walder stood alongside his fellow guards, waiting for the young lord to arrive. Lord Robb showed up looking horribly grim, alongside his southron mother. Lady Catelyn looked horrible, like she'd been crying all night and had only barely managed to look like a lady before her people. Lady Arya was white-faced, alternating between anger and fear. Lord Bran looked terribly sad and resigned. Only little Lord Rickon seemed unaffected by whatever was going on.

The court all shifted uneasily as Lord Robb rose and gestured for their attention. "People of Winterfell," he said slowly. "We have received word that King Robert has died." That got everybody's attention, and the crowd muttered loudly at this news. Walder remembered the king; he seemed like a jolly enough fat man, rather like the Manderlys who'd come to Winterfell now and then. He felt a little sad, thinking that he'd liked the old king. "His son has been crowned, Joffrey, first of his name, of the house Baratheon, King of the Andals, Rhoynar and the First Men, Protector
of the Realm." Walder nodded along; that was after all how it was supposed to work. Lords died, and it was very sad, then their sons replaced them. All very neat and proper.

"However," Lord Robb went on grimly, "the new king has seen fit to arrest Lord Eddard Stark, Hand of the King, on suspicion of treason." The crowd exploded into angry chattering. Walder didn't believe it. Everybody knew that Lord Ned and the king were friends. Friends didn't do that sort of thing to each other. Lord Robb held out his hand for silence, and silence fell on the hall. "The raven did not explain what the charges were, only that Lord Stark is now in custody," he said grimly. "We know not what... madness has taken hold of the Iron Throne, but we shall learn forthwith. The lords of the North have been summoned to Winterfell along with their banners."

That explained all the ravens, all right. Walder wondered if Lord Ned had had a hint something was wrong. That would've been like him, Lord Ned was a smart one. His son talked on a little more, but Walder paid it little mind. That sort of thought was for the captain and his sergeants, all he needed was a sword, a shield and to be pointed where the enemies were.

Near the end of day, as the dispirited people of Winterfell prepared for the evening meal, the castle shook with the noise of the sky-ship, another odd little addition to the castle in the last few turns. Walder had been with the kennelmaster tending to the direwolves when they turned their heads as one and bolted for the kennel door. The sky-ship's sound came to their ears not long after that. Naturally, they followed the wolves. Everybody in Winterfell came out to see the huge white ship flying low over the castle, turning and then coming to rest in the main courtyard.

The wolves all sat on their haunches right at the point where the ship's ramp opened and came to rest. Walder put his hand on his sword, just in case. The witch had always been kind enough, especially to the guardsmen, but one never knew with witches. Old Nan had been very clear on that point. As Lord Robb and Lady Catelyn came up to the ramp he spied two pale, exhausted figures appear at the top of the ramp.

Lord Ned and young Lady Sansa gave their family tired smiles and descended the ramp to the cheers of everyone in Winterfell, Walder included. Behind them came two more people, ones Walder didn't recognize but if they were with Lord Ned they ought to be fine, right? But there was no sign of the witch as the people cheered and Lord Ned embraced his wife.

A flash of green caught Walder's eye, and he saw the witch at the top of the ramp, gazing down at the crowd. Her expression was frozen like the heart tree's, and he couldn't read it. Instead of joining the celebration, the witch turned and vanished back into her ship. The ramp raised with a grinding sound, and the ship lifted up and moved away.

Over the sound of the ship and the confused din of the crowd, Walder could hear the direwolves baying mournfully as the ship flew away.

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**THE CUBS IN THE TOWER**

None of the servants would talk to them, that was the worst thing. Ever since Father died, Myrcella and Tommen had been stuck in their apartments waiting for Mother or somebody to notice them, to explain what was going on, but nobody ever came. The only time they'd been allowed to leave Maegor's Holdfast in the last ten days was to attend Joffrey's crowning. That was a dismal affair; only Joffrey and Mother seemed to enjoy themselves. Everybody else was still sad about Father or just looked puzzled about something neither of them could understand. Then they were back to the keep "for their own protection," as Mother said.

Tommendidn't mind so much; now that Joffrey was king, he was too busy to pick on him. Myrcella
paced like a caged lion and wondered about what was happening outside the Red Keep's walls. She picked up on little hints the servants said when they thought nobody was listening and tried to make sense of it all.

Then, one gray day, everything went even more peculiar. In their rooms in the holdfast neither the prince nor the princess got to see it all unfold but they could hear everything. They heard the shouts of the courtiers, the clamor of the alarm bells and over all of it the high, keening thunder of Lady Jade's sky-ship.

Myrcella ran to the window, leaning out precariously all the while trying to get a glimpse of the ship. The whole castle seemed to shake under the thunder. A white blur shot past the window, the draft of its passage knocking Myrcella backwards. The alarm bells kept ringing, and soldiers in red and gold cloaks ran to and fro in the courtyards below.

"What's going on?" Tommen asked, eyes wide.

Myrcella turned to her brother, eyes just as wide. "I don't know," she said.

The Kingsguard returned to the holdfast not long after, surrounding Joffrey, Mother and a litter carrying a battered Uncle Jaime shorn of his armor. The children poked their heads out of their rooms long enough to see this procession carry their uncle into Mother's chambers.

"What happened?" Myrcella blurted, then clapped a hand over her mouth. Mother seemed to take no notice, following Uncle Jaime's litter into the bedchamber. Sadly, that meant Joffrey took notice. He looked over at his sister and scowled.

"The witch betrayed us," he said bitterly. "After all that Father and I did for the bitch, she had the gall to turn on us!" He bent over, touching a funny looking birdcage that one of the servants had brought up behind him. "The Kingsguard drove her off, but I'll have her head on a spike for her insolence."

"As you say, Your Grace," Myrcella said meekly.

"Yes... as I say." Joffrey murmured, stroking the covered cage gently. He blinked, looked up at Myrcella and abruptly turned away towards his own chambers, taking the cage with him.

Myrcella closed the door, not wanting him nor Mother to see them. Something's wrong, more than usual. Tommen was sitting on his bed, holding his kitten and looking afraid. "Is Lady Jade gone?"

She nodded. "I think so. Joffrey said she betrayed us."

"That doesn't make any sense!" Tommen blurted. "She's nice! Why would she betray us?"

"I don't know," Myrcella replied. "Joffrey's acting odd... I wish somebody would tell us what's going on," she added sadly.

Her words were answered by a soft chime from the window. Princess and prince turned and saw a small metal ball floating in the air just outside the slit. The ball drifted in through the window, its eye glowing golden in the afternoon light. "It's one of Lady Jade's familiars!" Tommen exclaimed, holding his kitten closer. The familiar turned to look at Tommen, then at Myrcella, then it pointed its eye upwards and let loose a spray of blueish light.

In the middle of that spray, a tiny image of Lady Jade appeared. She looked up and nodded. "Hey guys," the sorceress said with a sad little smile. "If you're seeing this, that means I went and talked
with your big brother and… it didn't go as well as I hoped it might. I'm sorry you two, but I might not be around to tell stories for a long while."

The image sighed. "Things are probably weird and a little scary right now, with your dad gone and your brother getting crowned, and all the soldiers running around doing stuff isn't helping either. I wish I could say that's going to stop soon, but I can't. I'm a lot of things, but I won't lie to children if I can help it. Life is going to keep being weird and scary for some time to come, I'm afraid. Not all the monsters live in stories and, well, somebody's got to stop the monsters, right? If you want to know what I'm doing right now, I'll be out there doing my best to stop the monsters.

"Now, you're probably wondering why I left a familiar with you, right?" Myrcella nodded wordlessly. "Well, this is Dot. Since I'm going to be busy for the next little while, Dot's going to be looking after you. She'll keep out of sight, and if someone—anyone—tries something she'll intervene. If everything gets to be too much, if everything goes wrong and you're in real danger, grab Dot, tell her to call me and then hide. Find a safe spot where nobody will look and I will come and get you. I hope it doesn't come to that but better safe than sorry, yeah?"

The image nodded sharply. "Right, it's almost go time here, better leave it right now. Myrcella, Tommen, I'm sorry I'm not there right now to help. Look out for each other, okay? Keep Dot a secret and watch each other's backs. The two of you are pretty sharp kids, together you're going to be okay. I promise." The ghostly little sorceress threw them a smile and a wink and vanished. Dot's eye turned back to look at the children. They stared back.

"Well met. Ser Dot," Tommen said cautiously. The familiar chimed and bobbed a little. "Do you know any stories?" Ser Dot chimed again, rolling its eye to the ceiling, and then it spoke. Quietly, just enough so only Tommen and Myrcella could hear, it chanted in a voice that was sounded a little like Lady Jade's:

"Long, long ago, on top of a mountain called the Flower-and-Fruit Mountain, there lay all by itself a queer-shaped stone egg..."

LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 190.2

The king is dead. The king is dead and I have fucked the duck in a startling variety of positions. I really don't know where I go from here.

More background: while I was north of the Wall hunting zombies and finding out that the Builders were responsible for the not-nearly-as-legendary-as-I-had-hoped ice demons infesting the place, King Bob went out hunting and came back mortally wounded. A hunting accident, or at least that's the going story. Stark seems to want to call it a "hunting accident" but has no real proof.

You know what, we'll get back to that later.

Robert Baratheon, King of Westeros et. al. died roughly two weeks ago, around the same time we were wrapping up our wight hunt and returning to King Mance's encampment. As soon as King Bob kicked it there was some sort of brief but nasty power struggle between the queen and Stark. Stark apparently uncovered that Bob's three officially legitimate children were anything but, and Queen Cersei promptly accused him of treason and threw him in the dungeon. As you do.

You know what, we'll get back to that later.

This is where I reenter the story, as Stark's eldest daughter called me on the communicator as we were about to leave Castle Black and told me everything that had happened. Or at least the high points, as she had heard them. She asked me for help and… to be honest I wasn't going to turn her away. I don't know if I'm capable of turning away that kind of request. So I said yes, even though
that meant wadding up General Order One and tossing it in the bin. I sent my two auxiliaries to go fetch Stark from the dungeons whilst I went to retrieve Sansa Stark and inform the new king of my discoveries.

It… didn't go well. Legitimate or otherwise—and honestly I'm not sure I care either way—King Joffrey is a very dangerous little cuss. When we first met I didn't think highly of the boy, he seemed full of himself and not terribly pleasant, and becoming king doesn't seem to have improved his disposition any. His mother isn't much better—maybe worse—and most of the people around him survive by keeping their heads down. And that's after only a week of his reign. Joffrey didn't listen, dismissed the wight head I brought back as proof, and demanded my fealty when pressed. I refused, and things devolved from there.

Now, I'm back in the north, somewhere far away from Winterfell for the moment where I can reflect on my fuckups properly. The strategic rationalization for rescuing the Starks was a good one: I'm going to need the strongest possible leadership in the North to pull off having the free folk south of the Wall, to get people on the Wall as lookouts, to get the North ready for the hammer blow and so on. Robb Stark is a good kid and sharper than he looks, but he's still just a kid. He doesn't have the experience necessary to keep his sworn lords in line. Furthermore, if the Starks were imprisoned or executed in the south that would have northern eyes looking towards King's Landing when they need to be looking towards the Wall. Looking in the wrong place at the wrong time could be fatal. The only man who could in theory keep the North out of a roaring rampage of revenge right now is Eddard Stark, so yanking him out of the dungeon and returning him to the relative safety of Winterfell is the practical thing to do.

But that's just rationalization after the fact. None of that was going through my head when I decided to rescue them. The only thing I was thinking was that they were kind to me when we first encountered each other, and I wasn't going to leave them to that little jackass's dubious mercy if I could help it. So I intervened, and as a result the Iron Throne is now closed to me.

So what happens now? I honestly don't know. Civil war seems almost certain—Stark is convinced that Joffrey isn't legitimate, so he'll throw his weight behind the next official claimant, one of King Bob's brothers. The one I haven't met yet, of course. There may be other claimants, opportunists, general chaos while the lords duke it out (no pun intended) over who gets to be king. But that still leaves the Unbidden in the north. Some are already free, more are likely to get loose as the seasons start to change… and everybody's eyes are still in the south, not where they need to be.

I don't know what I'm going to do.

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**DAVOS**

"The king is dead."

The red woman's pronouncement came in the middle of council. Lord Stannis and those closest to him were standing around Aegon's table, discussing the events of the last few days. Davos Seaworth stood uncertainly in the midst of Stannis's sworn lords and the wise maesters when the shadowbinder walked in.

Stannis looked up at the witch sharply. "How?" he asked.

The red woman looked as serene as ever. "The Lannisters will claim it was a hunting accident."

"And is that true?" Stannis replied.
"Yes and no," said Lady Melisandre. "There was a plot, and the king was not meant to return from his hunt alive, but the arrow that claimed him was more luck than skill or treason." She paused. "Your Grace," she said.

Stannis closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. "Luck," he said. Unnoticed by the other lords, Davos absenty rubbed the pouch where he kept his luck. *We had best hope luck is on our side, soon.* "I thank you for the intelligence," Stannis said finally. The red woman nodded in acknowledgement.

"There is more," she said. "It can wait a moment, however."

"Your Grace," Maester Cressen said uncomfortably, "we must consider what we are to do next. If your brother is dead, then the Lannisters and their spawn now control the capitol. We are in a difficult position without alliances. Perhaps if we were to persuade Lord Renly…"

"Renly should need no persuasion," Stannis said sourly. "He is my younger brother; I have the claim and the right. I shouldn't have to go on my knees like a beggar for his support."

"All very true, Your Grace," Cressen replied. "But these are not normal times." He paused in thought. "Perhaps we might make common cause with the North? Lord Stark was close to your brother, he would not like to see him go unavenged."

"That assumes that Stark isn't already dead," Lord Monford Velaryon pointed out. "Were I a Lannister, I'd get a sword through his heart first thing after securing the crown."

"We should be thankful then that you are not a Lannister, my lord of tides," the red woman said dryly. "The wolf lord has been arrested and thrown into the black cells, but he yet lives."

Velaryon grunted. "Sloppy work," he said.

"An alliance with the Starks, their aid in exchange for their lord?" Cressen mused.

"Perhaps," Stannis said. "I have no love for Stark but he is warden of the North. His allegiance would be useful, if nothing else."

Lady Selyse broke in, her pale eyes shining eagerly in the candlelight. "My family will support my lord husband's claim," she said. The light in her eyes reflected off the ruby necklace she had taken to wearing the past few turns. The red glow made Davos uneasy. There was something deeply and sincerely off about how quickly she'd taken up with the red woman's foreign faith. "If the Tyrells refuse to bend the knee… the Florents have better claim to Highgarden than those upjumped stewards. My father would take the Reach for you if asked, husband."

"Peace, wife," Stannis replied. Lady Selyse—*Queen Selyse now, I suppose*—stilled but looked satisfied by Stannis's words. "Cressen, prepare a letter for Winterfell. Inform them of the Lannister treason and my accession, and offer them our assistance in retrieving Lord Stark from captivity in exchange for their allegiance."

"That will not be necessary, I think, Your Grace," said the red woman. "Though you should still send the letter. There are… other factors that will require your attentions soon enough."

The whole council turned as one to look at Lady Melisandre. "Other factors," the king echoed hollowly, his jaw set. "My lady, your counsel has been helpful these past turns but you speak too vaguely. I would have you explain yourself in plain language for one. What do you mean by 'other factors?'"
For the first time since the foreign priestess had arrived on Dragonstone, Davos saw the woman look uncomfortable. One hand went up and idly twisted one of the long streaks of ash-gray hair that sprouted from her red locks. "Your Grace, I have spoken to you of my counterpart, the green sorceress from Ulthos," she said slowly. "Her studies of Westeros have uncovered things that you will have to divert your attention to, sooner rather than later."

"Sooner than pressing my rightful claim to the Iron Throne." Stannis said flatly.

The red woman kept playing with the grey lock. "I take no joy in telling you this, Your Grace. Your claim is rightful and should be pressed… but your true enemy is not the child of incest sitting in King's Landing. The true enemy is in the north beyond the Wall, and you will need to fight him with all your strength or he will crush all of Westeros in his grasp. You must go north, King Stannis."

Stannis cut the red woman off with a wave of his hand. "I will go north when I have settled things with the boy Joffrey," he said sharply. "You may leave, my lady." The red woman looked startled and displeased, but recovered her composure and left gracefully.

Maester Cressen nodded. "A wise decision, Your Grace," he said.

"Wise? Perhaps," replied Stannis. "For now, we needs concentrate on the Lannisters. Only when the throne is secure will we be in a position to worry about whatever snarks and grumkins the witch is afraid of."

The council went on further into the night, the king making his plans. Eventually, the need for sleep overcame Davos and he begged leave. Stannis, who seemed inexhaustible, gave him leave and the smuggler turned knight stumbled out of his king's solar in search of his small apartments.

The red woman intercepted him before he could find his bed. "Lord Davos," she greeted him.

Davos gave the woman a puzzled stare. "No lord, milady, just a knight," he said in reply.

She smiled mysteriously. "Not yet," she said. "I wish to ask a favor of you, Ser."

"I've no interest in your red god."

"I do not ask for your faith, Ser Davos," Melisandre said smoothly. "Tell me, do you trust your lord?"

Davos touched his luck again. "He gave me everything."

"Aye, but do you trust him?"

"I…" Davos thought about it. Years before he had been a smuggler, then Stannis shortened his hand and made him a knight. His sons would rise alongside him, perhaps rise above him in time. "I do, milady."

Melisandre smiled. "And that is what I ask of you, good ser. Trust your lord and keep his trust in you. Our paths are difficult, but the Lord of Light sees us through even the darkest of nights." Her eyes glowed like Selyse's, and Davos wondered what this red god of the east was that could inspire such fervor.

"Tell me, milady," he asked on impulse, "you speak so openly to great lords. How do you do so and not fear them?"

Melisandre faded back into the shadows of the corridor. "I fear nothing," she said. "All is as R'hllor
LOG ENTRY: SURFACE DAY 190.3

This is a formal record to be released to Federal authorities in the event I'm... no longer available to be debriefed in person.

The date is July 11th, 391 UEC, time 1326 hours Fleet standard. This is Captain Jade Hasegawa, commander of Federal Starfleet Ranger Corps vessel Carefree Victory reporting from the surface of FSC-29294 III, known as "Planetos" by the indigenous population.

By the authority vested in me by the Starfleet Charter, I am hereby declaring an emergency under the provisions outlined in Section Three of General Order One, and I am invoking all necessary intervention and protection clauses as required by regulation.

I have concrete evidence that this planet is under direct, immediate existential threat from non-native entities. Furthermore, the threat isn't confined to only one world: based on direct interaction with these entities I fully believe that they intend to use Planetos as a beachhead for further expansion into our galaxy.

The entities were confined to a specific section of Planetos an indeterminate number of years ago by the Builders; apparently a previous Builder experiment involving psionics either summoned the entities or transported them, I'm honestly not sure which. Not sure it even matters at this point. The entities—called "the Unbidden" by the Builders and known as "the Others" by the indigenous population—are high-level psionics capable of feats outclassing any Federal psi knowledge, and seem to consider any life that isn't them at best livestock or chattel. However, the Unbidden seem to be locked into a... theme for lack of a better word. They manifest as cryogenic beings, most of their abilities use cold to one extent or another. Heat-based phenomena seem to be significantly better at countering Unbidden abilities than any other countermeasure. Whether this is an inherent issue with the Unbidden or some sort of weakness introduced into them by the Builders is... I can't say.

The Builders defeated the Unbidden and locked them away in some sort of holding facility in the far north of Planetos. Roughly 8,000 years ago the defenses weakened enough for some Unbidden to escape. The escapees were killed or returned to captivity by an alliance of the local indigenous species. At some point in the recent past the defenses started to weaken again and my ship and I were diverted to the surface by a Builder-enhanced species of sessile psionics. It seems they needed assistance and I was the closest thing to a Builder within their radius of effect.

Compounding the situation, the indigenous human population is currently... fractured. The society immediately bordering the incursion zone is facing a nascent civil war over a succession dispute. My previous interactions with these people—detailed in prior log entries—did little to stop this conflict. In the end, based on my personal interactions with certain players I did something no Starfleet officer ever should do in a low-tech conflict: I took a side. As a result, I may not have started this conflict but I almost certainly exacerbated it beyond where it might have otherwise gone. Furthermore, at least one side in the war is unlikely to listen to any warnings regarding the Unbidden threat.

My actions violated General Order One in letter and spirit. I offer no defense for that, all I can do is attempt to make it right.

I don't know if I can stop the civil war. Not yet, anyway.

I don't know if I can save the Seven Kingdoms from their rulers' foolishness.
I don't know if I can save Planetos from extinction at the hands of the Builders' mistakes.

...

...

...

But I'm going to *fucking try*.

***END LOG***
THE WESTEROSI

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
Sean “Mal-3” Breen

BASED ON
“A Song of Ice and Fire” by George R. R. Martin
AND
(loosely)
“Star Trek” by Gene Roddenberry, Gene Coon, D. C. Fontana, Robert Justman, David Gerrold, et. al.
“The Martian” by Andy Weir
…and many, many more…

CAST
(in order of appearance)
Brandon Stark
Melisandre of Asshai
Brynden Rivers
Jade Hasegawa
Eddard Stark
Robb Stark
Jon Snow
Maester Luwin
Theon Greyjoy
Sansa Stark
Moqorro of Volantis
Arya Stark
Lord Varys
Grand Maester Pycelle
Jeor Mormont
Ser Alliser Thorne
Tyrion Lannister
Ser Jaime Lannister
Robert Baratheon
Joffrey Baratheon
Mance Rayder
Thoros of Myr
Tommen Baratheon
Myrcella Baratheon
Catelyn Stark
Cersei Lannister
Renly Baratheon
Sarella Sand
Archmaester Marwyn “the Mage”
Illyrio Mopatis
Maester Cressen
Shireen Baratheon
Stannis Baratheon
Benjen Stark
Petyr Baelish
Ser Gregor Clegane
Ser Loras Tyrell
Maester Aemon Targaryen
Ygritte of the North
The Lord of Bones
Rogdel of the North
Darold of the North
Qhorin Halfhand
Walder of the Night's Watch
Ser Waymar Royce (deceased)
The Others
George the Singer
Orik of the North
Ser Meryn Trant
Walder of Winterfell
Ser Davos Seaworth
Monford Velaryon
Selyse Baratheon
and
Euron Greyjoy

Visual Effects by ILLUMINATI LIGHT AND MAGIC
Carefree Victory designed by Adam Kopala, based on a design by Masao Okazaki

MUSIC
“Creata (Canon Edit)” composed by Seth Peelle
“Rocky Mountain High” composed by John Denver
“Privateer” composed by Michael “Moonwolf” Longcor
“The Horse-Tamer's Daughter” composed by Leslie Fish
“Enterprising Young Men” and “A Hive and Kicking” composed by Michael Giacchino
“Eternity Served Cold” composed by Malcolm Brown
“Three Blasts” composed by Ramin Djawadi
“Briefing 1” composed by Keiki Kobayashi
“Victory” composed by Neal Acree & Derek Duke
“Do You Know Who I Am?” composed by Steve Jablonsky
“Atomic Bonsai” composed by Joren “Tensei” de Bruin
“Weight of the World” composed by Keiichi Okabe, performed by Emi Evans

Soundtrack available on Fnord Records

SPECIAL THANKS TO
The ASoIaF Meta Analysis Community:
Race For the Iron Throne (racefortheironthrone.blogspot.com)
Wars and Politics of Ice and Fire (warsoficeandfire.tumblr.com)
Poor Quentyn (poorquentyn.tumblr.com)
Good Queen Ally (goodqueenally.tumblr.com)
ASOIAF University (asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com)

Monstercat FM, for the writing dungeon music
live.monstercat.com

The SpaceBattles Constellation:
spacebattles.com
sufficientvelocity.com

Bob & The Gang at The Drunkard's Walk Forums
drunkardswalkforums.yuku.org

The Eternal Embers of the Jihad to Destroy Barney the Purple Dinosaur

All Our Readers

The Authors of the First Amendment

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No animals, wights or Lannisters were harmed in the making of this fanfic

Keep Circulating the Tapes

He had been at sea when the falling star came. That was the way things turned out for him, really; always in the right place at the right moment to seize upon events. A religious man might say the gods looked on him with favor. And who was to say they were wrong? Perhaps they were.

The captain watched the star fall to the north and west, then immediately turned his ship and sailed eastwards. The crew did as commanded, without complaint, because there was no other thing they could do. Aboard ship the captain was king, and this king demanded absolute loyalty. They sailed to a quiet place in the Stepstones where they could replenish stores without notice, then immediately the captain turned them eastwards, past the Free Cities and towards the smoking ruins of old Valyria.

If the crew had any objections, they kept silent. Silence was the oath, and the captain kept it ruthlessly. Into the smoking sea that had swallowed so many other adventurers they went. The foul steams coming from the water choked the men. Some died; the captain tossed their bodies overboard himself, guiding the ship through the smokes and steams by some invisible lodestone.

At night, the ship was beset by visions of the downfall of Valyria, of fountains of flame, the sinking of cities and the death-cries of untold numbers of dragons. More men died, or went mad, assaulted by these visions. The captain seemed to revel in the visions, gazing raptly into the whirlwind of blood and fire as if searching for something specific.

Twenty days into the smoking sea, the Silence made landfall on a flat outcrop of rock. The captain and a hundred of his slaves went into the dead island with picks and shovels. As his men went to work as silently as they rowed, the Crow's Eye looked upon the Valyrians' works and called them good.

Euron Greyjoy chuckled quietly to himself. His brothers may not sow, but he was not so particular. The ancient, empty promise of the iron price held no true allure for the Crow's Eye. Oh, he wasn't above taking what he wanted by force—old habits died hard—but there were things that just could not be had with steel. Or with gold, for that matter. Some things needed to be carefully grown, tended with loving care. His Silence wouldn't be as feared had he not cultivated his reputation as skillfully as a farmer cultivated his crops.

Then, there were the things that must be delved for. Nothing grew in Valyria, but there were so many interesting things buried under the ash. All it took was a man of singular vision to go there and just dig.

A whistle caught the Crow's Eye's attention. One of his slaves was waving from a section of the dig. Smiling cheerfully all the while, Greyjoy strode over to examine the find. He crouched down and lovingly brushed the dirt and ash from from the object's surface, revealing the golden color veined with blue stone. He traced the outline of the runes carved into it. It was perfect, exactly what he had searched for. Elsewhere his slaves piled up a mound of Valyrian steel scale. That would be useful in itself, but here, this fragment of dragonlord sorcery was the true prize.

With this, he would finally get what he always wanted.

The Crow's Eye chuckled merrily as he stroked the buried device. His slaves shied back as his chuckles turned to laughs that echoed hollowly across the dead stone and smokey skies.
Captain Hasegawa Will Return

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