A Song of Ice and Fires That Weren’t All My Fault

by Puzzled

Summary

Our friendly neighborhood wizard along with his daughter is thrown from the top of Chichen Itza into Braavos of the Hundred Isles. That was two years ago, now after struggling out of the gutter Harry is back on his feet and his luck is coming back.
1.

It was raining in Braavos. It was always raining in Braavos. At one time that had been a selling point. Braavos, the foggy swamp where no fire-breathing flying lizards will kill you and enslave your entire family and force them into volcanic mines! I was reluctant to admit it was a decent pitch.

As I walked along the canal trying to step over the puddles that dotted the stone path the amulet I was holding twitched. The movement was a little stronger than the last time, the closer it got to the turn of the tides the stronger my tracking spell got. At the moment they changed I could have found anything, but that one moment of clarity was drowned out by the rest of the day’s slow moving water grounding out my spells. I was close though, the item, a shipment of silk stolen off of a quay was on this island. I turned to the slight man who’d been following me as I tramped all over Braavos “We’re near. If you want to get any of your buddies, now’s the time.” The guard of the silk’s nominal owner nodded but didn’t make a move. “Your boss hired me to find the cargo, aren’t you going to get it back?”

“There’s no need Dresden.” It was the first time the man spoke in half an hour. My old shtick back home of being irritating chatty didn't really fly here, especially when none of my well timed quips and jokes were anything anyone had ever heard of. Well except Maggie but as she was raised in Guatemala until she was eight I assumed her pop culture knowledge base was a little less broad than mine. The short man turned from staring at the canal back to me. “We knew where the silk went from the beginning.”

“This was a test.” stating the obvious was one conversational gambit that still worked.

“Just so” The slight man began to walk back the way we came. “We were aware of your claims and spoke to some of your previous clients. Your reputation is well founded but it is said that sorcery is a sword without a hilt. We wanted to see if it was true yours was safe to grasp.”

“And are you satisfied?” I might have been irritated once at being challenged. Here in this world where I was the only thing keeping my daughter safe I was willing to swallow a lot of my pride.

“Indeed Dresden.” He handed me an oiled envelope. “You’ll find a draft on our account inside, my employers will contact you for further work if its needed.” With that the man resumed his silence as we continued to walk towards the residential part of the city.

“Who are your employers and how will I know them?”

“They are a consortium of trading houses and merchants, anyone from our group will pay half in advance from the same account on the draft you’re holding.”

“Good enough for me then.” Honestly I was relieved, I’d have worked for the local mafia as long as they paid on time. I had kept my abilities limited, people only knew I could find anything in the city as long as they had a part of it. Finding people seemed like a dangerous skill to admit having, helping identify thieves and possible murderers for the city based on their loot was as far as I would go. For Maggie’s sake I wouldn’t make any enemies. A trading firm was much more palatable though, the Iron Bank wouldn’t admit to having an account for criminals, at least until they had enough wealth they could join the upper classes.
Staying useful to everyone and not a threat to anyone was a fine line to walk, thugs had tried to shake me down a few times, one nice thing about the canals everywhere was that I could throw the mooks around a lot harder without worrying about the first law. My coat had saved me from at least one stabbing although I didn't think that had to do with my work and the threat of my little ball of sunshine had prevented any of the local talent from trying anything. After two years of struggle I was finally feeling like things had gone back to the way they were in Chicago, I even had my same ad:


Past the whole medieval Venice/Holland thing going on the only real change was my family. I’d lost all of my friends in the event that had transported Maggie and I here, but I did see the Red Court die as we left so I was hopeful that they had survived. I worried for them, but having Maggie here made her my first priority beyond finding a way back.

The guard split off as we reached the island I lived on, he had further to go towards the harbor. I could feel the wards on my house as soon as I stepped off the bridge, living with Maggie had given me a threshold immensely stronger than my old burned apartment and I had spared nothing on the defenses. I often wished Bob had come with us just so he could see the work I had done without him. For the first six months I hadn’t let Maggie out of my sight but now with the wards, the locks, and the help of the wives and families in the neighborhood I felt confident enough to leave her for part of the day.

Two years in it wasn’t as big a shock to see her. She still had Susan’s complexion even in the perpetually cool, cloudy and rainy Braavosi weather and she was beginning to look almost coltish from the height she got from me. I could see her with her friends, she had adapted marvelously from her suburban life to being kidnapped by vampires and then thrown into a fantasy world with a man claiming to be her long lost father. She spoke the numerous languages of Braavos with fluency I couldn’t match, I had learned some Braavosi but the so called common tongue of the Andals was much closer to English and I used that whenever possible. We had both learned to read, her almost embarrassingly quicker than I but I’d made too many friends in books to be illiterate. “Papa” she cried on seeing me “did you find it?”

I smiled as I shouted back “Of course, that’s why you get to hang around all day and have fun while I crawl in the mud!” She laughed, the other fathers on the island told me I was lucky to still be in the stage where I was my daughter’s hero. I knew I didn’t deserve it but that didn’t stop me from loving it.

She ran back towards her friends, they were giggling about something, apparently gossip was universal. I lowered the wards as I walked up to our house, the first room going in was where I met clients, behind that was the start of the house, a two story stone building that backed onto a shared courtyard. It was larger than my apartment had been and while lacking many comforts it was a home. The bedrooms and my lab were upstairs, I had replicated Little Chicago and I had the start of a library. Maggie had recently shown her first signs of magic and I wanted to ensure that all the magic I knew and the laws were preserved in case anything happened to me.

I wasn’t too worried. Braavos was a peaceful and strong city, unlike the kingdom across the sea or the other free cities there were no hereditary nobles. In many ways Braavos was the best city to land in. Finding lost items was more lucrative here than in Chicago, I had a healthy amount saved in the Iron Bank and even owned a partial share in a trading cog who’s captain owed me for finding his stolen cargo. It wasn’t America or the twenty first century, but it was home and had my family. Things certainly could be worse.
My lab was a mess. In Chicago sharing the space with Molly had led to some clutter but nothing like here. I missed my three ring binders full of notes, all of the materials for spells and potions and most of all Bob. I’d say I was a fairly well educated and skilled wizard but compared to Bob’s knowledge of the obscure and esoteric I was an apprentice again. Here I had several tables covered in parchment, the notes of all the magic I was trying to preserve for Maggie. The heavy wooden tables were scorched in places, she shared my affinity for fire and brutish magic and I was happier for it. Training her was the opposite of Molly, if I’d given her the beaded bracelet Molly had struggled with she’d have blown it up. Maggie wouldn’t have the temptation to mess with her friends’ heads though and her talents would allow her to follow in my footsteps as a detective if she wanted. Of course I hoped to be around for a long time coming but planning for the worst never hurt anyone.

The lab overlooked the canal along the long side of the island, Maggie and her friends weren’t visible but I wasn’t worried, no one would let anything happen here. It had taken a year of constant work but I’d managed to acquire our current home on an island of the upper middle class. There were houses of silversmiths, bankers and the families of ship captains along with extremely visible and regular guard patrols. It was probably the safest part of the city given that the true upper class had an obsession with dueling to the death that the more mercantile citizens disdained. The neighbors were friendly people, I had told them a version of the truth, that Maggie and I were stranded here in the same accident that had killed her mother. They had reacted with an extremely polite lack of curiosity which I was grateful for. Life was good, one of the silversmiths was even collaborating with me on the development of a small printing press. I wasn’t in any position to go all Connecticut Yankee on Braavos but I felt I could advance things in some small ways. My GED hadn’t focused too much on Medieval Europe but Braavos seemed like it was on the verge of when the Renaissance should show up. If in the future the Dresden-Koren press was lauded as the spur to literacy like Gutenberg I wouldn’t complain.

There were other projects I was working on, maintaining my model of Braavos was a constant struggle and I was working on a world map by buying the charts of sailors whenever I saw them. Essos, the continent I lived on, was dominated by the free cities which were founded by or against the fallen dragon empire. There was a massive river, comparable to the Amazon or Mississippi back home into the interior, a vast plain called the Dothraki sea. Mongol like horseman roamed the grasslands occasionally raiding and sacking the cities surrounding it. Braavos was safe from their deprivations though, apparently they feared salt water.

Across the narrow sea was Westeros, the sunset lands. They had just finished a civil war when Maggie and I had arrived, apparently caused by a mad inbred king. It sounded like a feudal dystopia and I was glad we had landed where we were rather than in some Hundred Years wars type struggle.

My main magical project past detective work was enchantment. I had been able to create objects that I could use and power for years but I wanted to make something like a Warden’s sword. An object that anyone could use without their own magic. My results after six months of hard work were rudimentary, I finally understood the difficulty Luccio must have had after switching bodies. I’d taken a month to make a rope that couldn’t be broken by any load applied but that was the highpoint. I wouldn’t be making Durandal anytime soon.

Despite my failures in item creation, finding lost things was my principal source of income and we lived well on it. Maggie had everything she needed and most of what she wanted, while I had enough to play around and try to improve my magic. My reputation was solid in the city, improved by the last job and I felt that my efforts with the smiths would allow me, or possibly Maggie if they were slow, to see the technology of the world we left behind. While I would go back to Chicago if I could Braavos was much better than I’d feared the consequences of the Winter Mantle would be.
Naturally this introspection was ruined by a knock on the door below. Looking out the window I saw a well dressed man who looked deeply uncomfortable on the edge of the canal. Using my carefully honed deductive skills I surmised he was a potential client. I was tempted to ignore him and call it a day but the mercenary instincts honed over a desperate year of taking every job to provide for Maggie stopped me. I hurried down the stairs and went to the front to greet the man.

“Harry Dresden, I am Noho Dimittis. I would like to hire your services.” Noho wore the dark colors typical of the somber city and based on his hands worked in an office.

“Come in” I told him, “and have a seat.” He did and I moved around to sit at my desk. “So Dimittis, what can I do for you.”

He leaned forward “It is said that you can find anything if you are given a small part of it. Is this true?”

“Mostly, there are limits, but if you tell me what you’re looking for I’ll tell you if I can be of any use.”

Noho sat for a moment, seemingly trying to decide if the particulars were worth sharing. Eventually he made up his mind and put a small bag on the desk, “I represent a firm that had a vault plundered, but not completely. The thieves missed these coins.”

I reached for the bag glancing up at Noho to see if he minded, he didn’t, and I slid the coins out. There was nothing special about them, square iron coins of the type commonly found in Braavos, minted and backed by the ferrous obsessed Iron Bank. I rolled one of the coins between my fingers as I thought, it was something my Dad had taught me when I was young and traveling with him as a stage magician. It was also good therapy for my burned hand which Noho had seemed to have just noticed and was staring at queasily. I saw his discomfort and stopped, I had gotten used to the appearance but it was horrifying on the first glance. It was getting better thanks to the miracle of magic but Noho probably wouldn’t appreciate seeing it even in another ten years.

“I may be able to locate the rest of the coins from the vault with these but I make no promises.” I looked out at the canal, the water was almost at its highest and the time for a tracking spell that had an incredibly weak link was approaching. I scooped up the bag and stood. “If you wait here for two bells” Braavos used a naval time-keeping scheme as befitted a city founded by sailors, “I’ll either have results or I won’t be able to help you.”

Noho nodded as I began to walk towards the back and the stairs. “If my daughter comes in, tell her I’m working and to find something to stay busy with” I called back as I went up the stairs, if he replied I didn’t catch it as I began to focus on the problem.

Coins from a vault were not very similar thaumaturgically speaking. I could certainly use the coin to find other coins that were near but if I tried that blindy Little Braavos would just show me the famous vaults of the Iron Bank where the largest concentration of coins in the city was. Or so I assumed, some merchant prince might have chests full but either way it wouldn’t work very well. Instead I had to use the bag of coins, to try to feel out their common past and from that where the rest was. It was a delicate spell and I wasn’t altogether sure it would work especially with all of the water in the city. I tied the bag of coins to a lanyard hanging over the city model, washed myself briefly to try to remove any other influences I’d picked up wandering and waited.

The moment the tides changed was detectable, not like sunrise or sunset in their rigid demarcation but a softer feeling, perhaps a drawn out note rather than a percussive pulse. It was that moment I was waiting for, when all of the water in Braavos was still, magically speaking, for my tracking spell. It was coming up, when I felt it I muttered my spell and fed power into the model and the coins.
Somewhat to my surprise the bag of coins spun towards an island. I looked at it, trying to think of the area. It was a nice place, more upscale than my island with villas and larger houses. I had even seen a few trees there which were a mark of extreme wealth on the rocky islands. Knowing which island the rest of the coins were on was probably enough, if Noho and I left now we could make there well before sunset and get a more precise location.

I went back to my office, Noho had been reading something from a ledger and making notes and looked up as he saw me. “Good news” I said “I’ve narrowed it down to one island, if you come with me now we can find the house they’re in. That’s as far as I’ll go though, if you want retrieval you’d better find some other help.”

We went out, I grabbed one of the wives watching the children and asked her to keep an eye on Maggie, she agreed. Noho had gotten the attention of a gondolier in the meantime, we boarded it as the man gave my size a dismayed look. Noho was a true Braavosi, other than asking the price if we found the coins he was somber and silent. The only color in the grey city was of its Bravos, young men with nothing better to do than drink and fight for outrageous reasons. They reminded me of the Sidhe courts in a way, minor slights became feuds that turned bloody all behind a polite facade. None were out though, it was still early afternoon and they were all likely sleeping off their hangovers.

We reached the island, Noho paid the man as I focused on the bag of coins. It swayed down along the shoreline and we followed it until we reached a palatial home with a red door. Noho reacted for the first time in our trip showing slight surprise. “Well Dresden your reputation is deserved. It’s amusing the thieves stayed here but you could not have known in advance who they were. You’ll have your payment and the thanks of the Iron Bank.”

I was shocked, I knew that I was becoming well known especially after the little test this morning but this was something else. The Iron Bank was reputed to have toppled kings and ruined princes, it was the driving force of the city and probably owned half of it. It wasn’t anywhere near as powerful as some I’d worked for though, so I kept my poker face. “It was a pleasure to assist. I didn’t realize you had actually had individual vaults, I thought it was all kept in your ledgers.” as I nodded towards his heavy satchel.

“Most are, like your own for instance” he replied. “Some clients prefer more physical proof that their riches are present, this vault belonged to one of them.”

“Well keep up the good work then, I hope you recover the rest of the account.” Noho handed me a draft, and I managed to grab another boat. Something about pushing someone six and a half feet tall around seemed to make the gondoliers annoyed. As the ride ended I tipped the gasping man, the tide was against us the whole way, and went home a second time. I lit the stove as Maggie came back in laughing, we had dinner, spent an hour playing with fire and meditation, I sent her to bed as I began to set the wards for the night. It had been a good day, two cases two successes and very real proof I was moving up in the world. Naturally the next morning Noho was back at the door with friends.

3.

Neither of the two new faces looked particularly dangerous and as Noho was an office worker, I wasn’t too worried about their intentions. I just had no idea what their intentions were, the Iron Bank couldn’t be robbed everyday and I doubted they were seeking me out for my incredibly vague awareness of 21st century accounting. Deciding the simplest way to find out what they were up was to ask I did.

Noho introduced his friends, Johannes Bille and Willas Morin, fellow employees of the Iron Bank. Johannes, a corpulent fellow who was about my age started their explanation. “The vault that was
stolen from, that you found the remainder of, belonged to a prominent man.”

“Belonged?” I asked “Did he lose it or is he dead?”

“The second I’m afraid, just three days ago. His death was what allowed the thieves, his former servants, to succeed. They had a draft he signed and were able to withdraw almost all of his money, leaving only a little to avert suspicion. It was only when the man, Ser Willem Darry, didn’t arrive at the bank for a pre-arranged meeting that we were concerned.” Johannes had a soft voice incongruous with his bulk. “Normally retrieving the money would be the end of the matter, Ser Darry had no heirs of the body and after dealing with any debts or bequests the account would be closed and the Iron Bank would hold onto the remainder.”

“So what’s different in this case? I never met the man and other than my involvement in locating the thieves, which you probably could have done given their location, his banking details aren’t relevant to me.”

“We would like to hire you again” Noho said. “Ser Darry had made an agreement with the bank that we are unable to fulfill ourselves.”

“You want me to find something for a dead man?” It seemed a little ridiculous, who’s will included quests for lost items?

“But at all Dresden” the third man, Willas, spoke for the first time, “We want you to find someone for a dead man. Two someones in particular.”

“I can’t do people, look for a bounty hunter if you’re trying to claw back debts owed him.” I could of course find a person given something of theirs but it was a dangerous skill. Some people really don’t want to be found and I’d prefer not to make enemies based on what I could do.

“You can find what they’re carrying though?” Johannes continued “If you had part of something that one of the persons was carrying as long as they held it you could find them?” It was always annoying to realize that just because we were in the dark ages people weren’t necessarily stupid. Even wizards got tripped up by that link and a random banker had deduced it.

“I might be able to find them if they’re still in the city” I admitted. “But just because I can doesn’t mean I will. Who are the people you’re looking for and why did Ser Darry want them found?”

The three bankers exchanged looks. Noho looked aggrieved as he explained. “Ser Darry was from Westeros, he fought on the losing side of their little war and fled to Braavos to escape persecution. However he did not come alone, he had the son and daughter of one of his closest friends with him and he set aside his remaining wealth and property for their benefit. The Iron Bank agreed to look after them until the son was old enough to fend for himself and his sister.” Noho sat for a moment looking for some reaction from me. The story of the rich exile was interesting but hardly unusual but Noho had looked for recognition of something. I had never heard of Ser Darry but perhaps I should look him up.

“So the thieving servants evicted the children from the house and now they’ve been wandering Braavos for three days?”

“Just so.”

“Alright I’ll look for the children, I’m trusting the reputation of your Bank to keep you honest but if I find you’ve lied the acts of the Bank’s keyholders will be the least of your worries.” The bankers looked unruffled by my threat, given the stories about the Bank’s reprisals that was a good sign for
their honesty. “What else should I know about the children, ages, hair colors, oh and their names?”

“The two children both have Lyseni coloring, silver blonde hair, Viserys is eleven and Daenerys is three. They both had sheltered upbringings and I doubt either is prepared to survive on the streets”

I sat back and acted like I was thinking but really I would have found the children for free if they’d asked. Seeing Maggie bound and threatened by monsters had left me with little tolerance for frightened kids. Children grew up faster here but an eleven year old shouldn’t be on the streets looking out for his sister. “Alright I’ll try. What do you have for me to use?”

Willas pulled a ruby the size of my thumbnail from his pocket. “This was set in a necklace Viserys will never take off. Is it sufficient?” I took the ruby, and hefted it. Selling the rock back home would have brought more money than I earned in five years. It paid to be nobility I guess. “I’ll find the necklace and if he’s still wearing it I’ll find him”

Noho shared another look with his colleagues and then spoke up “Excellent, we will pay five times what we did for the coins, once you have the children bring them to the main office of the bank.”

“If you’ve all told the truth and I find them, I’ll bring them in.” I was hoping the job would go smoothly, for lost items I charged a percentage of the value, Ser Darry had been rich and the previous day had been more than enough for half a year, the bank must be worried about their aura of infallibility if they were paying this much. The three men left and I saw them board a gondola back towards the city’s financial center.

It was a few hours till the tides changed and while the ruby necklace link was stronger than the coins I didn’t trust it enough over water. Maggie had finally woken up, she was usually up earlier but her exercises in magic last night had worn her out more than she’d admitted. She humored me by staying in to eat breakfast then ran off to join her friends in their plot to take over the island and the city. Or something.

I went up to my lab and began to consider what I’d need for the job. Braavos was a fairly safe city as they went but all cities have bad spots. Two children out alone for the first time and probably panicked couldn’t be trusted to even know where the safe spots were. Slavery was illegal here but I had encountered some in my desperate first year who wouldn’t hesitate to take an unattended child. I put on my shield bracelet and grabbed a chain I’d worked on to function something like Elaine’s lighting whip. Without a convenient wall socket it was a bit less useful but I was able to dial down the power through it so that it merely hit like a taser. A lot of my more deadly tools I’d relied on in Chicago weren’t that useful when all I could fight here were vanilla mortals. After fighting vampires, faeries, ghouls and ancient monsters, humans tended to seem a little squishy. That wasn’t to say they couldn’t be dangerous, Murphy alone was proof of what a motivated person could do, but I was much more limited in high end power against humans. Unless I wanted to go mad but a little difficulty seemed like a decent tradeoff.

I set the chain in a pile along with my duster and a few of my kinetic rings. I looked at my blasting rod but decided against it, I did take my staff though. It was of the first things I’d made coming here, the one I’d borrowed from Ebenezer didn’t make the transition and I’d needed the versatile tool immediately. It was six feet of oak, it lacked the resonance of my old lightening struck staff but after two years I was used to it. I’d recently bought two pieces of a bone white wood that felt much more attuned to me but they weren’t ready, I was teaching Maggie step by step how to make her own staff so I was limited to the speed of a ten year old. My current staff was good enough for today’s work though so I laid it down with the rest of my gear.

I had time until the tidal shift came so I did what I usually did in my downtime, writing notes about magic and the world we came from. It was strange to think that almost all of the important magic I’d
learned came from my grandfather and now to my daughter. I would have liked to talk with Ebenezer about why he never told me except that I understood. Keeping secrets kept me safe and I would probably have done the same thing in his place. I would have liked to learn more about my mother though, it seemed everyone knew her and I’d like to have more than Thomas’s memories about Maggie’s namesake.

As time passed I began to think more about the case. I’d have one shot to locate the island the necklace, and hopefully Viserys, were on. People were a little different from coins or crates of silk in that they could move themselves. It could take an hour to get to where they were if I was unlucky, in that time they could have traveled just as far. I’d just have to hope I’d close in on them so that I could find them even with their head start.

Most of the morning passed, Maggie had come in and banged around in her room for a little then went out again as it was about time for her lessons. There was a tutor who came around from island to island for the children of the middle class and they attended as a group, learning the four Rs of Braavos; reading, ’riting, ’rithmetic and rhetoric. The joke lost something here as neither the common tongue of Westeros or any of the Valyrian dialects even had a letter R but as I taught Maggie in English she had politely laughed at the joke.

I left a note for her, so when she got home she’d know what I was up to and having killed enough time performed my tracking spell. Little Braavos had benefitted from my experience with Little Chicago and took the power in smoothly. The ruby moved towards the edge of the city, near the wharves where the ships were berthed. I swore, it wasn’t the worst part but it was close by. Sailors on land always craved certain things and just like back home the red light district was conveniently adjacent along with its accompanying criminal ecosystem.

I put on my gear, grabbed a gondola, for once the tide was in my favor and I tipped the man as we reached my destination after half an hour of travel. Holding the ruby, concealed in a drawstring bag, up I pushed a little power into and felt for the link. Improbably it worked, the necklace was on the island. The ruby led me into a maze of yards and warehouses, goods were transhipped here and temporarily stored. I emerged back onto the shore on the bay side of the island and the necklace felt close. Regrettably the pull was headed towards what looked like a bunch of pawn shops. For a necklace he never took off it hadn’t last very long.

I went into the shop with the strongest tug, the door opening rang a bell and it seemed so normal that I almost forgot I wasn’t in Chicago. The proprietor, a average looking man except for some scars on his arms that made it seem like his life hadn’t always been too ordinary stirred. “Can I help you?” he asked as I walked towards him. I was wearing a black leather coat and carrying a six foot staff after having to duck to get through the door but his voice was calm. “I hope so, I’m looking for a necklace.”

He gestured towards a table off to the side, it was covered in jewelry but most looked fake and certainly none was missing the ruby I held. “The necklace I’m looking for has a bit more character” I drawled, “Isn’t there a place where you keep the better stuff?”

The pawnbroker smiled “I’m not entirely sure what you mean, my entire stock is visible there.” The smile didn’t reach his eyes and one of his hands was below the counter.

I shook my left hand to free up my shield bracelet, I didn’t think the situation wasn’t salvageable but a nervous gesture that would protect me from whatever he had over there was a move born from painful experience. “I’m looking for a golden necklace that you acquired in the last three days. It’s missing a gem in its setting and I’d like to know how you got it.”

The man who I was relabeling from a pawn to a fence didn’t change his expression. “I’ve told you, I
don’t know what you’re talking about.” This was where I missed my reputation back home. In 
Chicago I was thought to be a hitman for Marcone on the mundane side and two steps from 
declaring myself the Dark Lord Dresden on the other. Needless to say most people answered my 
questions, hoping to get me out of their lives and flammable buildings as quickly as possible. Here I 
was known mostly to businesses who wanted to recover lost items, it wasn’t quite the same vibe and 
I was sure the fence had never heard of me. Oh well, a few threats and perhaps some violence would 
serve to start the stories again. I took a step towards the fence, I still hadn’t gotten his name mainly 
because I didn’t want to introduce myself either, lifted my staff and with a minor effort caused the 
runes carved on it to burn with an actinic glare.

He nearly wet himself. “Please don’t” he cried, I heard whatever he had been holding fall to the floor 
as he pressed himself against the back wall. It wasn’t quite the most satisfying reaction I’d ever 
gotten but it was up there. “The necklace is in the back, I got it yesterday from two boys!” Well 
maybe Viserys hadn’t sold it, unfortunately that meant he’d been robbed at the very least, finding the 
two children was even more urgent now.

“Where can I find the thieves?” I growled, as long as the man was terrified I might as well try to get 
all I could.

“They’ll be here in the afternoon with whatever they got today, please have mercy they’re just 
pickpockets, they’ve never killed anyone!” There was a difference between feeling like Batman and 
tormenting a guy so I stepped back and extinguished my staff. He was still staring at it in fascination 
even without the light show.

“We’re going to wait here for them and then they’re going to tell me everything they know.”
The two thieves came after three bells of awkward waiting. They were young, fourteen at the oldest, and their eyes darted around the room looking for any threats. Naturally I was against the entrance wall and slammed the door behind them. They were as brave as the fence had been but it was much less satisfying against a couple of kids. I did the whole light-up staff thing again to set the mood and then held up the necklace. “Tell me everything there is to know about this necklace, I’ll know if you lie.”

The two boys shared a glance, the fence was nodding at them in a way I recognized as “tell the wizard what he wants to know before he burns the block down.” Like laughter, the pantomime describing the fear of seeing everything you own destroyed at the hands of indifferent fate was universal. I wasn’t sure how I’d ended up seeing the latter more than the former but I suspected my guidance counselor was to blame. The shorter of the thieves spoke up “We took it off some kid, he was wandering the Sealord’s Square yesterday.”

“Was he alone?” If the two had split up already finding them would be immensely harder. White blond hair wasn’t too common but enough had it that my chances of finding the correct children would drop dramatically.

“I don’t know we only took the necklace because it visible and we didn’t see any adults with him. The square is too well patrolled for pickpockets normally.”

“Tell me more, was there anything strange about him, anything else you noticed?”

“He chased us when we grabbed the necklace, not too far but he followed. He didn’t shout for the guards when he stopped either, he can’t not have seen them.”

Viserys stopping after a short distance was an encouraging sign. I had been eleven once and if I chased someone who stole my pentacle I wouldn’t have given up that easy. If he was being watched by a knight, he probably had been taught how to fight a little and a big eleven year old could have thought he would win the scuffle. Unless of course he was watching his three year old sister, and had to keep track of her in the crowd. I put out my staff and pocketed the necklace. “I’m keeping this, if you’re lucky none of you will see me again.” I let myself out and began to walk towards the square to consider my next move.

The Sealord’s square reminded me of St. Mark’s in Venice. It was in front of the palace, open to the water on one side and held cast bronze statues of the previous Sealords. I had only been to St. Mark’s once while teaching Molly about navigating the Ways, but the paved square had the same feel, where both tourists and residents went to people watch and wander. The necklace was a dead end, the two thieves had just taken the chance and the fence knew nothing. I considered going back to Iron Bank and admitting my failure but the square was near so it was worth a visit in case inspiration struck.

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Reaching the square from the side of the Purple Harbor gave me a view of the entire area. As I expected it was bustling, street vendors, merchants and sailors wandering through as the first bravos made their appearance. I thought about using the necklace to track Viserys since he had always worn it but I wasn’t sure I could do it. Possessions were a weak link to their owners at the best of times and...
being stolen twice could only further dilute it. I took the necklace out of my pocket hoping to see a strand of hair I’d missed during my inspection earlier, but none had miraculously appeared. I wandered around a little before deciding that as long as I was here it was worth asking the guards if they had seen anything. The first two I tried hadn’t been on duty at the time but the third was more interesting. “No I didn’t see them, but you’re not the first person to ask about them.”

Braavos was a large city but the odds someone else was looking for two kids of the same description who had money coming to them seemed remote. The guard didn’t recall much about the other man asking questions, dark haired, short, no accent and dressed neatly, but enough that I could ask the bank if they’d hired others of that description. If they hadn’t I had to worry about who else was looking. Either way going to the bank was my best move.

The bank was close to the Sealord’s palace, there was probably some one-upmanship going on there with the height of their towers and most subtle opulence they could display without being gauche. I had been many times before, both to cash drafts and to deal with my account. I asked a teller for Noho and after a little waiting another man came and escorted me up to his office.

“No luck Dresden?” he asked after seeing I didn’t have the kids. In response I set the necklace and the ruby down on his desk.

“I found the jewelry and its thieves, but the kids weren’t with it or them. They got mugged in the square.” Noho picked the necklace up and tried to fit the stone in, the ruby fit but one of the prongs, they were carved as claws, was broken off letting the ruby fall out.

“This is clearly the necklace” he agreed “but if Viserys has lost it then you can no longer track him?”

“Not with the necklace” I replied, ”but if you let me into their house there might be something else that he’d have part of.” I was certain that in a house the two had lived in for three years I’d find a hair or three, especially since the servants didn’t seem too dedicated what with throwing out their new employers before the old’s body was even cold. I’d have to fake something else though, I didn’t want anyone to realize how much I could actually do and the bankers had already shown the ability to think about my power. “Another thing, do you have other agents out looking for the kids?”

Noho shook his head “No, our branches have their descriptions but we are a bank, even going so far as to hire you to track children is outside of our usual scope. If it wasn’t for Ser Darry’s contract with us we wouldn’t even go this far usually.”

That ‘usually’ was the stone the bank's reputation rested on, destroy one monarch and no one ever shut up about it. For all that I occasionally missed my reputation, the notoriety was nice to be without. I wasn’t sure whether I should tell Noho about the competition but in the spirit of full disclosure I shared. He didn’t add much but he admitted that the children of formerly prominent Westerosis might be valuable even without knowing of their inheritance. He wrote a quick note to present to the guards on Ser Darry’s house letting me go in and telling the guard to record anything I took from the property and have me sign for it.

Armed with bureaucracy, I traveled back to the house with the red door, the guards let me in without trouble, their leader nearly walked into me as I stopped suddenly after entering. The entrance room to the villa was covered in dragon hangings. I knew that losers of the civil war had the dragon as their banner and from the looks of it Ser Darry was still pulling for them. There were dragons flying, walking, rampant, reposing and most of all burning. I knew that the Valyrians had ridden dragons once, but it was far enough in the past it didn’t strike me. Here were the relics of a dynasty that had conquered most of the known world on the backs of flying lizards.
I wasn’t there to geek out about dragonriders no matter how metal they looked. Riding Sue through Chicago during a zombie apocalypse was up there for album covers but I didn’t feel that it would beat fighting dragon to dragon over two armies. Reluctantly I tore myself away and asked the guard where the children’s rooms were. He didn’t know since he worked for the bank, but we climbed the stairs and investigated. The house was trashed, the servants had indulged themselves in their temporary wealth. Luckily all of the bedrooms except the largest were untouched. A small one looking at the courtyard with a tree out its window yielded several white hairs from the pillow. I palmed them while acting like I was looking for something. The guard didn’t know who I was or my methods but I didn’t doubt that he’d report all he saw to Noho. Noho was aware of my claimed limitations so I needed something that could conceivably work.

Daenerys’s room was a bust on that front, there were some clothes but nothing that could fake a link. We then left and eventually found Viserys’s room. I found and took more hair, with that I was sure I could find them, and then saw what I wanted. His desk had papers on it, after scanning them a few seemed ripped from his journal. It was an expensive habit before mass production but Ser Darry was apparently able to sponsor him. The ripped pages also fit what Noho knew about my skills, finding the book using the ripped pages was similar to the necklace from the stone and I was sure he’d buy it. The only issue would be if Viserys left the journal somewhere the bank discovered it, but it seemed like a negligible risk. I told the guard I was taking the papers and signed a receipt. If I hurried I might be able to make it home for the change of the tides and locate the two children tonight.

It was a close call but I made it. Maggie was home, escaping the drizzle that had caught me for the second half of my trip. I invited her up to watch the magic but she had seen me do tracking spells a hundred times and when I told her that she couldn’t do the spell this time she declined. Kids, give them reality warping powers and all they do is ask what else. Tying Viserys’s hair over the model I was somewhat surprised he had longer hair than his sister, but then again she was three and long hair was fashionable for the young. This case had been more work than I expected, but hopefully this last search would lead me to the children. Once again the tides changed and I exerted my will. The hair flew directly to a poorer district, it was a far better link than the ruby. The hair hung over it for a moment then the pause of the flow ended and it fell. I grabbed the hair, pocketed it and headed out.

I walked this time and every island I crossed to I tried the tracking spell. When I was about halfway there I started getting a pulse in the same direction I was going, there was a reason I never let anyone have my hair or blood and this was it. Even the slightly running water of the canals wasn’t enough interference to stop my spell. The bravos were out in force now, prowling the streets with one hand on their swords. A few looked speculatively at me, but when they saw I wasn’t carrying a sword and was wearing dark clothes they moved on. It was just as well, I could win a fight against almost any number of the bravos but their ensuing humiliation would sweep the streets and bring me into the public eye.

Braavos at night was a different city, the fog that was irritating during the day became something grander in the dark, softening the edges and adding a little mystery and glamor. After two years I was used to it and kept marching through. Six bells rang across the city as I arrived. The hair led me into the island, the streets were cramped and while the buildings were still stone they looked flimsy.

Triangulating by going down a few alleys gave me a fix on their location. I strode into the shadows off the main street and resisted the urge to illuminate it. Overt magic never went over too well even if most did better than the fence this morning. “Viserys, Daenerys, are you there?” Meeting lost children was always a little dicey, one of my first cases back into Chicago had been very similar to this and had almost ended with me arrested for kidnapping.
A blonde boy wearing the remains of expensive clothes stepped forward brandishing a rock. “Who wants to know?” The boy, who I was sure was Viserys, pulled his arm back as if to throw the chunk of stone.

I held up my hands conciliatory, trying to look non threatening. “I’m Harry Dresden. I was hired to find you by the Iron Bank.” Viserys looked conflicted until another shape came out of the shadows.

“You work for the bank? Ser Darry says you’re all snakes we can only trust so far as your contracts run.” The little girl, Daenerys, walked up trying to pass her brother who stepped in front of her.

“Don’t go any closer Dany.”

I crouched down, Viserys was small for his age and I’ll always be a long way up for a three year old. “Ser Darry left you his wealth and house. The servants who threw you out have been arrested, you can go home.” Daenerys looked excited, apparently she was ready to leave the streets but Viserys was more hesitant.

“How do we know you’re not working for the usurper?”

I snorted. “Kid I can’t even name the king over there. Come with me to the bank, I’ll stay twenty yards in front of you the whole way. Let’s just get your sister to a warm bed and you can talk to the bankers.” He searched my face and apparently decided to trust me.

“Alright, you go first and straight to the bank.” Shepherding two children at night through Braavos wouldn’t be the hardest thing I’d ever done. I turned to leave the alley when a man stepped into its mouth.

“He may not work for the Stag King, but I’m sure your heads will get us something over there.”

The gloater had brought friends and they spread out to clog the alley. I looked back at the two children panicking children, “Stay there for a moment.” I turned back towards the thugs but I wasn’t too worried over the vanilla mortals. I readied my shield bracelet and as the men hefted clubs or drew swords I gathered my will and lowered my staff.

“Forzare.” The wave of force, nothing to what I could really do, hit the men like an offensive line. The mass of them were on the ground scrambling and there was definite terror as they saw my glowing staff.

“Infriga!” My second spell was harder, losing the Winter Mantle had made ice less reflexive than when I bore it but some of the finesse had lingered. I drew the moisture out of the air and froze their clothes and weapons to the ground. They would escape eventually with no permanent damage but well after we were gone. “Viserys! Daenerys!” I shouted as I turned, “It’s time to go.” Apparently dealing with assassins had proven my bonafides, the two stuck close to me as we passed the iced over men. Both were staring at me with awe and Viserys’s mouth was opening and closing in shock.

I pulled them both in closer as we hurried through the streets. If there was one band of cutthroats out there, there might be more. I also didn’t know how they had found the children, could they have followed me? The thought sent ice through my veins, if they had followed me they would know where I lived, they would know where Maggie lived.
Viserys and Daenerys were struggling to keep up with my pace. I wanted to sprint home but I
wouldn’t leave them undefended when they had already escaped death once tonight. I reached down
and picked up Daenerys, Viserys looked like he might object but his eyes flicked to my now dark
staff and he silently increased his pace to keep up with me. After an eternity of dark streets and water
where my mind was going through everything that could have happened to Maggie we reached my
island. I had given Maggie a pentacle like my own and I had done the spell enough that sensing it
was easy. The pull was in towards the courtyard, still holding Daenerys with Viserys at my heels I
entered it drawing in power just in case.

The courtyard was dark, the moon wasn’t out and the ever present clouds dimmed the stars. There
was just enough light that I could see Maggie was sitting on the edge of the central fountain next to
someone I didn’t recognize. Looking around the rest of the square showed it was deserted although I
could see lights in a few of my neighbors windows. I walked towards the two of them, setting down
Daenerys. “Maggie what have I told you about talking to strangers?”

“Not to! But she knew my name and yours, so she wasn’t a stranger.” Maggie seemed calm, the first
year we’d been here she’d been nervous around anyone she didn’t know and had flashbacks to her
time with the vampires. The woman rose to her feet and turned to face me. She was tall and slender,
dressed in a dark cloak but the most striking thing was her mask. It was red, looked to be made of
lacquered wood and hid all but her eyes and mouth. The shock of seeing it made me call Maggie to
my side. She came quickly, there had been enough close calls that she recognized when it was
necessary to obey without question. Feeling somewhat more secure with all of the important parts of
my life behind me I continued to inspect the woman. She had smiled a little at the urgency of my
voice but now what I could see of her face was as blank as the rest of her mask.

“You daughter has a fitting name, Warden.”

When the last word left her lips I reacted. I had been on edge ever since the earlier fight and her
knowing things she couldn’t scared me. My staff blazed with power as I pulled water from the
fountain drenching her and then I ripped the heat from it, encasing her in ice. “You are going to tell
me where you heard that name” I spat out.

“Maegi? It means wise surely a traveler like yourself would know that.” Despite being covered in an
inch of ice and minutes away from hypothermia her voice was calm.

I stared at her, with her frozen time was on my side and against one woman who would be shivering
too much to hold a weapon for the next hour I wasn’t worried about her physical threat. Her
knowledge though, everyone who knew that was in another world and Maggie knew not to tell
stories about me. “Right now I’m considering why I should let you live, perhaps you could help your
case.”

“Is it the act of the wise to destroy what you don’t understand? I am here merely to see the new voice
in the chorus.”

“Fewer metaphors will increase the odds of your survival.” The woman still hadn’t betrayed any
emotion past her first smirk. “Tell me your name and how you heard about us.” I demanded. This
conversation was not going how I expected, the power I’d thrown around should have been enough
to cow anyone here and the mask wasn’t like anything I’d seen or heard of.

“I am Quaithe of the Shadow, Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden, and your coming shook the
world as far as Asshai. Even now you change the tempo with your rescue of the dragons.” She had nodded towards the children as she said the last but I was more focused on my Name. She had said it perfectly but there was no power behind it. For a woman frozen in ice she had an annoying way of retaining the upper hand.

“Well Quaithe” I started but I was interrupted.

“Who are you talking to?” Daenerys asked as she peered around Viserys, I looked back at her incredulously, then turned back to Quaithe. Who was gone. Right. The only evidence that she’d been there at all was Maggie’s equal confusion and the ice leaving a hollow exactly matching her contours. I swore and looked again with my Sight the courtyard was empty except for us, Maggie looked like she always did, beautiful and shining with her power. I turned to scan the rest of the area, Viserys and Daenerys looked much the same as normal except their silver hair and purple eyes blazed and they each held a jeweled rock in their hands. I pulled back, letting the sight go and exhaled.

“Sometimes in the dark you see things. I think its time for all of you to go to sleep, we’ll go to the bank in the morning.”

Maggie and Viserys looked indignant but Maggie was still worried about the vanishing woman and Viserys was probably a little scared of the hallucinating wizard. They followed me into our home and I sent them upstairs trusting Maggie to figure out the logistics. I reset the house’s wards and added a bit more power to them than usual, Quaithe’s little trick had spooked me more than I’d like. It had been two years where the only magic I’d seen was mine and Maggie’s, losing my uniqueness along with her strange awareness of my old world was a rude shock. There was plenty of magic claimed around here but I’d never seen any proof, the true magic was always far away and on the edges of maps, in Asshai, Qarth or north of the wall. I had assumed it was just ignorance leading to superstition when I first arrived but I had been preoccupied with survival. Looking back now I felt as foolish as the police officers who only saw what they wanted. There was clearly power in this world and I needed to know about it. It certainly knew about me.

The kids all woke up early, Daenerys had spent the night in Maggie’s room while I let Viserys use mine. I slept in my desk chair all night, partially for fear of Quaithe coming back but more for the gangs who might be hunting the two children. After a quiet breakfast I took them along with Maggie to the Iron Bank.

It was a rare sunny day, the bright light seemed to wash away the night’s terrors and the three children were having fun playing tag as we walked along the canals. The fishermen were already returning with the day’s catch and there was a flow of dark dressed men along our route. I kept a close watch on all of them, even though in the daylight along these streets the worst there could be were pickpockets and the bankers and the merchants paid for guards to discourage them. We went into the lobby of the bank flagged down a teller and went up to meet with Noho. The two kids clearly recognized him and relaxed. “Excellent work Dresden,I trust there were no complications?” Noho was writing something as he spoke and barely looked up.

“The competition showed up, said something about the Stag King but they weren’t too much trouble.” Noho paled but continued to write as if nothing had happened.

“That’s unfortunate, but it was anticipated. I’ll have your fee deposited in your account with the thanks of the Iron Bank. Is there anything else?”

“It’s more of a general knowledge question. I encountered someone else claiming magic during the
search, is there anywhere that the myths and rumors about it are recorded.”

Noho stopped writing and steepled his hands. “Magic, I do not know about. What I do know is that there is a group of respectable men who seek the truth behind the superstitions of the world. Johannes Bille, who you met, is a member. He might be persuaded to let you attend some of their meetings.”

I thanked him and said goodbye to the children. They were more sad to see Maggie go than I, but seeing an adult they knew had calmed them. We walked back towards our island with Maggie still in high spirits. I bought us both some sugary treat, almost like a cinnamon bun but different in a way that could probably be blamed on not having healthy American chemicals, and we watched the city hustle. I was worried though. Back home I had access to more information than most and with my own innate power I could judge what risks I ran and usually come out on top. Here I had nothing. My magic worked the same and I had thought I was the only one but that was clearly not the case. Looking back I didn’t even know if Quaithe was threatened at all by me, was she ever there or was she able to project an image across the world? The shape she’d left in the ice seemed to indicate she had a physical form but magic was a function of belief and if I meant to freeze all the water around a person and not in them I might be able to, even if the person strictly speaking wasn’t there. I missed Bob and even Lash, I really had been spoiled for supernatural knowledge.

It was a dilemma and while Maggie was cheerfully oblivious I knew it would eat away at me. Luckily I was in funds for quite awhile thanks to the Iron Bank so I had time to research what I could. Sadly there were no public libraries in Braavos, books were expensive and not for the hoi polloi. Johannes’s group was probably my best bet for the time being unless I wanted to hang out with drunk sailors and try to sift the truth from the lies and rumors.

We returned home and Maggie went out to meet with her friends before their lessons. I went up to my lab and started to work on my new white wood staff. I couldn’t wait for Maggie to be ready, if there were supernatural threats out there I would be as prepared as I could be and a properly attuned staff would be needed.

6.

Getting an invite to Johannes’s group, the Voyagers, was easy. He, Willas and Noho had benefitted from my quick work finding the two kids and was happy to invite me to speak about my ‘talents’. The meetings were held at what seemed to be a club that Victorians would have joined. The floors were thickly carpeted, servants in dark clothes and white gloves took our coats and offered us wine as we entered. The walls were dark wood panels with mounted heads along them. There were deer, bear and elk that I recognized but there were other stranger animals. There was a what looked like a pug-faced alligator with brown scales, a furry rhinoceros and at the end of the room hanging above the head of the table was the prize of the collection, a dragon skeleton. Johannes laughed as he saw me stare. “It is impressive isn’t it? That was a young dragon, barely old enough to bear a man. Looking at it always makes me proud to be a man, we may not have fangs or claws but we rule the beasts!”

I nodded absently. Even with just the bones it looked dangerous, without the flesh it looked quick, sharp and predatorial. I didn’t see how it could fly though, anything with that much weight would need much larger wings. The answer was magic of course and I cursed inwardly at my past complacency. Johannes didn’t appear to notice my flagging attention so I followed him and grunted at the appropriate points. The other members of the group were a diverse lot, for every businessman
there was a scarred captain or trader wearing the exotic clothes of far off lands. I could hear at least five languages, three of which I didn’t recognize and there were small groups clustered around whoever had brought back the most interesting prize. I was just now realizing I was going to be the star attraction for the group and hoped it would go better than Larry Fowler’s show.

We eventually sat down around the table, Johannes and I were under one of the dragon’s outstretched wings, and some of the members began to stand and give their presentations. They had maps of their travels with notes on each area they traveled through. They were sparse as they started but when they went further afield the details increased dramatically. The current speaker had traveled to the extreme south, past the Summer Islands onto the continent of Sothoryos. He described a land that was straight out of Edgar Rice Burroughs, brindled half-men, giant predatory lizards and abandoned haunted cities. I would have rejected these stories except everything was rigorously documented with sketches, detailed logs and the bones and relics that he brought. When he was done there was a break as we all got up to stare at his treasures. I was tempted to look at the statues with my sight but plundered images of gods from a dead city seemed like the sort of thing to not know the truth of.

Another round went by, this man had gone east along the north side of Essos and mapped it in what he claimed was unprecedented accuracy. There was a lot less discussion as we looked at his maps, he looked like a kid who’s classmates had insulted his show and tell item but he was given a glass of wine and a hand of applause which appeared to console him. It had been an enjoyable night, I was half expecting Allan Quatermain to show up and tell the story of King Solomon’s mines but then Johannes stood. He launched into a brief introduction then told the crowd about what he’d seen me do to find the necklace. The other members perked up, apparently bones and notes didn’t compare to in your face magic they could debunk.

I had anticipated this and had planned ahead with a few magic tricks. I wasn’t ready to tell anyone all of what I could really do but after what I’d seen I felt this group was my best bet to learn about the supernatural. I stood and was gratified to see a little surprise at my height. “My name is Harry Dresden, I was stranded here from a land I didn’t see on any of your maps and I wouldn’t know where it should be on them anyways”. They were impassive, I imagine claiming you’re from a lost civilization was a pretty common fraud. “As Johannes told you I have some skill in magic of a kind I haven’t seen or heard of anywhere in these lands.” A few of them were muttering, I thought I recognized one of my past clients in the back and he seemed to be telling his neighbor something. “Beyond the tracking described, fire is at my call.”

When I said ‘fire’ I ignited a ball of flame that burned brighter than the sun in the palm of my hand. The room was suddenly starkly lit with long shadows going back from the leather backed chairs and the closest men were squinting at me. Looking around I decided another trick was needed to cement my reputation, I extinguished the flame and with a gesture and a muttered word froze the wine in all the glasses. It was more than a bit trickier than it sounds to freeze it in a way that wouldn’t shatter the glasses, but for such small volumes Elaine and I had managed it one summer. Twenty years later I could do it to a crowd and it caused an uproar.

Fire was something that could be understood and I’m sure half had been thinking of ways they could have faked my trick. Ice in front of them, in glasses that I had never touched, in wine I hadn’t poured was much more convincing. Johannes looked overjoyed. I couldn’t imagine the fat man taking any role in the expeditions other than financier and now he had come through with the goods. There was a moment of silence then the room erupted in questions.

I didn’t answer all of them, enough to give some broad strokes of my magic and to tell them it couldn’t be taught without the aptitude and I hadn’t encountered anyone in Braavos with it. There
was some disappointment but seeing my tricks had put them all in an excellent mood. It was my turn to ask some questions. “Part of the reason I came here, past Johannes’s excellent recommendation,” he was still preening, “was to ask a few questions about other magic you’ve seen.” I briefly described my encounter with Quaithe, leaving out Maggie, the children and encasing her in ice.

There was more murmuring and then a fellow in the back spoke up. “I don’t know about the disappearing act, but ‘of the Shadow’ can only make me think of Asshai.”

“The shadow-binders guard their secrets jealously” another man offered. “I’ve heard tales of them using blood to summon demons that do their bidding.” There was more discussion about the shadow-binders which was accompanied by some outrage, the club wouldn’t have liked the White Council’s information sharing practices either.

The room was silenced as a sharp featured man at the head of the table stood.”Many groups claim true power, the Warlocks of Qarth, the priests of R’hllor, the Green Men on the Isle of Faces. The shadow-binders make no such claims and all know of them. If you seek for this magic you do not know, travel beyond the shadow.” He sat and the silence continued. Eventually a few of the braver members asked me more questions but the energy in the room was diminished. People got up and were milling around discussing the events. I felt a little bad for overshadowing the explorer but he was as interested as the rest in my little act. I wanted to talk to the last speaker but he had left in the confusion.

I fielded a few more questions from the crowd before Johannes came back to me still glowing. “I hope you enjoyed yourself, thank you again for speaking.”

“It was nothing, I would like to come back sometime. Who was that last guy, the one who talked about the shadow-binders?”

“Him, that was Tregar Antaryon, the brother of the Sealord. They had a falling out when they were young and he sailed far to avoid even hearing Ferrego’s name. The gossip is that the death of their father ended their rivalry because that’s when he came back to Braavos for the first time in decades.” Johannes thought for a second more, “He doesn’t usually come to these meetings, perhaps one in five, I think he was here for the Sothoryos expedition.”

I now had a name and place to investigate. Anyone related to the Sealord was at the pinnacle of society, my best bet to meet him again and ask more questions would be to return to the club. In the meantime trying to find out more about Asshai and its shadow-binders would be my new goal. I walked out with Johannes, stared down a particularly vicious looking stuffed lion and headed home through the damp streets. Maggie was still up when I got home, she’d eaten dinner at a friend’s and without supervision had decided she was too old for her bedtime. I utilized my parental veto, caved to her demands for a story and then finally went to my lab to record my notes on the day.

Writing all I learned about Sothoryos and the shadow-binders was depressingly quick so I started dossiers on the people I met at the club. They were wealthy, experienced and influential, knowing them could hardly hurt. I also wanted to bring my press to the attention of the Voyagers, they would certainly see the utility of it for their mission of documenting the world and enough ran businesses it would be helpful for that it would come into common use. It would also make the silversmith Koren and I rich, but I was prepared to accept the burden of wealth.

Going to bed myself I felt better that no one seemed to have the overt magic of my world, seeing Quaithe vanish and the information she’d had made me fear she had equal offensive powers to her apparent skulking abilities. Given the low profile of sorcery in this world I was confident if anyone
could destroy armies on their own for the low cost of going mad I’d have heard about it tonight. Just because I had the edge in power didn’t mean I was safe though. I’d shown that a little information could be dangerous to those stronger and I’d prefer not to fall to the shadow-binders’ uglier, less hard working, evil version of Harry Dresden. He probably had a mustache.
I spent a lot of time at sailors’ bars over the next few months. Tregar had not returned to the Voyagers’ Club, but Johannes assured me that long absences were not unusual. So instead of facts, I got to listen to the drunken rumors of far off lands. Every sailor had a story, mermaids, sea serpents, red priests sacrificing men to get a favorable wind but nothing local. Much like I’d thought initially, all of the supernatural was far from Braavos. Asshai was a year away and I wasn’t willing to take Maggie into the potential heart of the enemy to learn how to defend myself. Time and distance seemed likely to be some barrier, since it had taken Quaithe two years to contact me. So I sat listening to the ramblings of wine-soaked customers, and took notes on what they had to say. Much of it was contradictory or only came from one tale, but a few consistent claims came out. The followers of R’hllor claimed to be able to see the future in their flames, some north of the wall in Westeros could see through the eyes of nearby beasts and the Valyrians once could shape molten stone, along with taming dragons. The shadow-binders had their own stories though, no two alike. They could use blood to save a man, to kill him or to bring him back to life. The could enslave shadows to do their bidding and travel the wastelands past Asshai up to the cheerily named ‘Corpse City’, Stygia where no one else returned. They wore masks, one of the sailors almost described Quaithe’s, and there were no children in their city. It sounded like just the place to go on holiday with my daughter.

With no new leads to pursue I kept working on our home’s defences. I erected wards against spirits, demons, bugs, ghouls and refined the ones that vanilla intruders and burglars would trip. I didn’t know if anything would work, but I was going with the plan more is more. Maggie helped me, carving runes into the floor and engraving symbols on the entranceways. I made a circle in each room ready to be called up with an effort of will and drilled her on raising her own. She, of course, thought it was fun and enjoyed having a secret from her friends, who merely thought I had poor taste in interior decorating.

The neighbors had warmed up to us from their initial polite disinterest, which was largely due to Maggie’s diplomacy. She must have gotten it from Susan, as I had almost as many failed negotiations as burned buildings, numbers which were in no way related. My work with Koren the silversmith had helped a little, casting miniatures with the Alphas had been good practice for movable type and the first printed pages in the world had been created a week ago. Seeing I had useful skills, rather than wandering around aimlessly finding things had convinced them that I was respectable enough to be acknowledged on our island.

If they could see Maggie and I now though, their opinions might change. We were in my lab with her against the far wall. I had a ball of leather wrapped wood and was chucking it at her as she tried to raise a shield. It wasn’t as harsh as DuMorne’s baseballs, but Maggie was younger than when I started. She wasn’t able to generate the shield every time, only about one in three but they would stop the ball. After almost two bells of work she was frustrated and tired, but I kept on throwing the ball. This world was dangerous and even if she grew to my size, it was no defence against swords and arrows. She needed to be able to protect herself if I couldn’t and a strong shield would be needed. “Why can’t we stop?” she demanded after dodging a quick throw that had shattered her shield. “I’m tired and my head is pounding.” I was sure she wasn’t lying and it hurt me to continue but she needed to learn.

“Fifteen more blocks and we’ll be done.” I felt terrible, forcing her to keep going, but part of
mastering magic was building a will of steel. She had to be able to concentrate even if her hand was melting, and while I hoped she never felt them, there were far worse pains then headaches. She nodded, but looked mutinous, and I hoped that she would get her shields up quickly as I wound up and threw the ball.

A bell later she had recovered some color, when she had put up her last shield she had been pale behind her dark skin and her eyes had bags under them. Magic wasn’t easy work, tiring both the mind and body. We were sitting in the dark living room as she ate fruit and drank water I had chilled silently when she spoke up. “Why, why are you pushing me so much harder now?”

I exhaled. Maggie had heard many of my stories and thought of me as an invincible hero, I had saved her from an army of monsters, fought faerie queens, werewolves and ridden a dinosaur. She didn’t see Quaithe and her magic as a new and terrifying threat, but another enemy of the week in my long line of defeated foes. “This world is different than the one we left. I had thought there was nothing here that would threaten us beyond the ordinary sins and evils of mankind. I looked hard when we first arrived, and didn’t see anything I recognized as magic. I was complacent.” I stopped for a moment, Maggie was staring at me, her dark eyes unreadable. “Quaithe was the first sign I was mistaken. There’s no Nevernever here, or at least one that I can reach, and her disappearing trick, along with her knowledge shows there’s more than I know out there.”

“You can make illusions, you showed me how you could turn invisible and told me how Molly could make images and sounds. Why is Quaithe such a danger?” Maggie had been stewing over this for some time I realized, but getting hit a few times by a hard ball had given her the impetus to ask.

“She’s different. In a city the size of Braavos on earth there would be multiple groups of practitioners, and if I tried I could feel them. There aren’t any here. Her magic is different and unknown and you should always be cautious of new and surprising magic. I’ve been researching-”

“Is that what they call drinking now?” Maggie had a small smile even though she still looked exhausted.

“Quiet you. Seriously, I’ve been researching the stories about magic here, and some of it is scary. The Voyagers thought Quaithe was from Asshai based on her name and the entire city sounds like bad news. Sailors claim they do everything from killing to necromancy along with vague darker magic. If Quaithe can do a tenth of what the stories describe she’d be a threat. Worse I don’t know how to guard against it. Was she in the city when she visited, or did she project that image across the world. How did she even find us? She knew my Name and I know I’ve taught you enough to know how big a deal that is.” I paused looking at her, Maggie’s joke had encouraged me, but she was somber now.

“So you want me to be able to defend myself.”

“Yes, you know that I can’t always help, even if there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to save you. I won’t be around forever and you need to know this even if its two centuries into the future.” I felt bad even obliquely mentioning Chichen Itza but I stifled down the guilt. “I would like nothing better than for you to live a long peaceful life but based on my luck that’s wishful thinking.” We both sat in the dark quietly for a few minutes until I stood and told her it was time for bed. She went to her room with only a token protest, the magic and discussion had worn her out.

The next morning was cloudy but Maggie had recovered her spirits. I watched her play with her friends and wished that we were back in Chicago, where I had allies and knowledge enough to ensure she was safe. Instead we were trapped in some other world and threatened by some guild of
sorcerers. There was a Voyagers’ Club meeting tonight and I was going to attend to try to speak with the elusive Tregar. I didn’t know if he’d be able to add anything but it was worth a shot. Johannes had mentioned that he was apparently working on something to present in the near future but no one had any idea what it could be. I decided not to worry about it, and told Maggie she was skipping school. We spent the day wandering the city and not discussing magic until it was time for the meeting.

I left Maggie after dinner with instructions to practice her meditation and took a boat to meet with Johannes on the way. I saw the large man from a distance and had the gondolier pick him up. He saw me and boarded causing the gondola to sink and sway but we eventually got underway without getting soaked. “So did you hear if Tregar is coming tonight?” I asked.

Johannes looked stunned. “You haven’t heard? Tregar Antaryon was found with his throat ripped out in his locked study yesterday morning.”

By the time Johannes and I got to the club I heard all he knew about the murder. Tregar had gone to his study two nights previously, and locked the door. When the last servant had gone to bed the door had still been locked. The next morning Tregar did not appear for breakfast, after checking his bedroom and the rest of the house they decided he must be in his still locked study. The servants knocked on the door but there was no response. Thinking he might be asleep on his work they resolved to wait a bell and try again. At that point there was considerable worry as Tregar usually woke up with the dawn. They broke the door down and discovered him at his desk, with his throat wide open and no sign of a weapon. Losing my best chance to learn about the shadow-binders was a blow but the details of the murder interested me, it almost sounded like a classic locked room mystery. I would have suggested an orangutan did it, but I wasn’t sure if they existed here and I was quite sure no one here had read Poe.

The discussion at the club mostly focused on the murder with the members trading theories on how it was done and who could have been behind it. His brother, the current Sealord, was brought up due to their old grudge, but most thought that a sickly man would not cut down his younger brother. Tregar had made enemies on his voyages, from merchants he had swindled to husbands he’d cuckolded. Many of them were rich and many more might have wanted revenge. The servants were the logical suspects was the consensus. The door could be unlocked from the outside I learned, but they claimed to only know of the key that Tregar had. Most of the servants in the house had worked for him for decades but a few were new and no one was assumed trustworthy given the amounts of money his enemies could spend. I was most curious about the timing, Tregar had largely been retired for years. His children were grown and out of the city and he was thought to have no influence on his brother. Killing him now seemed pointless unless revenge was the only motive.

As I sat through a speech on the possible limits of Valyrian stone crafting based on the architecture of Dragonstone I wondered if Tregar’s research had anything to do with his death. He had been working on something and most thought based on his interests it would be on the magic of the priests of R’hllor. From what I knew of the religion it sounded like Zoroastrianism with two Manichean gods, the good one being R’hllor and the bad some unnameable being of ice and darkness. The priests claimed diverse powers and I was curious what Tregar with all his resources had managed to find out. They seemed low key, no crusades or forced conversions that I had heard of, but every religion had fanatics who thought that only they knew the will of their god. He might have committed some blasphemy and a deluded believer might have killed him for it. This was all useless speculation until I had more facts though. It could very well have been over some mundane cause, after all something like eighty percent of all murders were by people who knew each other and being
rich and scholarly didn’t protect one from human nature.

I left the club wondering what my next move should be. It was unlikely I could get access to Tregar’s records, I couldn’t even claim to be an acquaintance, much less a friend. If they were auctioned I had nowhere near enough money to purchase all of his books in the hopes of finding the right ones. The information I sought was just too difficult to reach, locked away in private libraries, the centers of cults, or far off cities. For now I was stymied.

In my doldrums I found myself wandering towards the richest part of the city and Tregar’s house. I recognized it from touring the city when I first arrived and was trying to get the lay of the land, I wouldn’t have known it was his house were it not for the crest above the door matching the current Sealord’s. The house was dark, the servants had been let go and the only presence was a single guard. I looked around, the island was deserted and I resolved to do something stupid.

I stopped walking and concentrated, ”Obscure” I breathed and drew light around me. In the dark and misty Braavosi night I was invisible. My veils still didn’t match Molly’s but I had improved even more since I had last taught her. As long as I moved slowly and carefully no one would see me. Tregar’s house, more of a mansion, was a large three story square with a courtyard in the middle. It was rather like my home’s arrangement except that our entire block would have fit in his house. The guard was standing in an arched entry tunnel with the gate open. The island was patrolled regularly and he must have thought that he would be a sufficient deterrent to thieves. I simply walked past him without drawing any attention and looked around the yard. Wide steps led up to the second floor, I could imagine guests at a gala walking up them and being introduced. I climbed them with less ceremony, and tried to decide where I would put a study if I was stupidly wealthy and had no other hobbies. It turned out my thoughts were nothing like Tregar’s, and I found the study after going three quarters of the way around the building.

The door was still broken from when the servants battered it down although the debris had been swept up. The bloodstain and the chair he’d died in had been removed but his papers were still on his desk. I walked to the desk and Listened, it was a talent that let me hear things in greater detail like footsteps of another guard. The house was quiet and I was alone so I dropped the veil with a sigh of relief. I called a dim light from my pentacle and started to shuffle through the documents. There was an ink puddle and smudging on one, it seemed that it had been the last page he’d worked on so I started with it. The parchment was part of a letter to his son in Pentos, congratulating him on the birth of a daughter. It didn’t seem relevant so I started on the other papers. They were also entirely routine or personal, and I was beginning to feel a little guilty for raiding the house of a dead man.

I extinguished my light and pulled up my veil and left the study, leaving it as I found it. I went the opposite way I came, the short way, towards the entrance and was almost there when through an open door I saw books. If I could look at them in advance, I reasoned, then I could simply buy the ones I wanted at the estate sale and get the information I needed. With renewed purpose I entered the library, Listened again and dropped my veil. I was wishing that I had grabbed some paper from the desk to make notes but I didn’t want to disturb the scene. I really missed Lash, her ability to retain all I saw would have been perfect, and I could have scanned in the whole library. As it was I went by titles, Mysteries of Asshai was going in the to-buy cart, Signs and Portents was being given a miss and the rather pretentiously titled Book of Lost Books was definitely not on my list. I was so entranced by my reading that I almost missed the sounds of footsteps. My interesting life has given me several talents by necessity though, paying attention to my surroundings not least among them, so I put out my light and re-veiled before another cloaked figure entered the library.

He, or a tall and bulky she, so probably he, was carrying a lantern with the sides down so it barely emitted any light. He went over to the wall of books like I had and began to go through them. I half wondered if there was a schedule I had preempted, and the next seeker of arcane knowledge would
be by in a bell. The new guy was much less discreet than I had been, he pulled several books from the shelf, some of my list among them, before stopping. He gave the shelves one more thorough going over, and put the books he’d withdrawn in his bag. He picked up his lantern and took several steps back while reaching under his cloak for something. He walked to the door and with a quick motion flung the object at the shelf where it shattered, spilling forth green flame.

After his spontaneous arson the figure ran, I started to follow before deciding saving the house was more important. I reached out to the flames to try to extinguish them before they got a hold, but something in them flung my power back. It startled me, no ordinary flame, no matter how hot, should be able to resist my power to that extent. I tried again with more force and was repulsed. My efforts seemed only to strengthen the fire, as if it fed on the magic I’d put into it. The whole bookshelf was now in flames and little licks had begun to advance onto the floor. I’d been in enough burning buildings to know it was time to leave as the room began to fill with smoke.

I ran towards the exit, barely keeping my veil up and trying to get a glimpse of the arsonist. I leaped down the steps and sprinted through the courtyard, I slowed when I saw the guard was dead, he’d been stabbed several times and his tunic was dark with blood. I entered the street and didn’t see the other guy but I could hear the slapping of his boots. I sprinted after him, rounding the corner I could see him heading for a bridge off the island. I was catching up, my longer strides eating up the ground between us. I realized I wasn’t sure what I would do if I caught up, I couldn’t kill him and I didn’t want anyone to know I’d also been in Tregar’s home. I decided that complex decisions could wait until I was closer, and continued the chase. The felon ran the length of the island before slowing, I was perhaps fifty yards behind him and still invisible, although I was starting to get the first twinges of a headache. He walked briskly but calmly towards the center of the city, acting like he hadn’t just murdered a man and set a building on fire. I kept on following him as he went further into the city, half thinking I’d find his home and come back later to rob it.

That plan fell apart as we entered the temple district, even late at night there were still plenty of people out enough that I could get closer without him hearing my footsteps. He pushed through a crowd with me right behind. Now that I was close again I could see his cloak was dragging on the ground giving me an idea. I hadn’t brought my staff or any tools but my shield bracelet to the Voyagers’ Club, which I was now regretting but since I was so close I figured the spell wouldn’t get away from me. “Scalpere” I whispered as I simultaneously stepped hard on his cloak. The part I’d sliced ripped away, the thief turned back to glare at me but I’d already crouched and vanished back into the crowd. Without a target for his ire he went on as I grabbed the piece of his coat. Congratulating myself on my cunning I almost missed the man walk up to a side door of the red temple knock twice and get let in.

9.

I walked towards home after that, holding the piece of fabric and thinking about the case. I wasn’t sure when I’d switched from thinking of it as a case from research, but historically cases involved more burning buildings than research so the new classification had a sound footing. The man who stole the books went to the Red Temple which implied he was a believer, had a confederate in the temple or that the temple would let in anyone who knocked. I didn’t really know anything about their god’s position about sheltering arsonists, but based on their rites, I felt they must be at least have a relevant encyclical. All things considered I was leaning against the man I’d chased being the murderer. Beyond the question of how he’d have done it, if he was going to sneak into Tregar’s house and kill him why wouldn’t he rob his library then? It had been two nights since the murder which made it seem like he’d waited for the heat, pun not intended, to die down a little before
burglaring. I wasn’t even sure of the motive for the robbery. My first speculation had been that Tregar was blaspheming in some way and that a devout follower had decided to speed up their god’s justice. Stealing the heretical books made a little sense then, to keep their beliefs from spreading, if not fully answering the question why wouldn’t they just remove the blasphemer and his books all in one night. Based on how the thief’s fire had spread they wouldn’t even need to remove the books, I was sure the room was down to ashes within minutes and saving possibly heretical books didn’t make much sense. Unless he’d saved rare books that weren’t heretical, and then burned the rest. Arriving home I decided that I didn’t really know anything and perhaps some sleep would help.

It didn’t. Maggie was up and running around early, apparently the meditation I’d assigned her had filled her with energy and there was nothing better to do than wake up at dawn and keep her old man from resting. I didn’t have any paying cases currently, I’d mostly been costing off the Iron Bank’s fees as well as my partial share in the cog. Since there was no chance of going back to sleep I thought I’d wander back to the scene of the crime. The city was gloomier than ever, the recent sun had passed and the city was shrouded in low clouds. Honestly the Valyrians probably had found this city and decided that even spending the time to burn it would be too much exposure to its crappy weather. I took my brand new Gandalfian white staff with me, I wasn’t sure if a better tool would have let me deal with the flames last night but I didn’t want to be unprepared twice.

The island that Tregar’s house had previously graced was crowded with gawkers. Smoke was still rising from parts of his home, and I could see more guards picking their way through the wreckage looking for anything worth saving. I wasn’t sure what they’d find. From my brief foray through his house I had no doubt Tregar had been immensely wealthy, but in the style of Braavos the ostentation was subtle, shown off in superbly crafted common items, not gold chandeliers or gilded mirrors. Most of what I had seen would have burned in a regular fire, much less a magically accelerated one. At least there were no bodies visible. I’d have felt much more guilty about not stopping the fire, or warning the inhabitants, if the mansion hadn’t been deserted. After a brief inspection I left, one burned building was much like another and the books I was interested in had been incinerated. From a certain point of view I hadn’t lost anything since I had never had any information and the books I’d chosen might not have helped. It was a blow though, first Tregar’s lifetime of knowledge and then his library snatched from my grasp. I didn’t even know where the stolen books went, and even if I found the remains of one in the library, the fire would have destroyed any thaumaturgical links between them.

I ate lunch at the Sealord’s square, rumor had it that he was hit hard by his brother’s death, but you wouldn’t notice it from the public’s mood. Throwing the remains of my fish in/on bread thing, that was almost a taco but not quite, into the canal I headed home again. I would perform a tracking spell on the cloak, but if it was in the Red Temple I wasn’t sure what I would do. They definitely had access to magic with their super-napalm substance and I wasn’t willing to raid a stronghold of potential enemies with unknown magic; I’d learned my lessons about that the hard way.

Walking home I thought about why I was interested at all in the murder. Besides my curiosity, which nothing had yet managed to stamp out, my initial goal was Tregar’s knowledge. In retrospect I didn’t even know if he had the information I wanted, I had just latched onto him and his reputation in the eyes of the Voyagers. Invading a temple for what I might not even want was too risky, but I had gotten proof that magic existed in Braavos and I could inquire elsewhere about the strange green flame. Crossing the final bridge to my island I was barely paying attention to my surroundings until I heard someone shout my name.

It was Koren, the silversmith I was working with, and he looked excited. “The press, I just sold it and got another two orders!” It took a moment to mentally shift gears from murder and magic to movable type but I eventually made it.
“Who bought it?” I had mentioned the completed press to Johannes but he didn’t see the utility, I was content to let history prove me right but he hadn’t been the only one sitting near me.

“Two men from your club and they brought another, some Westerosi, Haldon, who spent some time looking at it.” It was good news, in exchange for my help and the idea I was getting a small percentage of the profit. I wasn’t too concerned about the money, however if I was going to spend my life here, mass literacy would make it more comfortable.

“That’s excellent news, the kind of men there, if one has a new toy everyone needs it. Expect more orders from them.” The press might actually offer more opportunities I realized. Historically the cheap mass printing of books had spread information throughout the world, perhaps it could do the same here. I might be able to gain access to private libraries if I had established a reputation selling books. It would probably be more fruitful than listening to sailors in bars. Of course with my new found wealth, I could just hire someone else to run the bookstore which sounded much more appealing than working myself.

Koren and I chatted a bit more but he clearly wanted to get back to his forge and I was hoping to track down the thief. I arrived home just as Maggie was sprinting to her lessons, we shouted ‘hellos’ as we passed, and I went up to my lab. The months of a majority of my time devoted to magic had changed the place. Before it had been largely empty, but for a workbench and Little Braavos. Now it had shelves covered in my notes, clay jars full of ingredients for potions or spells, a full set of engraving tools and an iron ring five feet across in case I ever found anything to summon here or as a possible last refuge from projections. One wall remained clear for Maggie’s practice though, it had a few scorch marks, but so far she hadn’t followed me into mass destruction of buildings. I grabbed the piece of the cloak I’d ripped from the thief and wandered over to Little Braavos. Through sheer luck the tides would be ready soon, in the interim I thought I’d start planning a new focus, a gauntlet for water magic like I’d seen Carlos Ramirez use. I had never really used the more subtle element, my power gave me the luxury to be brash, but against a fire based religion water seemed as if it could be useful, or at least dramatically appropriate. It would make a contrast to my blasting rod as well as giving me more non-lethal options. Flinging fire around here carelessly would be an easy way to break the first law and slide into madness.

I passed the time until the tides shifted sketching possible designs and runes for he gauntlet. When the moment of stillness arrived I performed the tracking spell, and as I had half expected and dreaded, the cloth went right to the Red Temple. Well at least I’d confirmed one religion here had access to supernatural powers. Their green fire wasn’t quite a Sword of the Cross but in this apparent low fantasy world it might have the same impact. Thinking of the swords made me think of my own projects on enchanting. I had made a sword that would always be sharp when it was in my home or I held it but had no luck beyond that. The cheap cutlass I was working with probably didn’t help my spells, but I wasn’t willing to pay for an expensive blade that I would in all likelihood destroy. Luccio’s skills had only risen in my estimation after each failure of mine. I could only keep myself distracted with my experiments for so long though. The tracking spell wasn’t proof that the thief was affiliated but it was strong evidence. There was still so much that I didn’t know, unless more clues fell into my lap the murder case, and the hunt for magic here, was stalled.
I was in my lab staring at a hovering ball of molten gold. Maggie was watching too, pretending to work on her homework, but what I was doing was so cool I didn’t say anything. Since I didn’t want to check out the red temple, even though it turned out that they probably hadn’t made the green substance, wildfire, my investigation into Tregar’s death had stalled. I didn’t really mind because I’d had somewhat of an epiphany regarding enchanting. I had previously been trying to give arbitrary items arbitrary abilities, which in retrospect, sparing a glance at the beat up cutlass, had been foolish. Instead now I was trying to imbue a permanent link between two items, using the expertise that my most used branch of magic had given me. The gold floating in front of me was my sixth try but I had had some encouraging success with the previous two. The item, or items, were simple conceptually speaking. One was a small block of iron that I had engraved runes into and filled with gold. The second, the gold that was even now drifting worrisomely close to my eyebrows was the to be the arrow of a compass. I hadn’t let the gold solidify since I had pressed half into the runes and was now focussing on forcing the gold into the proper shape while holding the connection between the gold blobs in my mind. I would never have been able to do this before coming here, it was exceptionally delicate work, but the two years of enchanting failures had given me lots of practice. Even with that I was cheating. My water gauntlet project had been cannibalized to create a focus that would hold the liquid gold in the air, and I was using Soulfire to help apply my will. I had no idea how Klaus the Toymaker or Luccio had managed without the literal fires of creation aiding them but the shining white energy smoothly sank into the gold and shaped it into the thin arrow.

I breathed out in relief, the first time I’d tried the gold had splattered, luckily away from me. Cooling the gold was tricky, metals contracted as they cooled and my first rushed attempt had warped and broken when I went too quickly. It was only after talking to Koren about it that I had a better idea of what to do. This time was it though, I could almost feel the crystalline structures in the metal forming as I still forced my belief into the gold that the arrow and the runes were still the same piece of gold. Hardly daring to relax I let the arrow sink back to the surface of my workbench. It was still very hot, leaving scorch marks on the wood, but I picked it up with my gloved left hand. I let it rest flat in my palm and then moved my hand around the iron block. With no effort of will the arrow smoothly tracked, the sharp end constantly pointing at the rune covered cube. I had done it.

Maggie had hopped up to come look at the arrow with a distinctly unimpressed look. “So what, it can only point to the square and that’s easy.”

“Well my young apprentice, it may be easy for you and I, but this arrow will always point to the block, no matter who holds it.” She still didn’t look convinced, she had enough skill now to sense the magic I had used and she probably had expected something much grander as a result.

She stared at it a little longer, I dumped the now cool arrow in her hand and watched her toy with it before she looked up. “Jack Sparrow’s compass was cooler” she pronounced handing it back, and walking to her desk. It was a blow, my own flesh and blood betrayed me.

“Wait, when did you even see that movie?”

The others at the Voyagers’ Club were much more impressed. “It will truly give us the bearing of the block from anywhere?” A swarthy bearded man was holding the compass incredulously as he watched the arrow swing, unerringly pointing at the cube.
“As far as I know. Unless in the far corners of the world some other magic can block it.” I had presented the compass and then passed it around the room for the members to play with. Unlike the press, which three more had ordered, everyone saw the utility. “I’m willing to sell them for time and cost, as long as you pledge that I have the right to read any books on magic, or examine any items you find and bring back.” The captain and the onlookers nodded barely paying attention.

Another man in the back spoke up “With two of these and a chart you would never be lost, they are worth far more than your price.”

“Well only you guys get the special offer, and once others see these I’ll have more orders than I can fill.” As it turned out almost everyone there wanted one, most two. Geometry was an old science here, even if it was only what the Greeks had managed using a straightedge and compass. They could see that having the two blocks in different places would let the user place themselves at the intersection of the two lines. I wasn’t quite good enough at math to see intuitively how it would work, projecting lines from a spherical planet onto a map but I could overhear a group talking about trigonometry and the apparent distortions that would result from going further north. Answering a few more questions about when they’d be ready I made my way over to Johannes.

“You certainly make these meetings interesting Harry, your device was as well received as I expected.” The fat man and I were friends by now, and I had invited him over to see the compass before tonight. “Have you thought further on how you’re going to sell them?” It was a decent question. I’d intentionally kept a low profile in the city, certain groups knew of me, but now I’d be selling something revolutionary. I didn’t want people to know where I kept my stock, or who I was, the compasses would be valuable enough that they’d attract thieves who might not be deterred by the guards on my island.

“I was half thinking about enlisting the Iron Bank.” Johannes perked up at that. He managed several accounts I knew, but bringing this business in could push him up closer to the Keyholders. “I want to keep my name out of the spotlight, so if you’re alright with it I’ll announce to everyone here that if their friends want their own compasses to contact the bank.”

“I’m not certain that would work, the Bank does not openly involve itself in commercial ventures.” Seeing the look on my face he continued “However we can certainly help set up a location that will not be linked to you, you’ve mentioned before your desire to use your presses to publish books, perhaps you could use the same building for both. The Bank would be immensely happy to help finance something along those lines.”

It wasn’t quite what I wanted, a way to just shove all of the complicated parts onto someone else and just have fun with the magic but I did need to think more long term. I had another two centuries easily left in me and at some point I should start to plan for the future. In Chicago, before Maggie, I had slipped into a year to year pattern. In this world, with my only family sharing my same timeframe, I should use my lifespan as the gift it was. I didn’t want to spend my whole life in medieval times and as Ebeneezer, my grandfather had said, nothing worthwhile ever comes without hard work. I was comfortable with my life but I knew I could do more. “Ok” I said “let’s do it.”

It wasn’t quite that easy of course. The next day I met with Johannes and another banker to discuss the loans for the startup, both for the presses and the building. It went smoothly enough and the amounts were such that I felt I could pay them off eventually even if the business somehow went under. With the paperwork out of the way we went to look at possible locations. I followed Johannes’s lead there and we eventually decided on the building of a bankrupt insurance agency, several ships they had covered had never returned, enough to drive them out of business. It was a
solid two story building and had space upstairs for multiple presses. The compasses were to be stored in a bank vault before being sold to discourage thieves but there was plenty of room to display them, books or anything else I created. Johannes assured me he knew of several reliable and clever men who would be excited to work doing something new and I decided to trust him. We left my new office and wandered over to Koren’s smithy to spend more money on presses than I’d spent on my house, my car, and my magic combined and parted ways with Johannes still jubilant.

I walked home from there, thinking about my next step. I felt that short of taking risks in the Red Temple or traveling to Asshai myself I had done almost all I could to learn about the magic here. Several members of the Voyagers had invited me to read their libraries in exchange for a compass, though all admitted that they weren’t as large or as focussed as Tregar’s. The response had made me think that selling the compasses was the right move even if I hoped that the publishing house I’d started would eventually do far more in the world. As I went up to eat dinner with Maggie I felt that for the first time here I had a smooth path leading forward.

11.

There were numerous difficulties in getting my store off the ground. Johannes had come through with the promised employees and I sent them to Koren’s smithy to get a grounding in using and maintaining the press. Luckily the fundamentals were simple, setting the type and applying ink to pages was laborious but for the enthusiastic workers it wasn’t too much of a challenge. Making new letters was little more tricky, but lead was cheap and any flawed castings could just be replaced. I intended to contract the work to Koren for now anyways, his apprentices used the letters as practice in making fine designs since without the molds it was challenging to make letters that fit the grooves. Paper was another challenge, I was vaguely aware of how paper was made and thought with effort I could figure it out, but I was in no position yet to deal with it myself. Parchment would have to suffice for now.

Beyond printing the real source of income would come from the compasses. I had asked around the club to see what they thought would be the correct price point, the answers were large enough that the gold used creating them was a rounding error. There was a backlog from giving out my samples to the members but I was thinking of that as advertising. One of the earliest captains to get one had already tested his out, leaving one cube in Braavos as he sailed to Lorath and left the other cube there. He had taken a circuitous route back and the compasses always matched up with his location. He had loudly proclaimed this to me at the club, and there were discussions underway to create new charts using the angles to various locations as reckoning points. The eventual goal would be to have tables of coordinates with the angles to base locations, a few of the richer members were already discussing funding expeditions to place the base blocks across the known world and create new and more accurate maps. I intended to print the new charts and navigational aids once they were made, but I was leaving the exploration to others.

Time passed but making the compasses had invigorated me. I had always loved magic and using it to create and improve the world fit right in how I felt it should be used. I had fought with magic for noble causes, saved lives and arguably the world, but something in me exulted at using it in a purely beneficial way. I finally managed to build the compasses without the crutch of Soulfire, and with increasing skill came speed. I hadn’t had any other marketable ideas but when I had them I would be ready. I had a lot more time with Maggie as a result since I wasn’t constantly wandering the city looking for lost items. I wanted Maggie to have the same joy in using magic I did, so I spent my time not being the means of production trying to show her the fun and beauty we could create. We made spells together, instead of Flickum Bickus hers was Luci, to shine. When she first called light using her own spell I knew she was hooked. We continued with her hated shield lessons, but now that she saw what she could do, she do she was much more willing to press on.
It was partially as a reward for her hard work that we were on a ferry to the mainland. In the two years and change we’d been here neither of us had left the city, and I was hugely excited to escape the omnipresent scent of fish. We were going to a set of springs two days travel into the countryside that were a popular resort for the rich, whom I was rapidly joining. Being wealthy was strange since for so much of my life I’d struggled to make ends meet. It was nicer, don’t get me wrong but that was somewhat muted here given that all the comforts of wealth were matched by my previous lifestyle in Chicago.

We were joining a caravan of others, tourists and traders, and I had enough equipment to continue constructing my compasses. Once we were at the resort we would have enough space and privacy for Maggie to play with more exuberant magic, fire, force and lightening. So far it seemed she shared my strength and getting her the hang of her powers was better done quickly. “Have you ever ridden a horse Papa?” Maggie asked. Ever since she’d learned we’d be riding she’d been excited about horses. I wasn’t quite prepared for my daughter to go through a horse loving phase but living on an island at least gave me a decent reason not to get her a pony.

“When I was younger, on my grandfather’s farm.” I had told Maggie all I knew about our family, it was depressingly little between my half forgotten life traveling with my father, the stories Thomas had and the years of not knowing Ebenezer was related. All of them were out of reach now so I didn’t feel keeping them secret would serve any purpose. Besides, Maggie had lost her adopted family, trying to give her a sense of a new one was the least I could do.

I had forgotten how sore horseback riding could make me when we stopped for the night. We were just outside of a farming village that supported Braavos and the caravan had enough guards for when they went further afield that I felt safe. Maggie and I wandered around the little town, eating at the inn before returning to the group. It was a cool night, but not too cold to sleep under the stars. The seasons were strange here, I had tried to figure out what sort of orbit could produce them but had given up. Now that I knew there was magic in the world it seemed a more likely suspect. Perhaps some analogues of the faerie courts were feuding, whatever it was I’d have time to figure it out. Maggie was asleep under blankets and I was sitting by the low fire, watching it burn out. I looked over to towards her, she didn’t snore and her quiet breathing had occasionally terrified me when I first took care of her. Seeing that she was just as silent as ever and not abducted I turned back to the fire and saw Quaithe sitting across from me.

I didn’t panic or scream like a little girl but I did pull my staff to my hand with a burst of wind while jumping up. Quaithe, still in her mask, was as unreadable as ever staring up at me. “Why don’t you sit Warden?”

“Why don’t you ever walk up to people shadow-binder?” I wasn’t sure what to do with her, I was pretty sure that she was a projection I could disrupt, but as long as she was in front of me I wanted answers.

“There are many things I have to do, walking takes time I don’t have.” Quaithe maintained her inscrutable air and seemed happy with the increasingly awkward silence. I began to walk round the fire, keeping a distance from her. She twisted to look at me but didn’t say anything.

“If you’re so busy, then why are you here? The view isn’t very good in the day and less so in the dark.” I finished my circuit and sat back down, although I kept my staff up and readied my shield bracelet.

“You continue to change things. Much was foretold of the coming years, and you are pushing the
world from it’s course.”

“You said that the first time we met. Almost all I’ve done since is in response to your arrival.” Quaithe’s incredible vagueness was annoying but two could play at that game.

“I cannot say too much, if the future is to hold secrets must be kept.”

I didn’t take my eyes off her, that had sounded like a prelude to vanishing. “You know if I didn’t live here I might let you get away with that. Now, however,” I drew in as much power as I could hold, slammed my staff to the ground, and closed the circle I’d drawn around the campfire, “you will answer my questions.”

I wasn’t sure what Quaithe would do in response but laughter was not anticipated. “Warden your binding will not hold me.”

I continued to hold the power I’d called. “You say that, but I don’t see you leaving.”

“Oh, well then..” Quaithe looked as if she expected to end the conversation when her figure blurred but it reformed. For the first time I saw true emotion on her face, fear.

“Now I don’t know all about how your magic works. In fact I spent a lot of time trying to find anyone who did. But in my world if you’re trapped away from your body too long..” I trailed off letting her draw her own conclusions. At least one thing seemed to be the same between here and home. “Tell me what I want to know and give an oath not to harm or incite harm against me or mine and I’ll release you.”

She shrank on herself in a way that brought up what Murphy called my caveman instincts. I suppressed them, Maggie was more important that chivalry especially out in the country away from the wealth and friends I’d made. “Ask your questions Warden.”

“How did you know about us and how did you find us?” It was the first and most important question. While Quaithe had not been malicious, to my knowledge, what one could do another could duplicate, and I might not be lucky twice.

“It is like I said, your arrival caused a shock through the world.” She paused looking into the fire. “For those who have been trained, futures can be seen in the flames and they whisper names, truths, and lies to us. I saw you and your daughter in them and recognized Braavos.”

“Can anything block this sight?” I didn’t want random people scrying for me, Toot-Toot’s information about location had been too useful for me to cede it to others without a fight.

“I had thought not, but tonight was the first time I’d seen you since I last came to you.” So it looked like my expanded wards had done something. I’d have to see about expanding them from my island to all of Braavos, maybe the Titan would be a suitable base for them. It would be a monumental undertaking though, especially not knowing what ward did what. Vanishing an entire city from future knowledge might also be a clue that those involved should come and investigate which could ruin the whole thing. I might not even be able to do it either, large scale permanent workings like that relied on enormous ley-lines and I hadn’t encountered any fit for the purpose yet. Whatever, that was a tomorrow project, I’d focus on the witch in front of me.

“What other powers of magic do you have that I should be worried about?” It was a vague question sure but as long as I had the chance I’d grill her for all I could get.
“Our powers are vast, beware of shadows for we can command them. Never let a shadow-binder have your blood and don’t trust anyone a shadow-binder healed” Well that was fairly normal, standard practice but for the whole shadow command thing, and I’d fought shades before. It wasn’t enough to make me confident but I felt better knowing more.

“What should I do to defend myself against your kind.”

“This barrier seems efficacious, but the traditional way to stop a shadow-binder is complete darkness. Without light there are no shadows.” Quaithe was starting to look a little ragged, I’d never seen someone die from a failure at astral projection but I knew it was possible. Time to wrap things up before I killed her.

“Swear your oath then and I’ll release you.”

Quaithe swore with desperate quickness and I scuffed the circle. She blurred then vanished immediately. I got up and drew a circle around Maggie and I, we wouldn’t be sleeping anywhere without at least minimal warding from then on. I lay down with my eyes open, the starry sky which had looked beautiful before was now just pinpricks of light that could spawn hungry shadows. I stayed up for awhile but eventually sleep overcame me, and I dreamt of snatching shadows and red and gold masks looking down.

12.

After my chat with Quaithe the rest of the journey to the springs was smooth. If Maggie noticed that I had barely slept she didn’t mention it, somehow she was a natural rider and had been moving back and forth along the caravan. Reaching our destination was a relief, the two days riding had left me sore and tired. If the ride back was the similar I’d need another vacation to recover. The resort we were staying in had belonged to a noble family which had lost everything in the last hundred years, and some enterprising merchant had snatched it up. They moved into the estate, kept the main house for themselves and built rooms all around the grounds. It was quite nice, individual marble pools collected hot water from the springs, and we were separated from the next inhabited villa by almost a mile. It would be a shame to blow it all up.

Maggie did not share my apprehension. After splashing around in the sun, it was sunny here, a nice change, she wanted to get to the real reason we were out here. I had scouted the area near us and there was a ravine that looked as if some of the building fill had been quarried there. It was below ground level and far enough away from others that I didn’t think we’d be disturbed. Best of all there wasn’t anything flammable in it.

“Fuego” Maggie shouted, she had chosen to imitate my spell in this at least, and from the staff we’d worked on for months came a pathetic stream of fire. It was one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen.

“Good work!” My prior experience teaching Molly helped me, but teaching Maggie was much easier. Maggie’s power was much closer to mine in all respects and I remembered having the same problems she was encountering. She wouldn’t reach her full strength for years, and wouldn’t be truly skilled for decades, but I was confident that she’d have a smoother path than I did. Of course as long as she didn’t burn her teacher alive at sixteen she’d have an easier time so perhaps I should shoot higher than better than me. “Remember your will is what gives it shape, power, and direction, the staff is only a tool.” I was standing a little behind her, close enough to shield but not close enough that she’d feel safe from the fire. Our powers could create very dangerous things and she had to
understand on a visceral level what her magic could do. Currently her will was immolating any weeds we found growing amid the dirt.

“Fulminos” Maggie liked her lighting better, perhaps because it was accompanied by the droning roar of arcing rather than my laughter.

“My own little Sith lady!” The Mendozas had shown Maggie Star Wars which one more reason to be eternally grateful. Being the only one on the planet able to get my jokes would have been even worse than the lack of indoor plumbing. Maybe that should be my next project.

She turned to glare at me but was having a hard time concealing a smile. All around us smoke was rising and dirt patches had been melted to glass. If I ever doubted that she was my daughter that moment would have settled it. “Not everything should be a Star Wars reference you know.”

“I’ve gone nearly forty years without knowing that, so I suspect that you’re incorrect.”

“Whatever, are we done for now? I want to explore the rest of the place.”

I looked around at the blasted earth. “Yeah, I think we’re good for today.” Maggie looked happy to be done, for all the fun she’d had magic could be exhausting. We wandered up from the ravine, back to our little villa, changed from our smoky clothes, and towards the center of the estate. The grounds were manicured, keeping the look of a forest in places, but there was no undergrowth beyond flowers. It was quite lovely and I had to struggle not to feel out of place. It was nice to have money, but hanging out with the rich and famous was a new and stressful experience. Dinner for the first night and a few others would be served at the main hall to force people to mingle. It would be awkward, especially since I didn’t want anyone here to know who I was and keeping track of various stories would be tedious. Hopefully I’d see someone I knew and could sit with them and not make any new friends.

I was half lucky, and in a way that was worse than no luck at all. The tables had six seats, filling the other four were a man and a woman I didn’t recognize and a Voyager and his wife. “Dresden, not making your compasses around the clock?” Well there goes that secret.

The other man, dark haired, dark eyed and shorter than me, not that that was unusual, looked up. “You’re the one who makes those marvelous devices?” The man spoke Braavosi fluently but with a slight accent I thought was from the common tongue.

I pulled out Maggie’s chair before sitting myself. “I am their creator.”

“When I heard of them I thought it was trickery, but after playing with one,” he actually reached into his coat and pulled out a block and compass. “I am convinced.”

“Well its nice to have a satisfied customer.” Servants had bustled over to fill my wineglass and give Maggie some fruit drink. More potential witnesses, great.

“But, I have heard your name and I can see you do not know me. I am Oberyn Martell.” He said it like I should recognize the name and there was a brief pause when he realized that I had no idea who he was. “I am a Prince of Dorne in Westeros.” That was enough for me, Dorne was one of the Seven Kingdoms that had not so recently now fought a civil war. All I knew about Dorne was that it was on the south end of the continent and they made sour wines.

“You’re a long way from Westeros then, what brings you all this way?”
Oberyn shifted idly, moving the compass around the block and watching it spin. “Beyond the toys, I have some extended family in the city. The springs were something my companion,” he turned to his guest, a gorgeous blonde woman, “desired to see.” He darkened a little. “Besides Westeros has lost much of its lustre since the war.” We sat silently, Oberyn certainly had a gift for creating awkward moments. “But enough about sad things, you have not introduced me to the most beautiful woman at the table.” Maggie blushed, making me realize that soon she was going to be interested in boys, to delay that I’d buy a million ponies.

“My daughter, Margaret Dresden.” He took her hand and kissed it causing her to giggle.

“Charmed, you’ll no doubt be a heartbreaker, far sooner than your father would wish.” I forced a smile as the others laughed. “So how does one get into the business of making magic?”

“Accidentally for the most part, I learned of a need I could fulfill and was lucky enough to have friends to help get me off the ground.” I gestured vaguely at the Voyager member, his name started with an S but I couldn’t quite recall. “Much the same as anyone else in trade I imagine.”

S-man spoke up then “And what of you Margaret, will you follow the other path to gain a trade, following your family’s?”

I was hoping for Maggie to somehow evade the question but she was only eleven. “I’ll probably make something much more exciting than compasses.” His eyes lit up, Syrio, that was his name, smiled further and opened his mouth to ask another question-

“So Syrio how is the shipping business these days?” Oberyn preempted him and I was grateful for his intercession. Looking at him I could see he shared the same expression as Syrio but even so I was glad she was spared further questions. The rest of the dinner was tense, even though Oberyn and Syrio were both witty and their companions took an interest in Maggie having whispered conversations with her, I couldn’t forget the interest that both shared, our powers attracted attention and now Maggie was known to have them too.

Walking back to our rooms I stared into every shadow, for all my power against humans I was restricted. If I broke the laws even to save Maggie I wouldn’t be able to save her from myself. The next two weeks passed quickly, we spent more time in the ravine having fun with mass destruction and exploring the rest of the estate. We didn’t eat dinner with Syrio or Oberyn again but I could see them look at us when we entered the main hall. As soon as the threat of Quaithe was dealt with another arrived.
13.

The trip back was slightly less painful than the trip out, I wasn’t sure if my body had remembered how to ride, or if my fear that Maggie’s talents could be exploited distracted me. Oberyn had left ahead of us, headed to Braavos as I learned from questioning the staff. Syrio remained behind us, so at least they couldn’t learn anymore immediately. Maggie was not worried about Dornish princes or potentially corrupt businessmen, again entranced by horseback riding. Quaithe didn’t make an appearance on the trip either, I drew a circle around us each night in the hopes of preventing her or others scrying. All told it was a relief to descend into the fog that surrounded Braavos, and board the ferry back home.

Leaving Maggie at home after powering up the wards, I went to visit the store. In my absence they’d sold almost all of the compasses, the money was almost enough to buy and outfit my own ship. I had never expected them to take off so rapidly, in the four months I’d been making them I’d sold over two hundred and the demand showed no sign of stopping. The presses were much less profitable, the first book we had experimented with had been an almanac of general 21st century knowledge. It was mostly comprised of my notes for Maggie about the world we came from, but a little editing turned them into a passable textbook. It covered what I knew of germ theory and pasteurization, the basics of astronomy, planets, stars and comets, and quite a bit of physics and math.

When I was younger, learning with Ebenezer, I had thought it strange that magic, an exercise of raw human will, could be improved by a thorough grounding in thermodynamics. Being able to anticipate how much energy it would take to boil or freeze something, and the energy transfers required, helped me not to waste power. I also included a section on steam and water power, I didn’t know too much about the fine details of historical innovations but I figured getting the principles down early could only help.

All together it wasn’t especially advanced stuff but the products of five hundred years of science could do quite a lot. The books were messy, printing was a matter of skill we lacked, and the less said about bookbinding the better, but they were at least an order of magnitude cheaper than previous books. The first run of fifty had barely broken even, and most of the purchasers had been curious members of the Voyagers’ Club. Practice made perfect though, and the second editions would be better. I wasn’t sure what to print next, I was tempted to follow Gutenberg exactly and print the closest thing to a Bible this world had, the Seven Pointed Star, but that seemed needlessly inflammatory.

It was almost a relief to return to the club after being submerged in so much capitalism. However it had been long enough for the members to play with the compasses that it wasn’t an escape. The first presentation was of a longer journey, from Braavos to King’s Landing and the emplacement of a cube there. The captain had then sailed to Pentos and recorded the vectors at points along his route. I was gratified to hear they worked but I hadn’t really expected otherwise. The power I had poured into each made me confident they would work all around the world.

The second presenter was the mapmaker from my first visit to the club. He had brought props, a globe with two rings rotating about it. One of the poles was set through Braavos and the outer ring was able to be slid both along the inner and rotate, to allow for an intercept with another base block location. It was marvelous craftsmanship, even if the vast majority of the globe was blank. He announced that anyone who provided a city’s vectors would be gifted a globe, apparently my free
stuff for information thing was a popular model. He also brought proposed chart layouts, a circular map with curves running across it, he gave a long discussion about azimuthal and retroazimuthal projections which went over my head and apparently those of most of the audience. When he finished there were a few who clapped, and he was surrounded by them after with questions.

I said a few hellos to other members and briefly discussed my book, saying the information in it was from the school I’d learned my magic in and clarifying a few points. I was on my way out when Oberyn Martell stepped out of the crowd. “Dresden, would you mind if I walked with you?”

I was torn, anyone interested in Maggie was potential bad news, but I felt since the cat was out of the bag nothing could hurt from talking to him. “Sure, come along if you like.”

We left the club together and he took a moment to gather his thoughts. “When I was younger I aspired to the knowledge of the maesters.” He continued walking to let me stew on it. In my research frenzy I’d learned that the maesters were a Westerosi order of knowledge monks who were responsible for much of the continents education. I wasn’t too impressed by them considering they claimed to be thousands of years old and hadn’t seemed to spur any advances. “I forged several links in my chain before growing bored, one was of Valyrian steel, on sorcery.” He paused again, his rhetorical style was beginning to irk me. “Yet nothing I learned there was anything like what you can do, Syrio was forthcoming, speaking about your introduction to the club, and I thought to see you in your natural habitat.”

“It’s common knowledge that my daughter and I were shipwrecked here with no way of returning home. Is it so surprising that a far off land has different and unknown magics?”

“It’s enough to make me wonder how a man who can find anything, could find himself so very lost.” He stopped and turned to face me. “I visited your villa and saw the marks in that pit, why is a man with your power content to live in this damp city slaving for coin?”

I looked up at the cloudy sky, it had been nice to see stars for a little while, even when clouds weren’t present the streets were often lit and there was always smoke from fires. “Family, nothing that power could give me is worth more than my daughter.” Oberyn accepted my answer without further comment and we started to walk again.

“I told you I was here to visit some distant family members, did I not?” With my nod he went on. “I was surprised to discover they had already met you when I told of our encounter.”

Small world it seemed. “Who was it? I’ve had quite a few clients in my time here and one is much like another.”

“You’ll remember these, because they were your quarry rather than your employers.”

“Viserys and Daenerys, Ser Darry’s wards? I knew they were some noble’s kids but I didn’t realize they were family to the rulers of Dorne.” Oberyn smiled at my description of them, it made me remember I had once wanted to look deeper in Ser Darry, before the whole Quaithe fiasco exploded.

“Yes, a distant relation, four or five generations back, but we remember our history. They told me of a fantastic tale, of you throwing assassins to the ground in groups of hundreds with blasts of force and frost, of course children exaggerate but you have my gratitude.”

“Children shouldn’t be left to die on the streets, it would be nice if all my cases had such happy endings.” Our discussion had carried us about halfway to my home and I still wasn’t sure what Oberyn wanted.
“I never had much of a gift for sorcery, in truth of all the citadel taught me, my favorite was biology.”
He threw an outrageous leer at that causing us both to laugh although he sobered quickly. “I did learn of what various groups claimed they could do. Red Priests of R’hllor and Shadow-binders are said to be able to raise the dead at a price, can yours do the same?”

I didn’t want to answer the question and Oberyn must have noticed my reticence. “I don’t ask for a trivial reason, or perhaps no more trivial than anyone else who wants to bring a loved one back. Tell me what do you know of the usurper’s war across the sea?” As he said the last his face twisted, in sorrow or rage I couldn’t tell.

“No more than the next shipwrecked magician, the old king killed some of his high lords after the prince abducted another’s daughter. The rebels won and there’s a new king on the throne.”

Oberyn laughed bitterly. “So much was lost for two sentences. You have the broad strokes correct, but there was far more tragedy. I have fought across the plains of Essos and the Dornish marches, I know war is terrible, but I have never seen so much lost for so little.” His pauses that had bugged me before now seemed to have a grander purpose, as if he was gathering his strength. “Robert’s Rebellion, as they call it, was started by my good-brother’s, the Crown Prince’s, actions. He took a girl from her father and betrothed and when her family came to seek and take her back, his father killed them. I hold no special enmity for the Starks, that was the girl’s family, or the Arryns or the Tullys or the Baratheons. If my niece was stolen, and my brother slain trying to rescue her, I too would have marched and killed.”

I was trying to keep my feelings on his story off my face, I knew that I would have done the same as the rebels, I had already started and ended wars for the love of my family.

“There were battles, thousands died and at last the rebels were victorious, killing my good-brother and throwing down a centuries old dynasty. Until then I hadn’t lost enough to complain about, an uncle died, but compared to others I had not suffered.” His voice was growing harsher as he continued. “My sister and her children were in the capital then, trapped with the mad king as to ensure Dorne and my brother stayed loyal. When I heard of the defeat on the Trident I left Dorne to rescue my sister. Before I was there.” He stopped again and this was no planned pause. “I heard the news, my sister was raped and murdered and her killer’s daughter was the new queen.”

We had almost reached my island and Oberyn didn’t appear in a mood to continue his story but he seemed to rally. “I could not save my sister. I could not save my sister’s children. I could not even avenge her death.” He looked at me then and despite my years of practice I met his eyes and a soul gaze started.

Oberyn Martell stood in the midst of a desert, dressed in scaled copper armor and holding a long spear as the sun burnt down upon him. A red snake was coiled around his neck, hissing into his ear with poison dripping from its fangs. In the shadow he cast I could see dark haired girls looking up at him, but he was looking away, back over the shoulder the snake was on, blind to them.

With a wrench I broke free, to see him backing up hurriedly palming a dagger. “What are you, what was that?”

“That was my soul. I saw yours, and you saw mine. Try not to make anything romantic out of it.”

The joke seemed to steady him a little as he grinned, but whatever he saw, and our previous conversation was still weighing on him. “I know that you have lost much, I could see that at least. Can your power restore something I have lost, can you bring my sister back?”

Before I had planned to flatly deny it. Now though, after seeing the truth of him, I felt he deserved
more. “I could. If you gave me your sister’s body I could rip her soul from wherever it went and chain it back to this mortal plane.” Oberyn was listening intently although I could see his shoulders slumping, waiting for the catch. “If I did that she would be tormented and twisted, she would never know peace and she would not thank you for her return. I have lost those I loved before, you were right, and I know how little telling you this helps but if I thought for an instant that bringing back the dead would be what they wanted, I would gladly damn myself for it.”

We had now reached my island and Oberyn seemed to realize our talk was at an end. “Dresden, I thank you for your truths. I cannot promise I will not seek other ways to return Elia but your wisdom is appreciated. I owe you for more than saving my little cousins.”

“Look to the living, Elia would not begrudge you that.” He nodded and turned to vanish into the mists, I went back to my home and as I set the wards couldn’t help but think of the Darkhollow, and Kumori’s quest to end death.

Entertaining guests was a new and unpleasant responsibility that came with wealth. I had been invited to far too many dinners and parties and couldn’t politely refuse all of them. Going to them forced me to extend at least a few invitations of my own, and somewhat predictably, my friends would bring along their unmarried sisters, daughters, nieces, and once or twice, granddaughters. It would have been flattering, if I wasn’t sure they were after my bank account, or my power. Syrio discovering that Maggie also had magic was one of the most annoying potentially dangerous things that had ever happened to me, a combination that was somehow far worse than either mere danger or irritation.

I didn’t want to move from our current house, the threshold, while not especially remarkable, was quite strong and I had anchored numerous wards to it around our home and the island. If we moved it would take time for a new threshold to develop, and given I had confirmation my current wards protected us from magical threats, I wasn’t willing to leave. This wouldn’t be a problem except that to host people without insulting them I needed more space. I had hoped that my small downstairs would be seen as fashionable in its Braavosi style complete lack of ostentation but apparently the hipster movement here had ruined that ploy long ago and lacking all refinement was just seen as poor.

Luckily money solved the problems it brought, and we were able to purchase the house next to us and expand. Maggie and I enjoyed the new lab space, with more room she could play with a bit more energy, and I further expanded my enchanting workshop. The compasses, while lucrative, were getting boring. I had gotten the time to make one down to about a bell and would make around ten daily. The initial excitement of their construction had faded, I’d be making them for the foreseeable future to supply my current backlog, and enough to supply the demand at a vastly higher price point. I had other ideas running through my head, I’d been toying with a gong like device to transmit sound as well as bells I wasn’t sure which would work, if either would. I was also considering my next phase in the “advance technology enough that I can hex it again” plan, I was running into roadblocks where I just didn’t have the proper knowledge to bootstrap the technology.

With my mind so occupied I completely missed a question and now half the table was looking at me, waiting for a response. I cast my mind back, we had last been talking about a play inspired by a story that had been engraved into some cities walls, maybe they were asking if I would see it? “I’m not too sure it’s anything I’d be interested in.”

“Oh but you must do something for the Uncloaking!” Said one of the girls vying for the position of
Mrs. Dresden. “Your talents could surely create something marvelous.”

The Uncloaking right, I had no idea how the conversation had jumped from the theatre to the annual city wide masquerade ball, but seeing Maggie’s puppy dog eyes about it, I knew I’d regret not paying attention. “Perhaps I could put something together, I’ll have to think about it.”

The rest of the dinner I was forced to stay alert, committing myself to something elaborate and crowd pleasing just to keep Maggie happy was a once a night phenomenon. As I showed the guests out and the caterers cleaned up last of the food, Johannes, who had been lingering after finishing his third plate, approached me. “Providing entertainment for the city is no small thing you know. Traditionally those just entering the ranks of the truly wealthy, which you and I are both far from, sponsor something to announce their arrival. If you do something public it will be seen that way, there will be vastly increased scrutiny of you and yours.”

Well there went that plan. My obscurity had taken quite a hit, with my change from a detective to a tech mogul, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to face that level of attention. “Maggie will have to live with disappointment, that sort of attention is something I don’t want.”

He nodded but hesitated. “The whole city would be too much, but the Bank hosts a party every year for our employees and largest depositors. Many of the other Voyagers attend. If you truly wish to do something for your daughter it would be a more discrete audience.”

“Well using me to score points with crowds Johannes?” he grinned at the memory, “Maggie has been talking about the Uncloaking, she’s getting to the age where galas and romance are the most exciting things in the world. I’d like to do something for her, just to keep her as my little girl longer.”

“It’s settled then, the party is towards the end of the festival so you have around two months to prepare. If you can’t put anything together don’t worry, you shall still be invited, although I may insist you take my good-mother, she’s been intolerable since her husband died and I will use anything to distract her.”

“There’s no need to go that far, I’ll have something to impress your coworkers.”

Johannes left after that saying his goodbyes and entering the cold night, I barred the door and reset the wards while thinking about what my inattention had gotten me. I was considering what would impress a crowd here, my first thought was fireworks, I’d always enjoyed copying Gandalf, but my gunpowder experiments weren’t ready for the light of day, much less fireworks. I wasn’t really sure I wanted to introduce it either, my compasses were an unmitigated good, but gunpowder would have entirely different repercussions. It would show up eventually I was sure, but that didn’t mean I had to be the one to ‘invent’ it.

That left illusions then, I doubted the bank would thank me for destroying whatever hall they held the party in if I used real magic. I wasn’t as skilled with them as Molly had been, but with time to practice I could make something large and detailed enough to stun the crowd. With my mind made up, I went to put the little instigator to bed. Maggie had just brushed her teeth, dental hygiene was one thing the middle ages would never take away from me, and was practically bouncing. “Are you going to do it? Can I help?”

“I’ll be doing something, and you helping, we’ll see.”

“Papa, that always means no!” she thrust her hand out and muttered, lightning sparked around her hand and arced to and from her fingers. “Everyone will admire us, but since we’ll be wearing masks, no one will know, so it’ll still be a secret!” I laughed and hugged her, keeping her crackling hand away as I did.
“Sweetie, there’s one family in this town with magic, they’ll know it’s us the moment it begins.”

“So I can help?” Of course she’d latch onto my vague pronoun use.

“We’ll see, it depends on how you do with your shields.” Her enthusiasm was a little dampened by that but she still looked excited as I left her room, extinguishing her candles with a whisper.

“Flickum Bicus” I spoke as I walked into my expanded lab. Around the room candles were lit by sparks of flame, and the mirrors hung around the walls brightened the room. I wandered over towards my latest project. I rapped sharply on one of the brass bells and the other barely twitched. It had worked better before dinner, the connection was decaying rapidly. I hadn’t yet figured out how to link the two properly, if I picked up either of the bells, the other would also rise, I had no idea how to restrict transfers to only ringing. The gong had the same issue although the spells tended to last longer on it for some reason.

I left them and went to the more scientific side of the lab. I had a piston partially disassembled, I’d shown it to some of the sailors at the club and described how it could power a ship or anything really, if they had a ready source of heat. Steam engines were a simple enough concept that I felt they would progress without my help, now that the initial idea was out there. I knew enough about boiler explosions that I didn’t want to play with them myself and had shared the potential danger with my observers. I had some copper wire laying around unused, Ben Franklin’s adventures with lightning were something I got everyday with Maggie, and I didn’t want to tempt fate by giving it more ways to electrocute me. My notes on various experiments were loosely bound, the club was going to start a journal of each meeting and I wanted to have everything in order for when I showed off an ‘invention’.

Walking back to a workbench I started to sketch out ideas for an illusion focus, I’d never made one before, but for other tricky magic they helped so perhaps a new tool would be just what I needed.

I stood in the center of the crowd, holding my newest creation. All around me men and woman dressed outrageously, with masks covering their faces, danced. This was the one week where the staid and conservative of Braavos collectively let their hair down and they were enjoying every minute of it. A few had noticed me, standing still in the center of the whirling motion, but most had eyes only for their partners. That would be changing soon.

I had spent a lot of the time I should have worked on my projects over the past two months playing with illusions. I taught Maggie a little as I went, but she shared my lack of finesse and had difficulty with them. Since she wouldn’t be able to help directly with the magic, she decided to let me let her plan what would be shown, our whole attendance at the party was for her so I gave her command. With the show planned, a month’s practice on one specific illusion let me create something far grander and more vibrant than my normal limits. I wasn’t any better at quick and spontaneous deceptions, a month of effort wouldn’t erase years of neglect, but this one would be good.

I held my newest focus, an enormous fake diamond of glass, into the air so it caught the lamplight and around me people were beginning to notice the disturbance. I pushed my will into it, sending out a pulse of pure white light that forced those looking directly at it to shield their eyes and almost everyone to blink to recover.

When their eyes opened, the roof was gone, stars more vibrant than anything visible here or on earth shone down on the hall, filling the room with an eerie light. There were galaxies, nebulae, lone stars
and bright comets, all moving just above the heads of the crowd. The music had stopped, no one was doing anything but staring up. I turned to look for Maggie in the crowd, the joy on her face convinced me that all the effort was worth it.

I wasn’t quite done with the show yet, even though I felt that my effort already surpassed the jugglers, sword swallowers and fire dancers. Out of respect for my father I didn’t judge the stage magicians. With a twist of my hand the stars fled into the now apparently infinite sky, a knight, who I unrepentantly copied from Michael down to the red cross and white mantle, rose up before us. A roar shook the room and I threw illusory fire amongst the crowd to scattered screams that stopped when they realized they weren’t burning. I had never seen a dragon in its scaly flesh back in our world, and Michael, as irritantly modest as ever, never spoke in detail about his slaying of Siriothrax. The monster I summoned, modeled on the Voyagers’ skeleton, might not have had the same power or purpose as those back home, but sixty feet of armored flesh and fire was enough to intimidate anyone. It circled the room once, breathing fire and roaring again, before homing in on Sir Totally-Not-Michael. It crashed to the ground amid more screams, the drunker here hadn’t realized it wasn’t real, and roared again. I had thought that one or two roars would be enough, but Maggie was a member of the Michael Bay school and insisted. It breathed fire at the knight, who caught it on his shield in a completely realistic, and definitely allowing for convection sort of way, before lunging and snapping at him. The knight dodged and seized a hold of a spine on its neck and was carried up as the dragon reared, getting in a blow before being flung to the floor. Lurching, in a punch drunk manner I was far too familiar with, he readied his sword as the dragon stuck again. This time the sword found its mark through the roof of the dragon’s mouth and it pulled back, wings beating as it thrashed, screamed and rolled. The crowd was cheering now, and with a final gesture I had the dragon’s body explode in flame, washing over the entire hall. When they dissipated I had staggered halfway to the wall, illusions were easier than reality of course but that had been the largest, longest and most involved one I’d ever done.

I almost made it to a table, and a dignified collapse, when Maggie smashed into me. I lurched, but somehow managed to walk with one leg dragging an overjoyed eleven year old. “Everything you hoped for?” I said as I finally managed to sit down and accepted a glass of wine. The grin on her face told me all I needed.

Johannes swung by to congratulate me and I was forced to dance a few times with the unmarried brigade, Ebenezer’s lessons were still more useful than I’d imagined when spinning around a nursing home with near geriatrics. All told it was far better than my last costume party, I had never told Maggie that story of her mother, and I wasn’t sure I ever would. I didn’t let that night overshadow this one and was enjoying myself, naturally that was when a kid with white blond hair and a dragon mask came and started to rant at me.

I put up with it for about thirty seconds before I interrupted. “Kid, just because you’re in love with dragons doesn’t mean you get to complain about the show. Besides how do you even know it was mine?”

He scoffed. “Please, how many freakishly tall wizards can there be in one city, I remember you Harry Dresden. And I’m not in love with dragons, I am a dragon.”

I gave him a slow once over, for long enough that he’d notice. “Hair, no fangs, no scales, no claws, no wings; I’m not really seeing it.”

He stamped and I mentally dropped his age a few years, “I am Viserys Targaryen, rightful king of Westeros, and I will have my respect!”

“Wait,Viserys?” I reached over and pulled up his mask, sure enough it was the same boy I’d found
and rescued. I lowered the mask back down and took half a step back. “No wonder Martell was so entertained that I didn’t know who you were.”

“Prince Martell, you know him?” His face lit up at the name.

“We met once or twice, he said you were distant family.”

“Indeed, and with his, our, family’s help we will”-

An older man who’s only concession to the occasion was a bright toucanish bird mask interrupted “We will stop bothering the wizard. Thank you for speaking with Viserys Dresden, I think I speak for the crowd when I say we enjoyed your sorcery.” he took a firm grasp on Viserys’s shoulder and steered him back into the crowd.

Well that was a thing. I turned to Maggie who had returned from her mingling. “How does it feel to have hosted royalty, should we try to sell our stories to the tabloids?”

Maggie considered it “I thought a king would be taller.” She paused for a minute before going on. “Besides, Aemma said he was a terrible dancer.”

“That’s why we hold elections in America, we can choose the taller and better dancers instead of leaving it up to genetics” She laughed and I grabbed her, taking her onto the dance floor as the music picked up.

Much later we left the ball and began to walk home. Our costumes attracted little interest on the streets, the bravos were nowhere near done with the evening and compared to them ours were extremely restrained. The Uncloaking was in full swing, music and lights spilled from every door. The ever present mist diffused the lights from colored lanterns, and pleasure barges drifted through the canals. It was magical in a way that all our power could not quite replicate.

The next morning was rough. I hadn’t drank too much, but the late night, the power I’d used, and the alcohol all combined for an especially unpleasant wake up. I expected it to be a slow day, most of the city was hungover after all, and had planned to spend the day toying with my gong phone. I hadn’t made much progress in being able to move them independently but they could now transmit sound. I didn’t have a firm plan on how to solve their issues, so I had hoped that a day of experimenting would give me new ideas. Right after I finished breakfast and headed up to the lab the wards twinged, alerting me that someone was at the door. I looked at myself, mildly more presentable than the average Braavosi, at least this morning, and went down to answer it.

The man standing at the door was dressed entirely in black and reminded me of Hendricks for his sheer size. “The Sealord requests your presence.”

I looked down at myself, the clothes I’d been fine with, weren’t really what one wore to see a king. Of course I’d been less dressed for better so it wouldn’t stop. I did want to get Maggie up though. “Dressed like this?”

Pseudo-Hendricks had been thinking the same based on his sneer. “Just hurry.”

I closed the door in his face and turned towards the stairs. It looked like my flashy and attention grabbing magic had grabbed attention, fancy that. I burst into Maggie’s room and was extremely satisfied to wake her for once. “Maggie, get up, come on.” She eventually shifted, slowly blinking her way to full alertness. “I’m getting called to visit the Sealord, do you remember our plan?”

She looked blank for a moment then rallied. “Once you leave, raise the wards, if men come from him without you, or your password set the shield crystal in the front room, then take an escape potion to
“Great, I don’t expect any trouble, but be careful. Stay inside until I come back.” I was hoping I was being paranoid, that the plans for her safety would never be used but being called to the leader of the city was unusual enough that I wanted to make sure she was prepared. I threw on some nicer clothes and my new enchanted coat. I put on my shield bracelet and grabbed my taser chain and slide it into a pocket just in case. I didn’t think they’d let anything obviously magical like my staff or rod in, but I felt those items would go under the radar without actively prejudicing him against me.

I went back down to the messenger and got into the boat he indicated. The rowers were quick and put up with the load of two large men without complaint and soon we arrived at the Sealord’s palace. Walking up from a side entrance the halls were lined with portraits, previous rulers or perhaps just art I didn’t know. Pseudo-Hendricks had a brisk stride until we reached a door which he entered leaving me outside. After a minute he opened it and beckoned me into the Sealord’s office.

The Sealord was once a strong man, he sat tall even now and his shoulders were broad. He had Tregar’s eyes and chin, but the similarities with his murdered younger brother stopped there. Tregar always had an air of restrained energy, as if any minute he could leap into action to fend off pirates, or escape a collapsing tomb. Ferrego Antaryon lacked that energy. His arms look shrunken, like the muscle had gone and the skin remained and his eyes were surrounded by deep wrinkles. He didn’t look up when I entered, slowly dragging a quill across a page with a rasping sound leaving me standing awkwardly in front of his desk. Just watching him write left me feeling exhausted.

Just when I was wondering if he’d noticed me come in, he spoke. “I have heard many things about you Dresden, but after last night I felt that I should speak with you.” He started to write again with his slow motions and I was beginning to wonder if he expected a reply. Whoever taught rhetoric in this world put far too much emphasis on glacial pacing. “What brings a sorcerer of such power to my city?”

“Shipwreck and misfortune initially, the friends I made kept me here though.”

“Ah my brother’s little club. Before that though, you spent your days tracking lost cargo, why did you spend years wandering amidst the dregs of my city?” The drone of his quill started again.

“I was searching for a return to my homeland and didn’t want to grow attached before I realized the futility of my quest.”

“There are other cities in the world, although none quite so fine as this, if you’ll forgive my bias. In Qarth they venerate sorcerers, why stay in our damp city when you can have all the treasures of the East and West there?”

Saying that at first it was ignorance probably wouldn’t be believed. “I may have washed ashore here but it has become my family’s home. I have no desire to travel halfway across the world.”

“You are a stranger to this part of the world I know. Have you ever wondered why Braavos lacks a group like the warlocks or the shadow-binders?” I shook my head. “I see, we do not have them, because we do not tolerate them. The Faceless men remove any threats to the city, and as is fitting for an order formed against the sorcerers of old Valyria they take a dim view of magic. For all the good you’ve done for the city, I’m told your compasses will change the world, you may have one year of grace. By the time the next Uncloaking ends, you will be gone or you will be dead.”
The Sealord looked up, as if surprised I was still there. “I thought it perfectly simple, if you don’t leave Braavos within the year, the Faceless Men will kill you.”

I had taken a lot I wouldn’t normally accept since arriving in this world, but bowing to the whims of a bunch of upjumped ninjas was a bridge too far. “I understand they’ll try, but why are you bowing to their demands? Why are you letting a cult of assassins run me out of your city?” Some of my anger leaked into my voice and the Hendricks look-alike moved closer, I threw a glare and him and he stopped, looks like he’d been at the party.

“The Faceless men-”

I cut him off “The Faceless men are a group of thugs, we’re sitting in the greatest city in the world, and you’ll cater to their every desire?”

The Sealord looked stunned, I doubt he expected me to argue and it may not have been wise, but Braavos was my home now, I wasn’t leaving without a fight. “You don’t understand, they never fail, they cannot be stopped.”

“Should that matter? This city was founded by slaves fleeing an invincible empire, should they have just accepted servitude because the dragon-lords couldn’t be stopped?” I was nearly shouting now, I’d survived the assassins of the Red Court, the Summer fae and the Denarians, an entire city should not be driven by the fear of a small group.

My words and disrespect enraged the Sealord “You think it is so easy?” He rose from his desk with his face twisted in anger. Despite his wasted appearance he was still a large man and he loomed over my seated form. “They can reach anywhere, Slay anyone, the last man they killed for magic was my brother, and you know what happened to him, his throat was slit in a locked room!”

“And you did nothing in reply? You’re the most powerful man in the city!”

He sank back down, looking defeated. “My brother and I quarreled when we were younger, he spent over fifteen years out of the city, and I was never happier than when we reconciled.” His tone of voice changed, from angry, to contemplative. “He had his hobbies, as you know, and I believed them harmless until one day a servant of mine handed me a note. It was unsigned, and told me to stop my brother’s research. I thought nothing of it, until I sent for the servant to see who it was from, or tried to, my majordomo told me I must have been mistaken, that the servant I named had drowned the day before. I warned my brother of this, and he scoffed, the next day he was dead. When that same servant gave me another note, your note, I knew it was them.”

The one thought that stuck in my mind was that the red priests hadn’t killed Tregar, and the case was closed. I shook my head to clear it, and continued to argue, less loudly though. “You didn’t retaliate, you must have people who know who they are.”

He shook his head, “They can change their faces, their very shape, I know that they are associated
with the House of Black and White but what can I do? Send my guards to kill everyone there? How would I know if I got them all, I would be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life, and I am not so old yet to welcome death.”

“So you’ve given up on justice, do you think I just should flee then?”

He looked tired now, a broken man. “If I could have vengeance I would, but with all the might of Braavos behind me I would fail, what will your illusions and tricks do that I cannot?” He sat for a moment. “I know you have a daughter, do not leave her an orphan, a man of your talents can go anywhere, learn the lesson taught by my brother.” It was clearly meant as a dismissal so I stood and left the room with the bodyguard remaining behind.

I thought it was odd I would be left in the palace unescorted, when a balding man with a hooked nose called out. “So are you the sorcerer?”

I turned to face the slight man “I am unless the Faceless men have their way, should I recognize you?”

“All should recognize me, but you are a foreigner so it is forgiven, I am Syrio Forel, the First Sword of Braavos, and I could not help but overhear your conversation.” At the volumes we’d used he’d hardly have been able to hear anything else. “It was my impression that you intend to confront the Faceless men?”

“I don’t plan to roll over for them, why, are you going to deliver another warning?”

“All men should be wary of assassins, valar morghulis as they say. But if you plan to fight them, you might want a sword at your back. I am the finest in the city and my lord will not object to my accompanying you.”

I gave Syrio a once over, he’d had a half grin the entire time we spoke, and it was incongruous with the subject matter. When he moved it was smooth and he never appeared anything but perfectly balanced. I knew the best fighters in the city competed for the honor of being the first sword, and if he was the greatest, he couldn’t hurt to bring into a fight with ninjas. Besides water dancing sounded like a piratey thing and that would definitely help. “Sure, anyone willing to face unstoppable killers with me is welcome. If I go in I’ll give you a call.” I searched through my pockets for anything I could give him and track, only coming up with coins, they’d have to do. I drew my finger down the center of one, muttered “Sectis” and a deep gouge followed. I worked the coin apart and gave one half to Syrio who managed to look entirely unimpressed by my overt wizardry. “As long as you have the coin I can find you, when it’s go time, I’ll make the coin heat up and glow, I’ll wait in the square for a bell afterwards.”

He spun the half coin through his fingers before looking up. “When you are ready summon me, and we shall show them that all men must die.” I nodded and began to walk back towards the exit, he followed, apparently I wasn’t going unescorted. The awkward silent walk continued until I reached the canal where a boat was waiting. I gave the gondolier my address and sat back to think.

I knew next to nothing about the Faceless men. The common knowledge was that they were assassins who were masters of disguise, who had a perfect reputation, and a correspondingly high cost. I had never heard of their bias against magic though, I had thought them just another gang of hired swords. Killing Tregar in his own home was no mean feat though, he’d traveled the world and seen his share of battles, surprising him enough to not let him even get up from his chair showed real skill. I’d need to know more before I did anything else and before any of that I needed to get back to
Maggie.

I could feel the strength of my wards as soon as I set foot on the island, I had fed more power into them every night since my second encounter with Quaithe, and the air practically hummed with potential. I lowered them as I entered, and saw a nervous Maggie looking from the upper window. I heard her thunder down the stairs and she ran to greet me. “Papa what happened, is everything alright?” She hugged me and gave me a quick inspection to ensure I still had all my limbs. “What did the Sealord want?”

“Apparently the witch-hunters here make appointments. The Faceless men want us out of the city.”

Maggie was much more plugged into the gossip and rumors of the city and she paled. “What can we do, once a Faceless man is contracted you’re as good as dead!”

I stepped forward and wrapped her in my arms, she had shrunk on herself in fear, and I mentally cursed the assassins. I could take death threats with equanimity thanks to an interesting life, but I didn’t want that for her. The idea of murder terrified her, as it should, and I didn’t want her to change to be paranoid, and constantly looking over her shoulder. “It’s alright, I’m here. They will never touch you while I’m around.” Apparently that was the wrong thing to say as she burst into tears, burying her face in my coat. I moved us over to the couch and held her until she stopped.

Later, after Maggie calmed down, I went to see Johannes. Maggie insisted on coming with me and I didn’t have the will or desire to say no. We took a boat over to his house and knocked. We’d both been there before and the servants recognized us and let us in. While we waited his youngest daughter, a nice girl a little older than Maggie came to greet us and I was relieved to see them talking quietly. His manservant beckoned me, and I went up to meet with Johannes. “What’s the occasion Harry, you rarely bring Maggie for visits, except for dinners.”

“I might need a favor. The arrangement Ser Darry made for Viserys and Daenerys, could I set up something similar?”

“It would be costly, you have enough but it would be at least half of your total wealth. But Harry, you don’t need to worry about that though. If, gods forbid, something happened to you have enough friends that Maggie would be taken care of. I’d be honored to in fact.” Johannes sounded almost offended that I wouldn’t ask him first.

“If it were a normal situation I would be happy for you to raise her in my absence, however this is anything but. What do you know about the Faceless men?”

Johannes actually laughed. “Harry, I sometimes forget you’re not from here, you don’t have any enemies that could afford their prices. If someone threatened you with them, rest assured it’s only a bluff, and a poor one at that.”

“Well the Sealord and Tregar would disagree.”

He stopped laughing immediately. “Tregar Antaryon was killed by a Faceless man? His price would bankrupt a kingdom, how did Ferrego know?”

“A man wearing the face of a dead servant delivered a warning that Tregar ignored. You told me yourself what happened next. The Faceless men don’t like magic it seems, Tregar found something or went too far in his research, and now my illusions put me next on their list. They gave me a year to leave the city and then it’s open season.” I paused to let him recover. “That’s why I asked about
the bank, I couldn’t ask you or my other friends to take that kind of risk.”

Johannes sat back considering it. “Maggie will have a place in my home if you cannot care for her, never worry on that account.” I never deserved my friends, in this world or the last. “What do you plan to do, will you run?”

I stood, “I don’t want to, I’m going to prepare, and then say hello, with the First Sword at my back. The Sealord told me to seek them at the House of Black and White.”

17.

Maggie and I left Johannes’s house after he told me all he knew of the Faceless men, it didn’t really add anything to what I’d learned through osmosis in the city, or from the Sealord. We didn’t go home immediately though, the presses were our next destination. Ever since I got the business up and running, I’d been offering members of the Voyagers deals on reprinting their books. If they let me copy a book from their libraries, I’d give them a percentage of all of its sales. It was good practice for the printers to keep them busy, and democratized knowledge, or at least whatever information was in the books. There were plenty of books there that hadn’t yet been copied though, and it was beginning to resemble a library, even if most were just the same book, copied over and over again. Before the whole assassins mess I’d actually planned to found a library, I had considered several names, but I currently was leaning towards the Ivy and Bob Memorial Library. Hopefully the current situation could be resolved and I’d go back to more domestic pursuits. In all the books that hadn’t been copied yet I was hoping to find one that shed more light on the Faceless men.

Maggie and I spent the rest of the day there, reading through old and dusty books. Indexes weren’t a thing in books here, so to get a sense of the book you had to read the introduction at the very least. Even then some valuable tidbit could be hidden away further in and we’d miss it. Having a spirit of knowledge around to do research really had spoiled me.

The Faceless men came up several times in histories of Braavos. Sealords, kings, and merchant princes had been allegedly killed by them, the only clue to the seeming accident being the sudden poverty of the assassinated man’s enemies. Tregar’s murder seemed uncharacteristically overt, but the expertise in disguises shown by the dead servant was a definite hint of their involvement.

Another book on secret societies had a few more clues, the Faceless men weren’t covered in too much detail, the majority focused on a group of the knowledge monks who apparently wanted to destroy all magic. The author sounded like a conspiracy theorist, which made me a little leery to trust it, but it did have the most information. He claimed the Faceless men had been founded in Valryia before its fall, and somehow contributed to the Doom which even now made trips there extremely dangerous. They apparently worshipped a death god who had aspects in all religions, and killing for them was a ritual sacrifice. The most worrying thing he wrote was that they apparently had some means of taking the faces of the dead. I had thought them simply masters of disguise but after Quaithe I was forced to acknowledge they may have some sort of glamour based magic. It was an unpleasant thought, the Sight would burn through all illusions, but I had seen enough with it that I would never forget to be wary of it’s use.

We left the shop when the sun was about to set, they may have promised a year but trusting killer cult members was never a winning move. Maggie had calmed down over the day, like when dealing with Quaithe, she had an unshakable confidence in me that I knew I couldn’t live up to. I had more work to do though, the assassins might not have known the value time gave a wizard but they would regret it.
My first priority was our home’s defenses, given that the Faceless men might be illusionists I was working on a ward that would disrupt them. It would only function inside a threshold but it would stop them from infiltrating my house if they somehow got past the other wards. I’d probably install the same ward on any of my friends’ homes who had strong enough thresholds, I couldn’t think of a good reason for them to refuse.

My next project was also related to dealing with illusions. When the Faerie courts fought, the Gatekeeper had given me an ointment that penetrated glamours. I had of course kept some, and with Bob’s help, reverse engineered it. It would spare me from using the Sight and I could give some to Syrio or anyone else who came with me. Honestly I was tempted to make a barrel of it and give out free samples. Magic might be different here, but the essence of life should not be used to facilitate murder. Anything I could do to impede that goal would be worthwhile.

My normal gear, staff, blasting rod, water gauntlet, and of course my latest coat were all ready and had all the enhancements I could think of, since I’d worked on them ever since Quaithe appeared. It was two weeks after I received the warning that I walked with Maggie to Johannes’s now heavily warded house, and with my heart pounding, left her there.

I stood in the Sealord’s Square with the half coin I’d given Syrio burning in my hand. I could feel the other half approaching me, and I turned to look for him in the crowd. He emerged, wearing dark clothes and a narrow sword, moving with a predatory grace that reminded me of Thomas. “It is time then?”

I nodded and then opened my Sight, Syrio looked much the same except instead of standing still his sword was in his hand, while he shifted from stance to stance like lightning. I closed my third eye with relief, I had wondered since his convenient appearance if he was who he claimed. He was the First Sword, and only mortal, if he betrayed me it wouldn’t be through magic. “I think so yes. Let’s see what the House of Black and White has to offer us. First though, smear some of this over your eyes.” He took the small jar of the ointment, cracked the lid and looked at it dubiously.

“What is it? Warpaint is not something I feel the need to indulge in.”

I grabbed it back from him and put two stripes over my own eyes. “It will let you see through illusions, if they’ve got magic this will beat it.”

He took the gunk back and applied it while looking mutinous. “I’m grateful for your gift, but please endeavor to make your next cosmetic less rank.” After spending a week with batches constantly being made and tested I didn’t even notice the smell, whatever method Rashid had used to make it scentless it eluded me.

“You’ll be grateful for it the next time an invisible demon tries to eat your face.”

“This hypothetical demon will be repelled by the smell? If I have to wear it that long, I might welcome it.” While he complained, we started walking towards the temple of the Many-Faced god. The square was fairly central and the temple wasn’t, it was on its own island, creepily deserted of course. Walking across the final bridge, we left the teeming masses of the city behind us, and with them, their noise. The only sound were our footsteps, well my footsteps, Syrio’s were silent as he managed to look even more dangerous as we walked up the rocky hill the temple was built on.

The main doors were monochromatic, one door was of ebony and the other was made of the pure white wood I’d used for my staff. They were half closed, and the interior was in deep shadow. Syrio and I exchanged a glance, and pulled them the rest of the way open, letting in the wan light in as we
entered ourselves. I could feel death in the air, back home I wouldn’t have dared entered the
Nevernever here, for fear of what lurked on the other side of a place like this. The temple was dark,
low fires in alcoves carved in the walls provided what little illumination there was. There was a dark
pool in the center of the floor and and around the room were statues of gods I vaguely recognized.
Syrio, seeing the direction I looked whispered their names, “The Stranger, Bakkalon, the Weeping
Woman, the Merlyn King.” He stopped there, but there were far more statues than the four he’d
named, and I didn’t like that the last one shared the greatest wizard ever’s name.

There was only one man in visible in the temple, he was dressed in a gray robe and didn’t
acknowledge our arrival. He continued to sweep as we approached, only stopping when we stood in
front of him. He turned to look at us and Syrio gasped, whatever illusion he projected was defeated
by Rashid’s concoction. The man was wearing a mask, at first I thought it was finely dyed leather,
but then I realized no tanner had made it. It was the skin off of a corpse, the edges were stained red in
what I knew was blood, and I had to resist the urge to rip it from his face. Illusions based on flayed
faces were not the best introduction to magic, and Syrio looked pale. “Two men are here, a man
wonders why.”

Syrio gripped the hilt of his sword, “We came to speak to the Faceless men, and we have found one,
although perhaps we should call you the two faced men?” His lethal grace remained, but he now
moved in a manner that suggested violence was imminent. He surged forward, shoving the man
hard. “I have had friends come here to die, and you wear their skin? What part of the gift of death is
that?”

The cloaked man barely reacted to Syrio’s push, he recovered his balance effortlessly, and stood still
a few paces back. “A man still wonders.”

Syrio seethed at my side but didn’t reply. I stepped forward. “You and yours threatened me, and
killed a friend. I would hear the reason why.”

“We have killed none of your friends.”

“Fucker!” Syrio almost blurred forward, and grabbed the edge of his facemask. “You killed Tregar
Antaryon, and I want to know why!” With a sharp motion he tore it free, throwing the priest to the
ground with it. “Don’t like anyone else with magic, how’s it feel to be on this side of it?” He lunged
forward and kicked the man in the side, his breath came out in a rush and he curled around

As the priest wheezed another voice came from the back of the temple, and I spun to face it, Syrio’s
outburst had surprised me, and I was inwardly cursing about not watching my back in a ninja
fortress. “Tregar Antaryon did not die by our hands.”

Facing him I lit my staff, the entire length shone white, and chased the shadows of the temple away.
In the glare the mysterious temple now looked shabby, the dark grandeur was lost with my light.
“And why should we trust the word of an assassin?” The man walked towards Syrio and I, as the
beaten priest crawled away.

“We are servants of the Many-Faced god, we serve a grander purpose than murder.”

“I doubt it makes much difference to those who end up on your blades.” He had continued to walk
nearer, if he got too much closer he might be able to act before I could. Syrio unsheathed his sword
and stepped forward, the man stopped just short of skewering himself.
“Death comes to all men. Through us it comes gently, it is a gift. Tregar Antaryon’s end was not ours.” Despite having a razor sharp blade inches from his throat, the priest was calm, or at least his flesh mask didn’t show emotions. “A man wonders why you believed our guilt?”

“A man wearing a dead man’s face came to warn the Sealord” Syrio bit out. “Whatever would make us think of you?” He traced the air in front of the man’s mask with his blade. “If not you whom?”

“We are not the only ones in this city who can hide behind another’s face. You stand next to another.”

“Since he’d drive himself out of the city. Name names, or we’re going through this building ripping off every face, if its the one they were born with or not.” Syrio’s voice was growing manic, but his sword was perfectly still pointing at the priest’s eye.

“Tregar Antaryon was killed by a shadow-binder, the followers of R’hllor have them in their number.”

“It is said you kill those who study magic in this city. Why do you tolerate their sorcery?” He turned to look at me, his eyes didn’t dilate at all staring into my light, and I realized with a shock he was blind.

“We serve the Many-Faced god. When sorcerers seek to claim those who have received the gift, we act, and not before. You have nothing to fear from us yet Harry Dresden.”

I wasn’t quite willing to take his word but Quaithe had acted as if oaths mattered. “Swear this on your power, and in your god’s name, or I will join Syrio in the cleansing of this place.”

“Of course, the god I serve does not lie and neither do his followers. You have my vow.” At that he turned away, and began walking back into the depths of the temple. Syrio shuddered and then gave a harsh exhale.

“Let’s leave this pit, before I have to kill everyone in here.” He hurried out, his quick steps more than matching my longer strides. The sunlight outside was a shock, even with my light the temple was dim. We left the island in silence, before hailing a boat when we reached a busier canal. We sat as the gondolier pushed us out and he eventually spoke “Do you trust them?”

I thought about it, either we trusted them or we would fight, I wasn’t going to live with another sword hanging over my head. “I don’t know if we can, but we can pierce their illusions and without that they are just men, trained and skilled no doubt, but mortal.” Syrio nodded and was silent for the rest of the trip. As we parted ways in the square I handed him the jar of ointment. “Keep it just in case, when you run out I’ll make more.”

As I started to leave he called out. “Dresden, what will you do next?”

I stopped and turned back, “I think we’ll need to visit the Red Temple.”

18.

Getting out of the gondola and walking the last distance to Johannes’s house I tried to think of my next move. I’d already opted out of entering the Red Temple once, when I thought they had produced the wildfire. Now that I knew they had a shadow-binder, or at least the Faceless men said
they had one, I was even less enthusiastic about it. I’d been able to handle all of the magic Quaithe had shown, but she hadn’t been trying to kill me, and didn’t expose all of her tricks. The alleged shadow-binder had already killed once, and I didn’t even know how.

Johannes and Maggie were relieved to see me, I’m not sure Johannes expected me to come back, but Maggie was still clinging to my apparent invincibility. I gave them both a quick overview of what we’d learned, Johannes’s faced twisted at the mention of the Red Priests, and then Maggie and I headed home. Maggie was in high spirits with my safe return, but my mood was somber. There was so much I could do, and had done, to help this city, now I was about to face off against a gang of pyromaniacs. With my luck though we were probably doomed to fight as soon as they found out about my cavalier use of their god’s element.

Stepping back behind my wards was a comforting feeling. I had never raised anything near as intense on my home back in Chicago, and when I lived with Ebenezer he evidently hadn’t felt the need for such layered defences. Or I hadn’t been able to sense them, that would fit better with the mindset of the Blackstaff. The threshold surged with power, my magic defending against anything I could think of, and Maggie’s, lesser but still present, adding a another note to the almost audible droning of magic. It was tempting to just bar the doors and stay behind the walls of magic but that was hardly a solution. Instead I went to the lab, Maggie followed and I started to brainstorm about why the Red Priests wanted me gone. “Maybe they’re jealous?”

Maggie’s voice surprised me, I didn’t realize I’d been talking to myself. Her interruption broke my train of thought, now I was wondering if for all my years as a detective my internal monologue had been external. “Oh well, everyone needs a little noir in their life.” Maggie was thrown by my non sequitur, but I pressed on. “They could be jealous, that would explain why they only did something after the party. It was a lot of visible magic.”

“Why would they give you a year then? It doesn’t seem smart to warn you.” That’s my daughter, wondering why her old man wasn’t instantly bumped off by cultists.

“They might have wanted to avoid this situation, where I knew someone was gunning for me. If they tried and failed, they don’t know what I could do to retaliate.” Maggie was nodding along, I’d told her suitably edited versions of most of my cases, and she looked excited to be part of her very own Dresden adventure. “Especially with the framing of the Faceless men, you saw how everyone here is terrified of them, they might have thought I’d be too worried and relieved to have time to go that I wouldn’t stick around to investigate. If it worked, I’d be gone with no effort on their part, just an illusion and a warning while further discrediting the Faceless men in the eyes of the city.”

“But now you know it was them, their plan is ruined.” Maybe my abridged adventures had cut too much, omitting the terror and violence of the last showdowns might have given Maggie the impression that at the end all I did was pull a Velma, and remove the villain's mask. Actually if it was the Faceless men I could have done that, although Syrio had taken quite a bit of skin when he’d defaced that one mook, modern mask technology apparently beat the mystic arts in ease of removal.

“We don’t really know that much, we only have the words of a bunch of assassins. It is a lead though, and I’ll check it out.” Maggie was mollified a little by that, and I managed to get her to practice her shielding. I would have tried to have her do homework to get her mind off of magic, but her lessons had a seasonal break following the Unmasking festival.

I spent the rest of the afternoon playing with enchantments, my recent preoccupation had almost entirely cleared out my backlog of compasses, and to keep myself entertained I tried to add new features. The next logical step for the compass was to somehow indicate distance, if I got that
worked out only one would be needed for navigation. Of course my tracking spell didn’t really give me a distance either, just a bearing, so I’d need to improve that spell before I worked out how to set it in the molten gold. It was a nice break, for all of the fighting I’d done in my life I really enjoyed using and learning about magic. The compasses might not have been as impressive as a zombie dinosaur, but they’d done infinitely more for the world than riding Sue through Chicago.

It was with that in mind that I ended up going to the Voyagers’ Club that night, I hadn’t been for the previous month or so, I’d been busy, first with my illusion and then gearing up for the Faceless men. I wanted to go though, I didn’t want a threat that was less than what I’d dealt with back home preventing me from doing what I enjoyed. Of course I wore my coat, carried my staff, and had my holstered blasting rod as I went there, being willing to face danger did not equate to stupidity.

I arrived just before it started, Johannes wasn’t there, so I sat at a small table in the back with another man who I recognized as the leading mapmaker. He looked excited to see me, he’d been to my shop several times to buy more compasses and ask questions about their functions. I mentally resigned myself to a slow night when several laborers, their cheaper but durable clothing and heavily muscled frames distinguishing them from the members, entered, staggering under the load of the crate held between them. Another man, his frame almost cartoonishly muscled on one side but dressed much more in line with the rest of us, entered along with one of the magnates I’d talked to about pistons and steam. The four sweating men lowered the crate onto the front table which groaned under the load, and the fifth man, producing a small crowbar, split the crate open.

It was an ugly assemblage of black iron tanks, it looked as it was made from armor plates that were then hammered together. Bands of iron went around the tanks, presumably for reinforcement, and what looked like a bellows was attached to one end of it. The shipping magnate stepped up in front of it, all eyes were on him and the spectacle. “Gentlemen, together with Jacob Guldenmann” he gestured towards the man I assumed was a blacksmith, “and the insights of Harry Dresden, I have harnessed the power of steam.” His proclamation was met by some confusion, other than the few who I had spoken with about pistons and steam expansions no one looked very impressed.

Another man said what everyone but the select was thinking, “And what does that mean Mangini?” Mangini, the shipper flushed, and gestured at the blacksmith. He turned something on one of the tanks and with a hiss the bellows inflated, lifting a rod attached to it. Another sharper hiss, and it collapsed, before rising again in sequence. Around me the members got up to inspect the device but I remained in my seat, no matter what happened with the Red Priests, Mangini had just become the James Watt of this world and the industrial revolution was coming. By the time Maggie was my age there’d be steamships traveling the Narrow Sea, and in a century who knew? Pushing this world ahead could only help, in our world the supernatural predators were only driven back when humanity mastered technology, maybe with this the assassins and sorcerers would no longer be able to command cities. For all the issues I had with the White Council, I never disagreed with their role as guardians of regular human life, performing that role on a new world was as good a purpose as I needed.

I managed to get out after the meeting ended, only answering a few questions from the mapmaker who I invited to my shop to show his new maps. His enthusiasm was tiring, and when I was dealing with him I missed the chance to talk to a few other members, I still wanted to found a library and some of them had been interested in helping, especially since any books they donated would be returned with interest. It was a longer term concern though, despite the evening’s pleasant distraction I still had to focus on the temple of R’hllor.
Taking the afternoon off was pleasant, but the next morning I was back in the Sealord’s square with the half-coin pulsing in my hand. Syrio, accompanied by another guard, both with stripes of Rashid’s ointment over their eyes, found me in the crowd. “The Sealord wants to talk to you.”

I looked at them, my gaze lingering on their painted foreheads. “Why do you think I’m here, let’s go.” We walked into the palace, there were more guards visible than on my previous visit, one in every squad was wearing the new makeup. “So you’re going to want a bit more of that goo? You’re enjoying the smell after all?”

Syrio snorted “Just so. The Sealord liked having the odor of bird shit around him so much he’s made everyone wear it.” I was a little impressed that he’d scented out one of the components, I wouldn’t have recognized it were it not for the week I’d spent collecting it and mixing it. Seabird’s had sharp eyes that could often see through the water, it was an obvious ingredient for potions to look through illusions, if it wasn’t for the smell I’d always have some on hand.

We reached the Sealord’s office, the Hendricks clone was sitting there with him, again with the stripes, the Sealord wasn’t wearing any, but the jar I’d given Syrio was sitting on his desk. “Harry Dresden, I am grateful for the work you have done in interrogating the Faceless men. I am especially happy that you have given me someone to hold responsible for my brother’s murder.”

“I assume Syrio told you all we saw in the House of Black and White?” The Sealord nodded, he looked better than the last time I saw him, the prospect of vengeance had shaved years off of him. “Then you know all we have is the word of assassins that the Red Priests have anything to do with this.”

“Be that as it may, I am the Sealord. It is well within my power to send men into their temple and drag anything there into light, particularly this shadow-binder.” He stood up and looked towards the large glass windows overlooking the bay, “And make no mistake, if the murderer is there I will have him crawling at my feet and their Temple will be burned in the fires they love so much.”

I knew what the Sealord was feeling, I had done the roaring rampage of revenge before, but it had never been easy, or without cost. “I was planning to go to the temple, let Syrio come with me and we’ll see what they have to say.” The Sealord barely waited for me to finish before turning back.

“No, I do not negotiate with murderers. My guards will be storming the temple, your only choice is to go with them or give the shadow-binder free rein against them.”

That was how I found myself with Syrio and fifty stone faced men marching towards the temple district. They had used the last of the ointment I’d given Syrio, and all were wearing mail coats and dark leather. The crowds scurried out of our way as we approached, bravos, pickpockets, and bankers not daring to impede us. I didn’t want to do it like this, I’d have preferred a softer approach, but if there was a shadow-binder I didn’t want the vanilla mortals to be slaughtered without my help. I also had a chance to prevent it from descending into violence, if I didn’t go and there was a massacre either way I would blame myself for not doing what I could.

Walking up the steps next to Syrio in front of the soldiers half reminded me of Darth Vader’s first showing, but I fought down the image. We were going to try to find a dangerous warlock and I
didn’t know how dangerous the shadow-binder could be. A young acolyte dressed in red robes saw us coming, his eyes widened and he swallowed, but he came to us anyways, I was a little impressed. “How can we serve the Sealord?”

“Don’t impede our and turn over the shadow-binder you shelter.” Syrio brusquely spat out. He looked back at the guards and gave them several hand gestures and they spread out heading towards the other chambers of the temple. “He is suspected of the murder of Tregar Antaryon and we will have our answers.”

The acolyte gulped and nodded but I doubted he had any real power, we were threatening someone barely a step above an altar boy. Syrio’s teams were returning, herding everyone they found into the main chamber, he probably had more men outside watching and taking anyone who tried to leave into custody. We waited for a little longer as they got everyone, several older priests, both men and women, tried to talk to Syrio but he didn’t look at them and the guards pulled them back into the rest.

If I hadn’t been paying close attention I wouldn’t have seen it. Syrio perked up, when he stood normally he was relaxed, in a peculiar way that promised speed and death at a moments notice. Now he was almost quivering, one of the teams hadn’t returned. He barked out several commands and two thirds of the the men began to push the mass of priests up towards one of the walls, the remaining third formed up on us. Syrio was in front, I followed just behind. We headed for the door the lost team went in, it lead to a narrow stair leading down and I was beginning to sense something I hadn’t felt in years, dark magic and necromancy. “There’s something here Syrio. I can feel it.” He nodded and drew his sword but kept on going. For a man whose experience with magic was strictly of the horror and death variety, he was keeping his cool admirably. As we kept on descending the taint grew stronger, torches flickered as we passed and I started to draw power. I made sure my shield bracelet was free, and ran my fingers over my kinetic rings. I was as ready as I could be as we went further into the miasma of black magic.

The stairs eventually ended in a circular room with several doors. The taint was so pervasive I couldn’t sense a direction and if I looked with my sight it might put me out for minutes. We we crowded in the space, there was plenty of room but in some ancient instinct we had clustered together in the center of the room. Syrio started to speak and for the first time lost something of his composure. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Muller, Hestorin, take the rooms on the left. Nahar, Qarro, go to the right, the rest of you,” He gestured at me as well, “we’re taking the center. Anyone here, take them down, they can answer questions if they live, or we’ll find out ourselves if they’re dead.” The named men nodded and there was a last pause as they checked their weapons and loosened daggers in their sheaths. Syrio looked at the biggest man in our group, almost as tall as me, and heavily muscled. “Tormo, kick that fucking door down.”

The big man charged forward as the other teams ran towards their doors. I prepared a shield as I followed, shouldering through the splinters Tormo left and nearly running into Syrio. The room was empty except for five men with their throats cut lying neatly on the ground. We stared at them for a second, and that was when the screams started.

I turned back, stepping into the antechamber, the torches’ flickering lights disguised it at first, but the shadows were moving with purpose, and where they went, sheets of blood followed. My first reflex was to call for light, but the sudden glare just made the shadows sharper, I could see their rapid movements as they sheared through metal and flesh alike. The terror the wraiths brought filled me for a second before I fought it down, I had destroyed unruly spirits before, and they would not stop me now. Infusing my will with Soulfire I whipped my staff forward. “Laqueus!” a silver lash whipped forth and curled on one the shades, I pulled back and with a scream the shadow fell apart as the garrote pulled through it, I swung it towards the next one, but it dodged smoothly before leaping towards me. I stepped back and threw up a shield before it reached me. Its blade screamed as it hit
my shield and I felt feedback cascading through my bracelet. With an effort I pulsed the shield larger, throwing it back, and drew my chain in an effortless practiced movement. “Fulminos” I bellowed, the thunderclap from the white-hot beam staggered even the shades, as the one I’d targeted was obliterated.

I seized the moment and called forth another whip of Soulfire, the shades had dropped everyone else in the room and I swept it through the entire chamber catching the other two shades and shredding them. The room was silent for a moment before the moans of the wounded started up. The soldiers who had been behind me with Syrio were the only ones uninjured, and looked at me with more than a hint of fear. “There were five corpses and four shades.” I didn’t look back at them, keeping my eyes on the chamber. “The shadow-binder still has one left.”

“What can we do against it? They cut us all to ribbons!” I looked over my shoulder at the terrified guard before returning my attention to the room.

“What men have always done against darkness, face it no matter what.” With that hopefully inspiring, but entirely useless advice given, I stepped into the center of the room. The light now was entirely from my staff, the silver filled runes in it blazed as the staff itself shone, the only shadows were of my making. Standing in the center of the room amid the wounded and dead, with Syrio and the soldiers standing back in the room with the corpses, I began to turn. I was pretty sure I knew how this was going to go, the shade would erupt out from behind me as soon as I turned my back, and then with me out of the way, would kill its way through the rest of the guards. Fortunately that was pretty standard monster fare and I was ready. As soon as the shade moved I felt it. I roared “Defendarius!” as a solid blue shield formed around me, and the shade smashed into it and rebounded. With a snarl I sent forth the same Soulfire powered lash and ripped it into three pieces.

The feeling of dark magic immediately lessened, and I could feel the power of the shadow-binder now that it was the sole source of the intense wrongness. “Syrio.” He walked out into the room with his sword ready at my call. “The shades are gone, there’s only the monster responsible left.”

“Well let’s send him to his god then.” Syrio stepped forward and the courage he displayed against the unstoppable forces that slaughtered his men was inspiring. I kept my shield bracelet ready as we advanced on the room, and I stepped through the door first. The shadow-binder was pressed against the wall staring at something over my head and muttering. The magic might be different here but black magic still corrupted and he was far gone. Syrio snarled at the sight. “This wretch killed all my men? I’ll see him begging for death for days before I let him go!” He looked at us now and his mutters became shouts “The queen of ice and darkness holds your soul and death walks behind you! Servant of the Other! Begone!” he flung his hand towards me and I raised a shield on reflex, fire burned against it but couldn’t penetrate. As soon as I dropped it, Syrio surged forward past me, and impaled him. He gasped out his last words, each quieter than the last. “Ice will kill you too, a snow cloaked man will be your death.”

Syrio roared as he pulled his sword free. He slashed through the shadow-binder’s throat, his crimson robe now covered in blood. “You know what we say to the god of death necromancer? Not today!” he stabbed the man again before turning away, breathing heavily. Syrio may have rejected the man’s last words as ravings but I knew better. He had seen things, Quaithe was not the only one who knew things about my old world.

We walked back to the antechamber, the soldiers that could stand were leaning on each other, and those that couldn’t and still lived were being carried by the remnants of Syrio’s squad. The stairs were even longer going up, and when we reached the main chamber the other red priests were on their knees, with their arms bound behind their backs. “Oman, get them up, Beric send a runner to
the palace, tell the Sealord to expect some guests.” Some of the soldiers came to help carry the
wounded, the rest, with mailed hands and spearbutts assisting, got the priests moving. The looks
we’d gotten on the way there were nothing compared to now, seeing the entire clergy of R’hil lor
bound and marching through the streets drew a crowd that the unsheathed swords of the guards only
moderately dissuaded.

Reaching the palace was a relief, there were apparently enough cells below it to hold them while the
Sealord decided what to do with them. Syrio assured me he could handle the immediate reporting as
long as I’d come back the next day, while I hadn’t thrown around too much power the soulfire and
struggling against the taint of black magic had exhausted me. Despite it being the early afternoon I
went home, said goodnight to a confused Maggie, and slept, dreaming about Mab’s icy grasp.

20.

I woke up the next morning feeling excellent, until I saw Maggie sprawled out on my bedroom chair.
I hadn’t told her any of what happened, she must have been panicking while I was dead to the world.
I managed to pick her up, she was getting tall and heavy, and carried her back to her room. Tucking
her in, the thought of how surreal it all was hit me. Not a day before I’d been facing off against a
necromancer in the bowels of a temple, and now I was putting my daughter to bed. I didn’t know
how Michael managed the switch from family man to Fist of God so easily. I was grateful for the
opportunity though, losing my friends had, still, hurt but getting the chance to raise my daughter was
worth it. To keep her safe I’d fight a thousand necromancers, I was hoping there was only the one
here though.

I didn’t immediately leave to visit the Sealord, instead I made breakfast while waiting for Maggie to
wake up. I didn’t Listen but in the quiet house with the only noise being the crackling fire, her
moving around before coming down was audible. “Are you alright?” I nodded my head, she
inspected me for a moment as if to ensure I wasn’t lying, then stepped forward and slugged me in the
chest. I could only stare at her.

“What was that for?”

“For being an idiot! We’re wizards, we’re supposed to plan ahead and have plots, not march into
temples with a bunch of red shirt guards. I heard half of them died!” Behind her anger, her eyes were
bright, she was near tears.

“I’m sorry.” Her lips were quivering now, she looked inches away from breaking down. “How did
you hear about it anyways?”

“The whole city knows the Sealord raided the Red Temple and half his guard died. You come home
exhausted and singed, it wasn’t hard to put it together.” She choked out the last few words and I
enveloped her in a hug.

“It’s ok. I’m safe, we’re safe now, the shadow-binder is done.”

“But what if you weren’t? I don’t want to have to live with someone else, I’ve already lost one
family, I can’t lose you too.”

That shut me up, I didn’t have a good reply to her worries. I hadn’t wanted to fight, but I chose that
over running. It had turned out fine so far, but should I have just acquiesced and left the city? I had
the money and reputation needed to start over in Pentos for instance. It was like the Miami to
Braavos’s New York, warmer seedier and full of cartels, but Braavos practically owned it and had
banned slavery. We could have been fine there. Had I let my pride overcome the need to protect Maggie? I wasn’t sure, so I continued to hold her as she gathered herself.

The breakfast I’d been making had burned during our conversation, so we went to a little cafe two islands over. They served a very strong tea and egg sandwiches so normal they almost made me forget I wasn’t home. Maggie ate hers in silence, resisting my attempts to draw her into conversation. We walked home and I agonized over what to say. Right when I was about to make a stab at it she spoke. “Just don’t do anything dumb. You don’t owe them anything.” She glared at me to ensure compliance. “Good, go see the Sealord, and come back for lunch.” I walked her to our door, and then followed her orders. I wasn’t quite sure how that had happened, but if it made her feel better I’d do it.

This time I didn’t need the coin to gain admittance, one of the guards from our ill-fated confrontation with the shadow-binder saw me coming and brought me in. I waited in a conference room for awhile, I wasn’t sure what impact arresting the entire clergy of a major religion had, but I was sure it wasn’t minor. The Sealord hadn’t seemed worried at the prospect, but he had been a little preoccupied with avenging his brother. After seeing the wounds left by the shades I was pretty sure we’d gotten the man responsible, but a religion with shadow-binders serving it wasn’t likely to take the humiliation lying down. Fortunately that wasn’t my problem, at least not yet, and hopefully not ever, and the room I was in had a wide variety of cheese and fruit.

Two or three bells later, a servant finally came to get me. The Sealord’s office was more crowded than I’d seen it before. Ferrego, pseudo-Hendricks, Syrio, another three men I didn’t recognize, and the admiral of the city’s fleet filled it. One of the unidentified three spoke. “Syrio has told us the broad strokes of what transpired, we would like you to tell us more about the battle.”

I gave them a quick rundown of the fight, as well as all I knew and suspected about the shadowbinders, attributing my knowledge to books I’d borrowed from the other Voyagers. Admitting to consorting with another potential warlock didn’t seem like a good idea now. When I finished all but Syrio had grave expressions, and the Admiral was having a fierce but whispered conversation with the Sealord. “Enough.” The Sealord ended the argument, leaving the Admiral with a disgruntled face. “Dresden once again you have the city’s gratitude. Your presence is likely the only reason my First Sword yet lives and half the city guard wasn’t slain. But it is said the reward for work well done is more work. Your magic proved its worth against these shades, can anything be done to prevent them killing again?”

I thought for a minute, much of my obvious power was known to these men, the Voyagers knew I could control the elements and find things, and Syrio would have seen my shields and Soulfire. The fires of creation burned in a way that was difficult to forget and I was sure he’d mention the whips of it I’d used. I didn’t have an easy answer for dark magic, if there was one I’d have used it in Chicago. I couldn’t really prevent the shades from being summoned, but I could impede them. “To kill them, I’d have to be present as far as I know. I suspect they could only last a day at most, probably much less, but with their power a day is far too long. I might be able to set up defenses though. Not everywhere, and there are preconditions, but I think I have the spells to stop them.” The Admiral looked a little relieved, downplaying my power tended to make a certain sort of person more comfortable, an expert soldier like him probably hated all his skill and experience being obsoleted by magic. “I can’t say for sure though, the shadow-binder’s magic is strange to me, we’ll only learn if they work when something strikes them. Even then, if the shadow-binder gets inside all the magical wards will be useless.”

The Sealord nodded. “What will you need to erect these ‘wards’? The resources of the city are at your disposal.” I managed to restrain a smile, I’d never been handed a blank check like that before.
“I’ll know for certain when I’ve looked at the locations. I should warn you, the spells depend greatly on the character of the building. Your palace for example, its nature prevents strong wards from anchoring here. Your home, if you still keep one, would do far better. The Titan will probably be a strong anchor, and perhaps the Arsenal.”

“Then erect what safeguards you can, Syrio will accompany you and ensure you are given whatever you need. If that is all gentleman? I intend to see to the questioning of the priests if any of you wish to join me.” His face twisted at the last. I’d seen Mab inflict tortures and torments unmatched by mortal means on Slate, but seeing the mix of rage and anticipation on Ferrego’s face chilled me. I left the office in a hurry, I wanted to get back to Maggie and forget about black magic, death, and torture.

It was not to be. The Admiral caught up to me and called my name. “Dresden, wait.” He walked with the rolling gait of a sailor, for all that Braavos was built on the water, actual sailors rarely were seen in the nicer districts. The people there had either never lived on a ship, or had left their sailing days behind. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you for some time, please stay we have much to discuss.”

I really didn’t want to be there, but the Admiral was an important man for all I’d forgotten his name, his uniform was distinctive enough that it was the only thing about him I remembered. “Dealing with the Faceless men and priests has taken much of my time Admiral. If we could make this quick?”

I was amused to see him blanch at the mention of the Faceless men but he beckoned me into another conference room and a chair, no cheese sadly. “Our fleet has tested your compasses, we have also purchased maps from Hessler Oliva and the captains are impressed. In addition to your work on the ‘wards’ I would like to make a contract with you for four compasses and anchor blocks for every ship in the fleet.”

“You know you only need two right?”

“I would prefer to know where my ships are at all times, as well as letting their captains know.”

“Oh, ok then.” I stood “Was that all?”

“Well steam ships might be coming along faster than I thought. “Steam was used to power many things, I’m no craftsmen though, I told Mangini and few others much of what I knew, any refinement of their designs will be due to their work and diligence, not mine.”

The Admiral nodded, I’m not sure how much of my story he knew, cared about, or believed in, but my stories about enormous ships that could sail upwind must have gotten to him. Keeping the premier naval power of the world in the lead was a difficult job, and he must have been constantly searching for the next big thing. “Mangini said as much, he and some blacksmith told me about the challenges they’d found you hadn’t mentioned. When we first fit the engines to ships I would have your aid, often common knowledge can be lost in translation that would help a novice.” I agreed, I didn’t think they’d have anything ready for years, much less solve the problems of flames on boats made with wood and tar but it cost me nothing. “The last thing, in the temple we found stores of wildfire, do you posses the craft to make that concoction?”

“No Admiral, I don’t have the skill or desire to make such a hungry flame. You’d be better off avoiding that substance when possible, it even burns magic.” I said the last over my shoulder as I walked out, I was tired of interacting with the government and I was annoyed I’d been roped into making more compasses. I consoled myself with the knowledge that the threat of the shadow-binder
was dealt with for now, and life could go back to a more normal state.

21.

It took months to set up the ward schemes around the Titan. Enough people lived there full time, and considered the fortress their home that it had a threshold, albeit an extremely weak one. It took time to anchor the wards to it, I had experimented with wards a lot while teaching Molly and Maggie, but I still had a long way to go before claiming expertise. I knew the Merlin was able to place them in arbitrary places with incredible power, but he didn’t get on the Senior Council by collecting bottle caps. I still needed something to attach them to, a threshold, and had to be careful to layer the wards on slowly enough that it didn’t collapse. Warding was tedious and difficult work, any mistake could have caused the entire magical structure to fail and trying again would be harder with the ruptured and even weaker threshold. It was also a little awkward that no one but Maggie could tell I was doing anything. Syrio had followed me around the first few days, but there’s only so much rune carving and meditation you can watch before it gets boring. He assigned one of the crippled guards from the temple raid as my minder, he started whenever I spoke, and tried to keep as far from me in a room as possible. I managed to learn he had a family, and Syrio gave him the sinecure since he had been wounded in service to the city. I made a note to introduce pensions, and tried to avoid troubling him as much as possible.

I could do nothing for the Arsenal, and told the Admiral that, but touring it was incredible. I knew Venice had something similar in the Middle Ages, but knowing something, and seeing the acres of shipbuilding space and industry on one of the barrier islands was different. The foreman, Oliva, a cousin of the mapmaker as it turned out, was excited to show me around. Galleys and cogs were constructed from prefabricated parts, and he claimed they could build one ship a day, while supplies lasted. I had never really grasped how much went into making a ship before, the wood was obvious, but rope, sails, and tar were also used in huge quantities. I didn’t really know how mass production started on Earth, but here the Arsenal would probably be the model.

He proudly showed me the base room, where all of the Braavosi anchor blocks for the naval ships were kept, and the compass room next door where the ships were tracked. The Titan apparently housed the other set of compasses, and every night the bearings on the two compasses would be compared giving a location for every ship at sea. After almost an entire year of making multiple compasses everyday, I was much less excited about them, and barely managed to get through without offending him.

The last and most exciting part of the tour was the warehouse they had set aside for engine research. The city was running its own project in parallel with Mangini’s work, with a particular focus on the navy. They had developed the paddle wheel concept on their own, it was an easy leap from water wheels, but Oliva was quite excited about the propeller when I described it.

All together though, I was glad to be done with government contracts. They had paid extremely well, but one of the things I liked best about being a detective was being free to set my own schedule, and to do a variety of things. Spending four hours everyday enchanting, and then another three getting to the Titan and erecting wards got boring after about a week. Demand for the compasses was finally tapering down, at their current price I had worked through my backlog, and hopefully I’d only have to supply the new ones for the Arsenal.

The first day I was free in what felt like years, I slept in and refused to wake up even when Maggie knocked. It was a beautiful day, and sleeping through half the extremely rare sunny morning felt even more indulgent. I had nothing that needed to be done, it was such an excellent feeling that I
contemplated just staying in bed all day. Eventually my body protested, and I was forced to get up, although I resolved to be as lazy as possible all day.

I went out to eat, the waiter gave me a strange look for showing up at lunch time and requesting breakfast, but one of my favorite parts about being rich kicked in, anything out of the ordinary I did was no longer strange, or weird, but eccentric. Eating an omelette on the rooftop patio in the sun was the only thing better than lazing around in bed and I mentally congratulated myself on a perfect idea. Naturally Noho Dimittis and Viserys Targaryen decided to join me.

I looked askance at the two who had just invaded my table, and Viserys at least shifted uneasily. “What brings you fine gentlemen out this morning?” Noho had the poker face that seemed mandatory at higher levels of the Iron Bank and resisted my disapproval.

“Viserys and I were touring the city as part of his education, when he saw you, he insisted on saying hello.” I was a little impressed by how effortlessly Noho threw him under the bus for interrupting my brunch, and turned back to Viserys who seemed to have found his spine.

“You powers, the magic you showed at the ball and when you rescued us. Can you teach me it?” Viserys waited, looking excited, and I couldn’t decide how to crush his hopes. I extended my senses, I couldn’t feel any power from him but that hardly proved anything. The Targaryens were of old Valryia, and I knew they had powerful sorcery, enough to leave roads of melted rock untouched for four hundred years after their fall. I reached out and grabbed his hand, when nothing happened I knew.

“I can’t teach you, you need to be born with the power that I have.” I looked to Noho, he should have known that, and I was surprised he let the boy’s hopes get so high. Viserys was despondent, he must have dreamed of somehow regaining his family’s throne by wielding a special power like his ancestors. I had looked into the Targaryens after my last encounter. Viserys and Daenerys were the last remnants of Westeros’s former royal family. Their father had gone mad, along with their brother, leading to a revolt that ended with Ser Darry smuggling them out of a besieged fortress. It beat execution, but from a prince to an exiled pretender was a long fall, and I didn’t doubt he would do quite a lot to rise again.

Magic of my variety would have been terrible for him, anyone motivated like that ran a heavy risk of breaking a law of magic. If Viserys had it, and went untrained I didn’t doubt he would turn into a warlock, even the noblest intentions couldn’t stop the corruption of black magic.

While I thought, Viserys was visibly drooping. It might have been the last remnants of my morning’s good mood, but I might be able to do something. “You may not be able to learn my magic, but there are other forms in the world. I’ve been putting together a library of all that is recorded, with your guardian’s permission”, Viserys turned his beseeching eyes on Noho, “you can study what I have. I’m not sure how useful most of it will be, and there is knowledge I will forbid you from learning, but if you truly desire it I will help.”

Noho looked somewhat troubled by the idea. He had known that my magic couldn’t be taught, perhaps he was hoping a flat rejection would turn Viserys away from the idea. Rumors about sorcery and black magic had swept the city after the purge of the temple, and I was sure he thought I was responsible. Giving his charge access to the sort of power that had killed almost twenty guardsmen, not that I’d let him learn that, had to be a worrying decision. On the other hand, in three years Viserys would be of age, and a valued client to the Iron Bank. “Perhaps one night a week? Two bells no more?”

I nodded, that time commitment was fine, especially since he would just be reading for most of it. “Sounds good, shall we say the first one will be five days from now, at six bells at night?” The two
agreed, Viserys much more enthusiastically, and got up to leave. I grabbed Viserys’s arm right before he left. “If you truly mean to regain your throne I think you’d be better off studying people, wars, and what Noho says, than sorcery, but magic has brought me enough joy in my life that I don’t want to take away anyone’s chance to learn.”

He stood for a moment, I hoped my words would have some impact, before nodding sharply and hurrying after Noho. I looked down at my half finished plate and decided to eat the rest of the omelette. Maybe the day, and my pledge of laziness weren’t completely ruined.
As much as I was happy to be done with my externally driven projects, I had gotten used to being busy. Sure lazy days were nice, but the two years of constant struggle for survival, followed by months of constant magical labor, had managed to beat an approximation of the Puritan work ethic into me. Maggie bore the brunt of my new energy and time, we spent hours most days studying magic. DuMorne and Ebenezer hadn’t taught me as intensely, but they both had other jobs and responsibilities. Since I wasn’t squandering my time creating warlocks to overthrow the White Council and destroy creation, or being the Council’s wet work man, I could put more effort into teaching her. She learned quickly, and was far more skilled than I had been at her age. Part of that was in the similar nature of our power and part was her aptitude. Her mother had been very smart, and most people didn’t call me stupid; ignorant, foolish, stubborn and thick-headed yes, but rarely stupid. I wasn’t sure if it was just my fatherly pride talking, but Maggie was very clever, and grasped most concepts readily. We didn’t spend all our time with magic, I didn’t want to burn her out, but it was so much fun it certainly was our focus.

The other major recipient of my time was trying to introduce new technologies. A lot of the modern conveniences I missed relied on technologies that were impossible on a renaissance industrial base. Low power steam engines were the current limit of metallurgical efforts, and even then they were expensive. Mangini was using his to pump water from mines, where they were just barely cheaper than human labor. I knew they’d improve in time, especially as they were widely adopted and more brainpower was brought to bear, but I wanted them now. I had hit similar limits in most of my uplift efforts. It was fine to know that sending electrical signals down a wire was the basis of a telegraph, but it was useless to actually build one. I wasn’t an engineer, I didn’t have the knowledge of minutiae in all fields, from naval engineering to chemistry, and I felt I had hit the limits of my pre-existing knowledge. Naturally I sought to solve the problem with fire.

“More heat Maggie!” She pushed her sweat-damped hair from her face and groaned.

“It’ll just set the balloon on fire again! It’s not working!” Despite her defeatist attitude she raised her blasting road and sent another stream of flame into the cloth enclosure. I had thought hot air balloons were within reach, and rather than small scale experiments to get ready, I had bought and painstakingly sewed a fifteen foot diameter sack and had Maggie try to set it on fire. Or fill it with hot air, she had trouble distinguishing between the two. The cloth started to smoke, but I was able to pull the heat out of it, unfortunately that cooled the air inside. We had been at it all afternoon in the wetlands lining the lagoon, and it was starting to get dark, but I wasn’t ready to call it a day just yet.

“Once more, with feeling!” Maggie glared and sent a bar of flame into the bag, this time I was too slow to save it. The sight of a flaming balloon, like a giant sky lantern, rapidly ascending distracted me a little. As we watched it climb into the darkening sky I walked over to Maggie who did not look at all displeased by the outcome. “For all of your excellent traits, why did you have to keep my inclination towards burning things?” She smirked as she watched the balloon rise.

“At least it was only a balloon, and the wind will sweep it out to sea. When I’ve destroyed a block we can talk.” Telling her some of my more pyromaniac approved adventures had been a clear parenting mistake.

“Whatever. Get to my age and then we’ll compare records.” Her grin hadn’t wavered but I was
determined to be the mature one in the family and refrained from further commentary. “Any ideas on what went wrong with the balloon? I didn’t think we’d have too much trouble.”

“Well while you were standing back and shouting, I was carefully observing it. It looked like hot air was going through the fabric, not lifting it.”

One more technical problem, paper or parchment would probably work for a small one, but if I wanted to get people aloft I’d need something more durable. “I really didn’t think this would be so hard, it’s such a simple thing.”

“Don’t worry about it, instead just think what the people will think of a ball of fire traveling through the night sky.” Looking up the balloon was still visible, the fires were still burning and it was moving quickly towards the ocean.

“With my luck Viserys will think its a dragon, and ask for my help to track it down.” Maggie laughed and we began to walk back to catch the ferry.

Despite my worries, two nights later Viserys didn’t mention the balloon. He was a decent student, clever and attentive, but arrogant. I didn’t even really teach him, I just gave him the books I had, and messed around in my lab while he read them and occasionally asked questions. The magic of this world was strange and unknown to me, and I made sure he knew that coming in, but learning and talking about it was fun. I had removed all the books that discussed black magic, leaving mostly scrying spells and discussions on the Valyrian sorceries. He was predictably most interested in those, dragon binding and shaping stone would catch the imagination of any boy, much less a descendent of previous users. Magic in this world was said to have been linked to the dragons, and when they died the greater part was lost. None of the rituals we tried worked, whatever secrets Quaithe and the shadowbinder knew weren’t written down. Viserys took it in surprisingly good grace, apparently trying to resurrect the dragons had been an obsession of the Targaryen kings, leading to tragedy every time. While he was disappointed as I with our failures, I think he saw the weekly magic discussions as an entertaining break from his increasingly heavy workload from Noho, who was responsible for his and his sister’s education.

Currently though he wasn’t even pretending to read, and was watching me closely. At the last Voyagers Club a man had been complaining about his Myrish glass window being broken and I had managed to purchase the shards. I knew glass could be made by melting sand and had done it, but I didn’t know what was added to make it clear. Having clear glass on hand would let me experiment with it, as well as possibly identifying what else went into it. Using my molten metal lifting focus I was holding a ball of molten glass in the air, and trying to mold it into a lens. Shaping the floating liquids in midair was easy after the thousands of compasses but I didn’t have a firm idea on what shape lenses should be. A little magnification was easy to achieve but I was hoping for a microscope. The work would have been simple except that I needed to let the glass cool, it was at least a thousand degrees, before I could look through it. After six or seven tries I was satisfied ,and flipped the now cool lense to Viserys, who caught it. “What is it” he asked holding it up, one eye comically enlarged, “A Myrish eye? I think you’d be better selling your compasses for all the work that took.”

“Not quite, you’ll see next week I think.” I could feel someone approaching the wards, Noho was just about due. Viserys handed me back the lens, and marked his spot in the book he was reading.

“Either your printers are making lots of typos,” the word had caught on fast even here, “or that author could hardly spell, it was like a different language at times.” For all books on magic I had the printers exactly copy the words, I didn’t know if it would matter but more accuracy was usually better in magic.
“Hopefully the latter, they’re paid well enough for it.”

With Viserys gone Maggie emerged. Neither of them really liked the other, Viserys was both in the girls are gross years and jealous of her power, and Maggie didn’t see him as worth her time. Plus she was taller than him. “The ’dragon’ is gone?” Oh she also thought his ambitions were ludicrous.

“He’s gotten better, he didn’t even mention he should be king this time.” Maggie laughing at him to his face may have been a little rude, but he did tend to go on about it. “Enough about him though, take a look at this.”

She examined the lens before setting it down. “Well we’ll finally get to see if boiling all of our water these past few years was worth it.”

“Please, you still like heating water by throwing fire into it. If you had your way when I first taught you, you’d have left Braavos sitting on the bedrock with the ocean boiled away.”

23.

My microscope took longer to finish than the week I’d confidently predicted for Viserys. It was primitive, two lenses that could be moved on rails to adjust the focal point, but it was sufficient to show bacteria. My insistence, and Maggie’s obsession, with boiled water was vindicated, several members of the Voyagers Club were a little disturbed to see what lurked in the canal waters. My scientific pronouncements were generally trusted after the success of the steam engines, but seeing bacteria that I had predicted with their own eyes silenced all doubters. The remaining copies of my almanac sold out after that and I was contemplating a new edition, farming practices, animal husbandry, and genetics might make good additions.

Farming was the one outlet for technological improvement I had left. Ebenezer had been on his farm in the Ozarks for over a hundred and fifty years when I spent time there, and had the entire evolution of farming equipment in one of the barns. I drew plans for horse collars, horse drawn threshers, and plows and gave them to Guldenmann, the blacksmith who had assisted Mangini with the steam engine. I didn’t know how quickly they’d catch on but I was hoping my reputation would ensure enough were made and sold to introduce them to the wider world.

It was much more boring than possible steam powered ships and new enchantments though, which is why I was contemplating Oberyn Martell’s offer. He had apparently been hanging around the free cities since I’d last seen him, going up and down the coast. He was viewed as a destabilizing influence in Westeros and his brother nominally wanted him off the continent or out of sight, where he couldn’t cause trouble after the civil war ended. Since I knew he was meeting with the pretenders to the throne of Westeros, I’m sure his brother had his reasons beyond the publicly stated ones Oberyn admitted to. Whatever his purpose, Oberyn’s semi-exile was at an end, and he had invited us to travel back to Dorne with him.

“I know you are more than a merchant and a scholar, but the furthest you’ve been from the city is a day’s hard ride. Surely you’re looking for a bit more excitement, I intend to land at King’s Landing.” He had crashed a Voyager’s Club meeting and commandeered a map of Westeros where he was eagerly plotting a route. “Then we’ll take the Rose Road through Highgarden to Oldtown, if you’re missing your books by then you’ll have your fill. Then we can take a ship to Starfall and travel across the width of Dorne back to my home!”

It sounded fun, traveling with a high ranking noble would probably be the best way to see Westeros
and he was right, I had been bored. “How long would the trip take? Months, a year?”

“Four months to Dorne perhaps, and if you’re somehow able to tear yourself away from my homeland, another one by ship back to here.” Oberyn when not discussing the deaths’ of his family members was much more exuberant. Spending four months in fairly close quarters with someone that energetic would be a downside. I imagined that he would also be showing me off as we went, as an exotic foreign magician, but for an all expense paid tour I felt I could live with it.

I knew Maggie would like the idea and I did want to travel the world. Spring, of the freakishly long season variety, had just started and it was apparently the optimal time to sail. My businesses were practically self operating, and I had a large enough supply of compasses built not to worry about running out. If I hung around without anything obvious to do the Sealord might hire me to ward more fortresses, I had only escaped last time by the demands of shippers to let me go back to making compasses. Just because I was bored with them didn’t mean I wouldn’t use them as an excuse.

“Sure, let’s do it.”

A week later Maggie and I stood on the wharves looking up at the ship we’d cross the narrow sea in. It had no oars, a rarity among the ships here, and had a figurehead carved like a bird. It certainly looked more robust than the cog I’d managed to acquire part of, and I felt much better about the cruise. We saw Oberyn looking over the railing, and waving us up. “Harry, Lady Dresden, welcome aboard the Purple Martin, the fastest ship on the narrow sea.”

Maggie looked around the deck wide-eyed, I had been to the docks many times before tracking lost or stolen items, but I had rarely let her onto the wharves. The vantage point from the elevated deck showed the bustling port of Braavos, crates were being swayed on and off ships and the produce of two continents was being moved. The ship itself was crewed by Summer Islanders, tall and dark skinned, wearing colorful clothes. A man, who based on his even more extravagant clothing, I assumed was the captain approached Oberyn. “These are the last two passengers? I’ll have their luggage taken below, for we shall set sail within a bell to catch the tide.”

Leaving Braavos on the Purple Martin was unlike any sailing I’d done before. The Water Beetle didn’t compare to the way the swan ship cut through the harbor, as the crew constantly adjusted the sails, pulled on ropes and performed a million other arcane tasks. We sailed directly between the Titan’s legs, looking up I could see the murder holes and scorpions pointed down, all while the wards I’d built hummed at Maggie’s and my passing. We reached the open sea and the swan ship showed why it deserved the name as the crew raised more sails and we scudded across the waves. It would be around ten days till we reached King’s Landing, assuming average winds, and I hoped to enjoy all of them.

Maggie was almost as excited, I had brought a telescope I’d made, and she was watching the barrier islands sink below the horizon behind us as well as looking for whales and dolphins breaching the surface. She showed no signs of seasickness yet, but I was going to try to teach her a mental trick I’d learned from Lash on how to focus in a way that removed nausea. If she got seasick or nauseous from trying, I’d view it as a valuable and ironic part of the learning process.

“A lovely girl.” The captain had walked up behind me as I watched Maggie and I tried not to jump. The noise of the wind, the waves and the ship had masked his approach and his voice startled me. “Is this the first time either of you have sailed?”

“I’ve been on some fairly large lakes, but this is my first time crossing an ocean, the same for her.” Now that I was close to the man his clothes were even more unusual. He was wearing a cape made of bright feathers and pants dyed an eye-searing green, after so long with the somber Braavosi it was
extremely distracting.

“The Narrow Sea, from here to King’s Landing is nothing. Shipbreaker Bay, south of it, can be a challenge but this trip will be smooth, especially in spring.” The captain had a deep voice, it made his commentary sound like received wisdom from on high. I hadn’t been too worried about the trip, especially after looking at the low insurance rates for cargo on the route, but a confident captain was nice. We stood and looked at the waves for a bit, away from Braavos its fog dissipated, and the crests of waves were reflecting the sun.

“I’ve worked a little in the shipping business and I’ve heard about something new, compasses that tell you where you are, does this ship use them?” I was a little curious how the end users felt, on Earth sailors were notoriously superstitious, and I was wondering how’d they react to actual magic.

The captain’s face darkened and he spat into the ocean. “Those things. I spent fifteen years under my father learning to read the stars, the winds and waves. I could find my way from Yunkai to Ibben without once going in sight of land, and now? Buy two compasses and a chart and you’ll never be lost. The skill is gone, thousands of years of knowledge will be forgotten.”

With his mood soured the captain wandered off to perform some other important captainy duty and I returned to watching the sea. Introducing the compasses had been good I was sure, even if only to improve maps. It was just one of the first ripples I’d caused, I knew the steam engine would do far more. Not everyone would like the world changing, I already felt a little guilty at the loss of the Summer Islands’ tradition. In the end it would be worth it though, I didn’t doubt that the technology I was introducing would improve lives, and speeding up the natural progress could only help. Still looking at the wide white sails it was hard to look forward to them being replaced by smokestacks belching coal.

I was in our cabin with Maggie, working on her meditation, when the winds picked up and the ship started rocking. I wasn’t too worried, over the past few days we had sailed around a few squalls that had caused similar motions, but when it didn’t show signs of letting up I went on deck.

The afternoon sky was dark, I couldn’t see any breaks in the clouds, and the crew was rushing around the ship, tying things down and reefing the sails. Or furling, I had never been clear which was more or less but they were definitely pulling the sails in as the wind gusted. The waves were shuddering against the hull and the accelerating wind was blowing the spray up onto the deck. All together it didn’t look promising. “Dresden, you should go below.” The captain had once again surprised me, I was beginning to think summer islanders wore such bright clothes because that way you could see them after they snuck up on you. “This storm, it came up fast and we’ll have to run from it. It will get worse before it gets better and we don’t need inexperienced men on deck.” Taking one last look around at the darkening sky, I nodded and went back down.

I thought of asking Oberyn, who had sailed far more than I, for his thoughts, but he had barely left his cabin but for meals on the trip, being ensconced with a woman with her hair dyed blue. I didn’t really feel like interrupting, so I went back to our cabin where Maggie was waiting. “What’s going on, is everything alright?” There was an undertone of worry in her voice so I fell back onto an old parenting trick.

“He said we’re going to be fine.”

Naturally it came back to haunt me. The storm had driven us well north of our original destination
and we had to put in at another port to make repairs. As we watched the local pilot take us into White Harbor, and past some rather impressive fortifications, Maggie was telling Oberyn and his current friend how I’d tried to reassure her. “And then he came back, white as a sheet, and told me it was going to be fine, before hugging me and not letting go.” They laughed at my sterling example of parental care as I tried not to sulk.

“Harry my friend, take it from me, a man with many daughters.” Oberyn gestured expansively. “All of your efforts to shelter and protect her will be scorned, just give her the tools to protect herself and be ready to help. That was what I did for my Obara, and she has had no complaints.”

I left them to their mockery and eavesdropped on the pilot and the captain’s discussion. The main mast had developed a crack and would have to be replaced. The pilot was confident suitable lumber was available and we’d only spend a few days making repairs before continuing south. I pulled my coat tighter around me, south sounded good. For all the talk of spring there were snowbanks visible in the streets, and hunks of ice were floating through the bay. I didn’t know much about White Harbor but I’d picked up a little. It was a secondary port on the east coast of Westeros, and the major one of the north. It was on the mouth of a river, the White Knife, that penetrated well into the interior and was responsible for shipping almost all of the goods from the north. Just from looking at it, as we sailed in, it was far smaller than Braavos but a pretty city nonetheless. The buildings were made of a white rock, probably the source for the name, and when the sun pierced the clouds the city shone. Maggie had joined me looking over the railing. Nearly being shipwrecked had severely dampened her enthusiasm for sailing, and she and I were looking forward to solid ground. “Aren’t you glad we didn’t appear here?”

I thought about it, even knowing next to nothing about the city I didn’t think we’d have done so well. “Yeah, Chicago is the one cold white city I’ll live in. What about you? Didn’t you ever want to have a snowball fight?”

Maggie shivered theatrically, “If I ever wanted that, I don’t now. Even Braavos gets too cold for me, I miss Guatemala’s weather.”

“I like having seasons beyond rainy and dry, of course the way they stretch on for years here might be too much of a good thing.” Maggie nodded and huddled up to me. She was wearing a sweater of mine, Braavos was in summer and King’s Landing was apparently hotter, so she hadn’t packed too many warm clothes. She was swimming in it, a recently twelve year old girl, even a tall one would never fit my clothes and the sweater looked closer to a dress on her.

We waited as the ship docked, waiting longshoremen threw up lines and part of the crew tied us down as others had already started work on stripping the mast for it’s replacement. Oberyn joined us near the gangplank, he had changed into a tunic wearing the crest of his house, a spear piercing a red sun. “Are you two ready to visit the Merman’s court? I doubt a Martell has been here in a hundred years, if ever.” We followed him off the ship towards the white castle overlooking the city. The streets were clean, and the cold prevented the smell of fish from being as pungent as Braavos. The houses were smaller and they had thicker walls, no doubt to keep out the far harsher winters. I wanted to explore the city longer, but we’d be in port for several days at least and I’d have time.

The guards at the castle’s gates looked surprised to see us, but admitted us into the keep. A large balding man, in his early to mid thirties, wearing a blue cloak pinned with a mermaid brooch and a sword sheathed at his side approached us. “What business does a Martell have in White Harbor?”

“Well, I am Oberyn Martell, Manderly, and my ship had some trouble in the recent storm. But now that I am here, I may try to further my goal of making the eight.” The fat man blushed at that, and I was hoping whatever the joke had been also went over Maggie’s head. Traveling with Oberyn had
made it clear he was a bit of a libertine and I didn’t want Maggie exposed to it much more than necessary. He was a fun person to know, he had stories from around the world and a quick wit, but twelve year old daughters weren’t the ideal audience in my mind.

The Manderly seemed to have recovered, “My apologies my lord, I am Ser Wylis Manderly, who else do I have the pleasure of addressing?

“Ser Harry Dresden and his daughter Margaret, late of Braavos. I invited them to accompany me back to Dorne and thus far I have been a poor host, with our ship nearly sinking beneath us. I had hoped that the hospitality of your hall would help.” He looked inordinately pleased with his alliteration and Wylis joined me with an incredulous look.

“You of course shall have it. If you wish, you may stay here until your ship is ready to depart.” With that awkwardness out of the way, he led us into the castle. The rooms we were led to were warm and decorated with tapestries. Guards patrolled the halls carrying tridents, the mermaid theme had been taken a little far in my opinion, and instead of mounted animals, figureheads from ships adorned the walls. Wylis had sent someone to get our luggage from the Purple Martin, and we had hours until dinner. I lay down for awhile, relishing the solid and not rocking bed before rallying. I was about to find Maggie, and try to tour the castle when there was a knock on the door.

A servant in the green and blue livery of the house stood outside, “Lord Manderly hopes that you will attend him in his solar.” I assented and followed him through the halls and up the stairs. Entering the solar I nearly stumbled. Lord Manderly was the fattest man I’d seen since coming to this world, back on earth he’d be overflowing a mobility scooter, but here he was the lord of a major city, despite having the mass of an elephant seal. “Thank you Stebbins, you may leave us now.” The servant bowed and left. He waved a flipper languidly “Why don’t you have a seat Ser Dresden.” I sat in the indicated chair, and took some of the wine Stebbins had poured for us. “So tell me Ser, how did you come to be traveling with the Red Viper?”

I didn’t know if Oberyn had a cover story, so I decided to tell a vague version of the truth. “We met almost a year ago outside Braavos. We had several mutual friends and when he knew I was looking for entertainment he invited my daughter and I to join his trip. White Harbor was an unexpected, although enjoyable addition.”

Manderly drank some of his wine before replying. “It seems rather capricious of you. Traveling across the sea and continent can be hazardous, especially on a whim.” He reached down into his desk and I tensed from old reflexes. “Especially when without you these will stop being made.” He had produced one of my compasses and I groaned internally. I didn’t know how everyone I met seemed to know they were mine, but it was another annoying part of the compasses. “They are marvelous, some of my captains have even started buying one on every trip to Braavos and selling them when they return. Even at their current price it’s easy money.”

“They certainly have succeeded beyond my hopes.” I managed to say that and appear somewhat happy, it was getting harder every day.

“Well they are a gift to sailors and thus to me. Even if you weren’t traveling with a Prince of Dorne I would feast you for that. Will you be staying in Dorne when you reach it?” Oberyn had claimed that northmen were blunt, he wasn’t joking. I hadn’t thought a lord of the north would care where I lived but it seemed that my work was influential enough that I was a geopolitical consideration. Joy.

“I plan to return to Braavos after we arrive, something about the city appeals to me.” Manderly nodded and if he was happy it didn’t show. He asked a few other questions about the compasses, nothing about their construction, and then excused himself saying it was almost time for dinner. I left, following Stebbins who had stepped back in, before Manderly could leave his chair. I half though
cranes might be involved in getting his bulk up.

The feast was interesting. It was mostly fish, with eel pies as a course, but there was also venison and beef. Red meat was expensive in Braavos and was often of low quality, Maggie and I both ate more than we should, although we didn’t compare to any of the male Manderlys, who could probably have eaten a cow apiece. The main hall, the ‘Merman’s Court’ was more adherence to the castle’s theme. The walls were wood with carved reliefs of sea creatures, sharks, smaller fish and whales, while the floor had coral, seaweed, and crabs. It was an impressive room and sitting at the head of the table gave an excellent view. Wylis and his brother, the Lord’s sons, told stories about fishing, hunting, and sailing. Several times it seemed like they would tell a story about the war, but quick looks at Oberyn stopped that. For a first meal in Westeros it was excellent. The only diversion from the light subjects was Lord Manderly questioning Oberyn if he’d heard any rumors about the Ironborn. From what I gathered they were viking like raiders who had scoured the west coast before the kingdoms unified. Apparently they had been quiet lately, normally some would sail around the entire continent to prey on the shipping of the free cities, but there hadn’t been any yet. Oberyn didn’t know anything, but told a story about the islands, which made me glad Maggie was sitting with Wylis’s much younger daughters. Returning to my room and ensuring Maggie found hers, I sank into my stationary non-hammock bed, and dreamed of white trees and black birds.
The dream stuck with me after I woke and went to the main hall with Maggie. I forced myself to stop thinking about it, I’d had enough bad and weird dreams that one more wouldn’t phase me. The hallways were fairly empty, and I felt like we’d beaten the crowd as the main room was deserted.

Oberyn had not yet appeared, in addition to the purple haired woman he brought, he’d been flirting with a serving maid and they had all somehow left the hall together. It was impressive in a way, he was a man who knew what he wanted, and set out to get it as much as possible. It could have been practice or natural ability but he would have given Thomas a run for his money. Either way I didn’t imagine he’d be up for an early morning. Lord Manderly’s younger son, Wendel, was there when we arrived with the detritus of his breakfast in front of him. He wasn’t anywhere near as big as his father or brother, but he was still large, a manatee to their whales. “Ser Harry and Margaret. Good morrow to you both.”

He spoke more formally than I was used to in Braavos, which I did my best to emulate. “And to you Ser. May we join you?”

He looked at his emptied plate and then beckoned a servant over. “Three more helpings for us.” The servant nodded, I imagined they were all used to reloading the Manderlys. “So do you two have plans for the day? I understand you were blown off course, but even an unbiased man would call White Harbor worth seeing.”

The servant came back, visibly weighed down by his burden. When he set a loaded plate in from of the knight I had to speak up to be heard over the suddenly groaning table. “We were planning on exploring a little, it’s the first time in Westeros for the both of us, and we’d like to see as much as possible.”

Wendel nodded after inhaling half of his breakfast. “If you’d wait an hour or two you can accompany me. I have to deal with an issue at the mines and I could give you a tour on the ride out.”

As soon as Wendel said ride Maggie’s eyes lit up. She had taken all opportunities to ride horses since our vacation, and even the cold here wouldn’t stop her. “Please Papa, we’ll be able to see more than walking if we go with Ser Wendel.”

Wendel was grinning at Maggie’s pleading expression and my imminent caving. I threw him a look. “Wait until you have daughters Ser. We’d be honored to accompany you.”

“Excellent, then after we finish breakfast I’ll have some horses saddled, and some furs gathered for you, spring here is winter anywhere else, and we can head out.”

After our excessive breakfast, Wendel joined us in asking for seconds, we headed to the stables. The weather had cooled during the night, there had even been a dusting of snow. Every breath we took turned to steam in the cold air. The sky was a deep blue though, and the city’s white stone and the snow reflected the sun, making it almost blindingly bright. Sunglasses might be something worth inventing. Actually regular glasses too. We found three horses ready for us, two with furs draped on them. “I hope they fit you Harry, you’re a tall man.”
I gratefully pulled them on, “It should be fine, it’s not too bad right now anyways.” Maggie obviously disagreed and wasted no time in pulling the furs onto her shoulders and around her tightly. We mounted, Wendel, despite his bulk did it gracefully, and Maggie still was a natural. I felt a little self conscious as I bounced along next to them.

The castle was on a hill overlooking White Harbor and a long white-stone cobbled road stretched up to it, riding down through the snow covered town felt like a scene from a Disney movie. Wendel gave us a history of the city as we rode through it. His family had lost a civil war hundreds of years ago in the south before Westeros was united and the Starks, then kings, took them in. They had built the city on trade and silver mines, eventually becoming one of the strongest vassals to the Starks. The narrow cobbled streets and the architecture reminded me a little of Europe's old cities. When cars, or whatever their analogue here would be, arrived they’d have a hard time driving through. Until then it was a nice sunny day and it was living up to my hopes for the tour.

After a lap through the city we left through the thick walls. The guards called out a greeting to Wendel and we paused while they spoke, our horses stamping as we idled. The road to the silver mines was wide and smooth, we pushed up to a canter to Maggie’s joy and my spine’s irritation as we went. The mines were in the hills an hour’s ride away. Maggie and I left Wendel to his business and rode through the little town. After we’d seen all of that we cared for we entered a tavern that catered to the miners. The lunch there was just as substantial, the cold drove large appetites as everyone sustained a layer of blubber. During our meal Wendel sent a runner to inform us that he would be busy longer than expected and that we might want to see a true godswood since we were in the north.

We tramped back outside, reluctantly mounted again, and followed the messenger’s directions. The godswood was on the crest of a hill that stood out from the others. Only the top was forested, the rest had been cut away for buildings or supports in the mines, giving the hill a crowned look. Once we reached the trees we dismounted and tied our horses. It was silent under the canopy, no bird calls or animals rustling. There were buds growing on some of the harder trees, but most still had nothing and the sun easily pierced the bare branches. The ground was bare but for the snow, there was no undergrowth, despite that we found a hard trodden path, made by people walking the same way for hundreds of years.

After perhaps five minutes in the quiet woods, even talking felt vaguely sacrilegious, we reached the summit, a white tree with red leaves stood alone with its branches creating an empty area around it. It was striking in a harsh way, I followed Maggie as she walked around the edge of the clearing. The far side was carved with a face and something, paint or sap, made it look as if it was weeping blood. I walked towards the tree, hardly knowing what I was doing, and touched it.

It was just wood, cold and smooth beneath my gloved hand. I turned to look at Maggie but something caught my eye, an enormous crow sitting on a tree over her head. I twitched back in surprise, it was the first living thing I’d seen since we entered the woods and it was uncannily still as it stared at me. After a frozen moment it took off with a clatter of wings and I followed its flight until it went behind the white tree. I took a step back to try to track it, and my eyes caught the face of the tree, its eyes almost looked as if they’d moved to look at me. Giving up on the crow I moved closer to inspect them, if the red stuff was sap it was a neat trick of carving to get the optical illusion. I traced the face, it was carved deep into the wood and had to admire the craftsmanship. Whoever had done it had been a master. I looked up to see the full face and the eyes were staring at me. With an ice cold blast I fell into a soulgaze.

“OTHER OTHER OTHER!” I was on my back before the tree with small brown shapes flitting through the trees around me. “OTHER OTHER OTHER!” There was constant shouting in my head
as the voices pounded. “SERVANT OF THE NIGHT’S QUEEN!” I tried to struggle to my feet but the noises were hammering me whenever I tried to rise. I rolled, fighting to get up, beyond the clearing the trees were dark with hundreds of crows, staring at me. “OTHER LEAVE THIS PLACE!” Their wings thundered as they descended on me, buffeting me to the ground. “LEAVE!”

And then I was out. I stumbled back and fell, Maggie rushed to me. “Papa are you alright? You’re bleeding!” I was, thin lines of blood were coming from my nose. I wiped it away with one hand and staggered up with Maggie’s help.

“I don’t know. There’s something in the tree, it didn’t like me much.” I looked back at it. The eyes were gushing sap now and it looked even more like blood. ”Let’s head back to town, I think we’ve seen enough nature for the day.” The crow I’d seen before followed us through the trees, cawing harshly behind us as went. The horses were still there, we mounted and Maggie lacked her usual joy, giving me worried looks.

Ser Wendel was waiting for us as we reached the town, his evident good mood sharply incongruous with my thoughts. “Ser Harry, you’re becoming a Northman, leaving your furs open!” I looked down, sure enough the furs had opened when I fell. A thought suddenly pierced me and I needed to test it. I practically fell off my horse in my hurry, striding over to a mound of snow. I pulled a glove off and picked some up, I didn’t feel the cold.

26.

For the entire ride back I was quiet. Maggie was resilient as ever, and chattered with Ser Wendel while I occasionally answered with monosyllables. The Mantle wasn’t gone. When we arrived in Braavos, after falling through darkness from Chichen Itza in a moment simultaneously instant and eternal, the lack had been one of the first things I’d noticed. The icy power, the seeming limitless strength, and the predatory focus had all vanished. I’d thought whatever magic the Red Court had made stripped it from me, but I knew better now. Whatever kept us here and sealed the Nevernever must be powerful though, Mab wouldn’t tolerate going without her court’s strongest mortal tool for three years and change. I didn’t know what to do, I still had no idea how to get home and honestly the new revelation made me even less willing to find one.

Trying to dismiss Mab and her possible vengeance from my mind, I started to think about the tree. It had felt like a soulgaze when it started, but past that nothing was what I expected. In some respects it was like when Molly and I had practiced building mental defenses, but I hadn’t tried to push into the trees mind so any defenses it had shouldn’t have grabbed me. The voices were another thing. The shadowbinder in the temple had called me a servant of the others and referenced what could have been Mab as well. I’d read about their beliefs, the priests of R’hllor worshipped their fire god who struggled against a ‘Great Other’ of cold and darkness and death. It wasn’t hard to reconcile the two, Mab didn’t control death but Mother Winter could probably make a decent go at it. At the time I had thought it was just the ravings of a madman, if fighting He Who Walks Behind was visible to the sight, carrying the Winter Mantle would probably leave a mark. Now I wondered, could the Great Other be an aspect of Mab or something close?

Two gods fighting, one of fire and one ice did bear a marked similarity to the Faerie courts. I’d speculated before that the strange seasons were linked to battling supernatural powers and nothing I’d encountered so far had disproven it. Whatever had been in the tree had certainly thought I’d been an enemy, a servant of the Night’s Queen. I vaguely recognized the name, a book of myths on the north had described an apocalyptic war against zombies and Others that had only been won at great cost. The wall, a gargantuan structure of ice that I wouldn’t believe in had I not met men who’d stood on top of it, had been built to keep them out and a brotherhood, the Night’s Watch made to
man it. An early commander of the Night’s Watch had betrayed them, taking an Other for a wife and was known as the Night’s King, making an Other the Queen. It was unsettling but had also occurred eight thousand years ago and no Others had been seen since, whatever power the Others had might have been broken by the passing of time. There was nothing I could do for now though, while I had thought we had reached the gates of White Harbor.

During the dinner that night I barely paid enough attention to not be rude, luckily Oberyn managed to hold the table’s attention, telling stories of Dorne, Essos, and his wars in the Disputed Lands. It was strange, four years ago they had been fighting against each other in a vicious civil war, and now they were sharing drinks and laughing about it. It didn’t match with the Oberyn I’d first met, I didn’t know if he’d given up his goal or was just a good enough actor to hide it. For his sake I hoped he’d moved on, even if he succeeded the black magic would wreck his soul. Maggie was once again relegated to the kids table. Wylis’s older daughter Wynafryd, I was beginning to think that the Manderly’s must have a monogrammed heirloom somewhere, was seven or eight and they seemed to be having a conversation that immensely entertained Maggie. Hopefully nothing there would come back to haunt me.

After dinner I walked her to her room next to mine and she waved me in and closed the door. “Papa what happened today with the tree? You didn’t say anything the whole ride back.” As she spoke she made strands of lightning dance between her fingers. I watched it for a second, I had never favored lightning, early in my career it had reminded me too much of Elaine, and after I knew she lived it wasn’t as versatile as fire for me. Maggie’s focus had given her skill enough to make it a nervous habit. If I tried to play cat’s cradle with lightning the way Maggie did I might have lost a finger. As it was her hair was rising from the excess energy, a side effect I hadn’t mentioned to her because I thought it looked hilarious.

“I don’t know, there was something in the tree like I said. It pulled me in almost like a soul gaze and then spat me out.” I didn’t want Maggie to know about the Winter Mantle just yet. She couldn’t do anything about it and at worse she might think it was her fault since I sought the power to save her. I had told Uriel once I’d watch the world burn to save Maggie, and if I could spare her any pain I would. “It’s something to look into when we return to Braavos, or perhaps Oldtown and the Maesters’ library.” Maggie wasn’t as excited as me to see the library, Oberyn’s stories about tournaments and balls had captured far more of her attention, but maybe seeing me get knocked over by overgrown shrubbery would prompt her to do some research. We chatted a little more, she refused to tell me what she she and Wynafryd had been laughing about, only telling me that I’d find out tomorrow. I went to bed hoping Maggie hadn’t started a crusade or something worse.

The next morning we again beat Oberyn to breakfast, Lord Manderly and Ser Wylis were there and looked happy to see me. “Ser Harry you’re up early, would you care to join me in the yard?” They were wearing simple clothes and looking around there were a number of other men who had scarred hands and strong arms. “Our daughters may also have bet on the result, reluctantly I must defend her honor.”

I looked at Maggie, she’d affected an innocent mien. I’d fought with swords before, fencing mostly although I’d messed around with other styles when I’d been taught how to fight with a staff. The Manderlys were big men, and Wendel at least had muscle beneath the fat. They were also knights, trained to fight since birth. They weren’t supernatural monsters though, and I was sure I wouldn’t embarrass myself too badly. “I suppose I’ll also have to step up.” I said shooting Maggie a glare. “I’ll have to borrow a blade though.” I had brought a sword I’d never even swung on the Purple Martin, despite my string of failures I still wanted a magic sword. Now if needed it would be a useful prop to keep up Oberyn’s charade.

Fifteen minutes later I found myself in a padded jacket, a gambeson if I remembered correctly,
holding a blunted blade facing Ser Wylis. He was big, but moved like a man who knew what he was doing. As we circled he called out. “So what were you knighted for Harry?”

I kept my distance, if he didn’t want to fight yet I’d wait. “My brother’s niece was kidnapped, I received my knighthood for the rescue mission.”

“A noble cause then.” With that he closed, swinging his sword down in a slow arc towards me. I batted it away, the practice blade was well made and felt natural in my hand. Wylis’s bulk had made him slow and I didn’t doubt I could win. My earlier worries seemed foolish as I flowed forward and pressed the attack. Each move he made was telegraphed, a few swings later I saw my chance, launched a feint towards his head and then lunged forward planting a shoulder in his chest.

Wylis dropped to the ground and scrambled, trying to get back to his feet, but my sword was there at his throat. He theatrically dropped his sword and I pulled mine back, I wasn’t even breathing hard.

“Well fought Ser, hopefully the stakes weren’t dire.” Maggie and Wynafryd were cheering as I gave him a hand up, he came easily to his feet.

“If you’re looking for a bit more of a challenge you could try Ser Marlon.” At the sound of the name one of the spectators moved towards us. He was my height but much more solid. He had the general look of the Manderly’s but lacked their girth.

“So your daughter’s bet cost us the castle nephew? I’ll try to restore some honor to the Manderlys for our careers as sellswords and bandits.” He walked into the center of the yard with me and hefted his sword. “Well Ser Harry, up for another bout?”

I nodded swinging my own sword idly. If they doubted me I’d show them all. Marlon stepped forward and launched a thrust towards my gut, I slipped it to the side and tried to shoulder him like I had Wylis. He took the blow but stayed on his feet, looking much more wary. “You’ve got some strength for a beanpole.” The condescension irritated me much more than it should and I pressed forward to keep the initiative. The fighting wasn’t anything like fencing, Marlon used both his hands on the sword at times and was constantly looking to grapple or tie me up. It was brutal for all that it was practice, and a fierce joy rose in me as we battled. After what felt like a half a hundred blows I had his measure, I stabbed forward and locked our hilts for a moment, before using my strength to send him tumbling to the side. While he staggered I swung hard at his blade and knocked it from his hands, for a second he looked like he might try to close to wrestle, but then he raised his hands in surrender. I bared my teeth in a grin as a savage exultation overtook me, my position at the top was secure.

Nearly the entire yard had watched our fight, even Oberyn had appeared from somewhere standing next to Lord Manderly. “What do they feed you in Braavos? I haven’t seen Marlon beaten that easily since he fought King Robert before the rebellion.”

“Just fish they say, but who really knows?” Lord Manderly laughed as the other men went back to their own bouts. I left the yard after refusing few more challengers, apparently Ser Marlon had been enough to prove my mettle. Shedding my jacket, I was sweating in the cold air, I walked towards Maggie to try to teach her a lesson on not challenging people on my behalf. Oberyn intercepted me before I reached her.

“You didn’t mention you were a swordsman of such caliber.” I held back my instant rebuttal, I had been suspiciously good, Ser Wylis I might have beaten fairly, but Ser Marlon should have wiped the floor with me without magic. If I had doubted that the Mantle was mine, that fight proved it. The action movie strength and speed were back, and I didn’t think my new found skill with a blade was all my own either.
“You didn’t hear I’m a knight now? Of course I’m an excellent fighter.”

Oberyn laughed at my deflection. “If all my lies came true like that, I doubt I’d ever say an honest word. When do you have the time to keep in practice? I know how busy your work kept you.”

“Oh you know, a few minutes here and there add up.”

He looked completely unconvinced but let me go as I looked for Maggie and Wynafryd who had scurried off as we chatted.

27.

We spent two more days in White Harbor and I was quite happy to see the last of it. I’d asked about the white tree, a weirwood, and learned a lot I didn’t like. Weirwoods were the center of the old religion of the North, the religion of the First Men who received it from an extinct race, the Children of the Forest. Their nameless gods were said to look through the faces on the trees and used to have criminals executed in front of them. I wasn’t a fan of any of it. Old nameless gods tended to do things like wait until the stars were right and destroy the world. Learning that the trees held power, received sacrifices, and contained something with a mind, kept that association going strong.

Even worse whatever they had done had released the Mantle. The strength, speed, and power I’d bargained for were nice to have, except the price was high. Past whatever Mab was cooking up on the far side of the dimensional barrier the Mantle had a way of infiltrating my thoughts. Whenever I fought I had the urge to rend, tear, and attack with all my power at any weakness. Even more whenever I saw something I desired I had to fight the urge to take it by force and show the world my strength. It was a predator’s mind, a wolf hungry in the winter.

I kept to myself as much as possible for those two days, Maggie definitely noticed something, and tried to chain it deep within my mind. I had kept Lasciel out of my head for years, I could keep a set of dumb instincts buried. The Mantle didn’t want to stay down though. Whenever I pushed it back it seemed as if something was keeping it close. I could keep the Mantle suppressed for a time but it would come back, a wolf circling a dying campfire. I didn’t like the metaphor.

The Purple Martin hissed across the Bite, the large bay we’d found ourselves in, and the captain had promised two more days to King’s Landing. The storm had driven us quite a ways inland but with our damaged mainmast the captain had wanted to stay close to the coast. White Harbor was the closest port on the northern edge of the Bite and when we were done running from the storm it was the only safe option.

Oberyn looked just as happy to be leaving the North, for completely different reasons though. The girl with purple hair had apparently discovered he had a mistress, or as he called it a ‘paramour’ who had given him a daughter and was practically his wife. I didn’t want to get in the middle of the Julia Roberts story that she thought she’d been in, but it had been hard not to hear about it. She had stayed in White Harbor when we left and had taken up with one of the guards. It was a little sordid but the drama had helped keep the last day in White Harbor entertaining for Maggie.

The man himself appeared on deck and joined me at the bow. “So shall we keep up the charade Ser Harry? I don’t think anyone who saw you with a sword would doubt it.” Oberyn after his initial surprise had taken my newfound skills with aplomb, joking that a magician should have many tricks. ‘You’ll probably need a bit more detail than the yarn you spun for Ser Wylis.”
“Let’s keep it vague, say a knight in service to the Lady Mab, the member of a powerful family, gave me the title for the rescue mission.” I almost stumbled over Mab’s name. I hadn’t tried to summon her when I was first stuck here, now with the mantle showing the connection I didn’t dare to.

Oberyn had noticed my stutter and looked overjoyed. “This Lady Mab has a hold on you still? Who was she, some great beauty, a harsh taskmistress, or just a flight of fancy?”

I snorted. “Yes to all of those to some extent. Talking to her always felt like a sort of dream, a terrible one.”

Deprived of his usual pursuits Oberyn hounded me about ‘my lost love’ for the remainder of the cruise. It was a relief to cross into Blackwater Bay and past a brooding Targaryen castle called Dragonstone. I recognized its silhouette from the books Viserys and I read, it was one of the last examples of the Valyrian stoneshaping magics and had been the base Aegon conquered the seven kingdoms from and forged them into one with dragonfire. I would have liked to visit, except it would have meant another day on the ship which was infinitely worse than anything I could easily imagine. I’d have to try to see it on the way back.

We could smell King’s Landing before we could see it. Braavos was lucky in that respect, other than the fish scent the lagoon’s current swept the stenches of civilization out into the ocean. King’s Landing was not so fortunate, half a million people lived in a few square miles and it seemed like none of them had ever heard of personal hygiene.

We wouldn’t be there long though, the city was full of bad memories for Oberyn and we’d only be in the city as long as it took to unload Oberyn’s souvenirs and meet our escort. The Martells kept a house in King’s Landing and Doran, Oberyn’s older brother, had sent horses and a wagon to meet us there. The wagon would be with us for a week or two before it would leave our scenic route and head directly to Sunspear.

To get to the house, or the manse as Oberyn called it, we took actual litters from the docks. The three of us shared one and Oberyn pointed out local attractions, the Great Sept of Baelor, the slums with the attractive name of Flea Bottom, brothels, the Dragonpit where Targaryens used to keep their dragons, the Red Keep, more brothels, and finally his family’s house. I still had my sealegs, the ground seemed to be moving beneath me as I walked, but it was nice to stand up straight on solid ground. Naturally we mounted our horses immediately and with another twenty men riding as an escort, we left the city by the closest gate before riding almost entirely around to the south and joining the Roseroad.

We made it about ten miles from the city before calling it a night. I had the feeling Oberyn would have pushed on further to get away, but with the sun setting we were forced to make camp beneath the trees of the Kingswood. Aegon might have been an excellent general but he was evidently terrible at naming things.

Sitting at the fire with Maggie as the guards told stories about Westeros was what I had hoped for with this trip, and I was able to ignore the Mantle’s constant presence. The night was clear and a little cool, but laying under the trees looking at the stars that poked through the boughs reminded me of simpler times learning magic with Ebenezer. Despite the new problems I faced it was nice to share the time with Maggie.

When I finally managed to sleep my dreams weren’t my own. Ever since I’d come to Westeros my rests hadn’t been and this one was no different. I’d met my literal dark side before, the better dressed, better groomed, worse shaved version of myself, but he had added a new wrinkle for his first appearance in the new world. Instead of the leather duster he now wore black armor with a snowflake device across his chest and a sword belted at his side. “Harry, Harry, why’d you have to
“go and wake up the Mantle, it’s getting crowded in here now.”

“You know it wasn’t my choice, I didn’t really see the mysterious tree spirits coming. What’s with the new outfit?”

He traced a pauldron with a gauntleted hand. “Oh this old thing? I figured as long as the Mantle was going to be with me I might as well get some use out of it. Why, jealous?”

“Hardly. I’ve tried the games workshop look before, not a huge fan.” I looked at him again, if my subconscious was just surfacing because of the Mantle why wait until now? “What do you mean crowded anyways, we’ve had house-guests in here before and if you’re making a small brain joke, it’s on you too.”

He looked annoyed now, it was the same face I often made into mirrors and was especially familiar. “We had a house guest. Now we have two, and the first one is growing.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, the only previous inhabitant had been Lash and she had sacrificed herself to save me in the Raith Deeps. She had been in my brain and it had taken the damage, but as Butters had discovered wizards heal perfectly. Could she be back? “Lash, she’s still in here?” It was great news, she had split from Lasciel at the end, and became an ally. She had kept her knowledge though, if anyone knew how to get out of this dimension it would be her.

“Not quite Harry, just try to keep the problem in mind.” He faded out, and if I dreamed more after I didn’t remember when I woke.

The ride down the Roseroad was enjoyable and the beauty of the forest and then open fields distracted me from the new revelations. The Mantle had given me more skill at riding, part of the general instant badass package I assumed, and I wasn’t sore at the end of the days anymore making the whole experience much better. We hunted a little on the way, Oberyn as the brother of a Lord Paramount was apparently able to hunt in any of the King’s woods while traveling, and chasing deer through the woods satisfied the Mantle enough to keep its urges under control.

After almost two months of travel, stopping at castles every third night or so, we reached Highgarden, the seat of the Tyrells. It was the most Disney castle so far, dwarfing White Harbor’s New Castle and looming over the countryside. It was built on top of a hill overlooking the Mander with several layers of walls visible as we approached. Vines thickly covered the inner walls, I didn’t think they’d stay up for long during a siege, and made the inner keep appear to be the summit of a grass covered hill. We entered the gates unchallenged, Oberyn was apparently recognized, and were ushered into the main hall without delay.

“Oberyn Martell, your brother has finally let you slip the leash?” Lord Mace Tyrell was a strongly built man with short brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. From the stories I’d heard of him I’d expected a drooling idiot but Oberyn had apparently let his disdain for the man overwhelm the truth.

“My little exile has ended my lord, I once again have free rein across the seven kingdoms.” He accompanied his words with a flourished bow.

“It is good you have come here now then, my son Willas”, he gestured to a boy, fifteen years old or so, “is to compete in his first tourney in a week. The flower of the Reach’s chivalry shall be competing, but no field would be lessened by the Red Viper. Will you join the lists?”

“Gladly my lord, gladly.”
Lord Tyrell looked happy with Oberyn’s response. “Splendid, splendid, the tourney will be in a week, the day of my boy’s nameday feast. It should give you enough time to equip yourself.” He then finally appeared to notice Maggie and I, “And who are your companions Prince? I can’t say I recognize them.”

“I have had the honor of traveling with Ser Harry Dresden and his daughter Margaret since leaving Essos and we’ve shared adventures along the way.” Lord Tyrell’s son perked up when he heard my name, I restrained a grimace, anonymity had been nice while traveling.

“Any friend of House Martell is a friend of ours. Will you also compete in the tourney Ser?” Lord Tyrell didn’t seem to care about my response, as soon as he didn’t recognize my name his attention waned.

“My thanks my Lord, but I will have to decline entering the lists. Living in the free cities has left me out of practice.” He nodded and waved us away, the son’s eyes followed us as we left the hall.

Oberyn was ebullient. “A joust! It’s been far too long since I used a lance, are you sure you won’t join in the fun?”

“I hardly know the first thing about it. Anyways, with my luck, I’d skewer a spectator.”

“With the way you are on horseback? I doubt it. For all your complaining about riding your form is perfect for the tilt, you don’t ride like that without years of training.”

I could hardly explain that as the hitman for a supernatural queen I had the relevant combat skills installed as part of the general violence and mayhem package, so I grunted noncommittally.

He laughed “One day Harry I will hear your whole story, until then I’ll just tell more and more ridiculous tales until you’re forced to tell the truth in embarrassment.”

“You can give it a try, but I doubt you’ll approach reality.”

“Now that is unfair, you can’t just tease me with revelations like that.” As we bantered we circled the inner keep. The space between the castles and the first layer of walls was crowded with buildings, a smithy, barracks, stables and an armory. It was easy to forget while walking amid the flowery walls that this was a fortress, that almost all of its architecture was designed to make killing the enemy easier while simultaneously protecting its defenders. I didn’t really understand how such massive fortifications could be built, I didn’t think anything on earth from this time period was so large. The only easy explanation was that the extraordinary political stability of pre-conquest Westeros had allowed the castles to grow without end. The Gardeners, the late and roasted ruling family, had claimed a heritage that stretched back thousands of years, far longer than any dynasty I was aware of.

It took almost half an hour to circle the main keep, we had just begun to investigate the apparently famous briar maze between the second and third layers of wall when we were intercepted by the heir of House Tyrell.

“Prince Martell, I’m told we’ve met before.”
“Once yes, you couldn’t have been more than six, I was visiting my sister for her first pregnancy. Harry this is Willas Tyrell, the next Lord of Highgarden. Willas this is Ser Harry Dresden, best known for his practice of letting his foes throw him down twice before defeating them, and his lovely daughter Margaret.”

Willas didn’t quite know what to make of that, so after a moment of confusion he pressed on. “A pleasure I’m sure. I recognized the name Dresden, are you the wizard of Braavos?”

Subtlety and tact were apparently somewhat heritable, looks like Maggie was in trouble. “I haven’t claimed or heard that title, but I am from Braavos.”

“Are you the wizard then? My grandfather has brought me an amazing device that he said were made by a man called Dresden, is that you?”

“I have some skill, it can’t be taught though. If you’re seeking power you’d be better off studying politics.” One highborn semi-student was enough, even if I hadn’t been only staying a week.

“I’m not my aunt, I don’t want to waste my life failing to get spells to work, I just wanted to see some magic, your compasses weren’t what I dreamed of as a young boy.” I glanced around, other than the four of us in the labyrinth no one was in eyeshot. I was really being too much of a softy.

“Alright, for an early nameday present then.” I held out my right ungloved hand and theatrically pulled back my sleeve. “My hand is empty, nothing hidden in my coat?” He nodded, eyes fixed on my open palm. If I’d been doing stage magic it would have been a perfect time to ready something in my off hand. I wasn’t my father or my namesakes though, no props were needed. I raised my open hand to the sun, focused for a second, closed it, and brought it back down in front of Willas. “You’re satisfied my hand was empty?” Maggie was grinning at me, she’d seen this trick before. At his gesture I opened my hand, and for a second it blazed with sunshine, causing Willas and Oberyn to flinch back. “Many happy returns.”

If it had been an act it would have been a perfect exit line, but Willas immediately exploded with questions. “How- wait magic obviously, is that all you can do? No the compasses, what else can you do? Are there other wizards around? Where did you come from?”

I answered his last, “I’ve never met anyone with my power since I arrived. I was lost for a time until my daughter and I found ourselves in Braavos, so if you’re seeking other wizards you’re out of luck since I can’t find them either.”

He barely waited for me to finish before continuing “Did you study in Qarth or Asshai or are you from even further? How did you even get lost enough to reach Braavos?”

I cut him off before he could continue further. “Magic, for all of them. I wouldn’t be much of a wizard if I explained all my tricks.” He looked a little abashed, perhaps he had slightly more tact than his father. “I know the Prince needs armor and we all need lodgings, where should we go to find them?”

Instead of giving us directions, he called for his horse and led us, first to a blacksmith who had plate that only needed minor adjustments to fit Oberyn, and then to an inn that catered to visiting nobles who didn’t rate quite highly enough to have rooms assigned in the castle. The entire time he refrained from asking further questions, although he kept shooting me glances when he thought I wasn’t looking. He chatted with Maggie when he wasn’t answering Oberyn’s or my queries, and my initial impression of him as a younger version of his father was fading as he seemed well-spoken. He left us at the inn eventually, claiming he had duties at the castle and riding back up towards the keep.
“So he saw more magic in five minutes than I’d seen in two months of travel. What’s the secret? Flirt with Maggie? Because if so, I assure you that I can do that.” Maggie blushed, she had been riding next to Willas for the little jaunt, and ducked into her room to avoid our laughter.

“Not to be too overprotective, but that might get you a bit more than sunlight.” I turned back from watching Maggie’s retreat towards Oberyn and held my hand out, this time calling my little ball of sunshine, casting heat from the blazing pinprick that could be felt a yard away.

He was completely unintimidated by the glare from the ball. “So that is the trick then. Tell me, can your magic help me in the joust? If I win, I swear I’ll be as zealous as you in defending her honor.”

“Well a wizard might help for that, but as a knight I never could.”

“Then I only have myself to blame. I should have introduced you differently if I wanted to make my victory even more certain.”

“You’re that confident? I’m surprised that Lord Tyrell invited you to potentially overshadow his son’s big day then.”

Oberyn was pensive as he replied. “He wants one of his sons to be the next Leo Longthorn, in truth Willas is too young to be jousting against the knights here. One fewer skilled knight won’t get him to the finals and some part of Lord Tyrell knows that. It also would have been rude to not invite me, there’s enough bad blood between our families that he doesn’t want to add anymore.”

“How old is he anyways, thirteen, fourteen?”

“He was born in two hundred and seventy four, so either thirteen or just fourteen then. He should still be with the squires, he doesn’t have the experience or bulk to face knights.”

“Well let’s hope he gets knocked out cleanly in one of the first rounds, no one needs to get injured in a spectacle.”

“Honestly if his father wasn’t the Lord Paramount no one would be in the tourney, jousting is dangerous enough. An inexperienced opponent can be deadlier than an expert and he’s not the only borderline candidate I saw walking Highgarden.”

“Well then, win the tourney and hope he’s not in your bracket, at this point you’re committed.”

“True” Oberyn exhaled before brightening. “So if Maggie Gets asked for her favor will you curse or help the poor boy who dares to cast his eyes so high?”

29.

The town around Highgarden was strange in a few ways. Braavos and White Harbor, the two other cities I’d spent time in, were more mercantile and despite all of their differences shared attributes with Chicago. Highgarden’s castle town was completely dominated by the Tyrell’s, the presence of the Lord Paramount loomed over the town as much as Highgarden’s walls. There was a market, the Mander river was joined by a tributary just north of Highgarden, and goods from the fertile fields of the Reach were loaded onto barges and smaller oceangoing ships. Other than that the entire city was dominated by industries catering to the nobles. Armorers, swordsmiths, seamstresses with the finest fabric, and other less savory entertainments were everywhere. Aside from the omnipresent brothels, there was bear baiting, acrobats and tumblers as well as midgets in motley. The mercantile middle to upper class didn’t exist at all, the feudal structure dominated the town.
As a putative noble it was an interesting place to visit, but my American background made me a little uncomfortable to be bowed and scraped at. Even Maggie, who had seen enough Disney movies to want to be a princess, was discomfitted by the reality of it. The divide between us and the peasants was stark, even worse was the complete indifference Oberyn showed the smallfolk. I knew him to be decent, if mercurial and slow to forgive, but growing up as an aristocrat had shaped his perceptions enough that those without a title were barely even human. We were friends, but if I lacked my wealth and power he could have ridden past me being beaten by a noble and not even cared. All the glitter and pageantry of Highgarden was supported by nameless legions toiling in its fields; it made me want to write another book when I returned to Braavos, a plagiarized version of Locke’s Two Treatises.

Other than inspiring thoughts about the inalienable rights and dignity of mankind Highgarden was interesting. We were invited back to the castle for the feasts leading up to the tournament and Oberyn went hawking several times with the Tyrells. I used the time without him to practice magic with Maggie, given the presence of observers for much of our trip she had been idle, restricted to meditation and very subtle spells, which she was just as bad at as I had been.

The night before the tourney was the grandest feast yet, there were seven courses, elaborate cakes in the shape of birds and beasts, and tons of jesters who juggled, told jokes, and performed slight of hand. Willas’s eyes turned towards me whenever they did a trick but I refused to meet his gaze, one spell was enough for the trip. I mostly stayed out of the dancing afterwards, pleading unfamiliarity with the steps for those sufficiently desperate to ask an unknown traveling companion of a Dornish prince. Maggie was much more popular with the squires. Oberyn and I made fun of them as they blushed and stammered, I saved my glares for those who looked a little more confident. She had fun though, even if she turned pink when Willas asked her for a dance.

If anyone had asked for her favor she didn’t tell us as we sat in the stands the next morning. Oberyn’s joust was later in the day, he was in the same bracket as Willas but wouldn’t meet him until the quarterfinals, if they both made it that far. It was festive, we sat with the nobles in the stands and the cool clear weather was perfect for a sunny day outside. Across from us was the mass of peasants, held back by ropes strung with bunting laying out the lists. Everything was green and gold to match the Tyrell’s colors and there were roses everywhere, enough that their scent overwhelmed both the horses and the masses of sweaty people.

Oberyn critiqued the jousters as they went, pointing out their errors in form as well as telling as many stories about their houses as he could remember. He’d attracted his usual coterie of women and they hung on his every word and tittered at all of his jokes. As the day went on I could tell he was making his increasingly outlandish stories up, they were not so lucky and I wondered how many reputations would be forever tarnished as a result of his jokes at the tourney.

Just before lunch he left us to prepare for his jousts, due to his fame he’d been given a bye past the first round. His first opponent bore a shield with a green apple, Ser Jon Fossoway according to Oberyn’s still present fan club. They thundered towards each other on the first pass, both their lances splintered but Fossoway looked much less steady as he cantered back to get another. On the second pass Oberyn did something like a pump-fake and slammed Ser Jon’s shield hard enough his lance slipped past to his breastplate, and sent him flying from his horse. Oberyn did a lap of the field as Ser Jon staggered to his feet and saluted him.

Willas was up next, he’d won his first round over another young knight, and waved to the crowd as he and his opponent went to their respective ends. The knight he was facing looked much larger than him, I wasn’t sure how much of that was armor, but either way he dwarfed Willas. I was inclined to root for Willas’s opponent purely because of his shield having a bull’s head on a red field, I still held some loyalty for Chicago. Their first round left them both swaying in their saddles, and Maggie was
gripping my arm tightly as they set up again. The second time Willas’s opponent’s lance shattered while his skated off the bull’s face. The third and final joust was similarly inconclusive and Willas appeared to slump, the judges would decide it and his opponent had appeared superior.

Maggie relaxed and I turned to comment, when the crowd roared. Lord Tyrell had sent his son to the next round, there were a few jeers for the obvious favoritism but it was Willas’s tournament and most were willing to give him the home field advantage. The bull knight’s expression was hidden behind his helm but he rode quickly off the field after barely acknowledging Willas.

Oberyn returned to us still clad in his armor with a worried expression. “I had hoped to avoid this matchup.”

It did seem a little lopsided, Oberyn was a grown man and had won his share of tourneys, while Willas was cruising on his father’s favor. “You could throw the match.”

He scoffed. “Even if it weren’t more dishonorable than I’m willing to be, everyone would know. Willas’s seat is unsteady and he holds his shield too rigidly, Ser Buford would have beaten him if he wasn’t the heir to Highgarden.” He took a long pull from a wineskin before continuing. “Even then no joust is perfectly safe, it’s a bloodsport no matter how well armored or trained you are. I can’t even guarantee my safety, let alone his.”

As the last of the second round finished his mood improved. He accepted the favor of one of the prettier girls in the group and told them he had been holding out for Maggie’s, but she cruelly spurned him. They giggled at that before Maggie, used to his jokes by now spoke up. “I’m not especially interested in old and decrepit men.”

Oberyn lit up, he’d been trying to get her to banter back the entire trip. “You prefer a boy who’s growing strong then? I’ll try to leave him in one piece, or maybe just a little injured so you can nurse him back to health.” She blushed at that as Oberyn smirked, blew a kiss at his soon to be conquest and left for the field.

There were two more jousts before Oberyn and Willas met, one went to the judges while the other ended more definitively with a knight in the dirt. Willas appeared first at one end, his armor green and gilded with gold, while his horse’s saddle was embroidered with roses. It stamped nervously as he waited for Oberyn to appear. At last he rode in, his new armor was polished steel and gleamed in the afternoon light. His shield bore the spear pierced sun of his house and in contrast to Willas, his horse was perfectly still beneath him. Maggie’s hand had found its way back to my arm and the crowd quieted as they faced off. Oberyn threw a glance and a wave at our section of the stands, the girl he’d chosen nearly swooned, before the herald called for them to start.

Oberyn’s lance was perfectly still as he charged, the motion of his horse didn’t seem to affect his aim at all as they rapidly closed. He hit Willas’s shield right in the rose and Willas reeled, barely staying on his horse while Oberyn blew past.

Willas looked shaken, his lance swayed as they set up for the second round and at the herald’s cry they started again. Oberyn repeated his earlier move, the pump-fake worked a second time and Willas tumbled. He didn’t fall cleanly though, his leg caught in his stirrup and the horse reared and stumbled back before falling back onto him.

His scream of pain pierced the air, Lord Tyrell looked stricken and Maggie’s grip was painful. Oberyn galloped back and reached him first. He leapt off his horse and cut the saddle free, letting the horse roll off Willas’s leg as others rushed onto the field. Willas was quickly surrounded by a crowd and Lord Tyrell was striding across the field towards the knot of people. Willas’s screams finally stopped as I stood. Maggie looked at me as I pulled her up.
“Come on, we don’t want to be here if this gets ugly.” Oberyn was also riding away, he and Lord Tyrell had exchanged words and it looked like he decided discretion was the better part of valor in the face of an angry father.

We pushed our way through the crowd, people were surging towards the stands to watch the spectacle, and headed back to the inn. I’d give Oberyn some time to catch up, but from what I’d seen Willas’s leg was shattered, and if Lord Tyrell wanted vengeance on the man who crippled his son I didn’t plan to be here for it.

Oberyn met us fifteen minutes later, he’d thrown a cloak over his armor and discarded his shield. “I think you have the right idea, we should leave here before tempers grow much hotter.” I had packed Maggie’s and my stuff while waiting and already had our horses saddled. We collected our guards and left the town, riding quickly south towards Oldtown.

We pressed on until it was too dark to ride and camped off the road, I kept watch, if we were pursued I’d hopefully be able to veil us enough that we’d be missed. It was a long night and we were somber during the next day’s ride. Oberyn threw glances over his shoulder, his expression dark, and he barely spoke. The trip had changed character, we no longer rode slowly and explored, we pressed our horses as fast as they could go and lived rough. We couldn’t count on the hospitality of the Reach lords anymore after injuring the heir so badly. It was a relief after three weeks of hard riding to approach the coast and the last of the Reach, until on our last night we saw a glow in the southwest sky and the next day, smoke rising from the walls of Oldtown.

30.

We approached Oldtown and its billows of smoke through a stream of peasants, refugees with all they could carry on their backs. The smoke had been visible from our camp twenty miles out and it just grew darker as we approached.

Oldtown was large, not quite as populous as King’s Landing but far more sprawling. The walls around it were high and the smoke seemed to be coming from the coastal side. My attention was drawn to the other pillar stretching skyward, an immense tower, as high as any Chicago skyscraper rose from the edge of the city. The massive structure dominated the skyline and was completely incongruous with the city. The only thing I’d seen that even remotely compared in this world was the Titan of Braavos, but the Hightower the ruling family got it name from dwarfed it.

As our party reached the gates guards rushed out with spears leveled at us. Oberyn spurred his horse to the front “What is the meaning of this? What’s happened here?”

One of the guards, a particularly grizzled and scarred man spat. “Ironborn have been raiding up and down the coasts, half the Redwyne fleet is at the bottom of the ocean and as far as we know we weren’t the only ones hit. No one enters Oldtown unchallenged, there are reavers abroad. We saw at least one ship went up the Brightwater.” He stepped forward, his men tensed, and our guards moved their hands closer to their swords in reply. “Now who are you, and what’s your business here?”

“I am Prince Oberyn Martell, now let us in, and take me to Lord Hightower.” The guard stared at us a moment longer, his eyes tracking over our guards’ matching armor and weapons. before lifting his spear back to his shoulder.

“I’ll take you in but don’t expect much hospitality here, crippling a boy didn't win you any friends viper.” Oberyn grabbed one of his guard’s arms as he started forward, halting his response.
With a strained voice Oberyn replied. “Thank you, now take us to Battle Island.”

The guard captain gave us a foul look before motioning his men off to the side and detailing another to lead us through the city. We rode through the gate, I could hear mutters about Dornish bastards from the guards and Maggie drew closer to me as the crowds inside the walls looked increasingly restive at our appearance. If Oberyn noticed the mood of the people he didn’t acknowledge it, keeping his eyes forward and above the heads of the crowd. Our guide had mounted and we followed him through the city at a trot.

The streets were crowded with people just milling around, whatever Oldtown’s normal state was, this wasn’t it. The streets of the city were narrow and winding, the longest straightaway was barely fifty yards. We eventually reached a canal that seemed to run directly to the harbor and rode along it, the source of the smoke was visible at last.

Burned out hulks lay smoldering down to the waterline throughout the harbor and ruins of warehouses were smoking. Oberyn looked grim and nudged his horse into a canter. He had studied here when he was younger and seeing a city partially burned wasn’t pretty. The guard we were following saw our expressions and began to speak.

“It was two ships, they just sailed in, regular merchants for the sight of it. And then last night they started fires, they had scorpions on deck that were throwing flaming bolts. I heard they even had wildfire, half the sailors were asleep and the rest were drunk, they were right in the heart of the anchorage, by the time people were up they’d set fire to the nearest ships and no one could get close enough to fight back.” We listened to his story in silence as we kept riding on. “That wasn’t the worst of it though, they’d let reavers off their ships and they were armed and armored, anyone they saw trying to fight the fires they killed, they wouldn’t have spread half so far if it weren’t for them. Word is they did it all up the coast, at Three Towers and Blackcrown, who knows if the Reach is all they struck.”

We had reached the edge of the burned zone as he spoke, a canal had acted as a firebreak, the other side was a sea of ash and scorched stone. People were crawling over the wreckage, trying to salvage what they could or looting. Guards were watching but made no move to interfere as long as the scavengers were peaceful, there were still a few fires burning, throwing up the smoke we’d seen and been breathing all morning.

Oberyn reined his horse to a halt looking over the devastated harbor. “We need a boat to the Hightower, the Citadel is our best bet.” Without waiting for the guard he spurred his horse south towards an unburnt complex with solid stone walls.

The Citadel was the headquarters of the knowledge monks of Westeros, the maesters. It was a combination university and monastery, it was somewhat fashionable for nobles to spend time there studying without actually joining the order. The white stone walls ran right to the water and we rode around to the landward side where two carved stone sphinxes stood watch besides a closed gate. Oberyn rode up to the gate and hammered it with his fist, a slot slid open. After fumbling with his saddlebags he pulled something from them and passed it through the slot which promptly shut. A moment passed and the gates began to grind open, he barely waited for enough room before he urged his horse through and beckoned us in behind him.

The Citadel’s interior didn’t match it’s martial walls. There was a square, presently deserted lined with stalls, we rode past them with Oberyn barely throwing them a second glance. He was headed straight for a dock with a pinnace tied alongside it. The boat was the largest one I’d seen on the water that wasn’t burnt and Oberyn rode right up to it and dismounted. We followed him, and the sole sailor aboard looked panicked at the sight of twelve armed men and a girl looking down on him.
“This boat is going to Battle Island, if you wish to keep it you’re coming with us.” The poor man nodded and after hastily tying our horses we boarded the boat and began to row out to the Hightower.

The colossal structure was even more unbelievable up close. The tower was built on a foundation of black stone that seemed to emerge unbroken from the harbor. As we drew closer I could see the sheen of the rock, it was similar to the oily stones from Sothoryos’s ruined cities. The Hightower sprang further up from the mysterious island, it was a paler stone, maybe granite, and even ignoring the black base was tall enough to pierce the sky. With all of us rowing we quickly found our way to a small harbor carved into the rock of the base. We disembarked with Oberyn flpping the boatman a coin as he began to climb the steps up from the water’s edge. Maggie paused and I followed her gaze from the waves washing on the steps, up the stairs to the tower, past the innumerable balconies and windows along its height and finally to the top which blazed with light. “It’s a long way to the top,” I nodded and we followed the guards up towards the tower.

After twenty minutes of what felt like non-stop climbing around the circumference of the island we reached the gates of the Hightower. We were admitted and after another interminable climb entered the main chamber of the hightower. It was a pillared room with massive columns framing tall and narrow windows that looked in all directions over the city and the bay. The center of the round room held a throne where there was a knot of people gathered. Oberyn gestured for the guards to wait at the edge and he and I went forward until the man on the throne recognized us.

“Prince Martell, what brings you back to my city in such times, are you trying to bring greater misfortune to every castle you visit?” The group of lords around him stared coldly at us, they shared his thoughts even if they didn’t dare to insult a prince of Dorne as cavalierly.

Oberyn held his temper although I could see a vein on his forehead pulsing. “Ser Baelor, I came to both offer my assistance and to find out what happened, the reports from your guards were incomplete.”

Baelor snorted. “What’s there to say, rebellion. The Ironborn have attacked the entire coast, we’ve heard from the Arbor to Old Oak, longships have been burning and raiding, more ravens are coming in by the hour. The Redwyne fleet took a heavy blow, somehow the Ironborn were able to concentrate at a single point in the open sea, they led the parts of the fleet they hadn’t burned at anchor into an ambush. Our fleets are scattered now and until the Royal Fleet comes around Dorne the Lannisters have the only concentrated group of ships, assuming they Ironborn didn’t hit there too.”

“Have they put men ashore?” I didn’t listen to the rest of the conversation, I was focused on a single line. Baelor didn’t know how they’d managed their ambush but I did. This was my fault, my compasses I’d been so proud of had let a gang of pirates destroy the navies of the Reach. Even now they were murdering, raping, and slaving and they couldn’t have done it without me.
The rush of guilt almost overwhelmed me, I left the group of men and walked towards the window looking over the sea. It was growing dark, the ash had melded into the clouds and the sun was nearly down. Fog was rolling off the sea and I stared into it.

The Ironborn using my compasses wasn’t my fault. I didn’t even know they’d had them for sure, my only clue was a naval ambush. They were famed sailors, maybe they could have pulled it off themselves without them? From stories I’d heard from the Voyagers back in Braavos the height of naval tactics on this world was apparently sailing out of sight of land, and rushing in before anyone could react. If they had just gotten lucky it might seem like genius and sorcery to the witnesses. My rationalizations didn’t help me though. An invention I’d thought had no downside was probably crucial to a plan responsible for the deaths of thousands.

Lost in thought I remained at the window, only now focussing on what was in front of me. The sea was grey melding with the sky, and the fog hid the horizon. I wondered how far the Hightower’s beacon could be seen, it wasn’t really much of a lighthouse, the harbor was clear of obstructions and it had no obvious reason to exist. In any case whatever the maximum range was it would only be two or three miles tonight, the dense fog was moving in quickly. Even now it was entering the harbor, the watch towers that anchored the wall to the sea were being swept up, their bases hidden by the mist.

Preoccupied, I almost missed the activity atop one of the watchtowers, the bonfire they lit that pierced the fog and the droning horn that carried over the harbor ensured I was paying attention. The men behind me rushed to the window surrounding me and looking out. “The south tower, they’ve spotted something!” We watched as low grey shapes emerged from the fog. The longships’ oars almost looked like wings as they beat the waves, the poor visibility gave them an almost dreamlike quality.

Baelor broke the illusion with a curse. “How did the bastards get here without being spotted?”

One of his companions spoke “The fog Ser, its dense-”

“Of course it was the fog! But how did they get into the sound without Blackcrown alerting us? They can’t have gotten through entirely unseen.” Baelor’s voice trailed off as he spoke, whatever the Irobborn had done it had worked and more and more of their ships were entering the harbor. “By the Seven, they mean to land and finish the job.”

The longships were splitting up after they entered and were headed for the shores of the harbor, their raiders the night before had destroyed whatever of Oldtown’s navy was in port and most of the rest had been lost at sea with the Redwynes. They were ignoring the Hightower, without ships the garrison of the island keep couldn’t get to shore, and the soldiers and guards in the city had been fighting fires all night and day.

“They mean to hold the city.” Oberyn had been watching the invasion but had been silent until now. All of us turned to look at him as he continued. “With the ships they have here so far they have at least five thousand men, they’ll be hard men, killers since before they fucked a woman, without the walls to help they’ll go right through your guards. Everything that isn’t nailed down will get loaded onto their ships and then they’ll raid up and down the Brightwater. Oldtown’s walls and gates are enough to stop anything short of an army, and if one comes they’ll just leave. Until the Royal fleet
comes around Dorne there’s nothing on the west coast that can stop them.”

The Reachlords exchanged looks before one spoke “The Lannisters.”

Oberyn’s voice struck like his namesake. “Need I remind you what happens when you trust a Lannister? Besides this was too well planned to be the only strike. Do you think Balon Greyjoy would leave that fleet untouched and attack the Reach first? Lannisport probably suffered the same as here, though I doubt they’re going to try to hold it against Casterly Rock. Whatever defense you gain from a few hundred yards of water you lose for not being able to sally to your city.”

Baelor was pale with rage at Oberyn’s mocking tone, “And what do you suggest Ser. Just stay here and watch them burn my city?”

Oberyn looked almost entertained by the younger man’s ire. “What else can we do? The only boat we saw on the island was the pinnace we took from the citadel, anyone of those longships would just run it down without noticing. If you have a plan tell us, Ser Harry, my guards and I will be happy to assist if we can get there without drowning in the bay.”

The first ships were ashore and if they were facing opposition from the guards it didn’t seem to hurt them, I could see groups of men rushing into the streets past the burned out docks. There were at least thirty ships in the harbor and more kept coming, a few had taken up position around Battle Island and one seemed to be headed for the same cove we landed in.

Baelor saw it too and shouted to his guards, “Get to the slips, we can’t let them get a foothold!” He turned to Oberyn and smirked. “You’ll help with the defense? Fine, then take your men and go.”

Oberyn was moving before he finished, his guards were streaming towards the door and Maggie stood in their midst terrified. I stopped next to her briefly, the best way to keep her safe was to repel the Ironborn. “Stay here, and pay attention, if anything goes wrong, hide.” If we’d had our horses I would be much less worried, the bags held an arsenal of potions that would have gotten us out of the city with ease, not to mention my staff and blasting rod. I clapped her on the shoulder and met her eyes, we’d had our Soulgaze long ago. “I fought through an army of monsters once to get you back, I’m not going to let a different set have you again.” With that hopelessly inadequate goodbye done, I sprinted after Oberyn.

The Winter Mantle was energized now, and I let it slip from behind the shields I tried to keep it penned with. Any tiredness from riding all day vanished and my senses sharpened. Each step I took seemed to accelerate me further and I was rapidly catching up to the Dornish even after their head start. I caught them at the first set of stairs and slowed to stay with them. Oberyn threw a surprised look at me, if he’d expected me at all it would have been further along. We thundered down the steps, the twenty minutes uphill would take us maybe five down, and the longship might already be docked.

Finally we reached the last set of stairs, Oberyn stopped and drew his sword. I knew from sparring with him that he preferred a spear, but he too had left weapons back with the horses. It was only through chance that I had mine, I had wanted to keep up the knightly charade and it was much more plausible when I bore a sword. I drew it and felt a thrill run down my spine, the longer I let the Mantle work the harder it became to tell my thoughts from its. With steel in my hand I felt better, stronger, faster, and ready to kill anything that came in my path. The sound of battle rose up from below and after one final look at us Oberyn led the way down the stairs.

The Hightower guards from the throne room were already fighting the first of the Ironborn. They were a contrast to the neat and livered soldiers, no two of the pirates matched. As I ran down the steps screaming inarticulately my mind was calm. The small inlet was crowded with the pinnace and
the longship, it had just touched onto the dock and was disgorging men. The raiders were mostly wearing mail coats, but there was one with a dripping sword that was wearing plate and carried a shield. He looked up, saw us charging down the steps, and then went back to fighting, hardly seeming to care about us. Something about the indifference enraged me, I took two long strides to the head of the pack, then we were at the bottom of the steps, and on them.

The Mantle surged with power and I sank back and gave it its head. Instincts from a thousand battles, ambushes and assassinations called to me and I followed them. A quick feint with the sword, and a slash cut one of the raider’s throat to the bone. Beneath the icy joy the victory filled me with, my mind was moving glacially. My eyes tracked the spray of blood and I thought it was strange, so few of the things I fought really bled.

I was already shouldering past the gasping dead man, my sword licking out, almost every strike biting flesh. The dornishmen and Oberyn were at my back as I cut through the Ironborn, their triumphant faces shifting towards fear as they watched me advance implacably.

The fear energized me, they knew their place now as prey below me, the pirates still on the ship looked hesitant, only the push of bodies behind them keeping them coming forward. I dismissed them, the only thing I could focus on now was the armored man who had turned to face me at last, I’d make him choke on his earlier apathy.

I flicked a testing blow at his face which he parried, before lunging at me behind his shield. I met his shield with my shoulder and rocked him back, no mortal was a match for Winter’s power. He gave up ground as I advanced on him, ready to finish it. I had his measure now, one blow with my Queen’s strength would be enough, and I strode forward swinging my sword for what would be the last time.

He cowered behind his shield as my strike connected with its edge, it pierced deep into the soft wood and he had somehow managed to avoid the killing blow. His body language changed, I noted with the clarity the mantle gave me, it was almost as if he wanted his shield splintered around my blade. I tried to pull my sword free and he twisted his shield arm, the sword was suddenly binding on his shield and I yanked with him towards me, his sword thrusting at my stomach and only then did I see his plan.

Against anyone else, an unarmored man too close to dodge and with no chance to parry it would have been enough and his skill would have defeated my boundless strength and rage. I was winter’s champion though and the man who could kill me with a sword was not yet born. “Infriga!” I barked sweeping my hand down. The pirates entire side froze, covered in an inch of ice. I grinned, from this close I could see and smell his terror, ripped my sword from his octopus covered shield, and with a swing, finished it.

I turned back to the rest of the fight, our charge had broken them. The last of the Ironborn had managed to get their ship free from the dock and were backing water trying to escape. Their cowardly retreat ruined my good mood from slaying the armored man. They wouldn’t be free of us that easily. Pulling deeper on the well of Winter’s power I stepped into the water and released the gathered energy. “Infriga.”

Ice spread rapidly from me, groaning and cracking, as it rushed to fill the inlet. The drain nearly staggered me but the entire area of the docks began to freeze, ice racing around and beneath the longship’s hull, their oars skittering on the ice as they frantically tried to escape. I stepped up from the ground onto the ice and towards the captured ship. I stopped when I didn’t hear anyone following me and looked back. The guards and Oberyn were staring at me.

Their expressions ran from terrified to incredulous, I looked down at myself and checked to see if I’d
taken a wound in the melee. I hadn’t noticed, but I knew of plenty who had bled out without
knowing they were hurt. There was no blood on me though, just frost covering my coat, and I
looked back at them. “What shouldn’t we finish the job?” I turned back towards the longship and
strode across the ice, every step was sure, before I gathered my will and my Queen’s power and leapt
over the railings onto the deck. The remaining crew members groaned at the sight of me, one
particularly brave man charged at me with an axe screaming. I took one quick step to the side, and
cut through his raised axe and throat in the same swing. “Anyone else?” There was a clatter of
weapons as they dropped their swords and I laughed. Oberyn and a few of the guards had finally
made it onto the ice after me, and I leapt down to meet them. “I’m afraid you missed your chance
gentlemen, they’ve surrendered.” Oberyn had a strange look as I spoke.

“No Harry, I think we’ve had our fill.” His words were slow and calm and his grip on his sword was
tight. “Perhaps we could let Lord Hightower’s guards handle the prisoners and you and I could go
back to the tower, and you can talk with Maggie.” Maggie, stars and stones, I knew I was forgetting
something but it hadn’t seemed to matter during the fight. I took several steps towards the docks and
began to try to push the Mantle back down since I didn’t need it anymore. It resisted far more
strongly than the first time, I was barely paying attention as I tried to rebuild the mental walls until I
nearly tripped.

I looked down, the near tumble had somehow been the shock needed to bind the mantle and I was
curious what it had been. At first I thought it was a ball, a second glance showed it was metal, the
third that it was leaking blood, the fourth, it was someone’s head. I looked up and swayed, all of the
energy I’d used in the fight was coming due now, and I staggered into something cold. I pushed up
off it and glanced to see what I’d hit. It was a headless body, with one slide slumped and hanging,
and the other encased entirely in ice. All of a sudden my sword felt like it was made of lead, I let it
drop, the world rotated and I started to fall until someone caught my shoulder. Oberyn had me, and
along with another Dornishman pulled me towards the stairs as the world faded.

32.

Oberyn and his man half carried me as I stumbled up the steps. The world was alternating between
darkness and blinding light and I looked around to see where the glare was coming from. The guard
cursed as I slipped, barely keeping his hold on me. My head lolled towards him, and whatever he
had been about to say, he swallowed as I carefully stared at his forehead.

The Prince of Dorne didn’t share his reticence. “You’re heavy enough without falling all over us
Dresden. Shape up.”

I planned a retort but the greasy black stone seemed almost iridescent in the changing light and I
decided watching it closely was more important than demonstrating my wit. That focus was enough
to keep me a bit more steady as we kept climbing, I felt my mind was recovering a little from the
beating I’d given it with all the magic and then chaining down the Winter Mantle. When we reached
the foot of the Hightower I shook them off and took a few exploratory steps.

“Thanks, but I’m alright now.” They didn’t seem to inclined to trust me but my continuing
uprightness convinced them. I leaned against the pale stone of the tower and ran my hands through
my hair. When I stood up I felt almost human, I had barely even wondered how the tower was built
when I stared at it. “My little Rambo moment took a lot out of me, I’m fine.”

The guard’s doubting expression didn’t change but Oberyn looked at me and nodded. “If you trip
again we’ll just watch and take bets on how long you’ll be down for.”
“Fair enough.” We walked past the guards at the gate of the tower and I paused, with tons of pirates in the harbor the gates should be locked and barred. “Where is everyone, shouldn’t there be guards everywhere?”

“Most of the Hightower’s men were in the city fighting fires already. I’d be surprised if there were a hundred men on the island. As to their defenses, we can ask Baelor when get back to him.”

We made it back to the throne room without further conversation, I was glad to have more time to pull myself together. I saw Maggie who looked relieved to see me and followed Oberyn to the heir of the Hightower. Baelor was giving orders to the few men who remained and looked surprised to see us. “The cove, is it secure?”

“None who resisted lived, I left my men and your guards down there in case more follow.”

“They will come, this was too well planned for them not to have an idea on how to take my tower.”

“Harry might have slowed them a little, he killed a kraken on the docks.” Baelor looked at me for the first time in the conversation.

“Truly, which one?” I drew a blank at the question, the fight was a blur of blood and death and the only thing I remembered with clarity was ripping the heat from an armored man.

Oberyn came to my rescue “Ser Harry is not from here, he didn’t recognize them. I looked at the head, I know it wasn’t any of the three eldest. I’ve never seen Aeron or Balon’s boys, but one fewer squid is something to celebrate.”

“Well I doubt Balon would let this fleet be led by a green boy, Euron, Victarion or maybe a Harlaw or some other lord of an island is in command here.” He walked towards the edge of the room and looked over the harbor. No more longships were coming in now but I thought there were at least sixty ships beached and more were establishing a cordon around us. “We can’t count on being relieved until the other Reachlords muster and march. It could be weeks.”

I stayed silent, for all that I’d fought I’d never been much for large scale battles, a besieged castle was entirely new. “Then how will you defend your keep? How many men are with us, we’re twelve swords, with your lords and guards can we hold the island?”

Looking over the fires that were freshly burning in his city seemed to sap Baelor’s energy. The sun was entirely down now and the thick fog made it even darker. “We have the servants, sixty guardsmen, Lords Cuy and Mullendore with a few of their sons, Ser Bulwer and a few of my household knights.”

“That’s not enough to hold the lower walls?”

“Against a full assault? No. It’s good we still hold the docks but there are other spots to land for a longship, we’ll be spread too thin.”

Looking down from the tower I could see the lower walls, they were set back from the water’s edge and up steep hills and cliffs but they weren’t very tall, twenty feet at most and their backs were hardly smooth. A determined man with a rope or ladder could be over in seconds if unopposed and a hundred possible fighters couldn’t be everywhere. Oberyn joined me studying the walls and his slumped posture showed agreement with Baelor’s analysis.

“We can only hope that the city bleeds them too much to risk further losses storming the island, even if they can’t get at us we still can’t hurt them.” He paused and looked to me, the question clear in his eyes. “Unless?”
I was shaking my head before he finished. “If I could do that it wouldn’t end well. For any of us.”

Baelor swiveled his head between us, obviously puzzled. “What did you think Ser Harry could do?”

“I suspect since Ser Harry is Harry Dresden the wizard of Braavos, Prince Martell expected some magic.” The new voice surprised me, all three of us turned to look at the white-haired man approaching.

“Father, this is Ser Harry, Ser Harry, my father, Lord Leyton Hightower, Defender of the Citadel and Lord of the Port.” Oberyn smirked at the titles, he would find the evident failures amusing.

“His name has made it to the top of my tower, although I admit I didn’t imagine a wizard to appear quite so martial.” I was racking my brain over where I’d heard his name and it came to me, this was Willas’s grandfather, who had given him one of my compasses.

“I’m flattered to be recognized, I didn’t expect my reputation to have traveled so far.”

Lord Hightower kept walking as he passed us to stare out the window. “I had hoped it would look less bleak from down here.” His son moved and stood next to him silently. The moment crawled on until he straightened and seemed to shake the weights of duty and age off his shoulders. “Well nothing to be done about the city now, it’s our own skins we have to worry about. Dispatch the guards to the lower walls, if the Ironborn come we’ll pull back to the tower and try to wait them out, but there’s no point in letting them know that without bleeding them for it.”

Baelor was nodding as his father spoke and left to give the men their orders. Hightower turned to me then after another long glance at the smouldering city. “Ser Dresden, if you and your daughter would join me I’d appreciate a few words. If nothing else my library will probably be the premier one in the world after those dogs are through with the citadel. If it wasn’t for the rest I’d almost be glad to see those grey sheep shook up.”

Maggie rushed to me as I followed Hightower towards the stairs up, I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in tightly. “You’re fine?” She asked, looking me up and down and inspecting for wounds. “Why are you all wet?”

That was a good question I thought absently, I was soaked, up to my knees could be explained by jumping in the water but the rest- oh right, all the frost had melted. The Winter Mantle apparently was brand conscious enough to display itself when I drew on it heavily. “Magic.”

Maggie accepted that’s all she would get for now and nodded. Lord Hightower glanced back, eyes gleaming with curiosity but didn’t say anything as we continued to climb the stairs. The stairs went through the immense outer walls and spiraled up in long arcs. They were lit by thick candles, enough to see the steps, but far too dark to read.

As we climbed I marveled over the current architectural mystery. The Hightower made no sense, it was nominally a castle but from the top of the island’s bedrock it stretched easily sixty stories into the air, it was a match for any skyscraper, especially with the immense stone walls that supported it. The only structures on Earth that compared were cathedrals and obelisks, and those weren’t designed to have giant balls of rock or battering rams hitting them. Even if the height had simply been a vanity project I had no idea how it didn’t simply topple over and crumble, I didn’t even know if modern engineering could build a stone tower so tall and robustly. Things were just big in this world, the castles, the random statue shaped castles, the giant walls of ice and now their lighthouses. I was almost convinced there must be some magic woven into the stones but I was willing to hold belief in human ingenuity a little longer.
“Could your magic build me another tower?” Lord Hightower had been watching me as I examined his castle.

“I think one Hightower is enough, it would lose something if there was another that instead of fire was crowned with rocky spears. It might be a little derivative.” He nodded, I looked at Maggie, to my despair she’d missed it.

“Being among the ten wonders made by man would be a little less exclusive, Longstrider was right to stop when he did.” It was my turn to miss a reference but I decided to push on and ignore it.

“So what are you bringing us to see? I’m not a fighting man by trade but I could help the defenses and I’m as opposed to a foot of steel in my gut as any man.”

Hightower kept climbing, living in this building must promote some impressive leg definition. “I had hoped that we could chat and share knowledge, your Margaret could meet my Malora.”

“Malora?” Maggie spoke up asking the question I had half wondered about.

“My eldest daughter, she shares my interest in the arcane, I’ve always found it a bonding activity much like you two I have heard.”

I didn’t like the sound of that one bit. It was known among the Voyagers and some of my friends that Maggie shared my power, but here we were, halfway around the world, and a random noble was discussing it? I hoped he was just guessing, but the sinking feeling in my stomach persisted. “And are you successful? I’ll admit I’ve studied some other magic and I couldn’t get any of it to work. It seemed to be the common result of all who dabble in sorcery.”

“Before the past few years not much worked, I’d seen wildfire of course, though I’m not convinced that’s not simply a hotter burning oil, but a few years ago some other efforts began to bear fruit.” We had reached a level with a wide landing and Hightower finally stopped climbing. The stairs had been spiraling up in the center of the outer wall with doors leading to each floor, but here the stair emerged into an open space. He crossed it to a heavy wooden door and with an effort shoved it open. A strange light spilled forth, the colors were twisted by it and the shadows were so dark that I was half worried I could fall into them. Hightower showed no fear. “Now the glass candles are burning, not just mine but others through the world.”

I’d heard of glass candles, they were ancient Valyrian devices that reminded me of Palantir. “You know how I said your tower was at risk of losing its individuality?” Hightower glanced back confused. “Don’t worry about it, it’s a lost cause already.” His expression didn’t change but I entered the room, Maggie at my heels.

It might have been rude, but instead of greeting Malora I walked up to the candle. It was mostly as I’d read about, black stone, obsidian or something stranger I thought, carved with sharp edges that twisted as the rose. The light though, I recognized the description from the books, but they hadn’t captured its essence. It reminded me of the sight in the way that some things were illuminated but it was distinct from it. I looked down at myself in the glare, my coat seemed to shimmer with the magic I’d woven into somehow reflecting the strange light. My ungloved hand was also blazing, I looked to my left and though the glove blocked most, I could see a sigil, not quite Lasciel’s shining through. I decided freaking out over that could wait, and turned back to Hightower. He had moved to confer with his daughter and seeing my attention shifted back to them coughed.

“Malora this is Ser Harry Dresden and his daughter Margaret, Dresdens, my eldest daughter Malora.”
“Charmed” I said and Maggie jerked her head in greeting, she was staring at the glass candle still, watching its flames flicker.

“My candle, I can’t say I’ve mastered it, but it will show you things if you know how to look.” He approached the black spire and stared into the strange flame “I searched for you when I first heard your name, I only saw you a few months ago, in the north if the trees were any guide. Your appearance is a curiosity though, and we have larger matters to attend to.” Malora was looking at Maggie and I, her eyes flickering between us, it was clear the conversation wasn’t of any interest to her. “I can see Lannisport burning, Paxter Redwyne and his fleet are sunk or scattered, and the Ironborn are scouring the coast. There will be no aid at sea until Stannis Baratheon rounds the arm of Dorne and even then the only ships are the royal fleet and the Manderlys. The Greyjoys will own the ocean for the near future and we are besieged.” It was a grim picture he painted, the guilt I felt over my compasses use returned in full force. “So I will ask you like the Prince did, can you do anything to save my city?”

I stood looking at the candle as I considered Hightower’s plea. I had the raw power to save the city, with a little time and effort I could call down enough lightning or fire or even call up lava to smash their ships and leave their crews burning on the beach. The corruption would leave me insane, I didn’t know what my next trick would be after destroying the invaders, but I had a feeling it would have a lot fewer fans. Black magic was out, the obvious solution was worse than none at all.

We were on an island, the water both protected us and held us here. Despite our success at the docks our one hijacked ship probably couldn’t make it past the patrolling longships and even if it did, we’d be hugely outnumbered and have to force a landing before escaping the city with absolutely nothing stopping the Ironborn from chasing us. We were stuck in the Hightower and there was no prospect of help imminent. “How are we supplied, do we have to worry about food or water?”

“We have plenty of food laid in, especially since there’s so few of us. We have cisterns for water, I’ve never seen them less than halfway full even after months of drought, the Ironborn won’t be able to let us starve or wither away.” Hightower was watching me as he spoke, he was desperate for a solution and nothing was coming to mind.

My first priority was protecting Maggie, to do that I’d have to be alive, so that was number two. I felt confident that no matter what I could get us away from Oldtown and any number of raiders, so I moved on to what I could do to keep the rest of the people on the island safe.

Wards I dismissed, the Hightower had a threshold far stronger that the Titan but it would still take time to construct wards powerful enough to keep the Ironborn out. If I had the months I used in Braavos the tower could be made impregnable temporarily, I’d further developed my anti-zombie shield and with more power it could protect Battle Island as long as I was there. I could strengthen the walls themselves, the enchantments on my coat would transfer readily to walls, in combination with the threshold they had a certain magical solidity, the combined intent of thousands of builders and guards over the years would do much of the heavy lifting. That wouldn’t stop the raiders from just climbing over though, magic wouldn’t be enough to stop the pirates.

I could raise the lower walls though, I thought back to the battle in the Raith deeps, during the fight calling up the wall of rock had been a stretch but with prep-time I felt I could do better. I started mental calculations on the energy needed, before stopping to think if it was a good idea. Luckily I had an expert to bounce ideas off. “I might be able to raise the lower walls, if they’re twenty feet taller climbing them becomes a much harder proposition.”
“That will help us of course, but my city? The people out there owe me their allegiance and I owe them protection, can you do anything to drive out the Ironborn?”

I recognized Hightower’s plea, I’d heard it all too often both on Earth and in Braavos. Normal people saw me do something impossible to them and didn’t realize that there were limits. I had hoped given his own studies in magic he’d recognize the flaw but desperation can make fools of all of us. “I cannot use my magic to destroy the Ironborn, it is beyond my power.”

He sank, he knew his city was lost and I had been a last throw of the dice. “There’s nothing you can do?”

I wasn’t going to break the Laws for him but my thoughts about walls had brought an older story, that of Jericho, to mind. I had never really known what to make of the Old Testament on Earth, it had my least favorite verse for one, but from a wizarding perspective much of it was strange. I knew there were gods out there, Michael’s God was the top dog as far as I knew, but the story of the Israelites wandering around with the occasional miracle just seemed bizarre. If I ever made it home I might have to look up one of the things that was alive back then and get an eyewitness account. Between the mana and the random godly wood burn offs, Jericho stood out. The destruction of Jericho, with all of the marching around the walls and on the seventh day the walls falling almost seemed like a ritual description. I might forgo the horn, or maybe not, it would be a big effort and symbolism always helped magic, but I could bring down Oldtown’s walls and leave the Ironborn defenseless.

When I told Hightower my tentative plan he gaped. “That is your best idea? Tear down the walls?” I had expected a slightly warmer reception. With all the walls leveled a far smaller army would be needed to drive the Ironborn out, there would be no need for the brutality of a siege or an assault. Even then the worst of a siege would fall on the citizens, with the only intact navy the Ironborn could leave whenever they wanted. The city gave them a base to raid from, destroying the walls took away much of its value.

I explained my reasoning to Lord Hightower and he nodded grudgingly but still looked aggrieved. “Surely if you can topple the walls you can destroy their ships, that would cripple them just as much.” As he spoke he realized the flaw. “No, then they’d be trapped like rats in a sinking ship, they’d kill everyone they could and burn the city rather than surrender.” He stopped to think, seriously considering my plan. “How long would it take? If we could let the Reachlords know in advance they could attack and sweep the squids into the sea before they knew what was happening.”

“I’m not sure, I have to figure out the particulars but right now I’d say seven days. I won’t be good for anything else during those days either I don’t think, and if we’re interrupted during them the results could be catastrophic.” Earth magic had never been a speciality of mine, but I knew the basics and I was far better at magic now then when I’d learned it first. My current idea was simple, the scale was just enormous. I’d made sinkholes in combat before, this was the same, just more so. The ritual would be a metaphorical lever, my death curse might have been enough to wreck the walls but seven days and a clear mental framework would probably let me have the same result for a much lower cost. Thinking on it further I didn’t even need to wreck the whole wall, if I could just make a large enough breach the city would be freed.

“That will be our plan then, I’ll send ravens to Highgarden and the closer castles, they may not believe me but with the city captured they’ll have to besiege it just to keep track of the raiders. If we can alert them right before it falls then it will be the city’s best chance.” He had recovered a little, knowing his city could be free in as little as a week had given him new strength. “You said that you needed uninterrupted time, I don’t know if we’ll hold that long. How catastrophic could it be?”
I thought for a moment. “Worst case, I sink this island into the bay and we all die horribly as the Hightower crumbles around us.” Honesty was the best policy when engaging in magic with consequences best shown on a map.

“Sorcery is a sword without a hilt after all.” Malora spoke for the first time. She had stopped staring at Maggie and walked to her father. “Do you seriously believe this charlatan Father? He’s already claiming to have Joramun’s power and now he threatens us with the Hammer of the Waters? If he truly has the strength he boasts why is he toiling as a shopkeeper, not claiming power and glory in all the kingdoms of the world?”

Her accusation annoyed me, I’d taken a lot I never would have back home but being questioned by a girl who I was going to help for no reason was enough. I opened my mouth to reply when Maggie cut in.

Her lightning danced around her fingers and up her arms, giving her bracelets of roiling electricity. Tendrils snapped to the ground and the stand of the candle as she clenched her fists, and the Hightowers flinched at every sudden bolt. The glass candle’s light seemed weaker in the blue-white glare of her power and after they got a good look she spoke angrily. “Magic is meant for more than that, it’s a product of life and using it for death and domination is a perversion. My father chooses not to rule, if you don’t want his help we’ll leave you and your city.” She took a step towards the door before turning back. “Coming Papa?”

Malora looked pale, I couldn’t tell if it was her natural state, a product of the candle’s bizarre light, or fear of Maggie’s show, but she moistened her lips and replied shakily. “Please, forgive my words, help us.”

Maggie had been a bit more aggressive than I would have been but I was glad she had made her point. I was willing to help them but I didn’t have to and if they wanted help they should act like it. Maggie dismissed her lightning and looked at me for judgement, she almost seemed worried, but when I smiled she brightened. “Well Lord Hightower? Do you want my aid?”
The ritual itself would be simple. I had acquired a horn and the Hightowers conveniently had a model of the city, apparently modeled on Aegon’s painted table, that would do for a focus. After some calculations I had decided to try to collapse a half mile stretch of the wall, just to the south of the main gate. Even though the streets were twisty, the main road would be easily accessible for the invading soldiers and it would be far too large a breach to seal. I was practicing the sinkhole spell I would be using outside the tower, by lowering the walls rather than shattering them I’d avoid killing anyone directly, the Laws could seem awfully arbitrary when I was setting up for a battle but I’d seen the results of breaking them too many times.

Maggie was watching me, I’d managed to teach her some of the magic I’d be using, the vulcanomancy was the only part that really appealed to her. “I’d make fun of you for only liking the explodey sorts of magic but it would be a little hypocritical.” She laughed while watching the puddle of lava she’d been able to make bubble. The grounds between the walls and the tower were speckled with holes and molten puddles from our practice. The strange black stone responded well to the earth magic, when it cooled from a liquid it gleamed, the oily iridescent sheen becoming stronger, reflecting blues, greens, and purples.

The Ironborn had not made another attempt on the island yet but it had only been a day since they took the city. Whoever I’d killed apparently hadn’t been liked enough for them to storm the island in a rage which I was grateful for. If I’d known he was important I might have tried to take him alive as a hostage but it had been a closer fight than I’d liked even without additional complications. Looking from the throne room or the lower walls revealed a lot of activity on the shore. There were many ships beached near the Citadel with men there streaming in and out, carrying plunder back to their holds. Monasteries were meant to be raided by Vikings on all worlds it seemed. Oberyn and Lord Hightower had been discussing what they could be stealing, Oberyn with a sort of glee as Hightower mourned the desecration of millenias’ work.

Other ships were sailing in and out of the harbor, both up the Brightwater and into the Whispering Sound, Oldtown’s protected harbor made it perfect for a naval base. Baelor estimated that a third of the Ironborn fleet was in the south, throughout the day at least sixty had been present but it had been different ships. Their navy wouldn’t matter if the plan worked though, the Ironborn were fearsome raiders but they didn’t have the training or experience of the mainland armies in a standup fight. Many of the levies in the area had fought before in Robert’s Rebellion, even if the Reach avoided most major battles after the very beginning. Ravens had been sent to the nearby castles and while no responses had reached us Baelor was confident that if I brought the walls down the Ironborn would have to flee or be defeated. No one spoke about what they would leave behind when they left, a sacked city and based on their past actions, possibly a burning one.

I was focused on preparing for the ritual but I had spoken with Oberyn, he was concerned with what else the Ironborn were up to. Their entire campaign had taken place in the last day so far, they had sailed out of sight of land, unseen by any living witnesses and struck all along the western coast with two Pearl Harbor type raids. It was a hell of an opening act and unprecedented in warfare here, but now they could strike at will anywhere the waves touched and the Mander was navigable to Highgarden. Other lords might keep their forces close to home to defend their own lands from reavers, I was worried that I’d drop the walls and their wouldn’t be an army waiting for me. The trick would only work once after all, it would hardly be a surprise twice. If they knew they couldn’t trust
the walls they might just burn the city and retreat to the Shield Islands or the Arbor. Until a fleet arrived the Ironborn could pick their battles and move up and down the coasts far faster than armies could manage. Landing a heavy blow here would be essential in driving them off for good.

Content that I had the modified sinkhole spell down I finished my final preparations. Using Lord Hightower’s alchemical supplies I made two escape potions for Maggie and I in case the worst should happen. I had the map table moved to a higher room with windows that overlooked the walls I would collapse and began to carve runes that would emphasize the link between the model walls and the cities. It was nothing like Little Braavos or my freshman effort on Little Chicago but a map table that had been used in lessons about the city for generations was almost as good as having samples of the city built into it.

The ritual was kind of free form, my inspiration didn’t exactly lay out septagons and intricate rune carvings, King James probably would have edited them out anyways. I was keeping the walking around the model seven times for seven days and the horn though, they felt right. During the days I’d be focusing on weakening the foundations, readying the soil to suddenly collapse and let the walls drop. I was sure I could do it, using the leylines at Chichen Itza and the gravity hammer had been roughly similar and now with time and planning the walls would fall.

My greater worry was that some bored pirates would get ten or twelve ships together and storm the island. They must not have known how weak the garrison was or they’d already have the island and have us trapped in the tower. Lord Hightower had seemed confident that we could pull back safely if they assaulted and then hold the tower but nothing was certain in a fight, as of dawn on the next day I’d be largely unable to help, and if ten or fifteen men got into the tower chasing the defenders there was no guarantee that we could hold. If the tower was breached I was taking Maggie and perhaps Oberyn and leaving, I would do what I could but this wasn’t our fight.

That night standing on the walls I looked over the city. The city’s fires were out, the raiders didn’t want to destroy their own base and the longships were clustered by the Citadel. They had transformed it into their keep in the city, even though they were armed and trained the city’s population outnumbered them. Their forces were on the outer walls, on the bay or in the Citadel, they weren’t taking any chances of a citizens revolt.

I bit into an apple contemplatively, one unexpected pleasure during the siege had been the food, with such an understrength garrison the remaining cooks had made delicacies out of the food that would spoil quickly. We’d even have fresh fruits and vegetables, there were small herb gardens on the island that would supplement our eventual fish, fish, and more fish diet. If all went to plan it wouldn’t matter though, one way or another in a week the siege would be over.

I was up before dawn the next day. We had decided that of sunrise, noon and sunset the morning would be the best time for an attack. The Ironborn wouldn’t expect a small force to assault and wouldn’t be prepared for the sudden breach. If we were lucky we’d even catch some sleeping.

“Cadent” I intoned, “Terram corruet!” The precise wording didn’t matter too much compared to the intent I was layering into the model and thus the cities walls as I went. I could feel the energy drain increase with each lap of the table and after the seventh I gratefully sat down.

“That was a lot of power.” Maggie had watched me and was now looking at the map with some apprehension. “Do you think it will hold for the rest of the ritual?”

I knew that the props, all of my tools were props really, only mattered as much as I believed I needed them. I did need them, there weren’t limits that were all in my head Morpheus style but the tools
were secondary to my will and power. I might not have taught Maggie that as well as I should, I preferred to build tools and crutches to help my magic and she might not truly believe that magic could be done entirely without them. “You’ll understand when you’ve spent more time studying, but we don’t have to worry about it blowing up on its own.” She looked unconvinced, I had told her the mystery of Little Chicago’s energy buildup and how it had been fixed by parties unknown and she had been a little skittish about the model of Braavos ever since. By the time I was through the model would be holding far more power, but I wasn’t planning to send an astral projection through it so I would be fine.

The brief exchange had nearly exhausted me, I’d pushed a lot of energy into my ritual and I could feel the buildup of a nasty headache. I had told Oberyn and the Hightowers that I would be useless during the spell but I hadn’t actually expected it. I stumbled to a room on the same floor with a bed and collapsed into it.

When I woke it was late afternoon and Maggie was sitting in the room looking out the window. “Has anything happened?”

“Lord Hightower came up but I didn’t let him try to wake you, he said that Lord Tarly would be at the walls in time for the seventh day.” That was good news, if I left myself utterly spent for seven days for no reason I would have been a little annoyed past the larger implications.

“And the Ironborn, they’re still keeping to their patterns?”

“A few of their ships have sailed in closer but they got a scorpion or two working and scared them off. Lord Hightower is hoping they don’t think we’re worth the effort.” That was good news, if they would just ignore us for a week we might all make it out.

I managed to eat something and stay up for a few hours, Maggie was fussing over me and I was glad she’d never seen the aftermath of any of my cases, before trying to get back to sleep. If the pattern continued tomorrow would be even harder than today and I wanted to ensure I had all of the juice I needed.

Four more days passed like that, each day was more of a strain and each walk around the model seemed like a marathon. I could feel the energy of the ritual like a train hammering past me and Maggie’s pallor under her darker skin showed that it was as distracting and irritating to her.

The morning of the sixth day Oberyn joined us for the ritual. He watched in silence as I staggered around and chanted, when the final layer of the day set he flinched. He had a few new cuts I noted, and while he looked better than I did now, so did a decent amount of corpses. He sat next to me as I recovered. “Lord Tarly’s men arrived during the night, from the tower they are visible.” I was exhausted and lacked the patience to deal with thinking.

“And? That’s good news right?”

Oberyn smiled thinly. “Randyl Tarly has a reputation. During Robert’s little insurrection he was the only man to beat him and he brought seven thousand of his closest friends with him this time. The Ironborn would be fools not to be cautious of him and so far they’ve been everything but.”

“So they’re outnumbered by an excellent commander who’s about to get a massive breach in the walls? I don’t see why any of this is bad for us.”

“The Ironborn know by now that Lord Hightower is in here, they may even be aware of my
presence, we’ve killed everyone who reached the walls but I am recognizable. We’d both be excellent hostages against an assault.”

My mind was barely moving, the headaches had been getting worse the entire time and I just wanted him to tell me what he was saying. He evidently got the message. “They will attack us today or tonight, and in strength, we can’t count on holding them.”

“What do you want me to do? I’m spent, dropping the wall is taking everything I have.”

He leaned in and lowered his voice. “The Ironborn are not kind to prisoners. If they make it in all of our fates are likely to be dark, but Maggie’s would be worse.” The mantle rose at that and I had to fight down the desire to destroy everything that could threaten her. I managed it but my headache only got worse. “If you want I’ll claim her as my daughter, they may be more hesitant to defile the child of a prince than of a random knight.” Everything in me raged against the idea, Maggie was mine, but I saw his reasoning.

I closed my eyes in surrender. “Do it.” I didn’t tell Oberyn that Maggie would be gone if the tower fell but if I wasn’t able to go, she might not leave. She had more than a bit of my stubbornness and anything I could do to help her I would. Either way it would be done tomorrow.

35.

I woke up to shouts and warcries, Maggie was in the room with me and it was dark outside, so I restrained my first urge to panic. She had two vials in front on the table next to her as she looked down out the window. “Get away from the window.”

She jerked back from it and turned to me, I had woken up suddenly and she had been distracted by whatever was happening below. “Papa you’re awake, how are you feeling?”

I thought about my answer. The train had expanded into an entire railyard and I had a headache that almost drowned it out. I wondered briefly if that was a symptom of what my other half called our guest but I didn’t have the time to contemplate it. “I’ll live, what’s going on down there?”

Maggie glanced towards the window, we were pretty far off the ground, twenty or thirty stories at least but I had no idea how high an arrow could go and I didn’t want to take anymore risks. “The Ironborn attacked in the afternoon, they tried to take the dock again but Baelor sank the ship you captured in the middle of the entrance so anyone who tried would have to swim.” I wouldn’t want to be the attackers then, no armor, archers shooting at you from cover and a long swim before climbing out of the water to get stabbed. “That slowed them down a bit but they reformed and tried to climb the wall in a low spot, Oberyn led the defense and managed to fight them back but he has a nasty cut and they know how few we are now. He said they’ll try again from more places soon.”

It wasn’t as bad as it could have been, worst case would have been waking up dead of course, but it sounded like the Ironborn would have a foothold on the island soon. I wished that we could just leave but I’d made a mistake with the spell. All the energy I’d used had to go somewhere and the only option that wouldn’t kill a lot of people was for me to lower the walls as planned. Maggie knew this but I was worried she wouldn’t leave me behind if that was the only choice. If I really had to I could probably force her to take the escape potion but I didn’t control what she’d do with it, she could just stay in the room after dissolving into the wind and we’d be right back where we started. “So do they plan to pull back to the tower then?”
“Oberyn didn’t say, I was listening to Lord Hightower and him, and they were both worried about the next stage, even if the Ironborn are pushed from the city they still have all the ships, Lord Tarly’s men won’t be able to get to us.”

“Don’t worry about that, once the ritual is finished we’re both free to leave whenever we want and we can take people with us.”

“But the sun’s only just set, we have ten hours at least before you can finish it, they’ll be over the walls before then for sure!”

I wracked my exhausted and throbbing brain for a solution, we were a ways up the tower, if they fought floor to floor it could take a long time for invaders to reach us. We didn’t have the men though, and the Ironborn were limitless from our point of view, if they got into the tower we were lost. There was some hope though, Maggie had shown some talent in melting and moving the rock, she might be able to seal the entryway beyond all hope of entry. That would leave us in a room that had a wall of molten rock, I didn’t want to think about the structural implications and unlike earlier there was nowhere for the heat to go but into broiling us alive. A veil would be perfect except Maggie was terrible at them and I had no energy. What could my barely an apprentice daughter do?

The stairs were key I felt, they were a natural choke point and the only way to reach the upper levels. I was confident that soon after dawn I would be ready to fight with the Mantle’s aid, even if not at full strength. At that point Maggie’s safety was assured, there was nothing mortal on this world that could take me in a stand-up fight. If she could block the stairs and give me time we would be saved. The stairs curved up through the middle of the outer walls, they were voids in the rock with arched ceilings that transferred the load around them. They were fantastic masonry but I had no idea if bringing the ceiling down would cause a catastrophic failure. There were regular iron clad wooden doors along them but they wouldn’t stop determined men with axes for long, they couldn’t be relied on. If there was enough free stone in the tower a barricade could be made and Maggie could weld it together without producing enough heat to kill everyone close.

“Get Oberyn or Lord Hightower.” She ran to get them and I tried to think of other flaws in the plan. Maggie had my power, or at least as much as I did at her age so I didn’t doubt that she could melt the edges of rocks enough that it would take far too long to get through. Moving enough rock to block a stairwell though, she was a thirteen year old girl she’d need help.

She brought back Lord Hightower who was sweating after climbing the stairs in his armor. “Maggie said you had a solution for us? We’re going to need one.” I explained my plan and he shook his head. “We don’t have the men to build it, and what would we do with those on the far side when it was completed? They’d have to be there, the Ironborn won’t be waiting patiently for us to finish brick up the stairwell. Our best plan is to try to hold till dawn. Now if you’ll forgive me I need to help at the walls.” Hightower left and my mood sank. I didn’t know what else we could do, my only plan so far being shot down made my exhaustion and headache even worse and I only barely managed to keep a strong front up for Maggie, who I was sure wasn’t fooled.

“What else can we do Papa? I won’t just leave you here.”

I sat up and grabbed her shoulder. “You might have to, you’re what matters most to me in this entire world, if it’s a choice between me or you living, always choose you.” Tears were starting to shine in her eyes and I cursed accepting that stupid invitation to come to this feudal hellhole. “Hey, hey, don’t cry.” She buried my head into my shoulder and I could hear and feel her start to sob. “We’re both going to make it out of here, if a million vampires and a bunch of necromancers couldn’t kill us what
chance do Vikings have? Just promise me that if things go bad you’ll take the escape potion.” She kept crying with the sounds muffled, she hadn’t said anything but I didn’t want to press her further. I passed out with her still silently weeping.

The next thing I knew Maggie’s weight was off my shoulder and a frantic soldier was at the door. “They’ve taken the outer walls, we’re falling back to the tower!”

I stumbled to my feet, Maggie had been asleep next to me and after checking on her as she blinked awake and the escape potions I turned to the soldier. “What time is it? How many men remain?”

“Lord Hightower fell, Ser Baelor and Prince Martell managed to rally half the men back to the tower and bar the gates. We have archers, but it’s only a matter of time until they get a ram and get in.” The man they’d sent was swaying badly, I wasn’t the only one exhausted and he’d probably been up for the last twenty four hours, many of them fighting.

“What time, how long until sunrise?”

“At least an hour, the eastern sky is only just beginning to lighten.”

An hour. The defenders had to be keep them back for at least that long.

Well not quite, we were on a tower, I tried to think of how much getting to the top would get me, it had to be a few minutes at least. The map table wouldn’t be needed all the way up there, I’d have the actual city walls at my feet. Best of all it would be further for the Ironborn to climb. “I might need you to help me up, we need to get to the beacon level.” The soldier gaped at me but he was well enough trained to obey even dumb orders. I had Maggie grab the escape potions and began the stumbling climb towards the tower.

We were pretty high up, at a walking pace it took fifteen minutes to reach our height, the steps were shallow and the curves around the structure made it take much longer than a regular flight. Now with me stumbling along I thought it would take at least half an hour to reach the summit. I was reasonably fit, I didn’t jog like I used to, mainly because no one had invented sneakers yet, but I walked a lot. Exhausted like I was thougth the idea of climbing forty stories daunted me. It needed to be done and I reminded myself that every step climbed brought Maggie a little further from the Ironborn. I knew I was forgetting something as we went, potions, check, coat, check, taser chain, check, sword check, horn? No horn, goddamnit. “Soldier”

“Ser?”

“In the room with the map there’s a horn, go and get it and bring it back to me.” He nodded, still confused and ran back down the stairs. Youth, wasted on the young. I turned back and kept climbing. We had forty stories or so to climb, call it four hundred feet. I was pretty confident this planet was similar sized to earth but I didn’t really know. I tried to distract myself from my decreasing energy by calculating how much time this would get me but I didn’t know any of the dimensions that would be needed.

About halfway up I heard a dull thud and then another, “That will be the ram then.” Maggie threw a glance down the stairs and we all increased our pace. The hammering set a beat for climbing and as long as it kept going I knew the tower was still secure. As we got higher the stairway abruptly emerged from the wall and began climbing up the inside. They also turned to wood, if all else failed Maggie would be able to shatter the landings now that they weren’t structural, she and I were safe
now, no matter what. The end was in sight, a few more minutes of climbing and we’d be at the top.

We exited onto the beacon’s level as an ominous quiet overtook the tower. The gate was down. I looked to the soldier, he was pale, the climb hadn’t been any easier on him and reached for the horn. “You can go down there if you want, I won’t think any worse of you if you stay though.”

He gulped, his adam’s apple bobbed and I was struck by how young he was. I’d gotten old without noticing at some point. “It’s my duty Ser, farewell to you both.” He turned back towards the stairs, and something in me twisted, courage like that deserved to be rewarded.

“Wait,” I shucked off my coat, it wouldn’t last long on anyone but me or Maggie, but the enchantments should hold longer than the tower would. “Wear this, it’ll stop arrows and blades at least.” He took it and looked at it, he had been one of the guardsmen at the docks and had seen my power.

“Why not fight Ser? We could use you down there.”

“If I succeed the city will be saved, Lord Hightower valued that more than the tower. Good luck and Godspeed.” He pulled the coat on looking at it doubtfully, saluted and then was gone.

The eastern sky was definitely brighter now, we still had a little time until sunrise and I hoped the extra height would let me save more than just ourselves. “Maggie, go to the stairs, if anyone comes up who you don’t recognize drop a few flights.” She nodded and stood in the door looking down. I stumbled around to the city side of the tower, I could see the ships docked on the island, the plunderers in the city sleeping in their camps and out beyond the walls Tarly’s camp was stirring. I held up the horn, examining it. It was just a ram’s horn, I’d scratched some runes into it but it was just a carved and hollowed out piece of keratin, the same thing as fingernails. It was a small thing to be the focus of so much power, it didn’t carry the same metaphorical weight as the athame on Chichen Itza, but then, it was about to.

There was nothing more to do, I stood on the east edge of the tower and waited for dawn.

36.

I had never waited this long for a sunrise. The minutes stretched on for eternities, and I wasn’t sure that the increasing glow to the east existed anywhere but my imagination. The strain of the magic was immense, the power I’d gathered for the last steps felt like flames beneath my skin. I was hoping that as soon as I triggered the ritual I would start to recover, but I’d never done anything like this before and I’d already made one mistake about the cost I’d pay.

I held the horn in my hands and watched the city. It was peaceful now, the Ironborn were asleep along with the rest. Whatever they could loot was already in their ships or gathered in the Citadel for storage and for the past few days Oldtown had just been their base, no longer a target to be plundered. Lord Tarly’s camp was stirring though, I didn’t know if he truly believed in the plan but he seemed to be readiness his men just in case. Maggie and I were safe on the top of the tower, at the first sign of trouble she’d demolish the stairs and make it so only birds could reach us. Our part in the siege would be over soon.

“Papa!” Maggie’s cry disrupted my musing and I moved around to see what she had to say. “Papa, I’ve been Listening, I can hear the fighting and screams from below.” She looked pale, Willas’s
injury at the tourney had shaken her and that hardly compared to hearing men die. “They’re not all men too. What about Malora and the maids? Shouldn’t we have brought them with us?”

I had been ignoring my guilt over leaving them, Maggie came first and I wouldn’t risk her to save strangers. When we had been climbing I had thought about bringing people with us but I hadn’t thought it would help them, they’d just die tired. Now that I knew we could have saved people by wrecking the wooden stairs that excuse was gone, but knowing what I did then I’d do it again. “If they appear at the stairs call them up, and you can break the flights below them, don’t go down and if you see any Ironborn don’t hesitate, just smash the stairs above them.” She nodded but I wasn’t convinced. She was my daughter after all, and before I had her I had taken immense risks for a lot of faceless people. “Promise me you’ll stay up here, when dawn breaks I’ll probably be able to rejoin the fight, I’ll do what I can to save them then.” I looked her in the eyes until she nodded again, right now I wouldn’t be able to stop her if she did anything stupid, I’d have to hope Susan’s genes were dominant.

The conversation had taken some time and when I went back to the east there was a glow just above the horizon. Dawn was here, the sunrise was imminent. In a perfect world I’d time it so my final lap and hornblow would be at the break of dawn, it would be the most efficient use of my power and achieve the best result. Unfortunately I didn’t have a watch or know exactly when the sun would rise atop the Hightower, or even how long each lap would take. I’d have to wait until the moment felt right.

Ebenezer once mentioned that some spells cause echoes through time, he’d changed the subject hastily but for some reason I was thinking of it now. He was the Blackstaff, the Laws of magic were merely guidelines to his office, I wondered if he had ever knowingly felt his ripples in the currents of time. If any spell I ever performed would make a splash, it would be this one. I held my left hand out, despite it’s burns it was sensitive to the flows of magic and was the one I used to gather energy. I didn’t do that now, I just left it in the air, feeling for magic ripples that I wasn’t sure would exist, hoping that I’d know them when I felt them, like the frets on my guitar.

It was a poor time for experimenting but doing a spell of biblical magnitude demanded more than my normal repertoire. I closed my eyes and waited, for a few terrifying minutes I stood with my eyes shut half believing I’d missed my shot, and then I felt it, my own magic, pulsing through the air only barely strong enough to detect. It was time.

I picked up the horn and began to march around the perimeter of the tower. “Submersus, Cadent, Submersus, Cadent” Each step I chanted a word, and it was easier this time. All week I’d been pushing a rock to the top of a hill and it was about to go careening down. The magic wanted to be released, all the energy I’d concentrated with my ritual was ready to burst forth and change the world. I reached the start of my loop and blew the horn, the call echoed forth. Almost before the sound faded I resumed my march, each step was easier than the last and I almost ran as the magic struggled to break free. The runes on the horn were blazing as I started my seventh lap. Each blast of the horn had been louder and taken longer to fade away and I had seen the camps of the Ironborn erupt as the horn’s call reached them.

I reached the easternmost point on the tower and I knew that I had timed it correctly. The horn was shaking in my hands and I knew if I looked at it with the Sight it would be blinding. I held the horn in both hands and paused just a second. Right as the sun broke the horizon I put the horn to my lips and blew.

The runes were brighter than the sun and I would have shielded my eyes if both my hands weren’t full. The horn’s sound was different this time, a droning, low enough that I could feel it in my bones
and loud enough that I was sure there was no one left sleeping in the entire city. I looked to the walls, they still stood firm and I almost panicked, and then with a jolt, a feeling that was a strange mix of plunging into ice water, burning and missing a gear, all the magic I’d stored over the week rushed through me.

I couldn’t put the horn down now if I wanted to, its call grew and grew until the stones at my feet were vibrating. I could see the shockwave, a pulse hit the water of the harbor below, sails of ships went taut and then the city’s walls began to sink.

The blast seemed to go on forever as the walls sank into a cloud of dust until finally the magic released me. I slumped to the battlement, the horn falling to the ground with it’s runes still shining and waited for the air to clear.

The breeze off the sea began to sweep the dust away but before it finished I heard other horns, sweeter than mine had been, and the sound of drums. The dust finally dissipated and I saw ranks and ranks of infantry, leavened with knights in literal shining armor, marching towards the collapsed walls. The siege of Oldtown was over.

I gave myself a moment to recover, with the ritual over I was felt much better but I had just done more magic than any other time in my life. After the all too brief rest I walked back to Maggie, who waited for me with wide eyes. “Did it work? I felt it but are the walls down?”

I grinned, even though the only reason I was still standing was the adrenaline rush, and pulled her into a hug. “The walls are down, Tarly’s men are headed into the city now.”

She smiled back and then looked down the stairs. “The fighting has been getting louder, they stopped for a bit when you blew that last one but they’re back at it.” I looked down the steps and thought, right now I could turn the tide, I could knock the Ironborn back enough to lock one of the doors and then seal it, I trusted my own stone welding abilities more than Maggie’s but with the Mantle I could just freeze the corridor, it would give us long enough to rest and then we could simply wait for reinforcements.

“I’ll see what I can do.” I picked up my sword, when I brought it up here, I had thought that it would simply be a last resort but now with steel in my hand, I loosened the bindings on the Mantle.

The world sprang into focus, sounds, smells and sights were all more intense and the surge of winter’s power almost left me breathless. I went from the brink of exhaustion to ready to fight for days and grinnned at Maggie. The reavers wouldn’t know what hit them. We had three escape potions, I held two and Maggie had her own for when we were worried about losing. I pulled one free and toasted Maggie, she was staring at me, before taking it like a shot.

The world dissolved into wind and I with it. I gloried in my Queen’s element as I left frost in my wake sweeping down the tower. The sounds of fighting men carried themselves to and through me, I burst through the last of my allies and materialized between the groups.

“Forzar!” A wedge of energy targeted at their legs went forth, the Ironborn toppled en masse. One particularly quick one threw an ax at me from the floor, my mind was still moving like the wind and I idly watched it tumble towards me. I effortlessly caught it right before it would have split my head and laughed. My allies shrank back away from me, Baelor and a limping Oberyn were still alive I saw, before I turned back to the stunned pirates. “Infriga.” The merest touch of my Lady’s power was enough to bind all of them to the floor. I focused my will on their metal weapons and ripped the heat from them. Men screamed as their swords shattered in their hands, there was no law against
maiming, and I grinned. “Remember Winter’s power scum! Count yourselves lucky you aren't worthy of my full attention.”

With the heat I’d pulled from their weapons, I slashed my hand at the floor. “Flammamurus!” I left a trail of molten rock a yard wide across the corridor and then I turned leaving the screaming men behind.

“To the next door, I’ll seal it and we’ll wait for Tarly to kill the rest of them.” The remaining guards were quick to follow my instructions, with the vanguard of the Ironborn frozen to the floor and blocked by lava we had plenty of time.

We reached a door, I estimated we were still a few stories from where the wooden stairs started, and a man barred it behind us. I motioned everyone back and drew on the wellspring of Winter’s power within me. “Infriga!” I used a touch of soulfire, I didn’t know how long it would take to cleanse the tower and the fires of creation would make the barrier practically invincible, it would be cold enough to shatter hammers and picks if they could even get through the ice-backed door.

With my work done I started the climb back to Maggie, only Oberyn followed, Ser Baelor remained with the guards, his sister and some maids. Oberyn stayed a few steps behind me as was proper before speaking. “Harry what was that? And did you bring the outer walls down?”

“That was the barest hint of my and my Lady’s power. Of course I brought down the walls, didn’t you hear my horn?” Idly I wondered how tired Oberyn must be, he didn’t usually ask such stupid questions.

I kept climbing the frost covered stairs, Oberyn was moving slower, lacking my grace on the ice. He was silent as we ascended, this climb was far easier than the last stumbling affair and we reached the top in no time at all.

Maggie nearly knocked me down from hugging me before launching a barrage of questions, I reassured her that the maids were fine and the Ironborn stymied as Oberyn wandered around to the east side. I heard him call my name and I tugged Maggie with me.

He was pale beneath his dark skin, staring out at the slightly larger than I intended breach and the men pouring through. With my sharpened vision I could see knights fighting vikings all through the streets and the vikings were losing. Already some ships were casting off from the shore, headed for greener pastures. “You did all this?”

“Well not all, the army isn’t mine,” I replied modestly, “but for the most part yes.” He swore and looked back at the city, dawn had fully broken and the sun’s rays lit the city as its liberators stormed it. “Not bad for a week’s work I think.” He glanced back at me and swore again more vehemently. I had larger concerns though.

In a low voice I called to Maggie, “Maggie, I’m going to bind the Mantle again, watch me alright?” She nodded and I reached into my head to try to relinquish the awesome power my Queen had given me. I struggled for a grip and got it before starting to push it down. Icy spears pierced my mind, and I dimly heard Maggie cry out as I collapsed.
When I woke I felt better than I had in forever. I lay still luxuriating in the absence of the trains and almost decided to try to go back to sleep before I steeled myself and opened my eyes. I immediately shut them, the sunlight sent shooting pains through my mind and my headache suddenly returned with a vengeance. It was slightly better than it had been but that was small comfort now.

Trying to distract myself from the pain I tried to go over the events of the day thus far. Stair climbing, wall sinking, a little insanity, and passing out. Or maybe a lot of insanity, I dimly recalled shouting about Winter’s power and cringed.

The Mantle was dangerous, whenever I drew on it my perceptions were warped. Any obstacle was to be fought or frozen all for the glory of Mab. I was keeping the Mantle locked down in the same way I’d once dealt with Lash, but my other side had implied that it, combined with our as yet unnamed guest, was fighting for room and causing the headaches. It had hurt more to bind the Mantle this time, I didn’t know if it was because I’d used more power than by the docks or if it just got worse each time. Either way I didn’t want to use the Mantle lightly, at some point it might be too painful to relinquish and I’d be trapped heading down the same road Slate walked.

When I had rescued Maggie the Mantle hadn’t seemed quite so dominating, I wasn’t sure if that was something Mab controlled or if I had done something different. I had drawn more power directly from it both times I’d used it in this world, Chichen Itza had been a slow ramp up rather than opening it up to full throttle like I had here. It made sense that it would be something like Thomas’s demon, the more power I drew the more influence it had. I didn’t want to test my theories though, I might not be able to subdue the Mantle a third time.

I opened my eyes again, steeling myself for the pain and stumbled from the bed. I was still wearing my clothes down to my boots and had been laid on top of the sheets. Maggie wasn’t there, which was a little worrying but since I’d woken at all I felt reasonably certain she was fine.

I left the room, and listened, not mystically but just with my ears, and heard noise from below me. I followed the stairs down and came upon the the remaining guards and servants in the tower, they fell silent when they saw me. I thought back to what I had done to scare them while I was caught up with Winter, quite a lot actually, and awkwardly waved. “Hi, um have you seen my daughter?”

One of the guardsmen, sitting next to a particularly fashionable coat despite its stains, gestured down the stairs wordlessly. I left them staring as I descended to the next level. I reached the door and could hear Oberyn’s voice and laughter, Maggie’s. “And that is why you should never- Harry!”

Oberyn interrupted his punchline to shout my name, Maggie burst out of the room and grabbed me in a tight hug. “You did it! Are you alright? You’ve been asleep for hours!” Ser Baelor, or Lord Hightower now, and Oberyn followed her out, stopping in the doorway to give us a little privacy.

“I feel a lot better than this morning, I needed the rest.” I untangled myself from her and looked to the two noblemen. “Well how goes the siege, and do we have any food?”

Baelor had a similar look to his guards as he beckoned us into the room. Oberyn was irrepressible and spoke up. “We do have food, we had the cooks and servants carry as much as they could and wreck the rest. Even better we have wine, in his younger days Lord Hightower here used to sneak
bottles to the top floors. Since no one else ever climbed this high, they’ve been sitting preserved for years, some are vinegar and well,” he swayed in an elaborate parody of drunkenness. “Some aren’t.”

I ignored the wine and grabbed a loaf of bread and a hunk of what looked like ham, I was ravenous. After a few moments where those in the room with manners looked genteelly away, I finished stuffing my face for a moment. “And the siege? What’s the situation?”

Baelor had decided my show of appetite was evidence I was human enough not to smite him. “Lord Tarly’s men have the town, they beat the Ironborn wherever they fought and the reavers were too panicked running to set the city alight as we’d feared.” I nodded in between bites. “Our situation is much improved as well. Tarly’s forces captured enough ships that those on the island left without fighting. I suspect they stripped the tower of as much as they could, but they are gone.”

“Well that’s good, so why are you still up here then?” I was looking around for more to eat, the ritual had drained me all week and all I’d consumed had only taken the edge off.

“Well someone left a wall of ice that fire barely even melts under direct flame in the way, any tool used to break it shatters after a swing or two. We’re quite baffled as to whom could be responsible.” Baelor had said the last so dryly that I wondered if I’d imagined him being intimidated by my magic.

“Give me a few more minutes alone with the food and I’ll see what I can do.”

The ice wall resisted my spells for a bit before starting to calve off huge chunks. I battered them away with a ash shovel from a fireplace, with the magic gone they’d melt like regular ice in the warm spring air. The only people willing to get close to me were Oberyn, Baelor and Maggie. The rest of the servants, the surviving guards, and even Malora, hung far back, watching with eyes that were just a hair away from fearful. I was tempted to turn and shout at them but manfully resisted. At last we reached the door, it was shredded from the Ironborn hitting it until they reached the ice and nearly fell from its hinge once my mini glacier no longer supported it. I drew back and let the quivering masses pass me, for some reason I felt that giving them some distance would do wonders for their mental states.

The halls were picked over as we went down, the looting had been more intense in the lower levels, and Baelor grew increasingly angry at his home’s desecration. Maggie, Oberyn and I gave him space and idly chatted, or as idle as we could be in a ransacked castle. The lower stairs were dark, the torches that illuminated them were gone or out and the slit windows didn’t penetrate into the core of the walls. I called light from my pentacle, covering the steps in a blue glow until we made it to the bottom and the entry chamber where the shattered doors let in enough light.

The servants were there as well as a stocky man dressed in armor with an immense sword sheathed on his back. Baelor hurried towards him. “Lord Tarly, my house thanks you for your valiant efforts.”

He looked at our small party with some confusion and then turned back to Baelor. “Your father promised us a miracle Ser, but I didn’t think he would deliver. Is he well? Was that horn his?”

Baelor slumped at Tarly’s words, “My father is dead. The horn wasn’t him, that was Ser Harry’s work.”

Tarly spun to give us a second look, I didn’t blame him, I was uninjured, unarmored, and paler than usual, I didn’t feel or look particularly mystical. He strode over to us with his entourage following, barely giving Oberyn a glance. “That was you? You dropped the walls with horn blasts? How? What have you done for the Seven to favor you so?”

I had known my plan would get attention but I’d hoped to leave the tower before answering
questions. “I can’t claim any divine grace, it was magic.”

“Preposterous!” A man in a gray robe pushed forward from the crowd. “Magic is gone from this world, Valyria was its last embers and its fires are drowned now.” I was a little impressed by the statement, most people stopped doubting me far before I dropped three quarters of a mile of wall.

“You have my word, is that not sufficient?” The man paled and backed away. I realized I’d threatened him after the fact, noblemen like myself didn’t have to take backtalk from servants. His cringing was just another reason to leave this pirate infested feudal dystopia and return to a more enlightened city.

Tarly had watched the drama and had gathered his thoughts. “What is your name Ser? I confess I wasn’t aware of any Ser Harry’s. What is your family and where are you from?” I was about to answer when he spoke again. “And also know you have my thanks, your sorceries spared many of my men, storming the walls would have been bloody no matter what.”

I accepted his thanks with a nod, “I’m Ser Harry Dresden, late of Braavos. Oberyn invited me to join him on his return to Westeros, although he didn’t mention sieges as part of the attractions of Oldtown.”

“The east then? Where did you learn such power? Asshai or parts further?”

“Further, definitely further. My daughter and I were shipwrecked near Braavos and we made a home there, I am content with it.”

Tarly looked like he wanted to press me further but a runner came through the gates shouting for him and he turned to deal with him. Baelor walked towards another knot of men, leaving Oberyn Maggie and I alone. We headed towards the doors, we were all sick of this tower.

As we emerged from the gates everything went silent, an entire army was staring at us. I turned to Maggie, “Still got the escape potions?” She nodded staring at the crowd as I took one. “Oberyn, meet us by where we left our horses.” He looked at me incredulously as I bumped vials with Maggie and we both exploded upwards into wind.

38.

Rematerializing on the shore I couldn’t hold in a bark of laughter. For all the power I’d used in the ritual and battling the pirates dissolving into the wind itself was a magic like no other. Maggie burst from the ground next to me, surrounded by a whirlwind of ash and dirt, an identical grin on her face.

After making sure she still had all her parts, Maggie had fixated on the possibility of splinching and I didn’t have the heart to tell her that if she appeared missing a finger there was no way to get it back, she walked over to the dock we’d left from so long ago. “I guess it was too much to hope Blossom was still here.” She had been attached to her horse, a spirited mare. I was much less concerned with the fate of my gelding, if the Ironborn had taken it to the glue factory I’d have forgiven them for at least half the siege.

Most of what was in the saddlebags was definitely a lost cause, the gold I’d left there, the compass I’d been toying with and my engraving tools. I wasn’t too concerned about them, I was traveling with a Prince so funds weren’t a problem and the rest were replaceable. I really wanted our staffs and my blasting rod, they were just carved wood to the average eye and mine was long enough to be inconvenient, hopefully it would just be in the dirt somewhere.
The Citadel was a mess, campfires littered the grounds, the previously immaculate lawns and buildings defaced and the gates were hanging from their hinges. The glass windows, signs of wealth I’d admired on the way in, were shattered and one of the buildings still had smoke rising from it. I felt a little bad for the knowledge monks, all of their accumulated efforts destroyed in a week. Hopefully they could rebuild and expand, with all of the old gone there might be room for new growth. The printing press would certainly make it easier to replace their still smouldering library.

After half an hour the staffs were nowhere to be found, I decided that a bit more than the mark one eyeball was needed. While I’d been searching I’d been thinking about the way I’d felt my magic on top of the tower. My staff was attuned to me and if I sent a pulse of magic out I should be able to feel its resonance. It could hardly hurt and I really didn’t want to carve a new staff.

“Invenio” The magic I released was barely formed and weak and expanded in a disc around me. It was more delicate than my usual spells, if it had been flame I doubted it would even leave scorch marks on the ground in front of me. Maggie looked at me when she felt the magic, she had been looking at the campfires for the distinctive white wood of our staffs but stopped when she saw me doing magic.

I ignored her questioning look and held my left hand out as I spun in a slow circle. If my staff was close and still whole I should be able to sense its magic vibrate in response to mine. I felt a small twinge and I waved Maggie over. “What’s up? What are you doing?”

We walked in the direction of the twinge and repeated my spell, the response was stronger this time, before answering, “I’m finding my staff, pay attention because you’re doing it next.” We were heading away from the water, I wished I had a better idea of the Citadel’s layout but it couldn’t be helped. My staff was still sending vibrations out like a tuning fork, the pulses I’d sent were keeping it sufficiently energized.

Somewhat reasonably the magic led us to some stables, the Ironborn must have moved the horses there as opposed to leaving them tied up in the open. I cracked open the door and immediately halted Maggie. The stables stank with blood and the buzzing of flies was a constant drone. “Stay here, if you see anyone shout and shield yourself.” I didn’t think anyone hostile was left but taking chances now was just as dumb as ever.

I walked into the stables holding my sleeve over my nose. “Ventas” I pulled air from the door past me in a rush, the door on the far side slammed open with the sudden pressure and the smell was somewhat reduced. I felt a new sympathy for Hercules, if Augeas’s set smelt this bad I’d have just burned it down rather than sluicing it out for immortality.

I found our mostly empty saddle bags thrown into an empty stall. The rest held dead horses covered in flies, the retreating Ironborn doing all they could to savage the place in a final act of cruelty. Our staffs were there, unharmed if a little dirty, I spotted my blasting rod lying in three piece and left it. I looked through the remaining bags quickly, all my tools, gold and the notes I’d been writing for my next book were gone. I left the reeking building behind me, tossing a surprised Maggie her staff. She was pale, I suspected she’d gone and looked in the building despite my efforts to spare her from the sight.

We wandered back towards the bay, I hadn’t wanted to stick around and answer questions, the more people who knew me past a tall dark haired man the more problems I’d have. Now though we were stuck waiting for Oberyn to gather up his men and Oldtown was in no fit state to receive tourists. Whatever, it beat dealing with terrified people. I started to look for rocks to skip, and Maggie plopped down on the edge of the docks, basking in the afternoon sun.

After a few minutes of me mentally cursing the insufficiently flat rocks that refused to do anything
but sink Maggie spoke. “You left your coat in the tower.”

I had always had a coat with Maggie, it was one of my first purchases in Braavos and I’d been working on and wearing one for almost as long as she’d known me. “I saw the man I gave it too, he looked pretty battered.” It was also covered in bloodstains, I was pretty okay with leaving it. “The magic would only have lasted a few hits since he couldn’t power it. It’s only a piece of leather now, even if it does make the wearer roughly sixty two percent more attractive.” She laughed at that, she had never appreciated my sartorial genius.

“And the horn? It was still glowing when I left the roof, I could feel the magic in it from yards away.”

I had quite honestly forgotten about the horn, my little rampage after blowing it had distracted me. “I think I’ll take a page out of Gandalf’s book and leave an extremely powerful artifact with people who have absolutely no use for it.” She had seen the first Lord of the Rings movie but I had read them enough that I had used the rest as bedtime stories along with the Hobbit for our first year here.

If I ever needed to bring a wall down again the horn, it needed a proper name now and I resolved to think of one, would be extremely useful, the magic worked through it would forever help in similar workings. I didn’t plan on being a living siege weapon anytime soon though, the horn could stay where it was. Carrying it would just be a reminder of my potential power, I’d prefer to fade a little into the background, or at least have people not immediately connect me with the Wizard Harry Dresden.

“What are we going to do next? Our original plan was to take a ship from here to the Torentine river right? We’re not still doing that are we?”

It was a good question. For all that Dorne was estranged from the Seven Kingdoms it was still obligated to send aid in putting down the Greyjoys, unless they also decided to join the revolution party. Oberyn would probably be a leader of the force, his brother was afflicted with gout and wouldn’t be able to engage in warfare. If Oberyn went on campaign the vacation was over, one warzone was more than enough for me. “I don’t really know, it depends on our tour guide.”

Speaking of the devil I could see a boat, the pinnacle we had first taken to Battle Island was moving over the waves towards us. I squinted and saw Oberyn and his surviving men rowing it. They all looked tired and I thought one last bit of magic wouldn’t be amiss. “Veniat!”

My will seized the prow of the boat and yanked it towards me, it was barely more than the force I could physically pull but they shipped their oars as I towed it into the shore.

Oberyn was the first ashore, leaping over the gunwale. “You know that avoiding questions doesn’t make them go away? Fortunately as your friend I saw fit to answer them for you.” He turned to Maggie after seeing my horror struck expression. “How do you feel about a new step-mother?”

39.

“What.”

Oberyn didn’t lose his grin. “Lord Hightower offered both of his sisters, the fair Alysane or Lynesse, they’d be like older sisters to you Maggie. After Malora revealed Maggie was gifted too the betrothal offers flooded in, Randyll offered up his baby boy and Hightower decided to try for the entire Dresden clan and suggested his youngest brothers.” Maggie was staring at him aghast as I
contemplated flinging Oberyn into the bay. “Have no fear, I told them that you held my opinions in high esteem and would surely consult me about any marriages arranged.” His grin sharpened as he continued. “I’m very grateful for the invitations to tour the Reach, they mentioned I could bring any guests with me I wanted.”

Perfect. My anonymity was blown and large amounts of people knew Maggie had magic. “And did you arrange my marriage too?”

“Alas no, the fair Lady Mab holds your heart, back in your far off home. They were ever so disappointed.” He laughed at both of our dumbstruck expressions, “They would like to meet you again at more length when you return to the Reach though.”

It was feeling like a good time to get out of Dodge. “Lovely. So what’s your next plan? Back to Dorne or will your armies march to you.”

His grin faded at last. “Our leisurely travel will be cut short I’m afraid, my men and I must ride to Starfall and then into the mountains to the Prince’s Pass. Doran will have sent his banners there and if we ride fast we’ll beat them.” He beckoned his men and we followed, hopefully he had a source for horses and provisions.

As we walked I traced the route in my head, they’d be headed southeast, well inland the whole way until looped around the mountains and hit the Torentine. The south coast was barren though, there was nothing to attract raiders, the Ironborn had no reason to sail there. “What would you recommend for us? This is not our war and while it has been an adventure, it is time for us to return.”

“Travel with us as far as the Prince’s Pass, then when we reach the headwaters of the Wyl go to its mouth and take ship from there.” It sounded plausible and I nodded as we marched through the city.

Oldtown was scarred. Shutters to stores were smashed, there were sporadic empty lots covered in ashes and there were piles of bodies that the Reachmen were stacking. I tried to block Maggie’s view of them, but there was only so much I could do.

The city had been crowded when we first arrived, flooded with refugees and those displaced by the earlier raid. Now the streets were mostly deserted, the occasional resident and groups of soldiers being the only exceptions. I hoped that most of the missing people escaped but I knew the Ironborn took slaves, when the insurrection was ended they might be able to return to their homes but many would never see Oldtown again. So much had been lost and from what I understood it was pointless. The Iron Islands couldn’t grow any stronger and even if they were allowed to secede no one would tolerate them raiding. Balon Greyjoy was obsessed with the ‘Old Ways’ and was leading his people to destruction while wreaking havoc across the world. I could only hope he got what was coming to him.

The sun was low on the horizon by the time we reached Tarly’s camp after crossing over the ruined walls. Oberyn had a letter to the quartermaster from Lord Tarly stating that we should be given horses and provisioned. The taciturn man read it, spat and led us to a pen. “These are horses from his lordship’s household knights who fell, they might be a bit spirited for the girl.” Maggie moved forward indignantly but I hushed her, the sooner we were out of the camp and away from the city the better.

Oberyn apparently agreed as we rode east with the sun at our backs. We didn’t stop until the sun was fully down and it was growing too dark to ride, I ended up calling light to set up our camp as well as to get the fire going quicker.

We were riding at dawn the next day, it would be a week of hard riding to Starfall and to meet the
armies we needed to move fast. The countryside was peaceful, it was hard to believe that within fifty miles a city had been sacked, the farmers in their fields didn’t seem to have a care in the world until they saw our fast moving armed and armored party. Some of them might not even have heard of the attacks, the first raids had only been ten days ago and there weren’t newspapers or cable TV for them to get the latest excitement from.

As we went the events of the siege faded from memory. Traumatic events always recede into the background and by the fourth day we were laughing as we rode, the urgency of our ride not preventing levity. I also began practicing more overt magic with Maggie, after my stunt with the walls everyone knew what I could do and keeping Maggie sharp was important. The days flew by until we reached the sparkling waters of the Torentine, and the next afternoon the castle of Starfall.

Starfall was built on an island in the center of the river. If I hadn’t just seen the Hightower I would have called it tall, but after that monstrosity I could only describe the castle as striking. It was made of white stone throughout with a curtain wall surrounding the keep as it merged with the island’s cliffs. Several towers stretched up from the castle with one appearing to overhang the water below. Whoever built castles here certainly knew his masonry.

Oberyn had reined up as we stared. “Pretty isn’t it? It’s a shame the family has dwindled so, they used to outshine the castle.”

“What happened to them?” Maggie asked as she nudged her horse back into motion.

“The Rebellion happened. The current lord’s brother, Ser Arthur Dayne, was the greatest fighter on Aerys’s Kingsguard. He was loyal to Rhaegar though, he and two other ‘White Knights’ didn’t fight a single battle in the war, they guarded Lyanna Stark at a ruined tower in the Red Mountains.” We followed Maggie, our horses descending towards Starfall as he continued his story. “Once the battles were over Eddard Stark and his men came to find his sister. They killed the Kingsguard and found her dead. Stark had gotten Ashara with child at Harrenhal the rumors say, the baby was stillborn and when her lover came after murdering her brother it was too much she ended it all.” He pointed to the sharpest tower. “She jumped from there right into the water, her body was never found.”

“You knew them then?”

Oberyn looked nostalgic. “All the nobles in Dorne knew Ashara, she was the greatest beauty in the kingdom, there was talk we were to be married once before I was sent on my first exile.” He rode for a second, apparently thinking of happier days. “But I have my daughters and Ellaria, I would not trade them, no matter how amazing her eyes and breasts were.”

We had reached the waters of the Torentine during the story and there was a causeway manned by guards in silver and purple livery, a shooting star crossing a sword. “Prince Martell, we were alerted of your coming, Lord Dayne awaits you, your companions will have rooms made ready.”

It was nice to sleep in a bed when I wasn’t too exhausted to enjoy it. My body had gotten used to riding and I remembered why I had always enjoyed it so much, but sleeping on the ground was a younger man’s game. Oberyn, Lord Dayne and a few Lords from neighboring castles sat at the high table, discussing the logistics of the march. I was glad not to be up there, I was sure that Dayne had heard my name and recognized me but the men below the salt certainly hadn’t. It might be one of the last times that was true in Westeros and I resolved to enjoy it.

The next morning we rode at the head of fifty mounted men, the local Dornish nobles had sent half of their household knights with us as they waited for their infantry to muster. They were apparently not joining us in the Prince’s Pass, instead marching along the southern coast where they would help defend the south of the Reach and eventually join in the invasion of the Arbor.
The trip north through the mountains reminded me of Camp Kaboom, the Red Mountains and the passes had the same burnt appearance as New Mexico. I still half expected the Roadrunner to burst out of the horizon. We rarely saw Oberyn, he was conferring with his officers and once we reached the pass more and more men joined us. Maggie enjoyed the scenery, she had never seen a desert anything like this, and I had to watch her closely to prevent her from leaving the road and chancing encounters with the various poisonous inhabitants.

It was still sad to reach the headwaters of the Wyl, despite the Greyjoy Rebellion it had been an interesting trip, even if it caused problems, the resurgent Mantle first among them. Oberyn hosted us for one final dinner in his palatial tent. His paramour, Ellaria Sand, the bastard daughter of a nobleman had traveled to meet him and had just arrived that day. She was accompanied by Oberyn’s daughters, it had been more than two years since he’d seen any of them and I felt I was intruding on a family reunion.

Oberyn insisted though, Maggie and I joined his five daughters and they quickly pulled her aside. Ellaria sat with Oberyn and I as we watched Maggie turn increasingly red while they chatted. He was holding his youngest, Elia, on his lap, he hadn’t seen her until today and he had barely let go of her even when she squirmed to join her sisters.

I was mostly silent, drinking the sour wine of Dorne as the two caught up, it was clear that they were in love and watching them interact felt almost voyeuristic. I was thinking about our impending jaunt back to Braavos when Ellaria spoke up. “It’s such a shame your trip was cut short Harry, while I am glad you were able to see some of Dorne, none would argue that you missed the best of it. The water gardens alone are worth a visit, perhaps once the current troubles are over you can return?”

I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to come back, being known principally as a weapon of mass destruction had begun to irk me, I had seen knights and lords pointing at me when they thought I wasn’t looking. “I saw more of Westeros than I had expected, but there are always more things to see. Perhaps when Maggie is a little older we’ll return.”

Oberyn smirked. “The Reachlords will be happy to hear she’s returning.”

Maggie turned when she heard her name, she had been huddled in conversation with Nymeria and Tyene who were both about her age, while Obara, the eldest played with Sarella. “I already threatened Oberyn for trying to marry me off Papa, don’t you start.” I blanched, Maggie and marriage were subjects best left deep into the future. Oberyn and Ellaria both laughed at my expression and she started to tell some story about Elia’s first word which I barely paid attention to.

I was surprised to feel a hand on my shoulder and I turned to see Obara standing behind me. She was something of an anomaly in Oberyn’s daughters, the others all were beginning to show the looks that I expected of his lovers’ children but she had a blocky face with pinched eyes all on a larger frame. She also carried a spear, it was on leaning on a chair near the entrance to the tent. “Why aren’t you staying to fight? I heard what my father’s men saw, you killed ten men and then Rodrik Greyjoy in single combat, that doesn’t even touch on your magic, don’t you want glory? To be a legend?”

I considered her question, from Oberyn’s stories I knew she considered herself a warrior, choosing a spear and her father over her own mother. I had never known my mother but choosing war over her seemed absurd. “These aren’t my lands, keeping my family safe is more important than any battle.” Obara was thrown by that, looking at her more closely I saw scars on her knuckles and forearms, combined with her muscles I was sure she had learned to fight. She had probably been dreaming about feats of arms and armies for years, I doubted she’d ever really fought though, no one who had talked about glory like that. “I’ve been in wars before, back in my homeland. I’ve killed so many times I can’t even began to count them. Winning glory and stepping into legends isn’t quite as fun as
it sounds.” She nodded politely in response, clearly disagreeing. She had chosen the spear, the things I fought for, family and friends were part of what she cast away. I hoped she’d keep her idealism about the grandeur of war a little longer though, if only because it meant she wouldn’t see battle.
We left Oberyn and the marshaled armies of Dorne the next morning. I gave him my next generation microscope as a parting gift, with the advice to enjoy what he saw in it. He did once claim he was interested in biology after all.

He sent one of the guards who had traveled with us since King’s Landing along with a small party of soldiers with us on our journey to the headwaters of the Wyl. We left the Prince’s Pass towards the castle of Vulture’s Roost, extremely accurately named, where we spent a night. The castle was built at the very beginning of the Wyl and there was a road from there to the sea. The river was much closer to a stream at first, only in the dry mountains did it merit the name. It curved through the valleys between the rocky slopes, gullies and ravines cut through the ground to meet it. A man from Vulture’s Roost had come to guide us and told us of the floods caused by the rare rainstorms, he pointed to boulders scattered in the stream bed that had been carried by torrents of rainwater.

Eventually the Wyl widened, forming a narrow river valley that had farms along it, all with intricate irrigation networks. We reached the Wyl’s eponymous city and castle soon after and it was a relief to see an ocean that didn’t have pseudo-viking raiders sailing it.

Our collection of guards saw us to the nearly deserted castle, Lord Wyl had apparently already marched, and turned back to rejoin the main Dornish army. The lady of the house, Jennelyn, hosted us and took immense delight in feeding us various Dornish delicacies, spiced snake being the least objectionable. I was happy to leave the castle the next day, eating foods that I wasn’t sure couldn’t skitter off my plate wasn’t really my style.

We were in luck, a purple hulled Braavosi ship was in port and was willing to take us on as passengers. It wasn’t as luxurious as the swan ship we’d taken over but it looked well maintained and after talking to the captain I learned the ship was actually owned by another member of the Voyagers Club. We sold the horses that had carried us from Oldtown, boarded the ship and were on our way home that afternoon.

Our ship hugged the coast of Westeros as we sailed north. I asked the captain about it since I saw he carried my compasses and could theoretically navigate the direct route. “The Old Lion is hiring every sell-sail on the oceans, they’re all headed for Lannisport and I’d rather they not see us. Half of them are just a breath away from pirates, the rest already are, and they’ll all be sailing this way. The seas will be crowded.” He motioned me in close as if to share a secret and continued. “I’ve heard other rumors too, smaller ships have been going missing, some sailors swear they’ve seen a kraken. I don’t want to panic the crew so I’m staying out of the deep water until we get well away.”

I wasn’t sure if krakens were real but considering this world had dragons flapping around at one point I wasn’t going to dismiss giant ship eating squid just yet. We were making good time anyways, going up the coast didn’t cost us much additional distance. The weather was also far better than our last trip, even the cheerily named Shipbreaker Bay had clear skies when we traversed it.

We only really saw other ships in mass when we approached Blackwater Bay, once again I saw Dragonstone looming on the horizon as new ships of the Royal navy performed maneuvers. There were a lot of them, and all were bigger than the longships of the Greyjoys. We stopped at King’s Landing for a day, some cargo was moved around as part of the great flow of goods and services, and then we left for the final leg, departing from the stinking city towards Braavos of the Hundred
Isles.

Crossing back under the Titan was an immense relief. The defenses I’d emplaced sang as Maggie
and I crossed them, as if my magic was welcoming us home. Everything we had with us smelled
stale and leaving the ship to stand on the cobbled streets of Braavos felt amazing. After almost a third
of a year, filled with shipwreck, hard rides and sieges we were home. The house was as we left it, the
wards were still humming, both of us collapsed into our beds, clean sheets and clothes were almost
better than the soft mattresses.

I had hoped we’d have a few days before anyone realized we were back, some time to get up to
speed from our vacation, but the next morning, just as Maggie and I were leaving to get brunch
Johannes intercepted us. “Harry I’d heard you were back and thought to find out for myself, you
must tell me of your travels.”

I couldn’t really deflect without being rude and he was my friend so I invited him to eat with us.
After the initial pleasantries were done he started to ask questions. “We heard that the walls of
Oldtown were shattered and the entire Ironborn fleet was sunk by a wizard, you wouldn’t happen to
have any details?”

I wasn’t sure how rumors had beaten us here, we had moved about as fast any messenger could and
absurd stories from halfway across the world shouldn’t have disseminated this fast. “It wasn’t quite
like that.”

Johannes’s face lit up. “So it was you, what really happened? Fool some of the pirates with illusions
and the Westerosis believed them too?”

“Um, yes, that’s almost exactly right, it’s crazy how these stories get inflated.” Almost was a
perfectly accurate qualifier I felt.

“If that’s all you did you might be overshadowed by the other stories of magic coming into the club,
we had no less than five men talk about the Warlocks of Qarth’s newfound talents. It seems a little
shaking up and competition was all they needed.” Johannes continued on, filling Maggie and I in on
the news of the city. I was only half paying attention, mostly thinking about the magic he’d
mentioned. Lord Hightower had said his spells started working within the last few years, the captain
had claimed a mythical beast had returned and now an order of sorcerers was stirring. I had to
wonder if the increase in magic was related to my arrival, whatever had gotten us here might have
kickstarted the magic of this world. It wasn’t something I could deal with right away though, I’d
have to wait and see.

We left Johannes at the restaurant and I dropped Maggie off at home, she was eager to see her
friends, and headed towards the presses. In my absence they’d continued their work, books were
beginning to sell better, especially as the prices fell with their new speed and skill. Now that the
previous greatest library in the known world was mostly ash it might be time to make a new one, it
would be enough of a project to keep me busy.

The compasses were sold out, the stock I’d made hadn’t lasted half the time I was gone and I
resigned myself to more of the boring work. If the Greyjoys had used them as I suspected all the
navies of the world would want them, it was an alright problem to have but I wished that they hadn’t
taken off quite so well.

I left my means of production behind and tried to think of anything else I needed to do now that I
was home. Maggie would probably take care of the groceries, our maid service would need to be
alerted, my other friends would see me at the next club meeting. I just had to talk to Noho and Viserys about resuming our lessons. Now that I knew more people could get this world’s magic to work our continued failures were more annoying.

Ser Darry’s house was immaculate, the looted royal treasury was keeping the last Targaryens in style and after knocking on the door a liveried servant met me. He showed me in and soon after I heard footsteps hammering towards me. “Harry you’re back! Excellent!” Viserys wasn’t normally dour but the extreme excitement in his voice was uncharacteristic. “Come with me, you need to see what we’ve found!”

I followed the excited boy up the stairs to a study overlooking the central courtyard. He pulled a key from a string on his neck and opened a heavy ironbound chest. Inside it, nestled on silk covered forms, lay four jeweled rocks, no eggs, dragon eggs.

“Viserys, how did you get these?”

He spoke quickly, his words almost running over themselves. “I was going through the chests Ser Willem saved from the Usurper when we fled Dragonstone. He had a ledger detailing each’s contents and this chest was marked as carrying dresses, I was going to look for Daenerys’s nameday and when I opened it I found these!” The eggs were worth a king’s ransom, the chest held more wealth than the Voyagers Club combined.

“Who else knows about them? You can’t trust anyone with this kind of secret.”

He calmed a little from my tone, his exuberance fading. “Just Daenerys and I, she was with me when I opened it.” He reached into the chest and pulled out one of the eggs, it was gold flecked with blue and covered with scales. ”I think they’re alive too, they feel warm, I’m not just imagining it, Daenerys felt them too.”

I took the offered egg and almost dropped it. It was pulsing with power and I could feel it rapidly heating even through my gloved hand. I nearly dropped the priceless rock in my haste to set it down, my right hand felt a little burnt and I waved it frantically trying to cool it down. “You call that warm?”

Viserys reached out and touched the boiling egg, he held his hand on it with no signs of discomfort. “Yes?”

Maybe it was just me then, typical. I opened my third eye and glanced at the rock. It was glowing, between the scales of the egg, fires appeared to be burning and I got the impression of something moving inside it. Out of curiosity I glanced at Viserys, last time I hadn’t known who I was looking at and I was wondering if he’d changed. His eyes and hair still blazed but now a crown was on his head, instead of a rock his hand rested on an egg, and the egg was shaking under his grip.

“What do you think Harry? Should we try to hatch them?” Viserys’s question shook me free from wondering about what I’d seen ,and I thought about my answer. I knew he’d try to hatch them no matter what, I had been a teenage boy once myself, and I knew the last few Targaryen attempts had ended in tragedy. Maybe my presence could keep him alive. It was definitely foolish and would probably have enormous consequences but I wasn’t going to let a kid burn himself to death trying to regain his family’s throne.

“You may not be aware, but back home I was a bit of a champion at burning things. If you’re going to try to hatch some challengers to the title I think I’ll have to attend.”
Leaving Ser Darry’s old home after talking to Viserys made me think what I was getting into. As far as I knew, no one in the entire world knew how to hatch dragons. The last group that managed it reliably had conquered as much of the world as they wanted, since there wasn’t a globe spanning empire held up by flying flaming lizards currently, I pretty sure whatever was needed was lost sometime after the Doom of Valyria.

The Targaryens had dragons, they took over Westeros with just three and they managed to have about twenty right before their civil war killed most of them. It seemed like if there was a trick they had once known, letting the power behind the dynasty go because it was forgotten seemed incredibly foolish so it might have just stopped working. However from what I had read they tried a lot of things, mostly involving fire in what even I would consider excessive amounts. Their random attempts were a decent indicator that they didn’t know how to force eggs to hatch, maybe they previously hadn’t had to do anything?

Based on the other magicians in the world coming back it seemed like magic here was cyclical, or at least it had declined once and was now returning, maybe dragons required a certain amount of ambient magic to thrive? The Valyrian Freehold had lasted for thousands of years, presumably magic was strong the entire time, maybe the Doom drained the magic and it was just now recovering? I didn’t really know and had no idea how to find out.

One thing I was sure of was that the eggs were alive. Something had moved in them through my sight, and the one I touched had burned me. If Viserys’s set of eggs were alive, and only just recently since eggs that were warm to the touch probably wouldn’t have been stashed away in a treasury, other dragons eggs might also be. No one else I knew had a dragon’s egg but I had heard of them selling for outlandish amounts of money from other Voyagers. Even if Visersys didn’t hatch his someone else might.

Past the possibility of reintroducing dragons to the world was what Viserys would do with them when he got them? He wanted his father’s throne back, probably a bit of revenge flavored justice for his niece and nephew, and then who knows? He might reform the legal code and institute mandatory boiling water, he had used my microscope, but he was a twelve year old boy. He was bright, studious, kind to his sister and apparently decent with a sword but twelve year olds aren’t really designed to run continent spanning kingdoms.

If he hatched his dragons Westeros was guaranteed a civil war, Dorne was out for revenge if Oberyn was any guide, and there were still Targaryen loyalists throughout the kingdoms. Viserys riding on a dragon with three others behind him would cause panic amid the rebels and based on history they may just surrender rather than be burned, melted, and eaten by dragons.

The civil war might come anyways, the Iron Bank was holding the last two Targaryens as collateral for their loans to the Seven Kingdoms, if they defaulted they had ready made pretenders. Johannes had mentioned before our trip that they had extended a line of credit to the King and it was being rapidly spent through. The added expenses of a war would be more costly, I didn’t doubt that if they fell behind enough the Targaryen cause would benefit from Braavos’s immense financial might.

Viserys might be able to raise an army on his own as the Blackfyres had done, they had never been on the throne and managed five rebellions of various result, presumably the former dynasty would do better. Dragons would ensure a war, but their lack would not prevent one.
I made it home, still deep in thought and wandered up to my lab. It was dusty but untouched. I hadn’t expected anyone to get in past my wards but there were stories of thieves who stole from wizards, I didn’t want to feature in one of them.

Starting to make one of the terrible compasses I continued to think about dragons. I had about convinced myself that adding dragons to the geopolitical situation wouldn’t make it worse, but was it worth helping Viserys? I said I would, but I wasn’t going to let an impulsive agreement bind me. Ignoring the consequences there were four ways this could go down, either I helped him or I didn’t and the eggs hatched or they didn’t. If Viserys managed to hatch them without my help I wouldn’t be able to influence how they were used at all, I’d prefer to have a little say in the deployment of flying flamethrowers. The other thing that had initially convinced me to help was the fate of the previous Targaryen attempts. They all ended poorly, with one particularly gruesome incident involving the ironically named Aerion Brightflame drinking wildfire. I could keep Viserys alive in his attempts to hatch the dragons, once he had them he was on his own, I had fought one war more than I’d have liked already.

I had been holding molten gold in the air as I thought, the compasses had long ago turned routine enough they didn’t need my full attention, and I was surprised to see the intended arrow had been shaped unconsciously into a dragon’s head. I crushed it with a thought and began to reform the first of many needles.

It was a welcome distraction for Maggie to return from catching up with her friends, attending a tournament and traveling the world had to rank pretty high on summer vacation stories, despite all of the trouble I was glad Maggie and I were able to share the trip. Before coming here I had thought the best case scenario was me dying before Mab got her claws into me, spending years with my daughter more than made up for losing my friends. The last boat ride was tough though, two weeks in close company with a Dresden was enough to drive anyone crazy and I felt a little sympathy for all those I’d ever been on stakeouts with.

“So what were you up to today?” I had been only half-paying attention to her sharing the neighborhood gossip, Koren’s eldest daughter getting married was the only thing that was at all relevant, and now she was looking at me expecting a response, I already knew how this was going to go.

“Not much, went to the shop, things there are going well. Went to see Viserys, I wanted to know if he was still interested in studying, agreed to help hatch his dragons, and I’ve been making compasses ever since.” Hopefully she was as interested in my day as I was in hers.

“You’re helping dragon-boy? Why?” Oh well, at least she listened to me.

“I can explain-”

“He’s going to be all ‘I’m the blood of the dragon!’ and ‘Fire and Blood!’ or maybe his old favorite, ‘I’m the rightful king!’ He’ll be insufferable!” Maggie once again showed her keen grasp of international politics as well as a rapid understanding of the implications of introducing magical weapons of mass destruction.

“Think on the bright side, if the dragons hatch you’ll be able to go flying under something else’s power before you’re a hundred. Unless of course you’d rather go back to hot air balloons?”

“That is not a good reason to help, you couldn’t even fly back home anyways!”
“What if you got to name one? Would that make you more favorably inclined?”

She paused considering, somethings I would never understand. “Only if I also get to pick which one I’m naming. And if Viserys visits Daenerys has to come too.”

“Deal.”

After the high stakes negotiations life settled back into its usual pace. Viserys and I had as much success hatching the dragons as everyone else had in the last hundred years, we both read the books of dragon-lore in my rapidly growing library and began to make lists of possible approaches. I was half convinced that they would either hatch on their own or they wouldn’t, but Viserys was energetic in his efforts. His education with Noho had intensified and he viewed magic as more of an escape now than ever. The eggs continued to scorch me every time I touched them, Maggie only felt the warmth Viserys and Daenerys described, something else didn’t like the Mantle it seemed.

Things were going smoothly as I left my first Voyagers Club since I had returned to Braavos, Mangini had refined his engine enough to beat animal labor in pumping mines and there were rumors that the Arsenal had a boat carrying an engine of their own design, Westeros was the furthest thing from my mind. “Ser Harry?” It was a smaller man calling my assumed title, dark hair, I couldn’t tell the color in the poor light and not dressed expensively enough to be anyone I knew from there. I turned to face him, shaking my shield bracelet free out of an excess of paranoia.

“You do know I have a shop if you’re looking for me in a professional capacity.”

“My apologies Ser, I’m on a mission of some urgency.” He paused and I waved for him to go on. “Perhaps some privacy?”

“I don’t take strangers into my home and I’m not going to my office at this time of night. Either talk here or tomorrow.”

The man shifted, now that he was closer I could see his clothing was well made, if simple and had some sort of ball crest embroidered onto it. “Ser Harry, I am Davos Seaworth, I was sent here by Lord Stannis Baratheon to ask for your help.”

That changed things, I didn’t care if his business made it into rumors but I’d rather not have all my westerosi exploits known. “Come with me and I’ll hear you out.” I led him back into the club, there were enough rooms that we could be assured of privacy and one of the twenty four hour servants brought us both wine. Being rich was occasionally awesome. “So what does the brother of the King of the seven kingdoms want with little old me?”

Davos looked puzzled briefly, for all the similarities between the common tongue and English, expressions didn’t always carry over. “You are the wizard of Braavos? You were at the siege of the Hightower?”

“Yes, what of it?”

“Then you’re the one who makes these devices?” He pulled an anchor block from his pocket and looked at it suspiciously.

I picked it up, it was an earlier model, less refined than the ones I built today. “I do but if your lord wants to buy some he has to join the waiting list like everyone else.”
“No, my Lord has all he needs of your sorcery, he sent me to find information about them.”

“The magic to create them is beyond anyone else, their operation is so simple as to need no explanations, what does your lord want?”

Davos swallowed, my poor mood from being interrupted was evident and he grasped a bag hanging from a necklace. “Lord Stannis wanted to know if there was anyway to destroy them. The Ironborn are using them extensively, we’ve been unable to force their fleets to fight.”

So the Greyjoys had been using them, I had been almost sure but the confirmation was unpleasant. Sadly if there was anything I could do to them I would already have.

“Once they leave my hands I can’t do anything with them. Most of theirs are stolen I expect, you might try the shipping cartels and see if you can persuade them to move the anchor blocks of lost ships. There isn’t a magical solution.”

Davos looked like the sort of man who always expected bad news and shrugged. “It was a long shot, thank you for your time Ser.” We both got up and I walked with him from the club. “And also, thank you for your work in Oldtown, bringing down the walls saved a lot of lives.”

Davos vanished into the fog, he was curiously used to Braavos for a westerosi nobleman, and I tried to think if there was anything I could do. Any mass thaumaturgy would destroy all the compasses, far more were being used as I intended than the few the pirates had, wrecking all of them might cost almost as many lives as it would spare from the Ironborn. It was an unpleasant situation all around and I tried to clear my mind of it as I went home.

42.

The next morning I wasn’t thinking too much of Davos Seaworth. I was bringing my most recent batch of compasses to the shop along with Maggie, I was hoping to give her some more practice with exciting magic outside the city and we were chatting as we went. Or I was chatting, Maggie had been up late with her friends and her normal morning cheer was lacking. I was carrying the conversation valiantly, I’d had a bizarre dream of rafting down the Rhoyne while steamboats carrying everyone I’d ever met passed by and was trying to adequately describe the surreality of it to a put upon Maggie. She was looking about for anything else that could change the subject and interrupted my digression on whether I was thematically closer to Huck or Jim by spotting Davos waiting outside of the shop.

Of course she didn’t recognize him, but his simple clothes didn’t really fit into the district and everyone who frequented my shop knew that there was no point in standing around, the waiting list was months long, getting on it minutes earlier wouldn’t help at all. He was accompanied by another man, fair haired with a crimson cloak. I stepped in front of Maggie and leaned on my staff in front of the two men. “Ser Davos, I thought we spoke last night, do you have something new to say?”

Davos was calm, but his companion was looking at me in a way that implied he’d heard about Oldtown. “I’d be a poor servant to my lord if I gave up after one try. My companion, Ser Gerion Lannister, has a different task though, may we discuss them with you?”

Travelling with Oberyn had made me leery of anyone named Lannister, but this wasn’t Tywin so I
waved both of them in and to my office. Maggie went upstairs to the presses, new books were printed everyday and usually some were interesting. After inviting them to sit, and pouring both of them wine I sat back and steepled my hands. “Ser Davos you presumably have new questions, but you’ve already had one turn, Ser Gerion? What can I do for you?”

The blonde man had recovered some of his equanimity, looking at him a bit closer showed he was younger than I was, mid thirties and he had the beginnings of wrinkles, it looked like smiles were more usual, than his current blank face. “I was sent to negotiate the purchase of your next two hundred compasses, my brother is prepared to pay a premium to increase the priority of his order.”

The Lannisters were famously wealthy, their castles sat on productive gold mines in addition to them owning land the rough size of Spain. Still at the prices I was charging now they could raise a small army for that sum, it wasn’t Scrooge McDuck levels of gold but it would be more money than I’d ever earned in a single job. I wasn’t going to drop everything for them though, it might have been Oberyn’s influence but selling to men who killed children didn’t sit right with me. “That’s impossible, I have a waiting list stretching months and I don’t see why equipping your navies are more important than the peaceful uses of my compasses. I can give you the names of the groups ahead of you if you want to negotiate for their spots but barring that you’ll only see your first compasses in three months.”

Gerion looked as if he wanted to say something but my reputation was holding him back. Ser Davos spoke up for him instead. “Ser Harry, your compasses have aided the Ironborn more than you know, the entire Western coast is burning, your efforts at Oldtown led to the only victory of the war so far. Can’t you do more to help us neutralize their advantage?”

“It isn’t my war and while my magic has aided the Greyjoys I think my actions in the Hightower more than made up for my part in it.” I wished the pirates weren’t using my devices but I hadn’t sold to them, my hands were clean.

Gerion colored at my response, but Ser Davos grabbed his arm before he could say anything. He jerked free but remained silent. “There’s nothing you will do for us?”

“There’s nothing I can do that I will, the things I wish to do for you I can’t. In the future I may incorporate a way to remotely destroy the compasses, but that doesn’t help you now. I’m sorry.”

Gerion finally spoke, leaning forward over the desk his voice low and harsh. “You slayed Rodrik Greyjoy, saved the Hightower, shattered Oldtown’s walls, and you say you can do nothing? Do you not care about the dead? I nearly lost my joy in the raids, thousands are dead or enslaved thanks to your witchcraft and they aren’t going to stop until we kill them.”

“If they only needed such a small push to revolt there would have been war with or without me.” I still felt guilty over the use of my magic but I wasn’t willing to take the blame for the whole conflict. “I think we’re done here, I’ll get you gentlemen the list.”

Gerion stood, his chair nearly falling back in his haste. He threw a glare at me and stormed out. Maybe gentlemen was still an insult here, then again he might have been mad at everything else I had to say. Davos remained though. “I apologize for my companion, he nearly lost his daughter in the Westerlands, and then his brother sent him here, out of the fight. We would appreciate the list.”

“I’ll have it here tomorrow, you can pick it up then.” Davos nodded and followed Gerion out.

Maggie and I left soon after, riding the ferry to the mainland for some suitably open and deserted
space. I was thinking about the war halfway around the world as we crossed the choppy bay. It was a screwed up situation but out of my hands. Honestly it was an argument for bringing back the dragons, the Ironborn tried rebelling once against the Targaryens and got roasted. Once giant scaly death machines were in the sky open warfare was impossible, multiple countries had learned that from the Valyrians the hard way.

It was almost mutually assured destruction, armies couldn't fight dragons. Of course if only Viserys had them, that fell apart but it still seemed better than the current situation where there weren’t living flamethrowers keeping the peace.

We’d left the ferry and were headed for a friend’s estate, it had some tree concealed fields and was a good place to practice without being seen by villagers with pitchforks. I set Maggie to practicing her evocation, the heat from her flames took the bite from the chilly air, and I started to work on a few new tricks.

So far everything I’d fought here but the shadows were human, facing squishy mortals that killing could drive me mad limited me a lot. I had gotten by with the careful use of low powered force blasts and ice but sooner or later someone would fall the wrong way and I’d have another death staining my soul.

I needed something new, more adaptable that I could use against humans with less care. I had a lot of ideas, mostly stolen from riot control technologies that got writers creepily excited in Popular Science, but I didn’t really have a way to test sonic pulses or microwave pain rays. Instead I was focusing on telekinesis. All of the metal shaping I’d done making the compasses in midair had given me a more delicate touch when it came to force. Normally my blasts were planes of force, hammering forward, smashing and shearing everything in their paths, I was trying for something a bit more refined.

“It’ll be an elegant weapon Maggie, for a more civilized age.”

“Should I take that to mean you’re giving up on your lightsabre enchanting project?” She had paused to watch as I levitated a ring of field stones around me, it was very Luke on Dagobahesque.

I scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous, when I get that working I’ll say that everytime I draw it.”

“I half thought you’d have made Star Wars into a book already, it’s not like there’s copyright here.”

“In like a hundred years when they get video recorders I’m remaking it shot for shot, and Han will shoot first.”

“We all need goals. Can I be the Empress in it?” As she spoke she zapped one of the stones hanging next to me and I flung it away as it shattered.

“Sorry I don’t believe in nepotism.” She laughed and I swung the remaining stones out further as she started hitting them with her lightning one by one. As she finished I dropped them, holding them independently had given me a minor headache, it wasn’t much magical power compared to my usual outings, but the precision caused a different form of strain.

“Can we do the other Jedi stuff? Jumping around and super-strength?” I paused, that was more of an eastern thing as far as I knew, the whole mystical martial arts thing. I’d have to ask Bob for details, but he was a dimension away so no dice.
“I wouldn’t know where to start, I’d probably rip my own legs off trying to sprint, but it’s possible sure. Let’s wait till you’re more fully trained before we start developing new forms of magic to rule the galaxy as father and daughter.”

“That was a bit of a stretch, I’m not sure I even want to learn if it just causes you to make worse jokes than normal.” Teenagers, no respect for their elders and betters.

“Your lack of faith disturbs me, my young apprentice.”

“Just stop, you’re embarrassing yourself. Try to be-”

That was a mistake. “No! Try not! Do or-”

She held up one lighting wreathed hand. “I swear if you finish that I’m going to taser you.”
I thought I had seen the last of the Westerosi delegation, I didn’t think I’d made too good of an impression on Gerion which I was fine with, anyone who served Tywin Lannister probably wouldn’t be too good to get chummy with. So it was somewhat of a surprise when Gerion, Davos, and Braavos’s Admiral entered my shop while I was making the list.

“Dresden.” The Admiral looked annoyed, he wasn’t the biggest fan of magic but after warding the Titan and supplying his ships I thought we were on better terms. Then again it could be from hanging around with the diplomats, the Seven Kingdoms were generally looked down upon and he might think he was above going on errands with them. “The Arsenal is beginning a new production run, and in accordance with your contract with them, we’ll require four compasses per ship.”

Gerion was smirking as I inwardly cursed. I didn’t know how he had persuaded the Sealord to build his fleet, but the fabled Lannister wealth probably helped. I thought I already knew the answer but I had to ask. “How many ships are you building?”

“Fifty for now.” Well there went my time. I guess Gerion hadn’t felt like waiting his turn.

“You know, I think I only have to deliver the compasses when the ships leave their slips. What’s your build rate again? I feel like Oliva said it would slow down after the first few?”

The Admiral’s annoyance increased. “We plan to build two a day until the order is completed.” Just how much were they spending? How could jumping to the head of the line by bribing be better than just buying compasses floating around the open market? Whatever if that was their game I’d play along.

“Well Admiral I’ll manage, but my recent travels have given me a bit of wanderlust. You’ll have to let me know next time you start a building program, I might be halfway across the world by then.” It wasn’t very subtly delivered, but I didn’t want to let the government get a firm hold on me. I was willing to do my part to help the city I lived in, but I wouldn’t stand to be whored out. His face darkened and I was sure he got the message.

“We don’t anticipate any such future expansions. I believe the cost would be prohibitive.” He looked at Gerion when he spoke, his face hadn’t changed from it’s insolent grin. The admiral turned to leave and Gerion stepped forward.

“Oh Dresden.” For all that the title wasn’t properly mine I knew that him leaving it off was an insult. “We’d still like your list.”

I left soon after they did, if I had been younger and this was my world lights would have shattered for a block around me. I didn’t like getting jerked around and even worse the entirety of my spare time would now be devoted to supplying a dictator’s navy. I could only hope that the Sealord and Admiral would believe my threat, and wouldn’t test me again like this.

I was in a sour mood the rest of the day, Maggie was out at her lessons and I had nothing to distract me from laborious carving and enchanting. I had such plans to build telephone analogues, to make magic mirrors and maybe even golems. My one successful enchantment had turned into so much
work though that my enthusiasm was rapidly dimming. Other than teaching Maggie and playing with telekinesis I hadn’t had too much fun with magic recently, making it into a fulltime job robbed some of the grandeur it had always had for me. Now I had an extra two hundred to make, eight extra a day for the next month or so. I was going to have to increase the price again after this, I never wanted to make another one.

I ate a quick dinner with Maggie and managed to avoid venting about my day as she excitedly talked about a wedding a friend of hers was in, luckily people here didn’t get married at fourteen like in the dirt ages across the narrow sea. I was glad she had her friends, growing up between traveling, the orphanage, and then Justin I had never really made too many. Elaine was my first friend, and while I had loved her it was hard to say we were an entirely healthy or stable relationship. At least when she tried to kill me she didn’t try very hard, it was kind of sad that was only a little worse than par for the course in my romances.

After dinner I left the house and erected the wards. I was meeting Viserys for further research on the eggs. Previously his lessons had been here but carrying a live dragon’s egg through the city at night was so profoundly foolish we had only done it twice before realizing how bad an idea it was. I brought a few books, the Voyagers’ personal libraries were the foundations of my publishing company and were a wealth of information. I didn’t think many wizards would have been so free with their knowledge, but if there were any such hoarders in the club the peer pressure of others submitting their entire collections for reprinting had subdued them. I had a copy of The Book of Lost Books and was pleased to discover a decent amount of the books listed there now were on their second editions.

Dragonlore was rare though, between Targaryens, maesters and mystics there had been so much demand for it that very few books had any new information. Viserys and I were trying to create a science of the magic here by studying the various traditions, but progress was slow and not helped by our inability to do any ourselves.

Walking towards Ser Darry’s I was lost in thought. I had vague ideas to use magic to make a crude ultrasound of the eggs, Viserys was convinced they were alive and from the sight I agreed but I was curious about the contents. People had smashed petrified dragon eggs before and they’d been solid rock, I was wondering if we would have dragon balut if we smashed these. Breaking priceless eggs wasn’t on the table though, Viserys had reacted badly to my jokes about making omelettes.

I was relieved to reach Ser Darry’s, although at some point I should start calling it the Targaryen house, a cold front had blown in and I was missing the Mantle’s less heralded advantages. The servants recognized me, and we walked through the dragon covered halls to Viserys’s study where a blast of heat greeted me when the door opened. Viserys and Daenerys were both in the room, watching the eggs sit in the middle of a roaring fire as unconcerned with the heat as always.

“Harry you’re here!” Viserys was excited to see me but Daenerys, after ensuring Maggie wasn’t with me, only waved then returned to staring into the flames with the intensity only small children can bring to bear.

“You’re trying a new approach?” I said as I crouched to stare at the eggs in the fireplace.

“Munkun’s book says that dragons are birthed from flames. It feels right.”

I tried to keep the worry from my voice. Preventing stunts like these were a large part of why I’d agreed to help. “Your grandfather tried that at Summerhall, it ended poorly. Promise me you won’t try anything dangerous without me again.”
“I promise but-”

Rather than listen to him I cut him off. “No buts. What would you even do if they hatched in there?” I gestured expansively “A fire breathing lizard comes out? The bookshelf, all these papers, the room would go up in minutes. If we’re playing with fire we’re going to do it in the courtyard.” My experience in flaming buildings had imparted at least one important lesson, don’t be in them.

Viserys looked defiant but eventually nodded. “You don’t understand though.” He was subdued but I could hear the conviction. “It felt right, even Daenerys felt it.” The tiny girl didn’t look up, keeping her silent vigil.

“Well since this doesn’t seem to be working yet, what else are you thinking about trying?” Viserys recovered some of his enthusiasm and strode to the paper covered desk.

“One of the books you brought extensively quoted Barth, with his books destroyed by the Faith it might be our best lead.”

“And?” Dragonlore was extensively tied to the history of the Seven Kingdoms, with Valyria being entirely lost the remaining knowledge came from Westeros and much of it hadn’t made it back across the Narrow Sea. Barth had been an accomplished politician and scientist, a regular polymath. His magnum opus, Dragons, Wyrms, and Wyverns: Their Unnatural History, had been purged by a later more devout king thanks to accusations of blasphemy. Helping Viserys with his project had taught me more about Westeros’s past than months of traveling with Oberyn.

“Well he also says dragons were first born from flames.” We shared a look at the fireplace Daenerys and the hopefully not frying eggs. “But he also doesn’t mention any special preparations, at least in the portions that the author recovered. You might be right about them just hatching.”

“But he also kept it a secret, Barth was the friend and Hand of Jaehaerys, keeping the Targaryen monopoly of dragons would be worth lying in his book.” The boy deflated, he wasn’t old or experienced enough to reflexively doubt people. If he ever became king it was something he’d have to pick up quick.

We spent the rest of the night arguing about possible methods and whether we’d have more success than previous Targaryens all while Daenerys watched the eggs. When the fire burned down to embers she was asleep in front of the hearth. Viserys picked her up easily, he was starting to fill out thanks to fighting lessons from the Iron Bank’s tutors. I stood when he got up, it was late and I had a lot of magic to do for the foreseeable future.

44.

The work on the compasses proceeded smoothly, even if it was excruciatingly boring. Out of spite and wounded pride from being outmaneuvered I decided to experiment with the remote self destructs Davos had hoped for. I doubted I’d ever use them, for all I disliked Lannisters, marooning their random sailors wasn’t really the sort of thing I liked to do. It was still fun to imagine leaving Gerion lost in the middle of the ocean.

I’d made a new kind of link for them, instead of sharing motion like the gongs and bells these ones would try to stay at the same temperature. It wasn’t instant, Maggie had compared them to boats
reaching a new draft when loaded, showing the nautical knowledge the city had forced on us, but when one side was heated up the other slowly warmed to match it. Each of the anchor blocks, or at least a bunch of them if I got too bored, would be linked to one in my possession, gold melted well before iron and liquefying the golden runes would ruin the compasses. I didn’t know how far the link would go, it was much more energy intense than the arrow’s bearing, but thanks to the initial cartography work done by the Voyagers Club half of almost all ships anchor blocks were in Braavos. I was confident that the link would be able to reach across the city, at least for the one time I’d need to use it.

Despite my words to Davos I didn’t plan to sell the special edition compasses. If people wanted to break their own compasses they could throw the block into their own fires. I hadn’t seen any of the Westerosi delegation since our last meeting, I half wondered if they had tried to get people to break suspected stolen compasses, I doubted it would go over well.

The month passed with few interruptions to my routine, Maggie had initially shown some interest in enchanting but I barely let her help since the monotony would probably drive her mad. Instead I worked out my frustrations on the order with her on trips to the mainland where she continued to play with exciting magic. We both tried a little kinetomancy, it was peculiar at best and I felt it strain my joints and tendons when I moved that fast. There was obviously more to it than simply adding force to your limbs, but without more resources the only way to find out was painful experimentation. We both had time though, Jedi shenanigans were definitely possible, eventually.

It was a relief to be done with the extra order and when I delivered the last batch to the Arsenal Oliva shared my distaste. “I don’t care a whit for the Seven Kingdoms and their wars, we could be selling to the Greyjoys for all I care, I just don’t like supplying foreigners.” Patriotism, or whatever the city state version was called, was rare in Braavos, there were almost as many expatriates as natives, at least in the circles I ran in. A little of that and some healthy xenophobia was probably good for the man who ran the Braavosi military-industrial complex.

It was always nice to trash talk people with others who shared your prejudices so I left the Arsenal for the Voyagers’ Club in a good mood. I was curious what would be presented tonight, most of the technological development I’d spurred was passe now and we were back to sailors’ and explorers’ stories that were honestly more interesting, if less groundshaking. My compasses had been out long enough that their reference coordinates were being used extensively, the first time the two bearings were used filled me with a nerdyish pride.

Sothoryos was a common theme, now that cartography was so much more precise the first voyages down the western coast were returning with accurate locations of many landmarks and lost cities. Nothing more was known about the strange land yet but pushing more terra incognita into terra hostili cum monstris exteras civitates et manducate exploratoribus was good if not quite the progress I’d hoped for.

I had thought it would be a nice night with no more mentions of Westeros when a trader stood up to give what he claimed was the most accurate portrayal of the current revolution. He went into a lot of detail about how he’d managed to hire a flock of unchained Maesters to run his own ravenry business but I didn’t pay much attention. I was busy imagining a bunch of loose cannon knowledge monks who didn’t care for the regulations but got results and only Johannes’s not subtle at all punch to the kidneys stopped me from laughing at him.

Luckily he was done with the methodology and began talking about the actual war. The Royal Fleet had set sail, they were probably rounding Dorne by now, and were planning on liberating the Arbor first. The armies of the south were dispersed to make the Ironborn raids more costly, new ships were
being built in Oldtown, and a chain had been stretched across the Mander when it narrowed enough to be practical. The Braavosi built Lannister fleet, the Admiral had stopped pretending it was for anything else, had been crossing the Narrow Sea in small squadrons as each was completed and the last would be leaving within the week. The general consensus was that the war was essentially over, that the Greyjoys had failed to land a blow hard enough to allow their secession and the superior resources of the mainland would be decisive. The common opinion was that they were hoping a general revolt would occur across Westeros, but Baratheon rule was apparently too robust for that.

After another man presented on seeing the Warlocks of Qarth perform new tricks, ‘phantom turtles’ were apparently going from house to house which was one of the weirdest things I’d ever heard of. I didn’t really see the sense of ethereal famously slow reptiles carrying messages but it sounded neat. Maybe Maggie and my next trip would be East to see the strange things there.

I was idly discussing this with Johannes on the way out and his relentless practicality put a damper on my idea. “Essos is in chaos now. With the departure of the organized sell-sails to Westeros the waters are rife with pirates.” He was florid in his urgency, for all that he enjoyed learning about the strange adventures of the world he had little desire to see them for himself. “The Dothraki are in chaos, new Khalasars are forming and their Khals are striking at the cities and lands surrounding their sea to win glory. Stay and let the world calm a little before you travel more.”

It was good advice. I did have plenty to do here for now, and I had practically just gotten back, but travelling to Westeros had forced me to realize there was a world here. I wanted to see it, and my only real responsibility was Maggie. In a few years she’d be entirely self-sufficient, the thought brought a stab of pain to my heart, but she’d probably be up for some adventuring even if she didn’t need her Dad holding her hand.

I was a wizard, I was given the power of life itself and I could do more than create magitech Garmins. I wanted to see the Wall, visit the House of the Undying, maybe even explore the demon haunted ruins of Valyria. There were no opponents like the Red Court or the Denarians here, the worst of the shadowbinders didn’t hold a candle to my old enemies. I could wander the world and nothing, well nothing that wasn’t motivated so nothing that didn’t know me, could stop me.

For the past few years, really ever since that Chicago morning that started with that phone call, my primary focus had been Maggie. It still was, I didn’t think that would ever change, but I could have other pursuits. So much of my life had been driven by necessities, paying the bills, protecting people from forces beyond their philosophies, the usual, but now I was rich in a world that didn’t need me. Going on the Indiana Jones adventure tour sounded like a fine next goal.

Consumed with the idea of exploring and the thoughts of rolling boulders, I was only barely paying attention until I heard the name “Lannister”.

“Wait what? Sorry I was wool-gathering.” Johannes went from surprised to confused, even after years here I still tripped over idioms. “I was lost in thought, you mentioned the Lannisters?”

He looked a little aggrieved, he had been carrying the conversation almost our entire walk. “I said that the Lannister emissary met with Noho Dimittis’s manager. That groups in charge of loans to Westeros.”

“I thought the Lannisters were rich?”

“They are immensely, he wasn’t there for his family though. I heard from Noho that he was asking about our contract with Ser Darry.” Johannes’s voice was serious, granted that wasn’t unusual but he
seemed more worried about this than my plans to tour a war ravaged Essos. The Iron Bank had sheltered the Targaryens ever since I met them on that night which was well outside their usual service. They had guards enough to ward off common assassins and influence enough to dissuade nation states. “I know you meet with the Targaryens frequently, be careful the Lannisters make a dangerous enemies.”

“Do you think they’d be bold enough to attack them here? The Bank may not officially be a part of the government but they’re pretty close. It could cause problems for them on this side of the sea right?”

Johannes was quiet for a few steps, considering it. “It’s said that the King over there smiled at the bodies of Rhaegar’s children. It may just be a story but he is known to hate Targaryens.” I thought of what Oberyn had said of Robert Baratheon, it sounded in character but he did despise the man. “The official policy of the kingdoms is to let the last Targaryens wither in exile as long as they don’t cause trouble, but I think he’d applaud any attacks on them.”

“Well it’s nice to know international finance helps keep children alive.”

“It might not actually, there was some discussion after Gerion left.” Now that we were in his element Johannes was much more confident. “The Lannisters are one of the main sources of gold for the kingdoms and they use it to their benefit. If the children are killed the Bank would be forced to stop lending to them, it could be worth it for the Lannisters.”

I had no reply to that and we parted ways as I headed back to my island. There were other factors Johannes wasn’t aware of, partially by my design. If the Lannisters learned I was teaching Viserys, it wasn’t common knowledge but there were probably spies watching them who would have seen me, his threat level would jump immediately. Johannes didn’t know the truth of what I’d done to Oldtown, I’d lied about it to everyone who asked here, but the Lannisters would probably have a much better idea. Given what Johannes had said about their potential motives the Targaryens were probably in very real trouble.

45.

The next time I went to the Targaryen household I erected wards. They had a respectable threshold, nothing on the strength of the Carpenters’ which remained my gold standard, but comparable to my home. It would resist intruders for some time at least, and would definitely alert me if their house was stormed. It wasn’t much and would be vulnerable to a determined attack, but it was better than just the strong walls and doors.

Johannes had been rather blasé about the threat to the children but he operated in the world of finance where the benefits of lower interest rates outweighed the risks of potential sorcerer kings. I knew Viserys would never be able to duplicate my magic and the dragon eggs were a closely guarded secret, but if Robert or anyone over there got it into their heads that Viserys could access my power there’d be assassins coming over by boatload. I worried over the idea for the weeks after I’d learned of the threat, but as time went by my concern faded.

With the Lannister order filled I went ahead with my plans to raise the compass prices, I was sick of making them and at some point the demand would drop. I still would make them cheaply for the Voyagers, they had a slightly more noble purpose there, but for everyone else it would be expensive. For a set of two they’d represent almost a third of the cost of an average ship.
I left Maggie after eating dinner for another attempt to hatch dragons with Viserys. I raised the wards behind me as I entered the Braavosi night, the weather was warm and the normal fog was absent. I half regretted wearing my coat but the weather was so fickle here I might be glad of it later. I was thinking about enchanting as I walked, over time I’d decided my role in the dragon hatching process would just be the safety monitor and I often worked on something entirely different as Viserys bounced ideas off me. The self destruct thermal links had given me a few more ideas for my telephone projects, heat was essentially just molecules vibrating and I’d managed to transmit that without macroscale movement, sound would just be larger magnitudes.

Consumed by my thoughts I almost didn’t notice the first tugs from the wards. The second round definitely got my attention. I’d warded a few houses in the city, mine, Johannes, the Sealord’s, and a few others, but each was set to give me a different ‘tone’. It wasn’t quite a sound but they were just barely distinguishable. This one was the Targaryens’. I was still a fifteen minute walk away, if I ran I’d be there in maybe seven, as I felt the wards take another hit I was sure they wouldn’t last that long.

I started running anyways, and tried to think of what to do. I didn’t have an escape potion on me and if I went back to get one from the stock I constantly replenished it would take just as much time. I wasn’t in as good shape as I used to be, without sneakers jogging was a miserable experience and other forms of cardio, like say swimming in the canals, would kill me far sooner than heart disease would. The wards were pulsing along with my heart as I ran and I still had half a mile at least to go, the attackers would be in the house long before I got there and for all of Viserys’s lessons twelve year olds didn’t beat grown men. If I’d figured out kinetomancy maybe I could reach the house in time but I had imagined I had decades, if I wanted to save the children I had one option.

The Mantle’s power surged through me, nearly howling in joy. I didn’t know if I’d be able to leash it again but I wasn’t going to let two kids die while I felt their defenses crumble. My gasping run became a smooth lope, the air I exhaled fogged, a visible sign of my Queen’s power. The distance shrank as I accelerated to speeds that Olympians would be jealous of, I lost all doubts I’d make it in time.

I veiled myself as I reached the last island, I didn’t need stealth to deal with the killers but I was a wizard, we were supposed to cheat. I felt the wards fall as I rounded the last corner, a group of torch carrying men were just entering the dark house, the children were still alive. As I sped to an all out sprint, trusting my veil to keep me concealed I tried to plan my next move. The assassins were in the house, it was big but two kids and some servants against killers wouldn’t last long, I needed to make this quick.

With my quarry in sight my pace nearly doubled, each step sending me yards closer. “Forzare!” I snarled, there was no need for restraint here. I pulled it just enough to avoid pulping them, the men outside dropped screaming as I jumped over their crumpled and writhing bodies. My casual brutality would normally give me pause but through my increased familiarity with the Mantle I could recognize its influence, maybe if I couldn’t shut it off again I could resist it, either way that was a tomorrow problem.

I was in the entrance hall now, they had been in for maybe twenty seconds, not enough to search it. Viserys would probably be in the study with the eggs, he’d have been waiting for me. Daenerys could be anywhere, the four year old was mobile and when she had visited she had wandered all over my house, nearly exhausting Maggie who was watching her. I saw the flicker of torchlight up the stairs and with four steps was up to the second story. There was a dead servant on the floor, I stepped over her body and moved down the corridor as quickly as I could move silently. I was
wishing I had a blade in hand, but my staff would have to do.

The man didn’t hear me coming as with a single blow of my staff he fell, he wouldn’t be waking up for a long time if ever. I didn’t feel any guilt, or even the sense I should feel guilt, it may have been a political assassination but they were still children. I changed my grip on my staff from two hands to my left and picked up his sword, trying to think of the next step. Running through the villa would likely end with the children dead before I could stop their assassins, I needed a faster way to find them. I kicked in a door leading to room on the center courtyard, stepping to the window I looked for illuminated rooms, there was one on the opposite wall, partially hidden by a flowering tree.

I nearly went back out the door to run around the building before I realized I had options. Almost as soon as I thought it I was sprinting towards the window, I got one foot on the sill, ducking to not brain myself on the top of the frame and leapt.

Superstrength was pretty awesome I reflected with that strange extra speed the Mantle gave my thoughts, even so without further effort I wouldn't make it, landing halfway there, probably in the fountain I now had time to notice as I floated towards it. That wouldn’t do at all.

“Ventus!” The burst of wind launched me the rest of the way to the lit window, I pulled my legs to my chest and did my best turtle impression as I hurtled towards the window that was in apparent defiance to optical laws shrinking as I got closer to it. I clipped the frame with my shoulder and tumbled to the floor, barely managing to not skewer myself on my stolen sword as I rolled.

As soon as I got my feet under me I stood, the Mantle making such mortal concerns as dizziness a thing of the past. Daenerys was under her covers in her bed staring at me with wide eyes. “Come with me!” I had a hard time not doing the Terminator quote but she was terrified enough already. She got up, somehow taking a second to put on slippers, and clung to my side as I readied my shield bracelet and opened the door.

There was another dead servant on the floor and in front of me the man who had done it. I didn’t wait for him to notice me, a long step for me and a vicious slash to his spine ended him before he even knew I was there. I looked back to Daenerys, I needed to keep her close and my staff would be more useful. I dropped the sword and picked her up, she was looking at the dead servant her eyes bright, she couldn’t start crying.

“Dany, look at me, come on.” I spoke quickly in as low a voice as I could. She turned her head, up close her purple eyes were almost distracting. “You need to be quiet, can you do that for me? We need to go get your brother and then we can leave here.” She nodded and I was hoping that she would be silent just a little longer, until the sound of hammering broke the quiet. “Shit.”

I ran awkwardly with Daenerys in one arm, she wasn’t squirming but even small children aren’t very ergonomic. I rounded the corner to the hall with Viserys’s study, once again I saw men entering a smashed door, my reflexive blast of force didn’t quite work, one was flung to the ground in the hallway, one fell into the study and the third was unscathed heading into the room.

“Infriga!” The one in the hallway was down for the count and I burst into the suddenly smoky room, the man who fell had dropped his torch on the rug and it was going up. This observation was secondary to the sword coming towards my face, I got my staff in the way and flung it and the wielder back. I started to lower my staff to end this when the other man shouted “Stop!”

He had Viserys in front of him, his sword at his throat. I took a long step to the right to get out of the doorway and away from the flames. “That’s enough, the next step you take the boy dies.” As the fire
spread further I looked at the man. The other killer had moved back towards his partner on the opposite side of the room. “Here’s how this is going to go, you’re going to stay right there and we’re going to walk out the door with this one. I don’t care how fast you are, it’ll just take a twitch.” His sword left a thin line on Viserys’s throat, the boy went dead still but remained silent, his eyes pleading for a miracle. The standoff continued as the the fires moved closer to the bookshelf, its contents would burn in a heartbeat. The room was already sweltering and it was just getting hotter.

“If anything happens to the boy you’ll beg for death before I’m through with you.”

In an impressive display of bravado he laughed, a true smile appearing on his sweat streaked face. “Now that just sounds like you’re agreeing to my plan wizard. Come on Pate.” He and the other man edged around the flames, with the blade there I couldn’t do anything for sure, my new telekinesis wasn’t fine enough yet. They were about to leave and I was frantically thinking what to do next when it all went wrong, something on the bookshelf shattered, Pate turned to look, and the man I thought was frozen to the floor burst into the room and stabbed me.

My coat blocked it of course, he’d need far more than an oversized butter knife to get through, but it hit like a punch to the gut. I recovered and my Mantle fueled return stroke knocked him into the off balance Pate and they both fell screaming into the roaring fire.

Viserys chose that moment to try to twist free, the sword had left his neck but the killer kept a hold of him as they both stumbled. With a groaning crash the burning bookshelf fell and suddenly the floor was tilting, and the two of them dropped into the new burning hole in the floor. I swore viciously, even if he didn’t get his throat cut he had just fallen ten feet into what could credibly be described as an inferno. I absently felt vindicated about my fire warnings, the study was a deathtrap.

“Fuego!” I ripped the heat from the fire with a roar, or tried to, something resisted, and sent the heat in a bar of fire out the window. The flames had dropped significantly, holding the sobbing Daenerys carefully I pulled up a shield and jumped into the fire.

My landing snuffed out the fire in a circle around me, I’d tweaked my shield to block the hot air which choked the flames underneath us. I tried again to rip the heat from the fire, there was something peculiar about the way it fought back but it was enough to reveal the scorched bodies of the three men. I spun looking for Viserys’s body, he should be right with them, when I saw something rise from the corner of my eye.

I spun, and nearly dropped my shield. Viserys had risen covered with ashes and holding something in his arms. I rushed towards him, the fires near us were out but the rest of the upstairs was still burning. I would have dragged him but my arms were full so I herded the boy into the courtyard and flung him into the central fountain, if he wasn’t screaming yet it was because he was in shock and if nothing else the water would cool his skin. He erupted from the water sputtering and I paused something was wrong, his skin was pink, not the horrific red and black of burns, and the thing he was holding was flapping in his arms. “Oh no, just hell no.”

He lifted the gold scaled little beast in the air as it squirmed, its claws leaving red lines on his arms and chest, and for the first time in hundreds of years the shrieks of a soaked dragon filled the air.

For once the Mantle and I were in complete accord, stunned shock looking at the angry lizard in Viserys’s arms. I stood for what felt like forever staring at the next big thing in magical destruction until Daenerys started to cry again from my tight grip. I immediately loosened it and started to think.

When I’d agreed to help Viserys hatch dragons it had been a mix of safety concerns for him and
curiosity for me. Sure I’d thought about what Viserys would do with a dragon but seeing him now, holding the slightly calmer cat sized beast, had a way of focussing the mind.

If someone had been willing to take a swing at the Targaryens regardless of the Bank’s protection, giving them back their ancestral weapons would kick them into public enemy number one status. In three years or so Viserys would be able to ride the dragon and start his reconquista. There were a whole list of lords on the rebel side who preferred to be blue rather than well done, and their only hope was to kill him and the dragon before he was effectively invincible. It had been a lot easier to justify helping him when the risks were theoretical.

No matter what the future held, we were still in a building that was rapidly catching on fire with assassin’s in and around gunning for us. Whatever I did here would have huge implications for the world so I should change my pattern and take a moment to think it through.

Viserys’s voice broke through my thoughts and the roar of the burning house. “Harry what should we do?”

Well first things first, they were with me so none of the killers were an enormous threat. Second the burning building. It wasn’t that hot compared to some I’d been in, and with my shield I could get us out, even if it had been hotter. The opposite side from the study hadn’t even been touched yet, the flames were rapidly spreading along the roof but hadn’t made it down, not to mention we were in the middle of a paved courtyard, there were far worse places to be. Those were the easy two issues.

“We need to get the other ones.” Saying that I turned and sent a pulse of my magic into the burning room, the eggs should react and I’d be able to find them without spending more time in the fire. Now that one dragon was crawling around it was even more important to hold onto the remaining eggs. I felt a strong echo from the first floor, the chest must have fallen. I didn’t feel like walking back into the flames, I was a wizard after all. “Volat.”

With a few crashes the chest, a burning chair and a chunk of the wall burst towards me and skidded to a halt at my feet throwing sparks up at me. I opened the chest, falling had broken its lock apparently, and stared at the grapefruit sized rocks. I couldn’t carry them, whenever they touched me they burned. Viserys had his hands full with Smaug Junior, Daenerys... One look at the crying toddler ruled her out, Viserys would have to multitask.

I set Daenerys down and ripped the expensive lining from the chest to make a sack, knotted it and thrust it at Viserys. He took it looking over my shoulder at the dense smoke, I knew what it was like to see your house burn.

My first reflex was to put it out, there was nothing magical about the flames and I thought through a combination of siphoning the heat out and making ice I could save the house. Something stopped me though, Viserys had a dragon. Right now the only people who knew that were us three, but if the house miraculously stopped burning there’d be plenty of spectators and witnesses, not to mention the killers who were still looking for them.

I picked Daenerys up again, grateful for the mundane benefits of the Mantle as she squirmed, and beckoned Viserys to me. “Is there anything else in the house you need?”

“My mother’s crown.” He barely shifted his eyes from the fire consuming his home.

“I’m sorry kid, but we’re leaving it. We’re pulling a trick an old friend of mine taught me.”
“What! It’s the last thing I have left of hers! We need it!” He dropped the sack and I barely managed to step in front of him before he ran into the building, the dragon hissed and snapped at me when I got close.

I loomed over him, ignoring the lizard. “Your sister is the last thing you have of hers, and I promise I’ll get the crown if it survives. Now pick up the bag and stick close to me.”

He obeyed mutinously “What are you doing?”

“Like I said it’s a trick from a friend of mine, we’re faking your deaths for now.”

“Wait! What? Why?” Viserys screeched loudly enough the dragon felt compelled to join in.

I kept herding him in front of me scanning the flames for anyone else. “No one tries to kill dead children, it will give us some time to regroup.” He looked mollified and I set Daenerys down. “Put Norbert in the bag and hold onto your sister.” he was confused, philistine. “The dragon, put him in the bag.” When he tried it twisted free, batted at his hands and leapt onto Daenerys’s shoulders, for a newborn it was pretty spry. “Whatever, keep both of them and stay close to me.”

Faking their deaths for now seemed like the best of a bad bunch of plans. It wasn’t like their resurrections would be difficult, half of the managers of the Iron Bank seemed to know Viserys and if anyone else doubted him the dragon was a decent argument. Laying low while I dealt with their immediate threats didn’t really have downsides. The assassins would report success back to their masters, and with the slow communication we might get a month. Plus it concealed the existence of dragons. If I busted out of the burning building without the children the reasonable assumption would be that they were dead in the flames. I considered burning the house even faster to make it more convincing but there might still be people alive in there.

Veiling myself was tricky but in the dark I could do it, veiling other people next to me and not myself was a wholly different issue, especially if I was going to be fighting my way out simultaneously. I doubted all the assassins were still down. I’d just have to keep their attention on me.

“Defendarius!” The spherical blue shield surrounded us as we walked into the flame, it blocked the heat and I prepared to split my focus. “Stay behind me and as close as you can.” The two children were practically pressed against my back and we were one wall from the street, time to make some magic.

“Obscurata” I sent the simplest illusion possible, a dense cloud of smoke billowing out. Its non physical nature let it pass through the wall and I gave it a moment to intensify in what I hoped was a somewhat natural way. It should be up to my waist, Daenerys would be completely submerged in it and Viserys would only barely be sticking out. I pushed more power into it, the smoke would remain for a minute or two without my attention. I looked over my shoulder, the terrified kids were looking up at me. “Ready? Obducto! Forzare!”

Holding the haze around me made the air seem to swim, the wall exploded out with my second spell and I ran forward, only checking to make sure the Targaryens were following. My remodeling of the house had attracted attention, men with swords were coming towards us, we couldn’t have that. I let the pull of the Mantle guide me and with a sweeping motion knocked them from their feet and then froze them to the ground or tried to. The burning house had dried the air enough that it was hard to pull my Iceman impression, they were down but not for long.

Another group was coming from the other side and I shifted mental gears to intensify the haze, I
wanted them to see me and a conspicuous absence of children. I gave them a few seconds to close and get a good look before I broke their legs with a single word.

That should be enough to get their stories straight, now it was time to make an especially visible exit and vanish. I slammed my staff to the ground and shouted.

“Fulminos!” I might not have the grace Maggie or Elaine possessed with lightning, but I was just as strong with it as everything else. A bolt of lightning as thick as my wrist burst free and turned the night white and hit the cobblestones with a thunderous crack. No one else would be seeing anything for a minute, I had wisely closed my eyes and looked away just prior.

“Obscurata” This time the veil covered all of us and we hurried into the dark streets of Braavos.

It was a relief to get back to my island, I did a quick look to make sure no one was there who shouldn’t be and hustled the kids in. I only dropped the veil when the door shut, Maggie had come down the stairs to greet me and stopped.

We made quite a sight, I was covered in ashes somehow, Daenerys was in a nightgown and slippers, Viserys was holding a sack, wearing a dragon, and half his hair and pants were burned off. “I told you hatching a dragon was a bad idea.”
So I was home with Maggie, Viserys, Daenerys, and the star of the show, the unnamed dragon. As Maggie stared at it, and us, my mind moved to names for it. It was scaled in gold with its spine, wing bones, and claws an iridescent blue. Sadly that color scheme knocked a lot of potential names out. If it were black there was the old classic Ancalagon. Sticking with Tolkien since it had worked so well for me last time, Smaug was described as the Golden but I thought that was in reference to his bank account. Norbert, Puff, or Eustace Scrubb didn’t really have the gravitas for the dragon. It would eventually be an immense weapon and deserved a name from a more heroic age.

“Shouldn’t you be more excited?” Maggie broke the silence after we had ignored her quip. “You hatched a legendary monster, even if it did predictably burn your house down.”

I was a little surprised at her bluntness. Normally she was a little more tactful even to Viserys, then I realized that Maggie had no idea what had just happened. I was about to explain when Viserys spoke.

“Assassins from the usurper came for us. Rhaellion was birthed with our home’s destruction.”

“Rhaellion? After your mother?” It didn’t really fit with the more martial names of the past, Balerion, Vhagar, or Morghul. It was a nice gesture for a twelve year old but I wasn’t sure if most women would like a weapon of mass destruction named after them.

“She gave up her crown to help us on Dragonstone, it fell into the same fires Rhaellion was birthed from.” Viserys was somber as he held the dragon. It was content in his arms for now, although it was craning its head around, making full use of its serpentine neck. “She protected me from my father’s and brother’s madness, the dragon will protect us both from everything else.”

“Let’s go back to the assassination. What happened?” The Dresden approach to diplomacy would continue after me it seemed.

“I felt the wards fall as I was heading over, managed to get there in time and in the course of events we got Rhaellion.” Maggie’s expression showed my explanation was completely insufficient. “More importantly the killers probably think these two are dead, it should throw them off their scent.” She still looked unsatisfied, but I decided to use my wizardly prerogative and not explain further.

The rest of the audience was exhausted, Viserys was swaying on his feet, he hadn’t been carried through the streets like his younger sister, and the eggsack must have weighed thirty pounds. The.. dragonling? Dragonet? Hatchling? Who knew? had stopped inspecting the room and was wrapped around his shoulders. Daenerys was only standing because she was leaning on me. “It’s late, why don’t all of you go up to bed and we’ll plan our next move in the morning.”

I was glad for the additional bedrooms in our expanded home, the idea of sleeping in a room with a firebreathing lizard didn’t really sit well with me. Viserys had no such fear and Daenerys had loudly and crankily refused to let Viserys out of her sight so the two Targaryens were bedding down with their family’s mascot. One of the biggest regrets of my life was missing so much of Maggie’s childhood, but sometimes I really appreciated her being toilet trained and domesticated when I got to know her.
I stayed up after the kids went to bed, the Mantle was still active. Each time I had pushed it back down had hurt more, right now I couldn’t afford to be bedridden for hours. Now that I wasn’t drawing on it so heavily its pull on my thoughts was less. I didn’t have an urge to go forth and slaughter in Mab’s name, and killing the dragon to show my strength when it hissed at me had barely been a passing whim.

I didn’t really know much about the Mantle past the obvious. It had been the least bad of the options to save Maggie and I needed the power and healing Mab could supply. The trip here was still a blur, but I had redirected the bloodline curse onto the vampires, I had won my war with it. Now that I didn’t have an immediate deadline though, I was wondering how the Mantle worked. From its behavior it almost reminded me of my brother’s hunger demon; that the more I used it the more it used me. I didn’t like that one bit, Thomas was in a constant struggle with his darker nature and I wasn’t so arrogant to think I could do better. His Hunger had already cost the woman he loved severely, I couldn’t tolerate a similar threat to Maggie. Once this assassination business was settled I’d have to try to leash it once more, the thought sent a twinge of anticipatory pain through my mind.

Eventually I decided to trust the wards I’d set to their maximum strength and went to my own bed, if I dreamed I didn’t remember them.

Noise from the kitchen woke me, without the compass order taking my time I had shifted to a laid back schedule and Maggie woke before me almost everyday. She was usually quiet in the mornings, heading out to meet her friends or doing the last of her homework, this cacophony was entirely out of character.

I threw on some clothes and headed to the kitchen wishing that I still had the brownie maid service, whatever I was about to see sounded messy. The three kids were standing around the heavy wooden table where our caterers did the last of their preparations. Rhaellion was standing on it, seeing him move reminded me briefly of the batlike Red Court vampires. He agilely hopped around on his furled wings and hind legs, his long tail counterbalancing him as he tried to snag the pieces of meat the children were throwing him.

The sounds I’d heard came from him knocking over some pots that I’d been too lazy to return to their cupboard. Based on his almost distended stomach they’d been at it for awhile before the noise woke me.

“So you’ve found what he likes to eat then?” They had all been focused on a particularly athletic attempt by the little dragon and started when I spoke. “His belly is twice the size it was yesterday, do you think he’s had enough?”

The dragon still didn’t like me, it had turned and drew itself up on its forelimbs when I started talking. Currently the cat sized lizard did not intimidate me but I was hoping that in the next few years it would mellow out.

“Munkun says that they’re most biddable when gorged.” The excited boy kept his eyes on Rhaellion as he brightly summarized a centuries dead man. “I thought you’d prefer a calm dragon in your house.”

It was too early in the morning to argue with someone who made sense so I grunted a vague acknowledgement, grabbed some leftovers and left them to their fun. It was interesting that the dragon didn’t mind Maggie, another indication it was the Mantle that the magic here kept reacting to. I started to head up to my lab, laying low for a few days would give me a chance to work on the
telephones, when I felt the wards twitch, someone was knocking.

The Targaryens needed to be hidden, I turned back to the kitchen, Maggie was already moving, she was keyed into the wards as well and she had picked up Daenerys. Viserys was corraling the dragon into his arms as he followed her. “Good, take them to your bedroom, if I shout head to the lab, you know what to do after that.” She nodded, the general contingencies we’d planned saved time in a potential crisis. I shook my shield bracelet just to check it was there and went down to open the door.


They glanced at each other which was strange, Syrio in my experience was never on the back foot. “The Targaryen house was burned last night, by assailants unknown.” They both looked at me then, apparently hoping for a confession. “Their men talked though, they reported a tall man flinging fire and lightning.” Well technically that couldn’t have been me, I was quite confident no one had seen me throw fire.

“I was there, I didn’t see the children leave the house though, I got there just before it started to burn.” I didn’t know if it was the Mantle but I was entertained by the half truths. “Unless some magic beyond mine occurred, they probably wouldn’t have survived.” Syrio looked dismayed by my news, he was aware of the possible repercussions then.

I didn’t want to tell them the truth right away, Syrio was a sharp man but three can keep a secret when two are dead. The only one who might learn from me about the Targaryens living before the end of the week was the Sealord. I was sure the Westerosis had spies in Braavos, I wanted to make sure that they reported the assassination as successful so that they’d call off their dogs. “I still have some hope though, I didn’t see their dead bodies and maybe the blood of Valyria is good for something. If you keep the looters off the scene I’ll come by later to see if I can find anything.” Ideally giving them sliver of hope would prevent this situation from blowing up in my face when the truth came out. “I’d also like to meet with the Sealord after I inspect the lot.”

47.

To keep up the charade of the Targaryen’s deaths I did go visit their burned home that afternoon. The outer walls, except for my dynamic exit point, still stood but the ceiling, floors and inner walls gone. It might just barely be worth rebuilding, but I was hardly an expert contractor.

There were guards around the building’s husk. Inside the ruin some servants, based on their livery they were from the Sealord’s palace, were attempting to salvage Targaryen heirlooms. All the tapestries I’d admired on my first visit were gone, but if nothing else the gold and gems should have survived. We’d taken the best of the treasure with us on our escape anyways, I wasn’t sure anyone would give a Targaryen back dragon eggs.

I didn’t see Rhaella’s crown anywhere but it might already have been removed or it might have been lost in the fires. I was pretty confident there was no crown to dragon transmutation last night, but the magic here was weird, I wasn’t going to commit to anything.

I did another circuit around the house then admitted defeat, I had hoped for some possession of the assassins’ so that I would have a tool to trace them back to their lair, but if they had left anything
suitable it was incinerated. Before leaving I stopped to look at the fountain, it was still going, untouched by the fires. I’d been in enough burned buildings to know that somethings were randomly spared from flames, the burbling white marble fountain looked particularly incongruous surrounded by the blackened stones and ashes.

I wandered towards the Sealord’s Square from Ser Darry’s and I realized I had never actually confirmed my appointment, just told Syrio I might show up. Deciding that I’d rudely intruded on more dangerous people was the work of a moment and I climbed the steps to the palace’s front doors. “I’m Dresden, I’m here to see the Sealord.” The guards studied me, I wasn’t particularly disreputable looking today but my long duster and practical clothes didn’t really match the ambiance.

After a silent conversation the most dour of the guards came to a decision. “Wait here. Tormo,” he turned to a large man I recognized from our little temple field trip, “go check if the Sealord will see him.” Tormo seemed to remember me too, he threw a glance over his shoulder as he entered the building. The guards didn’t say a word, resolutely staring over the square and I spent a few awkward minutes waiting. At last Tormo returned with a servant following him.

“Ser Dresden? If you’ll follow me?” I didn’t think my assumed title would have made it over here, maybe the Westerosi’s had used it enough for it to sink in. Or maybe the servant was being polite, if incorrect.

He led me through the dark wood paneled halls, the artwork hanging was still striking, if less focussed on portraiture than my previous route in. Eventually we reached a sitting room where he left me to enjoy a tasteful cheese plate, they came standard it seemed. I was content to sit for a little and try the delicacies, I’d just had one that reminded me of pepperjack when another servant summoned me to meet Ferrego Antaryon.

Each time I saw the Sealord, not that it was especially often, we hardly moved in the same circles, he looked a little more haggard. “Harry Dresden, or should I say Ser Harry? You made quite an impression on our western guests.”

I took the indicated chair before replying. “You know how it is, pal around with a lord and it inflates your social status.”

“I suspect that your destruction of Oldtown’s walls had more to do with it.” If I’d been drinking I would have sputtered at Antaryon’s calm assertion. I’d managed to fool the Voyagers into thinking my exploits were overblown, but they were inclined to think of me as a man of reason and science. Not to mention they were above believing in sailors’ tales, especially when I denied them to their faces. Antaryon’s first exposure to my magic was the destruction of demons that slaughtered his men, even if he didn’t have spies and informants he would be more inclined to think of me as dangerous. Even now he had psuedo-Hendricks and another man standing in the corners of the room watching me. “But that was in a far off land and we have more pressing concerns than your proper address.” He steepled his hands, most people look utterly foolish doing that but the Sealord managed it. “What do you know about the Targaryen children’s current status?”

They way he phrased that sent alarm bells ringing. I’d told Syrio I thought they were dead and I was sure Ferrego knew that. Could he simply be fishing for information or did he have some evidence? “Your men came by earlier, I told them that I thought the children were probably dead.”

“Yes, you said that.” He looked up at his guards then back to me, his tone deceptively light. “Perhaps you could accompany me on a walk? You’ve been to my palace a few times and you haven’t received a tour. As one of our foremost citizens you should see what the industry of our people has produced.” He got up, standing he barely had to tilt his head back to meet my carefully off centered gaze, he was a large man, even as wasted as he was.
He walked around his desk and I followed him out of the office. The halls we walked to were wider and more grandiose than any I’d previously seen. It was as if the interior decorator had decided that enough was enough with Braavosi restraint, gold was going everywhere. The wood paneled walls were gilded and candles burned on golden sconces. Where before they had been somber old men, or images of ships on the sea, the paintings here were bright and airy landscapes, showing blue skies and green fields. Ferrego noticed my surprise. “One of my predecessors, four back if I recall, had a young wife he doted on. He poured his fortune into the building and changed only the character of this section before he fell ill.”

I was continuing to admire the rooms, I wore as much black as the next guy but Braavos was far too colorless. Seeing the brightness was a reminder that the entire world wasn’t grey stones, grey water, and grey fogs. “And? They just stopped?”

Ferrego sniffed. “Of course, if I had more time I’d have the whole garish section stripped to the wallboards. It is the best way to the balconies though so I must bear it.”

We reached a wide staircase that went to a ballroom and then kept climbing until the gold vanished and we ascended to the roof. It was tiled, a large flat expanse that overlooked the Sealord’s Square and the the Purple Harbor. His two guards gave us some space and he gestured me closer.

The brisk breeze and the lack of any nearby listeners assured us of privacy. “You were there last night, we took some of the killers prisoners and they said a wizard arrived right as they were entering.” Ferrego said all this in a low voice as he stood at edge of the roof. “From what I’ve heard of your talents the assassin’s wouldn’t have been enough to stop you.”

I was about to reply when he held a hand up. “Before you tell me anything else I’d like to talk about what happens next.” He waited for my nod before continuing. “It’s certain that they were paid by Westerosis. It might have been the Lannisters or the throne itself but it hardly matters. The children were under the Iron Bank’s protection and if they were killed a major response would be needed.” He turned from the harbor to look at me. “It would mean war.” Having said his piece he turned back towards the water. “You were saying something before I interrupted?”

This was a flaw in my fake the Targaryens’ deaths plan. It might be safest for them, but if it kicked off a war it would hardly be worth it. I had half planned on telling the Sealord anyways and he had clearly brought me up here to make sure only he heard what I had to say. “I did get them out, they’re hidden. I thought it best to let them stay dead until the sponsors of the killings were fooled.”

Ferrego didn’t look surprised, either he had deduced it or he simply had a good poker face, I wasn’t willing to bet either way. “That will work perfectly. Keep them safe for now, if pressure to respond grows we’ll reveal the trick, otherwise only you, I, and the Iron Bank’s keyholders will know they live for the next moon.” That pretty much finished our conversation, he pointed out a few highlights of the city as the sun lowered in the sky and gave some anecdotes about their history but not a bell later I found myself in a gondola headed home.

We were halfway there when I felt the wards pulse in the pattern that indicated someone was knocking on the door. I flipped the boatman another coin to speed up but when it wasn’t repeated and the wards remained up I relaxed. I still tipped him excessively when we reached my island and I walked the last distance.

The wards were as comforting as ever, my magic and Maggie’s standing firm gave the air a warmth beyond the merely physical. I opened the door and was somewhat disappointed to not have Maggie gallop down the stairs to meet me. I had always thought it would be her teenage years that managed that, not an overgrown lizard. “Maggie? Hello?” My calls went unanswered and I heard shuffling from upstairs.
I grabbed my staff from by the door and shook out my shield bracelet, I was being paranoid but something felt weird. I climbed the stairs, the kitchen was cleaned from the morning’s adventure but the children were nowhere to be seen. I was starting to panic now and I took the stairs to the lab at a run.

The lab was empty too, the noise was from Rhaellion nosing around one of my work tables. My attention was drawn to the chalkboard, there was a note in Maggie’s handwriting. “Quaithe was here!! Went to safehouse.”

I’d forgotten about the shadowbinder, my irritation at my oversight was manifesting in a rage and I gathered a nimbus of power around myself. Rhaellion hissed at me and crouched below a table. I’d spared the bitch once and now she was back? I grabbed an escape potion, that explained why they left the dragon, it could hardly use one, and was about to follow them when I felt another knock on the wards. Hopefully Quaithe had come back, it would make tracking her down much easier.

I bolted down the stairs thinking about all the tricks I’d heard of and seen from sorcerers here. As long as I kept my cool she should be no match for me. I burst out the door, staff raised and a shield at the very edge of my mind, Quaithe was there in her stupid red mask.

“Volat!” I flung her back into the waters of the canals and then ripped her out sputtering, I could feel her weight, this was no projection and I slammed her against my house’s front wall. “Infriga!”

She was terrified, her mask had been lost in her dunking and her eyes were wide as she started shivered from the inch of ice holding her fast. She had dark hair I noticed absently, and a face that could best be described as striking.

“I thought we had a deal shadowbinder?” I could hardly spit the words out “Didn’t my show last time teach you any lessons?” She stammered and a gesture with my staff pushed her further back into her icy prison. “Well? Speak up!”

48.

“I only” her shivering was bad enough she had to start over “I only swore not to harm you, I wanted to meet you again.”

I broke the ice away from her, but kept her pinned to the wall. I wanted her to be intelligible, for a little longer at least. “Then why did my daughter warn me? What did you do?”

“I only knocked! I swear it!”

Well this was unfortunate. I had no way to confirm her story without talking to Maggie, she’d be at the safehouse and would stay there until the next step in the plan was enacted. Maggie wasn’t supposed to ever return to the house without me if she’d run. I didn’t want to take Quaithe with me to the safehouse, I couldn’t bet I’d seen all of her tricks. Granted any plan that involved being frozen to a wall by a hostile wizard was either a product of madness or such genius that I couldn’t hope to compete.

I briefly considered locking her in the house, but Rhaellion was in there and letting more people know about the dragon was a terrible idea. Times like these made me miss my friends more than ever. Thomas would have watched someone for me no questions asked. Murphy as well, if the legal situation was sufficiently grey at least. Here it was just me, Johannes was smart sure but I didn’t think he’d react well to me dropping off a shadowbinder. The Sealord would probably throw her in a
dungeon for a little routine torture if I told him she was a witch, and if I didn’t she might easily escape. Call me old fashioned, but even with the Mantle I had some reservations about turning anyone over to the racks and hot irons.

With a sign I let her go, she fell the five feet to the ground and only barely managed to stay standing. She looked scared which pleased and repelled me in equal measures. “Come on, we’re going on a little trip.” I waved her ahead of me and when she didn’t move repeated the gesture more sharply. “Move or this whole thing will be a lot less pleasant.” She got the message and started walking.

She was soaked but Braavos was cosmopolitan enough that a drenched woman followed by a tall man in a trench coat attracted little comment. I was somewhat resigned to taking her to the safehouse, but before I did that I wanted to take away as many tricks of hers as possible. Luckily her clothes being completely covered in water and the random muck of the canals was a good excuse for an entirely new wardrobe that would not be concealing any components for blood rituals or even mundane weapons.

It might have seemed a little prurient to be in the same room when she switched outfits, but gallantry took a distant back seat to keeping Maggie safe. I’d also seen better, which was a thought I clung to as the Mantle clamored to take her to prove my dominance. Even barely drawing on its power it could still influence my thoughts, as soon as it was safe I was going to have to bind it down. Or I could spontaneously develop the detachment and serenity of the most devout Buddhist monks, but if that hadn’t happened yet I didn’t think it would.

So with a less wet and less exotically dressed Quaithe in front of me I headed through the dark streets towards the safehouse. It wasn’t much, just a small building in a part of the city that straddled the edge between poor and middle class. The building was as warded as I could make it without a strong threshold, Maggie and I had spent some of our first year there and the remnants of our presence had been enough to anchor some protections. I checked on it once or twice a month, there was no way to get in from ground level which kept out squatters. The heavy front door was solidly barred from the inside and the only entrance to the building was a hole I’d blown in the roof. The stairs from the first floor to the second were also gone, I’d put boards over the stairwell so that the upper story was almost inaccessible. It wasn’t impossible to break into it, but there were far better options around it, even discounting the wards. All told it was perfect as a location to vanish to, from there Maggie and I would have been able to use the money and supplies hidden to get out of the city. I had felt a little paranoid setting it up, but this excursion made it all worthwhile.

Quaithe hadn’t spoken since the tailor’s shop but now that we were stopped she seemed to regain a little of her courage. “I didn’t mean any harm I swear it. I saw something massive coming in the flames before the indications vanished.” I turned to look at her, I had been thinking about how to convince Maggie that Quaithe hadn’t enthralled me. We had duress codes of course but when with magic it’s much harder to truly prove consent. She took my silence as permission to continue. “The last time something so important disappeared you were at the heart of it, I’d seen flashes of you around the world, and everyone who stares into the flames felt your power at the Hightower.”

I looked back towards the safehouse, actually at the house next to it just to be safe. “Last time we spoke you said I was making waves. Who are you to care for them?” I didn’t have a handy dandy truth serum, Rowling had really spoiled her heroes, and I wanted to keep sounding out Quaithe as long as possible.

“There are many signs and portents recorded in Asshai.” She paused and my completely unimpressed expression seemed to spur her on. “Some might be ravings, even most I don’t know. What I do know is that prophecies written there have been true in the past, the fall of the Freehold the most recent.” That was more interesting and I shifted my attention back to her. “There are some that I
found years ago that seem to speak of events soon to come, of a bleeding star and the last dragons.”

“The last dragons died a century ago, you might want to check your oracle because they seemed to have missed some fundamentals.” I had never like prophecies, even the idea of them. Looking intently into the future was against the sixth law, the vague premonitions I’d started to get back on earth were as much as the wardens would allow. Even on this new world if someone really could tell the future they’d be a fixture in the casinos or otherwise exploiting it, not sending vague messages through motheaten books.

“Did they Harry? You saved two on the first night we met.”

“The Targaryens are just children with delusions of grandeur. Whatever let them master their beasts faded with the rest of this world’s magic and now they have nothing but a gift with lizards.”

“They have a gift now? You felt the increase as well?” Quaithe seemed to forget that she was the prisoner of a powerful wizard as she spoke excitedly. “When I set out for Braavos I doubted my course. I and all the rest had felt you halfway across the world. Yet on the very day I arrived and was to meet you the world shone with magic, as if a new sun had risen.”

I hadn’t, in fact felt the new magic she mentioned. Whatever powered the wizards of this world was foreign; Maggie and I operated on an entirely different source. Magic surging back last night did make sense though, there was consensus across most I’d read that when the dragons died so did much of the world’s magic. I didn’t know which drove the other, I had a vague theory that dragons needed a certain background level to live since the glass candles of Hightower had lit for the first time in generations before Rhaellion was born. I was hardly in a position to experiment though. “Magic was on the rise everywhere. I wouldn’t use an existing trend as vindication for your prophecies.”

She retained her optimism though, whatever fears she’d had seemed swamped by her enthusiasm. “You and your daughter were once like giants in the fires, casting shadows and causing earthquakes with your footsteps as you strode the world. When you hid yourself the signs your presence drowned out became clear. I have studied them, the evidence is compelling.” She stopped to breathe, I didn’t really like the idea of my presence being so widely known but at least my wards hid us. “Tell me, what do you know of the Long Night and the Others?”

Involuntarily I flashed back to my soulgaze with the weirwood, the flashing shadows in the trees, the thunderclaps of innumerable ravens’ wings and the pounding roar of the voices, “OTHER OTHER OTHER”.

“Not too much, I assumed they were myth.”

Quaithe launched into lecture mode to quickly to notice my rather blatant lie. “Eight thousand years ago a winter lasted a generation, the sun set for years, and in the dark, the dead rose. They were cast back by a single man and the Wall in Westeros was raised against their return.”

“And? You think a race of frozen twice dead zombies is coming back?”

“Well yes.” She deflated a little, I didn’t have patience for cryptic warnings. “The last dragons will be crucial when-”

“If.” My interjection was met with a glare.

“When they return they’ll be needed.”

“Maybe so. We can talk about your blind adherence to potential ravings later. I’m going to retrieve
my daughter now.”

With that I cast my mind out and shouted her Name into the ether. Elaine and I had developed a telepathy spell way back in the day and I had taught it to Maggie for this sort of situation. Once invited in she’d be able to look at my mind and satisfy herself I was myself. We occasionally practiced building mental defenses by attempting to invade the others mind, she would know what my mind should look like.

I felt her magic probe me briefly then heard her. “Papa!” Her mental voice was relieved. “That shadowbinder, Quaithe was at the door, I made Viserys and Daenerys come with me here!”

“You did the right thing. She came to ask questions though, not as a threat. We’re outside now, come home with me and then I’ll talk to her somewhere else.” I was about to break the link when another thought occurred. “Don’t mention the dragon. Make sure they know.”
Our procession home was silent. Maggie had taken my instructions a bit further than I’d expected and neither of the Targaryens said a word, glancing between the shadowbinder and myself. Maggie threw dark looks at Quaithe, who clearly didn’t want to talk, and I didn’t feel like breaking the quiet.

I stopped our gaggle when we reached my island. I looked at Quaithe when I spoke to my daughter “Maggie take them in and then raise the wards as high as you can. I’ll be home in four bells.” She led the others back down the canal and around the final corner. The sun had set a bell or two ago and the fog was starting to roll in.

The two of us hung back, out of sight of the front door, even if Rhaellion was lurking in the entryway Quaithe wouldn’t see him. I also didn’t want her to have any idea how the wards worked, I wasn’t sure what the knowledge that only Maggie or I could take them down and it took a second to get in could give her, but secrets were almost always worth having.

Once I’d given them enough time to get in I walked forward to the edge of the street, just check that nothing unexpected had happened in the last hundred yards. I could see candlelight on the second floor through the shutters, and the wards were beginning to power up further, they were in and presumably fine. Time for some more answers then.

I was about to start the interrogation when I realized it was late enough at night that bravos were abroad. On my firmly bourgeoise island there weren’t any of the delinquents, but Quaithe and I stood out. “Well come with me then, it’s time we finished that conversation.”

Wandering through the darkened and foggy streets reminded me of the night I first encountered Quaithe, it even had a little Targaryen related adventure. She was here in my power now, the mantle twinged at that thought, and I’d learn what else she knew. For now as we walked I was content to wait.

We passed onto busier canals as we traveled, courtesans’ barges drifted idly and from an alley I heard the clashing swords of a duel. Quaithe didn’t bat an eye as we passed, even when the noises stopped with a scream that morphed into a gurgle. I was taking her to a teahouse near the Iron Bank, it never shut and was always loud, we could talk there with a minimal risk of being overheard.

Opening the door for her, she might be a crazed homicidal warlock but some things were important, the noise of the shop spilled into the street. When ships docked, the Purple Harbor and the channel to it were sufficiently illuminated that they came in at all hours, street urchins were paid to run from the harbor and report the names of the ships that came in. Based on their originating port men there bid on the right of first refusal for the cargo. It was similar to a stock exchange, or the original Llyods of London, captains or shipping magnates could also purchase insurance on their vessels in addition to its function as a clearinghouse. Back when I first arrived in Braavos a lot of my jobs had come from here and a few of the regulars acknowledged me as I entered.

Beyond the noise the shop had a few nice points. First, the tea was excellent and strong enough it could wake the dead and I say that as a diehard coffee drinker. Second, the floor was tiled in a convenient pattern, breaking up the uniform grey each table was surrounded by a circle made of a rare stone. Once we had been seated and had our drinks it only took a minor effort of will to bring a
circle up.

“So tell me more about your ‘prophecy.’”

Quaithe took a long drink of her tea and looked surprised, the variety I’d ordered reminded me of Mountain Dew and was a key component to my escape potions. To the unprepared it was a kick straight to the hindbrain. “I told you the key points already, there are signs that the Long Night will soon be upon us.” I could hear the capitalization she put on the Long Night, but I was more amused by her reaction to the drink. She had put the cup down decisively as she spoke, I had a feeling she wouldn’t be returning here for culinary reasons. “The Targaryens are key, they are the last of the Valyrian ruling families, one of them will have a key role in preventing eternal night.”

My negative position on prophecy has always been pretty clear but eternal night was one of those things that deserved a little investigation. “Why the Targaryens and why Valyria? They’ve passed into history, the Doom broke them and civil war took the rest of their strength.”

Her academic fervor rose again as she leaned in. “There are several prophecies, and they all seem to be linked. The Red Priests have Azor Ahai, the Valyrians the prince who was promised and the First Men the last hero. The myths speak of them ending the night, winning the War for the Dawn.”

I cut her off as she appeared to gather herself for the next bit. “I’ve heard of the first, but that’s an old story, why now? What makes the last of a dead dynasty so important?”

“There were other signs, Daenerys Stormborn, born amidst salt and smoke, magic’s rise, the Ghost of High Heart.”

“If there were signs why are you the only one here? Shouldn’t we be flooded with shadowbinders, Red Priests and Greenseers? Why are you so certain?” It might have been a desire to keep the status quo but I felt that I’d been involved in enough end of the world adventures back on Earth. If only Quaithe had convinced herself that the future was bleak I’d be more inclined to dismiss her claims. “Does anyone else share your views?”

She had deflated a little in the face of my skepticism. “Yes, there are others, Marwyn.”

I felt the circle fall before I noticed anyone approaching, the Mantle surged and I spun with an icy dagger around my fist when Mangini clapped me on the shoulder. “Dresden! It has been too long!”

I let go a deep breathe, trying to calm myself. I flexed my hand and the ice I’d gathered, the Mantle had gathered, broke and fell to the floor. “Mangini, always a pleasure.” He didn’t seem to have noticed how close to being skewered he came and still had an arm around my shoulders.

“Pleasure is the order of the day! Now introduce me to your friend and let me tell you the news!”

Quaithe and I shared a look, from arcane secrets to a buzzed shipping magnate was a bit of a mental jump. “Mangini, this is Quaithe of Asshai. Quaithe, this is” It took a second to remember his first name, I don’t think I’d ever heard anyone use it in casual conversation. “Roone Mangini, a fellow Voyager.”

Mangini kissed her hand and addressed her with enthusiasm. “I have that honor, but today I am far more. Even Dresden’s sorcerous ways won’t match my triumph; through, smoke, sweat and tears the bloody Star has been reborn! She’s steaming around the bay tomorrow, we finally patched up her hull and got the engine and screw in her.” Quaithe’s face had gone white and the teacup she’d
picked up fell with a clatter. Mangini didn’t notice, continuing his story. “We showed Oliva, his whole vaunted Arsenal couldn’t match my yards, I’m going to steam right up to his dock and leave my mast there, just for him.” He continued on in the same vein for a while, I hadn’t realized both of them were so close to practical engines or that they shared such a rivalry. Eventually he left, seeking a more appreciative audience, but not before making sure I’d be at the harbor to see the Star on it’s maiden voyage.

“For the record I don’t think your dead prophets saw a steamboat. Shouldn’t the signs be more allegorical anyways?”

Quaithe had recovered some color and shook her head vigorously in negation. “How can you say that? I arrived here as magic returned to its grandest flowering in living memory, to ignore this would be foolish. When you attend this spectacle I’m going with you.” I stood up, my tolerance for events of any sort today was pretty much gone. Quaithe got up with me and followed me into the street.

When I left Earth I thought these kinds of things would stop. Wishful thinking apparently. “Well I’ll be at the Purple Harbor at noon, hopefully by then you’ll have found some new translation. If Mangini’s boat is a herald of the apocalypse I don’t think I’ll be able to take it at all seriously.”

50.

I left Quaithe outside the teahouse and headed home. There were bravos at every intersection and I walked passed several developing duels. They ignored me, I was in dark clothes and not carrying a sword, so I was far beneath their contempt.

The bravos were an expression of the universal urge for young men to do foolish things. When I first arrived I had thought they were the equivalent of fratboys, young men who had never really wanted for anything seeking a little adventure. They would wear their flashy silks and behave outrageously for a time before joining their father’s businesses and becoming the staid Braavosi stereotypes. There certainly were some like that, but most were poor and ragged men, rogues living from day to day in faded and torn clothes, fighting because they didn’t have anything better to do. Those were the ones who worried me, not all the D’Artagnan lites.

In any event I made it home unbothered, the wards were still at their siege level and took a few minutes to temporarily lower for me to enter. Having a stronger threshold had let me do a lot more with wards than my old apartment, there if the wards were raised up so high I’d have to wait for dawn to enter, here they were a bit more nuanced.

Maggie was waiting up for me when I entered, she couldn’t quite hide her relief. “What did the witch want?”

“Apparently the two upstairs are prophesied heroes who will save the world from falling into darkness.” I plopped down into an armchair, one of the first things I’d splurged on with my compass fueled wealth was an actual cushioned reclining chair, I had no idea how people had gotten by without them.

She was incredulous and paused to look askance at me before replying. “Has she met dragonboy?” At my nod she shook her head. “Are all ancient wisdom types really so gullible? How hard do you think it would be for you to fake up a prophecy that makes me the queen of the world?”
“I would never do something so cruel to the world, I do have friends here you know.”

“Some father you are, you never got me a pony and now you won’t even get me all the kingdoms of the world?”

“If you’d eaten your vegetables and cleaned your room more often then maybe.” She smiled, it had been hard not to spoil her and I probably would have if we hadn’t been so close to the edge for the first year or so. I had no idea how Michael had managed not to give into his children’s every whim, I was substituting blind luck for divinely inspired wisdom in any case.

“More seriously she does have some way of seeing the Targaryens, at least when they’re outside wards. When that little lizard hatched she felt magic surge from across the city at least.”

“We can’t assume she’s the only one looking then, what are we going to do?”

I leaned back in my chair thinking. “Well the Sealord knows they’re alive and some of the Keyholders of the Bank will know soon if they don’t already.” I was ticking the people off on my fingers as I went. “Quaithe, obviously, Noho will probably be told, you and I, and then the great unknown, whoever else can scry for them when they leave a warded area. No one else knows about the dragon though.”

We sat in silence for a minute, I didn’t know what Maggie was thinking but I was trying to imagine a way to conceal a dragon. It was cat sized now but everything I’d read said it would start to grow pretty rapidly. Within the year it would get to labrador sized, in two years as large as horse, and at three it would have the wingspan of a pterodactyl. The one in the club had been four or five years old and it was pretty massive, someone had ridden it into battle before a lucky shot took it down. The Targaryens would need to be gone from Braavos before it got to that stage, probably before it got to the dog size, it would be blowing smoke and flame pretty soon and fire and sailboats did not mix well.

One of the downsides in living in a feudal world I mused, was property rights. I figured I’d be a multimillionaire on earth by now, I could if I wanted, never work another day in my lengthy life. Back home I could have simply bought a few hundred acres out in the sticks, smuggled a firebreathing dragon in, and no one would know about it until it torched the local high school. Here, even on the mainland, most of Braavos’s land belonged to the rich or gentleman farmers. I could probably purchase some, but the close good land was occupied and the cheaper badlands were home to bandits that lived on the borders with Lorath, Norvos, and Pentos.

If the dragon was bigger, years two and a half on, Viserys could have simply admitted to having it, raised an army of sellswords and Targaryen loyalists, moved to Pentos and lingered for a year or so before invading. I didn’t like that scenario, for a conquest to have as little blood as possible Rhaellion needed to be large enough that no one dare would fight him, not just be big enough not to be killed by assassins. In any event the path from now to then was tricky.

“How long are the Targaryens going to stay dead?” I started as Maggie spoke.

“How long are they going to stay here you mean?” I flashed a grin at her disgruntled expression. “Maybe as long as month, two weeks at least. Enough for the Westerosis to hear they’re dead.”

“And then what? They’re not going to just give up right? Whatever reasons there are to kill them still exist, especially if the Sealord does something because of it, they’ve already paid the price.”
“True.” I had been half hoping for the Sealord to solve the problem without me, he presumably had some ideas but a wizard Targaryen wasn’t the sort of thing the Westerosis could safely ignore. “Maybe he’ll send them into hiding? I don’t really have any good ideas about it. Perhaps ‘Viserys and Daenerys’ will die replaced by the black haired children ‘Aerys and Naerys’ who couldn’t possibly be the dead Targaryen children. It isn’t our immediate problem though.”

“Right, so what are you doing about Quaithe?”

“Well tomorrow we’re going to see the maiden trip of Mangini’s steamboat, the regrettably named Star.”

Maggie looked a little confused by that tidbit. “That’s a hardly a terrible name, what’s wrong with it?”

I exhaled, the next part was a little more ridiculous than I liked to imagine my life. “It may or may not have perfectly fit into a prophecy.”

“If that’s true this world is even less dignified than your dinosaur stunt.”

“Hey, don’t badmouth Sue, I will maintain to my death that polka was the perfect beat to reanimate a dinosaur to.” It may have been a key part of my reputation to the younger Wardens, Ramirez’s fault for sure, and it had fulfilled the most important part of any plan, succeeding, but I still kind of wished Butters had owned any other percussive instrument than a polka suit.

“I don’t even really remember what polka is, but knowing you, I’m certain that’s incorrect.”

With those nearly blasphemous sentiments aired Maggie went up to her room and I managed to make it to my own bed, tomorrow would be a busy day.

Waking up to the clatter of a dragon feeding was just as grating a second time. Rhaellion again hissed when he saw me before going back to gorging himself on whatever they threw him. Larger pieces than he could swallow he dropped and breathed on, no fire or smoke emerged but a visible heat haze came forth. “He only eats cooked food?”

“Yes, Munkun said something similar and he definitely likes hot meat better” Viserys replied absently. The dragon had made quite a dent in the groceries, the icebox was almost completely emptied. We’d have to figure something out with the maid service too, they’d notice the additional inhabitants just from the extra bedrooms even if they didn’t see the kids or the dragon. I didn’t think the logical assumption from me having guests was the Targaryens surviving but it never hurt to be careful.

The morning passed swiftly, with all the commotion Maggie and I hadn’t had much time to practice magic so I spent the time until the demonstration throwing things at her as she worked on her shields. Daenerys had gotten a little bored with the dragon and followed us up, cheering each time Maggie blocked me. I tried to get her to throw things at Maggie too but she was firmly on the girls’ team and flung anything I gave her at me instead. See if I save the brat next time.

Eventually it was time to go, throwing on my coat and taking my staff, it would be foolish to knowingly meet another magician without it, I stepped out into the bright sunlight and recoiled. Once every couple of weeks the fogs and clouds of Braavos would clear and the sun would pierce down and remind you what color everything actually was. Still grey mostly, but there were occasional flowers growing in window boxes that added a splash of color and the faster moving canals gleamed
a mossy green.

The Purple Harbor was blue, the waves flashing in the bright sunlight. There was the beginning of a crowd there, I saw a few people I vaguely knew from my detective days and the Voyagers but most were just people looking for a spectacle. Being head and shoulders taller than most people I made my way to the edge of the Sealord’s square and stood against the wall overlooking the water. Quaithe could find me in the masses easier than the reverse.

She wasn’t the only one though. “Harry, Mangini also roped you in?” Johannes had emerged from the crowd, people making way before his bulk. “Do you think his little smoker will get a boat moving?”

I was a little conflicted, it was nice to see him but I’d told him of my encounters with Quaithe and he would definitely remember hearing about her. He also wouldn’t know about the Targaryen children and Quaithe might not keep it a secret, that knowledge spreading could only lead to trouble. “Well they used to work in my homeland, I don’t see why they shouldn’t here.”

I was a little curious about the steamboat, if it hadn’t been for the dragon and its circumstances I’d have been far more interested. I didn’t think a steam engine would fall to my murphyonic field but it was definitely a step towards the hexable type of technology.

As Johannes launched into a monologue about the potential of steam engines, I was actually a little impressed by his foresight, I tried to think of a way to politely get him to leave. Sadly I was too late. “Dresden you’re lucky you’re easy to find or I’d think you were hoping to be lost in the crowd.” Quaithe had found us.

Johannes looked amused to see me with a woman, he’d been entertained beyond all reasonable measure by my awkwardness at the dinner parties. “Harry is far too chivalrous for that Lady?”

I was about to invent a pseudonym for her, regardless of the fact I’d told Mangini her name when she spoke. “Quaithe, lately of Asshai.” Johannes sputtered and she smirked. “Has Harry told you of me?”

Johannes rallied and was about to reply when the crowd erupted in murmurs. Smoke was coming from a boathouse at the edge of the harbor and from the open doors a strange ship emerged.

Calling it a ship was a little of a misnomer, it looked like Magini had taken a barge and threw an engine on it. It was moving though, with no sails or oars accompanied by a billowing cloud of steam. The barge slowly moved into the harbor, a good rowboat could probably make rings around it, but it was going right into the wind. If the Summer Islanders disliked my compasses they’d probably hate steam engines.

True to his words Mangini sailed, well motored, towards the Arsenal whose walls were full of observers. The test was apparently a success, although I was sure he had made certain everything would work well before showing it off in public.

Quaithe was disappointed though, as impressive as the technology was it hardly pulsed with magical power. If she was hoping for it to gush blood or something she was out of luck.

“So how did you two meet?” Johannes irreverent question was a relief. I had half worried he’d run into the crowd when heard Quaithe’s name but in a few minutes he’d recovered enough to make fun of me.
“I saw him in the flames and felt compelled to come investigate.” Well at the very least that weirded Johannes out, he looked mildly discomfitted by the reminder of a shadowbinder’s power. “Then he dragged me all over the city and purchased me a new wardrobe before having drinks with me.”

“What.” I was fairly used to cryptic and prophecy obsessed Quaithe, not really a huge fan, but she fit into a neat mental box. Humor was entirely uncharacteristic of her type and it threw me. I took a step back from the seawall into the crowd so they were both in front of me. “That is an entirely misleading description of last night’s events.”

Both were smiling, Johannes was always entertained at my expense and Quaithe had a sphinxlike smirk. “You shouldn’t lead women on Harry, even those who don’t command mysterious forces dislike it.”

“I am so sorry.” Someone else’s words, not mine and I twisted to see who it was only to be greeted by a punch to my side.

The Mantle rose up inside me and the world slowed. Now that I had turned I saw a nondescript man with a dagger in his hand staring at me with a shocked expression. Apparently he thought a wizard would fall to a knife in the back. I stretched out my free hand as his face shifted towards fear, seized his wrist and squeezed.

His bones crumpled under my inexorably closing grip and I flung him to the ground in front of me against the seawall. The knife had fallen when I crushed his arm and he cowered unarmed between the three of us.

“Consto!”

It was a derivative of my newfound favorite telekinesis spell, it held things stationary, the assassin wouldn’t be able to move until I released him. “Who sent you?”

Quaithe and Johannes were only just reacting, my Mantle fueled actions would have been a blur without enhanced perception. “What are you doing Harry?”

That was Johannes, you can take the man out of the bank but you can’t take the banker from the man. His comfortable life had not prepared him for sudden violence. I lowered my staff so the glowing rune covered head was within a foot of the man, uncaring of the attention my actions were drawing. I only barely looked up to reply “Getting some answers from a killer. Now,” I returned my attention to the paralyzed man, “tell me who sent you before I start breaking things of yours.”

I relaxed my mental grip a little, just enough to let him speak, he swallowed nervously, then spoke again. “I am so sorry.”

“Wrong answer. Volat!” He only twitched at the breaking of a finger and the Mantle urged me to do more, to make him scream, when he twitched again, this time across his whole body. He started coughing and blood was mixed with the spittle. Johannes was shocked but Quaithe was made of sterner stuff. She dropped to her knees next to the convulsing man, looking for something as his restricted motions slowed. Once he stopped she pried his mouth open looked in and sniffed it.

“He has a shattered tooth, he poisoned himself with something quick, manticore venom or something just as fast.” She stood and wiped her dress clean fastidiously. “What did he say to you?”
“I’d like to know too actually.” Syrio had emerged from the crowd that had drawn back watching us. “Perhaps we should take this discussion to the palace?”

The three of us and the unfortunate corpse followed Syrio through the crowd. Now that my adrenaline was gone and the Mantle mostly subsided I was feeling a little shook up. If I had chosen not to wear my coat due to the nice weather I could have six inches of steel in my kidney. Sure people had tried to kill me before, I’d been captured, tortured, auctioned, and imprisoned, but literal knives in the back were more rare. Especially in this world, compared to Earth I hadn’t done anything worth being assassinated for.

Another of the Sealord’s guards had taken the dead man and the part of my mind that wasn’t scanning the crowd for follow up attempts was watching him bounce and thinking about who could have sent him. The Ironborn were a possibility, I was pivotal in throwing them off the mainland. It was a long way from Westeros’s west coast though, and sending a killer after me half a world away didn’t seem like an appropriate use of resources during an increasingly desperate war. The Red Priests might have done it, I’d been there for their expulsion from the city, but I was hardly the driver behind that adventure. I had probably angered some during my detective days, some of the cargos I’d found had powerful people who had wanted them lost. It had been almost two years since I’d been in the finding things business though, mobsters were rarely the patient sort. That left Westerosis, they might have wanted to get rid of the Targaryen and Martell friendly wizard, or it could have been someone I didn’t know about. For all I knew someone had bought up a ton of my compasses and was planning to kill me to increase their value.

I schooled my features as we entered the palace, one thing I’d learned was to never let them see you sweat. A lot of my reputation here was from my apparent invincibility, I’d bearded the Faceless men in their den, smashed a warlock in the bowels of the Red Temple, killed innumerable Ironborn before smashing Oldtown’s walls, defeated a horde of assassins while rescuing children and just now had taken a knife to the back with no apparent result. If people didn’t think they could fight me they might stop trying, maybe, with luck.

For once we weren’t led to a cheese filled antechamber, Syrio led us straight to a stone floored room with a sturdy wooden table. From the way the guard dumped the killer on it the table had held other unfortunates before. Johannes was looking increasingly panicked compared to Quaithe’s and my calmer expressions. When people said banking was cut throat they never meant literally.

“Syrio”

“Hmm?”

“I think Quaithe and I can tell you all you need, Johannes had nothing to do with it.”

He looked over Johannes in that peculiar manner he had, simultaneously disinterested and piercing. “Just so. Johannes Bille correct?” Johannes nodded, “I trust Ser Harry, Claudio will see you out. Don’t speak of this matter by order of the First Sword.”

The guard ushered Johannes out and we exchanged a final glance as he left. That left Quaithe and I looking at Syrio over a dead body. “So Harry, you decided you liked the palace so much you’d put a hit on yourself just to come back?”
“The art speaks to me, I can hardly go a day without dreaming about the chiaroscuro present in the Searlords’ portraiture.” Quaithe and Syrio exchanged a look, apparently the hallmark of noir films wasn’t a thing here, I’m cursed to forever lack an audience.

“Regardless of your questionable fondness for past Sealords, you sent Bille away while Quaithe remained.” He paused to give her a look that he probably hoped dripped with significance. “Am I to assume she has some information that he lacked?”

“I have some medical training, in antidotes and their poisons. I could assist in identifying the compound.”

“You offer is welcomed but unneeded, we have men who can do the same. Was it only for your knowledge that Harry let you stay? You seem much more comfortable after a murder than most healers I’ve met.” I should have had her leave as well, I hadn’t thought past Johannes’s comfort. Oh well, mistakes were made, we’d just have to press on.

“Death is an unfortunate reality, I’ve seen enough to accept it.”

He gave her another look. “Just so.” He switched his attention back to me. “So Harry, what did the dead man say to you?”

“The dead don’t speak it’s one of their defining characteristics.” He impatiently motioned for me to continue. “Before he shuffled off this mortal coil he said the same thing twice, ‘I am so sorry.’

“That answers one question then.” Quaithe nodded along with Syrio and I felt like the slow kid in class. Syrio was annoyingly perceptive, he noticed my ignorance and her knowledge. He motioned to Quaite. “Perhaps our healer here can explain to you?”

“A Sorrowful man, assassins out of Qarth. They’re notorious, although a class below the Faceless Men.” Syrio’s expression briefly twisted at their mention. “Their calling card is saying ‘I am so sorry’ immediately before their attempt, and apparently also before committing suicide.”

“Well as long as they feel remorse it’s OK I guess.” I stared at the killer for a minute, poison capsules in a fake tooth, that was fairly hardcore as far as things I had encountered here went. “Is there any chance at finding out who hired them from their headquarters?”

“Their discretion is legendary, they are expensive though. Who have you irritated enough for their price?”

“Come on, you know me Syrio, I can’t think of anyone who doesn’t like me.”

Both Quaithe and he snorted, neither having the grace to look even slightly abashed. “Too many to count then. Combined with the other matter it might be wise to leave the city for a time.”

“My home has its own protections.” The wards there would stop everything short of an army, and even then we’d have enough time to escape.

“Remaining in a known location while killers stalk you is foolish. The whole purpose of your and the Sealord’s arrangement is that your home is free from surveillance. If you’re being watched we’ll need to change plans.” That was a decent point, if we were sticking to the dead Targaryen plan enemies watching my home would throw a wrench in it. On the other hand if the kids left Rhaellion
would be discovered and I still had no idea what to do with him.

“Syrio is right” Ferrego had entered while we spoke, accompanied by his massive bodyguard. “I have a potential location for you as well, sufficiently isolated that your privacy and safety can be assured.”

“Oh? Keeping two Valyrian children secret will be harder somewhere they don’t blend in, especially out in the country where any new thing is noteworthy.”

“Dyeing their hair black would solve that if it were a problem, and there are other advantages to the location, namely no one lives within a hundred miles who will talk.”

“I don’t think anywhere in Braavosi territory is that isolated, even the hill country has shepherds and ranchers in it.”

“Nowhere on Essos or Sothoryos or Westeros. My brother owned an island in the Shivering Sea, he built a villa on it, for what reason I don’t know. It’s a desolate rock, the only noteworthy features are hot springs and sea lions. His children sensibly want nothing to do with it and left it to me.” He clasped his hands as if the matter was settled. “A week at sea and we can have you and the children somewhere no one knows to look.” It wasn’t a terrible idea, I could do a decent Prospero impression out there and a forgotten rock was an excellent hiding spot for us and a growing dragon. I also missed being on a creepy island in the middle of cold waters.

“Well as long as we’re provisioned that sounds suitable. How long do you think we should be out there?”

He looked pensive, moving to inspect the assassin’s body. “There are still Westerosis nosing around and this fellow indicates that they’re not restricting their targets to the children. Until we can force concessions about employing assassins in my city from them they cannot return to public life. Based on our negotiations so far, at least two months.”

Maggie would not be happy about a seaside vacation. Well maybe she would be if I described it like that, at least until she found out which sea she’d be besides. Having an assassin after me though made me less concerned with her social life. Now that one had failed against me they might seek softer targets, it wouldn’t be the first time Maggie had been used to get to me. Suddenly a stay in witness protection sounded like a better idea. “One last thing then, my particular variety of defenses works best on land I own, if you’re not interested in keeping the rock would you be interested in selling?”

“You’re welcome to it as long as you keep the Targaryen’s safe until they can return, Tregar’s wife described it as a rock covered in birdshit, although being from Lys she never enjoyed the cold. She may have been a little uncharitable in her words, but it’s essentially true, other than the villa and a jetty there’s not much there.”
With our impromptu vacation planned to his satisfaction Ferrego left us with the body. We shared an awkward moment over the slowly rigor mortising corpse before I turned to Syrio. “So do we get an escort out? Or is there some sort of frequent visitors card I need to get punched?”

“I have a number of men who will happily punch anything I tell them to, your choice between them or being walked out.” As he spoke he stepped forward and chivvied us into the hallway.

As we wandered through the dark halls I started to ask for details about the trip then remembered Quaithe’s presence and stopped. The Sealord and Syrio had blindly trusted me, even though we didn’t discuss anything she didn’t know I was surprised they hadn’t asked at least. Maybe they just assumed I would have gotten rid of her if I should have. Competence, even better to fake than sincerity.

She was still with me as I left the palace though, I needed a way to get rid of her before getting home and also a way to conceal the dragon outside of the wards. Best to bite the bullet now then. “Well it’s been fun Quaithe, but this is where we part ways.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, those two children are keys to this world’s salvation, they need to be taught, led-”

“Alive? I can guard them far better without worrying about you sticking a knife in my back.”

“Since that worked so well for the Sorrowful Man back there?” It was nice to be viewed as nearly invincible, every time we, well I, had thrown down I’d been far superior, but I liked people to keep trying failing strategies. If Quaithe thought me immune to knives and other such violence she might try something sneaky I wouldn’t see coming. Granted I didn’t think she was looking to kill me, but her motives were sufficiently obscure I couldn’t be sure. She also didn’t deny thinking about it just now either, even if I wouldn’t have believed her it would have been a nice gesture. “Is there anything I can say for you allow me to come along?” She almost sounded exasperated, perhaps I’d been thinking and not replying for longer than I’d thought.

“We’ll be back in a month or three, I doubt anything sufficiently ground shaking will occur in that time. Your prophecies have waited millennia, little longer won’t hurt.” With that I turned my back on her and stepped into the crowds. Since life doesn’t have natural scene breaks without head trauma she followed me.

“I can guard you against other shadowbinders while you travel. You were visible in the flames all through Westeros, I can hide you.”

That was interesting, I slowed to let her catch up. “I’ve never heard anything about that, can you prove it?” If others were looking, and based on her words they probably were, it would only take one glance at the boat to notice Rhaellion. A circle wouldn’t hold on a moving object like a boat, well maybe on a cruiseship but nothing large enough sailed here. Even then I doubted a circle would stop a projection from seeing through it. If some other observer decided to see what I was up to a dragon would almost certainly catch their attention. Their eggs blazed in the Sight and I couldn’t imagine how bright a live dragon would burn.
“Asshai’s greater mysteries were never written. I can guard you from the shadows and the light of the glass candles.” I’d meant to investigate glass candles more after seeing their unsettling Sight like illumination but I hadn’t had the time. Lord Hightower had used his to look up and down the coast, it wasn’t hard to imagine others using it to look for me.

“So is that how you spied on us when we first met?”

She smiled enigmatically. “Agree to take me and I’ll teach you all I know.”

Five days later we were all on a boat and ready to get off of it. Quaithe had been quite surprised to discover a dragon lurking in my home but I’d managed to get an oath and a vial of her blood as collateral against her talking. I didn’t tell her what I would do with the blood, her imagination would conjure greater threats, me being able to find her wherever she hid as long as the blood was liquid, maybe for a week, wasn’t really viscerally terrifying.

After that it was just persuading Maggie it would be a fun adventure and then putting up with her sulking when she saw through my lies. Viserys and Daenerys were excited by the idea of a trip, neither had left Braavos in the last four or five years and they weren’t as jaded when it came to trips across the sea. Rhaellion had been hidden in a crate, Quaithe was already one more than I’d like to know about him. We’d concealed the dragon carrier beneath cages of chickens, they were loud and any flapping could be excused as theirs. I’d actually purchased a lot in preparation for my new island, it was a mix of camping supplies and random equipment I wanted, enough tools to replicate my lab as well some more standard hammers and saws. Ferrego had taken care of the food situation and now, standing at the bow watching over the sea I was half looking forward to it.

Quaithe joined me a little later, just as the island came over the horizon. My first impression matched that of Tregar’s wife, a rock covered in guano. The Shivering Sea was grey under a leaden sky, and our home for the near future blended into both. My telescope showed a sturdy structure at the island’s summit, built of weathered wood and the local stone. Seagulls were perched on the roof line and there were seals along the beach, particularly large ones were sitting on the jetty.

“Want to get the kids ready to disembark?” Quaithe was a strange traveling companion. Every now and then she’d do something so normal I’d forget she had spent years mastering mysterious magics in the far east. Other times, like now apparently, she was silent. Even if her mask wasn’t lost in some canal I doubted I’d have gotten more out of her, she kept her face so still it half reminded me of the Sidhe, something alien lurking behind a woman’s face.

Unloading our cargo with the help of the crew took under an hour, the longest part was clearing the jetty of seals. They had no fear of humans and it took a few being clubbed by the sailors to get them out of the way. When I first came to this world I might have felt guilty, but without grocery stores you had to take what you could get, even if that meant you ate something that had a cute face you’d seen.

The house, calling it a villa didn’t really fit, was solidly built. The hot springs Ferrego had mentioned were the centerpiece of the structure. The rooms around them were built into the rock and the effort involved made me wonder just how rich Tregar had been. It would have been hard to build on such a remote island with modern technology, much less just human muscle power.

There were several bedrooms, servants’ rooms and a main room with a long table meant for meals. Any hopes I’d had for a secret library were dashed by the bare walls, past the furniture the house was empty. That hardly meant it wasn’t luxurious, quite a lot of work had gone into it. The spring’s heat
was used for many things, channels were cut that made the air warm and humid and removed the need for fireplaces. It wasn’t quite running water but any sort of plumbing was novel in this world.

The floors were solid stone and warm, the heat of the hot springs spread through the rock, even without the mini aqueducts. I deliberately didn’t think about the massive column of magma that might be just beneath our feet, instead I stopped exploring to ensure that our supplies were neatly stowed. I had just checked that we had everything for the fifth time when Maggie found me.

“Next vacation I get to pick the destination.”

“You don’t like our new island? Demonreach isn’t half as nicely furnished, even if it does come with a territorial genus loci.”

“Remember when I wanted to go to a resort? And we went and nothing exciting at all happened?” Maggie had her arms crossed tightly and for a moment I just saw Susan. “I got to ride horses, we played with fire and lightning in a quarry, we met Oberyn, no invasions, no seal clubbing. Take notes because those are the goals for all future trips.”

“Technically” she glared but I pressed on. “Technically this isn’t a vacation.”

“Then you shouldn’t have tried to sell it as one.”

Our moment of father-daughter bonding was broken by a panting Viserys. “Harry, Maggie, you need to see this.”

We followed at just short of a trot, Viserys looking over his shoulder as he paced ahead of us. Quaithe and Daenerys were in the central room, Rhaellion was taking long wing assisted jumps over the steaming pools but they weren’t paying him any attention. Instead they were staring at the remaining dragon eggs sitting among the hot stones. Two of them were rocking.

53.

As I stood looking at the two twitching eggs, the black and the bronze, I a hard time holding in a curse. Fuck it. “Shit.” Daenerys looked up, her head a foot away from the bronze egg, and I was sure she’d just learned a new word if only for situational comedy. “When did this start?”

“Just now. I came to get you as soon as I was sure I wasn’t imagining things.” Viserys was squatting near the eggs now, not quite as close as his sister but close enough to give the impression of a mother hen.

“You didn’t do anything? Why did you even take them out of their chest?”

Visereys looked at the two subtly moving eggs, searching for words. “It just felt right you know? Like before when I put them into the study’s hearth. I had an urge to put them with the rocks and I just did.” Quaithe was listening intently, no doubt making another mark in the prophesized hero column.

“Next time you have one of those feelings get me first.” I tried to think what I knew about dragon hatching, realized it was nothing useful and jumped a few branches on the evolutionary tree. “Chickens can take up to a day from the first motion till they hatch, we probably shouldn’t expect
them to emerge for a few hours.” Everyone else in the room looked a little indignant that I was comparing the two but I didn’t think anyone else there had ever had the dubious pleasure of dealing with chickens. Luckily we’d brought a brood so I could share my hard earned agricultural experience.

Thinking about the dumb birds made me realize another problem. We had managed to smuggle Rhaellion out here under their cages but that had taken planning and luck. Getting three dragons back in secret would be an entirely more difficult undertaking.

Everyone else on the island was entranced watching the eggs twitch but after twenty minutes I was ready to move on. Trying to distract myself I left the house and started to explore the rest of the island.

It was decent sized, perhaps half a mile along its longest axis and was a single hill up from the ocean with the house at its summit. Now that I wasn’t helping to carry crates up from the jetty I could see that the house was actually built into the rock to a larger extent than I’d first though. The island was obviously volcanic and it seemed like the house was built in the crater. I stopped my tour for a second, this island was shaping up to be a supervillain base. We had a wizard working with pretenders to the crown, dragons, a mysterious sorceress and the classic wizard’s beautiful daughter. “Just add lava, maybe a skull and we’re set.” The seagulls, like everyone else on this planet, didn’t get my joke.

I kept heading towards the water, the seals on this side were still blissfully ignorant of human nature and while they kept a wary eye on me they didn’t vanish into the ocean. I was more concerned about sea lions. Ferrego had mentioned them being here and from what I dimly remembered from the Lincoln Park Zoo I was a little worried about them. They were solid, deceptively quick, masses of muscle. Getting killed by a bull sea lion would be an extremely embarrassing and probably painful way to go.

Luckily the beach was empty of larger sea mammals and I made it to the water without incident. The island was pretty young geologically speaking I decided, the beaches were mostly solid rock with no masses of rounded stone or sand. I had brought some seeds in the hope there’d be soil, if I was claiming an island I wanted at least a little vegetation, but if I wanted any dirt I’d have to make it myself.

After worrying about terraforming I entertained myself a bit thinking about grandiose projects I could accomplish now that I was far from prying eyes. I’d wanted a giant tower ever since I read the Lord of the Rings and with no Murphy, Elaine, or Susan here I wouldn’t have to put up with jokes about phallic symbolism. Earth magic could do a lot with a volcano as a foundation, even with my fairly limited skills the rock practically begged to be shaped. It remembered being liquid in a way and I could exploit that to make whatever I wanted. Carving steps into the path from the jetty would be child’s play if a little taxing and building a seawall might even be practical. I had been looking for a new project ever since I mastered the compasses and building my very own supervillain base might do it.

If of course the dragons didn’t take all of my time. We’d have to be careful with them I mused as I walked back towards the house. Right now I’d lay decent odds on the gulls taking Rhaellion, to say nothing of the seals.

The springs chamber, it really needed a better name, was the same as when I left it. The Targaryens were still brooding, Quaithe was watching and Maggie was doing her lightning trick while reading. I’d brought quite a lot of books with us, all ones from my publisher and some of them were well
worth reading. Quite a few weren’t though, if the future Don Quixote had been printed by us already I had missed it. “Any change?”

“No, I thought I saw the last egg move once or twice but it’s still just the two of them.”

They were content to wait but I was sick of dragons already. I had liked them a lot better as abstract ideas than annoying lizards that hated me. Well so far only Rhaellion hated me but based on all of the eggs response to my touch I wasn’t hopeful. “If this was a movie,” everyone but Maggie looked up confused. “This would be a montage and there’d be a ticking sound and we’d all just shift positions between cuts for thirty seconds and the dragons would pop out neatly”

“As long as we’re complaining I’ve wanted all our boat rides to be montages or scene cuts since like three hours into our first trip on the Purple Martin.”

“Want to have a training montage instead? We never really finished your lessons in melting rocks back in Oldtown.”

Maggie extinguished her lightning and set her book down. “I can choose between seeing the first controlled dragon hatching in two centuries or pumping energy into the island and vaporizing a layer of guano? That doesn’t sound like a hard choice at all.” I had been proud when she discovered litotes but after she delivered that line brightly I wished she missed them along with sarcasm.

Framed the way Maggie put it sculpting the island did sound a little less fun, but watching eggs hatch was only a little better than paint drying. Assuming my immense ornithological experience held true they’d be there for a while, even when the shell broke the process still had plenty of time to go. I went to the kitchen, grabbed some of our limited bread supply and made a sandwich, I had priorities. As I ate I took some parchment and began to draw up plans for expansion, feeling like a kid drawing his ultimate tree fort.

My foray into increasingly whimsical architecture, flying buttresses everywhere, was distracting enough I almost didn’t notice Quaithe coming in. “Harry.”

“Quaithe.” She sat at the table without my invitation and waited, occasionally looking from me to the door to the spring chamber.

Eventually she realized that I was content to remain silent and spoke up. “You don’t want to see the birth of a new age in the world? No one alive remembers the last time dragons clawed through the sky, surely watching the eggs hatch with all your senses is more valuable than whatever you’re doing.”

I set my quill down, using one still felt ridiculous, and looked over my sketch before replying. “I’ve seen magic meant to change the world before, it was easy to agree to help Viserys hatch them but now that they are.” I paused to gather my thoughts, glancing at her. “Magic has a price, the last attempt at a new age I was involved in was a lot more expensive than I’d have ever willingly chosen.”

“Fire and blood are the Targaryen words. Viserys at least would have struggled to regain the Iron Throne with or without your help. He would have caused a war one way or another.”

Viserys would have tried, I was sure of that. He was just a boy though, he might have gotten a few thousand men and been crushed, or never made it to Westeros, sunk at sea or in the Stepstones like the last Blackfyre rebellion. Now though, there would be a full scale invasion and war. “You said I
changed things when we first met, what did you see in your flames before?”

Quaithe had been looking at me while we spoke, I’d been carefully staring at her forehead, but now she turned back towards the spring chamber. “I saw him crowned in gold, Daenerys from a great height overlooking darkness, and endless snow.”

“And now?”

She looked up and had an enigmatic smile, looking more Sidhe like than ever. “Ever since Rhaellion hatched, only fire.”

54.

After my unsettling jaunt into sixth law bending there was nothing to do but wait. Sure I had plans for the future, I owned the island and there wasn’t a terrifying genius loci that would be looking over my shoulder as I changed it’s very being, but I wanted Maggie’s agreement at least and she was on the dragon watch.

So I kept sketching, terraces, cisterns, a nice Moai or two down by the water, and the foundations for my eventual wizard tower. I was also starting to puzzle out how to make dirt, my as of yet unnamed island was entirely made of some sort of pumice like stone and the only vegetation was lichen. If I wanted to eat anything local that wasn’t fish, sea gulls or seals I’d need to figure that out. I was pretty sure the solution would involve excessive force to shatter rocks but I was willing to experiment.

Daenerys came sprinting into the dining room, or at least as much of a sprint as she could manage. I was pretty surprised she’d left her spot, she’d been practically sitting on the eggs last I saw. “The eggs, the shells are cracking!” I was pretty sure that meant there was still a lot of time, quite a lot of the shell had to be broken away before chickens could escape and they weren’t punching through jewel encrusted rocks. Nonetheless I followed the excited girl back to the spring chamber. The bronze egg showed it more but fractures were beginning to spread on both of the egg’s upper hemispheres. I wasn’t sure if the dragons knew which way to go or if it was blind luck they weren’t going out the bottom, but I wasn’t willing to question providence. Controlled studies would be for next time.

“Have you thought about names yet?” I addressed the room at large since small cracks were far more interesting to Daenerys than I was.

“Maggie has told me of an ancient dragon from your homeland, Ancalagon.” She smirked unrepentantly. “That will do for one of them, for the other Daenerys suggested Jelmazma.”

I took a second, Braavos spoke a dialect of Valyrian but from High Valyrian it was like French to Latin. Braavosi also had a lot of loan-words from its varied population to confuse the link even more. “Weather?”

“It translates better as storm but close enough.” Viserys didn’t even look up as he spoke, his entire focus on the slowly hatching dragons. It was a little creepy how entranced everyone was actually, I guess they weren’t quite as jaded when it came to world shaking consequences.

“Well I’m going back outside then, if I’m not back in a few hours the seagulls got me.” I got a halfhearted wave from Maggie and left the house.
The sun was just beginning to set, moving in had taken most of the morning and the rest of the day had been adventures in cryptoherpetology. There seemed to be more seals on the beaches, I didn’t know if seals and sealions slept on land or at sea but I’d have time to find out, at least until the dragons were big enough to eat them.

I was a little excited at the prospect of more dragons, and it was exciting to think I’d be seeing something unique in the last two hundred years but I really had no patience for watching the shells crack. Rhaellion, half flapping around as he was, was far more interesting and he hated me. He’d be about a week older than his siblings or clutch mates, it probably wouldn’t be noticeable after another month or two. If the books were right he’d graduate to full on flight within months, hopefully he’d stick around and not get eaten by seagulls.

Of course dragons flying over the ocean would be much more likely to be discovered. After hours of thinking about it I still had no good idea on how to get them back to Braavos without being discovered. The obvious solution was to leave them here, my island was not on any of the trade routes and any sailors who saw them would probably assume they were just birds until they were big enough it didn’t really matter. Even if that would fly with Viserys random ships weren’t the biggest problem. The ship that would pick us up from the island would be back much sooner, they had the greatest chance of exposing the return of the dragons.

I had almost made it down to the water and I turned back towards the house, the sailors might not be in a position to notice the dragons if I did enough to change the island. From the jetty it was a smooth incline up to the house, there were low cliffs on the far side but when the lava flowed out it had made a nice cone around much of the island extending below the water. I was pretty sure I could make walls around the beaches, something that was so obviously new and magical it might capture their attention.

I pictured it for a second, a galley sailing across the wine-dark sea, seeing the island of still thinking about come over the horizon with its black stone walls rising sheer from the water and dragons flying-

Yeah, no amount of masonry would be enough to change that focus. The dragons would have to be chained down and out of sight whenever visitors came through. I spent another minute trying to think of a smarter path but I gave up. We had another two months and the others might have more clever ideas.

Somewhat annoyed by my lack of progress I looked over the jetty. It was a mass of sand, gravel and stone, with timbers thrust through it to add stability. As long as I was down there I might as well start on capital improvement.

“Conflandum.” I fed energy into the structure and it drank it in. The core of the jetty began to heat up, far from the cold seawater leaching heat. The rubble kept on soaking in power until something shifted, like I’d crested a hill.

The temperature skyrocketed, a heat haze emanated from the top, the sea spray hissed when it touched the rock and bubbles were beginning to form around the edges. I concentrated further, the spell was running now and I just needed to keep pushing. “Conflandum!” The center of the jetty, a mix of sand gravel and rocks was glowing red hot by now. I couldn’t see it but I could feel the material beginning to shift and flow as I commanded it.

It wasn’t especially hard work, just a little effort, but all the rest would be much easier. The
minimally shaped and quarried stone had lost its connection to its molten past. The natural rock of the island would be far more willing to heed my call. Even now though, I was overpowering the constant water cooling and the rocks were beginning to melt together. The magic was the same as I used on all my compasses and shaping liquids with my mind had long ago become easy. The boiling water and flames from the igniting lumber were new but my mental grip was pulling the jetty into a solid rectangular mass.

When it was close enough I let the spell go. The water still hissed angrily when it splashed onto the top but that was expected. The new solid rock had a enormous thermal load, it probably wouldn’t be safe to touch until the next day. I watched it for a few minutes until all the boiling stopped, I had half worried that the thermal shock of the seawater would cause the dock to fall apart as it contracted but apparently it was fine.

I left my first effort behind me as I wandered back towards the house. The sunset would have been beautiful if it wasn’t covered by clouds and the grey sky was getting dark. The barking of the seals mixed with waves crashing as I climbed back home, entering I felt the very beginnings of a threshold. It was still too weak to hold any of the anti scrying wards that had stymied Quaithe so I held off on erecting any. In a week or two it would be much more established and I could start layering real protections onto it.

Just as I was starting to think about the other wards I could set up I heard a loud crack accompanied by gasps. I hurried into the spring chamber and saw a fragment of an egg quivering on the floor. Another crack echoed forth and a gaping hole was suddenly in the bronze egg, Jelmazma’s. I could see motion inside of it and with a triumphant shriek the little dragon burst out of the egg, shaking off the fragments stuck to it, and leapt onto the waiting Daenerys. It began questing for food almost immediately and she had a plate that she practically shoved its face into.

Not to be left behind Ancalagon’s shell also began to shatter. Rhaellion was perched on Viserys’s shoulder and stared down intently. In a slightly more subdued fashion it broke free and climbed onto his other side.

The Targaryens now had the same number of dragons they’d needed to conquer the seven kingdoms once, hopefully the lessons of the first conquest would still be remembered.
After three weeks the island was markedly different. For one I’d driven some of the sea lions and seals off, they were impressive and cute respectively from a distance but nature had its place and in this case it was way over there. I was willing to trade vistas of unspoiled beauty for a diminished risk of marine mammal attacks, and besides, now I could try to fish without them eating everything I threw in.

The other major ecological development was the introduction of draco vexo. The three dragons had simultaneously discovered the ability to flap around and had rapidly progressed from falling with style to powered flight. They had mastered buzzing around the spring chamber after a few days and had ventured into all the other bedrooms but mine, even as they rapidly left the cat sized stage they seemed to default to their habits. They only behaved for the Targaryens, Quaithe and Maggie were treated with lordly disdain and they kept a four yard minimum radius from me at all times.

Taking them outside into the open air was a little nerve wracking. They were young and while I was no longer concerned that they’d be beaten up by a seagull I could imagine them soaring up, getting caught by the ocean breezes, and swept along all the way to the Thousand Islands. Luckily they seemed quite competent in the air and even had a wary detente with the omnipresent gulls. I was sure within the month they’d switch to a more belligerent stance, but for now they were content to share the skies and depend on the kindness of the Targaryens for food.

They still only ate cooked and hot food, it might have been easy to get when they breathed fire but as all three were still limited to hot jets of air they relied on Daenerys feeding them singed bits of meat. The little girl performed her task with almost comical solemnity, using tongs I’d forged to hold raw fish over a flame and then flipping it into the air when a dragon came by to eat on the wing. The dragon she had claimed as especially hers, the bronze Jelmazma, received the lion’s share of her attention and she kept station, orbiting nearby. Rhaellion and Ancalagon were more independently minded. They still clambered over both Targaryens and flew to be fed regularly but they ranged up and down the length of the island, occasionally daring to overfly the sea.

None of the books we had, which represented almost all of the recorded and republished dragonlore, really spoke on how or when to train the little beasts. I didn’t really think leashing them and pulling them like dogs would work and Viserys seemed content to merely keep them acclimated to his presence. I couldn’t really help either as they all focused on me as a threat whenever I was near. They would rise up like cobras and spread their wings wide if I surprised them, blowing all the hot air their lungs or whatever flame organ they had could generate.

I kept my distance, only chronicling their growth and habits for posterity. Barth, the most acclaimed dracologist was a rumored sorcerer, as a wizard I was more than qualified to follow in his footsteps.

I had far more to occupy my time with in any event. Maggie and I had raised a low wall around the entirety of the island. I had taught her a little about rituals before but most of our lessons had been on the quick and dirty evocations she would need to protect herself. She was much further along with them then I’d been at her age, but there was far more to magic than throwing around increasingly powerful bolts of lightning.

So spending time teaching her the principles of exploiting the mental frameworks rituals could give
was rewarding. To use an analogy, off the cuff magic was to rituals as a deadlift was to a block and tackle. Rituals were less flexible and required initial setup, but with them far more could be done with less power. They were the reason the White Council and wizards were high on the food chain back on Earth. Even with the Mantle and all my gear I was vulnerable to the essentially limitless hordes of monsters and I was pretty close to the top of the heap when it came to power. As appealing as it was to cut loose with force and flame a wizard’s true strength came from intense preparation and planning, any fight a wizard knew about in advance should already be won.

On this world, it like the island still needed a name and despite intense campaigning it wouldn’t be Maggie’s rock, she shouldn’t need to be as martial as I had been. She was competent in a fight now but I wanted my daughter to have the same joy in magic I had, not to just see it as a tool.

She had made the ritual we’d used to melt and mold the stone, exploiting the rock’s memory of flowing to pull it up into walls like taffy. The pumice like stone lost a lot of porosity as we sculpted it and turned into something like basalt, making smooth dark stone walls about six feet high. We didn’t raise the entire wall in one shot, it would have knocked us both out when we managed it, but over a week we encircled the island, only leaving enough of the beach that the seals who remained had room.

The walls weren’t really to stop any attackers, even if they were higher with only five people we couldn’t hold them, they had a more numinous purpose. The entire enclosed section was ours and marked that way. A lesser threshold would begin to form at the outer edges, it would never be as strong as that of the house but larger wards could be applied to it eventually.

After the walls were raised we kept on shaping the island. Stairs from the jetty were pretty simple, even if we couldn’t walk on them for a day until they cooled. Together we hammered a small promontory flat with blasts of force like wrecking balls, I wanted to make sand and shattering rock was a critical first step. Releasing my power was intoxicating, the others’ awe as Maggie and I used the forces of nature at will just encouraged me to go further. We were on the island for the near future and having an audience as we changed the very structure of the rock just made it more fun.

No one on earth had done something so overt in years, here unwatched by prying eyes Maggie and I threw around enough power to build a decent sized pyramid, flattening hills, making snowmen out of molten rock, competing on who could make the creepiest Moai as adjudicated by our fellow islanders, and planning our wizard tower.

Despite her initial disinterest the dragons’ spurning of her had driven her to throw herself into her magic. I was sure she had wanted one for herself and their complete disinterest had annoyed her. I was happy to spend the time with her, regardless of the reason this was turning into something of a vacation.

“Papa no matter how much you insist making dirt will never fit on any vacation itinerary.”

We were standing near the remnants of a hill. Maggie and I had shattered it into gravel two days before and I was trying to figure out how to smash it finer without sending shrapnel everywhere. “If you want any plants from here before you’re fifty we’re going to have to. Think of it as packing for the next trip.”

That received a stare that made me miss being the coolest dad ever. My teenage daughter now knew better than me at everything, luckily we didn’t have a car or she’d probably demand the keys for her journey of self discovery. “We can’t just toss it into the ocean and have it tumble and erode them down?” She paused brightening with a look just like her mother’s excitement over learning a little
more about magic. “Or actually, lets just soak it and see what the water washes off, there’s probably a lot of sand already in there.”

Maggie was mastering one of the essential tenets of wizardry, applied laziness, or as I thought of it efficiency, quicker than I’d thought. We could pull water from the sea and spritz the gravel pile, it should be enough sand to start mixing fish guts and ashes in to make soil. Or so I thought, I wasn’t a botanist and Ebenezer’s farm came with its own dirt.

Moving water would be a little difficult, despite all my practice levitating enough water would be power intensive and tricky, especially since I wanted to drain it slowly. The obvious solution hit me and brought another concern to mind, I still bore the Mantle.

After I had brought it up rescuing the kids I hadn’t had a chance to take the time to remove it. Based on my last time I could be out for up to a day and I hadn’t wanted to be down that long while assassins were abroad. Soon after we were on the ship to here and if Rhaelion was discovered I wanted to be up and ready to act, not unconscious. Once we got here I felt the loss of my home’s wards acutely. As long as I didn’t have a safe place and was visible to all who looked, I didn’t necessarily trust Quaithe’s word, I didn’t want to decrease my combat power. The shadow assassins in the red temple had been dangerous and if they had the range they would be tricky to deal with and I’d take every crutch I could.

Now the island was warded, and Quaithe would have seen enough to know that Maggie would also be able to beat her like a cheap drum if needed, I had no real reason not to try to remove the Mantle except for a dread of the near crippling pain. All told it had been nearly a month I’d had it, far longer than all of the previous times combined.

“Papa?”

I shook myself back to Maggie with a start, she was looking for a response to her suggestion and I had my head in the clouds. “It sounds good, want to start making ice for the stream?” She nodded and headed towards the water as I followed slowly.

Tonight, I’d tell Maggie about the Mantle and try to remove it. Tonight.

56.

“And that’s why I got the Winter Mantle.”

Maggie was quiet sitting across from me. We were by ourselves, sitting on benches around a firepit we’d pulled from the living rock, well away from the other islanders and as the silence went on I wondered if I’d made a huge mistake.

I’d told Maggie the broad strokes of her rescue before, that I’d gathered friends and allies and called in favors to get there at the last minute. She knew her mother was dead but I had never been able to bring myself to tell her how it had ended. She had never mentioned it when she told me about her nightmares and it might have been cowardly but I couldn’t bear to see my daughter recoil from me.

“But it was dormant when we got here?”

“Yeah until that tree outside White Harbor.”
She was pensive, patience was a trait she hadn’t gotten from Susan or I, but Maggie sometimes just shut down to think. I was grateful for the time to gather my thoughts until I realized they were all worrying about the backlash from binding the Mantle doing something permanent this time. “You said it was something like a soulgaze, do you think the ‘old gods’ are real?”

Ever since I’d heard of the nameless old gods of the forests I’d been pretty negative. Back home nameless old gods had been flung from reality and trying to learn more about them or their servants was a fatal mistake. I didn’t think the gods the First Men worshipped were eldritch abominations of that magnitude but the association was less than flattering. “There was some power there, one thing I learned on Earth is that if something has the power to claim to be a god it doesn’t really matter theologically.”

“Nothing here has been that strong though, the shadowbinder in the temple barely made you sweat, but some overgrown foliage knocked you down and unleashed the winter mantle? They’re certainly a step above everything else you’ve seen.”

“Yes and no.” She motioned for me to go on, her patience had limits I seemed to find with ease lately. “Power is one thing but applying it is another like-”

“Please don’t use a kung fu metaphor.”

“It’s one of the essential shows you’ve seen, you’re lucky Molly took it first or you’d be called Grasshopper.” I gave her a second to lose her outrage. “Like I was saying we can’t assume they’re the most powerful just because something sucker punched me. I was ready to fight the shadows, one of those surprising me might have been enough to wreck my whole day.”

She nodded “Fair enough.” She angled her head and gave me a considering stare. “So why are you telling me all of this now? You mentioned a mantle atop the tower but you never explained afterwards and when you collapsed I forgot about it.”

“I couldn’t just be sharing important information with my daughter?”

“Please, you keep secrets for fun, and if you only told me about it now you must have a reason.”

“Secrets are a wizard’s prerogative, I fully expect you to have mysteries swirling about you by the time you turn twenty, to suit your namesake if for no other reason.”

“You’re still not great at deflecting questions if I can see you’re doing it. Why now?”

I exhaled, it was time for the meat of the conversation. Considering our talk had started by me explaining why I voluntarily bound myself to the Queen of evil faeries I wasn’t looking forward to it. “When I first realized I had it back and its effects, after your bet with Wynafryd,” she had the grace to look briefly ashamed, “I managed to suppress it, I can feel it sometimes but it’s not that big a deal, it just wants me to let it loose on occasion”

“But you let it loose, didn’t you?” I nodded, she took a second to think and then continued, “Why, the Ironborn? You’ve had it free the entire time since then?”

“It was them first, I released when we cleared the harbor and I bound it again, then I let it loose after I knocked down the walls to save the tower.”
“So if you can just bind it what’s the big deal? And if it’s bound why are you telling me?” Her voice picked up speed and volume as she went “It’s not is it? You let it go to save the Targaryens!” She stopped, breathing heavily. “But again, if you can bind it what’s the problem, why wait?”

“Each time it’s been harder, after the harbor it just made me fade out a little, when I bound it on the tower it knocked me out for a day, I’ve had the mantle on for almost a month now, I don’t know what it’s going to do.”

“What can I do to help? I can’t really help can I?” It was true Maggie shared my lack of talent with mental magics. Molly would have been of far more assistance, if I wasn’t worried about her backsliding and she’d been on the same planet.

“Just watch me and distract our guests, say I’m doing something obscure and wizardy.”

She looked nervous but gathered herself. “I can do that. When are you going to start?”

“After dinner, maybe it’ll be quick and I’ll be back in action before they notice.” I really doubted it but I didn’t want to alarm her more than necessary. “If anything starts to go wrong it’ll be easy for me to stop I think.” Of course if I failed I’d have to live the Mantle influencing my thoughts, at least when it was bound I could tell what urges came from it. It wouldn’t be the end of the world but having had Lash share my head was enough for me.

Supper was quiet for both of us. Daenerys was loudly narrating her adventures in barbecuing to everyone’s mild disinterest and Viserys and Quaithe were chatting. I’d normally be a bit more worried about her interacting with her prophesied hero but my future mental battle was filling my thoughts.

Eventually we all dispersed to our various rooms and Maggie followed me into mine.

“So, what should I do?” She drew each word out as she said it, looking around my spartan room skeptically.

“Just make sure no one else bugs me, if Quaithe tries something while I’m out freeze her or just keeps shocking her.” She looked surprised by my casual advocacy of violence against a guest. “Not that I think she will, but while I’m down you’re in charge. When I wake up the volcano shouldn’t be erupting or anything.”

That wasn’t really possible from what I was doing and I didn’t think Maggie would be able to do it accidentally, but her face paling was a little amusing. “Also don’t sink the island, we need to be a lot better known before we recreate Atlantis’s little drop.” She looked a little calmer, my jokes made the potentially dangerous magic seem a little better to her. “See you on the other side.”

It wasn’t instant but the world seemed to fade after I closed my eyes. Sounds were muted and the cool air seemed to no longer be a concern. Everything in my head was a metaphor now, when Lash had been around as an independent entity she had some degree of control but now it was all reflections of me. Well except for the guest my other side had mentioned that I had never even sensed but I was ignoring it for now.

I envisioned the Mantle as a suit of icy armor covering me, as I focused on it the cool air rushed back into my my sensormium, that was probably related I idly thought. I flexed my mind trying to peel myself out of the suit and a sharp pain shot through me as I opened a gap in the armor, I knew it was coming though and pressed on.
Ripping the chest plate open felt like driving nails into my brain, if I wanted my mind to be mine again I had to do it. At last with a crack the icy shell broke and I tried to fling it deep into my mind and bind it. It was something of a surprise when my other side caught it.

“I remember warning you about how crowded it was getting back here.” His expression worried me, he had lost his customary smirk. He was both me and a reflection of me, anything that hurt me would hurt him and vice versa.

“Our guest? I’ve looked and nothing was there.”

“She’s a part of you, a part of us. You wouldn’t be able to see her.” I didn’t like how my subconscious knew more than I did, it seemed too much like Freudian psychobabble. I wasn’t going to turn down information regardless of its provenance though.

“Her? Is Lash still in residence?” The possibility was there, the battle in the Raith Deeps had given me brain damage but I healed perfectly, if slowly. Something of her could be returning.

“Lash is hardly a part of you but she was involved in, shall we say, her conception.”

“You know that you’re in my head, it would help if you were a little less cryptic.”

“Well when a man loves a woman-”

“Less cryptic.” As I spoke I tried to think what he was leading to. Lash had been destroyed saving me, that was supposed to be the highest form of love after all, but that didn’t lead to, what, pregnancy?

“Didn’t you ever wonder where spirits came from?”

Of course my other side could read my mind, he was me after all.

“That’s right and don’t forget it, I’d hate to think I was the practical side of an idiot. Moving on though, she’s been in here ever since that night growing. Throwing the Mantle back encroached on her space, if you did it again you’d lose something, maybe the ability to run, the memories of colors’ names, whatever. You only have so much room.”

That explained the pain at least but it didn’t present a solution, as long as she was in there I’d have to keep the Mantle on, and she was still growing. Maybe my other side-

“Nope.” He looked amused answering my questions before I asked them. “I know a lot about your desires and the deeper parts of your mind but I’m not a grimoire. If you don’t know how to extract a spirit from your brain neither do I.”

“Can I talk to her?” Maybe if I spoke with her she could do something, deliberately slow her growth or anything really.

“She’s just baby in the metaphorical womb, not really set up for conversation while she’s sharing your brain.”

I was incredibly glad no one but me would ever hear that statement, Thomas or anyone would never let me hear the end of it. “Well I’ll have to figure something out. How long do I have?”
“Months maybe, less than a year for sure though.” He looked serious, and hardly mocking, that more than anything impressed the urgency on me. “You should probably wake up now by the way, the Mantle didn’t react well and I bet it’s panicked Maggie a bit.”

Opening my eyes took real effort, like swimming to the surface from deep underwater. Sensations, sound and touch flooded me and when I finally managed to see everything was too bright and distorted. It was only when I tried to sit up and couldn’t I realized what had happened, the entire room had a thick layer of frost and I was wearing the same icy armor I had in my mind, the helmet had blocked my view.

With a second more vigorous effort I sat up, the cracking of ice filling the room. Maggie was in the corner on a chair with a circle drawn around the base making her section the only ice free section. She looked up and down my ice encrusted body with worry “So, that looks like a failure.”

I rolled off the bed, it was going to be soaked in a few minutes and the ice squealed as it shifted. With my gauntleted hands I took my helmet off, it looked almost Corinthian, and tossed it to the ground where a cheek plate shattered. “Just a little bit, but I discovered something else a bit more worrying.”

“A deep obsession with the abominable snowman? I’d say you need therapy but A. you already did and B. there aren’t any therapists on the planet.”

“My own flesh and blood betraying me into the hands of shrinks?” With an effort of will I called heat around me and began to melt my armor, after a few seconds I stepped forward out of the steam soaking wet. “No, I need to start experimenting and I’ll need your help.”

57.

After another explanation, about having had a fallen angel in my head as well as her potential future sister this time, Maggie was speechless. And exhausted, my little jaunt to the center of my mind had taken all night and she’d stayed up for it. I sent her to bed and looked around my room, it was soaked or soon to be and I had no idea what to do to dry it without setting it all on fire. Screw it, I’d deal with that later, I’d fought mold demons, less sentient versions shouldn’t be any trouble.

The sun was rising and the sea reflected the deep blue sky. I wandered down towards the walls we’d pulled up, climbed up and sat on in, looking down at the seals gamboling in the surf. I had another mind in my head, a literal brainchild. The bad pun made me laugh a little before the whole future brain exploding birth came back into focus.

Molly and I had done some mental work, after Peabody the White Council had set up guidelines. I taught it to Maggie when we got here, we were the only two people on the planet that could attack each other as far as I knew but we’d been sent here by some bizarre magic, we might return even if I had no idea how it was possible. She had never mentioned seeing anything else in my head, my other side or Lash’s and my progeny. She’d have to find her, figure out a way to extract her without my brain melting and I’d have to build some sort of home for her. It said something about my life that I felt vaguely confident with only three potentially fatal magical problems I had no idea how to solve, it was fewer than usual at the start of a case.

Eventually looking at the water got a little boring, there’s only so many glittering waves rolling into
the shore you can watch before they all blend together. I also still had the mantle feeding me energy, I felt like I could run a marathon even with my lack of real sleep.

The other islanders were awake and if they noticed anything amiss they didn’t comment. Daenerys was back to her dragon feeding post, they were growing rapidly but were still incredibly gluttonous little beasts, and Viserys was halfheartedly going through drills with a wooden practice sword.

Watching him practice more than just the Mantle wanted to spar. Getting rid of my excess energy and getting my mind off of its eventual bursting seemed like a great idea and it would even be a productive use of my morning. He looked over as I called to him. “You up for an embarrassing loss in the name of getting better?”

He lowered his sword, grateful for the interruption. Even with the sea breeze and the cool morning air he’d worked up a sweat. From our conversations back in Braavos I knew he kind of enjoyed sword fighting but found the drills immensely boring. He was a good enough student that he saw the reasons and did them, but thirteen year olds, really everyone actually, don’t always enjoy doing the right things. “I don’t know if fighting an old man is really what I, as a future knight, should be doing.”

Alright for that he was getting a few bruises. “I’m not quite in the grave yet you know, be careful you’re not writing drafts your sword can’t cash.”

He grinned at that, digging around his stuff until he pulled out another wooden sword and tossed it to me. “All that just sounds like a challenge.” He gave me a few seconds to get used to the weight as I swung it around. “You ready? I don’t want to hear you complaining about me attacking before you were set when in reality it was just me not being ancient and rooted to the ground.”

We were about ten feet apart, one good lunge for me, rather more for the shorter Targaryen. The little terrace we were on was one of the first places we melted, where Maggie had perfected her ritual. When the rock froze again it took on almost a tiled appearance, neatly joined hexagons that made it slightly uneven but close enough to flat to move without fear of rolling an ankle. I was older, stronger, more experienced, even without the mantle a better fighter and I knew the value of patience. Naturally I attacked first with two quick steps and a probing stab.

Viserys had been well taught, he slid my sword aside, not trying to meet my strength, and moved forward to get inside my superior reach. If he had stayed at range I could just keep thrusting at no risk to myself. Unfortunately being a foot and a half taller than him and a grown man I was quite a bit stronger. I shoved him back and hooked his ankle, knocking him to the ground where one step had my sword at his throat.

“You should look into getting some roots, you may stay on your feet a bit longer.”

He let out a wheezing laugh as he accepted my hand up, the fall had knocked the wind out of him but after a minute he picked up his sword, game for another round. We spent the better part of an hour swinging swords at each other, Daenerys came to watch and brought the dragons who roamed around the edge of the terrace eyeing me warily. He was quick and decently skilled, I didn’t really have a baseline to know if he was talented or not but he rarely fell to the same trick twice, even giving back one or two swats. When I finally started sweating I called for a halt. He was panting and looked ready to drop but had kept going anyways. “I think that’s all my decrepit self can handle, skipping breakfast to exercise has never been a favorite of mine.”

The activity had succeeded in getting my thoughts off of my issues but as I ate some of the hard tack
and fish we’d been provisioned with my mind returned to my present difficulties. Of the problems I
had one at least I had some ideas on how to solve, the home for the spirit. Bob’s skull had been a
bleached and dried rune encrusted monstrosity but I had lived with it long enough I felt I had a
handle on how it had worked. Making another shouldn’t be impossible and even if I had difficulties
inside the house with a threshold my daughter would be protected from the sun.

My daughter. It was a strange thought, for so long it had been just Maggie and I, but now out of
nowhere we were getting a new family member, springing from my mind like Athena. I’d feel a little
immodest about me being Zeus in the analogy, but hey if the shoe fits.

As I pondered the ineffability of life and what I had done to have been launched into an alternate
universe with fire breathing dragons, exiled royals and questionable real estate decisions I started to
further mold the island. It was already unrecognizable from when we landed, beyond the walls we’d
raised, the previously smooth hill to the house was now ringed with terraces, and several pits that
were both cisterns and future ponds had huge chunks of ice melting in them. The dirt project was
underway, I’d been throwing all of our excess food and ashes from fires into a pit of sand and
regularly turned it. I knew it was possible to enhance the growth of plants, the second law only
forbade transforming humans but I’d never really tried. It probably wouldn’t be too hard to help them
a little bit, but giant walls of thorns surrounding castles were probably a bridge too far.

My mind had drifted from my current spell and the chunk of stone I’d been melting was glowing a
cheery red throughout. Only my modified shaping spell prevented it from cooking me, rock didn’t
melt till two or three thousand degrees and it was enough to cause things to burst into flame from
several feet away. One or two incidents at my workbench had been enough for me to enhance my
telekinetic grip to give me some insulation.

The blob of molten rock was bubbling as I kept feeding heat into, some gasses trapped in the rocks
were escaping and other minerals with higher melting points were floating through it, tossed by the
roiling lava. Idly I began to spin the different substances apart, it was similar to how I could purify
gold for my compasses and I was kind of curious if there was anything interesting in the native rock.
I wasn’t a geologist but there might be iron or something in the rock, a lot of things could be useful.
My magic enhanced centrifuge, I was able to make like things cling together, started to give results,
not that I knew what they were. Disks of differing colors began to form as I flattened and spun the
molten rocks. Once the bands were reasonably monochromatic I started to pull the heat from them, if
nothing else this exercise was testing my increased skill.

Eventually I set down the solid disks, most were off white but one in particular, the largest, seized
my attention, it was a transparent crystal, I almost thought it was diamond but I didn’t think my
telekinetic grip was strong enough for that, it was probably quartz or something. Either way, I mused
as I mentally moved it from the others, it was pretty striking.

“I thought I was adept at magic until I met you.” Quaithe’s voice shocked me, I had thought I was
alone down by the beach, and with my distraction I lost my mental grip on the crystal ring. It fell to
the rock and shattered. I turned to her and she was apologetic as she looked at the broken shards. “I
did not mean to startle you truly, it’s just with all my studying, years and years of unceasing effort, I
can’t even hope to compete with your daughter and here you are pulling diamonds from molten
rock.”

I grunted in reply as I picked up a splinter, I had been focused and her sudden appearance had
thrown me. “I’m pretty sure that wasn’t diamond, but I’m not a jeweler.” I dropped the crystal, now
that I knew how I could always make more, “And you knew I had power, it’s why you sought me
out remember?”
“It’s one thing for you to be a wizard. I came from Asshai where nothing grows and only mystics live and traveled to learn from the warlocks of Qarth.” She knelt to pick up another of the whole rings before stopping when she felt its remnant heat. “I’ve seen illusions, tricks and smokes that cloud the mind, even shadows brought forth to do their master’s will.” She stood and brushed off the front of her skirt. “But the things you’ve done, calling fire and ice, your devices that span the world, shattering walls and sculpting stone. Do you even know what your works look like to the rest of us?”

I almost answered flippantly but her seriousness made me consider the question. Maggie and I were a breed apart here. Quaithe’s speech reminded me of Malora questioning why I didn’t rule the world, on Earth I was a medium sized fish in a big pond, on this planet I was the shark, no the sea monster in the depths. I didn’t really think about it, perhaps because when I first got to Braavos I had lived in much the same way I always had, as a detective struggling to make ends meet, but now I was stepping into legend. My actions at Oldtown were intentionally biblical, storming the Red Temple was an adventure fit for Conan, and even now I was doing a decent Prospero impression on my very own soon to be spirit haunted island. “It’s not quite like that, it’s just that where I came from I wasn’t really anything special. It’s hard to examine yourself critically you know?” She didn’t look convinced at all but nodded ceding the point. “So why are you down here anyways? Ever since the dragons hatched you and Daenerys have been practically joined at the hip.”

“Right, Maggie is awake but she looks sick, certainly tired and she wanted to talk to you, I told her to stay up there and I’d go find you before I was distracted by your spells.”

When she mentioned Maggie looking sick I immediately started climbing the steps, with Quaithe finishing her sentence as she followed. She probably was just tired, she had been up all night and had only slept for three or four hours if I was any judge. Nevertheless if she wanted to talk to me, to ask questions, I wasn’t going to make her wait.
I hurried up the steps at just short of a run. If Quaithe hadn’t immediately told me about Maggie’s condition she probably was fine, but even minor threats to her always made me react. Bursting through the entrance of the house I rounded the hot springs, startling Daenerys and Ancalagon whose hiss rapidly receded, as I entered Maggie’s room.

She looked up startled as her door swung open, there were bags under her eyes, small ones, but otherwise she looked much the same as ever. On the trip up I’d been having increasingly ridiculous diagnoses running through my head, from pneumonia to the Red Death of Gogossos but when she sat up and raised a questioning eyebrow at my sudden arrival I was sure she wasn’t too ill. “Are you alright? Quaithe said you were looking under the weather.”

She coughed theatrically then flopped back indolently with the back of her hand against her forehead. “Staying up all night in a cold room? I might have a case of the vapors!”

“I would have made seagull noodle soup for you if you were really sick you know.” I continued inspecting her for the germs I’d definitely be able to detect with the naked eye. “Instead I rush up here and get no respect.”

“Papa you have enough people fawning over you, it’s all the dragons and I can do to keep your head deflated.” As she spoke she swung her legs out of bed, looking nervous before she realized the paving stones were heated and set her feet down. “Can we get radiant heating back in Braavos? There’s so many little luxuries you don’t know you want until you spend time living in the villa of the fourth richest man in the city.”

“You sent Quaithe all they way down to get me to ask about flooring options?” I was relieved she was joking, telling her about the whole fallen angel thing may have been a little abrupt but considering my other side said we were on a clock I thought she should be brought up to speed as soon as possible. “And yes, if you can figure out a permanent thermal linking enchantment, I’ll give you my notes.”

She looked a tad disappointed at that, she might have been hoping that the price for going into witness protection was me doing it but I liked making everything a learning experience. I was also stalled on it but I liked to preserve my image of infallibility whenever possible. If you can’t show off for your daughter, who else can you? “Deal, if you started it how hard can it be? Now out of my room, and grab me some lunch, I have a lot of questions and I’m starving.”

I left her to her late morning ablutions, one of our more successful projects on the island had been internal plumbing using a cistern we’d melted into the side of the crater. Compared to that heated floors barely registered to me, especially since the volcanic heat let me have my first hot showers in years. Food wise we were down to flour, eggs, hard tack and salted or seasoned meats, luckily the island’s waters had enough fish that we had some varied fresh food and in another month or two we might have vegetables. That was getting ahead of myself though, everything else was getting put on the back burner until I, actually I wasn’t even going to think of it as giving birth, my second daughter emerged.

While waiting for Maggie I went back outside, to the balcony atop the rim of the crater. We were
maybe five hundred feet above the waves and had a commanding view of the empty ocean. I’d had some vague ideas about emplacing permanent illusions powered by the volcano’s remnant heat to ensure privacy, like Avalon or Brasil, certainly not as Maggie suggested the island from that pirate movie. It was an interesting problem and would benefit from a lot of my or Maggie’s current projects.

Just as I thought of her she emerged, her wet hair already beginning to frizz out, this time for some other reason than streamers of plasma running through it. She silently accepted the hard bread and hunk of salted pork, sitting on the stone bench gnawing on them as she looked over the ocean before she turned to face me, her earlier levity was gone. “So I need to figure out how to skirt the Third Law enough to extract my mental half sister from you without driving you mad, and if I don’t your head will explode.”

When she said it like that it sounded a lot harder than it had when I outlined it down by the shore. “My head probably won’t literally-”

“No!” She tossed her half eaten breakfast to the ground before leaping to her feet. “This is not funny!” She was pacing now, rapid steps back in forth. “Are you even thinking about what I’m going to have to do to you? I’ll need to root around enough in your brain to find her where I’ve never even knowingly seen any indication of her.” I went to reply but she spun with a glare. “If this goes wrong you’re going to die and it will all be my fault! I’ll be alone on this world, I’ll have killed my last family member and there won’t be anything left!” She shrank a little after saying that, turning to look back over the ocean.

I wanted to say something, needed to say something, but she was right. This was life and death and ignoring it wouldn’t help us any. That didn’t mean we had to give into despair though. “You’re going to do it.” I put as much emphasis into my words as I could and some of it must have gotten through as she looked back over her shoulder.

“Why are you so sure? I’ve got the same magic as you, I’m good for blowing things up, not subtle fiddly mental surgery.”

“I’m sure because I know you. You might have gotten my best parts, my magic, height and sense of humor, but you got a lot from your mom as well.” She turned fully back around, I didn’t often talk about Susan with her, most of that was guilt on my part, so she was always interested when I gave her any hint.

“Before she had you, before we had you, she was a reporter. I don’t really know what got her into it, I always just thought I was lucky to know her, but she was bright and driven enough to work anywhere and she spent her time at a tabloid.” Maggie was silent, waiting for whatever would let me trust my mind with her.

“She could have been in New York winning Pulitzers, but there she was, working at a dinky little rag in Chicago. I think she saw something on the spooky side once and couldn’t rest until she knew more. That’s how we met you know, she was looking for a quote or something and didn’t stop until she found somebody.” I took a breath, when I started this I just wanted to say anything to boost her confidence but I was increasingly feeling like she needed this.

“Your mom was like that in everything, once she was bit she went to fight the Reds, not one in a hundred had the will to resist, and she thrived despite it. She had that strength, that nothing could stop her from doing what she needed. Saving you took her all the way to the top of Chichen Itza, fighting millennia old monsters that she had no business even knowing existed. You’ve got that drive
too, I know it.”

We stood there atop the volcano, I watched her, hoping for a sign that she was feeling a little better and was relieved when she nodded and squared her shoulders. “OK then, so what do we have to do?”

“Well that’s the thing, I don’t really have a solid plan.” She looked about to panic with her calm deserting her before I threw up a hand to stop her. “But that’s hardly unusual, we’re wizards. A little time gets us to the top of the world and we have months. We’ll be fine.” She didn’t seem convinced but when I gave her my best inspiring grin and a thumbs up she looked a bit better.

“But that’s enough for today I think, you still look tired and this is something we’ll try when we’re both fresh.” I lightly jumped off the terrace to the ground ten or twelve feet below, casual super-strength was awesome. “Want to see how to make giant quartz crystals? I figured it out this morning.”

She took the stairs but looked moderately interested and I counted that as a win. Now we only had to figure out how to deal with our newest family member and then things would be back to normalish.

59.

Showing Maggie the quartz making took up more of the afternoon. She didn’t have the skill yet to separate the various minerals, heating up a blob of rock and keeping it together in the air was the limit of her abilities. However the idea of having windows again, if not glass then at least something more transparent than shutters made her determined to keep working at it.

The process was also beautiful. The sheets of crystal hung in midair, shining in the late afternoon sun, scattering sunlight across the island. I hadn’t been able to purify the quartz completely, remnant impurities gave the sheets a faint tinge, from a pale yellow to an almost amethyst like purple, and the refracted light took on the crystals color. If it had been intentional I’d have been even more impressed with myself then I already was.

We weren’t just making quartz windows for the hell of it, although it was a new and fun use of my compass honed talents. With the sheets we could make everything from windows for the house to a greenhouse. We were a few hundred miles north of Braavos after all, even with a volcano underfoot the winters would get cold. We probably wouldn’t be here for this one, we didn’t have the supplies for it anyways, but I was planning on having this island for a long time. Capital improvements were almost a present to my future self.

They were also a distraction from the whole impeding daughter delivery thing, I’d have been up for almost anything to keep that out of our thoughts. Maggie wasn’t really in any state to go poking around in my mind and considering I was still dealing with the idea my brain was probably pretty turbulent too. I didn’t have a firm plan on how to go about extracting her, we had time to puzzle something out though. So much of magic was belief and willpower, Maggie and I were both strong enough that normally we could get new things done just by throwing energy in. Since it was my head that would hypothetically be the recipient our time tested method probably wasn’t a good idea. Despite that I was confident, I hadn’t come this far to have a mental miscarriage.

As I felt the sheet cool enough I could set it down Viserys joined us on the terrace, unaccompanied by any of his flying friends. “You two have been awfully reclusive today. Are you feeling alright?”
The last was said to Maggie who only nodded as she focused on feeding heat into a levitating rock. “Good, good.” He trailed off as he looked at what we had been building.

Shaping things with magic, at least the way I’d been doing it, wasn’t the most precise method ever. Most of that was on me, there was nothing stopping me from creating exactly what I wanted but I had to hold the entire piece, every face and edge, in my head at once. I had tried to make gears when I first got the hang of making the compass arrows, it would have been nice to make a clock or demonstrate how transmissions worked. Unfortunately I wasn’t able to pull one together, whatever tooth I focused on was sharp and perfect but the rest began to diverge and become rounder until the rest of the gear just turned into a knobbed cylinder. I had eventually given it up, just including drawings in my almanac, but someday I’d be good enough to build a watch in my head. Eat your heart out Dr. Manhattan.

Rectangles, flat sheets of uniform thickness, were simple enough I could make them. Making them the right size though, that was tricky. I didn’t have a perfect mental image of a foot or a yard, it was a lot easier to hold a sheet in my head without worrying about precise sizing. I could make them bigger and smaller of course, rough sizes were dictated by how much rock I’d melted but they weren’t anything that would fit into standardized frames. So rather than spending years internalizing tolerances I was simply laying the sheets on top of a pergola Maggie and I had pulled out of the terrace. It was far more delicate than our usual work, two rows of narrow fluted columns rose to about a foot over my head height before angling to meet each other over the center. The crystals formed a roof over the structure and even without the walls installed it was already heating up.

He thoroughly scrutinized our work, keeping a respectful distance from Maggie’s molten rock. “What is this for? A winter sunroom? I’d have thought it was a glass garden but for the complete lack of soil inside it.”

“A greenhouse, the plants will be potted, if we pulled out enough rock now we’d probably upset the columns and the quartz would fall and throw shards everywhere.” He nodded, his attention already shifting from the greenhouse.

“I had a question for you, if you can spare a moment.”

“Shoot.” I was keeping an eye on Maggie, she was starting to sweat and that could be a symptom of tiredness or a sign that she wasn’t holding the thermal shield. Either way it would be her last for the day, molten rock could burn from a few feet away and wasn’t anything to play with casually.

“The Sealord’s men will be back in six weeks at the outside. The dragons are growing rapidly, we won’t be able to hide them in the same way we did for Rhaellion.” I nodded, this wasn’t anything I hadn’t thought about but current events had moved it to the back burner. “And even if we get them back to Braavos undetected our home is burnt. I assume the Sealord or perhaps a Keyholder will host us and then we won’t be able to conceal them further.”

“It’s a tricky problem.” I had half forgotten about the house fire, but even if it hadn’t burned the dragons would outgrow it within months. “Do you have any ideas on how to solve it?”

He squared his shoulders, standing up a little straighter. “Quaithe has been trying to get us to come to Asshai, she says that she can summon allies who will take us there.”

That was enough to get my attention off Maggie’s liquefying rock. “She said she can communicate through the wards?” If she could penetrate them, well it didn’t really tell me much. It was easier to leave a threshold then to enter and for all I knew her way was so different the wards didn’t do
anything either way. It was good to know more about her capabilities though, since even with her lessons I still didn’t have a knack for this world’s magic.

“Yes, but that’s hardly the important part. She gave an option, what do you think of it?”

I paused considering. My kneejerk response was no, followed by sternly admonishing Viserys on the dangers of shadowbinders and traveling halfway around the world to a city where nothing grew. As I thought more my kneejerk seemed extremely sensible. “Asshai doesn’t have the best reputation you know. They’re said to use some pretty dark stuff there, not to mention the whole creepy city part of it. I don’t think taking your dragons and your sister there will end well.”

He nodded, his serious mien not fitting his young face. “What can I do though? The dragons are still too young, taking them back to Braavos is hardly an option, I wouldn’t hold them for a day before the assassins would be after them.” He wasn’t wrong, between thieves, hired killers and men seeking glory the lizards would have a pretty rough time.

Maggie’s excited cry distracted me. “Papa! It’s time to strain it.” The rock was entirely melted now, bubbling in her telekinetic grasp. With a whispered word and a gesture I took it, the transfer had taken some practice with water before we tried it with boiling rock. If the lava fell the splashes would have much more dire consequences then wet clothes. As I started to spin out the quartz and form it I thought about Viserys’s problem. There was one solution that came to mind but I didn’t really like it, it would have to do for now though.

After I set the last sheet down on the pergola’s roof I turned back to Viserys. “The only thing you can do if you don’t take Quaithe’s offer is to keep them here.” I gave him a second to digest the idea. “I can hide them among other illusions so that no one truly believes dragons live again and they’ll be safe until they can defend themselves.” I couldn’t yet but I had high hopes for a volcano powered constant illusion, it should work in theory. “Of course that means you’d have to stay here, untrained dragons would be bad news and I’d rather not have another Cannibal flying around.” He nodded to show his understanding but I didn’t think he was sold on the idea. That was fine with me, ultimately they were his dragons and if he chose to risk them and his life it was his right. I’d try to persuade him otherwise but he was getting close to manhood by this world’s standards, soon he’d be making his own mistakes and paying for the consequences.

The chat with Viserys and Quaithe’s apparent ability to communicate at range through my wards weighed on my mind. I could understand why she would hold that sort of information back, if I’d decided to imprison her here there wasn’t much she could do about it and a lifeline would be crucial. Just because I would have done the same thing in her place didn’t mean I was alright with it though. She’d promised to answer all of my questions as well as mask us from others while we traveled and she had at least answered everything I’d asked. I didn’t know if she had blocked people from scrying but it had been almost two months with dragons flapping around and from her interest it seemed like some more people would have come to watch if they’d known.

Unless she’d warned them off to lure me into complacency, dealing with opponents with unknown capabilities and motives was hard. I was starting to really miss everyone coming after me being vanilla mortals. I’d been on top of the food chain ever since I got my feet under me here, and while I’d had some scares I had mostly gone from strength to strength. Quaithe knew as much about our magic as anyone from this world did, she’d seen some of my limits and perhaps she had been biding
her time until she felt she could get one good shot in.

I found her with Daenerys, sitting at the edge of a pool whose mini iceberg had almost entirely melted to fill it. Jelmazma was in laying in Daenerys’s lap, her belly distended from the enormous amounts of fish she’d eaten. As soon as I’d seen how much the dragons could eat I had started to worry about food, we had been supplied generously for our expected stay but three voracious carnivores that seemed to eat about half their rapidly increasing body weight per day strained our provisions.

Like all problems on the island I had solved it with my new favorite tool, vulcanomancy. On Ebenezer’s farm I had gone fishing a few times, unfortunately I didn’t have hooks or a rod and reel here. What I did have were tides. I was familiar with fish traps, Ebenezer had used them as a metaphor for rituals on a fishing trip, how with a little effort up front a lot of work could be spared later. We had used sticks hammered into the ground to make the walls but melting stone to create weirs was kind of the same thing. Either way the tidal pools filled with fish and they were too dumb to escape when the water lowered. We had to beat the gulls and the seals to get them, but it was very little work for more fish than we could eat.

We might not need them for the dragons much longer anyways, I’d seen Rhaellion eyeing the seagulls with what I could swear was a speculative look. Pretty soon they’d be hunting for themselves and take away Daenerys’s chief form of entertainment.

“So this is where you two have been all day, lazing around in the sun.” The little girl blinked at me, she’d been focused on her dragon. Quaithe was already halfway to her feet though, she must have heard me coming.

“We can’t all pull stone from the ground like tar or spin crystal out of molten rock. The princess and I have been watching the dragons instead of your feats.”

Quaithe hadn’t used titles for the Targaryens before, I wasn’t sure if I was being paranoid but calling Daenerys a princess and Viserys presumably a king smacked of flattery and manipulations. The two had dragons now but were still years away from being royalty in anything but name. Viserys was smart but he was proud and he was at an age where he’d want to prove himself. Promises of aid in Asshai weren’t much but if Quaithe wanted the dragons there they were her best inducement.

“Instead you get to lounge around and enjoy the fruits of Maggie’s and my labor, the least you could do is provide an appreciative audience.” Daenerys had immediately gone back to playing with Jelmazma, the girl was obsessed, but Quaithe chuckled ruefully.

“Honestly watching you it’s hard not to be jealous.” She glanced at me curious. “Looking into the future is forbidden to us under pain of madness and we don’t have a good way to communicate across long distances. Your flames and the glass candles are better in those.” That wasn’t the whole truth of course, if I only wanted to
speak with Maggie I could make speaking stones, coincidentally Ebenezer’s version had also been obsidian, and I was content with the vague premonitions being a wizard gave me.

“Strictly speaking the candles aren’t needed to send images and dreams.” I hadn’t mentioned speaking with Viserys yet, hopefully she’d let something slip about her capabilities. “Like all Valyrian magics the candles were made with fire and blood, using your own blood and fire can let you project yourself briefly.” The Valyrians sounded a little nastier each time I learned about them. Blood magic wasn’t necessarily evil, I’d used plenty to track people for one thing, but as soon as it became a power source the temptation to get more blood than you could bleed went up exponentially. From there it was just a short jump to the slippery slope and an all black wardrobe with shoulder spikes.

“So when we had our second encounter that was a glass candle?”

She nodded. “I’m lucky enough to own one, there aren’t too many left after the Doom.”

“I saw one in the Hightower, Lord Leyton was able to get it burning. It didn’t do him much good though.”

The curiosity in her eyes had not faded, she did enjoy learning as much as I’d tell her about our kind of magic. “Until I learned of you I would have doubted that magic would have any place on the battlefield, the exhaustion of a magician for the death of a few hardly seemed worth it and only pyromancers could easily manage that.”

“There was a deficit of practical magic until I arrived, that’s true. It doesn’t really belong in war though, of all the magic I’ve used in the world I’ve liked the parts used for exploration the best. Using a force of life just for destruction makes us no better than beasts.” Quaithe didn’t object but she didn’t seem convinced either.

The magic here was different, that was undeniable now. Using devices powered by sacrifices like the candles might not be inherently corrupting but making them was for sure. The Valyrians hadn’t all been gibbering messes like warlocks often descended to, I wasn’t willing to believe every single one had the strength of will to pass through insanity and emerge a monster. That implied that there was no backlash from black magic for them, an idea that shook me deeply.

Ebenezer had always taught me that breaking the laws was a perversion of the natural order, that it sullied magic along with the wielder. Learning he carried the Blackstaff had been enough for me to avoid him for years, that he would willingly kill and wantonly destroy with magic despite his beliefs disgusted me. Here though, if there was never any negative feedback about killing with magic? The seven laws would never have been agreed upon if they didn’t have clear self enforcing results. This was a planet of unrestrained warlocks, no wonder Malora had been so surprised by my lack of temporal power.

“The quote all learned men say about magic is that it is a sword without a hilt, it’s mostly true especially that magic is a sword.” After my little epiphany I wasn’t really interested in changing her mind. I didn’t know what my life would have been like if the laws were merely guidelines, more burned buildings probably, but in this brutal world I wasn’t likely to draw many converts to the sanctity of human life school of magical ethics. “It’s a risky weapon but a powerful one, it wasn’t only the dragons that made Valyria great.”

“Asshai is known for its magic now though, is that why you invited Viserys?” She looked to me, startled by the segue.
“Partially, but mostly because the most dragonlore is preserved there. Even your libraries here can’t compare with the archives.” Her tone was defensive, but now that I showed I knew about her offer I was done being subtle.

“Not just because you and all of your shadowbindery friends want to have three new pets? The last time Targaryens had three dragons they took a continent, do you want to give it a go yourself?”

“They wouldn’t even let us ride them, we don’t have the blood for it.”

“Really? I’ve heard of dragon horns, they’re said to bind dragons to their blower’s will, you don’t have a brace of those lying around somewhere?”

She looked annoyed now, hopefully losing her equanimity would bring out the truth. “Ever since I learned of the dragons I have been trying to match them to the prophecies, it’s written that the Prince who was Promised must go east before he goes west, Asshai would certainly qualify.”

“I thought that their birth disrupted your visions of the future?”

“It did but that doesn’t mean the old predictions aren’t valid.” Up until then her voice had been slowly rising in volume but with the confession she slumped. “They might have known something I do not, some way to deal with interference that’s been lost with magic’s fading.”

“Either way I advised Viserys against going with you, and if you call anyone here they won’t make it ashore.”

She acquiesced with a shrug. “He would have to be willing anyways, the dragons wouldn’t be coerced even if he was taken. I haven’t told anyone about the dragons in any case, there are too many who would try to take them and risk the Long Night come again.”

“As long as we’re clear then, don’t badger him about it either, he has enough on his plate without you bothering him about a great and glorious destiny that might not even be his.” If I could I would have locked eyes with her to show my resolve, but I was in no mood for a soul gaze so I simply stared at her forehead until she nodded.

“If he asks I will tell him, but I won’t bring it up again while we are guests here.”
Over a week as Maggie grew better at poking through my brain I worked on my other daughter’s home. Bob’s skull was an impressive piece of enchantment that held a lot more magic than I knew anything about. It’s most basic function as I understood was to act as a permanent threshold, so that Bob as a spiritual entity could exist without worrying about the deleterious effects of the sun or running water inside of his sanctuary. My daughter, she needed a name but nothing I had thought of really seemed to fit, would have all of my and Lasciel’s knowledge and would probably be able to direct me how to improve it past the barebones spirit container I could build.

Lasciel’s knowledge, that was a potentially very scary set of memories. She had been around since the dawn of creation and had seen it all with the varied senses of an angel. Even with the bare minimum of help I had accepted from her I had benefitted enormously, everything from contortionist tricks to how to play a guitar was in her mind, and if I understood properly now in my daughter’s. I had improved my magic a lot since I’d been here, teaching Molly and Maggie had forced me to completely master the basics, but my work on enchanting had pushed me well beyond my former limits. Even the bench I was sitting on, that I’d pulled from the rock was far beyond what I could do at home. It wasn’t anything too difficult, just that I’d never done anything so overt and permanent, simultaneously powerful and precise.

Compared to the magic Lasciel had known it was nothing though. I’d consciously avoided taking Lash’s help whenever I could, but my daughter probably didn’t have my corruption on the agenda. She would be more than a magical research library of course, regardless of her humanity she was my daughter, but even just the general knowledge she had would be enough to dramatically increase Maggie’s and my knowledge and power. I didn’t really have any projects that needed new information, my current efforts were moving along, but with her help a lot of the enchantments I’d been struggling with would be much easier.

That was all reliant on getting her out and building her sanctum, something I’d let my thoughts distract me from. Bob had his skull and while I didn’t usually change what worked I didn’t really want my daughter to inhabit one. I also didn’t have any skulls on hand and taking someone’s here wasn’t really an option. If I was going to be sculpting a home for my daughter I was going to avoid making it as macabre as possible. Maggie and I had played with making the Moai, giant heads as seen in the south Pacific, but those were caricatures, only one step past snowmen as the stick figures of the three dimensional world. I could and would do better, even if it wasn’t strictly needed.

The character of my daughter was another mystery. If she was a spirit of intellect like Bob she wouldn’t be able to understand the difference between good and evil, for all of Bob’s human seeming habits and emotions he was somewhat alien in his aspects. When he expressed the knowledge he’d gained from Kemmler he was completely different, cold and cruel rather than the perverted jokester my sixteen year old self had called up. Whatever Kemmler had managed didn’t really stand up to a millenia old Fallen Angel. Lash had been benevolent in the end, but Lasciel hadn’t been. She would potentially be quite dangerous, depending on if the memories of Lash and myself had been enough to overwhelm the eons of Lasciel.

Extracting her would be chancy enough without worrying about her possible actions. However I drew some confidence that even if she was more Lasciel than Lash Maggie and I were the only wizards on this world who could help her. Even if she would betray us she’d probably need us as
servants if nothing else. That led to the nicely paranoid thought that as an immortal spirit I’d never be sure she wasn’t plotting betrayal, at some point though I’d have to relax.

Speaking of relaxing I needed to get back to work. The illusions I’d planned to hide the dragons were fairly easy, my little show for the unmasking had made it pretty simple to have a dragon just circle in the sky or fly around a sufficiently random route. The trick was getting continuous power into it. For the Lannister compasses I had managed to build links that would transmit heat at least once and I personally was able to leach energy from things and use it to power my magic. Joining the three things together, a permanent illusion powered by an external source of thermal energy, was a lot more complex, especially because I wouldn’t be controlling the illusion the entire time.

Currently I was working on the illusion, Maggie had been trying to get the heat transfer enchantment to work for some time and until my part was ready I wouldn’t help. She needed to learn how to experiment on her own, I wouldn’t always be around to answer her questions and it was a crucial skill. I’d explained some of what I’d done but I was enjoying the chance to be inscrutable as she struggled.

“I think I’ve got it?” Or she could be surprisingly talented and ruin my fun.

“Are you asking or telling me?”

She paused for a second, holding her left hand over the two carved chunks of basalt. “Telling.”

I picked up one of the rocks, it was a fist sized cylinder, with runes carved on the round side. Technically runes could be in any language but like casting in Latin having them in a non native language prevented accidents like making the paper fly when writing a travel itinerary. Ebenezer had taught me a pared down version of Old Norse, it only had a few hundred words but its characters were easy to carve and if I needed more words I could just make them up. Writing in Latin was possible, but its flowing characters took much more effort.

I tossed it in the air a few times, Maggie’s eyes tracked it nervously as it flew. “So why do you think it works?”

She smirked. "This's why." Right as the basalt landed she lifted a finger and sent a current of lightning into the other block. My hand spasmed and the rock flew across the terrace, clipping the edge of a bench before it rolled to a halt and started quivering.

With the reflexes honed through years of embarrassing enchanting failures I seized her rock and flung it at the other before dragging Maggie behind me.

“Defendarius!” The blue shield leapt up around us as the two rocks started to vibrate more energetically. The runes carved began to glow and rapidly brighten, smoke rose briefly and then everything seemed to stop. I kept the shield up though, even as Maggie started to peer around me.

“I think it’s-”

The explosion cut her off and bits of rock pinged off my shield. Looking at the scorch marks on the stone terrace I kept the shield up a little longer before releasing it and Maggie.

“So I guess it didn’t do that the first few times?”

Maggie didn’t really go pale, her skin was dark enough that it was hard to see, but her eyes widened
at the damage her work had done. “No, they equalized temperatures when I dropped one side into the springs and I was able to send static charges through them.” She looked at me before turning back to the blackened area. “Nothing happened like that.”

“The runes might have been damaged when you made me toss it, it was moving pretty well when it hit the bench. Do you think you put enough power into them for that explosion?”

Her expression changed, as she squinted at the marks, she started muttering under her breath, calculating the energy she’d used. It was somewhat worrying we both had such excellent understandings of how hard it was to blow up rocks. After about a minute, I was entertaining myself with the thought that explosions were so normal here none of the other islanders had come to check on us, she shook her head decisively.

“Nope, if they had just glowed and vibrated it could have been just the original spells, but the explosion was too much.”

“So do you know what you did wrong?”

“They weren’t just transferring the energy, some was getting absorbed.” She looked irritated before she brightened. “Just like Little Chicago! I’ve almost caught up to your mistakes!”

Little Chicago’s mysterious fixing still irked me but whoever did it was a world away. “If you’re measuring yourself by my mistakes you don’t stand a chance of catching up. I’ve blown up things in weirder ways than you can imagine.” She was still entertained though, her near success had excited her.

“Whatever. You know how Little Chicago got fixed, if I can just duplicate that we’ll have our energy source done.” She turned on her heel back towards the house but couldn’t resist a Parthian shot. “Try not to be too jealous of my incredible enchanting skills, if you need any help with your illusions maybe I can help.. Grasshopper!” She laughed at my gobsmacked expression as she rounded the edge of the crater towards home. Did I really want another daughter?

62.

“I think this is it.” I stirred, Maggie had been doing her Professor X pose for the last half hour as I tried to relax my mind. Her voice was the first sound other than the gulls and the waves I’d heard in longer, and the last time she’d spoken it had been to make sure I hadn’t been nodding off.

“You found her?” It had been two weeks since we’d perfected the energy transfer stones, the illusions had gone up two days later and since then we’d both been focussing exclusively on our other non-extraplanar family member.

Maggie stood and stretched, she had grown at least an inch since we’d returned from Westeros and was still firmly in the coltish stage of adolescence, if she kept following my model she had a long time there still. After what what seemed like an excessive amount of bending, capped off by her cracking her neck to my grimaces, she turned back to me with a grin. “There’s a part of your brain that’s not you, it’s pretty close but I’ve found it.”

That sounded promising, however thanks to the Council’s laws I didn’t have any better idea than Maggie. “So any thoughts on the extraction?”
“I was thinking about just pushing it out, but that could end with your skull leaving with it.”

I raised an eyebrow and spoke deliberately. “All plans should leave my cranium intact, let’s just set that as a guideline.”

Her grin only widened “I did have some ideas about trepanning. . .”

How had she even learned about that here? “This will be a strictly spiritual surgery, there will be no hole drilling.”

“I’m the doctor here, I get to plan the treatment course. Besides who else can you ask? Ancalagon?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, if I was going to have a different dangerous animal do it I’d get one that doesn’t hate me like a shark or a sea lion or something.”

She huffed at that. “Well if you don’t want marine animals to do it we’re going with my gentle pushing plan. Have you finished her sanctum yet?”

I swallowed my epidural joke and nodded. I was quite proud of it actually, even if it had worked through an accident of magic. I had been using illusions to plot out what I could make, it was something I couldn’t have done a year ago but small images in the dark were well within my capabilities now. Making a little blue Princess Leia that chased Maggie around begging for help had been one of my proudest moments. The night before though, I had been making images of potential heads. They all were based on Lash’s favored form, the tall blonde she’d often appeared as when she wanted to speak to me with bits and pieces of others bleeding in, Elaine’s eyes, Murphy’s nose, even a jaw that could have been Maggie’s or Susan’s.

I was thinking it was all somewhat pointless, I lacked the skill to sculpt a bust to match it, either with tools or my magic, until I realized I didn’t have to. I’d spent the last few weeks working on illusions that could be controlled remotely, if I gave the sanctum another energy source and one of the focusing crystals I’d made she’d be able to control her own appearance, to appear as she wished, not as my limited artistic abilities would show. Maggie didn’t know this of course and when she saw what I’d ended up with she looked aghast.

“That’s it? It’s just a wig mannequin, I could have done better than that for my sister, she doesn’t even have a face!” It was rather unprepossessing at first glance, it was a gleaming black bust, with the head and neck smooth with the sort of idealized shape that drawing puppets had before it widened at the shoulders. I had put in far more visible effort there, I had carved runes along the shoulders and the base and filled them with quartz, aided by a liberal use of soulfire. As long as the magma under the island was warm the bust would be able to create illusions with the slightest exercise of will. Bob had been able to interact with Little Chicago and I had put the same sort of interface so that my daughter could choose her own appearance. Lash had always been a little vain about her appearance, glorying in her mutability, our daughter would be able to follow in her footsteps, wingbeats, or ethereal drifting as the case may be.

Maggie was somewhat mollified by my explanation, studying the runes I had carved intently. “She’ll be able to draw on the entire power of the volcano?” Her inquiry was casual but I could sense the underlying tension. I had tried to answer all of Maggie’s questions but when I had explained the potential strength of a fallen angel educated spirit of intellect she had become sensibly nervous.

“Not quite, she can use it to make illusions but if she drew too much power it would short out.”
Illusions could be dangerous all on their own of course, but they weren’t as clearly terrifying as the force and fire we normally threw around. “It might not even work in any case, I focused on the sanctum aspects far more, she can always move to the next model.”

Bob had been compelled to obey whoever held his skull, I hadn’t put any such enchantments on this one for two reasons. First, I didn’t think it was right to do to my child and second because I didn’t want anyone to have her service if they stole the bust or even just inherited it. Her free will might be limited due to her nature but I didn’t want to reduce it further.

“So when do we get started? We have all of the things we needed right?” I looked around the lab, it would be a pretty spartan procedure, just Maggie, me and the bust to start.

“We should probably make a circle for it, do a ritual cleanse, and then wait for nightfall. We have a threshold but if something goes excitingly wrong we’ll have time before the sun rises to make a new sanctum.” Maggie still appeared uncertain, but I clapped my hands before speaking enthusiastically. “Also food, meditation, despite being the exact same as sitting still calorically, has always made me hungry.” She nodded with a faint smile and left. I wasn’t hungry in the slightest, but the lab here in the unoccupied secondary larder needed a few alterations before we began.

Quaithe and the Targaryens, possible band name there if you were into the dissident Maiar music scene, what with all the shadows and flames, were largely oblivious to Maggie’s and my project. They knew we were up to something mystical, but we had been doing large scale magic the entire time we had been here. At this point with the island having been entirely remodeled with illusionary beasts roaming the skies and Maggie toying with rock boats they were pretty jaded.

The other inhabitants paid even less attention. Rhaellion had won his carnivorous spurs recently, taking out a seagull in a burst of feathers. He had also shown the first sparks of his fiery breath, lightly singing the bird. Ancalagon and Jelmazma had quickly followed suit, Daenerys being the recipient of two mangled birds from Jelmazma much to her initial bemusement. I didn’t want to think what she’d bring back next, if their cat-like behavior stayed with their growth Daenerys might someday be opening her door to find dolphins in the morning. It was nice to eat dinner with them all, the humans not the dragons, Maggie and I had been growing a little standoffish with our work but even Quaithe was decent conversation.

Soon enough though it was time to face the music. I showered, hot water was a luxury I swore I would never willingly go without again, and threw on some clean clothes before meeting Maggie. She was also freshly washed and dressed, symbolically purging outside influences. As I entered she looked up from the circles I’d carved into the floor. “What are these?”

I knew she wasn’t asking the obvious question, circles had been part of her magical education since day one. “Just a precaution.” She raised an eyebrow before glancing back down. The circles were carved deep into the floor, a star was inscribed in the inner one with its points touching the edges, the bust was in the pentacle’s exact center. Outside was another circle, this one was considerably more intricate, incorporating celtic knots and runes running alongside it. “If anything goes wrong you’ll just step back and raise the second circle, anything inside will be stuck in there and you’ll be safe.”

She shifted her weight and pivoted, checking if she could move over both as easily as I had said. “Do you think it’s going to be that dangerous?”

I exhaled loudly, nervousness would only tighten my mind’s shields and I wanted to be as relaxed as possible for the ritual. “Nope, I think she’ll be as friendly as you can hope but I didn’t get this far without taking precautions.” I met her eyes without fear, it was an unusual gesture of trust for both of
us with the threat of soulgazes but she calmed with it.

“Well it will be nice to be a big sister I guess. Let’s do it.”

It wasn’t that simple of course but it was close for me at least. I sank into my mind, meditating and keeping my barriers as low as possible. Maggie put her hands to her forehead and closed her eyes, visibly concentrating. In my intentionally relaxed state I was more sensitive to the flows of magic, especially since the circle we’d raised meant the only power moving was Maggie’s. I intentionally didn’t follow what she was doing, just staring at the insides of my eyelids and trying to keep my mind blank.

After what could have been anytime from minutes to hours I had a strange sensation, like my brain was expanding literally rather than through psychoactive substances. The feeling grew more intense, until my brain felt like it was avalanching down a mountain or coursing through a dry riverbed when abruptly it stopped. With that moment the magic in the circle drastically changed. Maggie let out a satisfied breath and I opened my eyes. I tried to stand from my lotus position and nearly fell, only barely catching myself. I shook my legs to try to eradicate the pins and needles while my eyes were locked on the bust.

Green lights swirled over the smooth face, occasionally sketching what might have been features. I was wondering why the illusions wouldn’t work before the answer came to me. “Maggie, break the circle.”

She swung an arm through space, as transfixed as I was. With the connection to the rest of the world restored the green lights brightened, before they gave a blinding flash. As our eyes recovered I nearly panicked, the lights were gone and the bust was as blank as ever.

“It’s so nice to see both of you!” At the sound of the unfamiliar voice I swung, stepping between Maggie and the source, drawing in power before I saw who had spoken. A little girl stood in midair, she appeared no older than nine, and now that I was trying I could feel the energy emanating from the bust.

She was blonde, Lash’s features dominated, I was apparently cursed to have children who didn’t look like me, but on a second look I could see traces of myself as well as others. As a literal brainchild genetics weren’t really a major factor but it was strange to see aspects of old friends in the form of a spirit currently staring at Maggie and me. “It’s gotten harder and harder to see your memories as I grew, and you both look different than how I expected!” Her energy was also surprising, Bob had never seemed so enthusiastic but perhaps having a volcano fueling her helped.

“We’re happy to see you too.” Maggie had stepped around me closer to her sister, a slight wavering the only sign of her nervousness. “But what should we call you? You need a name.”

She brightened at that, both in her expression and literally, she cast shadows from her glowing form. “I have a name, my mother gave me one. Would you like to hear it?” I nodded, somewhat numb, Lash had apparently known what we’d made even as she went to her death. My daughter opened her mouth and a sound came forth, a single chord from an enormous orchestra evoking purity and strength and the first light of dawn.

Maggie and I exchanged a glance but she spoke before I could. “That’s a beautiful name but do you have one we can say?”

She looked flustered for a second before recovering. “Of course, you have mouths and lungs, I
forgot you were so limited. Mother also gave me a nickname.” She moved, sidled really, closer to Maggie and tried to speak sotto voce. “She thought Father would give me something embarrassing so she planned ahead.” She turned back to face both of us. “You can call me Lydia.”

“It’s so good to meet you Lydia.” My voice was thick with emotion, it had finally hit me that I had another daughter, seeing her named and speaking brought it fully home. “Your sister and I are very happy to have you here.” Maggie shook her head vigorously and stepped forward her arms outstretched, they shared an awkward hug but Lydia’s face glowed from more than just internal illumination even as Maggie’s arms clipped through her back.

“But enough introductions! I have so many questions, did you realize that the dragons are living leylines? Are you going to make the island a Genius Loci? It doesn’t have a spirit for you yet but Mother did that a little back when creation was young, I can get one growing, watch!” Before I could get a word in edgewise through her excited ramblings I could feel her draw in power and send it twisting strangely into the ground. “Well that’s done, just wait two or maybe three thousand years and it will be ready!”

Maggie said what I was thinking but lacked my characteristic tact. “Neither of us will be around in two thousand years.” Lydia’s face sank for an instant but she rapidly recovered.

“Oh that’s not a problem Maggie, I can teach you how to drain the lives from your enemies and extend your own, it’s dead simple!” She finished her sentence with a smile, looking at us as if expecting a laugh at her wordplay and congratulations. That more than anything hammered the truth home. Lydia was my daughter, she could act and look human but she was fundamentally different, Bob had never been able to understand good and evil and neither could Lydia. She was looking between us anxiously now. “If you’re worried about the First Law I have another method, it’s just like putting them to sleep for the rest of their lives, but you’ll need new enemies pretty regularly, every fifty years or so. What do you think? Maggie? Dad?” She trailed off at the end and looked near tears at Maggie’s shocked expression.

“We have a lot of time to learn all of that Lydia, we’ll be happy to study what you can teach us.” I threw a warning look at Maggie who forced a smile.

“That’s right, besides we’re on vacation now, do you want to go on a tour of our island with us?” Lydia’s happiness was back as soon as Maggie started speaking.

“Definitely Sis! Mother never made it here and everything is subtly different, there’s so much to learn!” As I followed my daughters out we passed an astonished audience, Viserys dropped his book and Rhaellion flared his wings from the back of his chair. Lydia and Maggie ignored them as they walked, and I just shrugged my shoulders at his unspoken inquiry as I followed my daughters out into the night.

63.

Three days after her emergence, definitely not a birth or cranial C-section, Lydia discovered the other people on the island. When Maggie and I had taken her outside to distract her from suggesting necromantic rituals she had immediately seized onto the seals and began studying them in as much detail as she could manage. I didn’t even know tricuspid was a word much less that seals had tricuspid teeth but Lydia delighted in appearing to Maggie and I to comment on the subtle differences between the seals here and the common grey seal, Halichoerus grypus, they closely resembled,
starting with their dental anatomy.

I wasn’t sure if her exuberance in learning new information was because of Lasciel’s memories, as a fallen angel she had known almost all there was to know except apparently the particulars of this world. Bob had never been quite so enthusiastic about learning but he was shaped by my expectations when I claimed him from DuMorne’s burnt house, maybe I had subconsciously influenced him to be less curious in addition to giving him my sixteen year old libido. Either way she constantly appeared to Maggie and I to announce her discoveries. She could sense everything within the wards, everything above the high tide line, and had been proceeding from one end to the other systematically, studying seals, sea lions, rocks, minerals, lichens, the advances in Maggie’s sculptural form during her poorly received island period, until Daenerys chased Jelmazma past her projected form.

We found the two of them chatting hours later when Daenerys didn’t appear for lunch. The two girls were seated on one of the lower terraces with Daenerys’s dragon draped over her shoulders. Viserys hadn’t asked about Lydia, accepting it as general Dresden weirdness, but for Quaithe this was the first time she’d seen her for longer than a few seconds.

As we drew closer I could hear Lydia lecturing. “Their internal magic is used to give them the strength to move and fly but so much more just spills forth, it’s like—” Jelmazma’s hiss at me alerted Daenerys to our arrival, Lydia was aware of course, Little Sister was always watching, but the other little girl spun to see what had annoyed her dragon.

“Oh hello Harry, why didn’t you tell us you had another daughter?” She blinked as the lizard continued to posture from behind her. “Viserys have you met Lydia?” She turned back to her former interlocutor, “He’s my brother, and the King of Westeros.” The capitals were audible as she spoke, Lydia turned to look over Viserys, raising an eyebrow and covering the fifteen feet between us in a step. Lydia did enjoy her projection, saying it was far better than being locked in a skull but she only barely paid attention to the laws of physics with it, when she didn’t simply materialize wherever she wanted to show herself to be.

“I’ve never met a king in the flesh before.” She said while walking around the suddenly nervous Viserys. “And now that I have there’s not much special about you.” Viserys looked stricken, and Lydia hastily corrected herself, she might not understand good and evil but she did try to be polite. “Well your phenotypes, particularly your hair and your eyes are quite rare though, violet eyes without consistent albinism is unheard of without work being done and Daenerys already told me she didn’t remember anything of the sort.” She leaned in, staring at him despite not needing to. “On the whole though you’re no different from any of Earth’s kings, same little imprint in the soul and everything.”

Well that was enough of that potentially fascinating conversation, I’d have to head this off before she started talking to Quaithe and telling her quite literally everything there was to know about Earth. “We were coming to get Daenerys for lunch Lydia. If you’re satisfied with your inspections for now you can join us.”

“That’s kind of you Father, I don’t need to eat though, you should know that.” I was the uncomfortable recipient of her scrutiny now. “Did Mother never teach you how improve your mind? It doesn’t even need any sacrifices to get started!”

“I think I’m good for now, it was just if you wanted to talk while we ate.”

“Oh.” She looked pensive before shaking her head in negation. “I don’t think I have the time, I’ve
only catalogued eighteen percent of the island and I’ve already fallen behind schedule talking to Daenerys. If I’m going to expend power in the sunlight I want to be efficient.” She smiled and began to fade out with her teeth the last thing remaining. “Thanks for the invitation though!” the breeze lightly called.

I wasn’t sure if the Chesire Cat came from my memories or Lasciel’s but neither words nor animation adequately described how strange its vanishing was. Quaithe and Viserys were staring at her last position while Jelmazma scanned the skies. “Harry?” Daenerys had joined us from her bench looking up at me. “You said something about lunch?”

Life on the island continued, Lydia proudly announced a week later that she had recategorized its entire natural history and was moving on to study the visible stars. I had no idea what sort of senses she was even using to look at them, her bust remained in the lab, but time passed and she didn’t shift to another project. It was somewhat of a surprise almost a month later when she broke her vigil and popped into my room to announce a ship was on the horizon. I hastily rolled out of bed and clambered to the top of the tower, grabbing my telescope as I went.

The cog flew the flag of Braavos, the titan on a purple field, but that hardly proved anything. The Sealord had arranged signals for us but she hadn’t yet shown them, of course without knowing that Maggie and I had begun to pull an obelisk out of the rock they couldn’t anticipate us seeing them at this range. I’d have to go meet them at the jetty in any case.

I woke Maggie and sent her to get the others up, Lydia materialized behind me as I threw my coat on and picked up my staff. “Does this mean we’re leaving Father?”

“Maybe, it depends if they’re who they claim to be.” I was moving through the spring chamber towards the front door now, Lydia calmly floating backwards through the wall as I exited.

“Maggie told me all about Braavos, it will be neat to see an entirely new city. There’ll be so much to learn and see.” She changed her pose, straightening even as she kept pace with my walk towards the beach. “I should warn you though, if we leave before I finish mapping the sky from here we’ll have to come back as soon as possible so I can finish, thanks to you and Mother I’m not the type to leave things half done.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” I was only half paying attention now, I was attempting to get the illusion of dragons overhead to reset to a more interesting part so that any sailors wouldn’t notice the real ones.

“Well that’s good.” Her projection abruptly stopped as I reached the jetty. With the volcano’s power she could send images much further but her senses, the ones I knew about from Bob at least, stopped at the waterline. “Father?”

I stepped back into my wards, the comfortable feeling of Maggie’s and my magic washing over me. “Yes?”

“Will I be able to talk to people in Braavos?” I looked towards her as she appeared uncharacteristically subdued. “I know you worry every time Quaithe talks to me, will you be that nervous about everyone?”

“Some people sure, but if you can keep your nature a secret you can talk to a lot more.” She grinned but I wasn’t too worried. She had gotten bored with Viserys and Daenerys quickly, declaring they had nothing else she cared to learn yet, and had been avoiding Quaithe apparently to keep me from
worrying. I was relieved with her opinions though, if she thought that the Targaryens were boring I doubted many would be able to keep her attention long enough to wonder about her odd behavior.

We continued chatting as I kept an eye on the approaching ship, at about two miles they ran up the agreed upon signals, the Sealord had sent them. It was almost a disappointment, I had been looking forward to testing how well the fog bank illusion would work on dissuading landings but it didn’t look like I’d get the chance today. “Lydia?” I interrupted her story about the island’s impact on the local weather and for a second she had the same rebellious expression that Maggie sometimes wore. “Can you tell the others that this is the Sealord’s ship?” With a flash she was gone and I turned back to the boat, leaning heavily on my staff as they drew closer to shore.
The dragons, real and illusory, circled over us. The one’s I’d made were rather more impressive I felt, with jeweled bellies with one stone missing and the gaps in their scales showing a furnace within. Lydia had apparently joined in the fun as well, there was a long ribbon like creature, a mix of an eel and a chinese dragon that lazily undulated across the sky letting off puffs of steam.

The cog nearly ran aground, the crew transfixed by the spectacle. Only last minute commands by the mate were enough to get the sailors focused on landing and not crashing into the new stone berth. I tried to look vaguely helpful, standing next to a bollard in the hopes they’d throw me a line, but the men on board were either too frightened or too proud for my help. I could hear muttering from the crew and I was half contemplating drawing power in case things turned ugly when Syrio leapt down from the rail to the jetty.

“Dresden!” He looked more piratical in the Errol Flynn mold than ever, if he’d introduced himself as Captain Blood I would have looked for the cameras. “From what Ferrego told me the island was a bird overrun shithole but this?” We both looked up at my island, the crystal pergola shone in the sun, one of the terraces was rapidly greening, Mini Tirith rose nobly from the volcano, and of course there were dragons everywhere. “If we had known you could work such miracles the Navy would never have let you go.” He spoke brightly but his smile didn’t go to his eyes, they were scanning everything I’d made and I could tell he was memorizing it to report to the Sealord.

“It helps that the island is mine. I couldn’t have done quite the same to Braavos’s forts.” That was a bit of a lie, I had sufficiently demonstrated my ability to perform aggressive landscaping in Oldtown but Syrio didn’t challenge me. “What are you planning by the way? Is it safe for us to return to the city?”

He finally took his gaze off of the island’s new features, swinging back to me although his head infinitesimally paused when his eyes passed my staff. “Ferrego does not believe it is safe for you and the others to return at the time, soon after you left the city was inundated with mystics claiming that the dragons had come again.” We both glanced up at Lydia’s beast that was now pulsing in color as it drifted. “It seems like your illusion at the last unmasking got more attention than you anticipated. In any event the Targaryens are rumored to have survived the blaze, there’s a story aboard every ship. There are still assassins abroad and if the children came back our subterfuge wouldn’t withstand their scrutiny.”

I was a little relieved by that, amid the bad news was the silver lining that I didn’t have to make a way to conceal three real dragons. Of course after nearly three months on the island it was starting to feel a little cramped. “Does he have any idea when it will be safe?”

“Not at all I’m afraid, the ending of the Greyjoy rebellion has enflamed the Westerosi king. He put a bounty on all enemies of his crown large enough that random Lyseni children are being picked off the streets.”

“So if I don’t want them to star in the grittier remake of Anastasia they’ll have to stay here?” He raised an eyebrow, obviously unfamiliar with twentieth century Russian history, but nodded anyways. “Well it’s not like the same view for three months got old or anything.”
“Cheer up Dresden, we anticipated you might be bored by now.” He waved at the crew who began to move about in preparation to unload cargo. “We brought more supplies, although it looks as if you’re becoming self sufficient, and the Iron Bank sent a tutor to keep up the children’s education.”

I grunted noncommittally, Syrio seemed to get the message as he lapsed into silence while the sailors began to carry the materials up the path, the ones who’d come last time easily distinguished by their astonishment. As the first men started their walk back down the hill I spoke up. “You should probably tell the Sealord I don’t plan on staying here much longer than another three months, he’ll have to solve the assassin problem by then.”

Maggie was definitely getting a little cabin fever and my other daughter might run out of things to categorize by that point. I really didn’t want to see what two bored children of mine could get up to. It was also a waste of her childhood, I didn’t want to make Maggie into the Braavosi version of Miranda, she should see more of the world. That went double for the Ariel of my allusion, Lydia quite literally grew by learning and restricting her information intake felt like starving her. If all else failed and boredom took us before the ship came back we could simply make an iceberg and sail it off, it might be safer for everyone than experimenting on top of a dormant volcano.

“I’ll let him know as soon as I return, I doubt he’ll have much of a problem with it.” We both went back to watching the crew offload cargo. I could see Quaithe and all of the children, bar Lydia, on a terrace that was a distance from the house’s entrance. I approved of her caution, some sailors might suspect there was more to this trip than visiting a wizard but removing the Targaryens with their obvious Valyrian heritage from their view might keep rumors about them from spreading. The literal dragons flying overhead would cause enough rumors, I doubted anyone would tell stories about anything else but the illusions. I’d also have to show they were illusions, Syrio knew I could make them and it wasn’t necessarily uncommon knowledge in Braavos but some of the sailors might believe they were the real thing.

I set a few of the beasts to start to turn transparent and flicker as well as leading a few of them into rocks, hopefully they’d realize they were a trick rather than assuming invisible ghost dragons were responsible. Syrio watched me as I adjusted the spell, a few gestures had been needed and their effects were obvious. To break the now less comfortable silence I tried to clarify what he’d said earlier. “You mentioned the Greyjoy rebellion finished up?”

He stopped looking at me with the way zoo-goers watch lions to answer. “Yes, yes, a bloody business towards the end too.”

“So the islands fell in the end? How long ago was this?”

“We started to hear of it just over a month ago, so two months at the longest. The islands falling was never in doubt, not with that king on the throne.”

“I’d heard he was vicious to his enemies.” I thought back to Oberyn’s stories, Robert Baratheon had been willing to kill children to finish his revenge, nobles who slaughtered his subjects would get no mercy for sure.

“That’s the thing.” Syrio looked pensive. “Ferrego had thought that he would just take hostages. The dragon kings had been leery of removing their Lords Paramount and the common expectation was that the Greyjoys would pay dearly but remain in charge if crippled.”

That didn’t seem sensible but as the King he probably didn’t want others to get in the habit of seeing liege lords killed. “So what happened that was so unexpected?”
“He destroyed the houses of the Iron Islands root and branch, men were killed, boys sent to their Wall and the daughters were given to loyal men, second or third sons. The only Greyjoy known to be alive is Balon’s daughter, a girl of thirteen or fourteen. She’s to marry.” He paced a little, kicking at one of the rocks that hadn’t been completely melted into the jetty looking a little surprised at how it resisted before he gathered his train of thought. “She’s to marry someone insulting, a dwarf or a bastard or some much lower noble, I don’t remember, the stories were confused.”

Well in one sense that was good, there probably wasn’t anyone gunning for me specifically as their father’s, brother’s, son’s or nephew’s killer. Of course I was halfway around the world on an enchanted island that now came with the hide in the mist stealth field option so the pseudo Vikings would probably have difficulties regardless. It was always nice to have fewer potential enemies though.

The thought jarred me, I’d never really enjoyed having enemies of course, but I’d rarely felt such joy at thinking of their demise. The cause, or a cause I was hardly a saint, was the Mantle. I’d planned to remove it before the Lydia situation stalled me and now that she was out I hadn’t even thought of it. Suppressing it, the thought of the pain involved staggered me after all of this time, had kept the impulses down before, not eliminated them but I had been able to clearly discern their source. With the Mantle fully on they crept into my thoughts without warning. I’d have to try to remove it again once things were settled and I’d gotten the measure of the tutor. Taking myself out of commission for however long was impossible while there weren’t only trustworthy or intimidated people on the island. If all else failed we’d be gone in three months and I could remove the Mantle either here or back in Braavos.

Syrio had been examining the island while I thought, he had gotten down on his hands and knees looking over the edge of the jetty and its seared and melted stone. When he noticed me watching he stood up and brushed off his pants. “When I saw the melted stones I thought some of your dragons were real.” Lydia’s monstrosity chose that moment to buzz the cog while flashing an eye-searing yellow. “But now I believe the stories coming out of Westeros about your power. You’ve stepped into legend there you know.”

“Merely an unfortunate consequence of staying alive I assure you.”

“When I was younger.” I gave him a flat look, Syrio was at least ten, probably closer to fifteen, years younger than me and I wasn’t willing to consider myself old yet. “Before I was the First Sword I should say, I craved fame and adulation and now you have it and lurk on your deserted island with your daughter.” He was still looking for a loose stone for some reason, systematically attempting to move each rock.

“I’ve been notorious before, it was nice to be anonymous for a bit here.” Syrio chose that moment to look up in triumph, one of the larger stones had shifted under his foot. He moved along with a satisfied air.

“Before. Someday you will have to tell the story of before, you have told tales about shipwreck and no one seems to know anything of it.” He faked a pensive look. “But honestly, unless you lived among giants you would always have a certain fame.”

“I couldn’t live among giants, I like being about to look down on people literally as well as figuratively.”

“If that were true you’d have built your tower in Braavos rather than out here Harry. Do you do
masonry by the way? I won’t always be the First Sword and if I ever settle down I’ll need a house and I think melted stone would be just the thing.”

“I think my rates would be exorbitant, maybe talk to Maggie. Are you thinking about hanging up the sword?”

He grinned but it didn’t look quite as full as his usual. “With all the magic, the new sail-less ships, explorers reaching ever further, it’s easy to feel as if the world has changed. It’s enough to make me think about the future.”

“You’re hardly ancient now, I adapted to having a daughter, I’m sure you can get used to a few new tricks.”

“I’m not so sure.” He had finally stopped trying to break my jetty as he kept his head down in thought. “Part of the reason I’m the First Sword was that I knew when to stay and when to quit.” He looked up and I had to hastily avoid his eyes. “Not just in fighting, if you pay attention, actually look and listen you can get a good idea of what’s happening next and if you want a part of it, in crowds, in the city, and the world.” He stopped trying to meet my eyes, turning to the sea tossing a rock he’d pried up from hand to hand. “It’s like music almost, when you hear a tune and think you know the next note. I’m the First Sword because I always listen to the music and get the note right.” He looked at the rock for a second before he sent it skimming into the waves. “It changes, sometimes fast, sometimes slow but there’s always that beat running through the world if you just listen for it. Right now,” He turned, somehow ponderously even though he was as light on his feet as ever. “When I left the city I didn’t hear anything, the music’s stopped.”

65.

Soon after Syrio’s unforeseen foray into prognostication the cog was fully unloaded and they warped out of the berth. I stayed on the jetty until they were a few miles out then stepped back into the ward lines. They were the only ones who knew about us on the island, and only the captain and the first mate probably had a precise idea of where exactly it was. It was time to make sure that no one who didn’t know where we were could find us.

With a slight effort, mentally it was like turning a knob, I canceled the dragon illusions. Lydia’s remained looking lonely for a few seconds, before it pulsed orange one last time and vanished, leaving the skies clear of reptiles.

“Ad Caligo!” With my awkward Latin phrase I set the central quartz crystal to project a dense fog around the island. After a few moments I felt the draw on me ease and shift to the volcano as the illusion became self sustaining and Maggie’s enchantment took the load. For several miles around the mist would grow thicker and thicker. We weren’t in the exact center, a little north of it actually, but anyone looking for the island would have a hard time. Lydia had suggested making reefs or rocks just below the surface to ensure no one could land without knowing the route but that would have to wait until our next trip, if the Sealord’s men were shipwrecked we’d be in trouble.

I waited a moment, making sure that the illusion would hold and there wouldn’t be another explosion, before I turned back to the steps. As I walked Lydia fell in besides me, one step there was empty air and the next her favored blond form. “Father can the new man see me?”

The tutor. I wasn’t sure why the Sealord had sent him, we wouldn’t be here too much longer but
perhaps the Iron Bank had wanted to make sure their investment was looked after. “Not yet, we have to get the measure of him, see if he’s trustworthy before you get introduced.”

“But father he probably knows things!” Lydia’s occasional one track mind wavered between annoying and amusing. She already knew most of what I did and had long conversations with Maggie and Daenerys trying to leach out their knowledge when she wasn’t cataloguing the stars or waters around the island. I’d persuaded her not to talk with Quaithe until we weren’t confined to the same island but oddly she hadn’t been too interested in the peculiarities of this world’s magic yet. “How can I learn more if I can’t ask questions? Viserys is always satisfied with such cursory explanations.”

“If you really have to you can whisper questions for Viserys to ask but not too many. Anyways we don’t know anything about the tutor, he might not be very good.” Also Viserys was not at all satisfied with cursory explanations, during the time I had been studying with him we’d had hour long discussions about such trivial minutiae that I couldn’t imagine that his interactions with a tutor would be any less thorough. Of course by an immortal spirit of intellect’s standards probably everything I’d ever learned or taught was the cliff notes version. She frowned slightly and started to fade out before I interrupted her. “Besides aren’t you still working on the seagulls here?”

She snapped back to full visibility with a blinding smile and started babbling about how their feather’s coloring was derived from subtly different microstructures from their earthly cousins, and how Daenerys had kindly regifted some of Jelmazma’s presents for further study. She continued in that vein until I reached the house where she vanished as quickly as she appeared.

Entering the house, the spring chamber was much different from the dark and sweltering room that it had been here when we arrived, I found Viserys and Maggie standing near our new guest as he admired the room. “How did you get so much glass here, and so finely shaped?” The quartz skylights had been Maggie’s idea. The previous wooden roof had been replaced by shaped stone holding the base of Mini Tirith, that name would catch on even if no one but me lived here, and with the loss of the shutters the chamber had been rather Stygian with the steam from the pools filling the air. Punching ventilation holes and adding the windows had fixed it, making the chamber resemble a roman bath more than a circle of hell. “And the masonry, Ferrego told me nothing of what his brother commissioned, his mason must have been a genius!”

Maggie, the traitor, laughed out loud at that and Viserys emboldened by her example joined in. “Tregar Antaryon was well known for his wealth and taste.” They both looked at me smirking and the tutor seeing them seemed to understand something wasn’t quite right.

Before he could say anything Maggie chimed in. “It’s said he recruited the mermaids to build his tower.” That was just ridiculous, even if mermaids were real here, the jury was out, they certainly didn’t have a reputation as craftswomen.

“So you believe this tower was a creation of the merlings or the deep ones? It seems unlikely, it lacks the characteristic black stone of their assumed work.” The tutor, an average man in almost every aspect, perhaps twenty years old, ran his hand over the sculpted stone. “The rock here, it reminds me of Harrenhal almost, as if it was shaped by dragon fire.” The man the Sealord had sent appeared a little flighty, he hadn’t even greeted me. He might be an excellent academic but I didn’t think he’d have the discipline to chivy Viserys down a curriculum if this was his normal mode.

“The tower’s construction will have to remain a mystery a little longer I think. I like my privacy and I’d rather not have a legion of archaeologists camping out here.” He looked briefly to me but kept most of his focus on the rock. His single minded focus almost reminded me of Lydia but she had an
excuse, the tutor was just being rude. “In the meantime perhaps you could introduce yourself?”

He looked slightly abashed, and he straightened. “My apologies Ser Harry, I am Robar Shett, late of Gulltown.”

“You’re Westerosi then? What brought you into the Sealord’s service?” Gulltown was in the Vale, one of the kingdoms that had deposed Viserys’s and Daenerys’s father. Ferrego had to be aware of that so he must have had an ulterior motive.

While I thought Robar answered. “I’m the second son of my father, my brother is the heir and there were no lands for me. I had the choice of becoming a knight in service to some other lord but before and especially after the rebellion my family was not well regarded by Lord Arryn.” I wondered why, I didn’t know enough about the war to understand from just his comments. “I’d always been of a scholarly bent so I decided to give the Maesters a try, if I didn’t like it my father could have helped me get into trade.” The way he said trade was typical of the nobles I’d meant. I certainly wouldn’t choose a monastery over a freer life.

“Since you’re here I assume you avoided the sack of Oldtown?” Robar nodded sharply, he probably had friends among those lost in the fighting.

“I returned home for my brother’s wedding, I had forged half of my chain but with the Citadel destroyed…”

The smoldering wreck Maggie and I had seen certainly wouldn’t be open for new students anytime soon. “So then how did you get chosen for this? Not many nobles, even second sons, cross the narrow sea to become tutors.”

He gave a crooked grin at that, “It’s kind of a funny story, I was resigned to helping my father and then my brother run our seat, he’s always been more martially inclined, but a friend of our father gave me the idea.” He gestured spreading his arms wide. “Lord Baelish is an old friend of my father’s, he’s a beast of a man and an excellent fighter for all of his age. He traveled back from the Iron Islands with my brother and when he heard my story he suggested I might try my talents in the free cities, that the Sealord was always looking for men of a certain temperament.”

I’d never heard of the Shetts but I wasn’t surprised Ferrego had taken him in, even if he wasn’t especially talented helping a man who might rise to prominence in a major Westerosi city was probably a flyer worth taking. That didn’t explain why he was sent here past his obvious academic background. “And tutoring? Is that what you hoped for?”

“It’s not my first task for him, I’ve been helping with the Westerosi diplomacy and the hunt for the remaining red priests. The Sealord said the assignment here was only for half a year here at the longest and I was training to be a maester. Teaching is part of what I planned to do.” He glanced back at the flowing rock. “Besides studying this tower and teaching the,” he paused and gave a piercing look at Viserys Maggie and me, “‘children’ of the wizard of Braavos is hardly an unimpressive task.”

Well the Sealord had apparently chosen a cover story, I had to assume it was meant to be sloppy since Viserys and Daenerys looked nothing like me, Maggie, or even Lydia.

“Yes teaching my children is of the utmost importance.” The two kids looked at me before both exchanged almost disgusted glances, if it hadn’t been my daughter I would have been tempted to later joke about Targaryen family traditions. “I’m certain that none of them will give you the slightest
trouble.” Lydia chose that moment to laugh into my ear and I barely managed not to jump. Lash’s surprise over the shoulder appearance trick was one thing I wish she hadn’t picked up. “But what will you be teaching them? Your own education was interrupted.”

Robar looked energized that the awkwardness had seemingly passed. “I forged my links in history, natural philosophy, agriculture, economics, and mathematics. Along with my earlier lessons I can confidently say that none of the children will lack any knowledge they would be expected to know in Westeros.” He had lifted his left hand as he spoke, shaking a bracelet free in a motion that almost made me raise my own shield. He had apparently fashioned his links into a smaller chain, copper, brass and gold among them.

“Well it will be good for them to get a little more organized course of study. “Maggie shot me a betrayed look, one of the reasons she had liked the island was the complete lack of homework. Robar saw that and gave a quick smile before he glanced back at me and paled.

I didn’t think the man was a threat, Ferrego wouldn’t have sent someone he wasn’t confident in but there were enough secrets here that I wanted to be certain. I was leaning against my staff and I had given it enough energy that it glowed so brightly that it left afterimages. “You might not have completed your chain but I expect you to keep to their vows. You will not share anything you learn here with anyone, even the Sealord.” I extinguished my staff and gave the shaken man a smile. “Keep that rule and I’m sure we’ll all be the best of friends.”

66.

After using my glowing runes of doom for the first time in quite awhile I left Robar to get settled in. Viserys and Maggie still threw him suspicious glances but without going for a soulgaze, not something I wanted to do but it could be necessary, I didn’t have any other cards to play short of violence. Indeed a soulgaze of mine was violent, it had made an FBI agent rave and very few people saw mine and came back with entirely good feelings about me. It also wasn’t perfect, even if Robar was plotting against me and the Targaryens he could still believe it was the right thing and his soul’s appearance would be inconclusive.

Before I could second guess myself further Quaithe appeared and beckoned to me. We hadn’t really spoken much since the dragons had hatched. She was far more interested in her instruments of prophecy than me and even after I warned her she still spent a lot of time with Viserys. So it was something of a surprise to see her waving at me to follow her up Mini Tirith.

It was only six flights to the top, raising the tower was hard work and neither Maggie nor I had wanted to continue after we mastered the basics. At some point it would have just begged for overcompensation jokes so we stopped well short. Quaithe was on the top platform, leaning against one of the jutting not at all copyright infringing black basaltic spikes. I was aware there was a bit of a conflict between the name and the architecture but I didn’t have a white stone island.

“Be cautious of Robar.” She said that in a way that suggested the matter was closed but I wasn’t going to settle for just that.

“Why? He’s no great soldier and he’s alone on an island with an omnipresent spirit, a notorious shadowbinder and me, he’d have to be pretty foolish to try something.”

“He only knows about you and he trained with the maesters. They fear and hate magic, he might be
willing to die to stamp it out with the bulk of this age’s power concentrated in one place for perhaps the only time.”

“The Sealord sent him though, Shett can’t have planned for this, when he left Westeros we were already on the way here.”

“He might view it as an opportunity, do not trust him. I’d question even leaving him alone with the children.”

Quaithe’s words were reigniting my paranoia and I was starting to feel like storming down, soulgazing Shett and then dropping him in a specially made oubliette. I fought it down, it was nice to blame such urges on the Mantle but they weren’t all externally prompted. Besides I had a better option. “Lydia?”

“Yes Father?” She materialized between us, Quaithe managed to resist jumping and falling off the tower, hanging around with us had hardened her nerves apparently.

“Were you paying attention to our conversation?”

“Nope” She popped the p of the word and twisted, looking like nothing more than a bored ordinary girl.

“Quaithe has been warning me against Robar, that the maesters who half trained him will have set him against us.”

“So shall we kill him? Or extract his secrets? There are many ways to get a man to spill his heart’s desire without enthralling him.” Her face contorted, deep in thought. “Oh! We can build a simulacrum of him and ask that, even the image of a man knows some truths.”

“I don’t think we’ll need anything quite like that Lydia.”

She was almost pouting now. “You let Maggie help you all the time but never me. When will it be my turn?”

I could see this becoming a terrible idea but Lydia’s help would solve two problems, any mystery with Shett and her own desire to be helpful which so often manifested in terrifying ways. “If you want to look through his luggage subtly, check for weapons or poisons or ciphers, and then tell me what you find that would be useful.”

“A baby could do that Father! I’ll be done before you know it.” She vanished and Quaithe and I shared a look, Lydia had that effect.

“How exactly did you get such a daughter?” Something in me roiled at her tone and I had to bite back my first response. Instead I smiled my most irritating grin.

“At the most basic level, the way you’re supposed to.” Lydia had reappeared just as I finished speaking and was positively bouncing with eagerness.

“How exactly did you get such a daughter?” Something in me roiled at her tone and I had to bite back my first response. Instead I smiled my most irritating grin.

“At the most basic level, the way you’re supposed to.” Lydia had reappeared just as I finished speaking and was positively bouncing with eagerness.

“Father, he has a supply of digitalus hidden with other innocuous plants! Should I bind him so we can question him more thoroughly? Or do you want Maggie to do it?”

For a second I stopped dead, I hadn’t actually expected Robar to have anything dangerous, if he truly
was planning to kill us a pocket knife and stealth would be enough. Poison had just been something
I’d thrown in off hand. Quaithe looked vindicated but nervous, and I tried to think of what to do with
him before Lydia’s phrasing caught in my memory.

“Digitalus and other plants? What form is the poison in?”

“He has a book full of seeds, trees, crops and flowers, among them foxglove! It’s a clever plan, but
luckily I’m here to help you.”

“What's the title of the book?”

She rolled her eyes as if the question was a pain to answer. “The Flora of Westeros, but it’s
obviously a way to avoid customs and other inspections. If he’s dangerous let’s handle him now.”

Lydia, for her vast expanses of knowledge and tremendous ability to learn and reason, was largely
blind to human interactions. Bob had been better and I was assuming it was something that came
with age as he had been the better part of a millennium old. “He’s here to teach Viserys and
Daenerys about Westeros and he did say he forged a link in agriculture. The book alone isn’t much
of a threat.” She let out an irritated huff but nodded. “Was there anything else there you thought was
suspicious?”

“Well if we’re ignoring the poisonous plants-”

“We are for now.”

“Then the only other dangerous thing was his razor. Everything else was clothes and books.” She
started to fade around the edges as she spoke. “Can I go now? There’s a planet orbiting closer to the
sun that I won’t be able to see for a month if I don’t look soon.” The sun was still in the sky and not
even the moon was up, I resigned myself to not question the vagaries of her astronomy.

“Sure, but if you’re going to publish anything let me know so we can avoid any blasphemy
prosecutions.” She got the joke smiled and continued to fade but Quaithe merely looked confused. I
was used to the philistines of the world not getting my references so I managed to overlook it.

I waited a minute to see if Quaithe had anything else to say but she remained silent looking over the
ocean. Just as I was heading down the stairs, at the least convenient moment as per the shadowbinder
union rules, she spoke. “Don’t let your daughter lull you into complacency, we both know how
easily men can kill.” I stopped to see if she had any other blindingly obvious insights, but when she
didn’t speak again I left her.

I did keep a close eye on Robar, two whenever I could spare them, but after his initial panic over the
dragons he settled into our ordinary routine. The dragons were big enough now that they were
catching their own fish from the ocean in addition to the seagulls and Rhaellion seemed to be
considering juvenile seals for his next trick. Currently the harbor seals still outweighed them but at
their current rate of growth it was only a matter of time.

Continuing on the topic of growing; the greenhouse was fully operational. We’d planted tomatoes
and a few other fruits and vegetables in in as well as some flowers from Robar’s book. The foxglove
was not one of them though, much to Lydia’s satisfaction. Maggie and I had moved on to larger and
drowner pastures, for the past few days we had been crushing rock and grinding in fish and the
mulch we’d made from crates while Robar looked on astonished. It was kind of nice to have an
appreciative audience again after the rest had become so jaded to Maggie and me throwing around
the forces of creation. We were going to plant trees on the new dirt terrace and I was hoping Lydia would have some trick to speed them up.

“Napoleon didn’t say that you know.” Lydia had a mind that tended to get stuck on one track, I was pretty sure that her current obsession was related to the planting but I wasn’t quite sure how.

“Napoleon didn’t say what?”

“You told Maggie that Napoleon said the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago, not only did he not say that, the planting of trees along the side of French roads is probably not due to him either.” If we ever got back home and I could find a way not to short out cameras, as seen on Larry Fowler, I was taking Lydia with me to Jeopardy, we’d make a killing to say the least.

“Either way trees grow pretty slowly and I only said that to emphasize the point.”

Lydia sniffed daintily and turned. “There’s no excuse for propagating ignorance.”

“Irregardless,” She spun back, almost mortally offended and I smirked. “Regardless of whoever said it originally the point stands. Do you know of a way to speed plant growth?”

I was sure there was a way, Ebenezer had never covered it though and if I experimented I was almost certain to end up with demonic mutant Ents or something. Normally I would be OK with that, especially in the shadow of my canonically Ent-proof tower, but with all of the vanillas around I had to be more careful. Lydia appeared to be thinking, knowing her she was filtering her results by which methods didn’t involve mass human sacrifice and other minor law violations. At last she nodded.

“There’s a Sumerian ritual that will do nicely I think, and using Maggie’s energy transfer runes we can cut out the more objectionable parts.”

I clapped and rubbed my hands together, having trees would be nice for more than shade, wood was always useful and we were fast running out of things to burn. “Excellent, shall we get started immediately then?”

With Lydia’s help we set up the groundwork. Maggie was far more engaged in magic now that she was able to substitute it for mundane schoolwork and she never failed to remind me that it was her enchantment that was making it all work. After two days of setup we at last planted the seeds, acorns, pinecones and then everything from Robar’s book, he just handed it to me blankly when I asked. All of the seeds were in and widely spaced at the time Lydia recommended, just before sunset.

“So on my mark you-” She pointed to Maggie, “energize your runes and then you Father cast the spell.” We’d been over it a few times and I felt pretty good. It was nice to have someone else be the expert once and a while. “Ready? Three, two, one, go!”

“Ġala dag utušuš!” I was reliably informed that the High Priests of Eridu used to shout something similar, but in a much more refined accent. Either way it worked, the future grove was suddenly encased in an opaque dome the color of the sunset. Maggie let out a sigh as well and I could see her anchor stones glowing. It was lucky we had a chamber full of red hot magma or all of the things we were doing would be impossible to power.

Lydia was staring at the dome with a gimlet eye, it was entirely for show since her senses had nothing to do with her projection, but at last she nodded. As she opened her mouth I could hear creaking sounds from inside the red-gold dome, something was moving in there. “It worked Father,
Maggie your runes are holding steady.” The ritual was conceptually simple, Maggie’s runes dramatically increased the growth of anything inside, normally that would almost instantly be fatal as cells starved and bones erupted from the skin but trees were a little simpler. My part had been an exhortation for the sun to literally cease in the sky, the actual effect was to intensify the sunlight and maintain it, almost like my pocket full of sunshine spell only far more refined. Since the plants had all they needed, water, dirt, air, and sunshine they could rapidly grow without dying, hopefully by sunrise they’d have had the equivalent of a decade’s growth.
The next morning, just before dawn broke over all of the island not currently locked into some sort of sun preserving loop of nested space that only didn’t violate the sixth law because human brains didn’t intuitively link the two, we trekked down to the terrace. Strictly speaking we weren’t needed, the dome would break by itself with the sunrise but after all of the work we’d put into everyone wanted to see the show.

The excavated and dirt filled area was still covered, the graceful arch of the magic glowing with harsher reds than the brightening eastern sky. As soon as the sun breached the horizon the ritual would fail, washed away by the dawn. I was holding the others well back, I didn’t think it would be dangerous but I had some not entirely irrational fears of duplicating the popcorn scene from Real Genius.

We’d come out a little too early, our breaths weren’t quite steaming in the air but leaving the house with its volcano powered steam heat to wait in the windswept exterior was a rough change. Viserys and Daenerys were huddled together, their dragons hadn’t deigned to come out with us, and they looked to be regretting the whole waking up early thing.

In contrast the others were staring at the orange dome, I could feel Maggie probing her enchantments and Robar and Quaithe were transfixed. It was one of the prettier things I had made, now that I’d been staring for a few minutes I could see the colors shifting, almost like an aurora as the various shades moved around the surface. I let my own senses extend out, trying to feel the pattern if there was one.

That discovery would have to wait another day though, as focused as I was on the dome the pulse from the break of dawn was impossible to miss. The oranges rapidly faded to black and an instant later it fell, letting us all the results inside.

The first thing that caught my attention was the soil. It had been soupy yesterday, sand, bits of wood and all of the food waste ground together with a lot of water. Now it was bleached white, ten years of concentrated sunshine had done a number on it. I moved towards it and all at once everyone began to follow me. The ritual had worked, trees had sprouted all over the terrace. There was an young oak, a maple, a bunch of evergreens I couldn’t identify and just off the center a white tree. I stopped when I saw it. I was praying it was birch or maybe Maggie and Lydia had conspired to add a Gondorian touch, but the blood red leaves dashed those hopes.

“Why did you plant a weirwood on my island?” I kept my voice level, not even looking at Robar as I remained focused on the tree.

“I was trying to plant the major Westerosi species, say what you will about the religion weirwoods are a key part of the continent’s history, the Pact between the Children and the First Men and-”

I cut Robar off with a raised fist. “Maggie, give the trees some space.” At her retreat I gathered my power, and not just mine, the Mantle had protected me from the weirwood at White Harbor and I was going to give it another shot. I stepped closer to the tree, the energy I’d called humming in my veins and Winter showing its presence by tracing frost across my coat. With my left hand outstretched I waited for any sign from the tree, to all my senses it felt entirely ordinary. I swallowed
a curse, I only had one more option prior to touching it and opened my Sight.

That too yielded nothing. The glow from our enchantments lingered but it was the same on all of the trees. The weirwood looked especially white, almost as if under a blacklight, but nothing special. I closed my third eye with a sigh, I couldn’t be too annoyed at the null result, it was always nice to step back from the truth of the world even times like then when nothing scarring appeared. I reached out with my left hand, preparing to touch the tree with the back of my hand, if anything surged through me I’d have an easier time ripping free like that. Once again, nothing. The tree was just a tree, whatever magic had occurred in White Harbor either was never here or beyond my ability to detect.

I stepped back and turned towards our guests. Quaithe had grown bored after seeing that there was nothing special about the day old trees other than their size, but Robar looked petrified. “It doesn’t seem to be a problem, next time you’re doing anything vaguely religious let me know though.” He nodded almost frantically, I felt a little bad for him, apparently there were other reasons than a lack of family funds he’d chosen to be a maester if harsh words were enough to panic him.

I left them and wandered over towards Maggie, ignoring Daenerys’s attempts to climb the apple tree. Lydia voice was just barely audible as I reached my other daughter, joining her in staring at her enchanted rock. “I told you it would work better that way but no, you had to show off your own design.”

“Girls, girls, no fighting in front of the guests.”

“Technically I’m behind.”

“You can say that again.” Maggie spat out before exhaling deeply and throwing a glare at the ground in the direction of Lydia’s sanctum. “Moving on, was there anything special about the tree?”

“Nothing, good work on the runes by the way, they worked just as we hoped.”

“They could have been better.” Lydia’s voice was just behind my ear, from Maggie’s instinctive twist to look over her own I assumed she was there too. “But it did work and it was something new so I can’t complain too much.” Her tone was conciliatory and I was hoping the discord was done.

“That’s the kind of sisterly love William Penn had in mind.” Maggie looked blank, apparently American civics hadn’t been a thing in Guatemala but even the crushing disappointment of half of my children not getting my jokes was something I could overcome. “While you’re both here though, be careful with the weirwood, I don’t really know what happened the first time and I’d rather be the magical mystery than the investigator.”

If Lydia had her projection present I was sure it would have looked crushed by my pronouncement, she was always seeking new information and even if the magic here didn’t really interest her a tree almost capable of soul gazes was pretty novel. “If you’re sure Father, I won’t let the scary tree get me.”

Sarcasm, another sign that she was mine if the whole eruption from my brain thing wasn’t enough. “Good. Another question though, why aren’t there any apples on the tree?”

Maggie and I looked over to see Daenerys about ten feet up looking down on a worried Viserys. Despite the tree’s apparent age being well over the fruit production years the branches were bare. Avalon of the Apples was not yet a go, considering the amalgamation of other stories and myths in
the island that was probably a good thing. “Oh that’s easy, the growth field doesn’t work on children of any type, none of the trees have seeds or anything yet. Give it a few months though, assuming the weather cooperates.”

Well that explained why the Sumerians hadn’t done this all the time, even ignoring the whole sacrifice part making plants grow without producing fruit or seeds for the next round was a non starter. “Any other drawbacks we should have worried about before we did this?”

Her voice in our ears sounded offended now. “Of course not! I would have told you if there were any side effects.”

“Just checking Lydia.” All of a sudden waking up early and skipping breakfast caught up with me and I let out a massive yawn, the sudden stares surprised me and I had to clamp down on the Mantle fueled reflex to demonstrate my strength and quell any thoughts of exploiting my apparent weakness. The urge was sudden and powerful but it was so different than my normal pattern that I was able to resist without too much effort. It was when the Mantle and my thoughts were much more in tune, like when I had thought that Robar had brought some poison that separating my impulses from those Unseelie inspired became difficult.

Keeping the Mantle on for now was a necessary evil but that didn’t mean it was convenient. “Speaking of checking want to tell us what you’re up to? We can go to the top of the tower and have a family breakfast.” It would also keep potential targets well out of sight until I could center myself, drawing on the Mantle in preparation for the weirwood had thrown me farther off balance than I had expected. Even now my coat was still frosted, with a snowflake device starting to form over my heart.

As Maggie and I left the sight of the others Lydia appeared mid step and began to lecture us on the orbital period of the as yet unnamed inner planet. I let her words wash over me, feeling vaguely guilty about partially ignoring her but as Maggie replied to her occasionally I was able to let the warm feelings of family wash over me and force the Mantle to recede. It would do for now.

68.

Sitting atop my tower with my daughters made me wonder what it would have been like had both my parents lived, or even if Susan and I had been able to raise Maggie in the sort of white bread middle class American life that the Carpenters seemed to embody and I had always envied. The thought passed quickly, jealousy had no place here and now, even with all I could have had, what I had now was enough.

“Why do you have such a weird grin Papa?”

Lydia did one of her flash steps closer to examine my expression in more minute detail. “It is unusual.” She wasn’t speaking to me, looking back over her shoulder to Maggie. “Maybe he’s drunk.”

“Don’t be stupid, there’s not any alcohol on the island.”

“It is possible to create it you know.”

“Or I’m just happy, you know, family and all.” They exchanged confused glances, apparently a
human soul didn’t grant any understanding of the vagaries of a father’s mind. Before they could suspect dementia I changed the subject. “I can’t by the way.”

“Can’t what?”

“Make alcohol, I spent part of my second summer at Ebenezer’s trying to artificially ferment everything.” Maggie looked scandalized, we had often made fun of the excessively drunk at dinner parties using our telepathic link, trying to get the other to laugh first and now I was revealed as one of the lushes.

Luckily Lydia came to the rescue. “If you still want to I can teach you. Mother was with a Benedictine monk in the late twelve hundreds and they toyed with spells to rapidly age wine along with the disruption of Celestine V’s reign.”

I didn’t have a ready reply for that, it was one thing to know she had Lash’s memories it was another to be confronted with an eight hundred year old piece of gossip. “If we ever plant grapes maybe we’ll try.”

With the matter closed we all lapsed into silence, enjoying the sunshine slowly warming the rune scarred tower top. Eventually the screams of the hunting dragons split the air followed by the thump that accompanied a burst of feathers and the death of a bird. I got up to watch, even though the little beasts hated me seeing them snatch meals from midair was always fun. It almost made me wish I’d invited myself to hawk when Oberyn had gone in the Reach.

Maggie joined me at the edge of the tower, leaning on one of the upward jutting spikes I’d placed at the cardinal points as soon as I realized the tower was never going to belong in a white city. Her head was tracking one of the beasts, against the bright sky their colors were indistinguishable, when suddenly she stopped. “Papa there’s a ship.”

I shaded my eyes, trying to see what she’d spotted. The illusion held firm against opposing eyes but to me, its creator, it was only a suggestion. Maggie shared my magic enough that she could penetrate it even without the Sight, but she had to focus where for me it was just an idle thought. A ship was there, just outside of my fog bank. It was a low slung galley, or at least something narrow floating with oars, but the striking attribute was the black sail.

Black sails as depicted in popular culture were never good, best case was a crew of roguish pirates, worst case was the historically accurate version. Either way I didn’t really feel like finding out which they were. “Lydia, can you get Quaithe for me?” She nodded and vanished as I continued to observe the ship that was now trying to circle the edges of the mist.

I didn’t know how they had found the island, Tregar had owned it and he had been known to many people. It wasn’t impossible that an acquaintance had known of his island home and had arrived to claim it for their own. The other possibility, as Quaithe arrived on top, was that they had searched us out.

“What is it? Your daughter-” I cut her off pointing towards the ship, she looked confused and then I realized that to her the fog was entirely opaque.

“Right, sorry. There’s a boat out there, navigating around the fog. Is there any chance that its one of your friends who found us out?”

She continued to peer out, muttering under her breath and I could feel something shift, the air became
heavier and there was a palpable sense of energy in the air. Maggie sneezed and the power was gone leaving Quaithe blinking, I didn’t know if whatever she had been doing worked, but it was the first time I’d felt her magic. “If they are friends of mine they won’t be able to penetrate the spells I’ve set.” She was looking almost waxy after her efforts, remaining standing only through an effort of will. “But with the dragons here they shouldn’t have before, with them near, their power, I can understand why the Valyrians held themselves apart from other men.”

“Just remember not to absorb any balls of energy larger than your head as a general rule.” The Overlord List, ‘Evil’ seemed so prejudicial now that I had my own island base, was always an excellent source of wisdom.

Maggie spoke from the edge of the tower. “Whatever you did doesn’t seem to have stopped them.” The ship had turned into the fog and while they seemed to be on a course to miss us the fog bank wasn’t so large that we could assume we’d be missed by a systematic search. Luckily we had magic and I had considered how to drive off other ships.

“Quaithe if you’re done want to head down, Lydia I have a few questions, and Maggie can you get my staff up here?” My corporeally challenged daughter appeared in front of me, sitting in midair.

“Yes Father?”

“I’m going to run this plan past you and I want you to tell me if it has any obvious problems.” Lydia was substituting for the five year old as long as I was following the list.

“Of course I’ll help but wouldn’t it be simplest to use your tower in the way you and Maggie designed it to channel the power of the volcano? With it you could simply sink the ship even if it comes no closer.”

“We’ll write that in as plan C. For now though, I’m going to try to be a bit more subtle.” Maggie arrived with my staff as I spoke and I felt its comforting warmth as I leaned on it over the center of the tower. “Illusions were a good defense against casual searchers, they wouldn’t see an island and wouldn’t see us. This guy, call him Blackbeard, seems to be a little more invested. I was thinking about calling up a wind, and just blowing him off but that might not dissuade him.”

Maggie took the Watson role after a short stare off with Lydia. “So what are you going to do?”

“Well it’ll be a little less subtle than sinking his ship but not by much, if Blackbeard keeps coming I’m going to break all of their oars and then blow them away.”

“Maybe you should try the breeze first before wrecking things? You know just to be neighborly.” That did make more sense, maybe the pirates or explorers or lost well wishers would give up at the first hurdle.

“I guess we can do it your way then Maggie. Ready for the first full power test of Mini Tirith?” She groaned at the name but she was as much of a magic nerd as I was, she had a tight grin looking at the runes beneath our feet.

With Lydia’s help we had set the entire tower up to be a ritual focus and had managed to link it to the magma chamber below. I had a half formed plan to use it to reduce the pressure if an eruption seemed imminent but for now I was standing on top of an energy source that rivaled a ley line along with a convenient control point. Lydia had looked over then entire thing and had pronounced it acceptable but Bob had made mistakes before so I was a little nervous about using it at something
approaching it’s potential.

The prevailing winds here were out of the north west so I turned to the gap between those two spikes. Calling up wind in small amounts was easy and common for me, before I’d gotten the hang of telekinesis I’d used gusts of wind for a lot of precise tasks. Standing on this tower made everything a ponderous affair though. Getting anything going with it was like starting a train, a slow buildup that resulted in an unstoppable force. Well locally unstoppable, any number of beings back home could have dealt with it but here I was the big fish in a small pond.

“Caurus!” I felt the energy flow start and the tower took it from me, it was a far better conduit than my fleshy body and I was starting to feel the beginnings of a breeze.

“Caurus!” The second pulse had a more definite effect, looking to the north I could see the wind hit the ocean causing a line of waves and whitecaps that shot towards us. Once more to ensure it kept up long enough for Blackbeard to get the message.

“Caurus!” I slammed my staff to the ground, more to lean on than for anything magical, looked down to catch my breath and stopped. The tower was lit up like a Christmas tree, blue lights dripping from the runes and casting a glow on the ground even under the sun.

“Well that’s a thing.” Maggie nodded dumbly and joined me to look towards our interloper. It was a hive of activity, the sail was being furled, but the rowers had if anything sped up, still determined to penetrate the fog. “We’ll give them a minute longer, if they don’t give up they’re getting carried home by Boreas, at least if his purview covers winds that far off the pole.”

“It would probably be Thraskias or Argestes Father, the Greeks had as many wind gods as a sailor could pray to. They don’t seem to be stopping in any case.”

She was right, the heavy gusts had done nothing to stop them. “Can you give us a closer look using your telescope trick?” She had some way of observing the sky, hopefully it could be adapted for slightly closer targets.

Without a word, just a gesture, an image of the ship appeared floating over the center of the platform. It’s hull was dark red, it had a woman as the figure head and leaning in close, Lydia helpfully zoomed in as soon as my head was close, the captain was a dark haired man with an eye patch. I didn’t recognize him but if I saw him again I’d know. I was trying to find any other identifying traits, six fingers on the right hand etc. when he looked up, almost meeting my eyes as I backpedaled. I wasn’t sure if he had somehow sensed me, he continued to scan the horizon in the direction I had been looking from, but either way it was time to send a message.

“Forzare!” After all of the enchantments and rituals it was something of a relief to return to the thuggish spells I’d mastered in a thousand scuffles. With an efficiency that had come with age and practice I sent two blades of force down range faster than thought, the shattered sweeps fell to the waves and began to rapidly disperse even as the ship slowed with the wind forcing it back. The captain moved to the gunwale, studying the debris before looking back up and throwing a salute to the air before turning back to shout orders as the helmsman turned the boat.

They were gone or leaving for now but I couldn’t count on them staying away, next time I’d need a better plan. For now though I’d stay and watch until they were below the horizon.
With the interloper dealt with for now I relaxed a little even as I watched him sail off. I still had questions, who was he, why was he here, and did he have some power on his side to defeat my fog and Quaithe’s jamming. His apparent ability to detect Lydia’s scrying was another issue, up till now our magic had been supreme and I didn’t like the idea of others having a fair chance. We’d have to keep watch from now on, I was sure they had spare oars and now we knew that at least one captain was interested enough to dare the mists.

The other problem was what to do about them. I’d previously rejected the idea of artificial reefs, sharp rocks lurking just below the waves but now I was reconsidering. I could pull my fog in and have them form a perimeter, no one who didn’t know the way would be able to land safely. Whenever the next supply ship arrived I could route them through my little minefield.

Literal mines were another possibility. I’d held off introducing gunpowder to this world because I didn’t think it was really needed for my Connecticut Yankee act and in Braavos I was perfectly capable of dispatching anyone foolish enough to attack me. Here, even if I managed to kill and subdue an entire ship without breaking the laws, I’d have a bunch of prisoners with absolutely nothing to do with them past summary execution. Granted they were pirates, hostis humani generis as the Romans put it, but I’d killed in cold blood before and I had never enjoyed it. Warning them off and then letting them sink themselves seemed much more palatable even if it all ended the same way.

Of course I didn’t have any gunpowder or the first idea how to make a mine, Lydia undoubtedly knew but I didn’t really like the idea of experimenting with high explosives. Mines also seemed liable to drift off and cause problems later, not to mention not really being any better than reefs. Besides if I was making gunpowder guns were the logical choice, cannons in particular. There was iron in the rocks here, I could see the rust red in some of the stone I’d quarried. I could probably extract it the same way I’d stumbled on making quartz and with Lydia’s convenient database of nearly everything I could smelt it or purify it or whatever and then cast a cannon. It wouldn’t be anything spectacular, maybe on the level of those used in the Revolutionary War, but it would fling an iron ball downrange fast enough to discourage any future visitors. It would also confirm that my island was far closer to Isengard than a Mini Tirith but that was a lost cause as soon as I raised a black tower. Oh well.

Sometime just before the ship had sank beneath the horizon Lydia had vanished, I looked down to see if I could spot her but other than the dragons who were staying low in the stiff breeze there wasn’t any movement. I descended through the tower, finally finding Robar writing in the spring chamber.

He stood when he saw me, I wasn’t entirely sure on the hierarchy but I didn’t think my assumed knighthood merited that much deference. “Ser Harry, Quaithe mentioned something about a ship?”

Or he was nervous about pirates invading. “They just vanished below the horizon, hopefully they’ve learned their lesson.”

“You didn’t kill them?” His face was guarded but I could hear some surprise.

“We don’t know that they were hostile for sure, I don’t want to slaughter the curious.” Granted the weapons of the ship’s crew were certainly a point in the hostile column but I was armed so I couldn’t really cast stones. That was what my cannon would be for. “If they come back again the welcome will be a little less friendly.”
He nodded, apparently satisfied. “I’d offer to take a watch but with the fog here..”

“That’s staying up, thanks for the offer though.” I left him to his reading and continued to seek out either of my daughters. Lydia would appear if I called her but I felt guilty summoning her even if she only came if she wanted.

Heading down the slope, neither had been inside the house, I saw Daenerys and Jelmazma staring into a tidal pool just outside the walls. Neither seemed to be in any danger, Viserys was near and the sea lions weren’t, so I left them to their marine biology.

I found my children further along, Maggie was holding a blob of molten rock and Lydia was hovering, no doubt giving incredibly useful and welcome advice. Neither was looking towards me as the lava began to shift and warp, extending into a cigar shape before it bubbled outwards. Maggie was frantically gesturing with her right hand, her staff outstretched trying to maintain the heat even as the massively increased surface area cooled it faster. Something seemed to shift in the rock, it began to distort and waver until with a curse and a sharp thrust of her hand she flung the lava out into the ocean.

It hit with a massive burst of steam and a hiss like all the kettles in the world. Maggie looked furious, glaring at her staff and began to wind up to throw it when she saw me. “Still working on the rock canoe?”

“It would have gone a lot better if someone hadn’t been distracting me.”

Lydia with her inherited Dresden diplomacy chose that moment to speak up. “You need to consider the growth in convection as you mold the rock, that’s-”

“I know!” She slammed her staff down to emphasize it and the sudden crack of the shattered stone stopped us all.

This wasn’t the first incident of friction between the two, I’d never had a sibling growing up so I wasn’t sure if it was normal but Maggie shouldn’t be so annoyed as to lose track of her power. Of course she was at the age where hormones and everything caused even the most level headed to buckle but as a wizard she had to meet a higher standard as hard as it was. “Lydia can you give us a minute?” She nodded and vanished. “How are you doing Maggie?”

She had calmed a little from her outburst but she was sullen as she walked to sit on the wall. “Oh you know, I’m fine. It’s not like I’m stuck on an island in the middle of the ocean with none of my friends and a sister who knows literally everything and won’t hesitate to tell me.”

“We’ll be leaving in a month, can you tough it out until then?” She raised an eyebrow, it was slightly better than an eyeroll but not by much. “I’ll talk to Lydia, she doesn’t really understand human interactions yet, Bob was a few hundred years old and never really got them so you’ll have a potentially annoying younger sister for awhile I’m afraid.”

“It will be better when I have somewhere to just get away, this island is starting to feel awfully small.”

“We can make it bigger if you want, but in the meantime want to tell me what’s up with your canoe?”

Two sentences weren’t enough to solve the sibling problems but changing the subject worked
wonders for her disposition as she enthusiastically described her experiments, culminating in the attempt she had flung into the sea. Eventually we exhausted the conversational possibilities of shaping stone and it was time to move onto more serious matters.

“So that ship, any ideas on dealing with the next visit?”

“Reefs seem like the simplest idea, it will be a lot of work to raise them but we’ve gotten pretty good at it.”

“I was thinking about something a bit more aggressive, but we’ll need Lydia’s built in encyclopedia, want to call her over?”

“I’ll try to be nicer Papa, no need to guilt trip me.” She turned to face vaguely towards the tower. “Hermanita!”

“Si?” The two descended into rapid Spanish and I only caught half with the English and Latin cognates. I didn’t interrupt though, we didn’t have anything pressing and I was hoping for a sibling bonding moment.

“So Father, what’s up?” Her tone made me laugh, the perfect diction paired with a colloquialism that she disdained even as she spoke it.

“We’re brainstorming more active defenses, how do you feel about gunpowder?”

“It’s kind of gross and we can’t make it here anyways.”

That threw me, I had thought that with magic and her knowledge we’d have a pretty easy time. “Why not?”

“I don’t know anyway to get the nitrates here through magic without getting you poisoned by ammonia and the other way is too slow and disgusting.”

“So we can make it?”

“Can’t, won’t; same difference. Besides blowing them away seemed to work, why not just do that again?”

“I don’t like shifting the weather patterns just to deal with pirates. Are you sure you won’t help with gunpowder?”

“Nope, I’m not going to be involved with it.”

“Please Lydia?” She looked at Maggie with betrayal in her eyes.

“Do you know how they get saltpeter? If you did you’d be on my side I promise.”

“Well we need to do something, do you have any other suggestions since you find gunpowder so odious?”

She looked to the sky apparently thinking. “Sink the island below the seas so no one can find it? Kind of like Atlantis but on purpose?”
Maggie spoke before I could, “Wait Atlantis was real?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”
“So if making your own fortress out of the living rock is so easy why did you have an apartment back on Earth?”

I looked to my elder daughter who was flushed from adding new black spiky rocks to my totally benign secret island base. “Well for the most part all of the good places to do this sort of thing on Earth are occupied.” This world was essentially virgin territory, if I had tried to reshape some island like this back home if the inhabitants didn’t get me the genius loci might. “Nothing we’ve done here, Oldtown for instance, is particularly tricky or hard magic it’s just that we’re operating unopposed. In the land of the blind the one eyed man with superpowers is king or something you know?”

She didn’t look entirely convinced as she stood over the model of Mini Tirith and its environs. With Lydia’s help it served as a link both to the island and to the magma underneath and made our exterior decorating project almost trivial. “So wizards couldn’t do large scale things because other people interrupt?”

I kept on admiring the new topology as I thought, the razor sharp fingers formed a ring around the island, their tips were occasionally exposed by the waves’ troughs at low tide but otherwise they lurked just below the surface waiting to rip some boats hull apart. “Well not entirely, there was a Russian wizard, Simon Pietrovich, who built a tower kind of the way we did and had it filled with neat stuff I’m told. He was a member of the Senior Council though, and had power, wealth and time to spare, my landlady would have objected to me building a tower to say nothing of the zoning board.”

“Do you miss it?” We didn’t really talk much about Earth, after my first efforts to get home had stalled out I had thrown myself into providing for Maggie, making sure that the remnants of her childhood were as nice as possible. She was usually fine with that as well considering her last experience with Earth had been a horrific cavalcade of murders and monsters but sometimes she and I brought up things we’d lost, everything from Burger King to our friends and family we’d left behind.

She was generally safer here, I hadn’t really thought about what my role in her life would have been after Chichen Itza and then after we ended up here I hadn’t needed too. Ebenezer had chosen not to tell me I was related to him to protect me from his enemies and I wasn’t nearly as well equipped for mutually assured destruction as he had been. It could have been terrible, not being able to see her and having to keep my distance to make sure she was safe, but knowing of her and constantly worrying. All in all I was fine with leaving Earth for her, rescuing her had been a suicide mission anyways and having all but Susan survive, the Red Court falling and escaping all of my enemies and debts with Maggie had been more than enough of a victory for me.

“Not really, there’s people I miss but having you makes up for it. Besides we won the war and saved the girl, it’d be hard to ask for more.”

She didn’t reply immediately so I went back to checking our work. We had made large walls from the slopes of the island that protruded most of the way to the surface, only stopping when the thinner spikes started. The spikes were closely spaced like shark’s teeth, leaving only a small passage on the far side of the island from Braavos that was concealed behind the fog. The ring was outside of the
fog which had shrunk dramatically, but concealing deadly traps with illusions broke the first law so in the fog I only had illusory spikes to discourage further exploration. Hopefully the narrow gap would escape attention as if anyone investigated there’d be no way to tell it apart without actually sailing a ship through it.

“As long as we’re doing all of this should we add more than hazards?”

“What were you thinking?” Maggie usually changed the subject when she wanted to think more so I didn’t press her on what brought up thoughts of Earth.

“I remember learning about how old sunken ships attracted fish as well as all of the life around volcanic vents, we visited an aquarium. We could make one of those and get more fish for the traps.”

“Adding some sort of vent or another spring would make a relief valve for the volcano too. If we weren’t here when it started to go off it would be an automatic safety.” Terraforming had always seemed cool in science fiction, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the idea of making a tropical lake in the middle of the ocean. The underwater walls would probably trap some of the volcanic heat in the enclosed area. Lydia could probably tell us more about the thermal effects but even if it didn’t work as I imagined there was no reason not to do it.

“Know what we should do?” I motioned for her to continue. “We should make houses and things underwater so if someone ever finds it they’ll think mermaids or something built them, like crop circles for UFO chasers you know?”

I liked the idea of perverting the course of history as well as massively retarding the field of geology, giving future geologists a few mysteries to ruin their theories was probably balanced by introducing microbiology, steam engines and the printing press. “Let’s do it.” As we started to plan what the underwater slopes should look like I had another idea to make the world a little weirder. “Let’s also make a bunch of tablets written in Latin that have fake prophecies on them, Lydia can give us the dates for eclipses and other astronomical things, we can scatter them around the world as we travel and in two or three hundred years we’ll be able to see what happens.”

“Can you imagine Quaithe or somebody chasing around a joke of ours?” Maggie smirked then intoned in a far deeper voice. “The one with the power to bring the summer comes, he will rise in the light and winter will end by the turn of the moon but if the dark triumphs there will be a month of cold.”

“We can do better than Groundhog day but it’s a good start, maybe you should start your own Missionaria Protectiva?”

Predictably she wasn’t familiar with Dune and its order of super priestesses but I tried to explain the broad strokes as we left the tower to look at the results of our work with our physical senses. The water was already a different color where we’d made it shallower and the waves seemed to be smaller with the larger ones being broken up by the wall acting as a breakwater. The surfing here was probably ruined even if I had been willing to enter the cold water filled with sea lions and sharks.

As we kept chatting about how we could fake a religion by making our own prophecies come true we passed Robar giving Daenerys her daily lesson in the greenhouse. It was kind of surreal, anytime a baby dragon was at school I had to make sure I wasn’t dreaming of Hogwarts but I followed Maggie in as she went to inspect her flowers. She had decided that as a girl she should have some interest in gardening and with Lydia’s enthusiastic help had managed to accelerate the flowering of
some of Robar’s seeds without dire consequences. I wasn’t sure which of them had made the blooms fluorescent, nothing natural should glow like that, but between Maggie’s Michael Bay inspired cinematography and Lydia’s taste in psychedelic dragons I was forced to admit their taste or lack thereof might be my fault.

As she watered and pruned them I idly listened in on the lesson. Robar was lecturing a somewhat bored Daenerys on the religions of the world. As a barely aware adult it was interesting, Robar was not especially religious from the month or two I’d known him so he was giving more of a historical overview of the various faiths. The worship of the seven vaguely reminded me of Christianity and Islam, nothing too much theologically but in how it displaced other faiths as it moved. The other religions didn’t seem as aggressively proselytizing but that could be because R’hillorism had been driven from everywhere I’d seen it. Robar at last noticed me, Daenerys had been watching Maggie garden almost as soon as she entered and he had been too caught up to observe us initially. “Well Ser Harry, do your arts give you any insight into the higher mysteries?”

I thought about it for a second, with the magic that seemed to be flooding into the world it would be smart to have people be cautious of seemingly divine power. “I’ve always felt it was best to avoid the attention of higher powers.” I’d rarely followed my own advice but I didn’t think many from home would argue with it. “But here I’ve seen powers that were claimed to be from R’hillor and from the Old Gods. I don’t know they were real, I could fake being a god without too much trouble, but they are something to be aware of.”

Robar looked stunned, he had seemingly accepted my magic as something unique and unknowable but with dragons around it was just one more curiosity. Having the religions of northern savages and pyromaniacs be real too seemed to be a bridge too far. “You’ve directly observed miracles?” Daenerys’s lesson was seemingly forgotten which the little girl immediately exploited to go watch Maggie, Robar didn’t notice as he stared at me.

“Well like I said I don’t know if there was a god behind them, but yes, I have seen things passed off as miracles.”

“Like what? If the Citadel was not destroyed you would have maesters beating a trail to your door even without your magic, just for the things you’ve witnessed.”

“I’m hardly the only one, Syrio was with me when we stormed the Red Temple and fought a priest who summoned murderous shadows. Gods can be dangerous, I’d recommend staying well away unless there’s no other choice.”

He nodded but I didn’t think he really needed my warning. He had a comfortable world without supernatural powers and would probably put all of them, me, the dragons and heathen gods into a mental box never to be reopened. In general that was the best approach.

Maggie seemed to be done with her efforts and I followed her from the greenhouse to the water’s edge to look at our work. Much of it was invisible but the impact should be clear in the future, especially if we kept going, I had an idea for an underwater hothouse, I didn’t know what would happen but maybe I could grow a coral reef or get kelp or something, we only had pelagic fish out here but with some work I could introduce some more vibrant species and they’d need a habitat. I was about to call Lydia for her opinion, she’d apparently been chatting with the proto genius loci while we worked, but she appeared before I could say anything. “Father, Sister, a ship is coming and it has a purple hull, I think it’s from Braavos.”

We’d have to get a better look but it was almost time for Syrio to return, if it was him he’d be our
guinea pig to navigate the reefs. Hopefully giant arrows in the sky would be enough of a clue for them.

71.

It was Syrio on the ship, and the enormous floating arrows were enough to get the message across especially with deeper troughs exposing the rocks. I made a mental note to pull the rocks up from the gap as we left, if any of the sailors planned to use the same route they’d have a rude surprise.

As I let the last of the arrows lapse I realized we had a bigger problem. I still hadn’t thought of a way to conceal the dragons on the ship and we were all ready to leave. Well screw it, we’d just brazen it out and refuse to answer questions. Hopefully the prior illusions I’d done would convince most people that any new dragons were also images to fool the rubes.

It was a pretty flimsy plan but on Earth, and here to a lesser extent, people were remarkably willing to accept mundane explanations. There were also a few species from Sothoryos that looked quite similar to dragons, there weren’t too many magi-zoologists running around so as long as the three lizards didn’t burn anything most would believe the lie. All the dragons were dead after all.

While the ship had navigated around the others had begun to pack, we didn’t really have much here past books and clothes, and it wasn’t as if we were entertaining so our wardrobes had all been pretty limited. It was the work of moments to throw it all into trunks and if anything was forgotten I had my monopoly on magical items to pay for them. Either way we were all ready to leave Mini Tirith so as soon as the ship docked we were leaving.

Viserys joined me with Rhaellion following, they’d gotten too large to be carried, with an anxious expression. He had the seeds of his dynasty’s rebirth walking around with him and for the first time they would be in an uncontrolled environment. “Will they be safe?”

“I think our plan of lying about them will work fine. They can look after themselves and none of the sailors will do anything to you. Everyone thinks you’re dead and the dragons as of now are actually wyverns to anyone who asks.” He was a little mollified by that as we watched the ship move into the dock.

After last time I didn’t try to help and as some sailors managed to snag the bollards without my help I guess their choice was vindicated. Syrio leapt off as soon as the ship was stationary capturing all of us with one long look.

“Ready to leave then?” I turned back up the slopes to look at all we’d made. The tower, the terraces, the trees, it was a long way from the desolate guano covered rock we’d found on our arrival. I knew I’d be back though, an island base like this was far too useful not to use and it would need semi-regular upkeep. Maggie’s garden would overgrow at the very least.

“I think we all missed the street food of Braavos as well as everything but fish or chickens.” The decoy birds had been a welcome change from the fish diet after the dragons started harrying them enough they stopped laying. Apparently having a cretaceous throwback or three around was a bit more unnerving than people.

“You seem to have replaced those birds in any case.” Rhaellion reared up and flapped at the insult and Syrio gave him an appraising look.
“Wyvern is pretty gamy anyways, we only made that mistake once.” Viserys looked briefly horrified by the idea of eating a dragon before he mastered his face and nodded.

“Very bony and stringy, they don’t have a lot of meat on them.”

“Well if you bring your luggage to the jetty my men will load it and you can handle your ‘wyverns’ however you like as long as they don’t cause problems.” Syrio was not fooled but seemed willing to roll with it, no doubt the Sealord would get a full report on our return. The dragons weren’t especially intimidating yet, no doubt he thought that they could be dealt with at leisure.

I had been tempted to levitate all of our possessions to the jetty but I didn’t really know my own strength, shattering our stuff would not go over well with Maggie. Carrying it all down the hill hadn’t been easy but it beat the alternative of picking splinters from all of my pants. Either way the crew began to sway our cargo aboard except for a few items. Somethings, Lydia’s bust first among them, were too valuable to be left to the sailors and I carried them on last myself.

Crossing the wards for the final time with her encased in the statue had felt strange. The island behind us looked dead, even ignoring my magical senses, and without her animating presence it really was. She was excited to leave, to see and learn new things so she had retreated to her sanctum willingly, but I didn’t like how she was chained to it as long as the sun shone. The island could be said to be just a larger prison but at least there she could do as she wanted without fear of suffering.

Also she could talk there, until we were in privacy she had to remain silent and after months of having her answer questions spoken to thin air it would be a little strange. I had offered to let her stay if she wished but she had said that the genius loci was not yet good conversation. Apparently all of the magic Maggie and I had poured into the island had accelerated its growth several times, it might be talking in my lifetime if we continued.

The ship was more cramped than the one we had taken out, adding three dog sized dragons and the tutor had ensured that space was limited. Viserys and the dragons ended up sharing a cabin, the girls and Quaithe took the second, and Robar and I held the last one. Originally I was going to get my own but with the dragon’s enmity for me I decided to let Viserys take it. Waking up barbecued was not in my game plan.

The winds were with us and besides distracting the sailors with some illusory fireworks the voyage was quick and dull. It was only five days after leaving the island that we passed through the Titan’s legs and the hum of the city was audible. I had spent time in the country growing up and I enjoyed my island but I was a city dweller at heart. The sights, the people, even the smells, they were a part of my life that couldn’t be easily removed.

A boat had rowed out from the Titan to meet us and informed us that the Sealord was too busy to meet us for now. Syrio looked stricken throwing glances at the crates the dragons had been cajoled into, but accepted with poor grace. The messenger also brought a clay pot filled with a vile smelling black substance that the Targaryens would be using for the near future, mixed with water it was apparently the hair dye for the rich and famous. I decided that traditional gender roles should be respected in this instance and quickly left to the bow with Quaithe and Maggie in charge of applying it.

With both sets of dragons suitably disguised we disembarked from the ship and loaded our luggage onto a gondola which was low in the water after we boarded. Syrio promised that the Sealord would call upon us quite soon but by that point I was ready to get home regardless of his wishes. With the
dragons it would be a full house but as long as it wasn’t rocking with the waves I’d be fine. I was already missing my hot water but not sleeping in a swaying hammock, or actually sleeping, would vastly improve my mood.

Either way it was a relief to reach our house and to feel the diminished but still strong wards over the entire block. The gondolier helped shift our junk to the door and for the first time in months I reached out to allow us entry. The locks clicked open and the air lightened as the apparently untested barriers of force and magic dropped. Maggie was the first to move as she dragged her trunk through the door, more delicately the now black haired Viserys pushed the dragon carriers in as Daenerys did her best to get in the way.

I waved Quaithe in after she threw me a questioning look. She’d had months to betray us and hadn’t and I was willing to extend a little trust, at this point I felt I had her measure. I was about to carry in the last of our stuff when someone called out from behind me.

“Ser Harry?” I turned and gathered power, while plenty knew me as a knight none of them should have been waiting for me, and none of my Braavosi friends would call me ser without mocking the title. The speaker was a bald man who was either walking to fat or naturally plump, dressed in the customary dark colors of Braavos. I didn’t recognize him from anywhere though, and from his address I suspected he must be from Westeros.

I shook my shield bracelet free for the first time in forever and wished my staff wasn’t in a trunk at my feet. It was only one man who wasn’t hostile yet, but anyone who had come to see me this quickly after my return worried me. “You have me at a disadvantage Ser?”

He laughed, chuckled really, in a far higher tone of voice than I’d expected from a man his size. “Oh I am no Ser, but I appreciate the courtesy.”

“Perhaps you could return it then.” Maggie had come back down behind me and I was acutely aware of all of the secrets and valuables inside my house. With a mutter and a gesture I shoved the rest of the luggage into the door and pulled it shut, she knew to raise the wards behind me. “Who are you and what do you want?”

His eyes were locked on the scrapes the iron bands of the trunks left in the flagstones but he looked up quickly after I finished speaking. “I serve Illyrio Mopatis of Pentos and we hoped to enlist your aid.” The man spoke smoothly but something about him made me distrust him.

“I have not heard of your master, if he wishes to command your services he should either rule the city I choose to live in or be as interesting as the children were.”

“Perhaps you could return it then.” Maggie had come back down behind me and I was acutely aware of all of the secrets and valuables inside my house. With a mutter and a gesture I shoved the rest of the luggage into the door and pulled it shut, she knew to raise the wards behind me. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“I don’t take commissions as a rule, you can tell your master that.”

“You have done some small services for the Sealord have you not? And it’s said that you were employed to teach the poor Targaryens.” I didn’t especially like how he lingered on the last name but as I was pretending they were dead I didn’t question it.

“I have not heard of your master, if he wants my assistance he should either rule the city I choose to live in or be as interesting as the children were.”

The man, still unnamed, smiled in a way that obsequious was fully inadequate to capture. “I assure you that if he wished to command your services he would become Sealord. However if you seek interesting things, like the last of the dragonlords, he can provide them.”
I was tempted to throw the man into the canal, after months without equivocation cryptic comments were not ideal to stay on my good side. With some difficulty I fought it down, his fat would only let him float and in the time it took him to crawl out he’d probably be a little more willing- with more difficulty I shook off the Mantle’s influence.

“Why would your master care about my interests?” There, a nice solid question without any magical threats behind it.

The man wrung his hands in front of himself but I didn’t think he was as nervous as the action indicated. “The Magister seeks curiosities and novelties of all sorts, he would be most gratified to have you visit since you have done so much to change the world.”

“And what novelties does he have that could tempt me to visit Pentos? Or would I be the novelty?”

He laughed, giggled really, before gesturing expansively. “The manse of Illyrio Mopatis holds the finest treasures of a thousand lands, you but have to name it and you shall have it as a guest gift.”

I was tired and I didn’t really feel like dealing with intrigue just as I returned. The man’s promises seemed extravagant, he’d been waiting for me which either meant he knew I was returning or had spent the last several months here trying to reach me. It all seemed suspicious and I was already missing Mini Tirith and its hot showers. “And if I wanted something as interesting as the last dragonlord? The supply here has run out you see.”

Something ugly flickered in his eyes, if I hadn’t dealt with fae before I would have missed it. Something I’d said bugged him but I had no idea why mentioning the Targaryen’s fake deaths would offend the servant of a Pentoshi magister. “The number of dragonlords has lessened of late, but in Lys and on Dragonstone their remnants can be found. Illyrio could procure any number if the blood of the dragon is all you seek.”

Well that was a bit of a leap. “I don’t really want a dragonlord.” I studied the man further, anyone who nearly immediately jumped to blood sacrifices was worth keeping a close eye on. “The Targaryens were kind children and I and all who knew them mourn their loss. I don’t think your master has anything I want.”

“Surely there is something, even one so powerful as yourself cannot have all of your desires met here.” He threw a disparaging wave at my adopted city and I was offended on its behalf.

“It meets my needs. Now if we are through?”

The smile returned to his face and he gave a bow embellished with flourishes. “Of course Ser Harry, please remember my master’s offer, he will always be willing to host a friend of the Targaryens.”

“If they have friends where they are, you know, since they’re dead.”

He threw an inquiring glance at my house where even now five dragons lurked. “Yes, indeed. A most lamentable state of affairs. Please remember the invitation wizard.” He turned on his heel and sidled back towards the canal. I watched him until he vanished from sight and then stepped across the threshold into my home for the first time in months.

“Who was that?” Maggie was in the front room sitting on a trunk waiting.
“He didn’t give his name but he claimed to serve a Magister in Pentos, Illyrio Mopatis.”

She mulled on that for a second. “I’ve never heard of him, what did he want?”

“He delivered an invitation and just to spice it up offered to give me as many Valyrians as I wanted.”

“If he was smart he’d have offered to remove them, two is at least one more than we need.”

“Well he might think we’re out since we don’t have any Targaryens anymore. Did they pick new names yet?”

It had been a lively discussion on the ship which I’d managed to avoid entirely. Names were important but I wouldn’t have been able to avoid advocating for ridiculous pseudonyms and if either liked one I’d never be able to take them at all seriously. “Duncan and Shiera, but do we really need to use them?”

“It can’t hurt to get into the habit, those aren’t the worse names in the world anyways.”

“Apparently they were Targaryens in the past or something. Duncan doesn’t really fit though, so who knows?”

“Duncan the dragon rider.” I tried, weighing it on my tongue. “It’s alliterative I suppose but yeah, it lacks a certain je ne sais quoi, it’s like if Aragorn was named Gilbert or something.”

“I can’t see a king naming their kid that anyways, especially here. If it’s not a Targaryen name though all the better, they still have purple eyes and dragons after all every little bit helps maybe.”

Right as she finished talking there was a hammering on the door, any harder and the person on the other side would have been launched by the wards. This time I grabbed my staff, just because the first person to meet me had just been a messenger didn’t mean this one would politely offer a nice selection of sacrificial victims.

I pulled up my shield, keeping it tight to my body and pushed the door open. Syrio was there with his hand on his sword and the Hendricks clone was standing with his fist raised from where he’d been beating on my door. There were a few other guards, not enough to be a threat, but any fight here would have pretty terrible consequences. I stepped out and leaned on my staff, silently thanking my height which allowed me to look down, or at least levelly at them.

“We just spent five days together on a boat Syrio, I didn’t think you’d be so desperate to see me again.”

“Oh you know, events conspired.”

“The scaly kind?”

“Just so.”

Hendricks didn’t seem to have any patience for our banter and made to step forward before a glance from me cowed him. The real Hendricks would never have been so compliant, well maybe he would, I hadn’t really had an occasion to threaten him on an even footing. “And Ferrego couldn’t wait an hour? After all I’ve done for him over the last months?”
“Valar dohaeris as they say.”

“They’ being the society of shape shifting assassins we quite literally faced off with? That’s really your argument?” Syrio raised an eyebrow but otherwise said nothing leaving us all standing uncomfortably.

Pseudo-Hendricks seemed to have recovered some of his bravado, I suspect my lack of smiting during our posturing had something to do with it. “Are you coming or not? We don’t have all day.”

I drew a little power, enough to give the air some weight and muffle the sounds of the city, he paled and drew back towards the far smaller Syrio. “I suppose I can accompany you. Who am I to hinder the Sealord?” Ice cracked as I strode towards the palace leaving Syrio and the goons in my wake.

Walking to the meeting gave me some time to think, none of the guards really wanted to talk to me after my Jack Frost impression and I was grateful for the chance. The Sealord had a choice; either he was alright with dragons in his city or he wasn’t. If he was fine with hosting miniature weapons of mass destruction, well problem solved. If he wasn’t, things would get more complicated.

He’d have to assume I was on the side with more dragons, he knew of my exploits in Oldtown and I was sure that the increased number of guards was in response to my new potential threat level. I was a valuable asset to the city though, given the choice between trying to get rid of me and the dragons violently and attempting a more peaceful resolution I was confident he’d be diplomatic at least once. If he wasn’t, well the Mantle was always ready.

The original pre-dragon plan had been to keep the Targaryens in the palace as random wards of the state. It would have been a polite fiction with the Iron Bank and others in positions of power knowing the truth but as long as the Westerosis owed the bank money they were a strategic collateral/pretender reserve. Now the Targaryens didn’t need an army or city state backing, only time and safety. If they wanted the new king of Westeros to owe Braavos an immense debt they’d have to act.

The Sealord would have to commit soon though, every day he waited reduced his leverage and he’d have to choose between the status quo and dragonfire. Either way the Targaryens were about to be thrust onto the world stage. I was definitely regretting ever leaving my island.
By the time we reached the palace I had cooled off enough I wasn’t leaving condensation footprints anymore but I was still a little on edge from the squad of guards Syrio had brought. With the wards on my home the kids were safe but being escorted to see the Sealord after all I’d done for him rubbed me the wrong way.

The dark wood halls filled with past Sealords sanctimoniously staring down at us as we walked were the same as ever and most of the guards peeled off leaving Syrio and Pseudo-Hendricks to shepherd me to the office. Ferrego wasn’t in his chair, for a change he was standing almost straight and if he had turned away from the window he’d almost be able to look me in the eye. He wasn’t the only person in the room though, Noho Dimittis was there along with an older man dressed in brown and grey who was seated in front of the Sealord’s desk.

I nodded at Noho but he barely responding, inclining his head only a fraction of an inch. The other man watched our interaction and then rapped on the table. “Noho, introduce us.”

“Lord Otherys this is Ser Harry Dresden, the wizard. Ser Harry, Lord Terrio Otherys; a keyholder of the Iron Bank.”

The keyholders were big deals, they were essentially the board of directors of the Iron Bank and were among the richest men and women of the city. Syrio’s news regarding the dragons had spread fast if a keyholder was here just hours after I’d landed. “A pleasure I’m sure. Young Johannes and the Bank have done well through your works.” He advanced on me as he spoke holding a hand out. I wasn’t quite sure what the protocol was so I shook it which didn’t seem to have any negative impact. He hadn’t worn a ring and I wouldn’t have kissed it if he had anyways.

“I was lucky to make such a friend and to share my good fortune.” The niceties observed Ferrego chose to enter the conversation, still looking out his window at the Purple Harbor and the square.

“Now that we know each other perhaps we can get to the point.” He turned to us and I was a little shocked to see him resting almost all of his weight on an iron cane. He took one limping step and sank into his padded desk chair with a not entirely choked off sigh of relief. “The Targaryen children have dragons, no doubt procured with your aide. What do you plan to do with them?”

“They aren’t my dragons.” My mouth was ahead of my mind and even as I spoke I wished I could pull the sentence back. The kids were in no position to resist the Sealord if they had to and their dragons were still too little to be a threat. I could have protected them a little longer but my statement could be interpreted as my tacit permission to do whatever they wanted without my interference.

“Come now Dresden, there were no dragons for centuries and then as soon as you find a Valyrian they’re back? You can’t hide your exploits from us like you tried with Oldtown” Noho said acerbically. Looking around the room everyone else seemed to agree with the sentiment the dour man’s tone conveyed.

“Regardless of who brought them back they are in your house now. You may not be aware but there were several attempts to break-in when you were away and all were repulsed.” Ferrego managed to sound entirely disinterested when he discussed the trespassers and I wondered what he thought of my
wards. “With you within the walls I doubt any intruders would have better luck.”

I didn’t answer his unspoken question and waited. Eventually tired of the silence Otherys spoke up. “I shall ask our question again, what do you intend with the dragons?”

“I believe Viserys will keep them a secret as long as he can and then within the next five years attempt to raise an army to regain his throne. But again, they are not my dragons and it will not be my war.”

The other men nodded, they had probably expected something similar but it was one thing to imagine dragonfire and another to have a wizard state it as a likely future. It also gave them a timeline, I was sure they were vaguely aware of the growth of dragons and realized that they’d only be able to put off dealing with them for so long. “You will not be fighting on their side? You have been their greatest ally in their time here.” The others seemed content to let Otherys speak for them, or Noho was too junior and Ferrego didn’t care to ask, it could go either way.

“I’m a citizen of Braavos and I’ve fought my wars, I won’t aid the Targaryens in any of their assaults.”

“You see yourself as a Braavosi then?” Syrio’s question surprised all of us, despite his and Hendrick’s presence they had largely faded into the background. Noho looked almost offended but when Ferrego raised an eyebrow at me to signal his shared curiosity he calmed.

“My first home is lost to me, but Braavos has been nothing but good to my daughter and me. You know what I’ve done for the city and its people, unless or until I can find a way back I suppose I am a Braavosi.”

Ferrego exchanged a long look with Syrio before he saw something that seemed to make up his mind. He looked back to me, his head moving ponderously. “As a Braavosi then, what would you advise we do?”

I didn’t really know. For all of my adventures I’d never really gotten into geopolitics, I was a bit more reactive than the planners and mandarins of the White Council. “The way I see it you have a two choices. First try to kill the dragons and with them the Targaryens. If you fail then you’ll have secured their eternal enmity and if you succeed you’ll have lost both your influence on Westeros and your ability to easily expand it.” I didn’t mention I’d try to protect them, I hadn’t guarded them from assassins and pirates just to let the government kill them. I thought they’d get the picture anyways. “Second turn a blind eye to them. I said five years but it could be shorter. Westeros has just finished up one rebellion led by a pirate, if the Targaryens return backed by dragonfire they could do at least as well and time is on their side. They’ll remember who was their friend in their time of need.”

Almost before I finished Noho jumped in. “The way you have framed that there’s only one choice. But what if they fail or what if the Baratheon king finds out and sends an army here to destroy them first? Five years is a long time to hide.”

“The dragons will be rideable in thirty months on the outside, less than three years. At that point nothing will be able to destroy overt Targaryen power, which way do you think it will go?”

“They’re a risk, one we can end right now.” Pseudo-Hendricks’s words set me on edge, my staff was just outside the door and my shield bracelet was ready, if this got ugly I’d be ready. “One man, a boy, two girls and some lizards against the might of Westeros falling on us? Easy choice.”
The room was rapidly cooling as the Mantle roiled and I was tempted to make an example of the oversized guard. Syrio, everyone actually, noticed the drop in temperature and I could sense his change from idle bodyguard to focused killer when Ferrego hammered the table.

“Hold your tongue Qarro!” His glare cowed the big man before he turned to me. “And you wizard, refrain from your sorcery.” I was tempted to show them all just who they dealing with, I was no conjurer of cheap tricks and they would remember, but now was not the time.

The room began to warm as the afternoon sun came through the window. We sat and gathered our thoughts, I had managed to avoid thinking about the eventual Targaryen restoration by worrying about other things but this meeting now would drive it like Yalta. Viserys should be here, it would affect Daenerys too of course but I didn’t think she would have much to add. It wasn’t my war and I had no right to decide the fates of entirely unrelated children.

“So if we will not deal with”- my glare at Noho’s euphemism made him recoil before he recovered himself again. “So if we support the Targaryens sub rosa for now what would we receive?”

“You still have the original reasons for sheltering them, Ser Willem’s contract and as collateral against the Iron Throne.”

Otherys snorted. “That contract ceased to be relevant the moment we faked their deaths, without the dragons no one would believe two random Valyrians to be the last dragonlords. As for collateral?” He swiped his hand in front of his throat. “The Iron Throne won’t pay if we support the Targaryens, as a nebulous threat they certainly provide encouragement but as soon as we aid them the payments stop.”

“As long as they’re hidden you lose nothing and if they last you gain everything, the gratitude of a king is no small thing even when it isn’t accompanied by fiery death.” That at least seemed to influence Otherys, no doubt the thought of a dragon backed repo man warmed his heart.

“In any event they cannot remain in the city proper, the dragons will soon be too large to hide here and there are already too many fanatics roaming the streets.”

“Do you have a suggestion?” Ferrego wouldn’t have raised the point without a plan.

“My brother’s island would have served but too many know of it and even the fog and rocks you sheltered it with would not be enough to stop a determined force.”

“Nothing will stop the men of Westeros if the dragons are known, they cannot tolerate such a threat.” Otherys threw Noho a distinctly unimpressed look, apparently falling in with the party line was a valuable trait at the Bank.

“Secrecy is the best defence I think, perhaps the mountains?”

There was a small range of mountains to the south that fed the river that spread into the marshes and lagoon of the city as well as the continent spanning Rhoyne. “It is something to consider, there are many abandoned forts and mines strewn through those rocks. One might be suitable. We shall return in a week to decide what the role of Braavos will be in keeping the dragons alive long enough.” We stood, Noho’s poker face was not quite enough to conceal his irritation but he and Otherys bowed and I let myself out.

It could have gone better I reflected, but so far we were all alive and there was no immediate effort to
I’d be setting up a new safehouse or three as soon as possible though.

Twilight had fallen on the streets of Braavos as I left the palace. The mists rose from the canals hiding the grimy streets from inspection and moving the whole city into an idealized dream of Venice. Bravos were abroad and the courtesans’ barges swayed in the current. I could see the teahouse filled with bankers even at this hour, the city was alive and filled with life in a way I hadn’t realized how much I missed in the middle of the ocean.

Of course I had no desire to see it. It had been a long day of sailing, carrying all our luggage and some dragons through the streets, dealing with bald Pentoshis and then negotiating with the city’s oligarchs. I was ready to go home, fall into my bed and not wake for hours, possibly days.

Naturally Quaithe, Maggie, and Viserys were waiting for me when I returned. The dragons were in the dining room, I could hear their claws click against the stone, and I was relieved that house hadn’t been burnt yet. I had taken precautions, my apartment on earth had taught a lesson I wouldn’t soon forget but I wasn’t willing to chance my wards against magical flames from the inside. If wildfire, said to burn almost as hot as dragon flame, had such exciting properties I didn’t really want to experiment with the genuine article. I’d have to caution Lydia about it, normal fire would hurt her if she lingered outside of her sanctum in it but dragon fire could be especially dangerous. Or maybe I shouldn’t tell her, she might want to find out given her curiosity.

“Well?” I shook myself, Maggie’s question brought me back from my thoughts and I walked across the room to sink into my armchair.

“The Sealord is willing to tolerate the dragons, not in the city though.”

Viserys looked relieved but Quaithe spoke before he could. “The dragons are of paramount importance, if you believe there is even the slightest chance of betrayal they should be taken from here to a place of greater safety.”

“This is your prophecy again?”

“You may doubt it, I cannot blame you but if there is the slightest chance I am correct isn’t it better to err on the side of caution?”

“Pascal’s wager.” Viserys’s words surprised me, I had no idea how he could have learned about French philosophers and Quaithe looked as confused for a different reason.

“Excuse me? I’m not familiar with-”

“Its the idea that avoiding an infinitely terrible fate is worth a course that will lead to an uncertain reward.”

“That’s not quite right Father.” I clearly hadn’t been paying enough attention if Lydia was lecturing on philosophy under my roof without me knowing. “Pascal framed it as a positive and there were no certainties, even insofar that nothing was certain.”

We all looked at the faint projection Lydia had materialized as in the center of the room. This far
from the volcano’s power source she lacked the power to create her vivid illusions, she was transparent with only the suggestions of colors and shapes as the illusion moved from her head. I knew that she was perfectly fine and it was only a shadow of her that was so weak but even so my fatherly instincts twinged. I could sense a brief monologue, or by anyone else’s standards a week long symposium, on early modern philosophy imminent and cut her off.

“Right. Like I said the Sealord is willing to shelter you and the dragons for now but that can’t be relied on. He’s frail and whoever the next one is might not be of the same mind. I’ll keep you and your sister alive but I’m not going to help in your war and the choice between you and the dragons is hardly one.”

Viserys and Quaithe surged to their feet protesting but Maggie’s bolt of lightning and its thunder silenced them. I was beginning to get jealous of her talent as a conversation ender even if it did leave burns everywhere. “I’m not going to kill them unless there’s no other way to save you two; the Sealord and the bank think that I won’t let them do it anyways so calm down a little. They’re safe for now.”

“For now? Why help us for all this time if you’ll betray us at the first sign of difficulty?”

“It would hardly the first sign of difficulty, that would have been when I pulled you and your sister from a burning house.” Viserys was standing and trying to loom over me; it might have been intimidating if I wasn’t the same height seated. “And sit down, if you’re ever to be king you need to be able to master yourself.”

He spun on his heel with his fists clenched at his sides. “What’s changed then? You haven’t expressed any doubts until now, you’ve been nothing but friendly to us and our cause.”

“I helped you initially for a few reasons, some of which the Sealord and the bankers know, that you might have ended up dead like Aerion Brightflame without me and that a rebellion was practically guaranteed, especially if Oberyn Martell’s presence was any guide.”

“And what was the other reason? If you’re willing to kill the dragons where you weren’t before has the next reason changed?”

“The reasons to help are the same, but you ruling Westeros is less important to me than your survival. Where Maggie and I came from there were no kings, divine right to rule fell out of favor centuries ago. I’m prepared to believe that you would be a better king than current one, especially if you can keep the peace backed by dragons but that’s not really driving me.”

“Alright, I’ll ask then, what is?”

“You two living first and second with the whole resurgence in magic thing you might not be the only dragonlords.” That shut everyone else up, even Maggie who had felt the living eggs hadn’t considered they might not be unique.

“They wouldn’t have hatched without a purpose, and what else could it be but to regain our homeland?” Viserys seemingly had felt obligated to ask but I could tell he was thinking about the idea of others.

“In my experience there’s no overarching purpose, just the collisions of everyone’s efforts.” Quaithe looked to protest but I wasn’t going to let her interrupt. “I wouldn’t assume too much about you and Daenerys being fated, surely if that were the case there’d only be two dragons? I expect we’ll see
other magic returning, Syrio mentioned that the city is full of wizards and I wouldn’t bet on those three being the only beasts stepping back out of legends.”

Quaithe finally got a sentence in. “There are prophecies, they fit this time, there is a higher purpose.”

“Are you really relying on a steamboat? I think that’s a stretch.”

“Can we take the chance? What if I’m right and the long night is returning, can you ensure the dragons aren’t needed?”

“Anything a dragon can do with destruction I can match, at least for the next decade or so and I’m a bit more versatile. But none of this matters now, we need a plan, a path forward that doesn’t end with you and the dragons dead.”

Viserys had sunk into his chair and looked worried until Lydia flickered next to him and whispered something that cheere4d him up. I had no idea what to make of that so I ignored it, I had a feeling Maggie wouldn’t be so restrained though. “I had thought all of our problems were solved when they hatched, that I’d just wait and then repeat Aegon’s conquest; that I could avenge my family.”

“Generally speaking the world doesn’t work that way.”

“I know but this time.. It seemed different.”

“Life doesn’t revolve around anyone, that’s one of those sad facts you learn growing up.” No one said anything for a moment and I decided that my day was over. “Right, think about what you want to do and we’ll chat about it tomorrow. Goodnight all.” I left them behind and climbed the stairs, I’d barely made it to my bed before I fell asleep and even the idea of dragons roaming around my house didn’t wake me.

75.

The next day was atypically bright with only a few scattered clouds and the mists of Braavos largely burned off. I didn’t want to deal with the dragon problem today, if my main concern had been a Targaryen restoration I would have just kept us all hidden on the island for five years and then sallied forth, pulling an army from the sellswords of the Free Cities with the promise of Westerosi gold lightly warmed with dragonfire. It would have been simple but that was never my goal, I had a life and friends here and Maggie deserved a better childhood than Miranda’s.

Speaking of Maggie she was awake, poking through the cupboards of the house. They were regrettably bare, only flour remained from before our trip. “So we’re going out for breakfast then?”

She looked up, daintily holding the remnants of a desiccated apple. “I think we’ll be fine, Lydia was making fun of how we meatbags had to eat and in the spirit of sibling bonding I was thinking I’d try dieting.”

“Well then you can come watch me eat, I’ve been craving red meat for the last four months.” Next time on the island we were bringing something with four legs, even if it was only jerky. Eggs and fish might be key parts of some fad diet I’d read about in the checkout line but they were hardly enough to truly live on.
Reminded of all she’d missed on the island she changed her tune and I waited in the front room for her to descend in a state fit to be observed by the masses. I could hear the clatter of the dragons moving around Viserys’s and Daenerys’s shared room and made a note not to let the maids know we were back. The service did fine work in cleaning and stocking the house, almost as good as the brownies, but I didn’t think I could count on their discretion. At last Maggie was finished, the lack of running water had posed no obstacle to her lengthy ablutions, and we set out into the streets.

It was an hour or two after dawn, most people were already about their business and the first fishing boats had already returned. Through an unspoken agreement we avoided the ocean and the many cafes looking over it. Six months of the view being nothing but water had removed whatever appreciation for it that we’d had. Instead we went to the center of the city. One of the larger islands had once held a park built by a past Sealord, after his death and the concomitant removal of the will to keep it, the land had been broken into lots and sold. One of the estates had kept the trees though, and over time it had turned into a house for wealthy travelers with the forest to shield the guests from the city. The original family’s source of wealth changed over time from trade to renting, they now kept houses in the major cities of the world and by presenting a bronze medallion a traveller had the right to pay for their amenities.

I had lucked into one in an earlier case, a captain had promised me any box I wanted from the cargo I recovered as long as I didn’t open it first and in a small ironbound chest, in addition to lace handkerchiefs, I had found the metal disk. It was only with my recent wealth I could afford to go regularly but sitting for a breakfast of steak, bacon and some sort of spinach like green below the tall oaks was definitely worth it.

“Any idea what this thing is?” I was holding the weird plant up with my fork trying to get Maggie’s expert opinion. “I’m pretty sure it’s not kale or collard greens, anything?”

She was much less willing to interrupt her meal, fixated on some sort of glazed croissant thing that apparently only had seconds left to live. “Maybe if we learned herbology like real wizards I’d know.”

“Just because I made fun of Lydia’s and your plan to reprint every book I’d ever read is not a reason to draw unfavorable Hogwarts comparisons, why once-”

“Yes Papa I remember the wannabes in Slytherin scarves.” She rolled her eyes expressively. “Did you know repeating your stories is a sign of old age?”

The lack of filial piety these days was striking, I was about to say so when I realized starting a story with ‘back in my day’ would only give her further ammunition. “Whatever. So have you met up with any of your friends yet? Have you thought of a cover story?”

“I’m just blaming it all on my eccentric father who’s slowly slipping into senility.” She looked up at me, challenging my authority while chewing on the last piece of her breakfast.

“Fair enough, it does sound like something I’d do.” Seeing she was finished and I only had some of the unidentified plant left I threw some coins on the table and stood, not having to do the dishes was perhaps the sixth best part about Braavos. “I’m going to swing by the shop and then the bank, want to tag along?”

“Is that all you’re going to do?” We left the hotel and instantly were back in the streets with the sea breeze and the city’s smells, the remnants of the forest gone behind us.
We do need a new safehouse but I’m not bringing you for that, I’m already conspicuous enough without another person following me around. I was half thinking of meeting Johannes though, it’s been quite awhile.

“Sure then, Lydia was just reading your library and I think I can stand a little time away from the-” she managed to stop herself before she said the names of any of our guests and I was impressed, keeping secrets even when there was no obvious reason to was a crucial wizard skill. “visitors.”

We chatted further as we walked, mostly inconsequential things like what we should do for the next Unmasking but my finely tuned instincts were insisting something was wrong. I didn’t look around too obviously, if someone was following us, still a big if despite my paranoia, I didn’t want to worry them. Instead I moved closer to Maggie and ensured my shield bracelet was ready. I had my coat so I was fairly secure but with the nice weather Maggie had left hers at home. I hadn’t said anything then but she was going to be wearing enchanted armor for the rest of her life if anything happened.

The Mantle was shifting inside me, Winter’s power was waiting, only a thought away from shredding anything and everything that threatened us but I held it in check. We were passing through the nicest and busiest parts of the city and if anyone wanted to try anything it wasn’t at all the place. Arriving at my shop I relaxed a little. Even though it wasn’t a house I had been able to erect some weak wards, enough to stop a single intruder given no one so far on this planet could do anything to remove it.

While I met with the manager, some ex-clerk for the Iron Bank, about our stockpiles of books and compasses I kept an eye on the street looking for whoever had followed us. For the twenty minutes we spoke I didn’t see a single person waiting or coming back around but that was hardly proof, an experienced team should always beat a lone target. I’d just have to be careful, and honestly there might not even be anyone The Mantle was restless and I wouldn’t put it past it to add to my nerves.

Either way we left the shop and I was momentarily more concerned about the compasses I’d committed to build than our potential tail which was the only way I was able to be surprised by Mangini.

“Harry Dresden! And his beautiful daughter back in our fair city!” The shipping magnate, and of late industrialist, had a voice that carried, even when it wasn’t as loud as it currently was. He only barely managed to avoid being splattered across the walls, only Maggie’s presence between us stopped my near reflexive blast of force. “But the fair Quaithe is not with you? No matter, I’d heard you were back but I wasn’t sure. You two must come to tonight’s event, the maiden cruise of the Doldrum.”

“That’s a strange name for a ship.” Maggie said it before I could, but she was right, it lacked a certain positive aspect. I didn't really think a windless sea was an auspicious name but perhaps it was something cultural.

“Yes, but you see it’s because it’s a strange ship the name is so fitting. It’s the first ship built from the hull up for steam power, and it can move quick enough with its engine alone to beat the current of the Rhoyne.” That was a game changer, as I understood it the massive river was traveled primarily by pole boats, larger ships, presumably built and owned by Mangini would outcompete them for sure. He continued with what I now heard as entirely deserved excitement. “The Doldrums isn’t fit for cargo, it’s been a test of our new ideas from your almanac. However to get more investors, I cannot devote my shipyards to building them as long as my greater fleet still uses sails, I need the party to show it off. As the inspiration the trip could not be complete without you.”

“We’d be happy to attend.” Maggie’s brightening face as he mentioned a party convinced me, it had
been a long time since I’d been around and frankly I was curious about the ship.

“Excellent, excellent, bring a guest if you’d like, we set sail, well cast off I suppose, at seven bells from the Purple Harbor.” Mangini vanished into the crowd almost before he finished speaking, ending his sentence over his shoulder. Maggie had a look on her face that I had been conditioned to fear, she was planning a shopping trip, and I decided to head her off so we’d get the last errand of the day done. The Iron Bank was a large enough and secured building that our tail would be lost, there were enough entrances and exits that with even the weakest veil Maggie and I could vanish. It might only be paranoia but I wanted to ensure I wasn’t an easy target while distracted with the party preparations.
The Doldrum was long and low. I had half expected something plump, maybe a two decked paddlewheeler like Twain had ridden but Mangini’s boat was slender and looked made for speed. I doubted it actually was, the engines couldn’t have advanced so far in my absence to allow for speedboats but minimizing drag would help even a weak motor. The engine seemed to be housed in a blocky frame towards the back, the rest of the boat was a single flat deck ringed by lanterns.

We joined the line to get aboard, Maggie was eyeing the others’ clothes. We’d been away for six months and within hours of returning she had somehow learned the latest styles which had necessitated a rushed trip to the seamstress. I had mostly gotten used to being in the middle ages and occasionally the early renaissance, but nothing hammered it home more than shopping. There were a few dresses on mannequins but most of the front room was taken up by bolts of cloth. Everything was custom made to fit, which could be nice in the coming years, other fathers claimed that the seamstresses knew where their money was from.

In any event she had been satisfied and as we boarded my enjoyment of the Braavosi’s monochromatic palate dropped immediately. The boat was illuminated in a sense but the flickering lanterns didn’t have the power to fully light the deck. From my height I could only see hair colors in a sea of black coats, it was going to be impossible to find anyone.

I had managed to mostly overcome my dislike for parties, but those had been indoors and well lit, here in the dark unpleasant memories threatened. There were no vampires here though, and I had more friends in the crowd than that night.

Speaking of friends I could see Mangini ascending to a podium towards the bow, looking to the wharf the flow of people had almost entirely stopped and I could see sailors releasing the lines. I tuned out most of his speech, it was mostly about the economics of steamboats on the Rhoyne or the river that fed Braavos’s lagoon. It was for a different and richer audience than us but it was clear that the Doldrum was a massive leap forward from poling up a river. As he finished to applause the ship began to move. Smoke, only just visible against the night sky, and steam began to emerge in greater quantities as the screw propelled us from the wharf. There was scattered applause but Mangini’s first test had convinced people it would work, this run was to demonstrate commercial viability, or at least enough to get investors in.

Maggie and I didn’t join the crowd gathering to look at the engine in greater detail, steam engines didn’t really blow our minds and as nice as the Doldrum was the Water Beetle would have run rings around it; instead in a new Dresden family tradition we headed for the appetizers. We weren’t the only ones with the idea, some of the wives and daughters who were attending had beaten us to them and the servers were temporarily overwhelmed.

As we waited for cheese and wine or whatever they had I was still trying to find anyone I knew. Most of the Voyagers would be here, at least those of them in Braavos, but they were probably among those most interested in the motor and its possibilities. With no one I knew in sight, or at least recognizable in the gloom, I resigned myself to being social, after I got my snacks.

Wandering alone, Maggie had ditched me to talk with a friend of hers, I was suddenly struck by my age. Sure I wasn’t decrepit and I had a good three centuries left in me, but strolling through a crowd
of Braavos’s beautiful people brought it home. All the women my age were either married or widowed and the unmarried ones were barely older than Maggie. The old half your age plus seven formula was failing miserably, luckily I heard a voice I recognized to distract me from my involuntary monkhood.

“So you’re serving the Magisters now?” Johannes was speaking to a man in a dark robe, I still wasn’t able to take grown men wearing dresses seriously especially when everyone else here was far more sensibly attired.

“Westeros was less hospitable of late, the King was too happy to accept my resignation.” I continued closer towards them, something was familiar about the other man.

“You had such a reputation for omniscience, I’ll admit I wasn’t the only one surprised to hear of your dismissal.” Johannes interlocutor’s face twisted a little at that, I wasn’t sure if there was a big difference between resigning under pressure and being fired but I had almost always been a contractor. Presumably being employed made someone more sensitive to the peculiarities. In any case I was close enough now that a man of my height couldn’t escape notice and Johannes shifted so we were both in front of him.

“Harry!” he moved forward to shake my hand, doing the awkward simultaneous shoulder grab while he pumped vigorously. I gave him a pat on the back as I tugged my hand free.

“Johannes, it’s good to see you.”

“Yes, of course, it’s been what six months? What have you been up to, no wait I’m forgetting myself. Lord Varys this is Harry Dresden, Harry, Lord Varys” Looking at the man, his bald head and plump features I knew I’d seen him before when it hit me, I’d met him barely a day ago. His posture, his clothes, his attitude, even his smell something flowery now were completely different. He wasn’t reacting as if I should recognize him, his disguise, Clark Kenting to the extreme, had made him confident apparently. I leaned forward to shake his hand anyways though.

“We’ve met actually, although at the time I didn’t get his name.” Varys didn’t react at all, fitting for such an actor.

Johannes didn’t notice the tension, to be fair I was trying to hold a poker face and Varys had apparently transcended them, and continued. “On your trip with Oberyn? I didn’t realize you visited court over there, much less encountered the Master of Whispers.”

That was a title that screamed trustworthy and I resisted the urge to check my pockets. “It was in passing just yesterday, purely by chance.” The bald man nodded, I was curious what he’d say to explain himself.

“Indeed I heard he was back in the city and seized the opportunity to speak with him although Ser Harry was too busy to give me much time.” I hadn’t liked being sought out when I thought he was working for a Pentoshi oligarch, now that he was the fired head of the Westerosi CIA or something I was even less happy.

“If you had only introduced yourself as a friend of Johannes rather than a servant of Pentos, I would have been much more welcoming I assure you.”

“A regrettable oversight that hopefully now we can rectify. So how did you meet my old friend, Ser Harry?”
Johannes didn’t dispute the title, indeed he seemed in an excellent mood although that could be the wine so I answered. “He was a representative of the Iron Bank seeking my assistance, during the case we happened to discover a mutual love for the mysteries of the world and he sponsored me into his club, it’s been smooth sailing since.”

“Smooth sailing, the Doldrum has rendered the term obsolete!” Mangini entered the conversation as dynamically as ever, Varys was the only one of us who didn’t start. “Lord Varys it’s not every day I host a man” he added a strange intonation there “of such esteem.”

“I was glad to attend of course, it’s nice to know my friends remain despite my changes in circumstances.”

Johannes hurriedly spoke up to encourage him. “Oh don’t be foolish, if you hadn’t returned to Pentos you would have been welcome here, I know I’m not the only one who remembers the work you did prior to Westeros.”

Mangini nodded sharply in agreement. “Too true, as long as you’re here as my guest though, what do you think of the increased rate of lost ships?”

Varys straightened as he thought. “Well the Greyjoys may not be my best area,” the three of them grinned although Johannes looked sympathetic and I realized I missed a joke, “I had assumed it was the remnants of the Ironborn seeking richer prizes.”

“That is the common wisdom but I wonder. Using Dresden’s compasses and the circle routes the ships have been sunk in a tight cluster, far denser than you’d expect from increased piracy.”

Varys was pensive, it seemed he hadn’t really wondered about it. “A fleet perhaps? One of the Greyjoys might have escaped after all, we never found the body or the ship of the Crow’s Eye but with the storms he was thought dead.”

“Why would they be so far north though? The Stepstones or the islands of Slaver’s Bay have ever been the dens of pirates, there are too many navies that regularly patrol these waters and the ships here are faster and stronger.”

“My little birds are singing a little less now but I have heard that at least one swan ship was taken, I doubt any single pirate ship could bring one of them down, so a fleet.”

Mangini didn’t look convinced but he noticed Johannes and I were losing interest. “Maybe so, I just have a hard time accepting a fleet can be in these waters without being found and destroyed. The Arsenal is starting a new building program” the three of them turned at my groan and I waved for them to continue. “If they’re out there Oliva’s ships will find them. Now what do all of you think of the Doldrum?”

The conversation shifted, Varys and Johannes had a rather detailed discussion of the possible Westerosi market until Mangini moved on to speak with the next group. “I hadn’t heard about lost ships.”

Varys nodded absently, his mind still on the steam engine. “Yes, a dreadful business, there have been six Braavosi ships and several others lost in the same hundred mile circle in the last month.”

“Seven actually, I heard actuaries talking about it although they thought it was too soon to adjust
rates.”

“The fleet will disperse them as Mangini said. In any event I must also move along.” He vanished into the crowd as Johannes also made his excuses. I set off to find Maggie as we chugged upstream, with spies and pirates abroad I suddenly had an urge to keep her in sight.

77.

“Fulminos!”

Maggie’s eye-searing bolt hammered my shield, tendrils arcing across it and grounding thunderously.

“I’m starting to think Susan hooked up with Elaine in some sort of bizarre ritual that normally I’d run into at the most embarrassing moment.” Maggie glared and flung another thunderbolt at me, she’d moved from her original Sithy lightning to something a bit more Olympian.

She gathered her breath before retaliating “If doing similar magic means I’m some sort of bizarre three way love child doesn’t that mean you copying Elaine makes us siblings? I didn’t think you were so Targaryen before getting here.”

She’d been charging another round as she spoke and I had to admit it looked amazing. I’d stand by my little flaming plasma ball of doom any day but watching my daughter holding something that Hephaestus might have forged was pretty cool. She was benefitting from all of the techniques I’d developed to deal with an excess of power and a lack of control but she was still doing amazingly well. I attributed her rapid progress to her mother’s, or mothers’, genetics and a complete lack of farmwork. Or maybe not having an Elaine analogue studying with her, for all the fun we’d had and the lessons we’d learned I’d be the first to admit very few were about magic.

Either way we were out in the same fallow scrubby farmlands that we’d practiced in before I got the island. The ground was scorched glassed, frozen and occasionally fissured, we had both gotten used to using a lot of magic on Mini Tirith and being back in Braavos meant lava powered landscaping was no longer an option. The practice hadn’t really made us stronger, as far as I knew there were no easy ways to do that without taking a fall down the slippery slope, but it had improved our stamina, we could both do more magic for longer before crashing for a day. Not being able to burn off the energy had left us both restless as well as giving us an excuse to leave the city.

The Sealord had sent a courier the day after Mangini’s party. Somehow he’d learned that Oberyn Martell was back in Essos and had invited him. His travel time had necessarily delayed our meeting of the disposition of the dragons. It was an increased risk, leaving the Targaryens in the city with their scaly pets for longer invited trouble however it had other advantages. The government of the city was apprehensive about the Targaryens, as well they should be. They had mostly committed to concealing the children until the dragons were ready but that was a large gamble. Oberyn, as a representative of his brother would ensure more concrete gains were ensured past the friendship of potentially mercurial dragonlords.

My thoughts were wandering, always a risky proposition when working magic, so after I slapped away Maggie’s latest shot I held up my hands for a timeout. “Your powers are weak old man!” she taunted and I could barely conceal my pride.

“I’m beginning to regret having Lydia show all of you those movies.”
“Don’t even start with that, you were the most excited out of all of us.” She was correct but I wasn’t quite willing to admit that to her.

“I half regret the prequels?”

“Really even when they had ULTIMATE POWER!” She flung a surprise burst of lightning at me that I desultorily slapped away.

“You would like them just for the electricity.”

“The complete lack of incest is also nice, there’s enough of that around here anyways.”

I shuddered a little at the thought. “True, Viserys really didn’t seem to understand why you were creeped out.” That in itself was creepy, I wasn’t an anthropologist but I was pretty sure inbreeding was pretty taboo everywhere, not to mention the Valyrians should all have had three eyes or at least giant jaws. I was chalking it up to whatever bizarre magic had run in their blood and had so spectacularly wrecked their homeland.

Maggie and I shared a moment horrified thought before she spoke up. “Speaking of our guests, are you about ready to head back?”

It wasn’t that late but Maggie had been throwing power around all afternoon, she looked beat. I had mostly been shielding, which given her focus on one sort of energy had let me tailor my shield to make it extremely efficient. I was still feeling pretty good but I had a backlog of compasses to make, the Arsenal was starting a production run to deal with whatever pirates were out there as well as to match the Westerosi fleets.

The pirates had been pretty common conversation since the party four nights ago, Braavos was such a mercantile city almost everyone was connected to the sea and rumors about the ships vanishing spread like wildfire. My favorite was that a refugee Lhazareen prince had taken to the seas out of a desire to escape the cruelty of the Dothraki and of men, never returning to his home country and styling himself Captain Daorys. I would neither confirm nor deny allegations I had made it but I was entertained by hearing it from three other sources.

Sharing this with my daughter I was only met with scorn. “You didn’t even conjugate it right, I don’t know how after almost half a decade you still aren’t fluent.”

My excuses, that of course a Lhazareen would make an obvious mistake in High Valyrian, fell on deaf ears as we made our way back to the ferry. The ship was still a galley, equipped with oars and a sail but I’d heard rumors Mangine or Oliva would begin selling their maritime engines soon, hopefully without coal the entire city wouldn’t turn an even darker grey. I would be concerned about global warming from my efforts but given how screwed up the climate was anyways I didn’t think it really mattered.

As the ship set off she broke the silence as I thought about the impact I’d had on the world with the question that was on the city’s mind. “So without ripping off H.G. Wells-”

“Jules Verne” I corrected automatically,

“Right, whatever, so what do you think is really hitting those ships?”
“I’m not entirely convinced it’s not just bad luck and a few lucky pirates.”

“But everyone is worried, even your friends at your club.”

I frowned, she was right and most of the Voyagers were level headed enough to make it a good point. “It was what, seven ships in the same area? Sailing is dangerous, a sudden squall, maybe one pirate or a fire on board, there are so many things that can go wrong.”

“They were all so close together, not really in time though, just area, it would have to be awfully bad luck.”

I wasn’t good enough at statistics to introduce it here past what had already been done, I remembered terms like Bayes theorem and Student’s distribution, but that was it. Lydia could probably help but I preferred to let her do her own thing as much as possible, I wanted to make sure she knew I saw her as more than an encyclopedia. Even so I remembered how in large enough groups, like the shipping records of hundreds of years that the Iron Bank’s actuaries had access to, weird things would crop up. Granted my compasses gave far more information than they’d ever had before and the grouping was worrisome but I wasn’t convinced it was anything above the norm, the city was probably just caught in the grip of a panic.

“We’ll see, hopefully the navy will either deal with it or find it wasn’t a problem.”

Thinking about the navy made me remember the Titan, it had been over a year since I’d put the wards up and they’d probably need maintenance, the threshold there was just too weak. It could wait until Oberyn came and took the children off my hands or whatever ended up happening, being alone in the city’s fortress might make adversaries confident enough to act against me and I didn’t want to put any ideas in their heads.

I’d bring Lydia with me when I did them though, she had expertise that dwarfed mine and she was always happy to go on field trips. Maggie and I chatted as we made our way back, picking up enough food for a small army as we went, The sun was still above the horizon but it was well on its way down, we’d make it home just in time for dinner.

Everyone was a little sick of the overcrowded house at this point, with the kids under house arrest and Quaithe essentially babysitting them Maggie and I were the only ones with freedom. The enclosed spaces were especially hard on the dragons, they had gone from an open sky with all sorts of things to hunt and eat to a medium sized city home. I think all of us were ready for them to leave.

Luckily they, the children, not the dragons, had been brought up well enough not to complain even if Daenerys was starting to look mutinous. With their dyed hair I’d have been willing to let them out at night, except if one spymaster had watched me others could be there too. Once they saw there were three kids instead of one the conclusion wouldn’t be too hard to reach and after all of this time I wasn’t giving up the game.

I left Maggie to clean up supper, one of the nice things about our plates was that they could be cleaned simply by blasts of flame and a rinse, and headed up to my lab to work on my favorite thing of all time, compasses.

I had just started carving the runes, honestly I’d done the magic enough the trappings weren’t really needed but the customers were used to them, when someone knocked on the door. Using my keen deductive instincts, Maggie and Viserys wouldn’t knock, dragons couldn’t and the height the sound originated I answered. “Come on in Quaithe.”
The shadowbinder opened the door and entered, looking curiously at the paraphernalia I’d accumulated. The lab tables were covered with tools and the remnants of projects. Lydia’s bust was sitting on top of the bookshelf in a place of honor though it lacked the tell-tale green glow of her attention. After a moment Quaithe sat at a bench, just as she lowered herself I remembered the bench had a bad support but before I could warn her the left leg popped off dumping her. She reacted with laudable quickness, twisting to try to grab onto the work table but in her haste she knocked one of my enchanted bells to the floor. The room erupted with ringing, half the bells had leapt off their tables and the others flung themselves up all the while their clappers pounded.

When the cacophony, it wasn’t quite as bad as a horologist’s place at noon, subsided she had something of a blush which was entirely uncharacteristic. I’d have thought hanging around would have made her a little used to occasional randomness but that had been slightly unusual. I half thought she was going to stand and pretend nothing had happened but she rose to her feet giving the bell she’d hit a suspicious glance. “What was that? Why do you even have all of those?”

“She raised an eyebrow and I felt compelled to continue. “Generally to teach people not to throw my things on the ground. There might be more lessons though, did you learn anything?” She stared at me a moment longer but I’d been stared at by worse and turned back to my carving. “So if you didn’t come up here to learn life lessons what’s the occasion?”

The silence, interrupted only by the last vibrations of a tuning fork, lasted a few seconds before she sighed and started. “It’s your belief that Oberyn Martell will be in charge of ensuring the Targaryen’s safety?”

I didn’t take my eyes off the miniature chisel, not looking where I was cutting was the sure way to get an annoying injury, and nodded. Hopefully she was looking at me so that I’d know she knew I was listening. “Well then do you trust him?” It was a good question and I put down the anchor block to give it the attention it deserved.

“He wants revenge for his sister, the Targaryens, particularly their dragons, are the best way to ensure he gets it. He won’t hurt children either, imprison them or send them into exile sure but I think the loss of his niece and nephew will have cemented that.”

“How can you be sure of that? I know you don’t believe in my warnings but they have a major role to play.”

I thought back to our inadvertent soulgaze, it and the journey had given me a pretty good grasp of his character. “I’m sure, Oberyn will play this straight as long as they do.” I turned to look at her, she was deep in thought but I hoped she was persuaded. “He’ll be able to provide protections I cannot.”

“Cannot or will not?”

I smirked a little, mathematician’s answers were fun. “Yes.”

“I’ve seen you in the flames you know, not as you are but in the future, or a future I should say.” That treaded awfully close to the sixth law but the magic here didn’t seem to follow the seven laws. “It was enough to see some of your power, if you wanted you could place Viserys on the throne tomorrow.”

That hit a little harder, I’d spent some effort since coming here to conceal my upper limits but Quaithe knew me well enough to spot a lie. “Yes.”
“And you don’t, what holds you back? Your life would be far easier and anything you wanted could only be helped by a friendly king.”

I picked my block up again and checked where I’d left off before resuming. “If I did that whatever threat you think exists wouldn’t compare to the power I could be. Restraint took me a long time to learn but I assure you this world is better for it.”

78.

“Unacceptable, for their security we’ll need at least a hundred men.”

Oberyn and the Sealord were facing off across his desk. He had gotten into the city two nights before, traveling with his eldest daughters and several guards. Ellaria had apparently had another daughter who was still too young to travel since we’d last met so she had remained in Dorne. The Martells had come to investigate the Targaryen’s deaths, rumours of my involvement that night had spread even with the Westerosi king commissioning a song about the last dragons burning that I didn’t feature in. It would have been an ironic end, even if in pretty poor taste.

The Prince had sought me out as he entered the city, hoping that I did know more about the assassination. The presence of the Targaryens and their scaly associates in my home had put him firmly on his back foot for the first time since I’d known him and it had only been the next day when he returned with his children that he had returned to anything approaching his usual self. I wasn’t sure how much of it was a front. I knew about keeping a brave face for a kid, but he was able to make jokes about dragons guarding maidens and how he wasn’t sure if any of them were safe.

Obara and Viserys had stayed with us while the others and Maggie went to play with Daenerys, dolling up little girls was apparently a universal constant even when the girl in question had a superweapon on a leash. It would probably have its claws painted pink by the time they were done.

We had spent the night discussing what the Sealord had offered and what the Martells would be able to provide. Viserys had chimed in occasionally but he had mostly been content to let the older man dictate, deferring to his experience. I knew he was aware of the price for Dornish help, Viserys would be marrying Arianne Martell, the Lannisters would be destroyed root and branch and Oberyn’s daughters would be legitimized. All told it wasn’t that much, but in return Viserys would have the nucleus of his army and protection while his dragons grew. We had threshed out the goals Oberyn would negotiate with the Sealord for and then I had left the- technically brothers and soon to be nephews in law I guess, together to chat.

All that led to me, Oberyn, Syrio and Noho sitting in the Sealord’s office while they argued over the size of the Targaryen security detail. Tregar had offered up a fortress in the mountains south-east of the city, the source of the river that filled the Braavosi marshes and the Rhoyne. It was old, no longer garrisoned with the fall of the Freehold and any military that could project force across Essos. It was also isolated enough that the dragons would be able to fly around without too much risk.

I had been thinking about ways of concealing them further while Oberyn had haggled. Lydia’s volcano tap was still working and she had been able to make illusions strong enough to show movies all the way in Braavos. Maggie and I had made quite a few of the links to the magma chamber, and they had grown more efficient with practice. If we made collars or something and one of the illusion foci the dragons could be made blurry, perhaps even translucent. If they stayed high and far from
prying eyes they wouldn’t be noticed.

The next Unmasking was coming up soon as well. Last time, nearly two years ago now, my illusions had caused me some difficulties but with the Red Priests gone there wouldn’t be anyone to object violently. If I made other illusions like the dragon, rocs, jets, maybe a Star Destroyer in the skies over Braavos, no one would believe more sightings, especially if I sold some of the projection stones, they would be like live action topiary for the rich.

Maggie could also help make them, it would be good practice for her and she would have a non murderous marketable skill. I planned to be around for a long time but giving her easy ways to make money was always a good idea even if we were both far richer than I’d ever expected to be back on Earth.

“Harry?”

“Hmm?” I looked up to see everyone staring at me, I’d been paying less attention than I’d thought if I missed a question.

“We were discussing the protections required on the fortress, particularly those of a more mystical nature.” Noho’s face twisted as he said the last words, for a man of rationality confronting magic and beasts from legend must be difficult. He was dealing with it but having your world view upended continuously was grating.

“They’ll be straightforward, I can set up the same ones as I did on the Titan and I have encountered a woman with expertise at frustrating the magics of others who is invested in the Targaryen cause.” Quaithe wouldn’t object to staying with the objects of her prophesy I was sure. “The only threats will be conventional.”

The Sealord nodded sharply “You see, fifty of your men plus twenty of ours should be more than sufficient. Hostile armies won’t be marching through the mountains and if seventy men and dragons can’t stop assassins there’s no hope for any of us.” Oberyn nodded with poor grace, he would prefer to have more men but I tended to agree with the Sealord. If Oberyn had been worried about the Braavosis betraying them having a better ratio would make sense but to me it seemed the best time for treachery had already passed. Especially since at some point the threat of wild fully grown dragons would become greater than any possible decline in international relations.

“With that settled,” Oberyn’s tone implied the complete opposite, “when shall we move to the fort?”

Tregar responded with an eloquent shrug, his broad though wasted shoulders giving it more gravity than I’d ever managed, like a earthquake toppling mountains. “When can you have your men here? I presume we’ll have your” he looked to me “help getting the dragons out of the city?”

“Of course, I’ve had a few ideas about dealing with the possible sightings as well.”

“And your work for the navy are your compasses read for delivery?”

I stifled a groan, I had gone from imagining new and innovative enchantments and he had to bring up the damn compasses. “I’m ahead of the Arsenal’s construction. Oliva will have his share.”

“Excellent, if you’ll stay after the meeting the Admiral has a few questions for you.”

I nodded then went back to planning for the Unmasking. The illusions for that would be
straightforward, it would be the persistent ones that weren’t actively controlled by Lydia or I and
didn’t simply loop over a period of minutes that would be tricky. If I could somehow link the
illusions to the surrounding areas to provide a little randomness, something like a ward trigger but not
a tripwire, just a counter might work.

Actually an illusion that reacted to other things would have far more uses than entertainment, it could
solve my long distance communication problem. If I could link two crystals so that the light entering
one came out the other it would be incredibly useful, depending on how well the light remained
coherent it could be anything from a signal lamp for Morse code to a soundless video chat. Light
would be easier than sound in some ways, I wouldn’t be transmitting force along with it, the crystals
wouldn’t be flying off shelves whenever I moved one like Quaithe had inadvertently demonstrated
with the bells. It was perfect, Maggie and I would definitely be able to do it, even without Lydia’s
help.

It was all I could do not to just get up and leave the meeting, I had things to do and listening to
Oberyn and Noho debating the frameworks for debt repayment negotiations was not one of them.
The Sealord shared my impatience it seemed and he coughed once the two seemed to stalemate over
some particularly obscure provision. “We have several years before the Targaryens will take over the
debts of the Iron Throne, surely details can be left till the dragons are safely removed from the city?”

The two men agreed or at least stopped and stood, I moved to join them before the Sealord waved
for me to stop. “If you could just wait a few minutes?” I sank back down as Oberyn and Noho left.
“Syrio if you could get Oliva and the good Admiral?” The swordsman nodded and exited leaving me
alone with Antaryon. He steepled his fingers and exhaled before looking to me. “I wanted to discuss
the recent increase in piracy, I was hoping that with your assistance something can be done rather
than just increase the patrols.”

“So it’s piracy for sure then?” The rumors hadn’t stopped in the last few days, they’d only gotten
more intense and had been wearing at my skepticism, bad luck could only explain so much.

“Just so.” Syrio spoke from the door as he escorted Oliva and Admiral Ciano, I’d finally learned his
name, into the office. “One of the lost ships, the Merling’s Bastard, got a lifeboat off with one man
aboard, he had an arrow in his back. Someone’s killing ships.”

“You’ve had pirates before though, and the fleet is the largest in the world. What do you need my
help for?” If I got my vision crystals, or whatever name that I wasn’t stealing from Tolkien working
that might be helpful in that ships could coordinate their searches or at least announce their location
just prior to being sunk, but nothing else really sprang to mind.

“There’s never been so little evidence along with so many ships destroyed. Whoever this pirate is
they’re too good, hiding and striking with far too much skill.” Ciano paused and gave me a
significant look. “We think they might have something extra helping.”

“Magic.” He nodded and Oliva took over.

“We had several ideas, whoever the pirate is could be putting anchor blocks on the ships and
tracking them that way, most ships follow the circle route to Westeros and with their bearing the
pirate can track them and strike whenever, they don’t need clear weather or the sun to find their
prey.”

“The captains aren’t fools though, they’d be looking for something like that.”
“A block could be hidden anywhere though, fastened to the hull, in a piece of cargo or even in the barrels of water. They’re small enough there’s no guarantee of finding one.”

Ciano was right but there had to be more, even being able to find the ships shouldn’t give the pirate that much success, the merchants were taking on extra men to fight, the law of averages said that one of them would escape or win eventually. I said as much and the Admiral nodded, looking grave.

“That’s the other reason we think the pirate has some sort of power, we sent five dromonds in a flotilla to stick together and patrol the hunting grounds, all of them were sunk in the same place.”
Getting the dragons and their humans out of the city hadn’t been as hard as I had worried. With Lydia’s help the dragons’ invisibility choking, Maggie had scoffed but what did she know about the dignity of Names, had been pretty simple. We hadn’t needed them though, the dragons had been shuffled into three large crates and simply carried onto wagons out of the city. The Targaryens had kept their beasts calm, the only times they stirred was when I passed too close to them. I wasn’t sure how they knew, through hearing, scent, or some more esoteric sense but anytime they were confined and I was within yards of them their crates began to shudder as they fought against their restraints. The misguided and deluded have called me stupid, as have some of the wise, but no one has called me a slow learner. As soon as I realized that my presence was antagonizing the scaly minrimmurder beasts more than usual I made my excuses and left.

Our home felt empty without three dragons Quaithe and the children running around, with the noise level so low I half expected to find some catastrophe around every corner with the culprits hiding. Jelmazma had a particular fondness for knocking over things that she had been able to walk under previously, all of the dragons grew quickly enough they had no coordination on the ground. Hopefully whatever fort they were being stashed in was clear of breakables and heirlooms, either way after a month it would be.

The empty house continued to bug me as I tinkered with the prototype illusion crystals. I had been guarding the Targaryens for the better part of a year and then suddenly in a span of days they were gone, off to plot their invasion of Westeros. Part of me was glad they were gone, for all that I had defended them from assassins and pirates there was a big difference between keeping children alive and protecting invaders. It was a fine line with the Targaryens and I’d probably stepped over it when I stood against the Sealord for them, but keeping moral dilemmas at a distance and out of mind was one way to feel better about them.

When Viserys and Oberyn had discussed the families that would need to be killed during their return I was torn. On one hand the Lannisters had slaughtered their relatives in particularly cruel and treacherous acts, even by the feudal dystopian standards over there, but on the other wiping out bloodlines had some bad associations with me. Taking a step back out of the history books suited me very well.

Besides I had more immediate problems. Maggie had spent most of the morning with me working on the seeing crystals. I had thought I could do something similar to the compasses, thaumaturgically link two pieces together, but something in the nature of the quartz resisted the pairing. Lydia had been little help, cryptically remarking that rocks remember their structure, before flitting off to work on her latest project.

I wasn’t entirely sure what she was up to, she’d been toying with ink and parchment, this far from the island she was limited in her strength but she still had the power to move drops of liquids. She made intricate fractals and sharp patterns with the black ink stark against the pages. They had elements that almost looked like writing but didn’t match any language I knew or had ever encountered and staring at them tended to make me go cross-eyed. I would have hung them on the icebox or framed them, but she had arranged them in some arcane order that deviating from would apparently ruin. I had asked a few questions, mostly making sure that her shaky grasp on human morality hadn’t led her to create some sort of monster summoning gate but she had assured me that
no one would be harmed by her efforts. I let it go at that, I was curious but I was willing to wait and see.

What I wasn’t willing to wait for was inspiration. I had told Tregar and Ciano that I anticipated having something for the fleet soon, confident in the inspiration I’d felt in the meeting. Now though, each failure and shattered crystal was less time till they’d expect results. I could for the first time almost understand how the artists who my Godmother traded inspiration for their lives felt. I was on the verge of a breakthrough- I knew it, but it eluded me.

My mind had wandered while I thought and the newest bit of quartz was vibrating in a familiar and ominous way. I dove back and tossed the smoking crystal towards the back wall with a burst of force, already rolling and facing away as it shattered with a thunderous bang. Shards pinged around the room, the few that hit me not penetrating my coat. I swore under my breath and got my legs under me.

Struggling to my feet I stepped right through Lydia’s worried projection. “Father! Are you alright? I felt the explosion from the floor below-” She spun her image for show, scanning the room looking for any damage from the shrapnel. “You seem to have made it out without injury but perhaps you should stop for the day?” I was about to reply when she gave me another evaluating stare, this time I could feel the magic she used to examine me. “I know older humans tend to need additional rest, it might be a good idea.” My outrage didn’t slow her as she kept right on. “I know you rejected my earlier immortality rituals but I’m sure if we all worked really hard we’d come up with something. But first-”

“Yes?” My tone betrayed my umbrage over the age remark but Lydia had an incredible ability to ignore things she didn’t want to deal with.

“Your explosion scattered all of my papers, can you move them back? It will take forever for me to.”

Screw it. “Tell Maggie I said she had to help.”

“Wait, but you’re here now, why can’t you do it?” Her illusion was following me as I left the lab and went to my room to throw on some less singed clothes.

“I” I said, spinning to face her, “am going out for a drink. It’s the first time in forever where I don’t have to worry about the massed forces of Westerosi assassins, belligerent shadowbinders or dragons and I’m going to spend at least one day enjoying it.”

“Oh.” She kept following me for a moment before speaking up one last time. “Are you sure?”

I stopped before heading out the door, for all that she probably wouldn’t notice my annoyance or connect it to her actions, sensitivity was a trait she’d gotten from my brain evidently, I didn’t want to leave with her possibly thinking I was angry with her. “Maggie will be happy to help and we’re both excited to hear what you’re making, maybe she can help?”

Lydia brightened at that, I was still amused when it occurred literally, “I do have some collaborative ideas, maybe moving them all around will work out for the best anyways!”

“That’s the spirit, I should be back soon, by nightfall at the latest and Maggie knows how to get food.” I left before Lydia had more questions, feeling free i slightly guilty.

It was early afternoon and the skies matched the stones with a breeze sweeping from the sea that was
only a hair warmer than chilly. Walking somewhat at random made me realize I didn’t really have a bar here. I was a member of the Voyagers club and could drink from their wine cellar but I was really craving a beer and steak sandwich. Tragically McAnally’s did not make the dimensional jump with us and I was forced to settle for an ale and fried fish sandwich at a nicer tavern.

It was fairly empty inside, the lunch hour had come and gone so I sat and munched in relative solitude idly thinking about introducing hard alcohol. It was nice to not have the pressure, even if I was procrastinating regarding the Navy. I’d have to meet up with Johannes soon, we hadn’t really spoken since the party and for awhile before that, it would be nice to just catch up with friends. Just as I was about to get up, I’d fished out a few coins for the tab, a heavyset man dropped into the seat opposite me.

I raised an eyebrow and the fellow didn’t react but I felt I had the flavor of this encounter. “Lord Varys? I didn’t think we had anything else to say.”

“Who the fuck is Varys?”

Well universe 1, Harry 0. “An acquaintance I mistook you for.”

The man, now that I wasn’t assuming he was a disguised spymaster I was paying attention to, smiled making a crevasse in his blocky face. “Must be a good looking fellow.” I gave him a once over, he was a big man rocking a twice broken nose, not quite my size but over six feet tall with a barrel chest that was running to fat but still seemed to conceal quite a bit of muscle. He was in his late forties or so, what little hair he had left that wasn’t cropped close to his skull was greying. He wore well made but simple and clean clothes and he didn’t seem to be armed but with arms like he carried he might not need a weapon.

“Sure, but since you’re not him, who are you?” His grin remained and he waved over the waitress with one of his meaty paws holding up two fingers.

“Bernard Rivers and I have a job for you Dresden.”

The waitress returned with two more tankards of ale and I accepted mine nodding in thanks. Honestly I had no idea what Rivers would want with me, but I was willing to hear out anyone who bought me a beer, it was just like old times almost. “So what is it? I have an office you know.”

“Yeah, yeah but I saw you in here, you’re not an easy man to miss, and I said to myself, ‘Bernard this is divine providence, go and say hello to the wizard’ and here we are.”

“Here we are, but I’m still a little curious as to why.”

“Have a little patience, I still haven’t even started my drink but it’s your time I’m spending I guess. Tell me Dresden, do you know what I do?”

“Not a clue.” I suspected something physical based on his shape but that didn’t really narrow it down.

“Well I own a third of the warehouses along the Ragman’s harbor, a few more throughout the city and others scattered around the world.” I must not have totally kept the surprise off my face because he laughed freely and loudly. “That’s the common reaction, people don’t expect me to look the way I do when we meet the first time. But from what I’ve heard about you recently I wouldn’t have thought you were the same man I learned of years ago. From cargo finder to the wizard of Braavos
and and the smiter of the Ironborn, hardly a small change.”

I grimaced, I’d hoped my stay away from the city would have dulled my reputation but no dice. I waved my mug for him to continue. He picked up on it, “I was hoping to retain your services in a bit of a throwback role, you see when people stop paying for us to hold their cargo and don’t retrieve it we open their crates and auction whatever’s inside, have to free up inventory you know?” He paused, taking a swill from his own cup. “We’ve found things you wouldn’t believe, dragonbone, Valyrian steel, corpses by the dozen, beehives, if you can name it we’ve got one. The most remarkable though we kept for ourselves, it was a horn, a massive thing of bronze and copper, green with age and carved. Even stranger it was always wet, we left it in the middle of a dry room, rice could stay there for years and not spoil and the next morning there was a puddle beneath it.”

“So you want me to look at it and see how it works?”

“That’s kind of you to offer and normally I’d take you up on it but we don’t have it anymore, six months ago someone broke in and took it among other things.”

“You want me to find it then? I’m not really in that business anymore.” The big man reached down, pulling a book from his coat. The small tome looked ludicrous in his hands but he held out to me, taking it I opened it as the cover was faded enough to make the title a mystery. Luckily the inside was better preserved as I flipped through it. “What am I looking for?”

“It’s alphabetically arranged, look to the Celtigars.” I followed his instructions and found what seemed to be a massive list under the house’s name, seeing my confusion he took the book back and turned to the next page pointing at an entry about halfway down. “That’s what has us interested.”

His finger led to a description, a horn that was of copper and always damp, clearly what he had held. “So you think you lost the Celtigars’ horn? If they haven’t come for it why worry?”

“It’s not just any horn, it plays a tune for kraken and they’re listening.”

80.

I had to let the idea sink in for a little bit before I was ready to speak. “You had something you thought could pull up sea monsters and you just left it to get stolen?”

Even as I berated him I was feeling hypocritical. I had left the horn I’d used in Oldtown carelessly on the tower, kept the Swords of the Cross in a umbrella stand and smuggled dragons cooped up with chickens. We probably should both attend a class on keeping legendary artifacts secure along with Sauron and maybe the Catholic church. Voldemort might be a guest lecturer, he at least had put zombies and curses before his little phylacteries, we all had a lot to learn. Bernard’s reply broke my train of thought about the ultimates in guarding MacGuffins.

“Well we didn’t know what it was when we had it!” He paused, allowing his rapidly reddening face to pale to a healthier hue. “It was only when it was taken solely, an old corroded horn hardly spectacular, from a room with gems and gold and masterworks of steel that we were more curious. It took some time, what with the Voyagers buying up every book these days but we found something that matched it.”

I took the book back, and gave the description another look, sure enough it confirmed that it was
rumored to have super-cephalopod summoning powers. “So this horn, do you know if the Celtigars lost theirs, or are there more blowing around?”

He gave a barking laugh, whatever else Bernard seemed to default to a good mood with worrying speed. “How would that conversation go? ‘Lord Celtigar did you happen to lose a heirloom? Because we might have lost it too!’” He drew his sausage like finger across his throat. “I don’t have any men I like little enough, well I do but still, I won’t send men to the mercy of some Lord across the sea.”

I tried to picture the lords I’d met, Rivers was probably right to be cautious. “Westeros’s rulers don’t really fill me with confidence that’s true. Still the Sealord is a reasonable man, why didn’t you take this to him?”

“I’m not a wizard, he’d just ask you about it, so I thought I’d cut out the middleman.” He chugged the last of his tankard at that, when he placed it lightly back on the table I was more surprised at the lack of the crash, I’d expected a smash and maybe a celebratory belch. Giving a sigh, I’d come here to get away from magic and its problems for a little I drained mine as well and stood, throwing a few coins on the table.

“Well we should probably go tell him about this then.”

The trip to the palace was long, Bernard seemed to know everyone on every street and insisted on chatting with them as they gave me suspicious looks. I was back to notoriety it seemed, stories of Oldtown had finally penetrated the city. He revelled in the attention though, it energized him all the way to the Sealord’s square where he realized that he was about to enter the halls of power.

“Relax, the Sealord is rational enough and you have nothing to fear.” The two guards who had let us in without a word and were flanking us now had quieted him.

“That’s easy for a wizard to say.” He did recover some of his spirit though, even as we walked through the dark halls watched by the images of Sealords long dead. “You’ve worked with him before then?” I hadn’t realized till now, but my exploits in the city were hugely overshadowed by my rumoured accomplishments outside of it. I’d kept a pretty low profile until I left the city and sank the walls.

“I’ve had occasion to help a few times, nothing too exciting.” That was the last chance we had to speak as one of our trailing guards rapped sharply on the Sealord’s office. It was wrenched open a moment later by Syrio who was standing with a decidedly aggressive air.

“Dresden and another visitor” he called back not taking his eyes from us. The hostility was a little odd, I’d been here often enough I had thought some trust was warranted, especially from him.

“Bring them in then.” Tregar’s voice was weaker than last time, and had a rasp underlying it. Syrio stepped aside at his lord’s command and we filed into the office.

“Wizard and guest. Have you brought me a solution to the pirate problem?”

I tossed Bernard’s book onto his desk. “Not quite but we do have more information.” He picked up the book, puzzling over its faded cover and Rivers leaned forward reaching to take it and Syrio tensed, a raised eyebrow from Tregar calmed the guard as he handed the book back to Bernard.

Rivers opened it to the same entry he’d shown me and passed it back, indicating the section. “Here
my Lord.” Tregar glanced over the page, eyes flickering as he seemed to inhale the words.

“How this then Master..” His voice trailed into a question.

Oh right, “Lord Antaryon this is Bernard Rivers.”

He gave me a look that suggested the manners I had displayed merited a stay in the dungeons before turning his attention back to the warehouser. “Why this Master Rivers, did you have the horn here once?”

“I did.”

“And you think something out of legend is responsible for our losses?”

I was about to speak up for him, I wouldn’t have brought Rivers here if the Sealord had not already indicated his openness to a supernatural cause but something in Tregar’s look stopped me. “With all due respect my Lord, there’s already a legend across your desk, one more hardly seems excessive.”

“Just so.” He stared at the description a little longer before looking up to me. “Well Dresden? Do you think this could be it?”

I had never learned much about krakens, much less about any power that could command them but it did seem to fit. From the description and the images back in White Harbor- giant squids pulling down ships I could imagine some pirate using them for his own ends. “It could be, we’ll know for certain when I get my spell to work.” I wouldn’t want to be on a ship to test it though, the galleys of the fleet were a long way from the Nautilus and I had no desire to emulate Ned Land stabbing at the arms with a harpoon.

Unfortunately that was where Tregar’s mind was going. “Could you kill a kraken by magic?”

I didn’t especially want to answer, I was pretty sure in a standup fight I could take most tentacled monstrosities but fighting something that could lurk underwater until it ripped a hole in the bottom of a boat was pretty much the opposite of that. On the other hand I had cultivated a reputation of invincibility, it was hardly accurate but by making myself seem untouchable I had dissuaded attacks on myself and those I guarded. Showing weakness was not optimal, ironic since I had spent my first years here pretending to lack much of my power. I’d have to go with the truth then. “Probably, but I’ve never seen a kraken.”

“A beast can hardly be stronger than walls millenia old.” Syrio’s contribution was not entirely welcome, he still had the dangerous feel he’d kept up since we arrived and his voice had a new edge. “And you’ve already killed one kraken.”

“There’s as much difference between a Greyjoy and a kraken as the Titan and the Sealord. Fighting something that can pull a ship apart without being seen is not a trivial thing.” I shifted my glare from Syrio back to Tregar. “We don’t even know for sure, it’s just the most likely suspect. I’ll work on someway to find out and kill it for sure but until then we should keep looking.”

Tregar nodded once and then gestured. “That’s all we can do for now, but trade is the blood of this city. If it chokes the city will also.” I recognized the dismissal and turned, Bernard made to follow before Tregar spoke again. “Master Rivers you have the city’s gratitude.” As we left the big man’s grin was incandescent.
Once we had passed out of the dark halls into the grey city he turned to me, still walking on air.
“What now Master Dresden?”

If the break-in had been recent I’d have wanted to check it out but after six months nothing was likely to remain. Still it was unfamiliar magic, it figured as soon as Quaithe left some new thing she’d have been helpful for showed up. “Can I see the place the horn was stolen from? And was anything else in the same crate you found the horn in?”

“Certainly, if you’ll follow me I can take you there now!” Once again I trailed in his wake, after the third time we were stopped I was beginning to wish I’d stayed in to help Lydia. Luckily Braavos had a finite number of people, we met most of them, and we eventually made it to the warehouse.

As I stepped in I felt nothing, the complete lack of a threshold wasn’t unexpected of course but it was not an encouraging sign for any remnants of the horn’s power lingering. “So was there anything special about the robbery?”

Rivers shook his head. “The singular thing was the single thing stolen.” He seemed a little proud of his phrase, it had the air of repetition.

“And where was the horn?” He led me to a room and took out an iron key, when I had first saw the state of technology for keeping things secured in this world I had almost decided to become a thief and Bernard’s key did not change my opinion of the art.

“The bugger picked the lock, we’ve improved since then.” I restrained a laugh until Bernard opened the door halfway and then closed it, I heard a sharp click and then Bernard opened the door fully.

A crossbow was suspended from the ceiling, with a vicious barbed bolt pointed right at the center of the doorframe. “Anyone who picks the lock without knowing about the rest gets a nice surprise.” I glanced at the array of pulleys, the door seemed to cock the bow, presumably there was some release since we hadn’t been skewered.

“It is an improvement I’ll agree.” We stepped into the room, I left the line of fire as rapidly as possible, before examining the rest of the clutter. Bernard hadn’t been joking, there were jewels, loose and in settings, coins, art and beautifully forged weapons. I had the feeling I was about to get a tour and he didn’t disappoint, showing me the finest treasures culminating in a valyrian steel dagger. Ever since I had gone deeper into the room I had felt something though, once we got close I stepped to an space on a shelf, it felt cold and I could feel the mantle resonate with it. “You kept the horn here.” It wasn’t a question and Bernard nodded, looking awed as I handed him the intricately carved bowl that had been in its place, closed my eyes and stretched out my senses.

It wasn’t quite like Winter, there were similarities, enough for the Mantle to sit up and notice, but the deep cold wasn’t there. It felt wet more than anything, with a deep undercurrent of power. Whoever had made the horn hadn’t messed around, with this world that probably involved mass human sacrifice but they had imbued an artifact with enough energy that its echoes were there six months later. The thieves wouldn’t have needed a spy to tell them this was present if they had any power, I was surprised I hadn’t felt it even if I was barely in the city at the same time. I’d know if the horn was near now, unfortunately it seemed like krakens and tentacles would be the first clue.
As I exited the warehouse, happily leaving the babbling Rivers behind, I was panicking over the horn. Nothing I’d ever felt had anywhere near the power it would take to leave an impact months later. The Swords of the Cross, the Reds’ athame, even the Shroud of Turin; they all paled behind the horn’s apparent potency. Of course that made me think I was missing something. I was the top dog in this world so far, the magicians I’d encountered had been far less powerful, if they were capable of easily making artifacts like that and then losing them I’d have noticed. Maybe the water produced by the horn had somehow left a stain on the shelf, maybe it wasn’t just an echo of the power. Either way I’d have to be cautious, with my luck best case I’d end up pulling a Brody and if a beastie took that much power to summon I didn’t really want to think of how hard it would be to put down.

My thoughts took me back home, I was hoping that the pirates were using something more mundane than a sea monster but the sooner I got the viewers working the sooner I’d know for sure. Entering the door I saw the subtle hints of Maggie’s passing, shoes scattered and a coat hung haphazardly, hopefully she had helped Lydia with her bizarre arrangements.

I thought I heard the two of them talking as I wandered up the stairs to the lab, sure enough they were seated at the workbench Maggie had claimed as hers and I had painted pink in an attempt to enforce traditional gender roles. Neither seemed to notice me as I approached, their heads were bent together studying something on the table. “You have to remember that using the framework that Father taught you, that the form of the object matters, metals aren’t the same as rocks and are further different from crystals.”

Maggie gave this some thought as I hung back and listened. “So we should use a different paradigm for this then? What do you suggest?”

“No, you’re both too wedded to the system, for mortals its probably the best tradeoff between the truth and convenient lies anyways.” It was always a little surprising to hear Lydia say things like Bob had occasionally dropped. I was generally inclined to overlook my daughter’s less human traits but sometimes she made it difficult.

“But if crystals can’t work for us then what? How can we get a bond like we want?”

Lydia took a breath, she had gotten much better at faking mannerisms since we’d returned to Braavos and she could observe more people before answering. “Quartz can and will work if you want but there’s complications. On the island the rock was easy to melt because in a sense it remembered being liquid right?” She continued as Maggie nodded. “But that’s only true because you chose to believe it and bent reality. Magic is your will being exerted on creation, it’s just that your meat brains can’t fully comprehend it so you use your incantations and runes and foci to simplify it.”

“I for one like my meat brain.” Maggie spun, Lydia had of course known I was there since I’d entered the house. “However I am aware it isn’t as fancy as a spirit built on ideas and knowledge, so enlighten us. How would you link the crystals?”

For all that I disliked asking her questions, she was more than a talking encyclopedia, Lydia did enjoy answering, really pontificating, on almost any topic. “Well it’s like I was saying, the way you were taught and are teaching the rock was easy to shape. Similarly with the way you think, crystal is different, it doesn’t exist until its fully formed and splitting it makes two crystals, the history doesn’t follow it when you want to do something as precise as your little eye thing.”

I could see where she was coming from, I intellectually knew that all of the tools I made were just props but they did make things much easier. It was only a step further to realize that the mental props
I used as crutches could just as easily be shackles if the process was sufficiently far from what they were made for. “You’re not saying the way we’re working is doomed to failure though.”

She floated up as she spoke, assuming a lotus position and rotating sideways. “Well the end purpose is pretty easy for you guys, you want the crystal, even when separated, to be whole enough that whatever light that goes in one side comes out the other. Your framework is fine for that, like I said it’s probably the best given the tradeoffs mortals have to make, that’s why you all use it.” She paused looking down between the two of us, she decided that we were following so she didn’t dumb it down further. “It’s just that when you see a solid gem and split it you don’t believe it’s the same anymore, even while you were able to force the metal in the compasses to behave the same way.”

“So we have to change our minds on how crystals are?” Maggie asked the question I’d been thinking so I was a little irked when the now inverted Lydia laughed at it.

“You’re the wizards here, you don’t need to change. You don’t have to believe the crystal is the same thing, you just need to fool it into thinking so. Make two identical crystals, cut one so finely that nothing could feel it or split it so slowly that at each step it’s always been that way. There are so many ways to do it, just not the way you have been.” She let that sink in for a second, glowing as she looked between us with a wide grin. “Now that that’s settled, want to help with my project?”

I wanted nothing more than to just sit and try to internalize her impromptu lesson but spending time rearranging parchment was hardly mentally taxing and she might even finally reveal the purpose. “Sure!” I grabbed Maggie before she could slink away and threw an arm around her shoulders. “We’d both love to.”

Tragically the mystery of the parchments was not revealed, Lydia firmly committed to telling us ‘soon,’ but to an immortal that could be minutes, months, or millenia. I did use the time not precisely arranging her scribbles at particular angles to think about a new approach. I wasn’t sure if I could make crystals that were identical enough but I did have some thoughts on making a sufficiently sharp knife from my enchanted sword experiments.

At the time I’d been inspired by the old kung fu movies, where two samurais ran at each other screaming, swung once, and you only knew who lost when their face slid off. Actually that might have been Equilibrium, it had been awhile. Either way a blade that sharp had been one of my goals before I’d given up and I’d managed to figure out an active spell to do it, even if enchanting an edge with it had failed. Anything cut by that spell wouldn’t even notice.

After dinner, Maggie had gone to visit friends and Lydia was doing whatever bizarre study of the stars she was on now, I sat alone in the lab. It had been the work of minutes to create a large clear crystal with flat sides, making the greenhouse on the island had given me all the practice I needed in manipulating quartz, and I’d secured it firmly in a vise. I was now trying to make the blade, I had half decided to call it the wizard knife, because Tolkien, but Maggie probably wouldn’t get the joke. It was really a saw in any event, I was making it from a hacksaw, the bow would give the spell a well defined stopping point, I didn’t feel like cutting gashes into the wall and whatever else was in range. I’d removed the actual blade, it was a pretty crappy one all things considered, already dull and only preserved from rusting because of the oil-cloth it was stored in. I didn’t need the metal anyways, the magic would be doing the cutting.

I halfheartedly carved a few runes onto the bow, Lydia’s little speech about mental frameworks made me want to try to get away from a reliance on tools, every little bit helped though. At last I held up the saw giving it a final once over. The wooden handle looked good, no cracks or splinters, I wasn’t really worried too much about the saw, I wouldn’t be sending too much power through it but having
a focus explode in my hand would be much worse without modern antibiotics. Enough dawdling though, time for some testing.

“Acuere” To the mundane eye nothing had happened but I knew better. Between the saw’s handle and the bow was an infinitely thin blade, sharp enough to split infinitives. I waved it around a little feeling foolish before tossing some scrap iron in the air and neatly bisecting it which only became obvious when the bow knocked the pieces apart. Oh yes. “Suck it Wolverine!”

Eventually the novelty of cutting things, and the increasing magical drain, holding the six inch blade in existence was far harder than anything so small should warrant, made me buckle down. I dismissed the blade before considering the quartz held in the vise. I was pretty satisfied that the blade would work, I just needed to set the magic to fool the crystal, whatever that meant.

Fundamentally I wanted the crystal to have the same properties before and after the cut, I wanted light to come in one side and out the other, regardless if one side was halfway across the world. If I just focused on clarity and poured magic into the material as I cut it I felt I had a decent shot at success. It wasn’t like I had a limited supply of crystals or anything, a first try was practically consequence free.

“Acclaro” The crystal was already as clear as I could make it but thaumaturgically reiterating couldn’t hurt. I brought the blade up again and drove the cutting plane straight through the crystal. Letting both spells go and setting the saw down carefully, base seven seemed like a pain to learn, I released the quartz from the vise, grabbing it before it fell.

Separating the two sides was tricky, the perfectly smooth surfaces had vacuum locked together, but a little effort split them. I held one end up to my eye and pointed the other behind me and nearly dropped it, Lydia was hovering over my shoulder.

Her little Casper act didn’t distract me for long, if she’d had a physical body I’d have picked her up and swung her around. The process had worked, now there was just testing to ensure it kept on going. She wasn’t really paying attention to my antics, spinning around feeling like a submarine captain staring through a periscope. “You made an interesting knife.” She said at last. “Did you give it a clever name yet?” Sarcasm was one of the mannerisms she had quickly mastered.

“I did actually, ready for it?” I was viewing her through the crystal as my head pointed towards the window.

“Ready for what?” Maggie’s voice came from the door as she entered looking flushed as I swiveled the crystal to stare at her.

Monocular vision was insufficient so I turned for a more thorough look at her, my father-senses were tingling, but I decided interrogation could wait till a less joyous occasion. “The naming of my super-sharp saw!” I grabbed a half finished and abandoned anchor block, threw it in the air and slashed it into three pieces, the movies made it look far easier. “It’s called the D Flat!”

Silence greeted me, Maggie raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“You know, because you can’t see it’s sharp? C-sharp? The note?” My daughters shared a long suffering look, Maggie shook her head and left, Lydia followed before stopping at the exit.

“There’s nothing really funny about enharmonic equivalents.”
“You got your sense of humor from your mother.” She looked puzzled before rolling her glowing eyes and leaving. I held the D Flat up for minute before sinking onto a bench. I wasn’t sure when my role had changed from brooding private detective to sitcom dad but I wasn’t entirely fond of it. Oh well, at least I had better stories than scoring four touchdowns in a game.
“Remarkable.”

I was sure it was only our location, deep in the Iron Bank’s labyrinths of offices, that kept Johannes from being a bit more ebullient. As it was he was staring through one of the eyepieces as he twisted the other, performing the same strange periscope dance I had the night before.

“Are you going to be selling these like your compasses?” It was hard to take him seriously as he peered through the crystal like a virtual telescope with his other eye screwed shut.

I grunted eloquently to express my utter lack of interest. “A few, but I don’t really want to be stuck making the same things all the time, the compasses got really boring really fast.”

Johannes snorted, at last putting the crystals down. “Only you would complain about earning a year’s wage in a morning because of monotony. Do you realize what these crystals of yours will do?”

I did in fact, it was actually worrying me a little bit. I knew some of the Voyagers were playing with electricity, starting to head down the road towards telegraphs, radios, and generations of children trapped in front of glowing screens. If my magic was so much better than their initial efforts and widespread it might stifle the innovation. However I wasn’t making a lot of them, maybe a pair for each of the free cities to make my own Western Union and one or two to be devoured by krakens.

“Well I’m not selling these in bulk. Scarcity will keep the price up, they’ll be a service not a product.”

“You’ve put rather more thought into this than your usual efforts.” Johannes gave me a level stare as he continued to toy with the crystals. “I’m flattered by being the first to see them of course, but why did you want me in an official capacity?”

“Last time I made something like this I asked for the bank’s help in selling them and you refused.”

“Yes, the Bank is not an emporium, financial services are what we provide, no more. Whenever we overstep the Keyholders grow agitated.” I let out a cough that definitely didn’t sound like ‘Targaryens’ and he grinned a little. “See what happened then? We were overrun with charlatans and mystics.” I raised an eyebrow and he smirked before continuing, “So what has changed then, that you’re back with goods even knowing our policy?”

“I wanted to see what your management would pay to have the only five sets not under my or the city’s control. If I get roped into making these for the navy again I want to have a price to charge.”

He picked the crystal up again, staring at it. “Just for an eyepiece? I think you’ll have more luck selling to the city and the navy.”

“They don’t have to be eyepieces, the crystal can be any form I want, look.” I held my right hand out and focused, a larger crystal block, about a foot square and an inch thick swam into view. “I can make something shaped like that, I will make it, so that you can read whatever is written on a sheet
of paper from half a world away.” He still didn’t look convinced so I went on. “Or it’s a window, I can have this end here and the other looking at the weather of the Reach to check on their harvest, or to audit a vault. It’s instantaneous and private information transfer, tell me you won’t pay for that.”

He was beginning to look as excited as I thought he should, of course for a Braavosi at the Bank that looked almost identical to his normal poker face, but I’d known him for long enough I was pretty sure. “You know I can’t commit, but for what you’ve described? A few thousand gold would be the extreme low end, the navy in a time of peace won’t pay that much per ship.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”

Tragically it was not entirely what Admiral Ciano wanted to hear, however if he wanted my stuff at cost he shouldn’t have caved to the Lannisters. Patriotically helping my adopted city was one thing but supplying foreign armies was something else entirely and I made sure he knew what I thought of the difference.

That business done, I’d be giving them another few sets for their patrol ships the next day, I wandered towards home, my day blissfully free of deadlines. Well almost free, I still needed to prepare for the Unmasking but that would be pretty straightforward and I had a month or two. Really the only mystery I currently had was what had Maggie so happy and I was quite convinced I didn’t want to know. I’d keep an eye out of course but hopefully she’d tell me herself soon. Shifting my mind firmly away from my little girl I changed course and started walking aimlessly.

It was a decent way to pass the time, when we first arrived I spent some of the desperate months working utterly lost with only a faint tug of magic to guide me. I’d gone down more strange apparently non-Euclidean alleys than I was entirely convinced existed and nearly fallen into stagnant canals that hadn’t had running water since the last time dragons flew. I eventually got the hang of it, but it had taken lots of long meandering walks before I felt like I truly knew the city.

That was then though, and I hadn’t been wandering in months what with the island and before that how busy I was. It had shifted a little in my absence, nothing too major but some neighborhoods were cleaner, the paving stones scrubbed and the gondolas neater whereas others seemed to be on a different slope, detritus in the corners and scum in the less traveled waterways. It was fascinating to see the city on this level, in Chicago everything was speeding by out the window, but here the fastest I could go was a walk and I was in the center of everything. It made me wonder what it would be like in fifty years, or even ten, the city would change and I wouldn’t. My steps and thoughts had taken me to the edge of the city and the lagoon ringed by the hills. They would still be here I was sure, no matter how long I lived. I rarely confronted it but I was on an entirely different timescale than everyone else here, especially in this world where without enemies I was likely to reach something approaching my true lifespan. Whatever though, I’d have Maggie and Lydia and whatever children they eventually had, perhaps when they reached one hundred, it was a Dresden tradition after all.

Encouraged by the thought I turned away from the harbor and there it was. Of course at the edge of the city there was the House of Black and White, as deserted as ever. I didn’t want to attribute meaning to my walk but ending up at a death cult’s temple while thinking about time and mortality didn’t really lend itself to good interpretations. I gestured with a rude motion I’d picked up in the Reach and headed back into the city. As the bravos said, “Not today.”
After my little walk I spent the next several days playing with crystals. I had ideas for the Unmasking and was pretty sure how I’d make them, but I had better things to do. I had mentioned kaleidoscopes to Maggie and she hadn’t known what I was talking about. Lydia tried to explain with images but it didn’t really capture the effect so I was trying to be a good father and build one.

Mirrors were pretty easy, making perfectly flat silver plates was trivial after all this time and cutting them to shape was a job for my new favorite tool. Making molecularly, well really really flat, pieces of wood with one slice felt like cheating after all the time I’d spent sanding in my life but I was a wizard, it was allowed. I was just trying to figure out how to melt the edges of the mirrors together without distorting them when I felt impacts on the wards.

Impacts was a strong word though, whoever was there was hammering on the door but despite the force it was probably meant as a knock. I put my tools down and called my staff, just because I was pretty sure whoever was there wasn’t hostile it didn’t hurt to be prepared. Lydia appeared as I was halfway down the stairs naturally, due to my incredible grace, my stumble down the remaining flight was painless.

“Can you get him to stop?” Lydia plaintively asked. “He’s making the wards vibrate a little and it’s throwing everything off.”

“Who is it?” Lydia would be able to see whoever was knocking with such urgency and hopefully it was someone I knew, random people shouldn’t be trying to beat my door in.

“It’s some guy dressed up as Syrio, he’s not trying very hard though.”

“An impersonator?” It would be a bizarre way to try to kill me, dressing up as the First Sword badly would hardly distract me and a sword wasn’t really a credible threat. “What does he look like?”

“He’s wearing the same uniform Syrio always wears but he’s a lot taller.” That didn’t narrow it down much. Even normalizing for my skewed perspective Syrio was pretty short. He was hardly the only man in the Sealord’s service also. Well, only one way to find out then. I threw on my coat and buttoned it, someone would really have to work to stab through it, readied my shield bracelet and opened the door.

It was pseudo-Hendricks, caught with his fist still raised. “Hello?”

“Quickly, you must see this!” He reached in as if to grab me and the wards flared, knocking him back with a crack and a scent of ozone. I stepped out as he clutched his arm to his chest.

“Calm down, where’s the fire?”

“There’s no time, you can ride correct?” That more than anything showed the urgency, horses were vanishingly rare in Braavos, the streets were too narrow and it was often quicker to take a boat, not to mention there was nowhere to pasture them without taking them on a boat to the mainland. If they had been brought out speed must really be paramount. I closed the door, Lydia would tell Maggie what happened, mounted the horse, and kicked it into motion to follow Hendricks’s Braavosi clone.

Riding over the cobbled streets was an adventure, the pedestrians didn’t have the reflexes to dodge horses baked in and there were a lot of accidental pumpfakes by the less wary. We didn’t ride anyone down which I counted as a win even though Qarro sent one into the water. I restrained the urge to laugh for an instant then gave in, we had moved far enough that the swimmer wouldn’t hear
Moving at a near gallop brought us to the Sealord’s palace in minutes. Qarro dismounted and started to run up the steps in one motion which I tried to mimic and nearly brained myself with my staff. My normal excuse for a lack of coordination wouldn’t fly with him, the man was almost as tall as me and he flowed like a snake. We moved at just short of a run through the halls, Qarro scattering servants as passed. We took a different turn from usual for the Sealord’s office, heading deeper into the palace. There was a door with two guards outside, he didn’t wait to be announced and smashed through, I followed with my shield ready, this could still be an elaborate plot.

Syrio, Cianno, and the Sealord were there, all transfixed staring at a cabinet. I calmed, there didn’t seem to be any threat of violence but when I followed their gaze I saw the reason for the alarm. The wooden stand I had first thought to be a cabinet was instead a set of frames for the viewing crystals. Two were dark and the third was covered, fabric and rope or something, and then it darkened as well, bubbles flooding through the image. Three crystals remained, one filled with the face of a man who either didn’t realize or had forgotten in his panic that they didn’t transmit sound. It may have been heartless but I ignored him, the other two showed something far more interesting.

Long coils wrapped a ship perhaps a mile from the others, pulling it down even as I watched leaving flotsam across the surfaces. A few smaller arms speared from the water and pulled other things, men and large chunks of wreckage underwater before the surface was calm again.

I wanted to turn away, I’d just watched the death of a hundred men, but I knew I would be fighting the thing and I needed to see it. I didn’t know if they had weaknesses but fighting blind would strip most of my strengths. I needed the information and the ships were the price paid for it. “Is there anything you can do?”

The Sealord’s question took me by surprise, I was trying to ignore the deaths I was about to see by focussing on figuring out how fast the kraken was underwater. “No. If I could deal with things in the middle of the ocean from land I would have rather than send those poor souls out to die.”

He nodded and there really wasn’t much else to say, the five of us sat in silence as one by one the remaining ships was dragged under. It burned to watch; there was nothing I could do and unprepared I wasn’t sure I could have even hurt the kraken enough to stop it. When the last screen went dark we kept quiet.

Eventually Syrio, responding to some signal of the Sealord’s or of his own accord, spoke. “Rivers was right then, it is a kraken.”

“For all the good it does us.” Cianno’s voice was bitter. He had never liked magic, even when it had been helping and to see his ships helpless before a monster must have grated more. “That thing could take the entire fleet and we only caught a glimpse of its master.”

“You saw the ship controlling it?” I was getting on a boat to hunt the kraken I knew, I had power for a reason and the tao of Spiderman demanded it, but contingency plans never hurt. “Not every ship is just sunk, they’ll have to rob some, and they must make berth sometime. The beast won’t do much good in a harbor and they’ll have to sell their loot somewhere.”

“It was a longship, they can land anywhere. The captain just has to have confederates on the shore somewhere.” Cianno was slumped still staring at the black crystals. “Its a distinctive ship though, black sails on a red hull, we can spread the word if nothing else.”
“What will we say?” Ferrego looked older than ever, defeated. “There is a ship that controls a beast none can fight? Kill yourself before it brings you to the Drowned God’s halls? People will notice our lost ships, the trade will stop flowing and our city will fall as surely as Ghoyan Drohe.”

“It will be fought.” My pronouncement was met with not a little surprise. I hadn’t been too helpful I’d admit, but seeing them shocked I’d defend the city made me wonder if I’d taken it too far. “Braavos took me in when I had nothing, I’ll not let it be destroyed if I can help.”

“You said you weren’t sure if you could defeat a kraken, did something you see change your mind?” Syrio still had the suspicious look when he spoke, I probably should have figured out why but I’d had other concerns.

“No, but power like mine is meant to be used. If there weren’t foes too strong for might of arms why would men have magic?” It might have been a minority viewpoint in this world but hopefully my example would encourage the others. Not in an Admiral Byng sort of way though, that would be bad. “Anyways if I fail, keeping the dragons around might seem like a better deal. They’ll certainly be down for calamari.”

“But you do think you can win correct?” Ferrego’s expression was unreadable, a marked improvement from before.

“Nothing is certain in a fight, all of us know that. I’ve never fought a sea-monster in the water but I have fought mightier.” None I’d beaten of course, tentacles like tree trunks really helped its weight class but I was sure the Naagloshii could have made the kraken into fish food. I didn’t tell them that though, best for them to think I was confident so that when they told the crew they’d share the feeling. “I’ll need time to prepare but I will fight it.”

“And your daughter? You’ve been reluctant to risk yourself before for her sake.” Syrio’s question did hit hard. My daughters did need me, but this also needed to be done. For the first time I felt something like Michael must have, the selfish desire to protect my family over everything with the knowledge that my power was needed. I couldn’t live with leaving my daughters unprotected but I also couldn’t live with hundreds dead to a monster only I could face.

Fortunately there was one solution. “I’ll just have to win then.”

84.

How to fight a kraken. It would have been a good book I was sure, maybe with two lesser sequels and a movie. It wouldn’t be a good movie, at best featuring an “up-and-coming” star and a few Shakespearean actors phoning it in as their thespian souls withered. Tragically no such book or film existed and I was sitting in the lab brainstorming with Lydia and Maggie.

Well Lydia and I were brainstorming. Maggie hadn’t taken my volunteering to fight a sea monster well at all and was ignoring both of us even as thunder rolled across the room with depressing regularity.

“I don’t think I’m strong enough to flash freeze a cubic acre of ice.” Lydia had somehow acquired a rather inaccurate image of human wizards’ powers which was strange since I certainly was vaguely aware of my much lower limits and Lash definitely was. I was split on possible reasons, either I was just so inefficient at magic I could theoretically manage to freeze a kraken in one shot or Lydia’s
immortal nature made her not really understand how long it would take.

“And you’re still against human sacrifice? If they’re consenting adults and you don’t use magic to kill them it’s fine.” She abruptly turned thoughtful, “Actually if you don’t use magic to kill them I’m pretty sure it’s fine anyways. The legalities surrounding necromancy have never made much sense.”

“Human sacrifice is not allowed, you know the rules.” She hadn’t liked the idea of a blanket ban and wouldn’t stop arguing about it, eventually resorting to King Kong to show that human sacrifice was still widely accepted in popular culture. Again she didn’t really have a great grasp of human timescales. Or maybe she did and was far more aware of what the cool kids had been doing than me, it could go either way. One nice thing about moving to the dark ages was that my style was always guaranteed to be ahead of its time.

“It would be the easy way.” She quickly vanished annoyed, not even bothering to do her Chesire imitation.

I turned back to my depressingly short list of ways to kill a cephalopod. Lydia had helpfully drawn a nice version of a happy Cthulhu at the top, I was hoping it was a joke but knowing her sense of humor didn’t fill me with confidence. I wasn’t quite willing to scribble over my daughter’s art, but a new sheet of paper was needed.

The empty list stared at me. I didn’t want to look back over at the old one for fear that the semi-fictional Old One would have squelched off the page to go off and wait for the stars to be right. Whoever killed Lovecraft hadn’t done it fast enough.

A clean start then. I carefully dipped my prototype pen, I had no idea how fountain pens worked but quills were a bridge too far, and wrote the first method, overwhelming force. It wasn’t particularly wizardy. It lacked the subtlety that we wizards were known for but it had the advantage of almost always working, for sufficiently large amounts of overwhelming force. In this case, a giant squid with tentacles the size of tree trunks overwhelming seemed hopelessly out of reach. I had done some comparative anatomy with octopuses sold in the fish market and had concluded that the kraken was capable of eating blue whales, if not quite for breakfast than maybe for a big dinner and some leftovers. I was pretty strong but something that size could probably absorb everything I dished out.

The other end of the subtlety spectrum was some poison. With Lydia’s help I was sure I could mix up something pretty nasty, that if it got into the beast would kill it for sure. Of course that had the disadvantage that the kraken would be in grappling range and I wasn’t willing to gamble against it taking out our boat in its death throes. I also didn’t want to make and fill the rest of the sea with some sort of alchemically designed super poison. It wasn’t for environmental reasons, any sort of magic nerve gas would dissolve by sundown, but anything that potent would probably require something pretty dark to make. Going warlock to destroy something evil was a classic path I had no desire to walk down.

Depth charges were another more promising avenue. With time to prepare I could make some pretty large explosions. Dynamite fishing was an old tradition I’d always wanted to try and hitting a giant squid with shockwaves might be the most efficient use of my power. Other stored energy approaches, something like my kinetic rings, might also work. I could probably also work up something that the crewmembers could use to try to hurt it without my direct control. I underlined it several times, I’d concentrate my efforts there.

I leaned back, trying to think outside the box. We might not even have to kill the thing, if the pirate was directing it from nearby, and if we drove it off for long enough, and if we could catch and board
the pirate we could take the horn. There were a lot of ifs in that plan, a major one being if the pirate ship was faster we’d accomplish nothing but dying tired. It might be the best though, killing several hundred feet of squid would take some doing that I’d just as soon not do. Letting the sailors fight it out seemed like a much easier solution.

I was cautiously optimistic on fighting it, but no matter what I thought of, and I’d had a lot of ideas, I couldn’t get around one problem. The kraken didn’t even need to show itself to wreck our whole day. It could just stay submerged, rip our hull apart and swim off before we knew we were all about to visit Davy Jones or whoever. If we wanted the kraken to deliver itself up we needed to be a target. That made the drive it off and attack the pirate plan even more dicey. Merchant vessels and naval galleys or dromonds were completely different and the naval ones were faster and built to take a beating. The pirate wouldn’t be fooled and we’d be sunk, quite literally.

The other side was that we didn’t know what the pirate did to merchants. We had assumed they used the kraken to stop the ship, cow all resistance and then after the crew thought they were free to go sink it. If they were instead just sinking them for fun, the horn might have made them go full warlock, we’d be in trouble. Floating in a flimsy tub being smashed by a sea monster. It was not really how I planned to go out.

“You’re going about this wrong.” Maggie spoke for the first time in nearly an hour. “You’re trying to fight the pirate how he wants to fight, in your adventures you always tried to go in sideways.”

She had a point, battling a pirate and a kraken in their natural habitat was a recipe for disaster but I didn’t have anything better in mind. “So what do you suggest? The pirate is hanging around in the middle of the ocean, if we want to fight him we’ve got to be there too.”

There was a pause, I went back to staring at my list. “We’ve seen the pirate before you know.”

I looked back to her startled. “When do you mean? I feel like I’d remember the pet kraken at the very least.”

“The boat that came at the island, it had a red hull and black sails, how do you not remember?”

It was a good question and now that she mentioned it I felt utterly idiotic for missing it. “I was a little more worried about how he found the island and sensed us looking. You’re right though, I should have realized.”

“So if he was willing to come try to find you, despite the stories, he might still be up for it. Let everyone know you’re headed to the island, take a bunch of soldiers, and when he attacks again beat him on land.” Maggie finished with an air of put upon genius.

“How do we make sure that he comes for me?” That was the weak part of the plan. I’d handled his ship pretty roughly last time I saw it and he might have gotten the message.

“Papa in your stories everyone always came for you, I think you have a knack for it.” She was right; but for every enemy who came there were a lot more who didn’t, scared off by my overblown reputation. “And he’s a pirate, there are stories about your island, how it’s covered in diamonds, guarded by moving rocks and full of treasure. If you put out a story that you’re going there to deliver something new there’s no way he’ll be able to resist.”

I did like every plan that had solid rock under me that would only sink if I did something catastrophic. “I’ll run it by the Navy, it’s a better first plan than just going out to fight I agree.”
She nodded firmly. “Of course it is, it’s mine. You always said I got my mother’s mind after all.”

“Only because my brain wouldn’t quite fit in your skull. Sooooper Geniuses like myself need expansive cranial space.” She raised an eyebrow. “Before I go on this fishing trip we are having a family viewing of the Loony Toons just so that you know how funny I am.”

The eyebrow stayed up. “That’s definitely what we’ll get out of them I’m sure.”
Two weeks later I was back on a ship. Lydia was coming with me, her bust in an iron banded chest holding six locator blocks. If our ship sank she’d be findable, even if the Kraken swallowed it and swam across half the world. That wasn’t the plan though. A hundred men, half of them the Sealord’s guard and the other half household soldiers of the Keyholders, were traveling with us in secret on an impounded swan ship. We’d let rumors spread about my intentions and we were planning to make a quick trip to the island, waiting for the winds to rise before we left. With any luck we’d be back on solid ground before the pirate had ever even spotted us. Of course no one knew better how wrong my plans could go than I did.

In addition to Lydia I brought on all of the anti-kraken weapons I had made, depth charges, three hammers that were carrying enough kinetic energy to topple the Titan, potions that would cool anything they touched to a hair above absolute zero, and a few other knick-knacks. My favorite, although it didn’t have any real use in a fight, was a south breeze Lydia had somehow taught Maggie to tie in a knot. We’d tried a few of her earlier works from the roof of the Sealord’s palace, and when they released there was a torrent of warm air that swept over the Purple Harbor for minutes, setting the ships at anchor to rocking and twisting on their moorings. It was incredibly cool and I was very proud of what she’d managed to make, especially since I was carrying a whole skein of them.

We were almost ready to make way, with the last of the supplies being loaded by grim faced sailors. Rumours had spread about the kraken, someone in the warehouses had probably talked, and my presence on a Braavosi government vessel was enough of a confirmation. I knew there were stories about me, I had heard there was even a song, but right now all I was doing was worrying the men in charge of keeping us afloat.

I wandered down the gangplank, dodging sweating stevedores carrying bolts for a scorpion. If our plan worked we’d be facing the pirates on land and heavy weapons could be a decisive edge. We’d also have walls, Qarro had been quite excited about them, and the reefs to stop the longship from landing directly. With any luck they’d sail right over it and get their hull shredded and none of us would have to lift a finger. I didn’t really see that happening though, it seemed too lucky.

Stepping off the gently shifting wharf I saw the other reason I’d disembarked. Maggie sprinted to me from where she’d been standing with Johannes, slamming into my stomach with a hug that would have been rib crushing if it wasn’t instead obliterating my lower kidneys. “Putting me in the hospital will only delay the inevitable you know.”

She released me, and stepped back. “Just because I’m letting you go on an adventure doesn’t mean I approve of it.”

I’d already spent hours trying to convince her that I needed to help and she’d been slightly mollified but still unhappy. I’d succeeded enough as a father that she had only been exposed to true danger and realized it once, and for her Chichen Itza was just blurry nightmares. My stories and even Oldtown had just been more episodes of the Harry Dresden case files to her, I’d never really conveyed the entire breadth of the terror. Now though, she intellectually understood what I was going to do; facing a monster that terrified a city, and she didn’t like it. “Think on the bright side. Without me around you don’t have a bedtime and you don’t need to eat your vegetables.”
If she hadn’t been a mature young lady she would have kicked me. “Papa! You being in danger is not balanced by a curfew. I had a gift for you, but if you’re going to insist on poor jokes maybe you don’t deserve it.”

“Hey I’m practicing for the kraken, it won’t have a sense of humor either.”

“You know just because people don’t like your jokes doesn’t mean they don’t have a sense of humor.” She spoke deliberately, as if I was a particularly slow child. “Actually, it usually means they have taste.”

“Shots fired.” Before she could muster a reply I continued. “Oh wait, you don’t get that one either.” She waved me on impatiently. “So what is my present? It’s about time you start getting me gifts anyways.”

“I’m not sure you deserve it, but without my help I often wonder how you do anything.” She turned back towards Johannes who had been waiting just out of earshot. “Lydia helped on this too, but the idea and most of the magic was mine.” There was a wooden box at Johannes’s feet, rosewood and sanded to a glossy sheen. “The case is also mine, D-flat is a pretty neat tool.”

“I remain extremely proud of it.” I took the box from her, it was solid, a hand deep and about as wide as my shoulders. The hinges were a pale yellow metal, too light for pure gold but still soft and I looked to her for an explanation, usually her gifts were far more practical even if the case was beautiful.

“Open it up.” I shrugged and putting a hand below it fiddled with the clasp. The case split open with a little effort, it seemed even with perfect cutting surfaces hinge were still hard to align properly. Inside, resting on a molded surface covered in pale green silk, was a copper sceptre. Well, not quite a sceptre but the bulge on one end, a chunk of amber held by a copper claw, made it look like one. Maggie started speaking, her words tumbling over themselves. “I know you have your staff, and blasting rod, and all the stuff we made, but this is a little more.” She reached out and picked it up, as soon as it left the case I could feel the potential in the air, her hair frizzed out immediately. “It’s a lightning rod, you probably guessed but it works like your rings. Lydia helped with this part, it acts as a universal ground, it can pull the static electricity from the air and store it. The case holds the extra, and it recharges very slowly but the rod can hold one real thunderbolt, stronger than anything you and I can throw unaided at least.”

She held it out to me and I took it, the muscles in my hand twitched for a moment and when they stopped I could feel the energy locked inside the amber. I examined it with my full array of senses, twisting it to see the runes carved along its length. “This is great Maggie, pretty soon I won’t have anything to teach you.” It was awkward with my arms full, but having limbs that span some European nations has advantages, and I managed to gather her into a hug. “Thanks, and I’ll be sure to tell you all about how well it worked when I get back.” She nodded but her eyes were turning bright so I pulled her tighter. “I will be coming back, I have enough of the escape potion in my coat to go half the distance, either back here or to the island, and once my feet are on the ground nothing will touch me.” I almost clinked when I walked with all the vials, but it was a small price to pay. Some might call it cowardice, but I had more concerns than personal honor and I’d already been trapped by pirates once in my life.

“Just don’t be stupid Papa, make sure to listen to Lydia too.”

“Soooper Genius you know.” She gave a watery laugh and I tried to pat her on the back. “Don’t worry, this will be over in a week or three and both of you will be right back to making fun of me.
Try to figure out something for the Unmasking too, don’t waste all your free time.”

At last she let go, ducking under the rod as she extricate herself. “I will and-” Her eyes moved past me, “I think they’re calling you.” I turned, a little annoyed at the interruption and put the lightning rod back in its box. “What was your line? ‘Tide and time waits for no man?’

I snapped the case shut. “Close enough.” Qarro was waving me towards the ship and I turned back to Maggie and Johannes. “Now I don’t want to come back to a city on fire, I’m relying on you my friend.” The rotund man smiled a little.

“Your daughter is far too sensible for that.” His smile turned to a full smirk, “I’d say she got it from her mother, but considering she fell for you that seems unlikely.”

Maggie laughed with him, more brightly this time. I got no respect. “We’ll see who’s laughing when I lug a kraken horn back to the Voyagers’ Club. Thanks again for watching out for her.”

“Oh course Harry.” He nodded at something behind me, “Qarro seems to desire your presence though.” The big man was much closer now looking annoyed. I gave Maggie another hug, a quick kiss on the forehead, and turned to head down the wharf.

I turned back once more looking at the two of them, I searched for a quip but every nautical one-liner I knew presaged disaster or belonged to the other side of the law. I gave them a quick wave, honestly with the communication crystals we could exchange messages, but leaving Maggie still felt weird. Oh what the hell. “Remember, it’s just a three hour tour!”

86.

Something seemed off about the swan ship. It might have been the absence of absurdly stealthy brightly dressed crewmembers, and I wasn’t anywhere near a good enough sailor to compare the rigging or the handling, but compared to the Purple Martin this one felt lesser. We were moving quickly though, I hadn’t even had to unspool any wind. With any luck we’d be at the island in the next few hours and we could just sit and wait for the pirate. We had agreed to give him three weeks before setting out to fight him, I was really hoping he’d take the bait.

I had no assigned duties during the trip, if it wasn’t for the risks I could almost enjoy the cruise. I had toured the ship thoroughly over the four days we’d sailed and been extremely impressed by the craftsmanship. It was kind of sad that the intricate joinings of the wooden hull would become a lost art soon, hundreds of years of expertise and experience were about to vanish. Metal ships were already being discussed amongst the Voyagers with cheaper metals now entering the market. I thought back to the captain on that first swan ship, he’d hated my compasses for threatening the skills he’d learned, I didn’t really want to know what he’d think of rusty tramp steamers plying the waves.

The swan ship might be the swan song of sailing ships, but it certainly beat a galley or cog. It flew through the water, even with the neophyte crew, and could probably have accommodated a few dozen more soldiers without strain. It was good it hadn’t really, the villa and the tower had been extremely spacious for the six of us but even filling the floors it wouldn’t hold our entire little task force. We’d brought tents for the unfortunate few, but past that, keeping a hundred men fed and supplied for the better part of a month took some doing, especially because the island couldn’t support anywhere near that many people.
I was glad to be going back to check on it, I was curious how the gardens, both underwater and in the greenhouses, were doing to say nothing of the other experiments. I wouldn’t be able to do much landscaping on this trip, I’d have to save my energy. It would be kind of embarrassing to have to duel a kraken then ask for a rain check because I had been busy making a new floor for the tower. The trees, my artificial reef, the underwater village, I’d be able to check on them but not improve them, unless we managed to win early enough the rest of the crew didn’t mind hanging around.

Lydia would be excited too, assuming she wasn’t depressed by not getting a chance to fully observe the ocean. She had never entirely finished her survey of the island and she was enough of a completionist it irritated her. Of course she was flighty enough it wouldn’t bother her for long, some other project would seize her attention and time until she remembered her old goal and asked about it. The only thing she had really sunk consistent time into was her paper project and she still wouldn’t tell us anything about it. Mysteries added spice to life, of course that might just be nostalgia talking. I did enjoy not being the sole source of magical wisdom on an entire planet though. If nothing else future generations, very far into the future generations, would have a source on the world we all came from.

I was thinking about going below deck to my cabin to say hello to her, leaving either of my daughters unsupervised for too long could have interesting consequences, when Qarro called me. I walked over, feeling very nautical as the swells we hit didn’t break my stride.

“Dresden, we’ll be making landfall in a few hours, the lookout thinks he’s seen your fog bank.” He was distractedly waving to get the captain’s attention as he spoke. I wasn’t really sure how the officer could miss us, we were both comfortably over six feet and Qarro was built the way little trucks want to be when they grow up. I could only assume he was trying to hold some semblance of authority in the face of Qarro’s direct control of the mission. “If he’s really this annoyed about his sister he could have mentioned it before getting on a boat with me.” Or it was more venial. I had half a mind to wait around for the inevitable trainwreck caused by Qarro the ladies’ man, but the awkwardness compelled me to seize command of the conversation.

“The island is surrounded by a ring of rocks just below the waterline that are as sharp as I could make them.” Qarro and the captain both looked shocked, one by the non sequitur the other by my casual admittance of power. “They’re concealed within the fog and there are other illusory rocks scattered throughout, just to make it a little more interesting.”

“Interesting? You wizards might not fear drowning but-”

“Shut up.” Qarro’s flat voice silenced the captain. “I presume you have some way to get through them?”

I nodded. “I like having my privacy, but I also enjoy being able to get there. Once we reach the fog we’ll need to slow down, I’ll open a path through.”

“And then we wait?”

“It’s better than being fish food. With any luck the pirate will sink himself.” Qarro looked over the bow, I trusted the lookout the fog was there but I couldn’t tell it from the horizon. “To be honest I was worried he’d beat us there. It’s a fine line between baiting a trap and walking into one, if his beast had found us on the waves..” He trailed off, obviously thinking of the massacre we’d witnessed.

“We’re thirty miles out or so, if he’s ahead of us he left it awfully late.” The captain spoke as if he
was trying to convince himself. He hadn’t been present but only a fool wouldn’t be nervous at reports of a monster from generally sober and rational men.

“There’s the other side to that, if he knew our destination this is the only place he’d be sure to meet us.” I was tempted to also glare at Qarro for that but it was too reasonable to argue with. It would be smart to get ready.

“Let’s wake the crew, get the men up and armed, Qarro’s right.”

The two of them took a break from their staring match, both annoyed since I didn’t really have the authority to command either, but being the only wizard in the world counted for something. The captain started shouting commands and his crew scrambled to obey, raising sails and tightening ropes. I followed Qarro below.

It was dark as soon as we were below the deck, portholes let in what little light there was, no one would risk a fire just because it was dim. The hold smelled too, the unfortunate scent of a large number of men confined in a small space. As the swordsman started to rally his troops I moved to my cabin near the stern. “Wake up Lydia. It might be showtime.”

An instant later the bust lit up and her vibrant projection appeared. This close to the island she was almost at full strength and could make illusions so real that only the Sight could beat them. “Do you have a kraken for me too look at?”

Her zoology cravings would have to be satisfied by a dissection. “As soon as it’s dead we can go look at it.”

She had gotten used to her weaker projections back in Braavos and her usual trick of brightening to show excitement was a bit over the top here. “So you do have one!”

I managed to blink some of the spots from my eyes. I was pretty sure the large blob I was looking at was her before I shook my head. “Sorry, no giant cephalopods today.” Since she was already looking through the water though, “If you see one let me know immediately alright?”

“Only if you promise to let me look at it.”

“You can spend up to an hour examining it when it’s dead.”

“Deal.”

With the day’s latest high stakes negotiations completed I moved to my trunk for what I’d really came for. I threw on my coat, slid my blasting rod into its holster and threw on my two bandoliers of potions vials. I looked down, I still had Maggie’s lightning rod, all the hammers, an axe I had been toying with during our trip, and I already looked like a Liefeld reject. I grabbed the rod and then headed back to the hold to get reinforcements.

Qarro was there, giving orders amidst the chaos of previously sleeping men arming themselves. “Who here ever wanted a magic sword?” My shout might have been ill-considered but the results spoke for themselves, the crowd went silent. “Well tough, I don’t have any. Luckily I do have three hammers and an ax that will destroy anything they hit for one swing.”

There was a press of bodies, despite how terrible an idea getting right next to a kraken was everyone seemed to want a magical smiting tool. I had planned just to give them to the biggest men there,
every little bit helps after all, but Qarro had other ideas. “Yarwick, Othar, Hans and Ekene. You all get to be heroes.”

The four stepped forward and followed me back into the cabin, to their credit they only stared a little at Lydia’s floating model of the solar system. I walked right through it and started handing out enchanted weapons like Gandalf. “So each of these, you get one good swing and you have to mean it. Don’t try to test them, they all have enough power stored to break a leg of the Titan.” I wasn’t sure if they really could, the ax definitely couldn’t, but the four men were treating them with a bit more respect now. “They’ll know, the first swing that you really want to destroy something with, when it hits there’ll be nothing left but vapor. Hit the boat, hit the mast, hit a person, all that will be left is smears and ashes. The kraken probably won’t die in one hit, but remember; whatever direction you swing the world’s strongest fist is going. Don’t sink the ship unless you really have to.”

With the mandatory safety briefing completed I went back to the deck. Even though we were on a fast ship it was still pretty slow, the fog bank was just now visible. As we sailed closer I was beginning to feel paranoid, it might have been smart to get the men ready but every yard we sailed made it seem like I had gotten the extremely dangerous hammers out for nothing. If one of them took an idle swing and connected most of us would drown, no kraken needed. Telling them that would probably be bad for morale so I stood at the bow with Qarro, watching the fog and the horizon for any signs. We spent an hour at action stations, the crew and soldiers had been nervous at first but they were all chatting now, the apparent false alarm and bonding experience of standing around on deck under the hot sun for no reason had papered over the divide between the two groups. I was about to signal the captain to slow down, just because I had set the fog to be at the edge of the rocks didn’t mean I had managed it, when I felt an uncomfortably familiar feeling.

Cold, wet, dark and most of all powerful. Even before the blast echoed across the waves, a foghorn roar that made the sea itself thrum I knew it. The black sails emerging from the fog was just more proof, Lydia’s projection appeared next to me and I knew what she was going to say. “Father-”

“How far?”

“Not very-”

The sea itself seemed to groan, if I had thought the horn was loud this was a million times worse. The ship vibrated and I could feel the pressure of the sound beating against my chest.

There was a shadow in the water. It was here.

87.

The sea bulged as it came, impossibly quick. It left the ocean swirling in its wake as the kraken charged. I froze for a second, I’m not ashamed to admit it, seeing a few hundred feet of monster surging towards me was entirely out of my experience. The entire sea rose with it as it’s tentacles and head broke the surface, our ship rocked as it struck us.

Half the crew fell, the rest were screaming even as the forest of tentacles smashed onto and through the deck. The man next to me was simply gone, I didn’t even see him get snatched away. Half forgotten instincts came to the fore, I unleashed the Winter Mantle even as I cast.

“Defendarius!” My shield formed around me, gleaming white with frost even as the first impact
struck. The clarity it brought me, the faster reflexes and time to think were welcome even if the Mantle’s usual instincts were silent. I didn’t want to consider that no other Knight had ever fought a kraken like this.

Outside my defenses the world seemed to slow to a glacial pace, Mab’s gift giving me time. The first blow had just been testing. However the beast sensed us out of the water it hadn’t noticed my shield until its contact. The one that had hit me, a chest thick band of suckers and muscle, was already tensing for a second try and from above I could see another slashing down towards me.

I had no time to retaliate, even with my speed. I held my staff over my head with both hands and focused my will into the shield. The spraying water froze instantly as it touched it, before the entire world went black.

My panic got me to my feet even as the light returned. I’d been smashed through the deck, my shield had shattered the beams beneath me and only the durability of the Mantle kept me moving after the sudden fall.

I nearly dropped again when the kraken wrenched the ship, the stores I’d fallen into toppled as I tried to plan my next move. I needed to see, I needed space, down here I’d be killed like a rat in a trap. By the time the thought had finished crossing my mind I was in the air, leaping straight up for the hole I’d punched through.

The deck was a charnel house, in the few seconds of the attack half the crew was dead. One body caught my eye as I spun searching, his organs had burst from his chest even as suckers had ripped patches of cloth and skin from him. I felt more than saw one of my hammers going off. Ekene had swung it into a thicker arm circling the mainmast, the arm was shredded, a ruined mass of flesh and blood but even with that it accomplished its aim. The mast toppled towards him, weighed down by the monstrous arm. The still spread sails covered the aft of the ship even as the tentacles continued picking sailors off, under and through the purple fabric. Rage was filling me, not the cold rationality and cruelty of winter but a desperate desire to hurt and kill.

“Fulminos!” Maggie’s focus erupted, a blindingly bright solid bar of lightning stretched from the amber head to the largest tentacle. The entire ship groaned as the thing convulsed, the other arms twitched spasmodically as the one I struck fell undirected and smoking. The thunderclap that followed knocked everyone still standing to the deck, even my firmly planted staff couldn’t save me from stumbling.

There was an instant of silence as everything but the waves went still, and then the crew rallied. Another hammer went off, this one poorly aimed but still destructive. It pulped an arm through the deck, leaving a hole in the ship I could see daylight through. Others were stabbing and slashing at the enormous fleshy ropes, taking the chance to inflict damage while it twitched. The arms were beginning to regain their direction though and even with the damage the dead men were still gone. I’d be fighting it solo in less than a minute, I needed to change the game.

The mantle answered my call, I bounded from the forecastle towards the side with the most tentacles. I ripped off my bandolier, the focus was lost somewhere behind me, and flung it into the barely visible core of the beast. The leather belt swung slowly through the air, the glass vials glistening with the sun through the seaspray until I sped them on their way.

“Forzare!” The plane of force smashed the potions into the soggy flesh, followed shortly by the explosions of ice the shattered vials had released. The head was cratered with broken frozen flesh, one of the strange eyes stared at me even as its w-shaped pupil cracked apart.

A moan filled the air, the sea itself was crying with grief and the timbers of our ship joined it.
Something deep in the vessel broke with a titanic crash, as the head retreated its arms still grappled and tore at the hull. We were dropping fast, taking on water as it dragged us down. I threw a glance around the bloodsoaked deck, the remnants of the arms mixed with the bodies of our crew. No one was moving, even as I dealt the kraken such blows it had savaged the crew.

The beast needed to die, as did its master, but it had absorbed my heaviest hits so far. The kraken was just so massive, even with its tentacles only a tenth of it was above the surface. I thought for my other weapons, the depth charges were lost somewhere on the shattered deck. I could call them to me, but they were already so unstable from the power any additional magic might destroy them and me at once. The axe though, I could feel that and knew it was more robust half charged. I dropped my staff, I’d need both hands for this, and with a thought pulled the battle-axe to me.

Even as it came, humming through the air to my outstretched hand, I leapt from the deck. Attacking the tentacles did nothing, the body was the only chance to hurt it and to do that I needed to be closer. The Mantle was practically singing with joy as I fell, the haft finally reaching me even as I reared back for the hit. The head came down, the enchantments I’d made channeling all the force it had stored even as I added more.

The blow and I landed simultaneously, the axe cleaving through the frozen eye and severing half the remaining face. I scrambled to keep vertical as the kraken roared in pain. From this close there was nothing else, just the sound reverberating and echoing from the sinking hull. It rolled from the ship, away and down, retreating leaving a cloud of blood and flesh and I fell as it dropped away. Just as I was about to strike the water I used the thing I’d lost my staff for, the escape potion turned me into thousand icy winds all sweeping over the ocean towards the black sails.

I burst from the surface with a freezing spray, rematerializing even as I swung the axe once more. A third of a pirate fell with the rest flying into a rower, I paused to savor their fear even as I let the water surrounding me freeze into armor. I wouldn’t need it, not for these worms, but they should know from my device who was killing them.

I stepped forward, covering yards with a stride as I drew on the full might of Winter. Each strike killed a man, I was inexorable, their dooms inevitable. They had been content to watch us die helplessly, now it was their turn. I had destroyed six before I even met the first with a weapon, his eyes were wide with terror and his feeble swings wouldn’t have hit me even if I hadn’t moved. I left the deck redder as I marched towards the bow. The men were running now, the few who fought being shoved towards me by the smarter, faster, cowards even as others jumped.

“Didn’t they tell you I’d slain krakens!” I punctuated my statement with another death, even as I stomped forward leaving icy footsteps in my wake. “Didn’t they warn you of my power!” The huddling masses cringed, each swing lowering their numbers. “Did you think that you would escape my vengeance?”

There was no one left on the boat to reply to my last, even as the blood dripped from my axe. Well there was one, a single man at the bow who hadn’t even turned to look at me. Behavior like that, either courage or idiocy deserved to be noticed. Even as I crashed down behind him he didn’t move, with one ice clawed hand I grabbed his shoulder and spun him to face me on his knees. He had a horn that breathed power, almost like my Queen’s but lesser. I had the desire to take it but no, I needed no pale imitations of her glory.

It was still firmly fixed to his blue lips and his one eye, he had gone all out for the pirate look, was rolled back in his head. We couldn’t have that, he needed to pay attention. I could tell the magic he was doing was from the horn, my memories were slowly returning from the chaos of battle, this was the kraken horn. Destroying it would be best, no one ever needed to summon a sea monster,
especially such a feeble one. Two more swings and this whole mess would be over.

The horn shattered satisfyingly, splinters from it pinging off my icy armor and leaving cuts on the pirate. He reacted more interestingly though, spasming and twisting even as his eye rolled wildly in its socket. I threw him to the ground and watched him, his limbs splayed and his fingers bent unnaturally. I gave him a few seconds to recover then ended it.

With the death or retreat of all my foes, I could see some swimming towards the fog or the wreckage of my ship, I calmed. It was a shame I lost my staff and Maggie’s rod, there’d been a lot of work in both of those. Lydia would need another bust as well, luckily being underwater wouldn’t hurt her and there were other blank ones sitting in the lab on the island. She’d be fine. This ship was still whole though, even if there was no one left aboard. When I left for the island I didn’t want the pirates to just get back on and sail away.

“Fuego.” My old standby served me well as ever, despite the seaspray and other liquids the tarred hull caught fire quickly. I fed it a little wind to ensure it spread, then took another escape potion. I exploded upwards towards my island with the ship burning beneath me, barely landing on Mini Tirith before all the magic I’d done caught up to me, I barely managed not to brain myself as I dropped and for a second time, everything went dark.
I woke in darkness, my cheek flattened on the warm rock. For a time, minutes, hours, life ages of the earth, I stayed there, all my limbs felt dead. Eventually I managed to get my legs beneath me and staggered to my feet, fervently wishing for my staff just as a support. I was on the deck of my tower, standing the winds that the rocky spears had blocked were beginning to cut into me. My ice armor had melted and all I wore was soaked in cold water.

I threw my coat off, it weighed a ton wet and I was barely standing as it was. I made my way to the steps down, gradually regaining my sense of balance and humanity as I moved. The magic had exhausted me, even with the tools I’d let loose a few of my biggest spells before the Mantle fueled my rampage. Those thoughts almost made me stumble again, it was a blur of red and white, cringing men crawling away as my ax fell again and again.

When the memory passed I was slumped halfway down a wall, only the friction kept me from reeling. I’d chosen to live by drawing deeply on Winter’s power but there were costs. The Mantle was inhuman and cruel and so was I when I used it. It had receded while I was unconscious, but I could feel it waiting for another chance to rip, tear, and kill.

That could wait until a little later to worry about, my mouth was bone dry and while I wasn’t hungry right now I knew I would be soon. The cisterns should be full so I made my way to my bedroom, threw open the faucet and shoved my face under the stream. After a minute of the cool clean water I started to feel more human and ready to deal with the problems. First things first.

“Lydia?” My call wasn’t that loud but if she was on the island she would hear me. After a minute of waiting I tried again without much hope. If she was here she’d be with me, she might have come to the island then gone back to whatever she was doing, she couldn’t go out in the sun anyways. For all I knew she could be deep in the kraken, inspecting its endocrine system or something.

Next were the sailors. I’d had a vague impression during my rampage that my allies were all dead, the kraken’s assault had been overpowering, but I owed it to them to make sure. If I was going out there though I needed some protection. It had been some hours based on the night’s onset but there would be a lot of wreckage and a least a few pirates had jumped rather than face me.

Leaving my room the stairs back to the roof looked daunting, but being sword and knife proof was worth the burn in my legs from climbing. Carrying the damp leather over my shoulder I descended to my lab. I hadn’t left much here, all of the best projects had returned to Braavos but there were a few things that might be useful. One of my water gauntlets, a random iron sword I’d made by pulling rust from the rock, and a blasting rod Maggie had made. They’d be enough, even without the escape potions I still had.

The forest seemed to still be alive but I didn’t really inspect anything as I made my way down to the water’s edge. As for traveling on it I had a few options, making a raft from ice would be pretty easy but I had no desire to use anything so closely associated with Winter. Maggie’s stone boat would have to do then. She’d made it the day before we left and hadn’t really tested it. It floated, and the inch of rock certainly seemed solid, but going to sea in a basalt rowboat couldn’t help but feel sketchy. Beggars couldn’t be choosers though so I shoved it down the slip and jumped aboard.
It was heavy and slow, rowing was hard work and it took almost ten minutes to get to the reefs where I had to struggle even more to clear a path. Forcing my magic through the water was more difficult than using Mini Tirith and I wished I’d thought to deal with them before getting all the way out there. Once I was through it got even harder. The reefs broke the ocean waves keeping the waters surrounding the island warmer and calmer than the unprotected sea. There wasn’t much of a breeze but the swells outside tossed my little boat around as I worked my way further.

There wasn’t much of a current but it had been hours, sitting in the boat with my visibility a few hundred yards in the dark I didn’t really have much of a chance of finding anything. Hopefully my daughter would be responsive this time. “Lydia!”

As long as I was shouting and making noise I might as well try to get the attention of anyone still out here. With a whisper I sent a new star into the sky, the fireball grew rapidly as I released my tight control until it bloomed a few hundred feet above me. The orange and red lights reflected off the waves but it ruined my night vision, the stars and moon took a few seconds to become visible again. Hopefully anyone out here would see it and, if they could, move closer.

“Father!” Lydia emerged from the water, her lower half a fish’s tail and she sprawled across the other seat. “The kraken sunk, I thought you were going to keep it somewhere I could look at it.”

“Next time I’ll fight one somewhere it can’t get away. Can you do me a favor though?”

She looked ambivalent, whatever she had been up to had kept her entertained but in the end filial piety won out. “What do you need? While I’m doing it can you rescue my bust? It keeps getting knocked further down the slope by fish, they’re really excited by the glowing.”

Pulling fifty pounds of rock from the bottom of the ocean was probably beyond me right now but I nodded anyways. “First, can you turn the fog off? I want any survivors to move to the island. The wards won’t let them land unless I’m there but hopefully they’ll all go to the same place.” The illusion vanished before I finished speaking, Lydia had been built into the advanced wards from the beginning and had more control of them then I did. “Second, are there any survivors from our ship? If so, want to show me them?”

She floated into the air, her mermaid tail changing back into her normal appearance as she looked to the east. “There’s a raft about six miles over there with fourteen men on it. They don’t look good though.”

Well that was far better than I’d thought even if ninety percent of the crew was dead. “Can you travel over there and tell them I’m coming?” Lydia vanished then reappeared shaking her head.

“Too far. They are looking this way though, two men seem to be paddling towards the island now.”

Six miles was a long way on a small boat and a single escape potion wouldn’t cover the distance. “Can you light the island up, put a message in the sky?”

“Sure, tell them you’re coming?”

I unshipped the oars and began to back water, headed for the breach I’d made. “No, tell them to put up a sail.”

The message, written in gleaming letters on the sky, lit up my return trip to the dock. I had to use a spell to get the boat out of the surf, moving a thousand pounds into the water was far more doable
than beaching it, but eventually I managed it. Climbing the tower for a second time was just as miserable but eventually I stood atop the rune carved rock with magic in mind.

The last time I’d done this spell I’d been pushing the very pirates I’d just killed off course and now I was pulling in shipwrecked sailors. I really should have named Lydia Ariel, lucky for her Lash had planned ahead.

Before I summoned the wind I started to worry about the pirates. Most were dead, I’d seen to that, but there might be a few still floating. They deserved to die, for all the romance of pirates they were just floating scum, murderers rapists and thieves. Despite that I didn’t really want to kill them, every single one of the people I’d killed in cold blood haunted me, even Grevane. It might have been ensuring they suffered a more terrible death of thirst or starvation on the open sea but I wouldn’t pull them in. If they survived the ocean it would be like fate or God or something had declared them pardoned.

It might not make any sense, but if there was one thing that the fight had shown me was that I was tired of fighting and killing. I’d spent most of my adulthood battling monsters and a decent chunk waging a war I both started and ended. Here, living with Maggie and Lydia, playing with magic and slowly improving the world, I was happy. I didn’t miss the terror, the pounding adrenaline, the knowledge I was gambling on my skill, my power and my will to win. I’d been a hero, done heroic deeds at least, and I was content to leave it in the past. “I’ll be a plain and quiet person with no need for adventures. Nasty uncomfortable things that make you late for dinner.”

“Who are you talking too?” Lydia appeared next to me looking energized, with her projection’s brightness she must have transferred to the bust linked directly to the island’s molten heart.

“Gandalf. Ventus!”

I’d forgotten what a rush using Mini Tirith was. It was attuned to me, the same as my staff, and enchanted to channel the power of the magma chamber. It was hard not to feel godlike with the power I could summon, pulling the masses of air from the east towards us was almost effortless. I directed the energy with light touches, if I had tried without my tower the magic would have burnt me up in an instant but the runes covering the rocks lit up and took the load. A stiffening breeze smacked into me, I could see the waves illuminated by Maggie’s illusion changing direction and I knew that the sailors out there would be coming in.

89.

The summoned wind kept coming as I stood on my tower. My coat should have flapped dramatically, but it was still so heavy with the water it only made a few desultory twitches in the stiff breeze. I’d have to watch and wait for the sailors until they crossed the reef, it wouldn’t do for men who’d survived a sea-monster to be sunk within sight of land.

As they slowly moved in, they’d gotten a sail up finally, I tried to think of what else I had to do. The kraken, hopefully dead, last seen by Lydia sinking down into the abyssal deeps missing half its face. The pirates, dead and sunk with the kraken horn destroyed. Ignoring the massive losses the mission had been a success. For a beast that had slaughtered whole squadrons it was cheap at the price of one impounded ship and her crew.

Actually, the Sealord might not know we’d won yet. Even more importantly Maggie might not
know, and she’d be panicking. We’d put viewing crystals on the mast so they could watch our adventures in Braavos, and I had one in my coat for Maggie, but the mast had been destroyed pretty quickly. Ignoring the sailors’ progress I started scrambling through my coat for the crystal. I was pretty sure I’d had it in there, but I’d also taken it out to speak with her during the trip. It could easily be in my cabin a few hundred yards underwater.

While patting myself down, I hadn’t been searching for anything like this since I last lost my car keys, I realized that even if the crystal was at the bottom of the ocean we could still use it. Lydia could just meander down and send messages, enough that they’d know we were alive and to send us a ride home. Of course as soon as I stopped panicking I found the crystal, it was glowing from one side and appeared to be showing a ceiling.

It was night here, a few hours after sunset, so Maggie probably was still awake. She might think I was dead though, my coat would have kept my end of the crystal black and indistinguishable from the inky depths.

“Lux.” The bright blue light I called from the tower would certainly show I was active, the runes shone and swam with power. I set the crystal against one of the stone spears so that the other gleaming spikes and I would be visible at a glance when she returned for it. The shining spikes were also another thing for the sailors to see, if they’d somehow looked past the burning words in the sky, the massive island and the earlier fainter glowing runes. Now there was nothing to do but sit, and wait for the last of the survivors.

I came to slumped against one of the rock spears. When I dropped off I’d been thinking with the strange focus that sometimes came with extreme exhaustion about how convenient they were and now awake they were back on my mind. I was congratulating myself again on my fine taste in architecture when Lydia appeared in front of me.

“Father, you must lower the rocks!” Her urgency seemed untoward, the tower had been this tall for months, I couldn’t think of a single reason to remove all of Maggie’s and my hard work. I must have somehow communicated this to her, because she flared bright enough to sear my retinas and shocked me back to full alertness.

“The reefs Father! Bring down the eastern edge!”

I shook my head rapidly, trying to get some blood flowing to my brain. Tapping into the volcano was much harder this time. The contours of the island and its spiky crown of reefs seemed to be stabbing into my cerebellum, and pulling the energy to shift the rocks made it spin and tear. Eventually I managed it, or at least Lydia stopped exhorting me, and I finally sank into blissful unconsciousness.

This time when I awoke the rocks were cool and it was bright. I could hear the seabirds and even some barking seals, their noises carried well with the wind. I didn’t feel like opening my eyes just yet, content just to lie there, but after a little my stomach growled and I knew I had to deal with life. Opening my eyes was even harder than I thought it would be, they were encrusted with sleep and half stuck shut. Clambering up while rubbing them on a platform without guardrails to protect me from as much as a hundred foot drop might not have been the best idea, but I maintain I wouldn’t have fallen off even if I hadn’t been grabbed.

Someone grabbing me could not be tolerated though, the Mantle surged to life and I spun, seizing and lifting an unfortunate by his throat and slamming him against the closest spire. He was choking I realized absently. That thought managed to shake me back into a more normal state, and I let the man
drop. He fell to his knees wheezing while I took a few steps back to try to regain my composure.

“Sorry.” The man I’d half Darth Vadered looked up, despite his rasping breath he managed to look skeptical with a side of terrified. “No really, I am sorry. I’ve picked up some questionable reflexes over the years and shooting first asking questions..” I trailed off as the sailor’s expression changed from a mix to completely incredulous.

“You-” He coughed and guilt flooded me before he managed to clear his throat and continue. “You saved all of us yesterday, a few bruises is a small price to pay for life.”

I raised an eyebrow then decided that any further apologies could be done on the way to food. “Well I’ll do my best to avoid strangling you in the future.” I started down the steps and he followed, his breath already sounding more normal. “Who’s in command of you lot?”

One nice thing about military units was that they had hierarchies, one of them would be in charge which immediately elevated them from a mob to an ordered mob. “Good question.” Or they wouldn’t because like Braavos itself their military should be a strange mix of an oligarchy and a dictatorship with checks and balances. “That big guy Qarro is here, we pulled him from the water but he had a hit to the head and he’s a little out of it.”

“So if he’s not in charge?” Some of my annoyance must have leaked through as he didn’t immediately answer. Someone else did though.

“Me.” It was the giant black guy who’d taken the mast down, Ekene if I remembered. He still had my hammer, a yard of oak fastened to a steel head covered in bronze runes. “Until Qarro regains his facilities I command the survivors wizard.” He certainly had the gravitas to command, some people are blessed with a voice others will follow. I had met a guy once who had a voice fit for a king though, and all he did was ask if I wanted fries. Hopefully Ekene had more than a magic hammer and a deep voice.

“Is anyone else hurt?” I didn’t have much in the way of healing magic but if someone was about to die I’d get Lydia and try. At some point I could hardly make things worse. Luckily he shook his head no.

“The only people who made it out and to our raft were without serious injury, broken ribs are the worst.” Thank goodness for small blessings then, dealing with the extremely wounded would have only made things harder.

“Well if there’s nothing immediately pressing, did any of you guys get any food? There should be fruit at least.” One of the sailors tossed something at me, an apple. Biting into it was one of the most satisfying things I’d ever done, if it had been any better I would’ve needed to eat it in private.

After what was probably an awkward experience for them Ekene broke the silence. “We found your crystal, your daughter wrote us messages and informed the Sealord. A ship will be leaving with the morning tide.”

“A week here then? We should be fine.”

“Indeed, we’ve scouted the island, beyond the fruit you had weirs full of fish and the seals aren’t afraid of men. I think we’ll all be glad to be on dry land anyways though.” There was a chorus of agreement from the men. “Past the basics though, were we successful? Is the kraken dead?”
I grabbed another apple and while it wasn’t quite the same I munched on it before answering. “It lost half of its head, and was sinking in a cloud of blood the last I saw of it.” I bit off a particularly big chunk and chewed it loudly while they looked at each other. “The man controlling it though, he lost his whole head and I destroyed the artifact he was using. The seas are safe from him at least.”

“That is welcome news.” I finished the apple, nodded to them, and left the tower. The sailors had all been staring at me and I’ve never liked being the center of attention. Awe could easily turn to fear, and we all knew where that led. Staying out of sight and mind as much as possible would be the best way to spend our wait. Besides, I was curious as to how my island had changed.

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The week on the island passed slowly. One of the things I missed about Chicago was that after people saw me fight they didn’t treat me like a wrathful god and stay as far from me as they could at all times. My little display had terrified the sailors and only Qarro was willing to spend time with me without immediately leaving. I was fairly introverted on the whole so I didn’t really mind the solitude. Lydia was there for conversation if I really wanted to talk, and there was plenty of work to do keeping the island viable.

Most of the things I did were fairly showy. With my magic I smashed the rocks to make more sand and dirt, built a new pond, filled it with ice, and shaped molten quartz for anything I felt like. I may have purposely done most it in sight of the survivors while having Lydia amplify my voice and add backing chants in Sumerian. If they were going to be bad company then so was I. Standing atop Mini Tirith and gesturing expansively as I raised winds might not have been strictly necessary, but I really wanted to push the Prospero link. Of course no one but a Dresden would get that reference here. When I got back I’d have to have Lydia translate and dictate the complete works of Shakespeare, although in my current mood I might attribute them to Francis Bacon. If anyone else ever made it here the confusion would make the whole thing worth it.

Qarro came to me on the sixth day, accompanied by the hammer wielding Ekene. I was preparing a spell to retrieve Lydia’s favorite bust but there was nothing time critical, so with a long stretch back I broke my circle and stood.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?” I still wasn’t sure if gentleman was a pejorative title here or not, either way I’d keep on using it. “Is there any news from the crystal?” Maggie had loaned the Sealord the last crystal we had, it made the communication loop over our relief ship’s location much shorter.

“No, it’s still going to be tomorrow sometime, depending on the wind.” Ekene was staring at the runes I’d etched into the stone while Qarro spoke. He’d recovered from his head injury and no longer swayed when he walked although he was missing some of his normal grace. I was pretty sure he’d be fine with a little more rest.

“So why are you up here? I have things to do and only another day to do them in.” It wasn’t like him to beat around the bush and I would like to further improve the island’s wards in addition to my continuing theatrical efforts.

“We were talking, the rest of the crew and we had some questions if you don’t mind.” Qarro looked quite serious and Ekene was comparing the runes on his hammer to the ones on the ground now, looking for a pattern or similarities probably. No one here could read them but me anyways.
“Go for it.” Answering questions about my power was always a minefield. Qarro directly reported to the Sealord and had never struck me as particularly stupid. His employer definitely wasn’t. I had lied quite a bit about my limitations when I first got here and I didn’t want to get caught up in my own web.

“So I wasn’t at the raid on the Red Temple, Ekene was,” the giant black man nodded somberly, “and half the crew knows about the flying lizards.” That was a little worrying if not completely surprising. Sailors talked and their rumors might make their way back across the narrow sea. “And all of us saw the kraken and have been watching you these past days.”

Ekene broke in. “So what we’re wondering, is there a common thread? Are the other legends coming back? Should we expect the Black Goat or the Stallion who Mounts the World next?” His deep voice didn’t conceal his nerves.

“I’m not familiar with the last one.” I turned away from the two of them and walked to the edge of the roof thinking. Whatever I said here would be the received wisdom for the city. I knew magic was strengthening, Quaithe and the Hightowers had shown convincing evidence, but I had no idea what myths were actually true here. “The world is changing, you’re right. If it’s any consolation it’s been this way before.”

Looking back at them I felt fairly confident that it wasn’t. Qarro stepped forward, only hesitating slightly as one of the runes glowed beneath his foot, the tower still had some feedback loops. “You have no idea why this is?”

“Nope, there was magic around before I got here and it only started accelerating two years after.” I leaned against one of the spikes, if only to stop pacing as I kept thinking about it. “The arrival of the lizards was a factor I’m pretty sure, but I also think that they were a response, not the cause.”

“Do you think it will continue to grow? I mean, the kraken was far beyond anything we’ve seen yet. Is anything else going to come crawling-” I cut off his increasingly panicked words.

“No idea. Whatever does come out of the dark we’ll put down.”

Ekene stepped forward, his knuckles paler around the shaft of the hammer. “One monster nearly killed-”

“Nearly.” I kept a close eye on him, huge people with weapons near me rarely turned out well and I could feel the Mantle stirring. “If I hadn’t been there you would have thought of something else, a ship full of wildfire or maybe just hiding on a merchant cog. Humanity will always beat the monsters in the end.”

Qarro snorted. “You actually believe that? The worst monsters are men.”

“What’s that saying our little death cult is so fond of? Valar Morghulis?” Whenever I heard High Valyrian I mentally translated it and I couldn’t help but think that the Faceless Men’s boast fit better with radical misandrists. “We didn’t get to the top of the food chain by being stupid, I mean look at the dragons. They’re the most dangerous thing in a fight and a bunch of shepherds found out how to master them.” I had some doubts about the story. Biomes weren’t really my thing but I didn’t really think volcanos were noted for their verdant pastures. I was too caught up in my attempt at an inspirational speech to worry about it anyways. “Whether it’s brindled men from the south, or wights from the north, we’ll win.” I paused for a second and felt compelled to continue. “We’ll probably also do something crass with their remains. Overall, don’t worry about it.”
Qarro looked far from convinced but something I’d said seemed to get through to Ekene. Since he wasn’t concussed and had a weapon his calm was a little more important to me. “So if the Sealord asks, your advice is to ‘not worry?’”

I pushed myself off the spike I’d been leaning on. “Pretty much. I’m still a stranger here myself, I have no idea what other bits of legend are real. We’ll just have to take them as they come and trust that we’re better.”

“Assuming victory because we think we’ll win doesn’t really seem like a sound strategy,” ground out Qarro. I nodded, conceding the point, and he went on. “If you don’t have any better ideas we’ll have to seek others out. Who was that woman you brought here, Kath?”

“Quaithe, I’m pretty sure she’s booked for the foreseeable future.” I felt that my phrasing deserved a groan but neither of them reacted. Philistines.

“She’s not the only one I’m sure. Someone will have a firmer idea of what’s out there.” Qarro was perking up as he planned. It was even odds that the Sealord had assigned the supernatural defenses to him and he’d want to distinguish himself and move out of Syrio’s shadow. I couldn’t help but think the whole thing was a Uriah gambit, anyone sent to fight the kraken had to be viewed as expendable and in extreme danger. Oh well, palace politics were hardly my concern. I just wanted to get home and not worry about malevolent forces marshalling.

“If that’s all?” I turned back to the ocean, making the dismissal clear.

“Sure Dresden, keep thinking about it though.” The two of them descended and despite my best instincts I kept thinking about it. Quaithe had offered to teach me her style of magic. I hadn’t really tried to hard, nothing she could do was beyond me with a little effort. I might have to go back to her to get more information, ignorance was no shield against evil wizards or invisible demons about to eat your face.
The ship was due in two hours, assuming the wind held, and if I felt like it I could probably see it from the top of my tower. I smiled at the thought, for all that I’d lost coming here some parts were definitely awesome. I had never really been into architecture but building my own home out of the living rock had made me a fan. Maybe when I had time and Maggie was a little more independent, fifty years into the future or so, I’d get into city planning. There had to be another volcano or oceanic hotspot around that I could claim. If I spent a few years setting up I could probably build the city in a day and name it “Rome wasn’t.” With some difficulty I tore myself away from thoughts of my own city, or a city I’d build then leave to see what happened next, and back to my current job.

Lydia wanted her bust back and so did I. It worked quite well, it was a masterpiece of my crafting, she’d spent time mysteriously improving it, and most importantly it had six compasses strapped to it. I’d leave one or two, that was only sensible, but four compasses meant two hours I had to do whatever I wanted instead of making more. Even if she didn’t want the sanctum I’d retrieve it for that. She had searched it out precisely, the mermaid tail had not reappeared, and I was standing up to my model island trying to decide how to lift it out of the sea.

“If you make a sort of bowl around it-” she cupped her hands as if to show me.

“No if I do that I’ll use enough heat that I’ll wreck it. The first step is always to get the rock gooey and that’s hard to judge underwater. It goes from rock to lava pretty quick.” Lydia flitted around as if my side of the model was more interesting and she couldn’t see everything on the island from anywhere.

“They’re completely different states. I don’t see how you’d have any problems telling them apart and knowing when to stop.” I wasn’t quite sure how Lydia saw the world. I was sure her senses were far more acute than mine, but she still had trouble internalizing mortal limits.

I looked down at her as she pouted, no doubt bemoaning the feebleness of the mind she sprang from. “If it’s that easy, you can do it.”

She looked up to me, then floated higher and looked down at me. “Are you not cooperating because I won’t tell you about my paper project?” Paranoia was new. “Do you think Maggie messed with it while we were gone? I’ve had a lot of ideas since I last worked on it but if she moved all of them I’m sure I’ll forget.”

“I’m reasonably confident you aren’t capable of forgetting anything without trying.” I used my best parenting voice to try to get her back on track. “And I’m not cooperating because I don’t think it will work.” Maybe I could just brute force the lift, I had a volcano to power me after all.

“Well if you hadn’t been expanding the greenhouses and planting more trees maybe we’d have more time to think of some way to fish it out.” Fishing it out, that might work actually, if I made some sort of wire and basket or grabber.

“How deep is it down there?”

Lydia didn’t pause at all before replying. “Two hundred thirteen fathoms, it gets steep pretty quickly.
past the barrier reef.”

Six feet to a fathom, a bit extra for inevitable screwups, I didn’t have time to make fifteen-hundred feet of wire. It would have been nice, just drop something to seize her bust with and drag it right up. Of course it had other advantages. My island was already an enormous navigation hazard with the whole razor sharp rocks wreathed in fog thing, adding a random spike outside the ring just seemed cruel. Oh well I could always knock it down later. Just as I started to pull energy from the magma for my newest addition to the charts I stopped.

“We’re being idiots, it’s underwater. I can just freeze the water around it, and it will float right up.”

It was easier said than done, but compared to the effort of shaping a molten pillar of rock a mile away it was incredibly easy. Conveniently it was bobbing around on the surface right when we were rowing out to the ship. From that close I was able to levitate it up to the deck as one of the two things I’d brought with me that were making it back to Braavos.

One boat ride was much like another, this one was noteworthy mostly because no one was talking to me. I’d hoped that some of the sailors would have gotten acclimated, but apparently seeing someone call down lighting and juggle molten rock isn’t something they got used to. Oh well, if I’d wanted to be normal I’d- actually I had no idea when in my life normality was an option. Whatever.

Instead of making new friends Lydia and I spent the voyage talking about the magic I could do without opposition. She was campaigning for setting up more genius loci. I was trying to persuade her that we should somehow induce leyline formations and then build a floating city with its own genius loci to tie all three big ideas together. She was initially enthusiastic, but we couldn’t agree on a name so I was forced to table the idea. It would have been nice if one of my daughters had inherited my taste in names but genetics or their mystical analogues were cruel.

I was still toying with large scale ideas as we arrived. It hadn’t really hit me until this trip that the entire world was unclaimed. There was nothing to stop me from using more and more power, none of the things on Earth that would have fought me existed here, and wouldn’t unless I made them. That was a heady feeling. With the soulfire Uriel had given me and Lydia’s knowledge I could be a demiurge, if not a full out god. It would take work, but I knew on a bone-deep level that I could do it.

I wouldn’t though. Absolute power and all that. I knew the temptations that came with it, and I was pretty sure that even if I was a good enough man now after three centuries I’d have a decent chance not to be. It was fun to dream about cities sailing gracefully through the clouds though.

The gondolier might have thought I was mad as I chatted with Lydia, a featureless bust at the time, the entire way back to our house but I really didn’t feel like carrying fifty pounds of rock through the streets of Braavos or leaving her unoccupied.

Clambering out of the boat, one nice thing about the shipwreck was that I didn’t have any luggage, I tipped the boatman extravagantly and basked in the comforting power of my wards. Every time I returned I enjoyed it, the threshold and the magic providing proof of what I already knew, this was my home, even more than Chicago had been.

Naturally it couldn’t last. “Maggie! Your favorite sister is home!” Lydia burst forth in her best Caspar imitation yet, surging up the stairs searching. I followed a little more sedately, setting her sanctum down on a shelf and hanging up my salt stained coat. The other side of the no luggage thing was rearing its head now, I’d lost my staff, Maggie’s lightning rod and a few other trinkets it would take a
while to replace. They could wait until after the family reunion though.

“So no greetings for your old father?” I climbed the stairs and turned towards the lab, she’d either be there or her bedroom, “Don’t you want to see what I got you?” My voice trailed off as I entered, she wasn’t alone. The first girl I didn’t recognize at first, but the second made her identity clear. “Obara, Nymeria. What brings you two here?”

The two Martells exchanged a look and Nymeria stood. “Our father sent us to request your help.” Lydia had already vanished somewhere and the three faces looking at me were serious.

I sat down on one of the benches heavily and Maggie moved to my side. “What’s happened?”

“The black dragon, Ancalagon. He’s gone.”

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“Of course he’s Ancalagon. It’s part of his name.” Maggie groaned and Nymeria smiled brightly.

“I know right? It even works with dragon too, he really had no choice but to leave.” Obara and Maggie exchanged a look that spoke of eons of suffering as Nymeria continued, her words tripping over themselves. “All jokes aside, he really did fly off somewhere.”

In retrospect having the dragons on an island surrounded by a few hundred miles of ocean had several advantages. Those advantages were easily outweighed though, by the fact that I had to be there with them and that they were turning into voracious flying murder machines who hated me. Moving them to the mainland and out of my hands was a choice I didn’t regret.

They’d been dog sized when I saw them last a month or two ago, and they were probably Mouse sized by now. I didn’t really know the average roaming range of a dragon but with a four or five yard wingspan they could probably cover some significant distance. “Did you put an anchor block on their invisibility chokes?” I was still a little disappointed in the lack of response to that name, I’d thought it was a funny reference until my daughters decided they was above the lowest form of humor.

Obara took over for her far more funny and excited sister. “The dragons don’t like the collars, they tried to scrape them off whenever they could. We found Ancalagon’s at the base of a cliff, ripped open.”

That was somewhat understandable, the dragons hadn’t liked me and considering they were creatures of magic that their hatred extended to my magic was pretty reasonable. The lost collar wasn’t entirely bad news, if it had stayed on there’d be a dragon that was invisible from a hundred yards flying around and doing, burning, whatever it wanted too. It was still a catastrophe but anything that lowered the odds of invisible monsters eating my face was a silver lining.

With my mandatory attempt at optimism out of the way, I settled down to try to deal with the problem. “When was the last time you saw him?” Nymeria was about to answer but I cut her off. “Actually, let’s discuss this over food, I haven’t eaten since I was on the ship.”

My executive decision led us to leaving the house. For all that I was excited to be home, Maggie’s culinary skills could be kindly described as ‘lacking.’ If all the food in the kitchen available was hers,
we’d do better not to eat it. I noticed two men peeling off from the canal’s edge and following us, Obara gave them a wave and they caught up. “My father’s men, Cletus and Ryon.” I gave them a vague nod which they reciprocated, then they went back to carefully watching the crowds. For all the freedom Oberyn gave his daughters I was sure that their bodyguards were assigned to keep them safe above all.

Our little procession made its way to the restaurant, my bronze medallion got all of us inside and I left the guards at an awfully romantic table for two as we moved to a more secluded corner. After the waiter took our orders, they’d recently added steak sandwiches, I looked to the Martell girls. “So how long has our scaly friend been missing?”

“A bit over a week, nine days. We waited three days for him to return on his own but after that my father sent out search parties and sent us here.” Obara was somber as she spoke, she must have realized that without a monopoly on dragons the Targaryen restoration, and Dornish ascendance, would be much harder. “He was always the most willful. Rhaellion and Jelmazma stayed much closer and returned earlier.”

The children had seemed to each bond with a single dragon, primarily Viserys dealing with Ancalagon but he had focused far more on Rhaegal. Daenerys had fed the three of them the same, but until her blue grew larger than she was, she carried her around like a cat. The black dragon did lack his siblings’ link, it was strange that he’d just leave though.

If they had something of the dragon’s, a scale, bits of a tooth or claw, I could track him. I’d always lied about that ability though. Keeping dragons in one family seemed like a decent reason to abandon my limitations, but I did like keeping some of the most dangerous abilities I had secret. The world didn’t need one more reminder that I was almost infinitely more flexible than shadowbinders like Quaithe- Wait Quaithe.

“Has Quaithe had any luck in finding him?” She had claimed that she was needed to keep the dragons hidden from other sorcerers and mystics, presumably that meant they were visible, especially if Ancalagon left her protection. Of course finding him was only the first step, bringing a reluctant dragon back to the mountains would be challenging. They were strong, fast, and in addition to their vicious claws, they could breathe fire. They weren’t exactly the job description for the dog catcher.

“She says she’s spending all her efforts keeping them hidden, I, and my father, believe her.”

“She looks terrible all the time now.” Nymeria helpfully chimed in. “She’s sweating and duller and lost a lot of weight.”

Well as ignorant as I was of the magic here, none of that sounded good. Scrambling for a bright side, even if she couldn’t find Ancalagon at least no one else could. Well other than by stumbling across a giant black death lizard, they weren’t exactly inconspicuous. With Quaithe effectively out of the picture I’d need to help. More broadly, I had let the dragons back into the world, I bore some responsibility for anything they did. I didn’t really like it, but if Ancalagon had really gone off the reservation I had a duty.

“I think I’ll have to come for a visit.”

Obara sensed something of the threat in my voice, but Nymeria merely looked excited. “Great! Father had hoped you’d come, or at least help. He’ll be ever so pleased.”

I turned to my daughter who had been picking at her salad the entire time. “Want to go see a castle
full of dragons?”

“We’ve already done that, and ours had giant black spikes.” I’d thought she’d be a little more enthusiastic about traveling but I was torn between admiration and annoyance. On one hand it was pretty awesome that my daughter had seen enough that the prospect of dragons looming over battlements was blasé. On the other, no one should ever think dragons staring down from castle walls was anything other than incredible.

“We’ll be riding horses?” That got through to her a bit more, she did enjoy riding and all too rarely got the chance.

She gave a long suffering sigh and nodded. “Alright, let’s go find some pets.” The irrepressible Nymeria squealed at a pitch high enough to rupture the eardrums of lesser men, and hugged Maggie who endured it.

With familial buy in achieved I looked back to Obara who was studying some vegetable she had pierced with her fork. “Do you think you’ll be able to find Ancalagon?” she said, not taking her eyes off the suspicious plant.

“Finding him will be the easy part, as I suspect you realize.” She nodded.

“You know I’ve thought about what you said, back in Dorne about glory.”

“I remember.” Vague comments about the cost of a legend that I hadn’t thought would sink in.

“I saw some combat against the Greyjoys and it was like you said, surviving a battle with the screams of the dying ringing in your ears isn’t as grand as the songs make it sound.” She finally decided to eat whatever it was and I cast around for something to say and fill the pause. “But even knowing that, there isn’t much else for me. I don’t have the looks or inclinations of my sisters, and despite my father’s influence I’m still a bastard, even in Dorne.” I was tempted to say something inspirational but I checked the impulse. Westeros was a harsh place and she clearly recognized it. “Seeing the dragons though, all my dreams about stepping into history, they came back. The Targaryens married into the Martells, I have a few drops of dragon in me. I just thought the entire time traveling, what if one of them bonds with me? I’d have a place then, no one could deny it or call my sisters and me just eccentricities of Prince Oberyn.” She picked up her knife and cut a part of her meal off savagely. “They didn’t of course. Now Ancalagon is fled and you’re going to hunt him down and probably kill him. Just another pretty story that won’t come true.”

Obara and Nymeria were frustrated when we didn’t set out at the break of dawn the next morning, but there were things to do. I’d wandered down to the palace where the Sealord had sat quietly and listened to my report, accepting that the pirate was dead and the horn broken. Considering there were several other witnesses to the deed there were no grounds to doubt my story and he thanked me for what I’d done. I didn’t let him know about the dragon problem. There was nothing he could do about it as it was, and if the wild dragon was coming this way I’d meet it on the road.

The prospect of a road trip was the other thing holding me back from leaving immediately. I’d just returned from getting marooned and a few nights in my own bed seemed entirely justified. I’d forgotten how much I missed mattresses, and blankets, and sheets that the boat’s rocking didn’t cause
to end up at the bottom of the bed through some sort of mysterious brownian motion. It wasn’t only
just lazing around, there was a lot of that I’ll admit, kraken hunting had depleted a lot of my standard
equipment.

My staff was the main casualty. Six feet of carefully carved and attuned weirwood was lost
somewhere in the vicinity of the Thousand Islands. That was of course assuming it wasn’t buried in
the wreckage of our first ship. Tossing it as I leapt to smite the kraken had felt, and probably looked,
badass, but I had assumed that it would float and I could retrieve it later. Events had regrettably
transpired. So now instead of a precision focus I had the first one that I’d hastily made when I’d first
arrived. It was a perfectly serviceable oak steel-shod shaft but it wasn’t quite the same.

Maggie had mourned her lightning rod, especially when she learned it worked so well, but honestly
it was a little too powerful for most things. The kraken had taken a tree trunk sized bolt of electricity
like a champ, most other things would be a greasy smear.

Ancalagon was not most other things. Of the dragonlore I’d read there’d been a lot of explanations
for the steady decrease in the size of the Targaryen’s beasts. One explanation that had a lot of
scholarly support was that they grew best and fastest when they were free to roam, trapping them in
the dragonpit had supposedly stunted their development. If that were true Ancalagon would now be
going through something of a growth spurt. Obara had described him as the size of a pony when
they saw him last, a flying clydesdale sized lizard wasn’t out of the realm of possibilities. He might
never measure up to his mountain crushing namesake, but I’d seen enough predators to know that
pony sized was plenty large enough to do some damage, even ignoring the whole fire breathing
dragon part.

Preparing for the theoretical dragon hunt was a little different than for the kraken. First, I was
annoyed I was becoming the Turok of Essos as opposed to resigned to do my self-appointed duty.
Second, I had to carry whatever I was bringing, or at least strive to make it portable and non-
perishable. Potions were right out, they’d barely last the week till we arrived at the castle. It was also
an entirely new challenge, I hadn’t really ever fought armored flying things and no one had ever had
much success on taking dragons on the wing. Ambushing it on the ground seemed like the way to
go.

I also couldn’t talk about it where Obara or Nymeria could hear, so Maggie couldn’t even help
brainstorm. Obara might have grasped some of my intentions but her view of the dragon’s use was
decidedly more utilitarian than mine. If it helped her family for it to be alive she would do her best to
keep it that way. I didn’t want to even risk the possibility of sabotage for anything I took. I didn’t
really think she’d do anything but avoiding giving her the opportunity seemed wise. It didn’t really
matter anyways, all I had past a few bits of cloth I’d rendered almost entirely fireproof, was a few
sketches and the word ‘dragonlance’ underlined a few times. Oh well, winging it was a tried and true
Dresden method.

After a few days of arts and crafts, as well as purchasing almost the entire available stock of
parchment for Lydia’s mysterious project, I was ready to go. Obara had been dispatched to get
mounts for us and announced I was riding a tall brown gelding. I had the feeling she’d overpaid for a
horse I wouldn’t be fighting on, but I did need one big enough to fit my oversized frame. Maggie
was newly in love with hers, a dappled grey that seemed to have just run off the cover of a young
adult novel. Both of our horses were loaded with various paraphernalia, food, clothes and things less
ordinary. I had a leather case, a golf bag really, that my staff, a new blank, a sword and rather ornate
spear were all jostling around in. It was somewhat ridiculous, I kept picturing a squire fetching his
knight master the number two beast slaying sword, but I did have a lot of stuff.
I’d learned to ride a long time ago on Ebenezer’s farm and whatever muscle memory had forgotten the Mantle was subtly teaching. Unfortunately all that meant was that I looked extremely competent until I dismounted and staggered around with an aching lower body. Riding took getting used to and spending all day in the saddle for the first time in nearly a year wasn’t the way to do it. The worst part was that everyone else, Maggie, Oberyn’s girls and the guards, were so much better off. I didn’t particularly mind, but misery does love company and mine was entirely unfairly alone.

The road we took left the swamps and started to climb, going parallel to the ocean as the foothills turned to mountains over the days. The nights I spent working on my new staff, recreating the silvered runes and the newest enchantments I’d made for strength and resilience. I’d had some ideas on adding the kinetic ring spells to it, as well as taking some inspiration from Maggie and Lydia’s rod and incorporating some sort of energy storage into it. I did like the idea of having a steady pool of power that I wouldn’t have to channel myself for emergencies. Even better I could use the energy for myself, I’d once owned a belt buckle that allowed the user to instantly recover their stamina at the cost of a far longer recovery period. Adding that to my staff seemed like a logical step.

“So are we there yet?” Maggie had never really had the joyful experience of an American road trip so I had to work to make sure she was in touch with her cultural roots. We’d never be able to play the alphabet game, or its close cousin the license plate game, but endless and boring rounds of I spy were entirely possible. She’d even gotten enough in the spirit to ask the age old question. Of course I had no real idea as to the answer so the tradition didn’t completely hold. All I knew was that we were in a long and narrow valley on the decently maintained remnants of an old military road. Luckily one of the guards, the ever laconic Cletus, gestured expressively and spat before replying. “When you start seeing random scrapes and scorch marks you’ll know we’re close.” Maggie and I exchanged a glance but Nymeria and Obara were unconcerned, quietly discussing something as they rode behind us.

“So their collars, the ones that make them hazy, how well do they work?” I didn’t look to the guards when I spoke, I was having the archetypical bad feeling, and my eyes were fixed on the eastern sky between the surrounding mountains.

Cletus had used his quota of words for the day so his compatriate took over. “Terrifyingly well. One second there’s a clear sky and then they just drop out of it, flames spilling from their mouths and you can’t tell where the hot air stops and the magic begins.”

Professional pride was warring with paranoia and I leaned back to pull my new and barely tested staff free from my golf bag. Invisible monsters coming to eat my face were a very real possibility and my old instincts were twinging. The dragons should be wearing the collars I’d made and my magic should be something I could feel easily within a certain range. Unfortunately the magic was attached to fast moving flyers and they might cross my useful radius faster than I would notice it. Nothing for it then. I kicked my horse a little ahead of Maggie, she always blazed with magic to my senses, stretched out my left hand and felt.

I always felt something like a fraud when I tried things like this. My natural talents and inclinations made me a bit of a thug when it came to magic and delicately reaching out like some sort of thaumaturgical radar seemed a bare step above dowsing like a charlatan. I always had the option of opening up my Sight, but I was pretty sure now I was actively trying I’d feel anything with time to spare.

For a moment or two there was nothing, the almost empty world still a shock after all these years, until there was a sudden warmth on my hand. The sensation changed rapidly, heating from a weak
winter sun, to the heat leaking through a coffee mug, to the coffee mug exploding and coffee getting everywhere while bursting into flames.

“Defendarius!” My roar made the ground move, or at least it panicked my horse enough for it to rear as my shield flared into existence ahead of us. It took a glancing hit, frost and silver sparks scattered as one of the dragons screamed.

The sound wasn’t just a cry, there was magic in it, trying to worm into my mind and fill me with terror. I snarled as the Mantle rose within me, its welcome chill wrapping my mind in armored ice and blocking further attacks.

The horse was still now, my knees had forced it back into submission. The dragon, golden and shining in the sun, paced behind my shield, fangs visible as its internal furnace burned. Maggie was pulling power in besides me, her lightning snapping as blue-white flames gathered at the head of my staff.

We made quite a tableau in the frozen, hah, moment, both sides ready to unleash a rather impressive array of elemental forces. He blinked first, Rhaellion leapt back, his immense wings throwing rocks against my shield even as he spun and arrowed east, vanishing quickly into the sky. I waited till I was sure he was gone before I dropped my shield and Maggie dismissed her bolts. The dragons had been fast before but now they raced through the air. Their sheer speed made me wonder how the entire world hadn’t fallen beneath the dragonlords’ heels. His first charge, even ignoring the invisibility, would have bowled the lot of us over and I had no illusions they were ungainly on the ground. If that was a juvenile was like I hardly wanted to imagine what they’d be like fully mature.

I turned to Maggie and couldn’t help but see the rest of our group watching us with wide, terrified eyes. None of them had seen either of us truly act and the hints we’d shown around the campfires didn’t really compare to feeling the heat of our fires or smelling the ozone from Maggie’s power. I recognized the signs of a coalescing angry mob, albeit a small one. “So. I had thought they were housebroken.” Poorly timed levity was the best way to avert shock.
It was three long nervous hours before we reached the fortress. I kept my staff in my hand the entire time, I wanted to be ready for a second surprise. Maggie stayed close to me on my left, nicely out of the way but close enough I could still shield her. The Dornish stayed behind us. They’d relaxed a little since our displays, but the easy camaraderie Maggie had with Nymeria was likely gone.

My first impression of the fortress they’d stashed the Targaryens at was how small it was. Highgarden, Oldtown, the Titan, all the castles of this world I’d seen were monstrosities. This was a squat edifice atop a hill, solid stone walls surrounding a barracks, some smaller buildings, and ovens. Riding through the gate I kept my power ready. We were entering a dragons’ lair after all. At the first sign of trouble my shield would be up nearly instantly, and retaliation would swiftly follow along with whatever Maggie would dish out. I didn’t see either of the two beasts, nor feel their presence so I relaxed a little before Oberyn and Viserys came to greet us.

They looked alright. Viserys had cut his dyed hair away and had returned to his native silver while Oberyn looked as healthy as I’d ever seen him. Apparently going on a dragon driven detox was the way to prevent his lute hero lifestyle from catching up to him. Neither looked happy of course, losing a third of their planned war winning force would do that, but they also weren’t scarred and barbecue. Things could be worse.

I dismounted heavily and the setting sun made me cast a long shadow as it hung low in the sky. The two of them were squinting as they looked at me, between the horses and my duster we were just a whippoorwill away from a shootout. Luckily Maggie has always had a complete aversion to dramatic timing.

“Hello Oberyn, Viserys. You know if you missed us this badly you didn’t need to let a dragon go for us to visit.” She had stayed astride her horse as she spoke, she liked being taller than people since she never was at home. “You do get points for letting Rhaellion greet us, he was quite happy to see us.”

Oberyn wasn’t phased, he had no way to know that the meeting had been anything less than amicable. Viserys though, his eyes widened a little and Maggie saw it. “I’ve got to say that he was almost too affectionate. Generally biting and scratching pets get sent to obedience school.”

“He did attack something,” Viserys’s voice was low, he wasn’t speaking for the audience he had. “But it was something cold, I got that distinct impression.” He looked between Maggie and I, visibly puzzled. “He knows better than to attack people, it’s hard to convey complex orders but we did make sure of that one.”

“You’ve learned to control them?” Explaining that a beast practically made of fire wasn’t a huge fan of my knighthood didn’t seem especially productive. It was nice to have some confirmation of the reason, I had been enormously worried that my smell or sense of style outraged them, but no one else needed to know the details. Honestly I was far more interested in how they’d learned to control them, or at least two of them.

Viserys nodded, still absent. “We keep them well fed and they obey. It’s more than that though, I can get a sense of what Rhaegon is doing and when I dream—” he cut himself off. “I can tell you more at leisure. You’ve come far to help us, please come inside, get out of the sun.” He waved to one of the
loitering guards, a Dornishman by his swarthy look, who came forward to take our horses. We followed him in as Oberyn greeted his daughters behind us.

It was a relief to get out of the sun, my duster was impressively enchanted but it didn’t do a whole lot against the heat and dust of the road. The stone building we entered was blissfully cool and the walls blocked the glare of the sunset. He led us to smaller room, a larder apparently, and offered us a plate of bread. Maggie took one before I could stop her. While I had no intent to do anything hostile, if we ever made it back to Earth she’d need to be far more cautious what she took from people. Courtesy and guest right wasn’t quite as big a deal here as in faerie, but treating it with some respect was only sensible. “Worried we’re going to go crazy and kill all of you?”

He colored a bit, despite his titles and duties in life he was still a young teenager playing at being a king. “Oberyn has been making sure we follow the customs of Westeros as host, giving out bread and salt.” I grabbed a piece and suppressed a grimace, despite the ovens outside it felt stale.

“Well then, we graciously accept your hospitality.” With a strained smile I bit the bullet and for a moment I wished it were actually lead. I did my best to keep my teeth in good shape but the only torturers Essos lacked were dentists. I had no desire to spend two thirds of my life toothless like eating rocks like this on a regular basis would make me.

“So you’ve lost a dragon.” The boy had been happy to see us but at the reminder of why we were here his face sank. “It’s been gone what, two weeks?”

“Closer to three. The three of them often roamed and Ancalagon was the wildest. He’d stayed out all night before, but after two days we were confident he was gone. After four we were sure.”

“You just let them roam?” There was a little confusion in Maggie’s voice. She hadn’t studied up on dragons and their peculiarities.

“We did want them to grow as quickly as possible.”

“And that matters?” She glanced between us, hoping one of us would make sense.

“Dragons are best when they’re organic free-range.” She raised an eyebrow but I ignored it. “Nymeria said Quaithe was in rough shape?”

“She’s plateaued I think, but no one would call her healthy. I can take you to her now?”

“Let’s.”

Maggie was looking around the building as we climbed the steep stairs to the second floor. “Where do the dragons stay when they’re not out burning things?”

“Mostly in the courtyard, Daenerys kept Jelmazma in her room until she grew too large to navigate doors.” There was exasperation in his voice as he spoke, given his sister hadn’t outgrown treating her dragon as a cat I couldn’t really blame him. At least when I got a sibling he was moderately housebroken.

Viserys pushed open the second door and wave of heat came flooding out. There was a fire in the hearth as well as a brazier filled with coals close to the bed. Quaithe was under a mound of covers with only her head exposed, and that barely. She turned to face us and the effort of moving her head seemed to take a lot out of her. “The Dresdens, always a pleasure.” I crossed the room with two
steps, from closer she looked even worse.

“This is all from blocking scrying?” Keeping the dragons secret was important but they were set up in the desolate mountains with practical invisibility just to avoid attention. Two of the dragons were following commands and they were already big enough that a small army would be needed to capture them, even ignoring the fortress. “Do you think that killing yourself just to hide them is worth it?”

“Yes. The dragons are needed for the long night.” She regained a little vigor as she spoke, her prophecies always drove her. “Three heads are needed. You must retrieve Ancalagon!”

I’d never really liked prophecies and Quaithe looking two thirds dead didn’t really help sell this one. An amorphous future threat really wasn’t as motivating as making sure that a dragon I had spared didn’t decide that Pentos or Volantis would look better on fire. Telling her that would probably stop her from cooperating though. “Are you able to get a sense of where he went?”

Her energy had waned as quickly as it arrived, she was barely able to keep her eyes open. “South, I can feel the draw on my power.” I wanted to ask more questions about what she was doing, there was a sensation of magic flowing from the fires to her but now was not the time.

“Ancalagon will be found.” She twitched her head in a way I interpreted as acknowledgement, rather than the more medically sound ‘get out of here before I die of exhaustion.’ Either way I left her in her sauna. Viserys led us back to the ground floor where the Martells joined us.

“How is the shadowbinder?” Oberyn was half sprawled on a chair that Nymeria was primly seated on. Obara paced behind them, her face blank.

“Alive and working. Suffering for it though.” Viserys answered his, brother in law? Did that even work if it was his brother’s wife’s brother? If Lara were married what would I call the man, other than briefly happy? Irrelevant, though slightly intriguing.

“I don’t see why we even need her with Dresden here.” The conversation had the feeling of an oft-repeated argument. I did appreciate his regard for my skills but Quaithe deserved better especially with what she was going through for them.

“I’m only here because you lost a dragon. Despite appearances, I have other things I like to do besides saving Targaryens.” My frosty tone seemed to get through to him as he straightened.

“We are of course grateful.” We both looked to Viserys as he spoke, defusing the sudden tension. “Quaithe revealed she thought Ancalagon went south, do you have any ideas on how to track him further?”

“A few, take me to where he slept here and we can get started.” Finding him was one thing, bringing him back another. There were darker possibilities I usually ignored, there were many reasons you shouldn’t let your enemies get you hair or nails, but I wasn’t sure a link that would find him would be strong enough to dominate him. We’d burn that bridge we got to it.

I caught my first sight of a dragon at rest when we walked to Ancalagon’s abandoned nest.
Jelmazma was on the wall sunning while Daenerys leaned against her neck. She looked down at us when we approached, her gleaming eyes focusing on me to the exclusion of all else, but she did nothing, laying her head back down where she could see me at all times. Compared to her brother’s reaction she was the perfect host. I still kept my shield bracelet loose and low as I poked through the nest, looking for something I could use. Just because she was calm didn’t mean she wasn’t about to jump off the wall and try for a Dresden flambé.

Oberyn watched from a distance as I shuffled through the mess. He hadn’t had any bad experiences with the dragons, he’d been surprised to learn we had, but staying back was smart and Oberyn usually was. Finding black scales in the ash and rock was difficult but after a few minutes I had several, along with broken teeth. They had a slight feel of warmth to them, remnants of Ancalagon’s flames and I was pretty sure I’d be able to track him with them.

Normally I’d be worried about the distance, he could have traveled thousands of miles in the weeks, but the dragons were full of magic. Metaphysically they were bright enough to be seen from immense distances, tracking him with bits of his own body would be simple. I still needed an excuse for my “new” ability, unless I just didn’t answer any questions. Being inscrutable was a wizarding privilege, and part of bringing magic to this world was setting up the customs.

Collecting all the ex-dragon bits in a pouch I dusted my hands off. Dragons didn’t really stink like bats or birds, bacteria probably burned right off them, but the ash had a weird smell and consistency. It wasn’t quite oily but it was definitely a bit more clingy that it should have been with a distinct odor. In retrospect I could have tried to do something fancy, a telekinetic sieve would probably be at the very edge of my ability, but poking through a crime scene was something I hadn’t done in years. There was also the risk my magic would disrupt Ancalagon’s trace, the old ways were sometimes best.

Daenerys had come down from the wall while I’d be searching, she was standing next to Oberyn chatting as Jelmazma continued to glower down at me. “Ser Harry!” The little girl almost ran to me but something checked her and she stayed close to Oberyn. She’d never been afraid of me before, maybe the dragon’s views were leaking to her? “Oberyn says you’re going to fetch Ancalagon for us?”

“I’m going to give a shot.” Finding him, or at least tracking him as far as I cared to follow, would be pretty straightforward. Bringing him back, I’d seen men break horses for riding before, I doubted the same principles would work with dragons. Luring him back would take herds of cattle or something, bribery was out. Similarly taking one of the Targaryens didn’t seem promising, he’d already flown off once. Bringing Rhaellion or Jelmazma into the mix didn’t seem like it would help. Hopefully something would occur to me on the way or I’d have one less thing to be jealous of Michael for.

“When will you start?” Oberyn had grabbed Daenerys’s hand and didn’t complain as she leaned away and swung in his grip.

“Are your daughters coming with us again?” Daenerys’s good mood hadn’t transferred to the Prince, his face sober as she continued swinging. “I don’t know how useful they’d be. I trust Maggie to hold her own against almost everything but if Ancalagon is hostile...”

I really did feel confident in Maggie’s power, assuming Ancalagon hadn’t gotten too much bigger. Her shields were especially good against force and fire, that came from me testing them, and her lightning would do the job. I wasn’t as sure about Obara and Nymeria though. If it came to a fight against the dragon, Maggie and I would win, and win big. That didn’t mean our surroundings would be fine, in fact the ground immediately surrounding us was likely to get hit pretty hard. Keeping them
alive would add some difficulties that I wasn’t fond of.

Oberyn wouldn’t see it that way though. His children were his trusted agents in this, he knew any guards he sent wouldn’t be a problem. I could bribe them or defeat them if they objected to anything I did. He could count on his family to be loyal and my affection for them to keep them safe. It irked me a little that a friend of mine was playing politics with me, but it was something everyone here did. It had to be accepted the same way I did my Godmother’s games, an inextricable part of their character. It was annoying though.

“They’re smart girls, they’ll be fine. You’ll going south as Quaithe suggested then?” At my nod he took a few quick steps and twirled the still clinging Daenerys into the air for a spin. He’d lowered her back down and she stumbled away, dizzy and giggling. “My daughters have never truly traveled the Rhoyne. Nymeria was born at its mouth, but she’s never sailed her.”

“I’ll do my best to keep them safe, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

“Life is a risk, you certainly can’t get out alive.” He looked at me then, his face more serious. “Or can you? You mentioned something about resurrections when we first met.”

“I’ve met my ghost actually, incredibly good looking fellow.” My joke didn’t really break the tension, coming back from the dead wasn’t quite as funny here. Well it wasn’t funny anywhere really, but usually my humor and charisma- I thought it was funny.

“Ignoring that, they might be safer with you.” My sceptical look caused him to start listing reasons. “There are two dragons here, of late I find them a bit terrifying. Where you’re going there might be none. As for more mundane dangers, they’ll have you, a few guards and money, I doubt there’s a more secure way to travel.”

“Half the people back home would have died laughing if they heard you say that to me.”

Oberyn smirked and I knew at once I’d made a mistake. “Your mysterious home. I’ve been meaning to ask, what would your Lady Mab think about you carrying two staffs these days? Would she assume you were, shall we say, less confident in some ways?” My flat stare left him unfazed. “I assume you envy your ghost’s looks, but if you’re craving validation-”

“Nope. Not even a little bit.” The entire Chicago police force and a chunk of the Wardens might have doubts, but I knew where I stood.

He laughed at my expression. “A pity. I don’t especially mind these mountains, beautiful if bleak country, but there is more to life than rocks.”

“Too true. Regarding our search, ‘South’ isn’t much to go on but the rivers do flow that way.”

“You have some way to narrow it down though, you’ve described how you can find things.” His tone was light but he had emphasized the word things.

I turned to look back at Jelmazma, away from Oberyn, he was more perceptive than I’d like. “I can pierce what Quaithe’s doing in this case. Dragons are different.”

“You’re different you mean. Assuming you find Ancalagon, what do you intend do with him?” This was the conversation I’d been anticipating and dreading the whole trip. He wouldn’t be put off with evasions like his daughters and a flat out lie would have repercussions. He spoke again before I
answered. “I saw the spear in your bag. I may not have your magic but I can tell it isn’t a riding crop.”

“I let the dragons into the world. I didn’t hatch them and I don’t control them but I am somewhat responsible for their actions, especially when there’s no rider.” I started to walk back to the central building and he fell in next to me. “I just got back from killing a sea monster, I won’t treat a dragon differently.”

“A sea monster?” For a second he was distracted but he quickly returned to the subject. “Ancalagon represents incredible power, we need to have him.”

“I don’t see two dragons being less than three, especially when he’s wild. Besides,” I stopped walking and twisting to face him, “I have a duty. Don’t doubt that I’m friends with you and the Targaryens, but if you had a rabid dog I would kill it. A rampaging dragon is hardly different.”

“He may yet be tamed, we might find a rider.” It was a last ditch effort and Oberyn knew it.

“Who? You and your daughters couldn’t ride it, do you think your nieces and nephews would have better luck? We don’t know why Viserys succeeded where everyone else failed for the last two hundred years, finding a rider by chance might be no easier.” I started walking again, the gravel crunching beneath my boots.

“There’s plenty of Valyrian blood around, the Velaryons, half of Volantis and Lys. Someone will be able to!” Oberyn apparently didn’t agree it was a last ditch effort, he was growing more and more passionate about the dragon’s life.

My voice rose in response, I wanted to make sure he knew my position. “And they’ll be loyal to your cause? Look Oberyn, I helped Viserys at first because I thought he’d kill himself trying if I didn’t. I sheltered the children because no one deserves to be killed for what their families have done. I let the other two dragons live because your Seven Kingdoms will fall back into war without dragons and Viserys was going to invade anyways.”

We’d reached the door now and I stopped, there was no point to bring the argument inside. “I thought that one side having dragons would reduce the casualties. If there are dragons on both sides of the war? I won’t let that happen, I’ll see them all dead before armies start getting torched.”

I opened the door and over my shoulder glanced back at him. “We’ll leave at dawn tomorrow. I’ll do what I can, but if Ancalagon won’t submit he’ll be put down.”

96.

We were mounted and riding half an hour after dawn. It wasn’t quite as early as it should have been at the fortress, the mountains surrounding us blocked the sunrise until a bit later which was a nice change. Despite the delay I couldn’t bring myself to regret leaving a place with warm and comfortable beds again. Our visit had been surprisingly congenial but I knew Oberyn wasn’t happy with my plans, even if he hadn’t told Viserys.

They had seen us off, Daenerys sitting astride Jelmazma atop the wall which gave me a chill to see, and Viserys harboring a painfully visible crush on Nymeria. The girl was on her way to being beautiful and I was torn between amusement and sadness, Viserys had made his choices and they
didn’t include true love.

Obara and Maggie had definitely noticed as well, and as we rode they clustered in a knot around her gossiping. In a nice development the girls, well young women, had lost their wariness of us. Having them be terrified all trip could be awkward so I was grateful for the change, but our two guards weren’t as trusting. I caught Cletus giving me appraising looks as we rode and I had to resist the urge to mess with him.

Instead I was messing with history as we rode south. Months ago on the island I’d had the idea to start leaving inscrutable carvings and signs everywhere I went. The rocky terrain we traveled through was perfect, whenever we paused for a meal or biology I left a mark. Maggie had gotten into it too, although hers weren’t quite as intentionally obtuse. She’d taken to shaping stones into ruined sculptures, weathered, missing limbs or noses but perfect in all other respects. She’d really gotten good at them, it was harder here than on the island with its volcanic stone but her strength was enough to force the rock to do whatever she wanted. Nymeria and Obara debated how long it would take people to find her works, they were intentionally twenty or thirty yards from the road and not visible to casual visitors. I liked the idea of weary travelers making camp at night in some dark clearing, only to wake with a statue looking down at them with the dawn.

My efforts were a little less subtle, larger, and clearly visible, sometimes from miles away. I’d carved long runic sentences into the faces of cliffs, sending telekinetic blades to punch deep into the slate. The dust was pretty visible but after a storm or two the only thing left would be gouges in curiously regular patterns. I’d leave a rosetta stone somewhere sometime, maybe fifty years from now just to get things started, but for now I liked the mystery. It was fun, shaping our island had been entertaining but essentially private. This was adding something to the larger world that wasn’t surrounded by razor sharp rocks and fog. If I had time and the inclination later I’d start doing more intensive things, a homage to the Argonath seemed like a reasonable goal, but for now I’d stick to easier things.

Our groups’ favorite so far had been when I shaped a cave’s entrance into an immense mouth, stalagmites and stalactites forming a toothy grin. Anyone who sheltered there in the future would need nerves of steel, or willful blindness. Maggie had followed it by making strange tracks of some clawed beast into and out of it, driving paleontologists mad was a family tradition after-all.

We were making good progress south though, despite taking breaks to treat the mountains like a beach for our sandcastles. We’d been descending for a few days, the river that sourced Braavos’s lagoon was the center of a large valley in the mountains. We’d cross it then climb again before we reached the headwaters of the Rhoyne.

I’d used Ancalagon’s teeth several times as we traveled to make sure we were going the right way, he remained to the south and from the strength of the pull seemed to be stationary. We had no way to catch him if he ran, his flight was far faster than anything we could match, but if he was staying put we’d catch up. The possibility of him flying back to the Braavosi mountains as soon as we got close, or anywhere really, was very real and I didn’t have a plan besides imitating Ahab in his hunt.

Our intention was to buy or charter a boat and head down the Rhoyne until we reached the dragon’s latitude. We were carrying enough money to outright purchase a fairly nice one, and if we needed more I could throw a compass together and practically commission one. That struck me as wasteful though, hopefully we’d be able to find a ride without any drama.

It was almost fun traveling on horseback though. I’d finally gotten back into decent riding shape and was no longer sore after a day’s ride. There was more civilization as we left the mountains, we were
able to sleep at inns several times before we started back up to the mountains. The food hadn’t been bad, nor the beds. As I got older things that I used to shake off, like sleeping on a rocky ground with a thin bedroll, lasted longer. I hated to imagine what it would be like without my slowed aging or the Mantle.

Despite my griping reaching the town that straddled the last navigable part of the Rhoyne was a disappointment. The ride had half reminded me of different times, playing Arcanos with the Alphas and questing across an imaginary world. The docked boats marked the end of that, I’d been able to partially ignore our goal while riding but now we’d be rapidly approaching Ancalagon.

Of course rapidly was a relative term. The Rhoyne was slow this time of year and we’d only be moving a few miles an hour. Normally on a boat that would be balanced by traveling all night, but on the river we’d need to dramatically slow or even stop, at least in the narrower upper portions. I was half thinking about staying on horseback and just following the roads along the side of the river but our guards had quashed it. The river was safer, bandits would need to cross the water and ships tended to moor in groups.

With our needs in mind we rode into town in a line abreast. My coat was flapping and despite my aversion to hats I felt I needed one. Our day had started fairly late so it was just before lunch when we crossed the walls. The streets were bustling, overland trade was less efficient by far but this was a terminus where Braavosi goods were transhipped. Essos had a long mountain range parallel to the coast and a few hundred miles in. From the mountains to the coast was scrubland of various types and caravans crossing it were dangerous and difficult. Crossing the mountains surrounding Braavos was easier than sailing all the way down the coast to Volantis and then back up. Qohor, Norvos, all the towns on the banks, the river was the highway of western Essos.

The waterfront would have impressive if we hadn’t come from Braavos, it was a long stretch of docks and wharves with goods being swayed and carried onto the boats. Following our guards’ lead we walked our horses down the line, looking for a boat that seemed well kept. None of us were mariners, so we mostly looked for fresh paint and cleanliness. I was starting to think about inquiring what boat shipped the most expensive goods, hopefully that would indicate quality, when a boat caught my eye and held it.

Wizards as they grew older got hunches on occasion, things and places that would be important later. The boat didn’t seem extraordinary, the only notable thing about it was how dilapidated it looked. I wanted to investigate further, having any information about the future could only be useful, but it was casting off, a blue haired man pushing the boat from its quay. His eyes swept over us for a moment then stopped, focusing not on me but on our guards. Cletus and Ryon had faded suns on their tunics and the blue man was locked onto them, at least until the pole he was maneuvering the boat with struck something and he shifted back to navigating. I watched him go, he didn’t look back as long as he was visible.

Giving up the mystery for a future problem I turned back to chartering a ship. Spending copious amounts of money eventually got the six of us three cabins on a gleaming ship, it apparently specialized in novelties, jewelry, art, I could feel at least one of my compasses, and spices. We’d be displacing some of the crew from their normal room but they were being paid enough not to complain. The boat, the Confused Tortoise, was heading to Volantis and they’d agreed to let us off whenever we wanted along the way and wait for up to a week before continuing.

“So on a scale from one to ten how much of your choice was driven by the name?” It was our last night on land for potentially weeks and Maggie and I were using the chance to throw around a little power.
“Maybe a third?” She looked startled, which she should, since my voice was emanating from thirty feet above us. Illusions were extremely powerful here and might stop most fights before they began. Throwing my voice or any other sound was the logical next step and it set me up for all sorts of Obi-wan on the Death Star tricks.

“I was talking to Lydia about it, she was thinking at least half.” My other daughter was no doubt hugely enjoying herself working on whatever her still mysterious project was. We’d been writing her regular messages on a piece of slate with chalk and she’d occasionally deigned to send something back. Her responses weren’t always timely and sometimes they were utterly irrelevant. We’d sent her a question about a spell that would respond only to moonlight, ripping off Tolkien was never a poor choice, and she’d replied with a rather nice landscape.

“She would be coherent making fun of me.” This time my voice was right behind her and I didn’t restrain my laugh as she jumped.

She recovered herself and threw me a glare before answering snippily, “There’s so much to say on that subject she could hardly not be.”

“You know if you two keep ganging up on me I’ll have to consider recruiting reinforcements.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Where would you get them? You’ve already alienated half the women in Braavos and the other half just haven’t met you yet.”

That stung a little, “I’ll have you know I was a very hot item in Chicago. I got chased by White Court nobles, fairy queens, a Warden commander, and last but certainly not least, your mother.”

She smirked and for a second I saw Thomas in her face. “That was a long time ago, before you had a kid. I’ve heard it wreaks havoc on your figure.”
I had assumed the name of our ship, the Confused Tortoise, was a joke but I didn’t really understand until I saw the turtles of the Rhoyne. The river was full of them, from snappers I’d expect back home to immense beasts, I’d seen a few with shells more than a yard in diameter and the crew told me far larger ones would be found to the south. The reptiles watched us pass with utter equanimity, completely unafraid of us. Nymeria delighted in telling us that they were sacred to the Rhoynish, even their remnants. I wasn’t quite sure that divinity was enough a shield from the cooking pots but the turtles seemed to roll with it. There couldn’t be a larger contrast between the beast we were tracking and them, on the whole I preferred the ones that couldn’t fry their meals.

We had a lot of time to watch the turtles, Lydia had pronounced them archelons we showed her before switching back to drawing, as the boat stopped at dusk. There was a lot of debris in the water, rocks, trunks, shallows, but our pace seemed overcautious. I wasn’t a boatman though and I couldn’t imagine the captain going slow on purpose so I resisted the urge to complain. Instead I worked on my Dragonlance (™) and fished.

Catching was another matter, despite the fish visible in the water they never bit my line, and if they had I’m not sure what I’d do. We were using strings to fish, hooked but no rod and reel, we’d have to haul them in freehand. All the traditional trappings, at least traditional as done by the twentieth century indigenous American, were absent. Luckily fishing as an activity was never about catching fish, it was more of a communal activity and in this nothing had changed.

“So you’re a knight who ended up in Essos because your home was lost?” I nodded vaguely to the captain, watching a particularly energetic trout ignore my line. “Ended up on the wrong side? You’d think a mad king with fire and blood as a motto would let you know who to root for.”

“On the whole, I’m a big believer in fire.” My line went taut right as I spoke and I managed to jerk the string just hard enough to set it without pulling it free. Ryon was behind me, shouting advice which I ignored, he was from a desert, and I slowly pulled the fish in. It was a more visceral experience than just spinning a crank. I was tugging the rope in hand over hand as the fish fought, whipping back and forth trying to get free. It was jumping now- the splashes just visible at the edge of the torchlight- and Cletus had the net in hand. I gave the rope one more tug, it was just feet from the edge, when the tension vanished.

A flash of an armored back and a slight grinding as the monstrous turtle dove under the boat was the only sign, the captain was laughing as I resisted the urge to flash fry the reptilian thief. I was a heartbeat from throwing something, force, fire, lightning, into the water until Maggie called out.

“Papa!” Distracted I let the energy dissipate, the torches flickered as the unshaped power spread back into the world. I looked to her and she grinned, there was something more in her expression than mirth before she turned back to Nymeria.

As the other men commiserated I coiled the line mechanically. Most of my violent urges, most of my urges period, I was prepared to shoulder the blame for. That one, vaporising a turtle, was not mine. The Mantle was growing stronger, before it had been easy to lock back and resist, but this was new. It had never led me to nearly blow my cover and obliterate a sacred cow of the Rhoynish, all over a lost fish. I’d left the Mantle in its default state for months now. Each time I planned to push it back
down I had a good reason not too, or what felt like a good reason at the time.

The Mantle was a weapon, Mab’s weapon, and it was foolish to underestimate anything she had a hand in. It wasn’t beyond the realm of possibilities it had some awareness, it was even likely. Lydia would know more, but she was hundreds of miles away. Despite her best intentions she often lacked the context to be helpful. She might not even see the problem in the Mantle’s growing strength. She’d never cared about morality until we spent considerable effort explaining it and truly still didn’t, only paying lip service to it for our sakes. From her point of view something that gave me increased strength, speed, and skill could hardly be bad. Occasional homicidal impulses might even be a plus, both she and her mother shared certain opinions on my quality of mercy.

In any case it was again a bad time to shackle it. It would knock me out for a day or two while we were on a boat in potentially hostile territory. Maggie would be at my side, but it was a far cry from doing it hidden behind protective wards, rocks and fog. As soon as we returned to Braavos we were going on another trip. Until then I’d have to restrain myself, avoiding situations where the Mantle’s impulses were close to my own. Even thinking that sounded like tempting fate.

Putting the rope back with the other tackle I moved towards the bow, where Maggie and the girls were. “So none of you wanted to try fishing?” Maggie’s version of fishing had been to detonate a shockwave in our fish traps and just pick the dead ones from the water but she’d been completely disinterested in a more sporting method. I was more surprised Nymeria and Obara hadn’t tried, both seemed the type to try anything once.

Obara shook her head quickly and looked out into the darkness, Nymeria gave a refined shudder. “They’re cold and wet and slimy, everyone knows fish should be light and warm, preferably seasoned with peppers.”

“Or not eaten at all, ever.” Obara kept watching the water as she spoke, “I spent months eating nothing but fish between the Arbor and the Iron Islands. If I never see one again it will be too soon.”

“The actual process seems like far too much work. I’d rather,” Maggie paused and gave a theatrical wiggle of her fingers, “than wait around. Especially if a giant turtle is just going to steal it.”

There was nothing to say to that sort of ignorance about what fishing was all about, so instead of pulling a Linus van Pelt and explaining I just left them to whatever they were doing. If history was any guide it would be making fun of Nymeria’s and Viserys’s doomed romance.

The days blended together as we moved south. The only indication of our progress and time’s passing was the increasing width of the river and even that was gradual. Little towns lined the banks wherever a tributary joined and the fields abutting the water had small docks to load barges with grains or vegetables for their long trips downriver.

Ancalagon remained forever south as we left the plains of Andalos behind us, entering hillier country which the Rhoyne triumphantly carved through. I kept an eye out for the ramshackle boat that had triggered my senses but they were either too far ahead of us or we’d passed them in the night. There was no sign of the ship or its blue haired crew.

The first real change in the character of the river was when the Little Rhoyne joined in, its currents sourced from the ruined city of Ghoyan Drohe. Traffic increased dramatically, Pentos’s overland and riverine trade flowed down the waters. We saw our first slaves then, a few men chained to the benches of a galley. They stroked in time with a drum that pounded hypnotically, its beat echoing across the waves.
Braavos had banned the slave trade in all the areas it controlled, they’d even forced it on Pentos. We’d left our home though, and as much as it lacked they’d gotten far more right than anywhere else I’d been here. I was almost relieved that looking at the slaves through my telescope I could see thief brands, they were out of my reach but I couldn’t quash the guilt of letting them stay in chains. Realistically I wouldn’t be able to do much through magical force, I could break their physical chains but there was far more to the peculiar institution than that. All of this time I’d been playing with magic, shaping stones and the world as a joke but there was something more I could be doing. I had power and freeing slaves was about as morally pure as it got.

There would be problems from emancipation, the Civil War and Reconstruction would have shown that even if the rest of history hadn’t, but I didn’t see how increasing freedom overall could be bad. The machines I’d made might do more than anything I could do personally but that wasn’t an excuse not to act. I was a rich man, there must be things I could do to get the ball rolling.

Distracted by my thoughts and plans the trip went even faster, I’d managed to persuade Lydia to help me and when I wasn’t putting down possible economic shattering ideas we worked on the lance. It was a masterpiece. It had started as something like a harpoon and now, it was more. The haft and blade gleamed with runes exhorting it to fly fast and true while others kept it intact. I’d even managed to get it to return to my hand when called, Mjolnir had nothing on it. If Ancalagon was struck by it he’d share the fate of his namesake.

It something of a rarity then when I was on the deck as we passed through Ny Sar. The city was in ruins and had been for hundreds if not thousands of years. Our Dornish contingent watched it avidly, their distant ancestors had left from here before making it to their sun blasted land, Nymeria’s shattered palace was even visible. I couldn’t understand it, the city was at the junction of two major rivers and the land was just left desolate. Rome and London had been burned multiple times and they sprang back up, cities’ locations were dictated by geography, Ny Sar should have been no different.

The city had been burned by dragons though, their fire was more that physical, even as it burned hot. Watching the rubble slowly drift past as we floated south was enough to make me wonder again if letting the beasts back into the world was worth it. I had the feeling the Rhoynish would say no.

Dagger Lake was lousy with pirates. All of us were on deck, armed and ready for trouble, each boat we saw was watched carefully and the passing islands we searched for ships launching. The Rhoyne was such a massive artery of trade that pirates trying to work wasn’t surprising. What was surprising as a former resident of a world whose seas were ruled for centuries was that they were allowed to live. Historically Dagger Lake was was contested by the free cities, the Northern ones uniting to force the more powerful Volantis below the lake. Any effort to patrol the lake was met by the massed fleets of the other Free Cities. We were passing through it with a convoy of ships, all of which had sailed at least a hundred miles and could be somewhat trusted. Our tightly packed mass of shipping seemed to discourage any pirates, presumably they preferred easier prey.

I had other things on my mind though. Ancalagon was close, his direction changing subtly over short timespans. I didn’t have a good enough fix on our location to precisely locate him, but assuming he was relatively stationary we’d be meeting him soon. There was also a cursed city coming up, I’d been around the block too many times to doubt that was a coincidence.
Only Maggie knew he was near, Nymeria and Obara’s reactions were unpredictable, and the captain didn’t need to know yet. If Ancalagon was lurking in the ruins of Chroyane there’d be more problems. The pirates of the lake avoided it, for good reason. The only inhabitants of the city were infected with grayscale, a disease that turned its victims into calcified masses of rock. I was hoping it was a curse as some thought it was, I’d be in better shape. I’d have a better chance dealing with magic than some strange bacteria or virus. Most of me was hoping that Ancalagon had chosen some nicer roost but things like that didn’t happen to me.

Approaching the fog shrouded ruins, the haze was visible for miles, a strange fatalism took over our convoy. Before there’d been nervous anticipation, a feeling I was familiar with, pre-combat jitters. Now there was just dread, the captains and crews looking south with bleak expressions. Most ships got through, most even unmolested, but there were stories. Tall ships, naval galleys, smugglers, all had fallen to the things that lurked inside the Sorrows. If I was right there was a new threat.

The lake narrowed as we got closer, and our convoy thinned as the captains tried to center themselves in the channels. The city had fallen into the water and underwater was a maze of broken buildings. There were routes through that could be traversed with a reasonable expectation of safety but running aground in the middle of a haunted plague city was not a pleasant prospect.

Entering the fog I could feel something, the mists weren’t natural, some magic drove them. It was irritatingly uncomfortable, like damp clothes on your back. Maggie noticed it as well, throwing me a worried glance which I managed to gather up elan to airily respond too. I kept my eyes on the tracker for Ancalagon. It was swinging rapidly, he was here.

“Captain.” My voice broke the silence, the sounds of the waves and other ships swallowed by the fog. “I think it’s about time for me to get off.”

He stared at me his mouth gaping. “Here? Or should I take you right to the Shrouded Lord?” The Dornish had gathered together, watching us with their dark eyes.

“He’s here?” Obara asked their question.

“Close at least, you should stay with the boat in any case.” I was keeping an eye on the captain who was paling as he seemed to realize his boat was full of madmen. “Maggie will keep you safe until I return.” My daughter forced a smile as she stood next to me, leaning heavily on her staff.

“You’re just going to wander in Chroyane search for a lost—” she cut herself off as she looked to the captain. “How are you going to retrieve him without us?”

“What could any of you do? You knew that it was coming to this.” I was checking my gear as I talked, my coat’s pockets were full of things I’d need, food, a waterskin, clean cloths, a set of my compasses and Lydia’s crystal. It wasn’t all I’d want for big game hunting but it would be enough, with the fog I’d be invisible. “Get me ashore captain. Wait south of the Sorrows for the agreed on week and obey my daughter’s orders.”

“If you think that I’m going to risk my ship for a madman you’re mistaken.” His crew had gathered behind him as his voice rose. “We’re sailing straight through the fucking city, and if you don’t like that you can jump off now!”

I set the runes in my staff glowing as I stared at the captain, the blue light hanging in the fog. “You seem to be under some misapprehensions about our relationship.” His eyes were fixed on the gleaming characters, darting back to my face as I spoke. “You will get me to land. You will wait,
and you will follow my instructions.” Frost was edging into my voice and onto the deck as he nodded, almost frantic. “Good. Wait somewhere safe to the south, you’ll be amply compensated for your risk.”

I cut the light as his crew scattered back to their tasks, looking for somewhere solid to get me off their ship. “Cletus, Ryon you have a new job.” The two broke off from their huddle with the Martells. “Keep Maggie safe, she’ll be able to prevent the crew from doing anything,” I paused as I searched for an artful term, “unwise.”

Turning to my daughter, she had a fierce grin that I was sure concealed terror. “I’m counting on you to keep our ride here. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t though, I can handle myself. Besides if anything comes up I can talk to you.”

“Just be careful in there, there’s been a curse for a millennium.” She stepped forward to give me a hug even as the helmsman turned us towards a jutting shattered bridge.

“I’ll be the next best thing to invisible the whole time, no unnecessary risks.” I stepped to the rail as we slowed checking my gear one last time. My dragonlance hung on my back and my staff was in hand, I looked back to the crew one last time and jumped. The Confused Tortoise vanished into the mists with distressing speed and I joined it, pulling up a veil as I strode into the city.

I knew it was mid-afternoon as I walked, but Chroyane was buried in fog. The walls were just suggestions in the grey, and the river had claimed parts of the roads as I picked my way through. I was using my staff as a walking stick, levering myself over gaps and testing my footing as I followed my tracker towards Ancalagon.

The string I’d hung his claws from was almost horizontal as it tugged me, my route was much less clear. I had to backtrack often, cutting back around broken buildings and fetid water. There was a strange moldy growth on the rocks, with the constant fog apparently plants couldn’t grow but some sort of fungus had taken root. It made the ground slippery and on the few times I had to jump it nearly dumped me into the water.

Overall I was moving slowly but surely, taking care to be quiet even as my veil hid me from sight. The mist was a great help there, bending the dim light around me was almost effortless, my illusion nearly perfect. I hadn’t seen anything living yet, not even a turtle, but I had no desire to. If I could just walk in and walk out of the city with no one being the wiser I’d be happy.

Optimism was never rewarded. I heard something just as my string linked to Ancalagon swung rapidly. He had moved, and from my sense of direction, crossed the river. The city was a warren and without my compass I’d have been entirely turned around but with it I felt confident. No matter my feelings though I’d have to cross the river to catch the dragon and there was only one way across still standing, the Bridge of Dream.

I knew the structure was in the south of Chroyane, currently I was near the northern edge. It would be a mile or two of slogging through the dilapidated buildings before I had to cross and repeat it traveling the other direction. For an instant I was tempted to do something overt, the dragons had all been willing to attack me and drawing his attention might be easier than tracking him down. I rejected that approach quickly though, sending a fireball or a pillar of light into the air was pretty much the opposite of a necessary risk, especially when moving through the city was just time consuming. I heard the noise again as I thought, heavy footsteps moving slowly from the south. I’d have to pass them to get to the bridge and I steeled myself for my first sight of a Stone man.
I stepped lightly into the road, still hidden behind my veil. The figure approached and I moved to the other side of the road at it came, each step accompanied by the grinding sound of stone on rock. It had one arm outstretched, the other hung low at its side cut off at the forearm. His, the only clue to his gender was his shoulders’ width, paces were deliberate, each one questing for solid ground before shifting his weight. The man was blind I realized with a thrill of atavistic horror, his face was a cratered mass of rock. Grayscale had taken everything from him, his sight, his limbs, and no doubt soon the half life in the plague ridden city. I watched him pass and fade back into the mists before I continued, moving faster now.

As I continued I saw more signs of habitation, shanties built from driftwood and crates. The moss was worn away along the center of the thoroughfares, showing the tracks of the city’s lumbering citizens. The smooth road dramatically increased my progress, a road this large had to link up to the bridge.

The still air and the limited visibility were making me uncomfortable as I walked, it seemed impossible to be claustrophobic in the center of a street twenty yards wide but I was making a good try of it. Maggie’s frantic message was almost a relief from the silence. “Papa!” Her voice boomed in my head, she’d forced the spell with far more power than it needed. “Obara left the ship! She’s on the Bridge!”

I fought the urge to curse, I was theoretically on a covert mission and marching around swearing would be the opposite. Maggie heard them anyways, our link was open and my especially loud thoughts carried over it. Normally she’d be amused but right now she was worried, almost terrified.

“Don’t follow her, I’m on my way there.” I broke into a run, not a sprint, but something I could sustain the whole way to the bridge. “What was she thinking?” Holding the spells together, my veil and the telepathy was beginning to give me a headache, one not helped by my lance bouncing on my back.

“She didn’t say anything, we were passing beneath the bridge when she just took a jump and started climbing. The captain wouldn’t stop and I didn’t want to force the issue.” The captain hadn’t been too happy with me getting off, stopping below the Bridge of Dream would be another level entirely. The stone men prowled the length of the bridge, he’d told stories about how those driven mad by the disease would leap to attack. Naturally Obara had set to climb it, without the benefit of invisibility or supplies. I cursed again and made no effort to stop Maggie from hearing.

“I’ll do my best, don’t let Nymeria off the boat and stick to the plan. Put her to sleep if you have to.” I felt more than heard her assent and the link broke. Pulling the lance from my back I kept up a steady pace, my lungs punishing me for not staying in as good shape as I once had. Pounding down the flagstones was enough to make me miss my Nikes and this was life and death. Air filled pockets and rubber soles really spoiled me for the footwear of the late middle ages.

I wasn’t entirely decrepit yet, one or two of the stone men turned to look at my gasping passage but none of them seemed sure I was there with the veil. At last I reached the bridge and slowed, it was a rotted mess and seething with victims of grayscale. They were moving though, headed towards the center where I was sure Obara lurked. It had only been a few minutes since Maggie’s warning, the boat must have been making terrible time, and it was possible she was still climbing. If she’d made it to the top even the slow reflexes of the rock covered unfortunates wouldn’t save them from the
weight of numbers. Either way I needed to cross the bridge, I’d just have to pick up Obara on the way.

Stepping onto the spans I had to revise my plans, there wasn’t enough room to sneak past the masses. I needed to clear the way and it was a forty foot fall to the water. For a second I thought about just dropping to the water and walking across, freezing a path beneath my feet. A roar, almost bestial, stopped that course. I needed to find the girl and sneaking across wouldn’t save her.

A crumbling sound behind me decided my course. A man, more rock than flesh, was running towards me, fixated on the distortion my veil made. His hands briefly captivated me, they looked like coral claws and I knew that their touch would be deadly, I needed to act.

“Volat!” With a gesture and a shout I flung him back, his legs breaking with a crunch rather than a crack. His left hand had shattered when he tried to catch himself on his landing, missing parts of three limbs didn’t seem to stop him as he started crawling towards me with disturbing speed and focus. Whatever else grayscale was, it was magical. Biology didn’t work that way.

“Infriga!” The moist air made the spell easy, ice encrusted him and for the first time he seemed to feel pain, screaming from cold where losing limbs had done nothing. I turned back to the bridge and saw I’d drawn a crowd. Their ruined faces were turned towards me and the first were starting to lumber towards me, their madness and hunger driving them.

I stepped onto the bridge towards them, the Mantle rising with my enthusiastic permission. The bridge was a series of long arches, something like a roman aqueduct I absently thought and impressively built to stand all these years. No longer though. “Forzare!” I shattered the arch closest to the shore, I didn’t want anymore of these walking rocks coming from behind me. A thousand years of masonry fell with a mixture of splashes and crashes. If anyone hadn’t been looking at me, they were now.

The nearest were fifty feet away and closing. Killing them, even without magic, would be easy, my lance would cut rock as well as flesh but their curse was another matter. If their blood got on me, I could probably beat the curse but I had no desire to try. Fighting them hand to hand wasn’t needed though, the first stone man had already shown what I should do.

I drew on the mantle deeply, frost gathered on my coat and weapons as I raised my staff. “Glacio!” I hammered the butt of my staff on the bridge and it shuddered as my spell gathered. Again. “Glacio!” I could feel Winter spreading, Mab’s power filling the fog, and with one final shout I commanded it. “Glacio!”

The world went white. Crystals filling the air sparkled as the sun shone on the ruins of Chroyane for the first time in centuries. The stone men were covered, gleaming as the ice like diamonds hung. Their screams broke the stillness as I strode forward, their frantic efforts to move causing them nothing but further pain amidst the suddenly blinding light. A few more bursts of force cleared a path, until I reached the center where a shivering Dornishwoman clung to a ledge.

“Volat!” My spell ripped her from her perch as she stared at me, depositing her as smoothly as I could manage on the ice covered surface. “Having fun yet?” I smirked at the girl, she was the only person on the bridge not covered in ice, even my hair was thickly coated with rime as my breath steamed. She wasn’t looking at me though, something over my shoulder had attracted her attention. I turned, already sure what it would be.

My spell had cleared the fog a hundred yards in all directions but it was already reaching back.
Ancalagon swirled through the edges of the mist, his black form melting into shadow as he spun through the closing gap. He had grown, freedom and an unlimited diet had agreed with him, his wingbeats shook the air. For a single fleeting second a part of me hoped that he hadn’t noticed us, that the frozen bodies would have shielded us but his echoing roar quashed that idea. The other part, the Mantle’s part, exulted. I’d put up with these lizards for too long.

The beast swept around us before stooping, I stood ready until Obara screamed behind me. Ancalagon was dropping, fires burning within his throat and while I could shield her the stone men around me weren’t so lucky. More importantly, if I killed him now his corpse would fall on us anyways.

With my Queen’s gifted speed I forced my lance into her hands before with a quick step and push I threw her across the gap to the other span. I was spinning almost before she was in the air, lifting my left hand and throwing up as strong a shield as any I’d ever made on this world.

It wasn’t enough, his fires scorched it before his immense mass struck me and sent my spherical shield and me reeling backwards, smashing through the frozen men. He flashed back into the sky after his pass, screaming in rage at my resistance. I regretted giving up my spear, the Mantle and I were united in the urge to retaliate but the girl had it. She didn’t have to keep it though, the lance would come when called. I’d waited too long for that though, Ancalagon was diving again, shallower this time. His flames sprayed out, scorching the bridge in front of me, the men I’d frozen cooking in an instant. I leapt to the other span, not bothering to shield again and he twisted impossibly quick, bowling over the men as his claws screamed against the bridge.

Another spray of fire stopped me from taking advantage of his proximity. I was forced to shield Obara and myself as his breath washed over us. He was on us before his breath stopped, battering my dome with his wings even as the flames continued, the rock at our feet warming as the stones outside the shield glowed. That was about enough of that.

“Forzare!” I flung the burst of force in the same instant I dropped my shield, an instant of heat was all we felt before I sent him rolling backwards with the force it would take to flip a truck. He recovered absurdly quickly, somehow turning his awkward roll into a leap back into the air.

“That is just not fair.” Obara didn’t seem to be in a state to share my displeasure at Ancalagon’s casual violation of the square cube law. That didn’t stop me from complaining. “If I was thrown backwards and did a few rolls on stone I’d be nursing broken bones, not flying.” The blow had seemed to faze Ancalagon though, he was flitting through the mists, barely visible. I almost launched another bolt of force at him but he’d be a hard target, far away and fast. I’d built the lance for this but I’d prefer a closer shot with that, no one had ever called me Lugh. I needed to do something to harry, heh, the beast, he couldn’t be allowed to orbit me with impunity.

“Fulminos!” The bolt didn’t compare to the one I’d hit the kraken with but I was satisfied by just making contact. He seemed to stagger in the air before roaring and climbing. I’d seen this movie before and I grabbed my lance from Obara. Its runes shone gold I fed power into it, the Mantle giving my arm the skills needed. This pass would be the dragon’s last, he’d have five feet of steel and ash in him.

Ancalagon screamed as he attacked, a piercing sound that clawed through my mind. I tried to cover my ears even as I wound up, the world was shaky as his cry filled it. He fell as my arm rose, the lance flashing into the air. His speed saved him. With a crack of his wings he twisted and what was meant to be a mortal blow just pierced the membrane of his right wing. His scream grew even louder but he broke off as his boiling blood sprayed us and he limped through the air into the ruins of
Chroyane, he was running.
“Come on!” I burst into a run after the fleeing dragon, dragging Obara for a few steps until she got the idea. My lance was returning, a mere thought was needed to pull it back and I could feel it coming closer. We barreled past the groaning stone men, keeping a healthy distance as we hurtled over the icy stones. Mid stride I knew to turn, twisting I threw my left hand out and snagged the lance in a single smooth motion. For all of the Mantle’s drawbacks being an action hero was awesome.

At the end of the bridge I skidded to a stop, the ice had given me perfect traction but the moss was another story. I let Obara catch up before I drew on Winter’s power. “Infriga!” The Bridge of Dream had stood for over a thousand years, wreathed in fog and haunted by plagues. Something special must have gone into it, time should have brought it low. Whatever it was, it wasn’t enough to deal with me.

The bridge lurched, the water that had saturated the rocks and mortar froze and grew in an instant. The flagstones were lined with ice erupting between them and I could feel the cold permeating the structure. It only needed a push. “Forzare!”

I was moving before the first splashes, herding Obara as I resumed the hunt with the sound of crumbling rock behind me. We were back in the fog now, and visibility had dropped to nearly nothing. Before that was alright, I’d been moving slowly, but now I needed speed and running into a mass of undead rock was not on my itinerary.

“Ventus!” Normally I’d never have tried to move the fog with a breeze. The ruins of Chroyane were immense and densely covered, whatever I managed to shift would just be replaced by more. Normally I didn’t have the south wind tied up in my pocket.

I’d made the strings to drive a ship for hours, a gentle breeze if we were becalmed, a zephyr to keep us underway. If I’d learned anything about magic in my time, it was driven by intent. The winds exploded out, a gale forcing the fog off the city. The gusts wouldn’t last long, minutes at most, but the city would be exposed to the sun. Ancalagon wouldn’t be able to hide and wounded as he was, he’d be kept to the ground by the force of the storm.

“Watch your step and keep up!” The wind tore my words away but when I started moving Obara followed, darting across the ruined streets as the few stone men turned to look at the sun for the first time in years. I couldn’t see our prey, he’d managed to vanish before I could banish the fog. I could feel him though, fire and fury clad in scales.

“This way!” I cut north, the wind at my back driving me as I plunged up a street. I splashed through the puddles, leaving them frozen in my wake. Ancalagon was getting further away, I could feel the heat from his presence diminishing, but I knew I could run him down. Winter was with me, there was nothing on this world that could resist my Queen’s power. He had moved back to the west, not across the river but over it. I might get a chance to freeze my path across the Rhoyne after all.

Rounding a corner I slid to a stop, the sun was shining across the city and for the first time it didn’t deserve the name of the Sorrows. Statues, still standing after all these years, looked down on the city. Tall pillars stretched to the sky, their open ceilings giving them a haunted grandeur not even
dragonfire had destroyed. Chroyane had been grey, the mists, the moss, the masonry, but with the sun it glowed with color. Everything I’d made with magic paled next to this, a monument to human ingenuity and talent, the city was a sculpture writ large.

All that was secondary, I could see Ancalagon. The dragon was atop an immense fortress or a palace, still standing proud even broken and abandoned in the center of the river. He was perched on a shattered dome, clinging to the roof as his blood left streaks of red on the stones. The distance was too far for the lance. I’d need to be closer, as it should be.

With my target in sight I slowed, Obara was grateful as she panted behind me. She’d kept up admirably for the first part of our chase, but in the end I had powers she didn’t. “The Palace of Sorrow,” I managed to speak somewhat normally as we loped towards it, Winter Knights apparently didn’t need to worry about cardiovascular fitness or lung capacity. “I wonder if he likes the reminder of what dragons can do.”

“Or it can only be reached if you can fly and he didn’t feel like dealing with any threats.” It took her a few breathes to gasp out her sentence.

“Either way,” I had to pause to help pull her up a wall I’d leaped onto, “we’re getting there.”

It took another few minutes but we reached the water’s edge at the closest point to the palace. There might have been a dry path somewhere but the fog was already rolling back in and visibility was dropping. It didn’t trouble me though, the Mantle had a solution and was clamoring for it. “Infriga!”

A carpet of ice spanned the distance from the street to the palace’s open gate and I jumped onto it without hesitation. The Mantle might be a one trick pony, but it was a pretty good trick.

Obara slammed down behind me and the floe immediately started bobbing. She didn’t have the preternatural balance on ice I had and I needed to hold my staff out for her to steady herself as the chill waters of the Rhoyne washed over our feet. I strode towards the walls as soon as she was stable. “Ready for some active archaeology?”

She managed a smile, her face pale beneath her dark skin. “My little sister is obsessed with history, she’ll be jealous.”

“That’s the spirit.” It was hard not to feel like the good Dr. Jones as we moved into the palace. There weren’t rolling rocks or traps, but if they ever made a fourth one ‘Indiana Jones and the Palace of Sorrow’ wouldn’t be terrible. It had all the things needed, a mysterious curse, a lost city, decent villains between pirates and the stone men, and a creepy fog shrouded abandoned-

Not so abandoned palace. Obara and I had entered an immense chamber, looking up through the roof I could see the last remnants of the blue sky fading, but the inhabitants of the room demanded my attention. There was a crowd of stone men, hundreds at least, grouped in a cluster around a dais. We’d been seen, their craggy faces turning to us even as their voices, low moans and rumbling growls filled the air.

I stepped in front of Obara, gathering power in case they stayed true to type and charged. I couldn’t freeze this many, the fog I’d blown away had taken the air’s moisture with it. If it came to a fight I’d have to be brutal if I wanted a chance to get through them. They were content to wait it seemed, staring at us with ruined eyes as some crumbled when their limbs refused to move. We stood still, just watching as the crowd started to shift, the grinding of stone bringing to mind plate tectonics.

At last they stopped, there was a clear path from us to the dais, an invitation I had no desire to accept.
With the crowd out of the way I could see the center, the dais was crowned with a cage of gold. A
statue was locked inside it, its hands locked around the bars. Obara stirred behind me, moving to my
side and staring. “Prince Garin?” wonder spiced with terror filled her voice.

The grinding sound resumed but this time there seemed to be intelligence behind it, laughter.
Chroyane instantly jumped several levels on the danger scale, anytime a monster laughed it was wise
to have an escape plan. Even as I turned, searching for threats, the laughter changed to words,
somehow intelligible despite sounding closer to an avalanche than a voice.

“A dragon, one of Nymeria’s get, and the Warden.” My blood went cold, enough that I felt it
even through the Winter Mantle’s casual thermal impunity. He continued as I quietly panicked. “We
have not had such guests here in centuries.”

Obara and I shared a glance, united in the desire to leave. A crunching sound behind us scotched that
plan. A stone man had fallen from the ceiling, his legs shattered but he dragged himself towards us,
unhindered by his missing half. Others followed, forcing me throw up a shield to block the shrapnel
of their ruined limbs. The laughter filled the air again, somehow mocking despite the source. “Do
you question our hospitality? Even the dragon lords of old stayed once they’d experienced the
joys of Chroyane.”

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Boxed in by infectious rock zombies a lesser man would have panicked. I instead manfully rallied.
“Er”

Obara gave me a look and, despite her clear terror, stepped up to the plate. “If we’re guests surely we
can leave.”

There hadn’t been a threshold in the palace, even if we were guests I’d have felt it. From one point of
view that was good, it showed that the zombies weren’t mortal. I’d be free to indulge the Mantle and
its instincts. On the other, the Mantle was a thing of faerie. Guest rights were real and had
consequences. Slaughtering my host would have repercussions, I didn’t know what, but I’d rather
not find out. Their leader would have to do something egregious, violate his duties, for me to be free
from them while a welcomed guest. I chimed in before that avalanche could speak again.

“And as our host you know our names, may we have yours?” My words didn’t have the presence of
the rockslide, but it carried through the chamber.

“Introduce me.”

One figure in the mass of stone moved, wearing faded silks that had once been intricately
embroidered. His voice was muffled, forced through his sealed jaw. “You have the honor of being
addressed by the Prince of Dream and Sorrow, the Sword of the Rhoyne, the Shrouded Lord.”

I recognized the last title, it wasn’t even surprising. The Shrouded Lord was said to rule the Sorrows,
but no one living had met him or knew him. Rumors from the crew of the Tortoise had been split on
his identity, some claimed it was a line of men, others that he didn’t exist. The other rumor, one I was
finding more believable by the second, was that it was the last prince of Chroyane, Garin.

It fit with the cage and his claims of trapping Valyrians, of course it also implied he was pushing a
millennium. Granted this world lacked magic to match mine, but anything that survived a thousand years had to pick up some tricks. Knowledge was power and you don’t stop learning until you start dieing. Garin was potentially dangerous, if the army of zombies wasn’t enough of a clue.

“It is an honor.” The steps of the stone men behind us had stopped but I still drew power. I’d rather deal with breaking guest right than be infected with grayscale. “However we can’t stay, we have an urgent task.”

“Today of all days? Impossible.” The majordomo spoke again, conveying confusion despite his garbled words. “It is the festival, no work may be done by any in all of Chroyane.” He turned back to the cage and its prince, “Unless your royal highness disagrees?” The spectacle was giving me flashbacks to the Erlking’s court, I gave Obara a quick glance, she didn’t measure up to Susan.

“Our guests must not labor, especially ones that brought such a gift in addition to their own magnificent presences.”

I stepped forward to answer, putting distance between us and our flankers was an excellent secondary reason. “Our apologies your highness, but we did not believe we would be able to attend and didn’t bring gifts.” I was increasingly sure this was going to end badly, but I needed to follow the forms to keep the Mantle’s power under control.

The booming laughter, both from the crowd and Garin’s avalanche did nothing to change my mind. “No gifts? You brought the sun for the first time in three hundred years. For such a feat, only one thing in my treasury can be said to be its equal. Eternity.” The crowd’s gaze seemed to sharpen on us, recognizing that we reaching the denouement of our little play.

“It grieves me that we cannot accept your most princely gift.” The scraping sounds of the stone men behind us resumed but they were circling, not approaching yet. “I serve a queen and will be called back to her service.” I was really hoping I was incorrect but it certainly wasn’t a lie. “As to my companion, while Obara is in my care her father did not give me leave to make such decisions.” That was it, either we’d be leaving or we’d be killing, grayscale was a fate far worse than death. I pulled more power in, the energy coursing beneath my skin and I could feel the Mantle readying for a fight. “In any event, the gift we’d view as greater than any other is leave to complete our quest.”

Whatever Garin or his mouthpiece was lost in a sudden sharp crack. My eyes were forced up, fissures were propagating across the dome, the structure had been weakened by the cavities already in it but something, maybe my storm or Ancalagon had done it further damage. Obara and I were yards from the nearest section with an empty ceiling and there were stone men in the way, we’d have to ride it out here and trust in my shield.

At last the rumbling stopped, a few stones had fallen, shattering on the floor, but the masons of Chroyane had known their business. The major domo picked up as if we hadn’t been interrupted. “If you refuse our gift your fate will be the same. You will spend the rest of time within the Palace of Love.”

That was a threat as far as I was concerned. I’d be free to act as soon as they moved. “Bite me Stallone.” There wasn’t a response for a moment, only the terrible laughter and then the world began to fade, a miasma rising from the ground and flooding through the roof. I threw Obara my spear, despite how it had turned out last time, yanked her to me and with a shout pulsed my shield.

I felt it strike the charging stone men, flinging them back with sickening crunches. The darkness was
nothing special, the fog had just thickened enough to block the sun. I was a wizard, I’d been fighting the things that went bump in the night for too long to be frightened. The Mantle agreed, I’d been too passive, nothing here feared me. That was all about to change.

“Fuego!” My old standby, my greatest servant, blue flames blasted forth, burning back the mist and the stone men in an inferno that not even the dragons of this world could match.

“Forzare!” My staff’s wide sweep sent a wall slamming through the first ranks of the rallying zombies. Their stone bodies might have been good against men, swords wouldn’t bite, but smashing them together and down made their cursed armor a deadly weapon.

With the immediate threat dealt with, the zombies were fast for being rock encrusted monstrosities, not fast by any absolute standard, I tried to decide my course of action. Ancalagon had been on the roof, wounded and weary, but I had to assume he was smart enough not to hang around on an unstable dome. I could leave here, take Obara and retreat back to the boat, but something in me rebelled against that. Garin had been holed up in this mausoleum for long centuries, spreading his curse and killing travelers. He’d also attacked me, that was something I’d like to terminally discourage. I was here and his army was reeling, I wouldn’t get a better chance.

“Want to commit regicide?” Obara looked shell shocked, the flames flickering illuminated her face. I didn’t wait for longer than a heartbeat for her response, grabbing my spear from her in what was becoming a regrettably common occurrence. I hefted it for weight, took one look at the golden cage, shifted my grip and with two steps for acceleration flung it with all the strength the Mantle could give me.

It wasn’t sporting, compared to a stooping dragon a man in a cage was nothing but the lance took the Shrouded Lord in the throat, driving straight through. I regretted it for a second, the spear was lost, his blood would be all over it, but in the end the dragonlance was just a tool. Killing an undead prince might not match a dragon but it would do. Of course it would be smart to make sure he was actually dead, I’d seen enough things walk off extreme physical trauma to be cautious. His body had rocked backwards, the ash shaft pointing to the sky. “Fulminos!”

The spear exploded, too much magic in too small a place, the surging electricity overloaded it, scattering pieces of Garin across fifty of his closest friends. The stone men stopped for a moment, staring at the remnants of their prince and I was briefly optimistic we’d get a Phantom Menace scenario where all of them dropped as one. I should have known better. They screamed, a sound like nails on a chalkboard and moved towards us with a single terrible purpose.

It didn’t matter. “Infriga.” I sucked the heat from their front ranks and pulled it into a sphere of sunfire, their screams of rage turning to pain. At first I’d been worried about killing them, I hadn’t seen what they’d become. The disease had stripped their mortality. Whoever they’d been before they’d been infected was gone, the curse had claimed their minds, bodies, and souls.

“Fuego.” I breathed the word and the world went red. Billowing flames ushered from my staff, perhaps I could have delivered a kinder fate than immolation but I needed to purge the curse, fire was the only way to be sure. I’d been powerful for most of my life, ever since DuMorne had pulled me from the orphanage, but standing untouched amidst the fires as the stone men burned was a new and unwelcome reminder. They had never had a chance against me, muscles and swords were no match for my magic.

At last there were no more, Obara at my side the only other moving body. She looked at me with barely concealed terror and beneath the Mantle my stomach twisted. “Let’s get out of here.” She
followed, we left the ruined palace silent and scorched behind us. The sky was clearing as we walked, whatever magic had held the fog was failing with Garin’s true death. My mind was leaden, I’d just slaughtered hundreds. I knew they were better dead, that whatever humanity was in them was long gone, but it grated. They hadn’t chosen their fate, no more than Susan or many of the Red Court infected had. It hadn’t stopped me then, it wouldn’t now, defending mortals from magic was a duty but I couldn’t pretend it was always easy.

It was dark by the time we reached the southern outskirts of the city. We hadn’t seen any more of the stone men for which I was grateful, but I didn’t call Maggie. I wanted time to reflect, to come to terms with my actions before I let her touch my mind again. The trip had been a failure, Ancalagon was still loose and he’d be running scared, it would be far harder to bait him into a confrontation now. Breaking the power of the Sorrows couldn’t be ignored, travelers would be safer and the scourge of greyscale might be weakened, but I had killed in a way I hadn’t in years. Maggie’s and my magic was a tier above that of this world, ending a millennia of suffering in an afternoon showed that, but the screams of the dying would haunt me.

102.

We walked south for another hour to leave Chroyane’s outskirts, but the sun was low enough I couldn’t see our boat on the water. I didn’t want to spend the night on the shore, I might have been able to deal with the stone men but against mortals I was far more limited. There was no law around here, bandits and worse could be abroad. I’d have to call Maggie for a pick up.

The link was easier than with Elaine, part of that was practice and part was that I was closer to Maggie than I’d ever been to her. I’d loved Elaine but it didn’t compare to the way I felt about my daughter. It only took an effort of will before I was able to send my thoughts racing across the distance.

Star Wars is forever superior but on this occasion there was only one thing to say. “Beam me up, Scotty”

“Papa!” Her near instant response was tinged with worry but also happiness. “You’re all right? What happened?”

“We’re fine and so is Ancalagon. He got away.” I didn’t actually know where he went, fighting the stone men, slaughtering them, had taken more out of me than I’d like and I hadn’t kept up the pursuit. Ancalagon had taken the chance to run and he was able to move far faster than us. “I’ll explain more when we’re aboard. Everything is fine there?”

“The captain has calmed down, it only took a little demonstration to keep him from throwing us off.” That wasn’t ominous at all, I had the feeling we’d better be looking for a new ride.

“I’ll handle that. You can tell where I am right?” I nodded when she sent her assent then realized she couldn’t see it. “Well then, get them moving. I don’t want to spend anymore time on land.” As we waited I started melting some of the river mud, I was going to leave something behind for archaeologists and the glowing muck was an excellent signal for the boat.

Once I’d finished with it, a crystal sword thrust halfway into a river stone, Obara and I sat silently. She only spoke when we could see our ship approaching through the dusk. “You told me once that you didn’t enjoy stepping into legends, yet you just did with less effort than I spend in an afternoon’s
training.” Her comment startled me, breaking the stillness of the Rhoyne’s shore.

“That won’t be a legend, you and I are the only witnesses.” Looking on it critically it could have been. Dispelling an ancient curse and killing an undead horde was the stuff of stories but it had been simple. It vaguely compared to burning the Velvet Room, but in Chroyane I had never felt truly threatened. Ancalagon’s attacks had been powerful but I’d fought and defeated better. Garin simply hadn’t been in my league. “I like to keep a low profile, you don’t know how nice it is to not to be on the hook to solve ridiculous problems.”

I was doing that now of course, but our little dragon hunting road trip was practically a vacation compared to some of my past cases. I certainly wouldn’t trade it for feuding faerie courts or vampires.

She nodded and for a moment I thought she’d lapse back to silence. “What do you plan to do about Ancalagon?” There was a hint of worry in her voice, it was borne out by her actions. She’d attempted to enter the Sorrows solo just to try to save him, when I left the ship with a giant spear she had drawn the correct conclusions.

“We’ll keep going. He’s far too dangerous to let free, you saw what he did to the Stone Men.” He’d been at least half again as large as Rhaellion, I felt pretty confident about fighting him for awhile yet but at some point he’d need far more care than just hitting him really hard. We’d have to catch him before that point.

“Do you know which way he went?” The Tortoise had just dropped a boat to retrieve us but that was a good question. If Ancalagon had fled north we’d need a new ride sooner rather than later. I felt confident he hadn’t though, if he’d wanted to lurk in the northern mountains he could have just stayed there. It was the work of a moment to check though and now was as good a time as any.

“South south east, and he’s either stopped or far enough that his flight is changing his vector much.” Obara grunted in reply, just as the rowboat grounded itself on the shore.

The oarsmen shouted up to us, sounding nervous. “You coming? ‘Cause your daughter isn’t being especially patient.”

I called light to my staff as I picked over the roots, rocks and mud lining the bank. “She gets that from her father.” I gallantly offered an arm to help Obara aboard and she scoffed, leaping on and grabbing an oar with a nautical grace I wouldn’t expect of a desert inhabitant.

“The Greenblood,” she offered in response to my unspoken question. “I spent time with the Orphans on their rafts, you get the hang of it.” I nodded and doused the light as the two of them bent to their oars, paddling us out to the waiting ship.

They had ropes thrown over the side, the beam was low enough that after handing over my staff I just pulled myself up before helping the quiet crew hoist the rowboat aboard. It was time to face the music, I’d be supporting my daughter whatever she’d done but I’d prefer not to have to watch my back for the remnants of the trip. “Captain.”

“Dresden.” I’d lost my title apparently, that wasn’t a good sign but my last name was better known than my first in some circles. I was torn between annoyance at his insolence and admiration, it took some guts to mouth off to something demonstrably mightier and even the Mantle wasn’t enough to make me that big a hypocrite.
“No troubles while you waited I trust.” I was leaning heavily on my staff as I spoke, still a head taller than the man.

“Nothing,” he glanced at Maggie who had taken a position at my flank, “worth mentioning.”

There was a story there I was sure but Maggie knew the Laws. It looked and sounded like she had threatened him, I’d need to keep a united front. “Excellent, then we’ll have no other troubles as we move south?”

He seemed like a rational man, all he’d lost from our detour was half a day and pride, hopefully our exorbitant fee would persuade him to stomach it without incident. “You don’t need us to wait anymore?”

“You may proceed when ready, if you’d like a light to avoid the turtles I can provide it.” He shook his head quickly and turned back to his crew as I motioned for Maggie to follow me to the bow.

“What happened?” She asked the question I’d wanted to, but she’d been the one sitting around worrying so I’d politely go first.

“Saved the girl, scorched the city, screwed the catch. Now why is the captain scared of you?”

“He wanted to keep going, especially after Obara jumped. I,” she looked away shiftily, “managed to enlighten him as to why that would be a mistake.”

“As long as you didn’t enlightning him that’s all right.” It was hardly optimal but I was in no position to judge. The last time she’d threatened someone on my behalf I’d approved and it wasn’t like I hadn’t intimidated him not half an hour before she did. “Ancalagon fled further south, we’ll be with them for a little while longer at least.

“There’s nothing between here and Selhorys, that’s a week’s sail. Do you want to transfer ships there?” I drummed my fingers on the gunwhale as I thought.

“I think we can stick with him, we’ll have to be vigilant though. No more sleeping through the night but he’s being paid well enough.”

“We can afford a different ship you know, is it wise to stay on this one?” Maggie sounded truly nervous, I was beginning to worry that she had done more than threaten. Of course this was her first experience with violence as an active participant, she’d looked from afar in Oldtown but she’d never stepped up into a potential fight as far as I knew.

“What happened when you persuaded the captain?”

“Nothing, I just set a man’s club on fire.” Seemingly realizing that ‘nothing’ was less than perfectly accurate she hurried to explain. “He was looming! Cletus and Ryon didn’t look too confident.” I could imagine that leaving an impression, one second you’re brandishing a club and the next you have a torch uncomfortably close to your face.

Well at least she didn’t kill anyone. “You’re right, It might be wise to get a different ship.” The cost was irrelevant, I was just annoyed to have to move. Rumors of magicians being capricious and dangerous probably were inevitable regardless of our actions. Now the only question was whether to jump ship at Selhorys or try our luck at one of the smaller towns. The crew probably didn’t have the nerve to try to assassinate us, but I wasn’t willing to risk Maggie’s life on an assumption.
“How is Nymeria holding up?”

“She’s fine. She didn’t really think anything could hurt her sister and when she knew you were going for her she was even calmer.” It was nice that someone had such faith in my abilities.

“Obara was lucky, we were all lucky. If she’d been a better climber she might have grayscale right now.” I knew what the disease did in its terminal form but I also knew that some people lived with it. It might be a similar sickness without the magic but I couldn’t tell for sure. The knowledge monks or shadowbinders might know, but both groups were far away and one had all their stuff stolen. If I wanted to learn I’d have to check myself and I had no desire to risk getting a curse powered sickness.

“What happened in the city? Just because you alliterated doesn’t mean I’m not curious.”

“I’m not entirely sure, I think I lifted Garin’s curse but Ancalagon’s in the wind. Overall it was a failure.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow at my defeatism. “Well even if you only broke the power that kept the fog in you probably dealt a blow to piracy, the cities’ fleets will be able to move much more easily into Dagger lake. That’s no small thing.”

That seemed optimistic, if anything I’d cleared the way for Volantis to project power further up river. The pirates might vanish but the peace might too. “Whatever happens we’ll both be around to see it. You should get to bed, I’ll take the first watch.”
Volantis claimed to be the greatest city in the world. Of course so did a bunch of others so I was quite confident they weren’t decisively winning. That was good because just being there made me want to burn it down. It was utterly full of slaves. They followed their masters around the headless statues, across the great bridge, and through the streets. All of them were marked, a merchant traveling with us had begun to explain their tattoos but I had lost patience halfway through and left before I started flinging power around.

They weren’t the first slaves I’d seen, some of the galleys on the Rhoyne had been powered by banks of chained men, but here they were inescapable. They ran the stores, the bars, even the hotel we were staying at. I’d fought against monsters for most of my life but every so often humanity decided to show that it could play in the cruelty big leagues too. Needless to say I wanted to leave as soon as possible, a feat that was proving increasingly difficult.

“What do you mean you won’t be leaving for another moon?” Ancalagon was to the south east now and the link was growing increasingly faint. I had hoped to join a caravan, traveling down the cheerily named highway terminating in Volantis, and then split off whenever he appeared to be due south. Unfortunately the caravansaries were staying in their caravansaries.

“It’s impossible to travel until the horselords are further away. The city may bribe them to be peaceful, but on the plains? They stop behaving as guests as soon as the walls are beneath the horizon.” A horde of nomadic raiders had apparently left Volantis just as we arrived. They had apparently decided that actual pillaging was too much work so they just rode in, looked threatening and the free cities paid them off. I appreciated the labor savings, as a wizard I fully approved of people cheating, but right now I’d prefer they just set up some sort of funds transfer. It would be nice if the whole gang didn’t need to show up for their protection money and leave me marooned in a city that made Dixie look like Wilberforce’s parlour.

“But in four weeks you’ll be moving?” We’d already been hunting for the dragon for something like three months, traveling aboard the river had been fun until it turned monotonous and then for our last weeks on the Confused Tortoise extremely stressful. Changing ships in Selhorys had worked out well but now we were stalled in Volantis. I was ready to be done with it and was bitterly regretting missing my previous shot. At the leader of the caravan’s agreement I handed over a handful of gold to reserve our spot then turned back for a journey through the streets.

I’d met the man, he reminded me almost distractingly of the peddler from Aladdin, inside an enormous building, the Merchant’s House, which doubled as inn. It was another of the superstructures of the world, this entire planet was like Texas, and was filled with the eponymous merchants and traders of all varieties. Just walking through it, my long coat and staff drawing no attention in the cosmopolitan city, I’d been bombarded with offers. Gold, spices, books, sex, and slaves, all the same to the proprietors in the inn and the vast square surrounding it. I was almost tempted to veil myself as I entered the throng but instead I just strode through it, keeping my eyes level as I tried to ignore the depravities around me. Things would change I vowed to myself, I would make sure of it.

The walk back was largely uneventful, I’d had to intimidate a group of pickpockets when the Mantle’s reflexes made me catch a thief’s hand and he turned out to have friends. Throwing him
bodily into them seemed to give them the idea they should seek weaker prey and I made it the rest of the way to the black wall unmolested.

The wall was intriguing, it was a solid mass of stone thrust up from the bedrock and shaped by Valyrian magic. Now that I was an accomplished architect using similar methods I couldn’t help but be impressed. They were two hundred feet tall, a number that couldn’t help but seem excessive, and thick enough to have a chariot race on top that we’d apparently just missed.

Normally as a foreigner I’d be barred from entering into the city center but the bronze medallion I’d found in one of my old jobs served me well. The estate that the family owned for travelers was inside and they had a slave at every gate to bring any of my party and me into the restricted area. I tipped the slave excessively as he ushered me to our temporary home, I might not be able to free all of them yet but giving a few a jumpstart for self manumission only cost money. He didn’t react at all to the coins but hopefully he’d appreciate the gesture.

The girls were in the living room of our suite, all of them had been happy to be pampered and get off the boat but our enforced waiting had begun to irk them as well. “Any luck, Papa?”

“They say the weather’s too bad, cloudy with a chance of being murdered or carried off into slavery.”

“We could ride out ourselves, we don’t need protection.” Obara had seemed to calm down after our little adventure but being cooped up had scraped some of that away.

“What good would that do? None of us know anything about the route and I can count my long solo voyages on horseback with no fingers.” If it were just Maggie and I we’d be fine. We could hide from anything we couldn’t outfight, but bringing along our full group would make that far harder. I’d prefer to have guards and experts guiding us, at least until we turned for our inevitable meeting with Ancalagon.

“Even if we join a caravan will we even be able to reach him?” Nymeria turned from her perusal of the cosmetics Maggie had badgered me into buying for her. “You say he’s southeast, the only thing in that direction is Valyria. It’s been eating expeditions ever since the Doom.”

That was the other elephant in the room. Little was known about Valyria these days. They had been going along business as usual, burning, enslaving, conquering and squabbling until one day it all stopped. There’d been a cataclysm of epic proportions, earthquakes, tsunamis, eruptions, the entire peninsula was effectively destroyed in minutes. That had been over three hundred years ago. Books and travelers claimed that whatever had killed Valyria was still there. I’d been able to deal with all the magic of this world and I felt confident I could test the power there without excessive danger. Of course that’s exactly what everyone else who’d tried had thought so I might be suffering from overconfidence.

“That’s another reason to travel with a caravan. We have a host of unknown dangers, we might as well minimize the ones we can.” Obara nodded, clearly unhappy with my caution. I had no doubt that she felt I was being timid. She’d seen me slaughtering the stone men and no doubt thought I’d do the same to the Dothraki. I wouldn’t tell the truth about my reasons, the threat of lethal magic was almost better than the actual magic, but she was losing respect for me. Her problem.

The four of us settled into various corners of the room. I’d found and was reading an actual newspaper, I’d had no idea my presses had made it this far, when there was a knock on the door. I got up, shrugging on my coat as I went, and looked through the eyehole. It was one of the household
slaves, holding a salver with a piece of paper on it.

Somewhat intrigued, I threw open the bolts and opened the door, the man bowed neatly and presented the tray to me. “There is a gentleman waiting in the courtyard who wishes to speak to you.”

I took the card, it had a flock of birds on it but nothing else. I turned it again, the other side remained frustratingly blank. “Did he give a name?” I hadn’t even known cards were a thing here, I half felt like I’d fallen into a regency novel.

“He only said that the last time you spoke had been on the Doldrum with Johannes and Mangini.”

Varys.

We were a continent away from where we’d last met and I had been keeping a relatively low profile the entire time I’d been in the city. It seemed he hadn’t abandoned the spying game afterall. If he was here I wanted to know what he knew and why.

“Do you have conference rooms where we can meet?” If he knew we were here denying him the precise location of our room might be an entirely lost cause but paranoia had always seemed sensible to me. The man nodded so I turned back to Maggie. “I’m going to meet Varys, be careful and don’t let anyone in but me.” I couldn’t help but notice Obara’s sudden interest at the name, she was getting up but I’d rather Varys knew as little as possible. With a thought the door slammed behind me and a whispered word froze it in its hinges. By the time she got it open the meeting would be over.

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The slave led me up to a room that was a mix between a tower and a widow’s walk. It was half enclosed with its open side looking towards the sea. The black walls were in the way of course, even from the hill we were on they loomed, two hundred feet was more than anyone really needed. I sat at the single long table and waited, trying to decide what Varys was up to.

He’d already tried to recruit me, not especially hard, but I hadn’t been interested and he should know that I wasn’t someone to be causally trifled with. My reputation would have kept him away if he didn’t have a decent reason, hanging out with living siege weapons wasn’t something normal people did. The last time we spoke he had believed the Targaryens were dead, but had offered a blank check to have me visit his master. From what I knew of him, Johannes had viewed him as the greatest information broker, he probably had ulterior motives past his claimed curiosity. I had no idea what they were, but speaking to him would probably answer more questions than my speculation.

I had just poured myself a chilled glass of wine, it was safer than the water and the air was warm, when Varys was led into the room.

“Ser Harry, thank you for seeing me.” The bald man sat, smoothing his robes as he lowered his bulk lightly into a chair.

As the servant left I called the wine bottle to my hand, displays of magic always discomfited people here, and filled a goblet. “Whenever anyone travels halfway across the world to see me I have a hard time completely ignoring them.”
He accepted the floating glass as I sent it to him, his face expressionless. “I had business in Volantis, when I heard you were here I thought to seize the opportunity.”

“And what precisely is the opportunity? I’m occupied for the next few months I think.”

“Yes, and with two of Prince Martell’s daughters. I didn’t know you were such good friends.” He sipped his wine before holding it up to the light to study it. I had never really been a connoisseur so I wasn’t quite sure if he actually had a reason or was just stalling. Either way I’d wait, I had time to kill and a lifespan five times his. Now that I was in my forties and a father I’d finally acquired a modicum of patience.

At last he finished his examination and continued as if nothing had happened. “To sum up the opportunity in a single word: dragons.”

My mind froze, then shuddered into halting motion. His employer, a Pentosi Magister, had an appetite for the exotic I remembered. He claimed to be able to provide things as exciting as the last Targaryens and had wanted me to visit. It wasn’t much of a stretch to assume he’d be in the market for dragon eggs as well.

I hadn’t been able to keep all my emotions from my face and Varys continued with a faint smile. “Illyrio has several eggs, and with the aid of some Qartheen mystics he believes the ability to hatch them.”

I tried to deflect, to get a little more time to react. “Why come to me? I’m not a dragonlord.” I was probably the next best thing though. My illusions would have spread through the world by now, not to mention whatever tales the sailors who’d seen the Targaryens’ beasts told when we returned from Mini Tirith. If he was as good as everyone thought he might even be aware of the truth, our wyvern lies were flimsy at best.

“If I may be frank with you-”

“Changing your name is fine with me.” It just slipped out, I couldn’t help it. I had spent years here before I was fluent enough for bad puns and built up a considerable backlog. He smirked, the first emotion I saw that might be real.

“You are a wizard. The wizard some might say. Gaining your assistance in this endeavor seems only sensible.” It wasn’t though. If Varys and his employer truly thought they could get dragon eggs to hatch their best bet would be to mimic the Targaryens’ approach. Hatch them and keep them somewhere isolated until they were big enough to start conquering. Telling me about them before they had a trump card just massively increased their risks, they had no way of knowing I wouldn’t fly in and destroy all of their stuff. Either he believed he had such a trump card or they thought the risks of exposure were worth my help. Neither possibility appealed.

“The last time dragons were hatched by Valyrians they didn’t have my help, you seem to be taking a chance by involving me.”

“Greater than the chance our attempt will fail and destroy the eggs?” The eggs were extremely valuable, even the fossilized ones. I had a feeling that money wasn’t much of a concern to the Magister, anyone who had a continent spanning spy network was probably doing pretty well for himself.

I needed the truth, half the reason I’d helped Viserys was that someone else would succeed without
my help. He ultimately had and now an oligarch was following his footsteps. I drew in power, the air grew heavy and the glasses began to vibrate. It was theatrical, but Varys was composed and I wanted to rattle him. “Greater than the chance that you succeed and I steal all the dragons and leave you and all your men dead in my wake.”

His face twisted, he put his hands into the pockets of his voluminous robes and the Mantle rose, he could have anything hidden in there. “If we’re making threats—”

“We’re not, yet.” My shield bracelet was ready, I sent a warning to Maggie, this had the potential to spin out of control. “But you are aware of what I’ve done. This meeting ending in hostilities is a possibility you must have anticipated, you’re risking an awful lot. Why?”

Varys seemed to calm slightly, his body relaxed even as his face returned to its placid mask. “Illyrio can give you much for your cooperation, we have money and power—”

“I have money and power, as much as I desire. You must have a better reason and until I hear it I won’t be helping.” I released the power in a wash of wind as I spoke. Further threats wouldn’t be useful unless this meeting went violent and Varys was surely aware of the likely outcome of a confrontation.

He sat, motionless staring into the middle distance for a near eternity before he answered. “This is not our first attempt.”

“The eggs were destroyed so losing the second batch isn’t a major risk?” That wasn’t entirely sensible I thought, but at least it was a decent explanation. I wanted more though and Varys realized it.

“Not quite,” he had to pull himself together before he continued. ”The eggs hatched, however as soon as the beasts were able to fly they left.”

My mouth dropped, that wasn’t quite the worst case scenario, but it was far from ideal. “You let a bunch of juvenile murder-beasts escape?”

“So did the Targaryens I hear.” There it was, that was his trump card. If he knew about Ancalagon he knew practically everything. Oberyn and a hundred guards were a decent force but a mercenary company or even just infiltrators could take them. He’d have to be warned as soon as I could manage. I held up my hand to stop Varys from speaking further.

“Before you continue, remember that I’ve gone to a not inconsiderable amount of effort to keep those children alive.”

He nodded, barely phased by my warning, his earlier nervousness might have been an act or he had ice-water in his veins. “I am aware of your actions Ser Harry. Neither I nor my employer wish to come into conflict.”

“Generally those who don’t want to fight me avoid threatening or spying on my friends.” I took a swig from my wine glass, before setting it down sharply. “Do you know where they went?”

“The dragons? Can you track a bird on the wing?- no even if you can, we cannot. Our warlocks report something is clouding their sight.” Quaithe no doubt, that explained how drained she was.

“How long ago was this?” If Varys had come looking for me it must have been awhile. Messages
could travel quickly, he had to know I’d left Braavos and then he wouldn’t have known where I was until his network spotted me. Assuming he was based out of Pentos it would have been a month at the absolute minimum. With that much time the dragons could be anywhere.

“Three months, they just took off and did not come back, none of my agents have seen any sign of them.” That matched up with Ancalagon, maybe there was some sort of migratory instinct in dragons or maybe it was something else entirely. If they were able to fly they had to be a few months old at least, they must have been hatched almost immediately after I met Varys for the first time. They’d be smaller than the Targaryens’ but the gap would rapidly decreasing, especially as these ones would have had been wild and growing quickly.

With a sigh and a thought I called Maggie, “All three of you come up, get the guards too.” Across the table Varys was sipping his wine, it was impossible to see that he’d just delivered news to change the balance of power in the world. “You should know that I won’t allow wild dragons to live if they’re endangering humanity. Yours, the Targaryens, anyones. If you can’t control them I won’t let you try again.”

He nodded, looking almost satisfied and placed his hand holding the glass back on the table. “That’s only sensible-” I cut him off with a burst of force, pinning him to the wall as I flung the table to the side with a single hand and a thunderous crash.

“I’m not finished. I let the Targaryen dragons live. They exist at my sufferance only because I think they’ll keep the peace in this world.” He was squirmed against the telekinetic bonds as I loomed, his eyes were level with mine as he struggled. “As soon as you or anyone starts to use them to burn armies…” The sun burst into life above my hand, the heat blistering from a yard away. “You’ll wish it had been the dragons that destroyed you.” I turned and let him drop to the ground gasping, I’d humiliated him and the least I could do for his pride was let him recover in privacy. Besides I could see his reflection.

“Those rules apply to Viserys as well and I might change my mind about them. Don’t make me regret my choices.” I turned back, he was mostly unruffled but I could feel the fear in him, the Mantle exulted in it. “Now as you know Obara Martell is with me. Her father sent her along, if you want to negotiate with the Targaryens she’s your immediate option. I’d prefer there be only one faction with dragons, I’m sure you can see the advantages. I hope you can come to an arrangement.”

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Varys was silent as I manhandled the table back into place. For all the Mantle’s disadvantages, poor impulse control, murderous urges, the very real possibility it was subsuming my free will- Ok, it was mostly disadvantages but super-strength was still incredible. Will had once said that every man from the ages of ten to thirty dreamed about getting superpowers, I knew for a fact that I did and I’d already had a set.

The wine had been spared, keeping it on a separate liquor cabinet had worked out well, so I poured myself and Varys another glass. He accepted it but remained silent. I could hear footsteps approaching, presumably the girls, and Maggie’s tap on my mind confirmed it. I unlocked the door with a gesture as the three of them arrived, Cletus and Ryon taking up stations outside of the room.

“Lord Varys, my daughter Maggie and the eldest children of Prince Martell, the Ladies Obara and Nymeria.” Nymeria was the only one to curtsy, Obara merely glaring and Maggie moving to my
side. “I think it would be best to clear the air. Do you mind if I summarize?”

He gave each of them a long searching look, memorizing their faces as any spymaster would before nodding. “I think that would be best Ser Harry, we wouldn’t want there to be any other misunderstandings.” I’d probably made an enemy of the man, slamming people into the wall certainly wasn’t the way to make friends, but I’d wanted him rattled.

“Alright there are a bunch of dragons on the loose and Varys knew about the Targaryens.” Varys looked startled as did Obara, of course the spymaster probably expected a little more dissembling compared to Obara’s actual surprise. “Varys’s set, assuming he ever gets them under control, are going to have the same rules as yours. No torching defending armies and no wild ones. I thought you’d appreciate the chance to thrash out some sort of detente.”

“When I return to my employer he will wonder why he should follow such rules.” Varys sipped from his wine after he finished speaking, his face unreadable.

“I suppose there are two reasons.” I raised a finger. “First, human lives are precious and should be preserved whenever possible.” No one ever seemed to buy that and the reception here was no different as I raised a second finger. “Second, I’ll kill all the dragons from any side that breaks them.”

He raised an eyebrow. “He won’t be alone in doubting your power.” The man managed to sound as if suspecting me of exaggerating my ability was an entirely aberrant and abhorrent behavior that he regretted even being aware of. “Are you truly so confident to face a dragon, a new field of fire?”

I grinned, not a smile, this was closer to baring my teeth. Varys didn’t trust me, my previous displays hadn’t persuaded him of my power. I had one easy option to convince him, or at least to make an impression. For only the second time in this world I intentionally met another’s eyes.

I stood amidst an immense web. People- peasants, knights, lords, and kings- stood upon the strands and all their words and actions sent vibrations running back to the center where Varys, a strangely androgynous figure, lingered. He had strings in his hands and he plucked them, playing them like a harp or guitar. Every strum rippled out and the people changed in response, growing closer or paranoid or violent or a hundred other things. Through it all Varys watched. He plotted, planned, and above all, he never stopped playing.

The world returned in a rush of sounds and colors, with the help of long experience I shook it off as Varys looked at me with a mixture of horror and awe. “What are you?”

My grin was back, wider and more feral than ever. “I thought you knew. I’m the wizard. And while I haven’t killed a dragon yet,” I looked down at my gloved hand and he followed my gaze, “my flames are hotter.” He didn’t look up immediately, staring at my hand and thinking. He’d taken the soulgaze better than most but they were disconcerting at the best of times. It didn’t help that my soul was apparently particularly terrifying.

“Now that we’ve both gotten to know each other a bit better I thought I’d try to move this along.” I looked between a confused Obara and the still pensive Varys. “I let dragons come back into this world once because I thought that there would be fewer wars if only one side had practically invincible murderbeasts.”

“The Valyrians were quite vigorous in their conquests actually.” Varys still looked grey, he’d recovered from being pinned to the wall far faster than from seeing my soul, I wasn’t entirely alright with whatever that meant. “The Rhoynish, the Ghiscari, even Westeros on some level.”
“Less than a continent in several thousand years of ruling? The Dothraki have done just as much with only horses.”

He nodded, either conceding the point or not wishing to further contest it. “Well then as you said, let’s move along.” He turned to Obara who met his gaze fearlessly, I noticed the slightest hitch in his motion before he met her eyes. “I suspect your father and uncle intend to help seat Viserys on the Iron Throne as soon as his dragons are large enough? And have Arianne marry him?”

She nodded, a short sharp gesture. “Broadly yes. What does a magister hope to do with the greatest, her eyes flicked to me and back, “weapons in the world?”

“Rule obviously.” Varys swirled his wine as he spoke, looking out over Volantis. “Did you know that the Triarchs once asked for Aegon the Conquerer to lead their armies, to rebuild Valyria after the Doom?”

“And Illyrio wants to give it a try?”

“And why shouldn’t he? Pentos is the largest of the Free Cities yet they have been brought low. Braavos sank their fleets, crippled their armies and all around them scavengers wait. Dragons would have reversed that in one stroke. The horselords wouldn’t dare approach and the bankers would once more remember why their forefathers fled.”

“How did you plan to control them?” Maggie’s question after Varys’s exposition seemed to surprise him.

“To own the truth I’m not sure that was a part of Illyrio’s plan. When I left Westeros and joined his service he already had the eggs and several warlocks he’d hired mostly on a whim.” His hands were suddenly expressive, as if his frustration with anyone who didn’t plan fifteen steps ahead needed to escape. “He actually directed me to hire your father when I was in Braavos, Illyrio has always been a man of action rather than sober contemplation.”

“Well it almost worked.” Nymeria turned back from the balcony, she had gone to look over the city and was only returning as she spoke. “He managed to succeed where generations of kings with the resources of a kingdom failed, that seems like a win for moving forward blindly.”

“And yet here we sit with a flock of dragons loose. Some thought could have saved a lot of trouble.” He looked at me as he said that and I had to wonder what he’d seen. I’d gotten a look at his character but that went both ways. “In any event, it does seem sensible for there to be an accord between Illyrio and the Targaryens, a second Dance would profit no one.”

“All of this is moot though.” Obara’s pronouncement silenced the table. “So far you have no dragons and no dragonriders.”

“We have the eggs and a way to hatch them. Your charges aren’t the only ones with Valyrian blood. We’ll only need to get lucky once, Nettles showed that.”

I broke in before the conversation could escalate further. “Her dragon was also content to stay on an island while it was free. In the future try to keep yours contained.” Actually I’d achieved all I wanted with this meeting so I stood, my chair scraping backwards. “I’m glad we were able to come to an agreement. Now if you two are finished? Good.” I took a step towards the door as Maggie followed, Nymeria drifting behind her. “I have some incredibly important wizazrdy things to do so I’ll take my
leave. If either of you kill each other I’ll be immensely displeased.”

The three of us walked out the door and I didn’t meet Maggie’s inquisitorial gaze as we passed the guards. “Important wizardy things?”

I kept walking, not looking down. “I keep seeing those giant black unadorned walls and thinking how much better they’d look with some prophecies written on them in fiery letters twenty feet tall.”

“What would they say?” Nymeria had gotten fully behind our plan to add some excitement to history, her sister hadn’t really seen the point.

“Oh you know the usual. Vague pronouncements that almost anything can be said to fulfill, just like all the best prophecies.”

“You know we could do more here.”

I glanced down at my daughter as we finally reached our rooms. “Care to elaborate?”

Her eyes were bright as she spoke and for a moment I couldn’t help but see Susan. “Something a bit more weighty, we could leave a message that could cause real change.”
“You know if we can’t do anything but wait and worry about other dragons on the loose I have an idea.” Nymeria wasn’t completely accurate in her assessment of the situation, Maggie and I were working on another projector, but she also wasn’t too far off.

I grounded the energy I was working with in a spray of sparks and ozone. “What’re you thinking?”

Everyone perked up for her answer, our company was more bored than I’d expected. Staying in the lap of luxury could get old apparently. “We can find my mother!”

I craned over to look at her, her characteristic excitement was present and she was practically vibrating. “Your mother is in Volantis?”

Obara answered when her younger sister apparently couldn’t due to her overpowering desire to phase through the floor Superman style. “Father told her it was a Volantene noblewoman, that’s all we know.”

Finding one woman in a given city, a blood relation at that, wasn’t too tricky. However I’d been lying about my ability to track people ever since I got here and as much as it twisted inside I wasn’t sure if finding her mother was worth the risk. I couldn’t quite bring myself to say it though. I knew if I had a way to find my mother, at least one that wouldn’t leave me insane, I’d have been after it like a shot.

“How do you plan to find her then?” Maybe she had a plan already, something that we could do without any danger.

“You can use illusions to disguise yourself right? If you go to one of the parties as my father she’ll definitely see you and ask about me!”

Staring at her with my mouth open for a solid ten seconds wasn’t enough to convey what I thought of the plan so she kept going. “And if it doesn’t work right away you can just ask around for whom ‘you’ slept with last time! Someone will remember who my mother is.”

Clearly a response would require a bit more thought. “Most people wouldn’t describe me as the best with women but-”

“That’s a terrible plan.” Obara came to the rescue, she must have been feeling residual guilt from Chroyane. “Your mother might be married, or no longer in society, or gone from the city. It would be funny though.”

“I don’t think my father could pull off imitating Oberyn.” I wasn’t sure where Maggie was going with that but she had enough of me in her that throwing her a betrayed look was a smart bet. “He doesn’t quite have the appeal your father has.” Betrayed was the right feeling, lucky me.

“Moving on,” I’d rather not have my own flesh and blood continue stabbing me in the back, “do you have any other ideas?” I turned to the guards, both of them were in their thirties, it was possible Oberyn had brought them last time. “How about you two? Any speculation?”
The two looked at each other for a moment before Cletus offered something. “The Prince was in the Second Sons for awhile when he was last here. Maybe one of them might know?”

I’d heard of the Second Sons, an appropriately second rate mercenary company. From what I knew of the soldiers here the Geneva Convention would be laughed at and sell-swords would be even worse. There was no reason to bring myself to their attention if they were even in the city now. “Let’s table that one for a bit.”

“Did she leave you anything ever? A necklace or something?” Maggie’s suggestion, she was twisting her pentacle as she spoke was a good idea, especially because I could seize the opportunity to steal some of Nymeria’s hair and use that instead.

“No.” Nymeria’s blunt denial scotched that plan, I’d have made up some lie about the jewelry knowing where it had been but from what they knew of my abilities I’d need something. I was almost willing to bite the bullet and reveal more of my power, finding a lost mother hit several of my weak spots before I had a better idea.

“You know Varys, a noted spymaster is staying in this very city. We can just ask him.” I didn’t trust the man, and we certainly weren’t on the best terms but I’d dealt with far scarier people. He’d probably relish the opportunity for me or Oberyn to owe him a favor. If that also failed I had another option, spending ridiculous amounts of money. Gold had stopped being a problem as soon as I started enchanting and using it to find a lost mother was certainly better than bribing captains not to mention my excursion into a haunted city.

Varys wasn’t in at the moment but the slave sent with the message promised that he would receive it. With that assurance given Nymeria seemed to calm down even as I started to develop my own case of cabin fever.

“Who wants to go exploring?”

Shortly the six of us were wandering the mean, well perhaps not quite kind, streets of central Volantis. My initial impression of the city, something like the Baghdad of the Arabian Nights was holding but only barely. Among the stucco walls and arched doors that my lackluster architectural education could only describe as “Middle Eastern” there were other buildings. There were cyclopean stone structures, made of the same black rock as the walls indicated the former homes of the dragon lords. Taller, more graceful buildings with angled wooden roofs looked almost Japanese, although I didn’t know what culture here built them. Other types were sprinkled in, even an onion dome in the distance. It should have seemed messy, the casual mixing of divergent styles but it somehow worked. The manses and villas of the old city had a certain grandeur that even knowing the source of their wealth couldn’t tarnish.

The streets were nearly empty, the old city was restricted to the citizens who’d been here from the Freehold’s reign and they were far too important to travel when their slaves could do the walking. Our group must have been a strange sight as we wandered and gawked but if we were offending the gentry no one came to tell us. We couldn’t quite get lost, the wide streets and towers atop the wall made that impossible but we tried as hard as we could. Eventually we admitted defeat and returned to the hotel. Varys was there, waiting in the same room as before looking as if there was nothing he’d rather be doing than sipping his wine.

“Ser Harry, I heard I could be of service?” His voice wasn’t unctuous in the least, he was entirely polite, but the view I’d gotten of his soul hadn’t inspired any great trust. It was hard not to listen to all
he said and search it for lies or manipulations.

“We,” I gestured broadly at our little party, “have a question and everyone acknowledges that you are the best man to answer them.”

“They’re far too kind, I only listen and occasionally offer some aid.” The compliment had no visible effect, not even satisfaction. Sometimes I wished that my talents lay in other directions. Molly would have been able to divine his thoughts purely based on the emotions he broadcasted, but I was stuck with more mundane senses.

“Nymeria here,” I didn’t need to point her out, even if they hadn’t met earlier I had the feeling Varys had her entire dossier memorized as a matter of course. “Is searching for her mother. Having just encountered you, I naturally thought that you might know who she is.”

The spy glanced between the two of us. I could almost see his mind working, his thoughts crawling over his web as this new possibility snapped into place. At that moment I was sure he knew offhand. All the Martells were linked with the Targaryens and as such were important, even the bastard daughters. He wouldn’t tell us for nothing though, even if he didn’t demand immediate payment there was the unspoken understanding of debts.

“I do recall something of the sort. I know who might know better, but my own tasks,” his shrug was a work of art as he watched for my reaction.

“Perhaps we could help each other?” I didn’t especially want to owe anything to him but he should recognize the limited value of the favor. If he was as smart as people thought he’d probably make it something simple, just to establish a relationship.

He played with a ring before he answered. “It’s kind of you to offer but I couldn’t possibly impose.”

“I have some talents, it might be simple for me.” I wasn’t usually one for negotiation, it was already running longer than I liked, but something in me, perhaps the Mantle or perhaps my maturity was enjoying it. I half missed the days when I leapt straight to force and fire after a witty quip or two.

“I’ve been looking for several books, and they’ve had a rather interesting time of it, traveling across the entire continent.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Finding things is what I do best. I’ll happily give you a location for them in exchange for a name and address.”

Varys smiled at that and steepled his hands on the table. “Finding them is only a problem in the broadest sense. I know precisely where they are, down to the bookshelf. It’s extracting them that I require assistance in.”

That did make things more interesting. “I take it money isn’t a problem?” His employer was casually experimenting on dragon eggs, Illyrio probably wasn’t digging for change in the couch cushions. “The current owner isn’t willing to sell?”

“I don’t think owner is exactly the right term,” Varys reached for the wine and topped off his glass, “‘possessor’ might be better.”

“They’re stolen then?”
Stolen from Braavos in fact, from the estate of the late Tregar Antaryon.

107.

I hadn’t thought too much about Tregar’s library since an agent of the R’hllor had burned it down around me. It had been an interesting night, wildfire, invisible chases through the streets, and the prelude to a purge. Or a pogrom, something like that. I’d moved on fairly rapidly after that, developing the compasses and seeking other alternatives than raiding the temple but it had been an open mystery for a long time.

“Who cared enough to drag books this far?” I tried to inject the appropriate derision into my voice but couldn’t quite pull it off. The Word of Kemmler had led to mayhem and nearly murder on an unprecedented scale, just because it couldn’t happen here didn’t mean I wasn’t worried about the information in Tregar’s library. Knowledge was power, even if it wouldn’t translate into a necromantic vortex and the Wild Hunt.

“The books were rare and their subject matter has unexpectedly become relevant again.” He was swirling his wine now, not looking directly at me, most likely caution driven by the soul gaze. “They were taken by an agent of the Lord of Light. After the Sealord expelled them the volumes made their way here.”

That was an unforced error by me. I’d been in the temple, fought a shadowbinder’s wraiths and been one of the few to emerge entirely unscathed. That was a win but I’d failed to follow the first commandment of adventuring, I didn’t loot the place to the bedrock. “What are the books you’re looking for? In Braavos our library isn’t inconsiderable.” Making copies of existing books was part of what my printers did to practice and by now we had as many shelves filled as a decent elementary school library. Baby steps, but we’d found a number of nominally lost books.

He shook his head in reply. “I asked Johannes, some of the books we’d wanted were there but not all.” He glanced away, north. “At least one of the only other copies was lost when the Targaryens ‘died.’ You didn’t save any books did you?”

“I had other priorities.” I grabbed my own wineglass then, the pause served as an adequate segue to the real point. “When I proposed an exchange of favors I didn’t expect you’d want me to rob R’hllor and his merry men. Do you really think that a name you already know is the equal to my storming the largest temple in the city?”

“Well probably, but I’d been stung by strange magic before. Burglarizing the home of thousands of fanatic pyromaniacs as a minor favor for friend was not a good move. “Nope.” Nymeria looked crushed so I pressed on before she could say anything. “Now what were you really thinking of?”

A small smile flashed across his face, so quick that I wasn’t sure if I was meant to see it or his mask had cracked. Either way I didn’t like it, was he happy that there was a limit to my power, that there was slight wedge between me and the Martells, or that I had played into his hands somehow? “It was a longshot.” He drained his wine, either he had an excellent liver or he was nervous, that was his third glass since we’d started. “If you aren’t willing to raise the ire of R’hllor then I have a different
option.” He reached into his robes and I tensed, old reflexes flaring, before he pulled out a wooden box. He set it down and carefully opened it, the top slid off with an expensive sounding swoosh.

It was an anchor block, one of the first. I reached for it, taking it as he gave permission. The spells were still strong, the link was holding and a tiny bit of my soul was powering it.

I set it back down on the table, pushing it across to him. “Usually people carry the other part of these.”

"Someone was.” I waited for him to continue and eventually he did, not at all discomfited by the pause. “Give me the bearing of the arrow from here and I’ll tell you the name and address. It’s as a fair a trade as you’re likely to find.”

I pulled the block back with a thought and a whisper, tossing it lightly in one hand as I considered it. This block was one of the first, I’d stopped needing soulfire within the first thirty or so, that meant that a Voyager had owned the block. I didn’t know how or why Varys had acquired it. The whole point was that the blocks were stationary and he could hardly have counted on me being willing to help him. “Whose was this?”

“Euron Greyjoy’s.” Well that answered how it left the possession of my colleague, murder and piracy. How Varys got it was a different question so I waved for him to continue. “He led an initiative to hide the anchor stones within ships of the Royal Navy, it let the Iron Fleet choose their battles until we discovered their secret.” Even though I’d suspected the Ironborn had used my compasses for their revolution it stung. I hadn’t set sail nor reaved the coasts, but without me they couldn’t have done it. “That more than anything was responsible for me losing my position in Robert’s court. Much like Nymeria here I have a personal stake in the individual’s location.”

It was a pretty story. It was common knowledge that I’d gone out of my way to fight pirates, but even if he was lying I wasn’t sure how much harm a single bearing could do. I was inclined to agree, perhaps sensing this Varys spoke to further sweeten the deal. “If you need more reason the arrows were kept aboard his ship, the Silence, and even now who knows how many ships he’s tracking? Just because the Ironborn were destroyed doesn’t mean the Crow’s Eye can’t cause harm.”

Something about the name leapt out at me, but whatever it was vanished before I could recall. “If the arrows are on a ship they can move you know. This is a one time thing so don’t complain if it’s pointing at a patch of empty ocean.”

He nodded, outwardly pleased. “That will be entirely sufficient.”

“Caveat emptor then.” I held the block up and extended my senses out. There it was, a line of power, the bright link stretching north. I could feel the resonance strengthen as my magic and that of the arrow aligned across half the world. “Got a way to record this?”

He pulled another box from his robes, this one holding a more traditional compass. “If you could?” We arranged ourselves so that he could take a sight down my arm and marked it off relative to the compass’s magnetic north. “Excellent. One fewer pirate.”

I flipped the block to him as I returned to my seat. “There’s a step or two in behind I think. Now for our name?”

“After that I feel I should perform my own little act.” He waved his hands theatrically as he spoke, ending by plucking a card of paper from his empty hand. He presented it to Nymeria and stood.
“You’ll find your mother at the address, a Lady Marilla Vaelaros.” He bowed to the girls and I, drained the last of his wine and left, no doubt onto his next intrigue.

Nymeria was shell-shocked, her sister little better as they stared at the little square. “I didn’t think that we’d actually…” her voice trailed off as she looked around the room. “Should we go now?”

The sun was beginning to set but I thought we had another hour or two of light, even with the tall walls forming the artificial horizon. Even if it had been pitch black and storming out I’m not sure I would have been able to say no though. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Nymeria straightened decisively, her energy returned. “Now then.” She turned to her sister, looking up at the taller girl. “You’ll come with me right? I know your-”

Obara gripped Nymeria’s shoulder seemed to consider, then pulled her into a hug, uncommon tenderness for the usually brusque woman. “Of course.”

I gave them a moment for their family bonding, exchanging a glance with Cletus to commiserate exactly how awkward this was. “Well then we’ll escort you there and you can have your reunion.” I didn’t want to intrude on them any further but I had a responsibility to Oberyn to keep track of his daughters. I recognized the last name vaguely though, they had bought at least a few compasses so they presumably had the wealth to keep their house safe, Ryon and Cletus would be enough there and with them gone Maggie and I would have a chance to set up our message.

108.

A few hours after we’d left the Martells to their family reunion found Maggie and I at the external base of the black wall. I was industriously committing vandalism, etching messages deep into the previously pristine stone. We still planned to put up a larger message later, but this was part of our game, mystifying archaeologists.

Maggie was being her usual supportive self as she stood guard. “When the sun rises in the west? Really Father?” I ignored her for a moment as I finished the line.

“It’s allegorical.” I didn’t dignify her comment with my full attention, instead looking at the edges that had warped a little as they cooled.

“You know I never finished school, but I’m pretty sure that doesn’t mean ‘stupid.” I turned then, Maggie’s attention was split between making fun of my work, shining a light, and holding the veil making the alleyway appear to be empty.

“You know I offered to let you make this one but you didn’t want to. If you want to make fun of my prophecies maybe you should write your own.”

“I’ll leave the mysterious messages to you and Lydia.” We both took a second to think about Lydia’s project, she still wouldn’t tell us anything about it and I was worried we’d return home to a house covered in bizarre markings. For a second I thought it could be karma for carving bizarre markings across half the continent but I rejected that crazy idea pretty quickly. “I’ll stick to sculpting faces into random cliffs.”

“And they’ll just think it was some artist with a gift for scaffolding. I on the other hand will be the
basis for no less than three sets of prophecies.”

“Who’s going to be able to find all of them? Who’s even going to be able to read them?”

I turned back to the wall, drawing up power for the next stanza, plagiarizing some hymns felt like the way to go, before I answered. “Questions like those are the reason why I am the master and you are the apprentice.”

Her retort was nearly instant. “It’s more that you’re thirty years older and were taught by a competent wizard, for all the good it does you.”

“Details.” My concentration lapsed a little as I waved my free hand in dismissal and I made the line for one of the runes just a bit too long. Seeking a way to shift the blame to the obvious culprit I took a step back and shook my head ruefully.

“Maggie, Maggie, Maggie. We’ll never get the *Dresdenaria Protectiva* going if I keep making typos because I don’t have a good light. Can you pick a color and intensity and stick to it?” She didn’t reply instantly, prompting me to look back at her. She wasn’t listening to me at all, her attention entirely focused on the sky and the red flickering light beginning to fill it.

“I took a second to react, joining my daughter in staring at the illuminated clouds and towers of smoke. My time in Essos had dulled my edges, where once I would have been moving instantly I now had to gather my thoughts which were mostly a useless litany of profanity.

“Shit.” Maggie looked vaguely offended but she’d get over it. If the fires were intense enough to light up the sky they were probably over a broad region of the city. We were at the edges of one of the affluent foreigners’ district, all the better to avoid attention as we vandalized. We’d need to circle through a good deal of the city to get back inside the black walls, we’d specifically chosen a point as far as possible from the gates. I didn’t think the fires would be able to jump the wall but that still left the problem on how to get into them in the midst of a slowly panicking city.

I gently grasped Maggie by the shoulder, she was transfixed by the sky and led her out of the alley, dispelling the veil she’d been maintaining with a whisper. The sound that suddenly filled the air was a punch to the gut. When she’d set up her illusion I hadn’t realized it was blocking sound, I hadn’t thought she even could, but now screams and shouts were audible over the distant roar of the flames. The noise seemed to snap Maggie out of her fugue, she gasped once and shook my hand free as we hurried into the crowded street.

The streets were full of people, there seemed to be some groups, small organized parties, streaming in the direction of the flames but the rest were stewing around in confusion. Some were drawing water from the wells in buckets and wetting their roofs, I wasn’t sure if that would do any good but at least they were trying something. Others were just standing outside their homes, generally grouped by blocks, holding shovels and rakes and implements of destruction as they tried to look intimidating. City wide fires were an excellent opportunity for mayhem and these people, foreign professionals mostly, were prepared for looters.

It probably said something about me that I was more worried about the citizens than the fires but I’d dealt with fire and humans before and I knew which was more dangerous. Maggie didn’t though. I’d kept her from direct violence as much as I could, the closest she’d gotten had been the siege of Hightower and even then she’d never been close enough to see or even smell the results of combat. The inexperience left her focused on the fires, looking to the west where the fires seemed highest.
To get back inside the walls we’d have to go north and closer to the fires, at night the hotel only had one gate manned by a slave to let medallion holders in. I looked down at my gloved left hand as we hurried through the streets, I’d never really feared fire but I would always be aware of what it could do.

The fires were even louder now, we were getting closer and they were spreading but I thought we could probably outrun it. Of course almost everyone who had died in a wildfire had probably thought that, but I had some advantages that most didn’t. In any case we’d be at the gates in five minutes, once we were in we’d be safe.

As we approached the gates the houses and businesses got nicer but the streets were emptier. The people in this neighborhood were probably the spillover from the inner city and had family or friends behind the walls. I was a little surprised they abandoned their homes, but the choice between the fires that were growing ever nearer and poverty was barely one at all. Besides they probably left their slaves to guard them, why risk free blood?

In any case with the streets clearer we were able to speed up. Maggie wasn’t quite as far from the average height as I was but that was based on American norms. Here at something like five nine she was taller than most men and I wasn’t sure she was done growing yet. We both were able to eat up the ground until I stopped short and pulled her against the wall with me.

She knew better than to protest, trusting I had some reason to manhandle her and it was only after I veiled us that she spotted the reason. Armed men, swords drawn and dripping were marching in a loose group. They were moving away from the gates but I wasn’t sure I wanted to get much closer to anywhere they’d been. It was only a few hundred yards to the gate but it was closed to us.

“Well Maggie it seems like we’re going to have an adventure.” She was nervous but she’d steadied, our jog through the city had done my daughter some good.

“Don’t you always say adventures are best left to other people?” There was the hint of a smile on her face as she spoke, Maggie was going to be fine.

“I’ve also said do as I say, not as I do. You should know I can be hypocritical” I took another look down the street, the number of armed men was only increasing as more entered the city. Whatever was happening that way was nothing we wanted to get mixed up in. “We have two priorities, avoid the fire and avoid any fighting, I think south is our best bet.”

She nodded and I dropped the veil as we began to retrace our steps. I could have kept it up but I might want the power later. I had an immediate reason to regret the decision when a group of orange robed men carrying torches and clubs burst from a side street and fixated on us. The apparent leader, the only one wearing armor, moved his torch in front of his face, as if to look through his flames. He held it there for a second then dropped his torch, staggering back, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly.

I started pulling in power even before he shouted, it had been a long time since my last mob but I knew the signs. My pulse of force got there before he finished but the damage was done, “He serves the Great Other! Kill them!”
I was moving before they hit the ground, scooping Maggie up with a burst of Winter fueled strength as I ran. Sure I could beat them, maybe even entirely without magic, but I’d have to kill all of them to stop them from spreading stories about me. Running and leaving an illusion in my wake, a shorter silver haired man just to throw them off, was my best bet. And if that failed it wasn’t like I still couldn’t win if I had to fight.

I ducked into a side street, moving towards the river but also the flames. I wanted to get as much distance as I could in the time before they realized that the image I’d left was only that. The fires didn’t worry me too much. I hadn’t had much occasion to do it, but with a tuned shield I could walk through them. When people weren’t shooting at me I could pull off a lot of tricks I never really managed in combat. Of course if a building collapsed on me as its frame gave way I’d still be in trouble. Simply hiding in the middle of a fire wouldn’t work, even if the smoke didn’t kill us.

I’d moved a few blocks though, taking several rights and lefts to take me south and west. If I couldn’t get back into the old city getting onto the Long Bridge would at least put a river between me and the fires. I had enough gold to get a room for Maggie and I, perhaps even at the Merchant’s House assuming it wasn’t full of fellow refugees. It was good Obara and Nymeria were with their relatives, it spared me from worrying about them when I wasn’t able to protect them. Obara, despite her lapses in judgement, could protect herself but being within a villa with walls and guards was far better than being without.

“What was that?” I still had Maggie on my shoulder, she was putting up with it but I nearly dropped her when I realized she was there. I’d been unconsciously drawing on the Mantle for strength and carrying an extra hundred plus pounds of Dresden apparently wasn’t enough to register. I set her down as I thought about my answer.

“No idea. I know the ‘Great Other’ is the bad guy in their pantheon and he’s associated with ice and darkness…” I trailed off as the reasoning became abundantly clear. “They must be able to see I’m the Winter Knight.”

“Quaithe never mentioned it.” We were moving briskly now, joining into the flow of the crowds with the same idea as us. “You’d think it would be something that she’d bring up if she could.”

“You would think that.” So far all the mystically inclined Red Priests had seen something, the warlock in Braavos had practically name dropped Mab in his ravings. The weirwood too, whatever that had been. Either this world wasn’t as cut off from ours as I’d thought or the bad guys here just looked like Mab. Either way I’d have to avoid them, fighting mortals was dangerous and mobs with pitchforks and torches had killed more than one unprepared wizard.

“She was calling you Warden though, how could she see that and not the Mantle?” I steered Maggie gently away from some more exuberant young men as we walked and I thought.

It was peculiar, there hadn’t been any sort of power associated with me being named a warden. Luccio had given me a cloak and that was it. I wasn’t even wearing it when we crossed to this world and of my titles it was the one I valued least. Za-lord and Father were tied and then it went down really. “It’s a question for another day. I’d like to get the dragon business sorted out first.”
“Do you think there will be more?” Maggie was on with the questions tonight, each one was logical and led to unpleasant conclusions.

“Probably, if a random merchant prince managed it why not everyone else?” I was split on what to do about them, at this point it might be wisest to just hat up and start imitating Michael. If enough people had dragons I couldn’t intimidate them into following my rules, I could only be in one place at a time and if one person got away with murder the others would try as well.

Killing them was harder than I’d thought though, Ancalagon had shown that much. I hadn’t ever been threatened by him but he’d set the terms for the fight, he’d chosen when to attack and retreat. Somewhat luckily dragons hated me so they’d willing to attack with next to no provocation, but with actual intelligence behind them they could just run faster than I could follow. I wouldn’t be doing people much good if I was just chasing a dragon and its rider from one burned out fortress to the next.

Those depressing thoughts carried me to the long bridge, the swell of people not stopping the merchants there from their work. A flickering light caught my eye and I pulled Maggie with me to a stall selling glassware. It might have been the most cliche move in the book, but I picked up a hand mirror and held it to her, using it to look behind me.

“Papa I don’t-” It was one of the orange armored men, a torch in his hands but he wasn’t looking through the flames just yet. I didn’t think they could be looking for me, we’d outrun the party I’d scuffled with and it wasn’t like they had cellphones to spread the word about a short silver haired fellow. He was here for something else, that didn’t mean I wanted to hang around to find out what it was.

“We’ll take it.” I tossed two gold coins onto the confused merchant’s stall and surged back into the crowd, crouching a little as I went. I didn’t know how their scrying vision thing worked, the press of bodies might not block anything, but it was worth a shot. He didn’t have a brute squad with him either, at least one I’d seen, so I only had to worry about him. The man didn’t follow as we kept moving, his bright clothes and torch made him easy to spot as he stood, and I almost let out a sigh of relief before I saw what was awaiting us on the far end.

There was a solid cordon of orange, red priests and their lackeys lined the bridge with several staring intently into their fires. I froze for a second, there’d be search parties behind us I was sure and the men in front of us were ready for trouble. It wasn’t like before either, a wide open abandoned street was infinitely preferable to fight in then the packed bridge. Even now the masses of humanity were pushing us forward towards the red priests, whatever we did it would have to be soon.

I wished I knew more about their visions, I’d been happy with just being able to block them with a circle and thought that was all I’d need. Now it would be nice to know if they could penetrate a veil or if I could just walk straight through invisible. One thing I was pretty sure they needed was fire though, and that I could deal with. I reached out with tendrils of magic, feeling for the sources of warmth and light.

“Infriga!” I left it as late as I dared, the closest priest was about to sweep our group and his expression as his torch went dark was nearly indescribable. Shock, fear, embarrassment, they all crossed his face until he looked to his fellows and saw all of theirs had gone out. Fear was briefly ascendant, then he rallied.

“Close the bridge!” His men swung into action around us, for a second I thought we’d slip through
until a second line formed behind them. If we’d been just a little closer I’d have taken Maggie and ran, trusting in my speed and power to get us through and away before they could react. There were too many people in the way though, by the time I fought through and reached open space they’d see me coming and be ready. One of his colleagues had a flint, he was trying to relight his torch. I could keep stealing the fires but that was hardly a long term solution, I needed to get off this bridge and away from the followers of R’hhlor.

Stealth hadn’t worked, things weren’t dire enough to try violence, that left some sort of distraction. I moved to the edge of the bridge, struggling through the increasingly packed mob and looked over to see an empty part of the river. If all else failed we’d have an escape route, even if jumping into the Rhoyne was a last resort. It wasn’t quite the Ankh but I’d seen enough things in it on our trip that tetanus was likely the least of our worries. That and the giant potentially man eating turtle monsters.

I needed something loud, something so obvious that the priests would break ranks and I could get through. Luckily thanks to Maggie’s sense of aesthetics and theatricality I had something prepared.

“Forzare!” It was a wide angled blast, not my strongest but I wasn’t trying to hit too hard, I just wanted an immense splash. I managed it and for second wished I’d brought my crystal focus.

“Illuminas!”

Out of the splash a dragon erupted. It was black, spiked, and roaring, sending flames shooting hundreds of feet into the air. There was instant panic on the bridge as the mob pushed forward, shattering the line of priests as people struggled to get away from the monster discerning viewers would recognize from the Uncloaking over a year ago.

I let the illusion vanish into the clouds of smoke and kept Maggie close as we pushed through the crowd leaving the confused priests staring into the empty sky. I was feeling pretty good about the maneuver, no lives were lost, no proof of my involvement and we were off the bridge on the side of the city that wasn’t on fire. It couldn’t last though, the screams that had been dying down started again but louder, and I half turned to see what was happening.

There was another dragon, a real one, gliding low across the Rhoyne.

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All of Volantis was screaming, the fleeing masses stampeding from the bridge as the dragon approached. Men were jumping into the water, desperate to escape the beast even as the merchants’ stalls splintered from the force of the crowd. It was moving slowly, but that only added to the terror, the dragon looked indomitable. I’d have to change that.

The two us were off the bridge in a small alcove looking over the Rhoyne, I’d pulled Maggie there as soon as I saw the beginnings of the rush. People died leaving stadiums on Earth, I couldn’t imagine fleeing from dragons would make them more careful. “Can you veil us?”

Maggie’s eyes were locked on the approaching lizard but she nodded. A fierce pride filled me, my daughter was as brave as any I could ask for even as a part of me wished I’d never needed to know. She closed her eyes and I could feel her gathering power before she held out her hand and breathed a word. “Obscurata.”

The world dimmed, the torches lining the Rhoyne, the fires across it, and the bonfires from the Red
Temple dimmed as her magic twisted the light. It wasn’t much but if we couldn’t be seen people wouldn’t attack us. I’d be able to focus all my efforts on a sucker punch to the dragon.

During our forced vacation I’d been thinking a lot about the fight with Ancalagon. He’d been too mobile to really engage. Grown dragons were fast and agile and had no reason to fight me instead of leaving. I’d made him retreat sure, but even if I hadn’t run into the stone men he could have just flitted from building to building and left me chasing him all over the city. If I wanted to defeat a dragon I’d need to keep it in one place. I’d had a lot of ideas for that.

All of them needed preparation or for it to be closer though, so I waited behind Maggie’s veil, drawing in enough power that I could feel it boiling beneath my skin. The dragon was moving deceptively fast and seemed to be coming our way, not right at us but towards the spot I’d been when I pulled my illusionary dragon from the water. It was too much to hope those facts were unconnected, but it would put the beast within range for my second try at dragon slaying.

I needed to distract myself from the magic roiling inside me, the feeling was a terrible mix of a high fever and waves crashing against my skin. Keeping Maggie focused seemed appropriate. “So when it gets close enough I’m going to try to knock it out of the air. Keep the veil up but watch for Red Priests.” They had to suspect something was up, if dowsing their torches hadn’t been enough my dragon would have certainly done it. “Warn me if they look too interested in us.”

“How interested is too interested?” Her voice was a little strained, her talents weren’t with veils anymore than mine were and holding one around us was clearly taxing her.

“Oh you know, pointing, shouting, shooting arrows.” I was only half focused on the conversation, holding my staff up as the carved runes began to glow with power. “Hopefully this will give them something else to think about.”

“What are you-”

“Forzare!” My shout cut her off. Just as I had before I sent a wave of force into the surface of the water, barely ahead of the dragon. It started banking to dodge but I’d put too much spray into the air-it couldn’t escape the splash. “Infriga!” I’d drawn heavily on the Mantle as I cast my second spell, pulling the heat from falling water. All my senses grew in intensity in response, it only made the dragon’s scream more piercing.

I couldn’t see it through the icy cloud- the instant mist I’d formed from the vapor was entirely opaque- but I heard it crash into the water. I’d encased it in ice and whatever magic dragons used to fly wasn’t the equal to an inch of Winter’s hardest rime. I waited for the beast to appear from the fog. My sucker punch had dropped it, but not put it out so I held the energy I’d yanked from the splash. As soon as it was visible I was going to slam all my gathered power into it, a bolt of lighting to keep it in the water and then I’d just keep hitting it until it died. It had the advantage of simplicity and the Mantle was in full agreement with my plan. At last, it felt like minutes but I knew it had been seconds at most, I saw the thrashing form of the dragon. It was big, larger than Ancalagon’s size, but that was a problem for later. It was time to kill.

“Fulminos!” Maggie’s veil failed against my unleashed power. The bolt formed and erupted as I hurled it down like Zeus from Olympus.

I missed. Intentionally, but my entire will had been bent on smashing the arrogant lizard and redirecting it had cost me. At the last second I saw something, without the Mantle I couldn’t have, and it had taken all I had to pull the blow. The dragon had a rider.
Having a bolt of lightning miss by yards still didn’t do anyone any favors, the thunderclap alone was enough to stun but given the alternative was crisping them they couldn’t complain. Besides now I had bigger problems.

Despite my imminent difficulties I couldn’t stop myself from staggering against the railing of the alcove, suddenly doubting my legs’ ability to hold me. I hadn’t been able to smoothly redirect the energy, there had been a backlash and coupled with my earlier efforts I was running low. I’d used a lot of power on my first two spells, and I wasn’t as accustomed to throwing around as much power as I used to, especially after running across half the city with Maggie on my back.

Maggie was looking anxious- she was saying something! “Papa! They saw you!” I followed her outstretched arm and inwardly cursed, outwardly too. The priests and their lackeys, deacons maybe, were charging from the bridge, clearly ignoring the stunned dragon in the river. We needed to get moving and there was only one way to get away that didn’t involve a fight with screaming mobs.

I handed Maggie my staff then grabbed her, holding her in a bridal carry as I stepped onto the railing. Ice had worked well so far, here’s hoping it continued. “Infriga!” With that I jumped into the Rhoyne.

I landed on my little ice floe, taking the drop far more gently than I needed to in an effort to spare Maggie from the impact. The Mantle gave me superhuman strength, not whatever tactile telekinesis bullshit the writers gave Superman so he didn’t splatter Lois. I set her down and took back my staff, already planning my next step.

We needed to break contact, we didn’t know the city and even with the Mantle I couldn’t outrun an arrow or the mobilized forces of the Red Temple forever. Eventually I’d be brought to bay and when I turned to protect Maggie I might win. No one else would.

Escape was our only option and I still didn’t know the limits of the priests’ scrying. Distance seemed like a good choice for a first try. I shoved us off from the shore, using my staff as a barge pole was hardly the worst thing I’d subjected one to, and set to raising defenses. Or I would have if I didn’t need to grab Maggie to prevent her from falling off the side. I’d forgotten that she didn’t have my sure footing, for me it was firm ground not a perfectly smooth sheet of ice. With one hand on her and the other pushing us we were underway, just in time as the priests reached the alcove we were at.

The current wasn’t enough to move us away, this close to the ocean it went the other way half the time, but we had enough room that the mob couldn’t attack us with their clubs. Slings and arrows were a different story though. In the time they took to get them we might be out of effective range, but with enough bodies it wouldn’t matter. Besides we were going to slowly pass under the bridge, dropping things on people you don’t like was a pretty common human innovation I felt confident they could replicate.

A thunderous roar made me realize I’d forgotten a very important part of the equation. The dragon was still alive and somehow back in the air. It circled above us, roaring as it clawed for more altitude. Its rider was still present though from her frantic yanks on the reins she didn’t have much control if any. Following an atavistic instinct I pushed Maggie to the ground behind me, the priests forgotten as I focused on the larger threat. I knew what was coming, it would get to whatever it considered an appropriate height and then dive, spraying fire. It would have learned the lesson about the water. Dragons would never write a sonnet but they were far more than dumb beasts, my trick wouldn’t work twice. It would just stay at a distance and try to roast us, and if that wasn’t enough I was sure the priests would be happy to finish the job.
“Think you can hit it when it comes by?” I wasn’t expecting much of Maggie, for all her bravery it took experience or madness to be ready to fight for the first time. Once again she made me proud as she shakily stood, one hand on my coat, as one of her bolts materialized in her free hand. I looked down and met her gaze, she was scared but fiercely determined, her eyes alight with power. “That’s my girl. Wait for my signal”

The dragon sportingly chose that moment to dive with one last roar before folding its wings and shooting towards us. I wanted to slap it out of the air, with the Mantle and Maggie behind me I knew my magic wouldn’t fail, but the rider was saving the beast. I needed to get her off somehow before I could engage, before I could let Maggie attack. Fortunately I had just the thing.

My shield was ready, just a thought away from materializing as I focused on the rider, the Mantle giving my mind speed as she swelled with the dragon’s approach. I could see down the throat of the beast, down to the furnace of its heart and as my senses extended I could feel its fires. “Velo!” I’d refined my telekinesis spell, with it I yanked on the saddle, trying to sever the straps holding the woman to the dragon. It failed utterly.

I almost didn’t break through my shock in time to step forward in front of Maggie and raise my shield. As the flames buffeted us, there was something more in them than just fire but it wasn’t enough to be a problem, I barely managed to quell my panic. The rider was wearing a gem, a ruby set in a necklace that had flared red when my spell hit her and failed. Someone, likely the red priests based on the color scheme alone, had access to dragons and artifacts to block my power. It was time to stop looking for a win and instead just an escape. Dueling a dragon and an army from atop an iceberg was not something I wanted to do with Maggie at my side.

I jumped off the ice, pulling Maggie with me. The water was warm, in the areas that my shield hadn’t masked it was steaming, but the Mantle was cooling it rapidly around me and Maggie seemed fine. Luckily she’d dispelled her bolt before we landed, self-electrocution would be an especially embarrassing way to go. I shoved us away from the floe, and with as little of my power as I could I veiled us.

The dragon swung back over our heads but didn’t attack, in the darkness we were nearly invisible and with my veil we were completely so. It glided over the bridge, by now it was empty of all but the Red Priests, before circling around again. It had other senses than mere sight and my only hope was that the water was deadening whatever they used to detect me and the Mantle. I didn’t dare move, only clutching Maggie and holding my staff as the bare minimum of flotation needed to keep our faces barely above water.

If it attacked I had few options but all of them would kill the rider, this last attempt at escape was it. I’d told Uriel I’d burn the world for my daughter, daughters now, and I’d deal with the consequences later. As it swept over us once more I tried to prepare myself for that action. I’d killed DuMorne without going warlock but most of me realized that even rationalizing it was the beginning of a slippery slope. I’d do it, but it would cost me.

The dragon roared as it passed over the iceberg, it had somehow passed into a faster part of the river and was thirty or forty yards distant now. I was beginning to think we were home free before the dragon stooped, twining back towards us- no towards the ice. Watching the beast come over us was terrifying, I could hear it sucking in air before it spat flame and set the water ablaze. The ice was gone when the flames vanished, the dragon circled once more, roaring its triumph before turning and flying upriver.
We’d escaped.

Well at least one danger. I could see men launching boats from the banks of the river, between the darkness and my veil I wasn’t worried they’d find us but they had more than just eyes. Whatever power the priests had was still a threat, we needed to get out of the water. For now though we just had to go with the current, as long as we were unseen we’d eventually escape the cordon. At that point we’d need a better plan. Connecting tonight’s pyrotechnics to the Wizard of Braavos wouldn’t be too much of a stretch and at least one spymaster knew I was here.

My thoughts were frantic as we drifted in silence, Maggie’s frightened eyes locked on me as we slowly passed through the searches. We needed a refuge, somewhere to lay low, and then in the distance I saw it.

It was the poleboat. The one that had captured my attention weeks ago, with the blue haired crewman. Luccio had warned me against overly trusting those hunches but right now, floating through a filthy river with my daughter, I knew I had few options. It was time for a little piracy.

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It took what seemed like forever to drift towards the little poleboat. I couldn’t see its name, the boat had swung on its mooring line to point into the current and its stern was downriver towards the sea. It hardly mattered, we were boarding her even if she was called something like Dresdenbane. Well that could be tempting fate a little too much I thought, as we bumped against the hull.

I caught us on the bounce, the planks were slick with algae but the slightest effort sheathed my fingers with icy claws and they sunk into the wet wood. We waited in silence for a moment and I listened. If anyone onboard had noticed us they were doing a good job of hiding it. I heard four sets of slow deep breaths, one higher pitched than the others, a child or a midget. All were asleep, one was towards the stern, their lookout apparently failing at his job. I was a little shocked at their lassitude. I’d just gotten in a fight with a dragon and the city was on fire, you’d think they’d be up just for the spectacle. Oh well, at least it would let us get on unnoticed.

Maggie and I maneuvered in the water so that she was on my back, one arm around my neck and the other holding my staff. I looked briefly for a gap in the railing but if there was one it was had to be on the other side. I drew upon Winter’s power and with a set of icy crampons- were they still called that for hands?—silently pulled us up to the gunwale. I peeked over, feeling uncomfortably like one of the bandits in Home Alone, but I’d been burnt by overconfidence before, taking a little time to-

I caught the sword with one ice encrusted hand, with the other I launched us up over the railing the wood cracking beneath my strength. Maggie fell from my back, the sudden acceleration too much for her grip, but she was on the deck with me and the fool who’d dared attack us. We were both still holding onto the sword, my gauntlet had frozen the blade in my grasp and he was too shocked by what I’d just done to let go. He wouldn’t get the chance. There was no comparing our strength, I ripped the sword from his hands like he was a child and threw him to the deck. I looked at my prize for an instant, the metal was super cooled by the touch of Winter wedded to my mortal power. With two hands it was easy to snap it, I held them both for an instant, just to show him, then flung the pieces into the water. With the hierarchy firmly established I felt it was time to open negotiations.

“What’s your name?” My conversational tone surprised him but didn’t stop him from trying to scuttle away. A wave and a whisper left his clothes frozen to the deck. “I won’t ask again.”
“Griff!” The blue haired man was looking around frantically now, no doubt hoping that the commotion had woken the rest of the crew. I’d missed him somehow, he must have heard us bump the boat or something, so I did a quick scan of the area for any other ninjas. The deck was clear but for the still sleeping guard and the door to the cabins was still firmly shut. “I’m Griff.”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t be too happy to learn you were lying about something so important.” I hadn’t meant anything by it, I just wanted to keep him on the metaphorical back foot, but his sudden pallor told me everything. Terrified and surprised people weren’t good at lying and I had the feeling that whoever he really was was part of the reason this boat had jumped out at me. “You know I said I wouldn’t ask again, maybe if you tell me now..”

I let the claws on my gauntlet, at some point I’d acquired a full set of icy plate, lengthen and his eyes were locked on the barbed points. Sensibly he folded. “I’m Jon Connington.”

Well that meant nothing to me. Sure having his name from his own lips was useful for all sorts of magic, even some that wouldn’t drive me mad, but I didn’t recognize it at all. He had a Westerosi accent, and considering he had a last name he probably wasn’t a peasant. The sword was another clue in favor of that, but what would a noble-ish Westerosi be doing slumming it on a poleboat? Naturally I asked him.

That startled him, not quite as much as seeing a man covered in ice flying at him but for an instant I saw it before resignation swept the expression away. “I lost a war.”

“And?” Maggie stepped up to my side, leaving a bit more of a gap between us than she usually did. That stung but I could hardly blame her, right now I looked the part of Mab’s knight. I was covered in pale armor, exhaling mist, and frost was covering the deck beneath me. “Plenty of nobles were on the losing side and stayed, Robert was merciful to a fault.”

He surged up, or tried to before the ice held him fast. He stilled as I raised a hand, clearly getting the message. “He butchered children! His dogs raped and murdered the princesses and he sent assassins to finish the job!”

Maggie was unfazed by his outburst, hopefully she was just hiding it rather than blindly trusting me. The bonds had worked this time, but next time they might not have as sturdy clothes. “The Tyrells and Martells still rule their kingdoms and there are plenty of loyalist houses who remained. Really if you weren’t a Targaryen you’d probably be fine and all the adults of that house died famously.”

“They didn’t betray their Lord Paramount and then get exiled by Aerys.” My attention had shifted from Connington though, his escape attempt had been ineffectual but it had woken some of the others, the door to the cabin had cracked open a hair and the watchman was awake.

Right now I had the initiative but I needed to keep it, and faking omniscience would help. I kept my voice level as I called out to them, as softly as I dared. “If you don’t come out unarmed now you will have reason to regret your choices.” I wanted them to be quiet, sounds carried over water and there were still Red Priests upriver. They’d be drawn to a commotion and the drifting into the night trick was unlikely to work twice.

The watchmen dragged himself to his feet and the door to the cabin opened revealing two women. I’d heard four sets of lungs, aside from the abnormally stealthy Connington. “There’s one more in there.”
“He’s just a boy!” That was Connington, panic on his face and in his voice as the others gathered behind him. It said something good about him that even with him frozen to the deck they thought he could protect them. Or they were just afraid, well maybe both. “He doesn’t need to be here for this!” That fit with the sound of the breathing, a small child, four or five at the oldest.

I looked across the assembled crew, fear written on their faces and a stab of guilt pierced me. They’d seen the stick, time for something more conciliatory. “I’m not sure what you think ‘this’ is, but I think we got off on the wrong foot.” My armor melted around me as I spoke, if I hadn’t already been drenched from the swim it would have soaked me. “My daughter and I are simply looking for a place to spend the night. Away from dragons and their masters.” I fed a little heat into the deck and Connington felt it, shifting to test his new freedom of motion. “I don’t care what you’re doing here and I feel like I’ve convinced you trying anything violent would be foolish.” The icy claws came back at that line, just a little. “If all goes well you can drop us off on the east bank tomorrow and you won’t have lost anything but a night’s sleep and a sword.”

The Westerosi slowly rose, exchanging a look with one of the women, the taller one, before he nodded. “Just the night?”

“You can have us off at dawn.” A smile flickered across the taller woman’s face at that. “I’ll even pay for the charter.”

“That will be acceptable.” I resisted the urge to reply, it wasn’t like Connington had any choice in the matter, but I decided to be gracious in victory.

The taller woman took a step forward then, Connington looked as if he wanted to protest but he didn’t say anything. “Can we have the name of our guests?”

Her voice was low and smoky, now that I got a better look at her I was glad I wasn’t fully drawing on the Mantle, she was tempting even with my instincts mostly in check. I put a hand on Maggie’s shoulder. “This is my daughter Maggie.”

It was something of a habit to avoid directly giving out my name when possible. Maggie followed through with her part, “And my father, Harry Dresden.”

It had taken a few years but it looked like I’d gotten my old reputation back. They shrank back, literally moving back, as all the color again left Connington’s face.
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I let them react for a moment, trying to give whatever reputation I’d acquired the most time to work, before I broke the silence.

“You’ve heard of me then.” I swept my gaze across the four of them. They’d mostly gotten themselves under control but I saw Connington’s hands clench when I let my eyes linger in the direction of the cabin and the sleeping child. “I know Jon of course, but who are the rest of you?” The taller woman was about to answer but I played a hunch and cut her off before she could speak. “Keep in mind that I won’t look favorably on lies.”

She glanced at Connington, his face was blank, and seemed to come to a decision. “Septa Lemore.” Well that was slightly suspicious, but since I still had no idea what Connington was up to it wasn’t like I could prove otherwise. I also didn’t care too much beyond my new reputation as being able to sniff out lies.

“Sure I’ll buy that.” The other two didn’t seem too enthused about the idea of giving out their names but I let the silence linger as I alternated between staring at their foreheads. Eventually Connington, not willing to wait all night, stepped forward.

“Yandry and Ysilla, the owners of the Shy Maid.”

“Charmed I’m sure.” They nodded in response and with names to file my observations under I gave them a bit more of my attention. Pointlessly it seemed. At first glance they were unremarkable, small and dark. They lacked the poise of Connington and Lemore, as well as the impression of dishonesty. Appearances could be deceiving of course, but the man had slept through a dragon attack—well maybe that did demonstrate poise. I was pretty sure I couldn’t manage that.

I turned back to Connington who seemed to be rallying. “So why a poleboat? I know it’s pretty easy to get established in the Free Cities and except for Braavos they’re much less damp.”

“Anonymity—” I stopped him before he could continue.

“You have dyed hair and are slumming it on a dilapidated wreck of a vessel.” Yandry shifted at that, looking slightly offended but I didn’t let him stop me. “Now I’m not a sailor but I do consider myself something of a connoisseur when it comes to vehicles and this isn’t really much of one. Sure it’s still floating but…” We all looked at the boat, its slimy hull, the mildewed sail, and the more recent cracked railing. “If you wanted to hide that badly you could be a guard in the cities, keep your hair whatever color you wanted and be free of wizards leaping into your boat. But,” I let the word linger, I wanted to keep them on the back foot and giving them time to worry about whatever I was up to seemed reasonable, “I don’t actually care what you’re doing. We’ll be gone and if you’re lucky you won’t even have to wake up the kid.”

I took my staff back from Maggie and leaned on it, letting the faintest pulse of power set the runes alight. The intimidation factor was nice but I didn’t feel like sending up a signal flag for whatever the dragon’s senses could find me. They took the hint, all but Connington retreating to their cabins.

I moved to the bow with Maggie, looking upriver where search parties still were crossing the water,
men with torches in little rowboats. She was doing something I noticed, whispering as she held her hands close together. A few seconds later she drew her hands apart, framing a scene like a stereotypical director. From the side the region bounded by her hands looked strange, but as I moved behind her I realized what she’d done.

It was a telescope, but more than that she’d shifted the light such that everything in her field was as bright as day. We watched the searchers peering into the depths while others combed the banks. There was no sign of the dragon and the streets were still deserted except for the red priests and their acolytes.

“Cool trick.” Maggie looked up quickly, her face twisted in concentration but she smiled.

“Lydia and I were talking about it, I can’t really do it during the day though.”

I put my left hand closer to hers, trying to feel the magic more directly as I questioned her. “Too bright?”

“Lydia said something about probably non-cancerous levels of UV if the sun’s out, I didn’t think I wanted to find out more.” I just nodded, it figured easy nightvision would have some drawback or everyone would be doing it. There might be someway around that though, or at least ways to exploit similar spells. I’d have to get Maggie to show me how it was done. “What are you going to do about the dragons?”

I stayed crouched behind Maggie, looking through her hands at the commotion. “I don’t really know.”

“The whole monopoly on force thing is out the window, and I bet that your threats won’t seem as persuasive anymore.”

I had rather visibly failed to kill a dragon. Hoping Varys wouldn’t notice seemed incredibly foolish and he might have taken an entirely different lesson from the night. “As long as they have riders they’re pretty difficult to kill, I don’t want anyone to notice that though.”

“Why- oh,” she canceled her spell and turned back to me as I stretched out again. “The Laws?”

“Yeah, I like having the threat of absurd and out of context levels of force.” I was suddenly sick of watching the red priests and looked towards the ocean. Connington was at the stern, observing both of us. “I’m back to being feared and that will only last as long as people are too afraid to test it. Right now we’re still unknown but Varys and others are going to take tonight as an upper limit.”

“You could have brought it down.” She was still looking at the sky, back where the dragon had vanished. “Non-lethally though.”

“I have some thoughts.” No good ones but if nothing else Lydia would probably have some suggestions. I couldn’t be the first wizard to fight mortals flying through the air and someone must have a solution or nasties would just strap mortals to their mounts. Well maybe not, flight was difficult and mortals were generally viewed as food or an amusement, not a tactical vest.

“You’ll have to make a statement,” sparks flickered through her fingers, “shut them down hard enough that they won’t dare to try again.”

“That’s easier said than done,” I agreed with her but I wasn’t sure it was even possible. People were
brave, ambition led men to try things they knew had terrible chances, and then there were fools who might succeed in ignorance. Ebenezer had dropped a satellite on the Reds in an effort to get them to back off, it hadn’t worked and I didn’t have a convenient Russian orbiter or a tool to stop the inevitable corruption. “Our first priority has to be getting out of this city though, I don’t want to deal with a cordon of Red Priests.”

“We could just bust out.” I knew she was just throwing out ideas but I gave it a moment’s consideration. It seemed likely to just end in disaster, I had visions of orange robed men surrounding us on the Demon Road.

“Well at least I know you’ve inherited something of the Dresden ethos.” She gave me a mock glare and I smirked in reply. “I’d prefer to something a bit more subtle as a first attempt.”

“We’ll probably only get one try, if they catch us we’ll be busting out no matter what.”

I looked down the river, at the hundreds of moored ships. “I think some options have dramatically better odds of success. Besides,” I gestured vaguely at the black walls, invisible in the smoke of the burning city. “We need to get the Martells out too.”

“The Martells are here?” Connington was on the deck beneath me in an instant, the Mantle had roared to life and I had an icy claw a millimeter from his eye. If he blinked he wouldn’t be getting the eyelid back.

“Generally it’s unwise to eavesdrop.” Maggie was crouched next to me, her lightning flickering between her fingers. “In this case spectacularly so.”

I stood, but ice rose with me. A frozen sarcophagus locked him to the deck and my armor had flowed up leaving me fully encased. “How much did you hear?”

His stoic face had evaporated, terror was writ across his face. “Nothing, I was coming to ask and I just heard you say the Martells—” The ice groaned as it tightened around him. “That’s it! I swear it!”

“You know you’re a bit of an enigma Connington, and until now I didn’t really care.” I let the ice slacken for an instant, no longer crushing him. “But you’re trying real hard to move up the list of my priorities. Why do you care about the Martells?” I let the ice contract again while I went over our conversation. He couldn’t have heard much, when we were talking about limits he was at the back of the boat. I couldn’t know quite when his absurdly stealthy tread brought him in earshot but hearing our plans to leave the city wasn’t especially sensitive. If all else failed we could just leave them locked up until we left, then put them into an enchanted sleep so they couldn’t reveal our plans. He was shivering and I suspected his extremities were starting to match his hair. I was a little surprised he wasn’t talking yet. “You know I remember seeing you paying attention to the guards back at the top of the Rhoyne, why does an exile care?”

He kept silent and I was beginning to worry, at some point being trapped in ice was quite fatal and if he didn’t break soon I’d have few options. His silence was telling though, if he had a legitimate reason he’d spit out, especially since he had been nearly terrified of me to start.

Before he could say anything or I could release the ice Maggie took the chance to speak. “You know, we can just ask Lemore,” her eyes flicked to me for an instant, “or even the boy.”

“No!” He struggled against his bonds, they held of course but once again the child was his weak point. “Spare the boy, I’ll talk.”
“You see? He can be reasonable.” Maggie’s words belonged to Winter more than anything I’d done, but I could see the truth behind her words, she was scared. She was playing the role but this wasn’t anything she’d ever done before.

I pulled the ice back, just to manacles holding his limbs down. He’d warm up, especially in the tropical night but I wanted to make sure he was firmly aware of the balance of power. “So Connington, what are you really up to?”

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When the still trapped Connington finished his story Maggie and I exchanged a glance. To be fair we’d done that a lot through his narrative but most of that was Maggie rolling her eyes. I stared down at him for a moment, he appeared to have gotten used to being frozen to the floor by enchanted ice but it really wasn’t the scene for a conversation. I let the ice melt away from him and gestured for him to take a seat on a crate against the railing. He rubbed his wrists, they didn’t seem frostbitten but I was sure they weren’t feeling too hot. I gave him a minute to recover before starting up.

“So according to Varys you have a boy who can claim to be the rightful king of Westeros.” I tried to be strictly neutral in tone but Maggie’s amusement at the idea had gotten to me.

“He is the rightful king.” I’d half expected an explosion, but being stuck to the ground had apparently drained some of Connington’s fervor. “He’s the blood of the dragon, the son of the previous heir, that makes him king.”

“Does he have a dragon?” Maggie’s question seemed to batter him even more.

“No, but..” He gave a hopeless shrug.

I didn’t like kicking a man when he was down but sometimes you had to just put the boot in. “Well the red priests have one, and Varys claims his employer has hatched several.”

“That fucking eunuch,” there was no heat in his voice, not anymore. “Why wouldn’t he tell us?”

“The value of a Targaryen is dramatically less than a dragon.” I looked back upriver, still somewhat leery of the local one coming back. “Maybe sponsoring a revolution is less appealing than conquering whatever he feels like.” I let him stew on that while I tried to think about our own problems.

Despite this little divergence into geopolitics our underlying difficulties hadn’t changed. We still needed to escape the city and we still needed to deal with the dragons. And we needed to retrieve the Martells. It was times like these that I missed cell phones, not that I could ever use one but I had friends who weren’t quite as limited. It would have been nice to shoot Obara a call and have them meet us, tragically we still needed a Marconi and a Bell before that could happen.

The fires in the city were mostly dying down, from our position on the water I could see that they had never been quite as apocalyptic as I had thought. A few neighborhoods had burned and I didn’t want to think about the costs to the people who lived in them, but the whole city hadn’t gone up. That probably meant that getting back into the inner city would be easy. There’d be such a flood of people heading the other way that the guards, or more relevantly Red Priests, wouldn’t be able to pay
attention to two random travelers. “Get some sleep Maggie. I’ll keep watch until dawn.”

She eventually passed out on a bench. Connington had brought up a blanket still in his daze, but neither of us wanted to talk. The light of the fires dimmed just as the sun was starting to rise, the eastern sky retaining a constant glow until finally I felt the change in the world that came with the sunrise.

Yandry steered the Shy Maid to the eastern shore, a groggy Maggie joined me near the railing as the wharfs drew closer. The river was alive with the earliest fishermen returning as others set out and the first of the shippers departed for their destinations. I didn’t see any of the priests, but they didn’t need to be in orange robes. Or I didn’t think they did, maybe there was some magic in those old orange robes they wore. In any event we were ashore and moving towards the black walls without incident.

“If we’re trying to get out of the city how are we going to chase Ancalagon? The Dothraki are still there, caravans won’t be heading east.” I didn’t reply immediately. I had tossed Yandry a coin and promptly realized that was one of the last ones I had. At some point my coin purse, a term I hated even thinking it was so emasculating, had fallen. It was probably at the bottom of the river, a vast specie injection into the underwater economy. I still had the all important medallion to our hotel and I had more there but it was unsettling to be poor again, however briefly. I had gotten used to wealth and dropping back out of the one percent hit harder than I thought it would. Money was a social lubricant, having the ability to simply buy or payoff most people I met was a luxury I truly enjoyed after being envious of it my whole life. It was also the sort of safety blanket that made being in a strange city halfway across the world from my home an exciting adventure rather than a catastrophe.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” She gave me a bit of a glare, deflections were one thing she couldn’t stand, but she stuck with me without further complaints as we moved through the city.

It had recovered from the fire, existentially at least, the crowds were as full and happy as ever as the morning rush began. I suspected it was different in the affected regions but we’d avoided them, part of my clever plan to keep as much distance between the Red Temple and ourselves at any given moment. The crowds only grew denser as we reached the black walls, navigating around until we reached a gate where I found one of the hotel’s liveried slaves. He was distracted but ushered us through. Our water-stained clothes drew attention, but not quite enough for anyone to stop us as we made our way through the wide boulevards. There were few signs of fire damage here, not that I’d expected many. The massive walls would have served as a fire break and the only danger could have been embers swept aloft by the winds. Old Volantis was mostly stone though, it would take more than that to cause any real problems.

I was explaining this to Maggie, much to her poorly hidden dismay, when I noticed one column of smoke that was rising from inside the walls. I had the feeling that this was not my morning and I let my lecture die down as we turned onto our street. The smell of smoke was overwhelming and the streets were covered with ash. The hotel was gone. Well not all of it, the walls, the outbuildings and bits of the structure remained but describing it as a bombed out husk wasn’t entirely inaccurate.

I put one hand on Maggie’s shoulder and turned her to face me, speaking with the utmost seriousness. “If anyone asks we weren’t here.”

She shook herself free. “You’ve barely burned anything down on this planet. I don’t think you’re still suspect number one when anything gets set on fire.”

Maggie wasn’t looking at me when she replied, her attention was on the remnants of our hotel. Our
hotel where we’d kept all our stuff, tools, equipment, money and most importantly, dry clothes. Seeing all of that apparently gone was a real blow, I had been looking forward to changing out of muddy damp clothes before starting to plan our escape. Those things mattered when you were out of your twenties and lived a life of pampered luxury.

We pushed our way through the gates, joining the scrum of slaves, servants, and guests picking through the rubble. The fire seemed to have started from near our rooms, that side of the building was hardest hit and my hopes that we’d recover anything were sinking fast.

“Fire is purifying right?”

I kept my eyes on the smoldering building as we moved closer, there was still a decent amount of smoke coming up and there could easily be fires burning beneath the surface. Climbing around the wreckage could be a fatal and painful mistake. “Yep, just like the sunrise.”

“So Ancalagon’s scales..”

I stopped short. I’d been focused on the loss of our things, the fire had lost us a dragon. Unless I pulled something brilliant, something I didn’t really think was possible this time, our entire trip was a waste. “That can be a tomorrow problem.”

“And what about the Martells? Their stuff is gone too!” Maggie was starting to show signs of incipient panic, it had been one thing after another, even with her little snooze in the middle. “Wait, Lydia! Her crystal!”

I’d half forgotten about Lydia, she talked to Maggie more than I, but that was no excuse. She was physically fine of course, but not knowing our fates would hurt on a deeper level. For a creature of knowledge I couldn’t easily imagine a worse torment than ignorance. She’d have seen the crystal engulfed by flames and then go dark, she’d probably assume the worst. “We need to get back to Braavos.”

“How? We can’t charter a boat this time, your purse is at the bottom of the Rhoyne.” A smile had flickered across her face at the word purse, I elected to ignore it in favor of being happy that she was making bad jokes. Well not too happy, a good sense of humor was important but at least she was trying.

“We’ll go tell the Martells, I’ll throw a compass together and then we’ll see who has a fast ship.”

With at least a semblance of a plan we moved out, still drawing the occasional scornful look in our muddy clothes. The streets were mostly empty, only tradesmen and slaves dared intrude on the rarified neighborhoods of the obscenely wealthy. Nymeria’s mother’s house loomed in the distance, it was tall enough to loom, and the guards recognized us. They looked surprised to see me though, that might have just been how disheveled we were.

They showed us to a small garden and then left, presumably to get the Martells and gossip about how ridiculous we looked. I sat on a low bench in silence while Maggie admired the flowers, I was just glad to be off my feet. Nymeria and a woman, clearly her mother joined us, confusion on the girl’s face. “Harry? Maggie? What are you doing here? The man you sent said you’d only need one of us—where’s Obara?”
Due to my incredible maturity and lifelong dedication to both Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance I managed to avoid vaporizing most of the garden. Instead I swore. Nymeria’s mother looked shocked. I doubted she entertained foul mouth magicians stinking of the river often but with the grace of a woman born to wealth she held back any response but a raised eyebrow.

After a very satisfying expedition into the vulgarities of four languages I was able to get control over myself. In my defense it had been an extremely stressful evening. “Maggie and I have been playing tag with the Red Priests and their pet dragon all night, we didn’t send anyone here.”

Somehow Nymeria had picked that up from the previous context, she wasn’t surprised but she did stumble, her mother holding her up. She was a brave girl though, she collected herself rapidly and straightened. “If it wasn’t you, who could it be? And what can we do?”

“We’re getting her back.” I didn’t know how just yet, not that I’d mention that, but any other option was intolerable. Kidnapping struck far too close to home and I’d do my best to express my displeasure to the perpetrators. “Don’t doubt that at all.”

“Logistically we’ll have difficulties.” Maggie as ever strove to be the voice of reason. “All of our stuff burned with the hotel.”

“You were staying in the inner city correct?” That was Nymeria’s mother, Marilla something. In all the confusion I’d forgotten it. “I didn’t realize anything here burned. When the dragonlords built them the walls were designed to keep even the largest firestorms out.” You had to admire their thoroughness and forethought I supposed.

That information changed the situation though. It had been bad luck, or I had thought it was, but now it seemed like enemy action. Losing our stuff hadn’t been the biggest problem in the world, the only real issue was Lydia worrying about us, but now it assumed a new importance. I didn’t know when or why the fire started. The safest assumption was that it was an attempt on our lives, but when that occurred would be useful to know, pre or post dragon.

The Red Priests had recognized me, but that one warlock in the bowels of the Braavosi temple had also seemed to sense Mab’s power then. They might just have flipped out and attacked, not been specifically looking for trouble. They also had enough manpower that they could have tried a more certain way of killing me, not to mention their dragon. The whole thing seemed pretty haphazard for a religion with literal legions of armed men, and kidnapping Obara didn’t fit at all, but if not them who?

There was only other one person I knew in this city, and he did have the correct reputation. Varys. I had no illusions that the man liked me, but I had thought he’d be wary enough to avoid me. It could have been an attack of opportunity, just a low risk high reward play, or he might have seen me fight the dragon.

I’d threatened to kill any dragon that broke my rules, but I’d just failed to kill one. Sure, I could have, but I didn’t. Varys might have assumed I was a paper tiger, that the removing me from the board was the best choice. Taking Obara would give him leverage on the Targaryens, even ignoring the nominal Aegon he was apparently bankrolling. He’d probably be back for Aegon’s cousin then, his agents must not have wanted to press their luck.

Varys was famously successful, before he’d lost his position he’d somehow managed to survive a
regime change after clawing his way out of the alleys of the Free Cities. It was safe to assume he had thought his actions through, and even if he hadn’t he represented the third faction with dragons. He’d originally sought books from the Red Temple, then settled for Greyjoy’s location. If he’d sent his men in to rob the place that would explain the roving bands of priests I’d run into, maybe even the fire in the city. He was probably not long for Volantis then, he’d made too many enemies too quickly and it would only take one faction to decide that killing a spymaster was a great idea.

“What are you thinking Papa?” Oh, right I wasn’t in my normal solo monologue capable state, that’s one thing about being a detective I missed.

“I’m thinking we need to move quick.” She groaned and I shared the sentiment, I’d do a lot for a good night’s sleep. “Obara can’t be far but whoever took her will be doing their best to change that.”

“But you have nothing you said.” Marilla was concerned, but I couldn’t tell if it was merely politeness or actual worry about the apparent vagabond squiring her daughter around.

“Reports of our poverty have been greatly exaggerated.” It still sometimes threw me how people didn’t react at all to even the most famous quotes. “I’ll have more gold than I can carry twenty minutes after entering the Merchant’s House.”

I had enough gold for a compass and at this point I could shape the blocks out of anything, even a cobblestone pried up from the streets. We could get horses, supplies, guards- hell I could simply hire people. It might be smart to do that anyway, dispatch teams in all directions. The idea had me feeling more awake, or maybe that was just the mantle accelerating my healing. Tiredness was sort of like being injured, maybe this was a new aspect of Mab’s power, not just a second wind.

“You know that we will offer assistance?” I hadn’t known that actually. Obara was nothing to the noble family, the half sister of a bastard daughter. Perhaps my time in this world had made me cynical but I hadn’t expected anything. “Oberyn and I may have parted on,” she took a second to think over her phrasing with her daughter staring up at her, “less than optimal terms, but I did love him. I’m sure he’d help if the situations were reversed and I won’t do anything less.”

“Well that makes things easier.” Maggie had been quiet long enough it seemed. “But we still don’t know where she is, or even who took her.”

I exhaled, then laid my cards on the table. “Varys. I’m almost certain.”

Nymeria looked skeptical. “My father always said we had his support.”

“I’m sure Varys said that too, to everyone.” He would have wanted the Martells on his side, especially if he was scheming to put their nephew or cousin on the throne. “It might even have been true, before he got his hands on dragons.”

“Dragons?” Apparently Nymeria’s mother hadn’t been read in and had dismissed my earlier mention of the beast as hyperbole. “What do you mean he has dragons?”

“He claims to have joined the increasingly less exclusive club of people with flying death lizards.” Her mouth dropped open. “Along with-”

I was cut off by a servant bursting into the atrium. “Lady Marilla, you must come! To the roof!”

She stood and we all followed her, barely keeping pace as the slave bounded through the halls and
up the stairs. I nearly ran her over when she stopped short at the door to the roof, I did run into her. She took a few more staggered steps to regain her balance, but her attention was solely skyward. The dragon was back, circling above the inner city.

Nymeria, pushing past me through the door, was less shocked than her mother. She’d been far closer to the Targaryen’s beasts, but seeing the red monster circling in the sky, lit by the morning sun was something far different. The roof was filling with the various members of the Vaelaros- that was it!-family even as neighboring households turned out for the spectacle.

A muttered word from Maggie and a lense of air formed between her outstretched arms. It distorted the image wildly for a second before she managed to get it in focus, but then she got the hang of it and the dragon and its rider were right in front of us.

It was a woman, with hair as red as the gem at her throat and the dragon’s scales escaping from beneath her copper and gold helmet. Her face looked a little scorched, perhaps my lightning had done some damage, but she was staring down at the city from atop her mount without any indications of pain. She snapped her reigns and the dragon dove before flapping leisurely back to its previous altitude, I could see the men on the walls panicking as the dragon casually rose above them.

The dragon roared, the distance made it bearable but even then it could be felt in the bones. For me it was more than my just bones, I could feel the Mantle responding to the challenge, desiring another fight before I clamped down on it. Every dragon I’d met had been inclined to hate me, and this one had a human intelligence with the same opinion directing it. Getting into a fight with it tired, in the middle of a city, and surrounded by family and the family of friends didn’t seem wise.

Maggie released her spell and wavered, holding something that precise was taxing, and I caught her even as a wash of compressed air billowed from where she’d held her lens. I maneuvered her to a bench while inwardly berating myself.

The Targaryens had been keeping their dragons secret, as was Varys. Just because they weren’t ready for showtime didn’t mean that the Red Priest would follow along their script, that much power needed to be used. Now with the ruin of the aborted Pax Dresdena flying above us I could see the potential future of the world. A new set of dragon lords, made more terrible by their numbers and lack of unity. I’d hoped for neutrality, to enforce some standards or conventions, but that was likely shot now. If I wanted to change that I’d need to pick a side at last.
“We need to get out of the city.”

Marilla managed to tear her attention away from the dragon for a moment, half confused. “Then go, the guards will not..” She trailed off, already starting to realize the consequences.

“I know from personal experience that people tend to obey anyone riding a giant lizard.” For a split second I wondered who’d win in a fight, then dismissed my fond memories of Sue. “Right now I bet the Fiery Hand is marching. The city guards won’t question them with that overhead.”

“Then you must move quickly,” she snapped a command to her servants, her Valyrian almost too quick to decipher. “What do you need?”

“Gold, food, clothes and horses.”

“Not much then,” she gave Maggie and I an appraising look. “Three of those are easy enough, but you are both larger than anything we have on hand.”

I was willing to trade our drenched and muddied clothes for high waters, it’d be like I was fifteen again. “We don’t need to be the height of fashion.”

“That’s one height he’s never had to worry about.” That’s my daughter, she’s got jokes. “How are we going to get through the gates if they’re being watched? They have to have put two and two together and realized we’re here by now.” And good points, regrettable.

The priests had been able to spot me, and as much as I enjoyed the idea of a long chase on horseback it didn’t seem like the greatest idea. Luckily I was a wizard.

“We’re not going through the gates.”

It only took Maggie a second to grasp my plan and Nymeria’s excited gasp showed she wasn’t far behind. For some reason turning into the wind was coolest thing to her, she’d been incredibly jealous of Viserys for experiencing it. “An escape potion? When can we leave?”

“It’ll just be Maggie and me.” I looked to the girl’s mother, she was already nodding her permission and agreement. “You’ll be safer here and you don’t have the power needed to fight with us.”

Well Maggie had power but I wouldn’t let her face a dragon anymore than Nymeria. If she would be safer here I’d leave her, as much as it would sting. There’d already been an attempt on my life though, and while I assumed it was the Mantle rather than magic the Red Priests could track I wasn’t going to bet Maggie’s life on it.

“But what about Obara?” That brought me up short. For a second I was about to say something about a single girl’s life not mattering, but I had a long way to fall before I could accept that level of hypocrisy. It was true though, between the dragon in the sky and whatever Varys and his employer were up to there were far larger problems on the horizon.
If Varys had taken Obara as I suspected, two of those problems might only be one. She couldn’t be too far from the city in any case, she hadn’t had enough time to be moved. With the escape potions we could cover miles in an instant, perhaps enough to catch up to her. We still needed a way to track her though. Luckily there was one easy way. If I could guarantee she was with Varys I could try to home in on the portion of my soul I’d left in his anchor block Nazgul style.

That couldn’t be depended on though, for a man that paranoid he might have left the block or sent it elsewhere. He knew that I could use a block to find its compass, it wasn’t too big a jump to assume I could find a given block if I felt like it. Normally I couldn’t, I’d made thousands of the damn things, but for a spymaster operating largely in ignorance it might be too big a risk.

Past that I had nothing, no scraps of clothes, Varys was rudely bald, and I doubted I’d be finding any of his fingernails. Obara though, she’d slept here.

“Can you take Maggie to Obara’s room please?” Nymeria nodded and pulled my daughter to the steps down where she caught herself on the doorframe.

“What should I be looking for?” I heard the question she wasn’t asking. For years here I’d hid my true abilities, that was coming to an end.

“Anything.” Her eyes widened, then she vanished down the stairs. Marilla had twigged onto our hidden message, but she lacked the context to understand it and I wasn’t sharing. “I’ll need access to your kitchen, and then the supplies in an hour.”

“Of course,” she waved a hand in invitation and I followed her from the roof. She was silent for the first flight, but as we reached the bottom she turned to look up at me. “Do you have to run? Could you fight the dragon?”

The Mantle wanted to rise at that, it chafed at my retreat and even more at the woman questioning me. “There’s more to this than a single dragon,” the evasion felt hollow so I kept talking, searching for a decent reason. “If I fought it the city would burn too, there wouldn’t be any winners.” That wasn’t quite true, I could feel the tactics filling me now.

As escape potion to reach the dragon, a lance in my hand and one quick thrust would leave the monster dead or dying. I could cripple R’hllor’s followers with a single stroke, of course I’d thought that the last time I attacked a dragon. Part of me wanted to do it, to cowboy up and pull a St. George, but part of me, the larger parental part stopped me.

It had some arguments a brasher me might admit. The dragons had senses beyond the physical and their fires were the same. I didn’t want to surge up in an icy wind and have it nonchalantly turn and roast me. My younger self would no doubt have accused me of cowardice, but I had something more important to worry about now. Not to mention I’d have kicked over a very large and pyromaniacal anthill, the priests were far more of a threat to me than their beast.

A retreat was the wiser course for now. We’d hopefully recover Obara, swing through Braavos to pick up Lydia and then link up with the Targaryens, unless a better idea came to me in the interim.

“What can we do then?” She’d led me to the kitchen while I thought, so I started sorting through possible ingredients for the potion while trying to muster a response. I’d grown far away from the common man when I came to this world, further than I was back home. I had power beyond mortal understanding, literally as much money as I wanted and hobbies that could belonged in religious texts. For me fighting a dragon was an option, for her and everyone she knew it was practically
suicide. It was also what I saw magic being made for, what it’s purpose truly was. That belief, that faith, made the next sentence hard to say.

“Keep your head down.” It felt like a betrayal of my younger self, but I managed to suppress the guilt and started to pull together the components for the escape potions. Maggie joined me when I was halfway through, a pouch in her hand she quickly opened to show several black hairs. One problem down, the rest awaited.

Marilla came through with the goods, giving Maggie and I saddlebags filled with clothes, provisions and funds. She didn’t say anything as her servants dropped off the heavy loads, but the guilt came back. I knew it was foolish to spend energy now on a gesture. We were about to try to escape a hostile city and I’d barely slept in the last twenty four hours, but not all of my younger self was gone, and I’d always been a sucker for a pretty face.

After all this time it was easy to shape rock, I thought about leaving a crystal to send messages, but that wouldn’t help them in time for anything. Instead I reached for their threshold, it was solid, made stout by the continuous inhabitation of the family for generations. It was already strong enough that without an invitation I could have barely lit a candle, and that made layering wards onto it easy.

The protection wasn’t complicated, especially after all the practice I’d gotten warding the city buildings in Braavos and the practice I’d had tying magic to objects with everything else. Maggie watched in silence as I spent part of my limited reserves, but we’d been hosted without complaint, I needed to give something back.

I nearly staggered when I let the spell go, I could feel Maggie’s disapproval at my near exhaustion. The mantle was firmly behind me though, for all of its predatory nature it was of fairy and the interplay of obligations and duties was central to it. It wasn’t the same as riding out to destroy their enemies, but their villa would never be touched by dragonfire. Mundane force of arms could take it, but I’d done the best I could against the magic here.

“If the dragon ever attacks, don’t leave the house.” Marilla looked grateful, but she had no idea what I’d done. I could only hope that she’d believe in me and pass along the warning. Either way, as Maggie and I trudged towards the roof and our exit, we were leaving.

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Watching a heavily laden Maggie drag herself up the stairs I couldn’t help but laugh, unfortunately she was in no mood for humor.

“If you’ve got enough energy to laugh at me you can carry more of my stuff.” Despite her annoyance she kept marching, her packs swaying precariously. Four stories had never felt so long, even with the Winter Mantle reinforcing me I could feel a bone deep weariness. Maybe we should have had the servants carry the load, but we were already going to be asking a lot of the escape potion. Schlepping our own bags would ensure that they were associated with us when it came time to change states. I’d never carried much beyond clothes with me using on before and I was half worried about splinching. I was a little annoyed at Maggie for bringing it up.

Once on the roof I spun in a slow circle. The dragon wasn’t visible but I didn’t doubt it was somewhere close, probably within a bastion of Red Priests. We wanted to leave the city for home, that meant going north, unfortunately most roads north were on the western side of the Rhoyne
which meant we’d need to cross a mile of water one way or another. The escape potions might be able to do it, were I fresh I was sure I could, but ifs and ands etc.

I let out a sigh before breathing in deeply trying to feel a little more alive. Going north always felt good, Treebeard didn’t know what he was talking about, so I picked out a section of the walls in that direction that looked deserted and pointed it out to Maggie. I gave my load a final check and handed her one of the potions, she looked at it dubiously before raising it in a toast. “To poor decisions!” God that wasn’t ominous at all, I’d have to teach her about tempting fate. I watched her go, threw mine back, and then as a dry leaf before a hurricane flew.

Normally the feeling was exhilarating, like riding in a convertible with the wind in your hair except for everything, but this time I was preoccupied. Was I in charge of Santa? As the Winter Knight I was directly beneath the Queens in the org chart, but did I have direct reports? Back on earth were there elves awaiting instructions and annual reviews because I was out slumming on a different plane? Even worse, if old St. Nick was on the Unseelie side of the street, what did he really do the kids on the naughty list?

Solidifying luckily knocked thoughts of Winter Court bureaucracy and screaming children entombed in coal from my mind, only for them to be replaced by more relevant concerns. “You still have Obara’s hair?”

Maggie broke off from checking herself, I hadn’t been the only one worried about splinching, and pulled a bag from a pocket. “Yes?”

“Good then show me what you’ve learned, give us a heading.” I leaned against the crenelations, the Black Wall gave an incredible view and waited.

“Now?”

“Sometime today would be ideal.” We’d been spotted, I could see confused guards scurrying as Maggie fumbled with her pouch. We could do this spell on the ground of course, but it would be nice to cut a mile’s walk or so. Our first stop would be a stable, I was sick of lugging our bags, but in Volantis we were spoiled for choices. One of them would be the shortest ride and I was determined to go to that one. I enjoyed horseback riding, but not enough to do anymore than necessary.

She held up the pouch and I could feel her pulling in power, not a lot but I’d grown far more sensitive since the background magic was so low. On earth there was always a flow, a hum of the Little Folk at least, but here the only currents were Maggie and I. She still pulled in more than she needed, more than I’d need, but I’d refined the spell over decades. Maggie had the same crutch of power I had, she occasionally made use of it.

The bag swayed on its strings, pointing north-east, away from the Red Temple, and a buried worry vanished. I had no desire to fight an entire cult, almost anything would be better than that.

The guards had finally gotten their acts together, and a squad was marching towards us. Maggie was wide eyed, nervous not frightened, but I managed a little more equanimity. “There,” I pointed at a corral towards the edge of the city, it was were the Dothraki bought and sold their horses and had been recommended to us back when we first were planning to chase down Ancalagon. It was a happy coincidence that Obara was apparently over that way. If it were anywhere else we’d have had to do far more due diligence on the horses, apparently hosting barbarians who were experts on horses promoted a climate of honesty enforced by the threat of an unsatisfied customer backed by fifty thousand screamers.
Maggie vanished into the wind and I turned back to the guards, they’d slowed after the obvious display of supernatural power. Sensible. “You will always remember today as the day-“ There was a roar from the streets below and I could hear the wingbeats snapping through the air. I chugged the potion, one liners were overrated anyways.

This time bursting back into a material form was uncomfortable. There was a distinct odor of manure and part of me was afraid I’d gotten it permanently mixed up with my molecules. We emerged from an alley, unoccupied, and plunged into the crowds. With my staff and height we weren’t really troubled, people tended to get out of our way and we made into the stables.

As I understood it the compound was something like a permanent trading fair, horseflesh from across the world constantly changing hands to be bred, raced and ridden. The variety was incredible, quarter horses, chargers, placid work horses, breeds I didn’t know the name for and-

“Zebras?” I followed Maggie’s outstretched arm to see a black and white striped animal, presumably a zebra, but who knows? There were dinosaurs in Sothoryos, I had no idea what else was lurking around the edges of the maps.

“A zorse actually.” A tanned man had seen our confusion and like any good horse trader had promptly swooped in to exploit our ignorance. “Mostly a novelty, but they don’t get sick and will eat almost anything, worth it for the avid traveler.” I gave the zorse a speculative look, it might be true, but that was nothing we needed.

“We’re looking for something a bit more mundane, four horses up for a long ride.”

He instantly changed modes, clearly evaluating how much we could afford. “How much are you looking to spend? In my herds I’m sure I have something to satisfy you, but if we could narrow the range?”

Marilla had been generous, and while you could spend any amount of gold on a horse we were in the market for good ones. “Show us what you have, and we’ll go from there.”

He was a member of the Selfridge school and only nodded, leading us through the warren of stables and fences. “How far are you looking to go and will you be keeping the horses? I only ask because if you’re looking to sell at your destination the markets are very different. Take Pentos and Norvos, about the same distance but in Pentos you’d want a dray where in Norvos you’d be better served with a palfrey.”

Maggie wasn’t listening, her eyes locked on a silver horse lightly stepping around the edge of the herd. It was a pretty horse, but too pretty. Anonymity was our greatest shield and people would remember that one. Maybe when we cleared the city we could splurge on horses, but for now we were staying under the radar.

“Those two, that one, and the grey courser.” The salesman snapped off commands to a boy, based on their shared features his son, and he split them from the herd. It took a little mental digging but I remembered Ebenezer teaching me how to buy horses, all the checks and tricks. I half thought the Mantle was guiding me too, so it wasn’t just good for fighting. In the end I swapped out two of my picks, haggled the man down until he threw in the tack, paid him and rode off with Maggie completely sure I’d been ripped off.

“So which way to Obara?” Our last direction had been from two hours ago and atop the wall, we
needed to triangulate. It only took her a minute to do the spell as I led our string of horses, then with
the miracle of geometry ten minutes later we had a location.

Part of me wanted to just ride in and take her, but I was crashing hard. We needed more information,
and now that we were safely hidden from anyone who knew who we were I needed to rest. I was
sure I’d win any fight, but I’d be sloppy and that was dangerous. With my hand forced by mortality I
found an inn that looked reasonably secure. The patrons had the sort of hard-working air that the
people who ground their way into the middle class seemed to acquire, and the stable boy didn’t bat
an eye at us having extra horses. I barely took my boots off before collapsing into the bed, sleep
followed quickly.

Naturally when I woke up Obara was in completely different location and given my luck, moving.

117.

Amusing parallels to the Two Towers faded away after the second day of riding. Whoever had
Obara was moving fast. Maggie and I were changing horses frequently enough to keep up a good
pace, and we didn’t seem to be making up much ground. Reports from the people we passed weren’t
promising either. The road along the Rhoyne was well traveled enough no one would notice a
random group of men, and slavery was legal here. They could have Obara trussed up over the back
of a horse and the only comments would be on the efficiency of their work.

We’d raced through Sar Mell, the ruined city barely registering after Chroyane, and our next
milestone was Selhorys. I was already beginning to grow uneasy about the chase, Volantis and its
environs were well defended but we were moving into the wilderness. Inns were growing few and
far between and would continue to do so until we reached the next city. Nothing really brought home
how different the world was before trains and cars as working hard all day only to cover forty miles.

I was active as we rode, layering spells onto a spear I’d traded for a piece of shaped quartz. The last
time I’d fought a dragon one hadn’t been enough but it was certainly better than nothing. It also had
the advantage of not only working on scaly murderbeasts, I didn’t have high hopes of rescuing
Obara without a fight. The group that had her couldn’t be too large, the travellers coming the other
way would have mentioned a sizable band of soldiers or mercenaries and they would have definitely
noticed. If someone wanted to start anything out here the state troopers wouldn’t be coming so
vigilance was key.

The kidnappers had started with a day’s lead at most and the only way to figure out if we were
closing was to compare the bearing of Obara’s hair to the curves of the Rhoyne. We knew where we
were, the road was well marked and maps had undergone a revolution since the introduction of my
compasses and the printing press. With the angle we could get a rough estimate of where they were
by assuming they were on the river road, it wasn’t much but after four days I felt confident we’d
made up some of the distance.

Selhorys was a ten day ride from Volantis at the pace we were setting, and I was hoping they’d slow
there. The kidnappers, I was still assuming they were Varys’s men, had probably shared the desire to
get out of Volantis’s developing theocracy as quickly as possible. They probably didn’t have the
remounts, or the quality of the horses we had so they would probably take the chance to rest. Or they
wouldn’t but that might be better, I’d prefer to have as few witnesses as possible to our fight.

Eight days into the chase I was positive we were within ten miles, but the roads were becoming
relatively crowded again, we were slowed down by caravans, farmers and even other travellers. I
could only hope they were too, but our speed advantage was practically destroyed.

“I take back everything nice I’ve ever said about horses.” The trip had been hard on Maggie, it didn’t
compare to the luxury we’d always managed before. “I feel like my spine is shaking itself apart
diagonally.”

“That’s what we got for buying palfreys, that whole ambling thing.” Most of the horses Ebenezer
had were gaited, it made more sense on the farm, but Maggie had learned on the more specialized
horses that preferred to canter or trot. They were more fun certainly, but less efficient than the ground
devouring strides. “It beats the hell out of walking, and we’re making better time than a poleboat for
sure.”

Unable to overcome my incredible logic she changed the subject. “When we get Obara back we’re
putting a bell on her, this is twice she’s made us take longer.”

My raised eyebrow didn’t cow Maggie, but I didn’t think we could blame this one on her. “Really
the only way we could have moved faster was to sail, and that wouldn’t accomplish the whole
getting Obara back thing.”

“At least I’d have a bed.” She rode a few more seconds before continuing. “And someone cooking
my food, and dreams that weren’t full of four step rhythms and horse manure.”

I steered my horse, modestly named Bucephalus, over to her and gave her a comforting pat on the
shoulder. “It’s a hard life traveling the world doing glamorous things.”

“We haven’t even left any fake prophecies on this run, I don’t see the glamor.” She had a point, I’d
been too consumed with playing with my spear- an internal voice screamed phrasing- to continue
with the legend seeding. We’d have plenty of time after we got Obara back, Maggie was genre
savvy enough to look a little worried when I told her that. “You’re just throwing up death flags.”

“I’m not big on critical analysis.”

“Clearly. Luckily I’m here to be as critical as needed.” She kicked her horse ahead a few steps and I
let her go. It was tough being in such close quarters for so long, and when we finally caught up we’d
have enough stress without being at each other’s throats.

We entered Selhorys early on the tenth day, and from the way Obara’s hair started swinging they’d
done as I’d hoped and stopped. Part of me wanted to wait, but a larger part complained that was how
we’d gotten into this mess. We tracked the signal down to an inn in the seedy part of the town and I
dismounted, leaving the horses to Maggie. “If anyone comes close, give them a bit of a jolt.” She
nodded and I pulled my staff free from the saddle, leaving my spear, the Dragonlance MK II. Going
in guns metaphorically blazing was an attractive idea, with the Mantle I wasn’t worried about my
chances in a fight, but it was also stupid.

“Obscurata.” Fading from the visual spectrum here always made me feel badass, like the Predator in
the jungle. Or in the city in the less appreciated sequel, I had fond memories of it that weren’t entirely
driven by seeing it as part of a double feature with Elaine. One thing the movies didn’t do justice was
how hard it was to move around without bumping into people, abandoned warehouses and
rainforests were definitely better choices then taverns. In any case I made it up the stairs without
incident and moved to the door that Obara’s hair was dragging me too.
A younger me might have just kicked the door in, a slightly older me would have tried the door first, but as myself, seasoned with experience and possessing the incredible power of the Winter Knight I did something far wiser, nothing. Well nothing visible even if I could be seen, I Listened.

The world fell away and my whole awareness was on the aural world. Past my own heartbeat, speeding up due to stress and excitement, and the chatter of the inn beneath me I was able to focus on the room. Three people breathing, one of them a slightly higher pitch. The two deeper breathers, I was assuming the kidnappers, were on one side of the room. In a book they’d be incongruously asleep but I wasn’t quite that lucky. Narrative convenience only went so far apparently. It would be nice if they were asleep though, and as it happened I had a way to do that.

“Dormius.” The spell was as grey as I was willing to go, I was reluctant to even give it much power so close did it skate to the Fourth Law. Putting them to sleep to avoid killing all of them seemed like a good use, but that was thing about magic. It always seemed like a good use. In any event their breathing, their inhales and exhales, slowed and deepened. I gave them a minute then tried the door. Locked.

Smashing through it was always an option, but I was hoping for something a little more subtle. I gave the door a speculative rattle, and then peered along its edge. I couldn’t see anything, the door was tight to its frame, but I was pretty sure that it was barred. It was a nice simple solution that was resistant to clever picks and pricks alike. Unfortunately for the kidnappers the proprietors of the inn valued something about their doors more than their security, the ability to get them open. The hinges were on the outside.

“Fuego.” It wasn’t my typical blast of flame but something closer to a cutting torch. I still couldn’t manage Luccio’s lasers but all the sculpting I’d did had given me a far finer touch. I dragged my finger just away from the hinges and they separated with a hiss of steaming metal. The door swung inward, the bar not secured enough to stop it, and I stepped into the silent room.

Two thugs, straight from central casting were asleep, one on a narrow bed and the other sprawled across a chair. When I saw Obara I felt I’d gone far too easy on them. Obara had an ankle chained to the other bed and her hands were tied behind her. Her face had never been conventionally attractive, but bruises and what looked to be a broken nose marred even that. Another lance of flame cut the chain securing her to the bed, and my knife cut her remaining bonds before I shook her awake with a hand over her mouth.

She came up fighting, struggling and launching a kick that would have ensured Maggie wouldn’t have any more siblings if I didn’t manage to shift enough to catch it on my inner thigh. Far too close for comfort really and almost enough to make me reconsider the whole rescue. To her credit she was immediately apologetic as I pulled her to her feet. I was about to veil us, stealth mode had worked so far, when it all went wrong.

“Get the fuck up!” In retrospect the removed door was a bit of a giveaway.

The man’s shout caused an eruption of movement. The guards I’d knocked out jerked awake, Obara flung herself at one of them barehanded, I took one long step forward and with Winter’s strength smashed the yeller’s skull. The sudden violence didn’t phase our enemies, the free one was scrabbling for something- a sword- and I could hear sprinting footsteps. We couldn’t have that.

I grabbed the searching man by the leg, dragged him from the bed and flung him through the open door with an awful cracking sound. Obara’s man went a different way, she’d pulled a knife from somewhere and he was choking the last of his lifeblood away into the mattress. She was covered in
blood- arterial spray a detached part of me thought- and other than a new bruise appeared alright.

We had an instant of peace before the others came, so I ripped off my coat and flung it at her. It felt weird to be fighting without it, I’d had a duster for decades, but the icy armor was becoming just as comfortable. It was also terrifying, a fact made clear by the first man backpedaling as soon as he saw me. Too little, too late, he joined his friends in whatever hell they believed in as Obara and I cleared the door. I grabbed his sword as I passed, my staff was fine but something in me wanted a sharper edge.

The stairs down was where the next resistance was, a big man charging up swinging an axe wildly. I swayed away from each of his blows, removed a hand for his daring and then kicked him down the stairs. My blood was up, and my enemies weren’t. In a haze of red I entered the dining room, staff in one hand and a crimson sword in the other. The room filled with screams then emptied, leaving just Obara with me. And the bodies, couldn’t forget those.

“Was that all of them?”

“There were ten-” I ran back through the unlucky few, “so yes.”

I could still hear one heartbeat besides ours, the Mantle giving me senses far beyond mortal. I turned to face it, giving my sword a few swings, I’d barely loosened up. “Get up if you want to live.”

It was a fat man, wearing an apron and quivering. The bartender or cook or owner probably. I handed Obara my sword and reached into one of my coat’s pockets, it was far harder to find not wearing it, and pulled a coin free.

“Sorry about the mess.” He’d caught it and nodded frantically as we walked out, doors swinging dramatically in our wake.

Maggie appeared from a heat haze and I steered Obara towards one of our remounts. With the fight over clarity was returning and we needed to move. We weren’t in the best part of town but massacres had a way of drawing attention even when life was cheap. My armor was melting away as we rode, trying to get as much ground between us and the tavern as possible. I doubted anyone got a good look at me, frost covered screaming maniacs all were pretty hard to pick out of a lineup and I’d shed the distinctive style. Other than being soaked there was nothing to distinguish me. Nothing humans could see at least. In what was becoming depressingly common a familiar roar filled the air.

The streets went perfectly still for an instant, everyone’s hindbrain recognizing the sound of an apex predator, before all hell broke loose. Our horses reared and it took every ounce of strength I possessed to stay astride. Maggie managed it somehow, but Obara wasn’t so lucky. She fell and in an instant was beneath the mob.

“Defandarius!” The blue dome pulsed out at waist height, clearing the press of bodies and letting Obara stumble to her feet. It also left us the center of the crowd, nicely isolated for a dragon’s viewing pleasure. The beast was stooping, the rider was frantically beating at it but whatever spells or tricks she had weren’t working. I could see the fires gathering in its throat and I knew that in seconds the blast would roast the screaming crowds. Not today.

“Forzarel!” At the range I’d tried it was far too diffuse to do damage but I’d succeeded. The wall of force hit the dragon’s wing and knocked it sideways away from us. It clawed its way back into the air but I’d delayed it, hopefully enough for the crowd to clear the square. It circled at altitude and I could feel the weight of its gaze, its hatred.
“Maggie, my spear.” She tossed it to me and stayed close barely keeping her horse still. “Obara’s got my gold, get to the river and wait for me. I’ve got some business here.” She was about to protest but my glare and quick kick to her horse’s flank got her moving, with the dragon overhead her horse wouldn’t be coming back willingly. Obara mounted and was about to follow, before she pulled the reins sharply.

“I never said thank-”

“You can say it in twenty minutes.” She nodded and gave her horse its head as it started to gallop following Maggie.

That just left me astride an increasingly nervous Bucephalus, a spear in one hand and my staff in the other. I pulled my armor back from the air as the last of the crowds vanished, hopefully out of the city.

“Well then-” I knew dragons didn’t speak English but as I moved I was hoping some gestures were universal- “come get some.”
I found myself squinting as the dragon circled, the sun was high and a solid third of the sky was a blinding blur. Based on past experiences I was sure it was going to dive right out of the sun, so I gritted my eyes and watched it.

The dragon and I had fought before, it knew I could hurt it. I doubted it knew that the only reason it was still alive was the presumably screaming rider on its back though. Part of me chafed at the restrictions, the same part that was extending sheets of ice as barding over Bucephalus. The dragon had to come to me. I couldn’t fight it at that sort of range or land the precise kind of blow that toed the line between leaving the rider a red mist and not even phasing the beast.

Its wings were key, I realized as I made my horse sidepass towards the fountain at the center of the square. I wanted it to dive at me, and for that it needed room. It might even be willing to fight on the ground with sufficient free space. Once it was down it couldn’t get back up in the air though, if I wanted this to be decisive that would be key. Ancalagon had run, and this beast could do the same if it correctly decided that I was too much for it.

As long as I was waiting I might as well make the most of it. A single spell was enough to smash the walls of the fountain, water gushed across the square forming an ever increasing pool. Worst case the dragon turned it into steam and boiled its rider, best case I stuck it to the ground like Ralphie in a Christmas Story. Another escape potion would be nice, but despite my fantasies of flying up and fighting it Superman style I knew better.

Shifting my spear to my right hand was awkward, Gandalf never had to deal with having his hands full. I wanted the sharp edge though, which made the confusion worth it. I’d been toying with a cutting spell ever since I’d built the viewing crystals and the spearhead would be enough as soon as I pumped enough power through it. The spell would also be a goad, the longer the dragon circled the better the chance that its rider regained control and flew away. I wanted Selhorys to be my very own Thunderdome, only one of us would be leaving.

“Acuere!” The spear wasn’t quite as sharp as the D-Flat, and I couldn’t really keep the spell coherent at that range, but the dragon seemed to lurch in the air. I’d hit it. It did one last turn roaring, then with the sun at its back plunged.

Bucephalus chose that moment to panic. He’d been fine with a sneak attack, being covered in ice, and walking through increasingly deep water, but a diving dragon was too much. He reared, doing his best to get me off his back as I frantically tried to keep my shield up and astride. Part of my mind, constantly running since I was a teenager, was raving about the album cover possibilities, the rest was doing my best Catholic schoolgirl, keeping my knees together.

Atavistic terror only fed my shield, the dragon's flames buffeted it before one of its hindlegs truly smashed us. The shield held but the impact flung me from my horse and I landed heavily in the dirty water.

Bucephalus fled, eyes rolling in terror and I thrashed trying to find my staff before the dragon turned around. I could hear its wingbeats, a sound like tearing linen, and then the indrawn breath that preceded its fires.
“Undo! Glacio!” I still wasn’t the best at water magic, but making a wave was the sort of magic you just needed power for. All around me the water rose before my second spell ripped the heat from the dome around me, hail fell around me as my shield formed on the inside of my impromptu igloo.

It wasn’t a moment too soon, the pale light through the walls went red and the ice sublimated in the dragon’s fire. The first impact was soaked up by the remaining ice, my shield channeled the force, but the second flung me the opposite direction- into the remains of the fountain.

I froze the water beneath my feet with an effort of will, then encased by my icy shell slammed a spell into the water.

“Fulminos!” The dragon had been charging on the ground sending up a spray of water, but my lighting bolt staggered it. It reeled back screaming and I saw my chance.

“Infriga! Forzare!” The droplets of water in the air solidified into blades before my wave of force cast them forward like buckshot. Bloody holes appeared in the dragon’s outstretched wings even as its bulk shielded its rider. It almost cringed, drawing its wings towards its body before the thought of retreat seemed to cross its mind. The Mantle and I were in complete agreement on what to do.

“Infriga!” Part of me missed the days when burning things was my first option, but like Frost said, ice would suffice. Rime covered the dragon and the shallow water captured its talons with frozen bonds. It would break free in an instant, the dragon’s muscles were beyond mortal, but for the first time in the fight I had the initiative. I violated all of my squishy wizarding instincts and charged.

Winter was around me, throughout me, and shoved me forward- I was riding an avalanche down the mountain towards my wounded prey. It saw me and spat a lance of fire at me, somehow-impossibly- I raised a shield and powered through it to the thrashing beast. The ice broke just as I reached it, the dragon ripped its chest free, but something else came up with the broken shards.

“Volat!” My spear was in my hand as the dragon’s head lashed down at me. The world slowed as Mab’s power filled me- I leapt to the side even as my shield bracelet glowed with power. I summoned an angled plane, the dragon’s fangs struck it and slammed into the ground at my side. Shifting my grip on the spear and drawing even more on Winter’s strength I wound up and stabbed it home, deep into the monster’s brain.

It appeared a lobotomy wasn’t enough to kill it instantly as its motions wrenched my spear from my grip. Its chest high head knocked me away with a blow that I felt through my armor as it flung me through the air. I landed with a spray of water and surged to my feet only to see the dragon writhing, one thumb claw fixed to the ground as the other ripped gouges through its scales. Its tail thrashed as fire and blood spilled from the tears in its throat. The dragon was dead, its body just didn’t know it yet.

I stayed clear as it continued its death throes, nearly tripping on my staff as it bobbed just beneath the surface. I gave it time, the dragon was dead and I didn’t feel like getting disemboweled by the last twitches of a nervous system.

I looked around the square as I waited, a few buildings on the edge were burning, but Selhorys was largely built of brick. The risk of a conflagration seemed low even if I hadn’t flooded the ground. Bucephalus was on the ground, either the dragon had gotten it in all the confusion or my lightning had. I didn’t much care, if the dumb animal hadn’t gone mad with terror as a ten ton monster attacked- well I couldn’t blame it, but the whole battle could have gone much more smoothly if he’d
been like his namesake.

That reminded me- I wasn’t the only rider. I walked forward staff in hand and sent my ice out once again. The living dragon might have broken it but I doubted the dead one could. It would also help if the rider was still in condition to fight, for me the ground was firm and solid, for them it would be impossibly slick.

One of the wings was across the saddle and there was something moving under it, I could see still gleaming bronze armor shifting through the holes I’d made. I stayed back out of the rider’s field of view and let her work, at last she seemed to shift the wing enough that it slid down from atop her. I let her take a few breaths before I spoke.

“You know I’ve always heard kids should have pets because they teach them how to handle death.” She twisted in her saddle, mouth dropping open. “Thoughts?” She didn’t answer, still doing her codfish impression. “I didn’t get any until I was older and I was half convinced they’d outlive me, but you probably felt the same way about Mr. Sparky here.”

She grasped at her neck and spat a word. I shielded on reflex and felt some power brush against mine, almost too little to worry about. I was quite sure not worrying would be foolish in the extreme so I surged forward over the ice, grabbed the gorget of her armor and yanked her from the dragon’s corpse.

She screamed as she fell, one of her ankles was twisted up with the stirrup, but she managed to get on her hands and knees to try to crawl away as I splashed over to her. Her red hair looked like blood in the water as it escaped her helmet and the Mantle drew my attention to the curves revealed by her wet clothes beneath her armor. I fought the urge down, but not entirely, I wasn’t particularly gentle as I flipped her over with my boot and froze her into place, holding my glowing staff inches from her face.

“So we haven’t been introduced, but I suspect you know who I am.” I didn’t especially feel like giving out my name to someone who had power. “You’ve been operating with a bit more anonymity though, who are you?” She sputtered, looking up at me in shock. “Don’t look so terrified. I’ve got a message for you to carry, so if anyone kills you it won’t be me.”

With the prospect of immediate death off the table she managed to stammer out something, my staff’s glare increasing in brightness made her enunciation improve. “I am a servant of R’hllor! You will have nothing from me!” The ice burst into steam around her, and she went for the sword at her hip.

Once I might have been too surprised to react, but this wasn’t my first rodeo. I fought through my shock to knock her hand away, my staff hit her wrist with a crunch and she reeled. Another kick sent her rolling through the water and this time the ice completely enclosed her, leaving only an opening for her head. Whatever power she had probably couldn’t melt that instantly.

“Don’t overestimate your importance. If you don’t carry my message, someone else will.” I stood a few yards away, enough room that even if she repeated her trick she couldn’t get off a sucker punch. “Now are you ready to talk?” She was stubbornly silent, so I made the ice contract around her wrist to get a response.

“Traitor!” Her scream was a surprise, I might have been an enemy to the Red Temple but I couldn’t think how I could have betrayed them. “You serve the enemy of all light! Of all mankind!” Well the first was technically true, but the second? “Perzys and I may have fallen but there are more! I’ll be dead before I spread your words!”
We were beginning to gather an audience, people showing the universal desire to rubberneck. I had preferred the relative privacy of the deserted square, fewer chances for a wizard hunt to start up. The woman probably had coreligionists in the crowd as well, I knew better than to assume people would automatically side with the person who had killed the monster burning their town.

“Well then.” I looked around the crowd wishing that I had an easy spell to make a megaphone. Sound was as hard as light in its own way. If I’d prepared a speech I could do it but off the cuff was another matter. I’d just have to shout. “Spread the word, I killed this dragon, and I’ll kill any dragon that attacks humans!” I stomped over to the dead beast and started to pull my spear free with a disgusting wet squelching sound. I brandished the bloody length of wood, scattering red droplets across the melting ice beneath me. “This spear did it, you or anyone with one can do the same!” That was a bit of a lie, dragons were army killers and the one I’d just killed had been quite small historically speaking. “And if you can’t, I will!”

I pointed my spear at the priestess, the dragon’s blood pooling at its tip. “Bring her back to her masters in Volantis! Tell them what I’ve told you, and do not fear them. Wherever monsters come heroes follow!” I made my staff burn white for one last push and stabbed my spear into the flagstones, “I will follow.” It was bombastic and if Maggie had seen it I’m sure I’d have been mocked incessantly, but with the dead dragon as a backdrop it worked. Speak softly and carry a big stick might have been a good motto, but smashing things with a big stick and shouting was its near equal.

Right then with the silent crowd around me I was wishing Bucephalus had made it. I needed an exit strategy and riding off was better than tiredly splashing away. The magic I’d cast had worn on me, but I was pretty sure I had enough for two more spells.

“Caligo!” The mist rose around me, the moisture from the fountain making it easy and the receding Mantle giving it a chill. It was easy to pull the light around me and vanish into it as I hurried from the square. My armor dissolved from me and I was left as a tall soaked man pushing through the masses. The entire city was still in flux but I made my way out of the riverside gate and mentally called for Maggie, her relieved answer made my skull ring as I headed upstream for her and Obara.

They were both mounted, but they weren’t alone, a long and narrow ship was moored just offshore and a man with a rowboat next to him was speaking to them. Maggie broke off speaking as soon as she saw me and urged her horse towards me. Obara and the man followed more slowly.

“Papa you’re alright!” She swung down from her horse and pulled me into a hug, nearly knocking me over. She was a big girl now as much as I pretended otherwise. “Is the dragon-”

“Dead. I snuck out in the confusion.” Obara and the man, he was strangely familiar, were shocked, but after a moment’s thought my reputation persuaded them. I was trying to figure out who the man was when he nodded to me.

“Ser Harry, it is good to see a friendly face so far from home.” Between his voice and the ship I finally recognized him, Magini, the shipping magnate. “We saw the dragon, and then I recognized your daughter on the shore. You say you’ve killed the dragon?”

“It’s rider claimed there were more, and she’s probably telling the truth. The Red Priests seized control of Volantis.”

Magini looked south speculatively. “Well we might have to cut our trip short then, I have no desire to
confront their zealots.”

“They aren’t much for conversation, no.”

“And where are you bound? North to Braavos?” Weeks of riding were ahead of us and the prospect was immensely irritating.

“We’ll be making a stop along the way, but yeah, basically.”

“Well then your choice is simple, come back aboard the Doldrum!” For a second I didn’t reply, the idea was so attractive. “I get the story of the first dragonslayer in centuries and you’re spared the ride, don’t refuse, I won’t hear of it!”

“If you’re twisting my arm, I suppose we have no choice.”

Mangini clapped his hands, clearly pleased with himself. “Splendid! As long as the dragon’s dead we’ll take on provisions here, we’re low on charcoal, and then start the trip upriver!”

I let him usher us aboard, promising to sell our horses and barely paying attention, the power I’d spent finally catching up to me. I was only awake in the loosest terms when he showed us to a cabin and I collapsed onto a bed in merciful darkness.

119.

Something was strange when I woke, it took a few minutes in the dim afternoon light to figure it out. At last it came to me, the engine. It was a mechanical sound occurring with a regularity I hadn’t heard since I came to this world and it threw me. Everything had been organic or natural, donkeys pushing wheels, men rowing or even the wind cutting through the sails of mills. The steam engine driving us upriver was fundamentally different, a construction of iron and steel, kept in control through gears, timing belts and kinematics. I resolved to stay as far away from it as possible. I hadn’t had opportunity to find out but I suspected my murphyonic field was still running. A boiler explosion would not be a fun thing to experience.

Stretching with a few snaps and cracks that a younger me would have laughed at, I ducked out of my cabin and moved for the deck. The Doldrum had undergone some modifications since I last rode it. The vast open floor was gone and replaced by cabins and holds, Mangini didn’t have to entertain anymore and the Doldrum was meant to make money. Even if Volantis was closed to them it would still revolutionize trade among the other free cities.

Actually, I paused before climbing from the hold, how had he gotten the Doldrum from Braavos to the Rhoyne? There were mountains in between, and I doubted he could have portaged it. Deciding that past problems of other people weren’t important I emerged from the semi-darkness into the sunlight of the later afternoon.

Obara was the first to spot me, the swelling in her face had gone down and she’d acquired new clothes from somewhere. It was lucky she had the frame she did, I couldn’t imagine there was a surplus of women's clothes aboard. “Harry, you’re awake!”

I blinked a few times. “Well it was only one dragon.” My stomach growled just to reinforce my pronouncement. “How long have we been sailing? And how long until dinner?”
“Steaming Harry, steaming!” Mangini had been sitting with Maggie and Obara at a table near the bow. “Sailing is done, we’re in a new world now. As for dinner,” he glanced at the sky, “whenever. Come and drink with us, we’re admiring my new collection and sharing stories.”

He did look a little florid, Maggie had a slight flush too. Oh well, alcohol was safer than water and she might have been worried about shorting the engine out. Or she wanted to try wine, but I was going to assume the more virtuous explanation for my daughter. I pulled a chair back from the table and sat, cursing the average proportions of the Braavosi. I was tall in modern times and I could count on one hand the number of people taller than me in this world. The only way not to have my knees smashing things was too slouch, which I half preferred because it put people at roughly eye-level. The effort to avoid a soul gaze was balanced by being able to accurately read expressions.

It did make it difficult to examine the objects on the table, so I had to shift my weight in a way that made the light chair grown as I leaned forward. “Fangs, claws and scales!” Mangini looked proud, justifiably. He was one of the only owners of recently killed dragon trophies in the world. “After you retired we went up into Selhorys to see the sights. It was lucky we were quick, I was able to get one of the canines, but the other was gone already.” He pushed forward a wickedly sharp fang before gesturing to the next piece. “I had to buy this one. Some enterprising young fellow with an ax went around and chopped off the talons. He’ll go far, mark my words.”

The talon was the size of my forearm, for an instant I imagined what would have happened if my shield hadn’t held and gulped. “Your spear is still embedded there, no one wanted to touch it.”

I wasn’t too concerned, unlike the weapons I’d made for the kraken the spear needed power channeled through it to work. It would be nice if it stayed there, but after a season it would be rusted and rotted. If someone took it and sold it to lift themselves out of poverty or something I’d be okay with it. In any case there was another thing I’d left in the square that I was far more concerned about. “What happened to the priestess?”

“She vanished in the same fog you did according to the mob. The smart money was on ghosts of the Rhoyne devouring her.” I nodded without commenting, I assumed that meant she escaped despite the busted ankle. “You have to tell me more about what happened in Volantis. The tales were confused and I’d just as soon have an eyewitness.” Luckily another goblet of wine arrived just then, along with a platter of cheese and cured meats. I related the story while choking down my first food in what felt like decades. When I finished, Maggie and Obara chiming in with occasional details, Mangini looked pensive. “This makes Antaryon look almost prescient, exiling the Red Priests can only help.”

The wine was making me a little more confident than normal. “I think they’ll stay away from Braavos as long as they know I’m there.”

“Which will be of great comfort to those in Pentos, Lys and Myr I’m certain.” He took a long draw from his own goblet, draining it before topping it up again with a bottle I recognized as costing more than our horses had. “They will see the planned fate of Selhorys, and if the Red Priests truly have more dragons they’ll take steps to oppose them.”

“The Rhoynish took steps against dragons, so did the Ghiscari. That’s why they won their wars against Valyria right?” Mangini nodded to Obara, acknowledging the touch.

“Valyria had hundreds of dragons, fully grown. I can’t imagine the Red Priests have them in such number or they would have acted sooner. Which reminds me,” he picked up the fang, being careful
to avoid its sharp inner edge, “how old do you think this beast was? Based on the size and my admittedly cursory research I’d say at least a decade. It’s a bit larger than the one in our club.”

“Um.” He raised an excellent point. Perzys, the name the priest had given her beast, had been at least half again Ancalagon’s size and he was larger than Rhaellion and Jelmazma. I was pretty confident that the Targaryens had hatched theirs first, Quaithe had sought them out as opposed to ones in Volantis. If that was true the Red Priests had a way to increase their growth, even more than letting them fly free and eat whatever they wanted. Images of Mola Ram ripping out hearts and feeding screaming slaves to Perzys crossed my mind, I wasn’t entirely sure I was too far off base. “No idea, it’s not like you can count their teeth or anything.”

“Well not anymore certainly.” We all stared at the tooth for a second. It was a sad way for anything to go, getting ripped apart for souvenirs, but it was better than if the Red Priests had succeeded in their goals. Mangini filled us in about happenings in Braavos for the remainder of the evening, despite my nap I made an early night of it.

The Doldrum only traveled by day, similar to the poleboats, but it moved far faster. The boatmen were confused by the sight as we powered north, we were on a ship that would utterly reshape the habits of a thousand years. The only thing that slowed us was the need to purchase charcoal. Mangini planned to establish coaling stations along the river but for now every few days we had to stop and buy all of the charcoal a town or village had. Wood would work in the furnaces if all else failed, but charcoal was more efficient as well as more controllable.

It took six days to reach Chroyane and I almost didn’t recognize it. The ruins were there, but with the fog washed away they were visible from far down the river. The grey mold or fungus that had covered it in the fog shone in the sunlight. Maggie might have compared it to bird shit but the ancient stones were effectively whitewashed. Knowing the curse was gone gave it a sort of beauty, different than the shrouded grandeur it had possessed before my visit. Mangini asked several pointed questions, especially when we crossed under where spans of the Bridge of Dreams still arched, but I demurred.

Garin and all his fellows had suffered tremendously, they’d become little more than monsters but they were once men. They’d probably sinned as much as anyone, but I could only hope that the people they once were would have approved of my cleansing. And if they didn’t, well maybe they deserved it.

The Rhoyne was clear now, no more mysterious dead cities with curses, except for Ghoyan Drohe, but that was technically on the Little Rhoyne. Maybe with the obstacle removed the pirates of Dagger Lake could be dealt with once and for all, if a city was rebuilt on the bones of Chroyane they’d need to sweep the waters clean. I wasn’t too optimistic in the short term, but hopefully I’d live to see it.

After that the rest of our journey was uneventful. Mangini and his men were continually messing with the engine to encourage greater speed and power and we covered greater distances each day. I wasn’t able to help, but seeing people working to improve the world was always intoxicating. For all the magic I did and the power I held I was sure the steam engine and its descendants would eventually do far more. It was almost a shame to leave them, but Braavos and home beckoned.
The three of us set foot on Braavos just as the sun set, the familiar shift almost masking something else. Maggie felt it too. We both drew up short, nearly halting traffic off the ferry before a tired Obara shoved us to the side.

“It’s like a ward but..” Maggie spoke first, I could feel her power as she sieved through the air for clues.

“It’s too big, yeah.” I rapped my staff sharply on the ground, shouldered my bag and strode forward. “I suspect it’s-” A bird dropped from the sky, whipped around us with a clatter of wings, and then alighted on my pack. I was about to knock it off when I saw it- the bird’s eyes glowed green. “Lydia?”

“Father! Maggie! You’re back!” Luckily she didn’t bother to make the osprey’s beak move, that would have made the whole thing entirely too weird. “I was going to give you another year or two before I went looking, but I was getting worried.”

“Our crystal melting in a fire didn’t worry you?” Maggie didn’t seem to find anything strange about talking to a bird, a mindset not shared by any of the other people on the street.

“It didn’t melt, it’s just pointed at a beam in the dark.” The bird managed to look pensive. “I wasn’t sure why you didn’t go back and get it, but I enjoyed watching the ground settle. I learned a lot about Volantis’s geology.”

“We had to leave the city in a hurry.” I was walking as we talked, hoping to get some distance between us and the gawkers. “There was a dragon overhead.”

Lydia’s eyes lit up, well brighter. “I heard about that! The sailors by the docks were spreading rumors, one of Syrio’s men has been waiting outside the house for the last two weeks.”

Of course the news had beaten us, sailing in the open ocean was still faster than Mangini’s motorboat. We’d probably outrun stories about me killing Perzys though- no ravens. The birds weren’t as omnipresent as in Westeros but I was sure Selhorys had at least one flock of messengers. Speaking of birds-

“When did you start possessing ospreys?”

She preened, literally. “Oh you mean George?”

“George?” Obara asked, sparing me the necessity.

There were times I knew Lydia was my daughter. “He helped me get my wings.” It took me a second to get it, but I was in no position to judge.

“Clever Clarence, how’d you get him?” Lydia was a strong spirit, the strongest on this planet, but the sun would erode away at her very self. There was a reason I’d put as much effort into her bust, it was a sanctuary for her. If she’d gone out on safari she’d be taking an awful risk.

“One of the windows broke, he came and made a nest in your lab.” I picked up the pace at that. Sure the house was warded, but structural integrity helped cement them. If the weakened wards bounced enough thieves eventually one would get through and I had enough stuff the thought of losing it was irksome. “Oh don’t worry, he ate most of the mice and the cats are keeping the rest running scared.”
Maggie was on the same page as me. “We should have hired a maid.” I nodded, just because she would have been pressured for entrance by every single faction didn’t seem like a good reason anymore. Especially when it was compared to the menagerie we were apparently headed for. “And I want a new mattress.”

“Don’t worry, we’re burning all of it.”

Lydia’s babbling about her various adventures would normally have been enough to keep my attention but the state of the house preoccupied me. I was half imagining Whipstaff Manor, but luckily from the outside our house looked mostly unscathed. The wards were up and crackling with power, few, if any, had tested them. Lowering them was almost stressful, I was far out of practice, but after a single false start they dropped. I shoved the door open, it looked like moisture had swelled it, and then I had an angry raptor on my shoulder.

“George no!” Lydia’s spectral form materialized next to me as her bird battered at my head trying to escape. My duster spared me from its claws, after a second of buffeting he was clear and my shield was glowing between us. He seized upon the back of a chair, the claw marks showed that it wasn’t the first time, spread his wings and screeched.

“What is it with things with wings hating me?” I didn’t drop my shield as George’s golden eyes bored into me. “Take him over again, and get him upstairs somewhere.”

“Not in my room!” Maggie had been amused by the interplay but the thought of an eagle leaving fish all over her stuff was enough to ruin it. “Keep your pet in your room Lydia.”

“Fine I will, but you don’t get a kitten then.” George’s eyes glowed as Lydia repossessed him. “George will just have to eat all of them, I was saving some for you.” She turned, carefully tucking the bird’s wings in before half flying half hopping away. Maggie and I shared a look, I wasn’t sure precisely why Lydia was saving the kittens for us, but only Maggie was willing to find out. She chased the bird up the stairs shouting.

I let my bag drop to the ground and shook my arm out, trying not to laugh at the shell shocked Obara. “I’m going to let them fight it out, all of a sudden I’ve had enough of home.”

She looked up the stairs where muffled shouting was audible and then back into the darkening streets. “Where are you going to go?”

“May I suggest the Sealord’s palace?” We both jumped, and I would forever blame Obara for the girlish shriek. Once my heart rate dropped back into the triple digits I turned.

“Syrio you should be careful about the whole ninja thing, someday someone’s going to-”

“Don’t worry, I’ve seen more embarrassing reactions.” I joined him in the street, Obara following. “Mostly by little children-”

“I will feed you to my daughter’s osprey one spoonful at a time.”

“If I thought it wouldn’t eat you first maybe I’d be worried. Besides,” his tone shifted, “you’re not even the third scariest thing walking the earth anymore, or even above it.”

Ignoring that disquieting idea I sent Maggie a pulse of thought communicating the plan, she appeared at her window and waved. “Lead on then, there’d better be food at the palace though.”
“Never fear, things haven’t fallen so far in your absence.”

The streets of Braavos were comforting in their familiarity. The mists and shadows didn’t conceal plague monsters, the priests on corners weren’t screaming at me, and there wasn’t a dragon overhead. I’d missed them, the two years I’d spent trawling them hadn’t been fun but with the passage of time they’d grown on me. Bravos flitted through the fogs, their hands moving to their swords before they realized who we were, who Syrio was.

I glanced over at the slight man. “Keeping them in their place?”

His eyes were moving as we hurried, constantly flicking across our path. “Always, but I like to think of myself as a teacher now.” A grin crossed his face at that.

“The burned hand teaches best?”

“Burned, stabbed, same difference I suppose.” He mimed a slash and riposte. “Qarro is getting faster every week though.”

“Time catches us all in the end.”

“Indeed, although for Lord Antaryon it will have quite a chase.” He seemed to sense my raised eyebrow. “He’s looked that bad for years, I stopped assuming he was on the brink of death when it became apparent he wasn’t. In any case,” the Sealord’s square stretched before us, “we’re here.”

In the gloom the portraits of past Sealords looked almost sinister, I ignored them with the confidence only fighting scarier things in the dark brought. Syrio rapped sharply on Ferrego’s door and an instant later it opened, spilling light across the hall.

“Ser Harry, Obara Sand, I was hoping you could answer some questions for me.” The withered man waved at chairs sitting before his desk, the absence of food was a concern but I sat without mentioning it. “Specifically on dragons.”

I made sure my staff was leaning against my seat then cracked my knuckles loudly. “Let’s start with what you’ve heard and we can go from there, news was scarce on the road.”

“Volantis is now ruled by the Red Priests, according to the most recent rumors they have two dragons in the air, a green and a white.” Qarro was in the corner opposite Syrio, statue-like before he spoke. “Everyone agrees a third was killed in Selhorys, most credit you. The other suspects include Prince Garin and a reborn Serwyn Mirror Shield.”

“Totally one of those guys.” They were in no mood for jokes, so I let out a long breath and nodded. “I brought down the one in Selhorys, its rider claimed there were more but I didn’t see any of them.”

“And it was ridden by a Red Priest?”

“Priestess actually.” They digested that for a second, clearly they’d never been beaten up by a girl.

“I hardly need to say that this development changes the dynamic with the Targaryens.” Ferrego was looking at Obara now. “Our aid had the implicit assurance that their dragons would support us, with equivalent hostile forces evident we are prepared to offer certain concessions.”
I did my best to keep my mouth shut, for him to say that so bluntly they must be running scared. “I will convey that to them, but I am certain that King Viserys will remember his friends during his time of need.” The Sealord nodded gravely at her, then turned to me.

“Do you have any solutions for us? You took care of our last few mythical problems but I hope you agree this one has a different scope.”

I gave it a moment’s thought for appearances, but the question had been consuming me ever since Selhorys. “I can defend Braavos proper, but beyond that?” I shook my head ruefully, trying to ignore the man practically shrinking behind his desk. “They’re just too potentially quick. They won’t stand up and fight and right now I don’t have a better way.”

“You are working on one though?”

Images of explosions- bloody bodies torn apart by bombs and bullets- filled my mind. “Of course.”
Experiments with gunpowder were nearly immediately sidelined by getting Obara back to her father with a summary of our excursion. Compared to the original goals, to capture or kill Ancalagon, it was an abject failure. To top it off I’d even gotten one of his daughters stranded in a draconic theocracy, but I felt that sometimes in the course of human events shit happened. It wasn’t like Volantis was holding her though. Nymeria could be sailing back whenever she felt the need, but she was probably safer there. Certainly she was safer there than on the initial chase for her sister. I assumed Oberyn was fairly plugged into the world, or as much as anyone could be, so he probably already knew about the Red Priests. That only left our less public adventures and Jon Connington, both of which I was fine with Obara telling him. She rode off the next morning, accompanied by several of the Sealord’s men.

With her dealt with and Maggie busy redecorating I was temporarily free. That left me trawling through the wares of alchemists and witch doctors, buying samples of every powder they had in stock. Lydia was still refusing to help with gunpowder, so I was resigned to figuring it out the hard way. That was almost better, I’d prefer not to share the responsibility even if she wouldn’t mind.

I knew black powder was made of sulphur, saltpeter and charcoal. Two of those things were pretty easy. The resort I’d met Oberyn at had sulphur springs and charcoal was trivial, but I had no idea what saltpeter was. I did know that the ancient Chinese had discovered gunpowder so whatever saltpeter was couldn’t be too exotic, odds were I’d find it somewhere for sale along with random drugs and herbs. Wandering through the market I was recognized, men of my height stood out, and the shopkeepers were elated to see me. No doubt they’d brag that I’d bought things from them and treat it as a testimonial. Hopefully no one got too sick as a result of their snake oil, besides no matter what it wouldn’t do less than homeopathy.

I’d managed to get everything I bought labeled so after a solid morning of wandering through stinking shops I returned to my house, finally daring to see what George had done to my lab. Sensibly the bird was absent, considering the mess that he’d made of my once neat room could have driven a lesser man to madness and eternal vengeance. Luckily I’d done worse as an apprentice and dealt with worse from Maggie and Molly. At the very least cleaning it up gave me some time to think about my testing methodology.

I’d gotten a bunch of sulphur and charcoal, the two ingredients I was sure of. The current plan was to grind them up with one of the mystery substances, wrap them in a tiny paper bag, toss them in a fire and see which made the largest bang. Once I’d managed that I’d try to narrow the proportions down, hopefully I’d have something to present soon.

I’d thought about building cannons, or rockets, but I decided the model I’d followed with the steam engine was the best bet. Give a bunch of smart people the idea, a few warnings about shrapnel and appropriate storage methodologies, and stay out of their way. If I was needed to build the weapons it defeated the whole point of inventing them, something I was still uncertain about. I liked the idea of guns out in the world better than dragons burning everything at the whim of their riders, but I’d far rather have chosen none of the above. I shared some responsibility for the Targaryen dragons, but the rapid emergence of Illyrio’s and the Red Priests provided some consolation that they were inevitable. Guns though, they’d be on me.
With or without guns the dragons still had to be confronted, something Ferrego had stated during our meeting. He wasn’t quite Churchill shouting about fighting them on the beaches or in the fields, but Braavos was founded by slaves fleeing Valyria. The institutional memory was strong, he wasn’t willing to tolerate being ruled by a- dracocracy? Either way he had announced that he was calling on the leaders of the other nations and cities to meet to present a united front.

I wasn’t sure how well that would go, he could talk all he wanted about hanging together or surely hanging apart but the other cities might decide it was safer to just capitulate. They were willing to pay off the khalasars, accepting and co-opting the Red Priests seemed far safer than daring dragonfire. It would be interesting in the Chinese sense to see the result. I’d be there in my capacity as a wizard but also as a dragon-slaying badass- he probably hoped I’d stiffen their spines.

Johannes looked unimpressed by my complaints.

"At least you can face the beasts.” We were in his new office, notably closer to the entrance of the labrythine Iron Bank. “The rest of us are not so lucky.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” I couldn’t help but be defensive. “My power’s cost me an awful lot, more than you know.”

“Maybe so,” he deliberately shuffled some papers on his desk, “but would you prefer to have to watch things without the opportunity to improve them? Because I can assure you that that is not desirable either.”

I snorted and changed the subject to distract myself from having my pity party called out. “What do you think the other cities will do?”

“Pentos- you said that one of the magisters is trying to hatch dragons?” At my nod he continued, “if he succeeds they won’t accept anything other than leadership, their current embarrassment is something of an historical anomaly.”

I thought back to Varys’s attempt to hire me. “From what his man said they weren’t having the same results as the Red Priests, although I wouldn’t trust him entirely.”

“No, of course not.” Johannes pulled a scroll from a drawer and spread it out to reveal a map of the world. I recognized it as one of Oliva’s by the paired numbers next to points of interest, his explorers had made it far, past Asshai to the east and deep down the coast of Sothoryos. “We must presume that they have taken Selhorys despite their setbacks, Myr is their obvious next target. Lys and Tyrosh will then have the choice to resist or surrender and potentially share in the conquest.”

I traced the Rhoyne north along its tributaries. “Norvos and Qohor?”

Johannes was pensive, carefully considering his words. “They’ll fight, or want to. The Dothraki though, they’re willing to be bribed but if the cities’ armies are entirely absent they might sack them with no need for dragons to be involved.”

Well that was encouraging, human nature would prevail in the face of armageddon. “What a mess, it looks like it’s all on me then.”

“It’s not quite that bad, you are forgetting something.”

“The Targaryens? There’s only two of them compared to however many eggs the Red Temple
holds, and theirs are smaller.”

“Not quite,” he tapped the space off the western edge of the map. “There’s a continent ruled by a king famous in his hatred of dragons. I suspect he’ll have something to say about Volantis’s new overlords.”

“Robert Baratheon.” I tried not to let Oberyn’s distaste color my views but it was hard. He’d been complicit in atrocities and sent assassins after the Targaryens but this was a different time. I couldn’t fairly judge him by twenty first century western morals, but that didn’t mean I had to like him. “His armies are across the narrow sea, will he come over here when he’s probably safe for the near future?”

Johannes just shrugged. “He loves to fight, the Greyjoys certainly learned that. I have no doubt he’ll come.”

“What will he do if he learns about the Targaryens?” Viserys would want to be at the conference, and with Rhaellion he deserved a seat. That alone might be enough to wreck the whole thing, their families had done too much to each other to coexist.

“It might be better if he didn’t, but I suspect we won’t be so lucky.” Varys had known they lived, he probably wasn’t the only one. Keeping it a secret would only mean that it would come out at the worst possible time. Robert was also Oberyn’s and Dorne’s king, learning that they were sponsoring a pretender couldn’t end well.

I stretched as I got to my feet, Johannes rose with me. “It sure would be nice if we could cooperate against a common enemy.”

He smiled, at that, sadly. “We both know better than that, we’ve seen the world,” he opened the door, ushering me out into the bank’s quiet halls. “The Westerosi have a saying about the pursuit of power, you win or you die. For most it won’t matter if it’s to an assassin’s dagger or to a dragon, it’s the cost to play the game.”

122.

Three weeks later I had what I was pretty sure was saltpeter in a sulphur charcoal mix reliably blowing up. The advance had taken several more runs through the depths of the medieval pharmaceutical industry. In desperation I’d gone so far as to try George’s droppings based off Lydia’s comments, but that had been a disappointing and noxious failure. With the pale brown powder sourced I was about to make some alchemist extremely rich, but before that I’d be attending my first summit since the fall of the Red Court. It was kind of funny how that color had it out for me.

The conference was being held in the anomalously bright section of the Sealord’s palace. I was half convinced it was to throw everyone off guard, they walked through a grey city, past dark halls full of darkly dressed people- then suddenly they were in a shining chamber full of crystals and mirrors. Thus disconcerted they’d be easy prey for Ferrego’s clever stratagems, or maybe it was just the only conference room that could fit everyone in style.

There were an awful lot of chairs as I wandered around the not quite round table. The gargantuan slab was made of a pale wood, sanded and varnished to a high gloss and somewhat tear shaped with one seat at the point, the Sealord’s. The rest of the seats were fairly evenly distributed around the
circumference. I liked it, the table suggested equality, or at least rough parity, while still emphasizing the primacy of the city’s leader. Whatever meetings were usually held here must be interesting, and somewhat frequent, judging by the visible wear patterns in the thick rugs. Maybe Ferrego met with the keyholders, or the heads of various guilds, or maybe he just threw parties. The man was an enigma.

I found my chair close to the point, three or four chairs away from the Sealord. The chair on the prestigious side was unlabeled, but to my left was a placard for a man named Jorgen Nestoris. I didn’t recognize it, but it didn’t sound like a Westerosi name so he was presumably of the free cities. I was tempted to go around the room to see if there was anyone I knew, but there was a pre-meeting reception party thing going on outside and I’d been invited to show the flag. Time to go be wizardly.

Emerging from the conference room I immediately drew attention, the price of being able to look down on people both literally and figuratively. It could have also been my rakish good looks, but considering that most of the participants were men with more than a hint of grey in their hair I wasn’t as big a fan of the idea as I usually might be. Or it could be that rumors of a tall wizard had spread enough that they recognized me. Well that fit the goal.

After a few awkward moments occupied hitting the buffet I was desperate for someone I knew, just to find someone who wasn’t doing their best not to stare at me. It took a minute, but eventually I saw Oliva, the shipbuilder not the mapmaker, and made my way through the crowd who parted at my approach. “Oliva.”

“Ser Harry, it’s good to have you back in the city.” He was speaking for the crowd around us who definitely weren’t eavesdropping. “I heard you traveled up with Mangini?”

Mangini hadn’t been able to resist bragging about his technical lead over the Arsenal. “It was a lucky coincidence for both of us, we met outside of Selhorys.” If I hadn’t run into him I’d still be traveling and by now I suspected I’d have saddle sores that never went away. “His ship was quite impressive, how are yours turning out?” I knew Oliva had one of the more advanced programs, but all of the ships I’d seen had belonged to the shipping magnate.

“Sea trials are scheduled for the next week, we wanted a bit more than a barge.” He couldn’t keep the defensiveness out of his voice. “The engine’s functioned well in testing.”

“Engine?” A young man, he couldn’t be much more than twenty, broke into our conversation. “Pardon me, I haven’t heard the term before.” Oliva and I shared a look, it was one thing to know that we were being listened to, another to have it so baldly confirmed.

“A new means of creating motive force.” The builder’s tone was meant to discourage, but the man didn’t take the hint.

“And it can be used in ships? Is this related to the steam pumps?” Part of me was amused at his boldness, here he was interrupting a dragonslayer and a man of obvious means, but he was clearly also annoying Oliva. “I’ve heard of their usage in mines but-”

“There you are Petyr.” A tall man, aged but powerful strode from the crowd, his walk that of a man who expected people to get out of his way. I almost cringed when he opened his mouth, he had fewer teeth than fingers. “Lord Stannis wished to to-” he stumbled over his words when he saw me, “speak to you.”

“Of course, I’ll go meet him.” The slight man, Petyr, masked his irritation well but I recognized the
signs from my time as an angry young man. He gave a motion that suggested a bow to the new man and vanished into the crowd. That left the three of us in something of an awkward silence that the old man broke.

“Forgive me, but you are Ser Harry Dresden are you not?”

I resisted the urge to suggest dentures and carefully kept my eyes on his forehead, for more reasons than to avoid a soulgaze. “In the flesh, but I can’t blame you for ignorance that I also share.”

Oliva took it upon himself to make introductions. “Harry, this is Lord Jon Arryn, Lord of the Vale and Hand to the King of Westeros.” From my vague understanding of Westeros that meant he was something like the Prime Minister, or at least what I thought a prime minister was. Civics wasn’t something I ever really focused on.

Arryn didn’t thank him, treating the recognition as what he was due. “Indeed and it is in that capacity that I would like to thank you for your work in-”

A ringing bell cut him off, a servant calling for our attention. “My lords,” he gestured to the now opened doors, “if you please.”

Arryn stopped by the door, no doubt waiting for the rest of his delegation, but Oliva and I entered together. We split at the table, he wasn’t sitting too far away, but he was on the opposite side of the Sealord. Next to me Nestoris was in his seat, or someone was. He was tall, not my height but sitting I wouldn’t be able to see over him, and dressed in the drab colors typical of a native Braavosi. Of course his drab color was purple, a subtle bit of ostentation considering the price of the dye. He gave me a long assessing stare as I sat, but whatever he thought there was no hint on his features.

We didn’t have time to chat as Ferrego entered, flanked by the Admiral, Syrio, and several other men I didn’t recognize. No one stood as he walked in, another sign of the lax conventions the table’s shape implied. As they sat I realized that I was practically at the head of the table, it wasn’t a very subtle move by the Sealord.

“My lords,” his voice was more powerful than usual, as if he’d been saving his strength all the other times I’d spoken with him. “We know why we are gathered here today. Volantis threatens us all, as it did once before. They fell to an alliance when they sought to reestablish the Freehold, and the same will be needed to defeat them once again.”

I wasn’t sure what the protocol was, if he was just opening the floor to everyone or if he was just indulging in a rhetorical pause. No one else seemed to know either, until a man with an extravagantly dyed mustache spoke. “What use are our fleets and armies against dragons? History is clear, the alliance you mentioned only succeeded because a dragonlord chose to aid them rather than Volantis.”

“Dragons have been killed.” The man next to Arryn spoke, his voice silencing the growing hubbub. “By ballista, by spears, by men brave and disciplined enough to stand against them.”

“Finish your list Lord Stannis,” I was going to have to introduce nametags, the sea of diplomats including the speaker were anonymous, “and by magic.” The crowd turned as one to face me.

“Ser Harry cannot be our only hope.” Braavos’s Admiral rescued me. “He’s only one man, while he can guard a city he cannot run the dragons down.”
“Lies! Braavosi lies!” The man who shouted was immediately hushed by his fellows, but he seemed to say what the majority was thinking.

A balding man who still impossibly exuded dignity cleared his throat, and where his gaze fell men went silent. In what was becoming depressingly familiar I had no idea who he was. “While my colleague from Pentos may have spoken intemperately, that does seem to fly in the face of his demonstrated abilities.”

I was on my own this time, facing a room full of desperate men. For an instant I wanted to do something showy, something to cow them into silence, but they deserved better than that. They might be rude and arrogant aristocrats, but dragons wouldn’t only burn the irritating. I had to work with them, or they would constantly be expecting Braavos to betray them aided by my presumed awesome power.

“I can kill dragons. You all know that by now.” The star burning over my hand was a little showy, but I wanted them to remember my words. “The Red Priests know that too. They can burn all of your lands to the bedrock and forever avoid me, I don’t have wings.”

“The testimony of scores of men states that you can turn into the wind at will.” That was the big man next to Arryn again, every word he spoke was bitten out. “Surely you understand our doubts.”

It was excruciatingly hard to prove a negative and I let some frustration into my voice. “I’m the only one here who’s killed a dragon. I suspect I’m the first on their hit list and if I could solve the problem as effortlessly as you seem to believe I can, I would.”

“And you wait in Braavos while even now Volantis may be marching?” I was beginning to dislike the balding guy. “The Disputed Lands are only that in name now, it is no secret that envoys of R’hallor have been received in Myr. If anything is to be done to avert our subjugation it must be done quickly.”

Well the Myrish man spelled it out nicely, while also throwing me under the bus. He was angling for something, probably a pledge that I would travel to Myr and swat any inconvenient dragons out of the sky. I wasn’t particularly against the idea, I’d prefer a straight fight, except I didn’t think it would work. Myr would be safe, but Tyrosh or Lys could be attacked, or even Braavos. Of course since they thought I could travel on the wind that reasoning would be rejected.

I wanted to look to Ferrego, he had clawed his way to the top of a city of schemers and had to have anticipated this, but I didn’t want to show weakness. Visibly deferring to him would also cement the others’ suspicions of a plot. Before the silence stretched so long that I’d feel compelled to break it another man stood.

“If you are so desperate as to bow to a dragon for protection,” he was nominally speaking to the Myrish diplomat but his eyes were locked on the Westerosis, “you should be aware you have choices. Volantis was destroyed last time they overreached, King Viserys Targaryen is prepared to follow the Conqueror's example.”

123.

“Viserys Targaryen is dead.” Stannis Baratheon’s words weren’t enough to stop the sudden chatter. “He died in this very city, two years ago.”
“You may believe what you wish, but for those more grounded,” Viserys’s representative’s eyes swept the room. “He offers his protection.”

“Westeros will have no part in any alliance that includes Targaryens.” That was Arryn, still a presence despite his age. “The death of dragons has been a blessing for the world, we will not allow their masters to rise again.”

“Your king’s swords won’t save Myr.” The balding man didn’t appear surprised by the big reveal, if Varys had known it followed others might. “But dragons..”

“And even if he wins? You’ll have a new ruler just the same.” Arryn put his clenched fists, massive but gnarled with age on the table. “There is but one path forward if we don’t wish to fall back into thralldom to mad men. All the dragons must die.”

“A pretty idea, but we aren’t all so lucky as to possess a wizard capable of pulling them from the sky.” Of course it would come back to me, but as the Myrish man continued I was still struggling with what I should do. Letting Viserys’s dragons live had been for almost exactly this purpose, so that they would fight anyone else who hatched them and I’d have some influence on their riders. In a perfect world there wouldn’t be any need for dragons, there wouldn’t be any wars, and the games of kings would never trouble the people. This world wasn’t that one, even Pangloss would admit that.

Assuming the Red Priests were wise enough to avoid me, the Targaryens were our best immediate hope against dragons. Gunpowder would work in the long term, with my limited and Lydia’s vast assistance they could probably get to cannons or rockets able to stand off dragons within ten years, twenty at the outside, but I doubted it would take the Red Priests that long to consolidate their rule. Gunpowder wouldn’t remain a secret either, by the time it was decisive Volantis might rule almost all of Essos and be able to win a purely conventional war. My natural inclination was to support vanillas against the supernatural, but in this case it might not be wise.

The argument had continued while I thought, it was only when my name came up that I was startled back into awareness.

“Dresden says that he can’t catch the dragons, and perhaps that’s true.” The speaker was next to the man who’d called me a liar, probably also from Pentos then. “But there’s one way that the dragons will be forced to fight him. If we all gather our armies and march on Volantis with Dresden among us they’ll have no choice but to attack. If they allow us to storm their city they will fall, and if they fight he will kill their dragons and the balance of power will be restored.”

From the room’s response the plan was popular and even made sense on its face. My gut was against it though, and while I’d gone against it before I wanted to think it through. Varys served a Pentoshi magister and it was far from impossible that the diplomat was in his pocket. Assuming that it was a plan created by those inimicable to me what could they achieve?

If Volantis followed the script, something that was far from assured, I’d kill their dragons. Well I’d kill two or three dragons, more than that at once would be dicey to the extreme. That would leave me in the middle of a half burned army which would be mostly anti-Braavosi, just based on population. If I took out the Red Priests’ dragons and then fell to a tragic accident it would leave Varys and Illyrio as some of the only dragonlords, with the only proven weapon against them dead. Maggie would be able to what I could in time, more with Lydia’s tutelage, but if their plan relied on killing one wizard, two was hardly a hurdle.
“When I learned of the Targaryen dragons,” admitting I’d been there when they hatched didn’t seem wise, “I gave them certain rules, that if a dragon attacked civilians I’d destroy it. I’ve given that warning out three times now.”

They were smart men, and most could probably do addition. Ferrego was quickest though. “The Red Priests and the Targaryens are obvious, who was the third?” He might not have been the quickest actually, just ready. Obara had known of Varys’s claims and I didn’t know what else she might have told the Sealord. Viserys’s diplomat must have known as well, and could also have shared.

“Varys, lately Master of Whispers to Robert Baratheon and presently in service to Illyrio Mopatis.” Putting more cards on the table seemed like the best course of action, I wasn’t going to go get Uriahed for Pentos. Even if their plan hadn’t been entirely a ploy the risk was still there.

“So we march down the Rhoyne, the dragons come out, everything turns to fire and blood, and then the Cheesemonger seizes all that remains?” That was Nestoris from next to me, his voice carrying across the table. “I can’t be the only one with apprehensions about this course of events.” The Pentoshi looked gobsmacked, either he hadn’t known or he was a superb actor. Nestoris wasn’t finished though. “And who else might have or be seeking dragons?” He inclined his head fractionally towards me. “Dresden might have been the first remnant of a past age to emerge but he wasn’t the last. I have some sympathy for Lord Jon’s position, but the world we were young in is gone. We must all strive to master this new one.”

“It’s easy for the Iron Bank to say that, for all of Braavos to say that, but most of us are not so lucky.” It was the mustachioed fellow again, conveniently also providing a faction for Nestoris. “Norvos has no wizards or dragons. Our choice is between dragonfire and domination, unless some alliance can be formed here and now.”

“King Viserys is willing-”

The man I now knew was a Norvohsi cut off the Targaryen ambassador. “We already pay one set of conquerors to pass us by, I am reluctant to commit to a second.”

“The Dothraki will be destroyed, the forces of history that allowed them to exist are gone.” Nametags were first on the list of useful inventions. “Whoever triumphs, Volantis, the Targaryens or even Pentos, the Horselords will fall. Their days of raiding where they will are over.”

The Norvoshi didn’t rise to the bait. “It’s one thing to say that, especially from an island, another to risk it.”

“Speculations aside,” Ferrego had apparently had enough of the divergence from the topic, “these new revelations have not fundamentally changed our peril. What shall we do against Volantis?”

Hours of arguments followed, I felt most still liked the frontal attack except that it was proposed by Pentos and thus suspect. When we broke for the day I was happy to stand, joining in the sudden snapping of creaky joints. I wanted to talk to Ferrego but he had vanished into some antechamber, so with a nod to Oliva I set out for home with my mind still churning.

I didn’t have much hope for some sort of Last Alliance forming now, there just wasn’t enough trust between the factions. Revealing Pentos had to be done, but it destroyed the momentum for a coalition strike. The worst case scenario, dragons burning cities while I was effectively chained to Braavos seemed imminent and as I walked I was desperately searching for some new solution, a better one than waiting out the decades of war.
It was a relief to step back inside my home’s wards and increase their power, literally sealing the world away. Maggie burst from the stairs as soon as I hung up my coat, Lydia flashing into existence next to her.

“Papa! Lydia, tell him!” While it was nice to see my girls excited, I couldn’t help but be a little apprehensive.

“Tell me what?”

“While we were away Lydia finished!”

“What?” Their expressions told me I wasn’t quite as impressed as I should be. Honestly I was more surprised that she had completed her mysterious project. I’d been assuming ‘soon’ only meant ‘before the sun explodes,’ but it seemed we were going to live to experience it after all. Those thoughts paled in importance with that I still had a recovery to make. “I mean that’s great! What does it do?”

The two of them shared a look, probably judging if I’d been sufficiently apologetic. After an interminable moment Lydia spoke. “Perhaps it’s best if we just showed you.”

Before I could say anything vaguely restraining Lydia nodded to Maggie, her face scrunched in concentration and she swept her hand down sharply. “Aparturum.”

A hole in the world formed in front of me, a jagged rip into the fabric of reality. Lydia flitted through before I could stop her and I had no choice but to follow, stepping from my living room into the Nevernever.
I pulled in as much power as I dared as I left the material world. I had enemies here, immensely
powerful ones, and my allies were worse. Last time I’d left my house through a way I’d found a
giant centipede considerately left by my godmother. If she was here I couldn’t expect anything less.
If Mab was here- I’d seen what she did to her last Knight.

With the air seething around me I did a quick spin, behind me the dark wood of my living room,
around me- well if I’d had doubts about truly being in the Nevernever they were gone. We were atop
a skyscraper sized tower of rough black stone. Waves crashed at the base of the cliffs far beneath me
and all around us stood other pillars, buttes or mesas jutting from the fog shrouded waters.

After a terrified minute I let my power fade, and joined Lydia in staring at the world around us. It
was bleak, but it had the sort of unnatural perfection I expected. It was the sort of landscape that
would have had hundreds of animators slaving to create, fantastical even as the waves and mists
rolled past beneath us. Something was bugging me about it though.

“It’s awfully dead for the mirror of a city.” Braavos was a grey city, but it had life and lots of it. That
should be reflected here.

Lydia looked at me as if I were especially slow. “Well it’s still new, dreams haven’t filled it yet.” She
walked to the edge, and then it struck me, she was leaving footsteps, she was corporeal here. She
squawked as I pulled her into a hug, then patiently waited and bore it. “If you’ll release me we can
explore further.”

“Further? Let’s!” Behind me I heard Maggie step through her portal, she was staring around us with
unabashed curiosity. “Last time I only opened a way to see if it worked, all I could see was the
ground.”

The thought of Maggie and Lydia in the Nevernever was enough to terrify me. “That was an
incredibly bad idea.” I gave each of them my best stern look. “It’s a little hypocritical for me to say
this, but don’t go into the Nevernever without me until I say you know what you’re doing.”

“Well you’re here now, can I close this yet?” She was looking a little shaky, unfamiliar magic was
always harder and she’d been holding the way for a minute or two already.

“Let’s make sure we can get out without it.” I gather my will, then with a hint of power and a gesture,
for the first time in a long time, I pushed my way through reality. “Aparturum.”

One of the most useful aspects of the Nevernever was that distances didn’t correspond to those on
Earth, it allowed for the daring and well informed to travel incredibly quickly. That being said, over a
few feet it was usually pretty one to one. My rip, neater than Maggie’s but not by much, opened next
to hers and showed the wall of the living room, despite the tears being parallel I could see the
opening of hers through mine. I stepped back into the house and then through hers, traveling five feet
in ten steps was the complete opposite of how efficient travel was supposed to work. “Looks good,
close it.”

With both of the openings shut we spread out around the top of the tower, looking across the new
world. With Lydia’s words about it still being new I studied it, the pillars of rocks continued into the
distance, with a dense fog eventually blocking further views. I could see patterns though, I
recognized the layout.

“The towers are each islands?” Normally the Nevernever was distinct, but here it seemed to map
nearly perfectly to the city.

“Some are just single buildings I think.” Lydia’s form was changing as she walked, despite having
mass she liked her mutability. “It’s still changing, the towers are because I started spreading it from
here, every wizard wants a tower after all.”

“So they’ll better represent places as time goes by?” Maggie was looking into the distance, trying to
fit the various pillars to the city’s landscapes. “When will the long ways form, and where are all
living things?”

“They won’t really, and there aren’t any yet.” Wings were spreading from Lydia’s back, her clothes
had turned into a toga much life Lash had favored, and she flexed her new storm colored limbs.
“There’s something keeping the Nevernever shut here, I was only able to lift it inside Braavos’s city
limits.”

Suddenly things were falling into place. “That ward when we entered—”

“You were leaving one, one that covers the entire planet as best I can tell.” The power it would take
to create something like that- I’d never really thought about how to close the Nevernever but if it was
easy, or even not nearly impossible, everyone would do it. “This is kind of a bubble beneath the
ward, we’re still separate from the greater Nevernever.”

“What would happen if we just walked to the edge, into the fog?” Maggie was looking at the distant
clouds with an inscrutable expression.

“You’d come out the other side I imagine.” With two more exploratory flaps Lydia launched herself
into the sky, shouting joyfully. We watched her sweep down around the tower, orbiting until she was
just above the waves before she started her climb back up.

Maggie was still staring into the distance in a way that set my dad senses tingling. “What are you
thinking?”

It took her a minute, but then her words spilled out, tumbling over themselves. “I know that you
don’t really want to go back, or at least you don’t mind staying here, and I don’t really have a lot of
ties to Earth but—”

“You still have friends there, you still miss it.” After the terror and then the relief, the thought had
crossed my mind. I’d left a lot behind there, a lot of good, a lot of bad. Michael, Molly, Murphy,
Mister, Mouse, the list went on and even included other starting letters. One M stood above the
others though, and I was happy not to be within her reach.

“Yeah, and there’s more than just that.” She went silent and I let her, this had the sound of something
that had been building for awhile. “I mean the people here, all my friends are going to die centuries
before me, and we’re the only ones who have,” she waved gesturing to the entire new world, “all
this. At least on Earth there’d be equals, sometimes I’m talking to Sera or anyone and I just think,
‘I’ll see your great grandkids grow old.”
Well that got deep in a hurry. I knew the feeling, but when I was younger I had Elaine, and then later with Susan I’d pushed past it. The fact had always been between Murphy and I, it bothered her more than me, but for Maggie, the entire world was going to die young. It also wasn’t something I could just say wasn’t a problem, death was one of those things that just had to be accepted. Without their early deaths my mother would have far outlived my father, and whomever my grandmother was Ebenezer had vastly outlived her as well. It was a price we paid for the gifts we were given.

“I’m not going anywhere yet, and Lydia-”

“You’re about to go fight in a war against cultists and dragons!” Her shout rang through the empty air. “And Lydia’s my sister and I love her, but she could get distracted and vanish for a century!”

“Do you want to try to go back?”

She walked to the edge of the tower and kicked a loose rock free, we watched it fall until it at last made a splash seconds later. “Yes, no, I don’t know- do you want to stay here?”

I kept my face under control, whatever my feelings there was one thing that was paramount. “Yours and Lydia’s safety and happiness are worth more than everything else I’ll ever possess.”

“You have enemies though-”

“I’m getting more practically every day we spend here.” It was the price of power being used. “I have allies there too, powerful ones.” Some of them were also my enemies, it made keeping track of them convenient.

“I just don’t know.” She turned back towards me and I pulled her into a rough hug, trying to communicate surety.

“We can’t do it immediately, we don’t even know how to get back for one.” I wasn’t entirely willing to up and abandon this world to its fate either. “Honestly, when I went to rescue you I half thought I’d have to give you up, to hide you to keep you safe. Whatever magic brought us here I’m glad for the chance to raise you. You don’t know what a gift that was.”

She’d heard that story before, but I don’t think she ever grasped what I’d really meant. I’d come in saved her from the monsters, and then we were living in an adventure, where despite setbacks, I always triumphed. She’d grown up since we’d arrived, but despite the things she’d seen she didn’t truly understand there were things I was afraid to face.

“If you do truly want to go back, we’ll do it. Just think about it.” She nodded and I turned away looking over the landscape to distract myself.

I could see the canals in the layout of the towers, and now that I had a better understanding I could see differences it what had been largely indistinguishable stone. Our island was tallest, something that fundamentally fit, and I could see across most of the city. The islands along the harbor’s edge was smoother, as if the stone was shaped by the wind and waters, suggesting lightness and motion. Behind them, in the red light district, the stone was paler, almost shining. I suspected that that section would change fastest, dreams might be bought and sold there but they were there. In a few weeks the area would probably be unrecognizable.

I turned, looking for other landmarks. The Sealord’s palace was rectangular, composed of square spires that somehow called scepters to mind. The Iron Bank was flat stone, a sheer cliff that rose
even as veins of faintly rusted iron and gold twined across its surface. The various temples were
cathedralesque and vaguely gothic, flying buttresses soaring to the grey skies. The House of Black
and White lived up to its name, one half of it the only section of white visible in the city, even as its
other half was stygian. After the red light district the churches and temples would be next to change,
the beliefs of their worshippers warping the Nevernever. I’d have to be careful there, at least two
religions definitely had access to power and I had no idea what effect this new dimension would
have on them.

Lydia might have a better idea, and as she alighted I asked her.

“No idea, probably nothing for now.” It was always disconcerting for her not to know something,
especially when Lasciel’s memories should show the first time the Nevernever was made. “It’s only
a city, it will take time for things to coalesce. Besides, you shouldn’t worry about the gods, the Titan
will be the first to form, I can already detect hints of his awareness.” The skyline had been missing
something, a thousand feet of stone and bronze shouldn’t be so easily forgotten. “You poured magic
into him, hundreds of people live and work there everyday, and say what you will about gods, it’s
easier to believe in something you can see.”

“Is he dangerous?” Maggie asked and before Lydia said anything I knew her answer.

“Of course he’s dangerous. But so am I, very dangerous: more dangerous than anything you’ll meet
in this world. Papa is dangerous and George is dangerous. You’re beset with dangers, and you’re
dangerous yourself.” Tolkien paraphrases showed that she was my daughter more than any facial
features. “He’ll be a guardian though, there isn’t much that will stir him.”

“How strong do you think he’ll be Gandalf?” She tilted her head, a very George-like gesture, and
then shrugged.

“Weaker than Maeve, stronger than Korrick, you could probably take him if you did something to
get on his bad side.” Something on the level of the Summer Lady’s servant was still far higher than
anything else this world had ever seen. I’d have to pay him a visit, the need for information balanced
the risk.

I dragged my mind back from future excursions to a more immediate problem that this could be a
solution for. “How hard would it be to expand this pocket, to get other cities linked in?” If I had
Ways between the cities the dragons’ threat would be almost completely destroyed, they wouldn’t be
able to hit and run with impunity.

“From here? Impossible.” She continued after I raised an eyebrow. “Lifting the ward here is taking
all the power of my link to our magma pocket, even with all the setup I did. From Mini Tirith I could
do more, but that would just bring in the ocean nearby and we’ve all had enough of seamonsters.”

“Could we bring the ward down entirely?” Lydia floated into the air as she considered Maggie’s
question.

“If we went to wherever it’s based, probably.”

Maggie started asking almost before she finished. “Where is it based?”

“First guess is the Wall, just because it’s a giant magical wall, but I’d have to be there to be sure.”
Well that was reasonable, Lydia had inherited some of my knowledge of genre norms.
“Destroying the Wall, or however we have to bring down the ward should probably wait until we know why it’s even there.” I didn’t feel like unleashing a nameless evil held back by this superward.

“Well it’s nominally supposed to keep the Others out, but mostly it just stops wildlings.” Lydia was beginning to sound bored of the conversation.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but the Others are the ice demons that raised the dead and brought generations of darkness?” It didn’t take a genius to notice the thematic similarities.

“That’s them.” Lydia’s wings were growing back and she was looking longingly at the wind tossed spray. “On the bright side you’re probably in charge of them.” She flung herself into the air, diving rapidly as Maggie and I exchanged a look of disbelief.

“So when this is all over, we’re going there?” Before answering I walked to the edge of our island, I had the impression that the towers around us were already subtly different than when we’d entered.

The Ways would be impossibly valuable and could solve the entire dragon problem, as well as giving us a path home. “We might be going there sooner.”

125- Jon Arryn

“What do you make of him?”

Stannis looked up from the maps and ledgers that he'd been studying since the day's summit. “Who? The wizard?” At Jon’s nod Stannis leaned back from the table, contemplative. “He’s no friend of ours.”

“What makes you say that?” Jon had his own ideas, but Robert’s brother had a sharp mind and it shouldn’t be wasted.

“He’s friends with Prince Oberyn, that would do it alone.” He was also prickly, a delicate touch was needed to keep his attention from focusing on slights, real or imagined.

“It’s possible to have friends on the opposite side of a war.” He knew that well. The Rebellion had been just, necessary even, but he’d fought against men he’d known well for decades. He hadn’t killed any, but if the swirl of battle had been less kind he might have had to. “He claims to be against the use of dragons, if Dorne is aiding-”

“They must be.” Stannis was not his brother, for better or for worse, and his temperament showed it. He was far brusquer and it won him few friends. “We were wondering why Prince Doran exiled his brother, now we know.”

“A bold claim.” Jon agreed with it though. After the rebellion he’d managed to wrangle Dorne back into rough alignment, but the entire realm knew it was only nominal. If Viserys Targaryen returned on dragonback the region would rise in a heartbeat, even without whatever Oberyn was up to. “If Dorne is already with them it gives them a safe eastern harbor, the scum of Essos will be free to sweep north through the Boneway.”

“Straight into the Stormlands,” that was a subject guaranteed to irritate the man, he’d never forgiven Robert for giving Renly Storm’s End. “The Tyrells can’t be trusted, the boy will have the whole of
the south on his side, not to mention a grown dragon.”

“Dragons,” a surprised Stannis looked up at him, “the wizard mentioned Targaryen dragons. Accidentally perhaps.”

“Who will ride the others? A girl of six and? There are only two Targaryens left.” Stannis was coloring, the conversation had managed to hit all of his pressure points.

“Your seat has its share of dragonseeds, the free cities are teeming with them. Finding a rider will not be a problem.” Or it might be, the last dragons had died well before Jon had been born and he’d never cared much for their stories.

Stannis pulled a book to him, Jon couldn’t make out the title, before discarding it. “The Red Priests are certainly managing-” A knock on the door interrupted him, Stannis’s grunt was enough for whoever it was to enter.

Seaworth, Stannis’s pet smuggler. “My Lord, you called?”

“Sit down Davos.” Stannis turned back from inspecting the man to Jon. “I had Ser Davos travel through the city, to search out rumors and the mood. Tell us what you’ve learned.”

“Gladly,” the slight man sat, dropping a rough bag on the table, pulling several papers out, charts apparently. “Back in my previous life,” he looked up, if he was searching for a response he didn’t find it, “I knew my way around Braavos pretty well. I’ve still got friends, a little grayer, a little wiser, a lot fewer.”

“No doubt as their crimes deserved.” The Master of Ship’s voice was flat.

Seaworth didn’t take any notice to it, anyone who dealt with Stannis must be used to him. “Of course my Lord.”

“So what did you find?” Jon had sent Petyr on a similar task, his wife had recommended the boy to him and so far he was everything she’d promised.

“Well I have met the man, but with your permission I’ll go over what the city thinks of him. There’s a lot of lies, a lot of trash, and what I think is some truth.” The smuggler slid a sheet of parchment along the table to them, Stannis picked it up before he could. “The first anyone heard of him was five or six years ago, he came out of nowhere.”

“And he advertised himself like this?” Jon took the weathered page from him, it was a simple broadsheet, he could see the defects in the cut of the print.

**HARRY DRESDEN — WIZARD**

Lost Items Found. Paranormal Investigations.
No Love Potions, Endless Purses, Parties or Other Entertainment

Jon took a moment to recover himself. “Was he serious?” For a man who killed dragons, who’d ripped ancient walls from their foundations it seemed a farce. “Lost Items found? What is he, a
“tradesman?” He looked at the smuggler who was clearly resisting the urge to move away. “Or was it your source? Could he be playing some sort of game?”

“I thought much the same,” Stannis’s voice was sharp. “Do you trust the man who gave you this?”

Oddly Stannis's doubt seemed to build Seaworth’s confidence. “With my life, I’ve done it several times. He referred me to a friend of his, a bit more respectable ever since he went straight. He belongs to a group of merchants, they hired Dresden four years ago to locate some stolen property. He did it, entirely on the level.”

“How could they afford him?” It wasn’t a question Jon thought to ask often, but Dresden’s devices and presumably time were ruinously expensive. He couldn’t think of anything merchants carried that would be worth hiring him to find.

“He took a flat fee back then, a cut of the cargo.”

“So what changed? Why did he change from recovering lost or stolen property?”

Stannis’s teeth started grinding as soon as Davos shook his head. “Couldn’t say. He started selling those compasses of his, stopped taking jobs and then he stepped into legend.”

“Pulling apart Oldtown is quite a jump from bounty hunting.” If it wasn’t for Tarly’s word about the matter Jon wouldn’t believe it. He hadn’t been able to see the ruins himself, but the story was so incredible a hundred ravens from Mace Tyrell wouldn’t have convinced him. It was something from the age of heroes, a man blowing a horn and shattering miles of ancient stone.

Davos shifted uneasily, gripping a necklace. “Oddly that’s one story that no one believes here. They’ve got others though.”

“Such as?” He knew the man was somewhat nervous, but he should be more forthcoming.

“He battled demons beneath the Red Temple, they say he killed a kraken—”

Stannis cut him off. “He killed one of Balon’s sons at the Hightower, could that be what they’re talking about?”

“No, they meant a real monster, half the sailors at the tavern claimed they knew someone who sailed with him and didn’t return. There’s apparently some guardsman in the city with a hammer that can shatter mountains with a single blow that Dresden gave out and didn’t bother to take back.”

Jon suddenly felt his age. “Gods, never let Robert hear that.”

“Yes my lord. The sailors also claim he’s got an island in the seas to the north that can only be found by those who know where it is—”

“That describes all small islands.” Stannis seemed to be losing patience with the tales.

Seaworth plowed ahead, undaunted. “Shrouded by fog, covered in glass, and full of dragons.”

“More dragons? They’re beginning to be less exciting.” The knock of the door was almost a relief, Jon wasn’t sure he could bear anymore stories, Petyr slipped in soon after.
The young man sketched a bow. “My Lords, Ser Davos.”

Jon waved him to a seat, one reasonably clear of papers. “Yes, yes, tell us, what have you found?”

Petyr was carefully pulling the documents from his chair and glancing at them as he spoke. “Dresden is closely affiliated with the Iron Bank.”

Stannis snorted. “Along with the Sealord and the Arsenal and the Navy. The man’s a Braavosi to the core.”

Baelish looked apologetic. “I must disagree, Ser Harry’s appearance in the game coincided exactly with the first time the Iron Bank hired him.”

“What do you mean?” Baelish was a clever man, and like all clever young men liked to show off. Keeping him on task was essential. “And how do you know?”

The lord of the Fingers shrugged. “Men like to talk when they have an appreciative audience, especially about things that no longer seem important. A scribe of the bank was willing to tell me much.” Petyr smiled, having them all hanging on his words was clearly gratifying to him. “When Ser Willem Darry died his servants stole his money and threw the Targaryen children into the streets. Ser Harry was hired to retrieve them and the money.”

“Obviously he succeeded.”

“Quite. From there Dresden’s rise was rapid, he joined a group of the rich and influential, sponsored by a member of the bank, and started producing his compasses.”

Stannis was still focused on a different issue. “Why then? Did your man have any insight into the timing?”

“He bought a house, a nice one, just prior. He might have been saving up?” Petyr was obviously reluctant to admit failure if he was grasping at straws.

Jon shook his head. “There must be something more.” For a man with that sort of power there were always something real, certainly not money.

“Who can tell what goes through the mind of a wizard? Maybe he was waiting for the stars to be right.”

Stannis’s tone showed his displeasure. “And the Dornish? How did he meet Prince Oberyn?”

Petyr’s information seemed to be running dry. “I can only assume his group, but I have no firm knowledge.”

“What else is there?” Jon looked between the other men, “we’ve got myths and conjecture, what do we know for sure?”

“He has a daughter. He’s friends with Prince Oberyn,” Stannis was ticking them off on his fingers as he went. “He was reluctant to sell compasses to the Lannisters. He’s rich, as rich as he cares to be.”

“He’s a prolific writer and tinkerer,” that was Petry interjecting. “He spurred the invention of the printing press, the new plows, and he has something to do with the steam engines.”
“Steam engines?” Jon hadn’t heard the term, “explain.”

“New devices,” Stannis ground out, “to power things. Pumps, mills, ships, the Arsenal has a ship that can sail against the wind.”

“They’re being used on the Rhoyne as well, a man named Mangini is building them,” Petyr added. They’re faster than pole boats by far.”

If the Arsenal was using them they were surely worth looking at, but there were more important things than novelties to worry about. “Does his daughter share his power?” The man was roughly aligned with the Martells, but perhaps a marriage to a second- no first born son of a bannerman could change his stance. “How old is she even?”

“She does, and as to her age? Flowered, but hopefully not deflowered.” Petyr’s jape fell flat to Stannis’s stoney gaze. “Fifteen perhaps?”

Too old for Ned’s boy, the same for his great nephew. Edmure Tully perhaps? He was old enough, he should be married. It could bind Dresden firmly to the crown, and if Lysa was able- No, he was getting ahead of himself.

“What can we offer him to remain neutral?”

Seaworth looked confused. “He’s willing to fight Volantis-”

Jon cut him off. “The next war is the one I’m concerned about.” He unrolled one of the new maps, weighing its corners down with the incredible surplus of books Stannis had acquired. “Ideally all the dragons and Dresden would die in battle, but we cannot plan for that. Either he and Viserys fall to Volantis, or Viserys Targaryen will set his sights on us as Aegon reborn.”

“Dragons can be killed.”

Petyr shook his head, responding before Jon could. “The Myrish man was right, we can’t assume that we can even engage one.”

“Well if we can’t kill the beast, we can kill its rider.” Seaworth’s suggestion silenced the table. He continued before any of them could object. “I’ve got six sons, I’ll die for them but walls and ships and brave men won’t stop dragons. A single knife will kill Viserys.”

“Two knives. He has a sister.” He couldn’t tell what Stannis thought of the suggestion, he was back to grinding his teeth.

“With the Targaryens dead there would be nothing to stop the Free cities from uniting.” Petyr wasn’t uncomfortable with the idea. The smuggler he could understand but Petyr had been raised by the Tullys, he should know better. “Except the dragons Dresden claims Pentos has.”

“Varys.” Stannis practically spat the name. “I told Robert he should have purged the court, now the eunuch is setting Essos on fire.”

“Quite an improvement from being caught off guard by the Greyjoys. From disgrace to Dragonlord.”

“Allegedly. It was an awfully conveniently timed revelation for Dresden to get out of the expedition”
Stannis turned to Seaworth. “Do you know anything of Illyrio Mopatis?”

“I hardly traveled in the same circles my Lord.”

Petyr was quick to answer in his stead. “He’s a merchant prince, rich as they come. His ships dock in Gulltown.”

Jon covered his eyes, rubbing his forehead. “Just an upjumped merchant then.”

“Dragon riders have come from lower stock.” Jon lifted his hand to stare at the man, he must be tired since it didn’t cow Seaworth. “The smallfolk remember Nettles, I couldn’t name another past Aegon.”

“I think there’s another point to consider. If this magister managed to hatch a dragon how hard can it be?” Petyr’s eyes were alight. “If we could get a dragon then—”

“Robert would rather die.” Stannis was right Jon knew, but for a second the idea had been seductive. “And who would know how to even start? The Citadel is burned, and if the Targaryens had any eggs left they’re lost or hidden.”

“Or Ser Darry escaped with them and Viserys has them.”

“Had them, you can’t make a dragon without breaking a few eggs.”

“Had them,” Stannis was willing to allow Seaworth correct him, but not Petyr. Jon would have to warn the boy. “I doubt you’re the first to have the idea, every single carved rock from Ib to Asshai is going to be sold to desperate men.”

For the second time that night Jon felt old. He could barely imagine it, dragons springing from the wastes of Essos, every man a king. “How could we even think to stop them? I doubt we’ll find a Serwyn, certainly not in Robert’s Kingsguard.” The thought of Boros Blount going against a dragon was entertaining for almost exactly as long as the fat man would last.

“We could throw ourselves at the feet of Viserys and beg for mercy.” Stannis’s tone made it clear how likely he thought that idea was. “Or hope Dresden is serious about his threats against all dragons.”

“The man claims he can’t chase down dragons. I doubt he’ll leave Braavos undefended to save a king Oberyn probably turned his mind against already.” The room went silent after he spoke. It wasn’t the good kind, he recognized it from the first days of the Rebellion, when his lords thought of toppling a dynasty that had ruled for three hundred years. He needed to say something to rally them, if men like Stannis weren’t optimistic the rest of Westeros would topple. “Surely we can think of something other than sending cutthroats and assassins at them!”

“Ghis didn’t. The Rhoynar didn’t. We can’t fight them on horseback beneath snapping banners.” Petyr sounded almost excited at the prospect. “We won’t match their strength, so if we don’t want to be ruled by incestuous madmen we’ll need to fight from weakness.”

The Arryn blood in his veins practically boiled at the idea. As High as Honor was more than just words, it was a code, an oath, but he couldn’t see an alternative. Frankly he didn’t even expect assassins to work, Oberyn Martell was a famed poisoner and would surely be aware of the threat. That dishonoring himself might be pointless just made it more bitter. “You’re right. Upon our return
to King’s Landing we’ll begin to take steps in that direction.”

125.

Leaving the Nevernever, or at least the pocket of it we had here, was as always a relief. Other than the still accreting Titan it was empty, but for most of my life entering the Nevernever was courting extreme danger, or at least a dog’s life. That sort of fear didn’t really vanish, I’d never be entirely at ease there. Maggie wasn’t nervous and was less happy leaving. For her it was just a realm of magic and mystery, yet another result of being on this world far from real power.

It was hard to remember sometimes, especially when the dragons presented such obstacles, but I was nearly a god here. That didn’t mean I was invincible, far from it, but without any opposing forces I was free to do things best found in myths and legends. Lydia’s bubble was the first real threat to that, even if the Titan wasn’t as strong as she thought he’d be the first of many. Of course the nascent entities would be largely limited to Braavos, or so I thought, and all it would take to avoid them was vacating the city.

Alternately, I could try to get in on the ground floor and ensure that everything there was friendly to me. The Nevernever was still largely formless, I could build something for an ally, or try to shape it from the real world. Lydia would know how, but I had more pressing concerns for her.

“Lydia?” She’d shed her form before returning, I wasn’t sure if she could sustain a real physical body but she clearly didn’t feel the need. “When will the Titan be up for conversation?”

“Pretty soon,” she looked amused when I gestured for her to continue, at this point I was sure she was being deliberately obtuse about the passage of time. “Less than a year I think, it will go faster the more people you tell about him.”

Talking would be nice, interesting at least, but I was hoping for more. “How long until he could fight off a dragon?” The Titan was the embodiment of a fortress for Braavos, it wasn’t much of a stretch to hope he’d be willing to battle a supernatural threat.

“Less time, being strong is easier than being smart.” Far too true, and not just in 80s movies.

Promising, but potential was different from reality. “Would he be willing to pull a St. George?”

She started rotating, her usual habit while thinking. “Maybe. Things are a little different here, everything is so fresh!”

Maggie decided it was her turn to be the Watson. “What do you mean?”

“Well back on Earth and related environs, power has a purpose,” she paused looking between the two us. “Summer fights Winter, the Knights of the Cross battle the Denarians, it’s a developed,” she paused struggling to find a word, “ecosystem. Here with this little realm the Titan exists and is gathering power strictly because of human belief. He’s as of yet unbound by the strictures and Mantles a similar entity would have.”

Well that was somewhat encouraging. “So he can do whatever he wants?”

“He can do whatever he wants, insofar as he remains the Titan of Braavos.”
“He’s a statue though,” Maggie looked as if she thought we were both being impossibly dense. “A fortress yes, but he’s a few thousand tons of immobile rock. Won’t remaining as the Titan mean he does nothing?”

“He’s a symbol of Braavos, a guardian, perhaps even an incipient genius loci. Demonreach manifested a body, despite the fact islands are usually characterized by their non-ambulatory nature.” Lydia was nodding as I explained.

“You’re almost right. There’s enough more you’re missing that I could try to explain until the sea washes Braavos away, but there’s no time for that.” She started to rise through the floor, thanks to her inverted position that meant her head remained until the end. “It’s dark out so I’m taking George fly-”

She didn’t need to cut herself off simply because she vanished, her voice was a projection she could throw where she wanted, but it seemed to amuse her to temporarily assume limits. I tried to resist the thought she considered it slumming it.

“If you can get the Titan to fight dragons then-”

“We can replicate Lydia’s trick in the other cities and have their own entities form?” It was an attractive idea, especially because it would be a nice self-sustaining solution. I certainly liked it better than the gunpowder revolution I’d started, but if it took years for Lydia to pry back the ward over the other cities it might not work.

“Well yes, but I was thinking we could leave to investigate the Wall, for a way home.”

“We’ll go there, but we have responsibilities.” Lydia had said power had purposes, a thought aligned with my own philosophy. “We’re both blessed, we have an obligation, with-”

“Spider-Man is not the answer to everything,” for a second I wanted to argue, but I could see she was serious. “They got along fine without us for thousands of years. I know you feel guilty for the dragons, but they’d probably have come back without us. There’s always going to be problems here, just promise me that once we’re done with this current set we’ll try to figure out a path back.”

“We’ll look for a way back, I promise.” She nodded and looked a little calmer. “I can’t promise we’ll find one, but once the dragons are dealt with we’ll give it the good old college try.”

Maggie had mastered the art of eyebrow raising. “You never went to college Dad.”

“You mother did, and she had stories.” I wanted to pull the words back before Maggie perked up in interest. Susan’s stories had far more drunken excursions and the poor choices that characterized the transition to adulthood than I wanted to tell my teenage daughter. “Mostly about studying and the importance of the Dewey decimal system though. Very boring.” She pretended to believe me, and we split up to forage for food.

One of the first things I’d done on arriving in Braavos was introducing the sandwich, finding the appropriate sort of bread was surprisingly difficult. It would be a lie to say they’d taken the city by storm, a few places served them, but I’d managed to get one bakery to make the right kind of loaves for me. When we got back from our road trip it had been an important errand to get them baking them again. Naturally, after slicing the bread and various dried meats with the incredibly well utilized D-Flat, building something Dagwood would be proud of and toasting it, there was a knock on the
door I felt through the wards. It was a true dilemma, on one hand the sandwich, the other the world. A second knock decided it, I walked to the front trying to dislocate my jaw, using the sandwich as originally designed.

“Oberyn?” He pushed in almost before I gestured for him to enter, quickly shutting the door behind him. “Why yes, it’s nice to see you too.”

“Apologies.” On closer inspection he was heavily cloaked, his hood was still up. “I’d rather not be seen on the streets.”

With ambassadors from King Robert around I wasn’t surprised. Last time they’d been here they’d had enough muscle to successfully invade Ser Willem’s villa, with Arryn here I couldn’t imagine they’d have less. An exiled Oberyn being spotted would give up the whole game. “Understandable. I thought you’d be with Viserys.”

“He’s a smart boy. He’s got a good head on his shoulders, astonishing as that is given his male relatives.” He’d taken the chance to remove his cloak, revealing mail and leather armor beneath it and a truly excessive number of knives. “And Obara told me about how little dragons like you, so if I wanted to chat it had to be before I joined him on his campaign.”

“And you wanted to supervise your diplomat.” It made sense that he was in the city, he wouldn’t want to rest his cause on a random supporter’s shoulders.

“Yes, one of my goodsister’s relations. Young and eager enough to join our cause, old enough to know to be cautious.” So someone from Norvos, during our Westeros tour Oberyn had mentioned his brother and his wife’s estrangement. She had been considering returning to her home city, I didn’t know if she had or not.

“Isn’t that dangerous? The Norvoshi envoy wasn’t amenable to your cause and might share your man’s identity with Westeros. It won’t be much of a jump to assume Dornish complicity.”

Oberyn shook his head dismissively. “That ship has sailed with our revelation, Jon Arryn is too clever not to now realize the truth of my exile.”

“And you’re not worried about your homeland?” Dorne was the least populated of the seven mainland kingdoms, it seemed like a reasonable target for a quick invasion and regime change, especially with the threat of future dragons.

“It is a risk, but Dorne has eaten greater armies before. Besides, Robert has to know that starting the war now is pointless. Viserys is presently willing to risk himself fighting dragons. In the event of an attack Robert has to worry that he’ll return to Westeros prematurely and thus move away from his most likely cause of death.” I wasn’t sure I bought that line of reasoning, but it wasn’t my war.

“Well, we’ll see.” I waved him to a chair, gave a mournful look at my sandwich and moved to grab a bottle of wine. “So what’s the occasion? I know I’m excellent company but braving the streets seems like a bit of a risk for conversation.”

“Good conversation is worth facing far more than the Usurper’s assassins. Besides-” he threw a leer, “who says I’m just here for conversation?”

My glare didn’t move him, but Maggie’s did. “I do. Hello Oberyn.”
“Lady Maggie!” He got up and bowed extravagantly. “No wonder your father took you with him, otherwise he’d have returned to find the entire world trying to court you.” She blushed a little, he noticed and kept on teasing her. “I understand Gunther Hightower is now married but Humfrey is probably still up for grabs, just let me know when you want to meet them. I’ve been planning on touring the Reach and with you along to be impressed it will be a constant party.”

The static shock that hit Oberyn he sat back down had nothing to do with either of us. “Well with conversation the only thing on the menu, other than whatever that,” he nodded to my sandwich and I moved in front of it defensively, “is, I’ll cut to the chase. What do you plan on doing?”

“What I said I would, if dragons start burning cities I’ll kill them.” That was the sort of sentence that had to soak in, so I took up my neglected dinner. “I can’t do as much about armies or other disasters, but I will stop dragons.”

“And will you be taking the field like our friend Varys’s man suggested?”

“On its face it seems like a decent plan, except for the part where the dragons come out and threaten to torch the cities behind us.”

Oberyn was looking through his wine glass, Maggie and Lydia had gone through a domestic phase and made them into ‘artistically’ shaped glasses. “You don’t think the armies will remain coherent in the face of that?”

My glass was more normal, it was easier to clean which was always a concern here. “Why would they? Who’s going to let their families burn?”

“I don’t think the average soldiers are the ones who makes those choices, but we’ll see.” He drained his goblet, or tried to. Maggie’s art managed to trap a spoonful of wine somehow. “Obara said Varys couldn’t master his dragons, any idea why?”

“Couldn’t say.” It didn’t seem especially hard, the Targaryens just worked and the Red Priests certainly had no problems. “He was looking for something else though, more than just my help.”

That made him sit up. “Oh? What?”

“Books and Euron Greyjoy’s ship’s location. Revenge apparently.”

“That doesn’t fit what I know of the eunuch, he’s cold blooded, too cold for that.”

I shrugged, I didn’t know the man well enough to be sure even with the soulgaze. I wouldn’t put it past him though, some of his spiderwebs might be long but he was pulling on them. Which reminded me I should be careful, I had thrown him against a wall and threatened him. It was a problem for another day though.

I tried to think of a change in subject, it was depressing how many of my conversations these days revolved around geopolitics and mostly came up blank. “How’s Quaithe? Oh, and how long are you staying in Braavos?”

“She stopped blocking scrying about a month after you left, she recovered fairly rapidly. Hearing about the other dragons was certainly a shock for her, but she was glad for the explanation.” Well that was good, I’d have bet she’d be on death’s door based on how she looked last. Her magic was foreign, but blocking all dragons from scrying really seemed difficult, especially when there were
two new groups spread across a continent. “As for me, I’ll be around until the conference is over, then I’m recruiting some sellswords to form the core of our force.”

And from magic back to politics. “You can’t just use Dornishmen?” It seemed like the cheap and easy way to do it, a few second sons looking for adventure could fill out the ranks, especially since all they really needed was Viserys overhead.

“Despite what I said earlier my brother thinks keeping the bare minimum of deniability is worthwhile.” He stood, clasping his cloak. “Besides, all of his guards are already my men and they have one job. The rest are just decoration and noise.”

I stood to let him out the door. “Well good luck with that. Try to avoid getting murdered.”

He smirked as he left. “A hundred angry husbands couldn’t do it, I doubt Arryn’s less motivated men will do any better.”

126.

Actually sitting down and doing magic felt a little weird. For the better part of the last year I’d been on the road, chasing dragons or Dornish girls, and while I’d done a lot of magic it wasn’t the same. Here in my mostly restored lab, between George and the gunpowder it was still a bit of a mess, I had all the tools and components I needed.

Well at least what I needed to make compasses. I’d agreed to supply the Arsenal and I wanted to make sure that new ones were entering the commercial market. They were immensely boring to make, but thanks to them the world’s edges were getting pushed back. I was more than willing to squander a few mornings in the service of exploration. Pulling the gold around the anchor blocks was routine after all this time, the runes weren’t even needed to cement the spell. Intellectually I knew that all my equipment was just window dressing, props for what Lydia dismissed as a meat brain, but they did work. Moving past the crutches, even if only for the compasses filled me with a fierce pride, it was true magic, something I once couldn’t even have dreamed of.

For all of that, my mind was free to wander as I spun the molten metal. There was certainly enough to think about. The omnipresent dragons, the pending intercontinental wars, and Maggie’s newfound desire to return home. None of them were easy to deal with, maybe Gandalf had some special talent for turning ordinary hobbits into anti-evil Rube Goldberg machines but I’d missed that lesson. I was also a few hobbits short, but since I had no idea what I’d do with them I was focusing on the larger problem. I didn’t see a way to deal with any of the dragons past what I was already working on. Well enchanted weapons might work, but I didn’t especially like releasing those into the world. Ekene still had a kraken slaying hammer, I wasn’t really sure if there was a protocol for asking for it back.

They would be faster than waiting for flak cannons though, and wouldn’t have anywhere near the same impact on the world. Framed like that it was a persuasive argument, except I knew I was nowhere near good enough to make Mjolnir. The hammers I’d built were powerful, but if dragons were willing to come down and fight on the ground without being driven half mad they’d be easily killed by mortals. No, they needed something like a javelin, something that could be thrown- or launched, some sort of bow maybe. That was a problem for another day though, I still had compasses to make.
A familiar sort of presence, half remembered, brushed against my ankles and gold splattered everywhere. Cursing I stumbled over the cat and thrust my hands into a bucket, a few drops had hit my hands and even the instant contact burned. The cat, kitten really, looked immensely unconcerned despite nearly being flung across the room when it tangled up my legs. Apparently living in the same house as an osprey whose tastes were remarkably undiscerning made life’s little scuffles unremarkable.

I nearly shouted for Maggie to get her cat, she’d named him Gato as a joke only three people on the planet understood and I was immensely proud of her for it, but now he was just annoying. I’d let her keep it on the condition she looked after him, but like all parents I’d ended up feeding and taking care of him. He was supposed to stay out of the lab though, besides the various alchemical reagents and metals there was plenty of things he could get into, briefly. Besides that, cat hair got everywhere. I missed Mister, but I also missed the brownie cleaning crew that made him far neater.

The thought of my half-bobcat forced my mind back to Maggie’s wants. I didn’t really know what had prompted it, perhaps it was just what she’d said about lifespans, maybe the realization that it was possible, or maybe it was just teenage angst. Either way I’d said I’d look into it, a promise that was increasingly weighing on me.

I was still the Winter Knight, I had and somewhat still was even now relying on its power. Mab didn’t give out gifts for free, if I returned she would expect me to be her enforcer. That was unacceptable I had no intention to turn into Slate, frankly I’d rather die. Of course I’d been in Braavos for the best part of six years, who knew what sort of impact missing a knight had had on the eternal war between the courts.

Ignoring Mab, a fundamentally foolish choice, there were other threats back home. Here I was the big fish, back home I was at best a medium sized one swimming in the open ocean. Nick and his merry band, Mavra, the Black Council, the list of my enemies went on and on. Taking her back there was risky at best, but Earth did have its benefits. Water I didn’t need to boil, modern medicine, allies, and Burger King. On the whole I felt safer here, but I could understand why Maggie wanted to go back, the grass was always greener.

Her cat leapt onto the table, nosing at the still scorching beads of molten gold. I picked him up, his squirming talents were no match to Mister’s, and set him back on the floor giving him a slight push towards the exit. Well if nothing else his interruption proved I still needed to pay attention to the compasses.

The rest of my morning passed uneventfully, leaving me with a box of compasses and a stiff back. Maggie had left at some point to visit her friends, so I ventured out to find lunch. In an unpleasant throwback I felt the eyes on me as soon as I stepped out the door. I was wearing my coat, even if I hadn’t wanted to be both protected and fashionable the dismal weather merited it, and I had my staff. If anyone wanted trouble I was well equipped, but it felt fundamentally strange to have to worry, especially here at home in my own neighborhood. I’d have to warn Maggie, I didn’t really think anyone would be dumb enough- well I had to warn her.

Conveniently George, or some other osprey, was overhead. I waved at him, hopefully Lydia was driving. The bird circled down to me, perching on the center fountain, his eyes burning green with her power.

“Hello Father.” This time she bothered to make his beak move in time, despite her efforts it looked absurd. “What’s up?”
I glanced back at the men I’d tentatively identified as tails. “Oh you know, the usual. Warn Maggie that she’s probably being watched, and that she should be on her guard.”

“Shouldn’t we just make them stop?” George’s eyes were locked on one of the increasingly nervous watchers.

“Nah, better the devil you know.” I stretched to my full height and since Lydia had already given up the game turned to face the same man and gave my best smirk. “Besides, if she really feels nervous she can just flee into the Nevernever.”

“The pocket of the Nevernever.” Lydia was occasionally a bit pedantic, definitely something she got from her mother.

“Whatever, just go tell her please.” She stretched George’s wings then leapt to my shoulder.

“By the way, we need to go back to the island if you want to keep the ward up, I miss having a volcano.” I nodded dumbly and she burst into the air, circling once before heading into the clouds. No one ever mentioned how much work kids were, we’d practically just got home and Maggie wanted to go to the Arctic, now Lydia wanted an island vacation.

Despite demanding children I still needed lunch, so I set off into the city. I half wanted to interrogate my tails, but at this point I really just wanted a steak. Come to think of it McAnally’s was another reason to head back. There were good steaks here, and thanks to me good sandwiches, but never together. Add to those his beer, and a life of breaking knees for Mab almost sounded attractive. With that temporarily ruled out I only had one option, the Voyagers’ Club beckoned. It had other advantages than a great chef, its doorman would stop the tails and force them to wait for me to emerge. I’d gone so long without the Nevernever I’d half forgotten its utility, but entering the club and never being seen to leave it sounded like a great idea.

The rooms were half deserted. Very few of the members were ever around at any one point, and the regulars who lived in Braavos had jobs and responsibilities that kept them busy in the middle of the day. All of that was for the best though, because it meant that as soon as I ordered I could hear the sizzling.

I was about set to enjoy my meal in silence prior to a bit of adventure and exploration in the Nevernever when a man sat down across from me. That by itself didn’t change my plans, I’d chosen the largest table because of its chairs and it would comfortably seat twenty. I felt that it was big enough we could politely ignore each other, he could eat and then sail off to wherever.

Or not. “You’re the wizard then? Dresden?” I’d forgotten both my celebrity and the type of men who joined the club. They wanted adventure and mystery, and more than that they were the rare sort who after they found it, kept looking.

“That’s me.” I took the chance to take a look at the man now that he’d made his way out of the background. He was a sailor, and if one ignored the purple eyes and white-blond hair straight from central casting. He could have been anyone from Long John Silver to Captain Blood, all he was missing was an eyepatch and a parrot. His clothes were well tailored though, there was a lot of money in them, and his posture was straight, the sort that had to be beaten into you. “I don’t think we’ve met..”

“Lysandro Ormollen. Of Lys.” I got the feeling I was expected to recognize his name, but I was drawing a complete blank. “My brother sent me here as part of our delegation.”
“Also of Lys?” He nodded, again as if I should have known. I’d never been to Lys, it didn’t really have the family friendly reputation, but I was pretty sure Bob would have called it heaven. Either way it was just another city, presumably one in which Lysandro’s brother held power. It was a little surprising that he was enough of a sailor to join the club, but maybe he was a third or fourth son and had to seek his own fortune. Tregar had done it after all, and Ferrego ruled Braavos. “Well what can I do for you?”

“As you are aware,” his tone made it clear he didn’t think that at all, “Lys is one of the closest cities to Volantis.”

I raised an eyebrow in lieu of anything even less mature. “Along with Tyrosh and Myr, what of it?”

“The blood of Valyria still flows in Lys,” I half thought he was about to brush his hair to show it off, “and other remnants still linger there.” If he said they had also hatched dragons I was going to punt him through the wall. “If you aid us in our present difficulties you may take all of them that you desire.” Well bribery was an unexpected surprise. Curiously straight up as well, I’d have expected a little more dissembling.

Sadly, as I would like to encourage the honesty I wasn’t for sale, at least not for that. If I were anyone else I’d have been interested, but my magic was different. His treasures were just curiosities to me, of course if I said that no doubt he’d either be offended or offer more.

“I’m already doing all I can.”

“Surely you can replicate your efforts while you’re in Lys though?”

I hesitated, then- “Actually no.”

He leaned forward, desperation in his eyes. “Anything, anything you need we can provide, gold, girls-”

I cut him off with a raised hand. “What I need, what we all need, is time. None of us can get that.”

For a moment he stayed where he was, then sank back into his seat and nodded. “I’m not sure we’ll have any. I had hoped for your help, but failing that we shall once again join in Westeros’s struggles.”

It took a second, I didn’t see how their armies would help, then I realized what he meant. “Viserys then.”

“If we’re going to be ruled by dragons we will at least have our choice.”
“I never thought I would have to worry about dragons and demons.” Ferrego looked exhausted, even more than usual. He’d been trying to wrangle the other cities into some semblance of order and it was obviously taking a toll on him. Telling him that Lys was joining up with the Targaryens hadn’t helped.

“It did all escalate pretty quickly.” The first frantic years were beginning to seem more attractive, when I was the only magic in the world. “As soon as I learned Viserys hatched his dragons I thought others might follow-”

“It was a reasonable suspicion, but I wish you had been wrong.” We were in his office, a large map covering a table. He had figures on it, red dragons over Lys, black over Volantis and similarly themed ones for the other cities. He picked up the dragon over Lys and looked at it contemplatively before returning it to its place. “It might be better to have no dragons but those in Volantis. Creating a solid bloc to oppose them would be simpler.”

“Well if Viserys loses you’ll get your wish.” It was hard to think of a fifteen year old riding to war, but dragon fights typically went to the death. If he didn’t win there wouldn’t even be a body.

“And what of Pentos?” There was a white dragon over that city, I could only assume it was a joke about Illyrio being the cheesemonger. “Your revelation about them was what sank the first coalition.”

I turned to face him, staring at his forehead. “You knew too, didn’t you.” It wasn’t a question and he didn’t directly answer.

“It could have been revealed at a more appropriate time.” His voice was level. “Pentos and its magisters are known concerns, giving them dragons does not change their goals.”

“Which would be of great comfort when they burned our cities while our armies were in the field.”

“Maybe so, but I’m more concerned about the dragons with riders.” It was a fair point, but I wasn’t willing to bank on Pentos continuing to fail. Ferrego stepped away from the map towards his desk, shuffling through some papers. “There’s a question I’ve been meaning to ask, do you know why my brother was murdered.”

It was a segue I hadn’t expected, but it had come up while Obara was there. I should have seen it coming. “Varys claimed it was for his library, a few books on dragonlore.” I was pretty sure the Red Priests had killed him, I’d never gotten a confession but their man had been there robbing the place and the Faceless Men had implicated them. “I can’t be certain though, he could have been lying.”

“It’s enough for me. I scourged them from my city, but that wasn’t sufficient. I will see them dead.” Somehow I believed him more because he didn’t go into histrionics, he said it as calmly as a lunch order.

“They have some power behind them.” I was trying to delay as I came to terms with the new information. I’d always seen Ferrego as rational, kicking the Red Priests out of Braavos was one
thing, destroying a globe spanning religion was another. “R’hllor will be worshipped at least as long as it helps its followers, probably longer.” I wasn’t sure if there were gods in this world. There was power certainly, but nothing like Odin or even the Lords of the Outer Night. Not yet at least.

“I will settle for tearing their temple to the ground and drowning it beneath the Rhoyne.” The calmness was rapidly leaving his voice. Even Syrio was a little taken aback by that, apparently the First Sword hadn’t ever seen the Sealord as so vituperative. “If an attack by half trained dragons is the price, I’ll pay it gladly.”

Against my better judgement I matched his volume. “I’m not willing to get burned for your vengeance, or watch others burn for that matter.”

“You were happy enough to let the Targaryens go free, and that made all the difference! Magic was dead before the dragons woke!” I could hear footsteps outside the door, and Syrio’s stance was shifting towards imminent danger. “I didn’t share my brother’s interest, but I’ve read. If we just killed those beasts we wouldn’t have any of the others!”

“Maybe, maybe not.” I was pretty sure that magic was coming back with or without them, but telling Ferrego that would only be seen as self-serving. “But we’re not in that world, we need to face facts.” It was a messy world we were in, there wasn’t a single clean strike I could make to end all the conflict. “Not everything has changed from what you knew, magic doesn’t make men gods, it’s just strength.”

Ferrego calmed a little after my reproach, Syrio relaxing was the real clue. “If I had believed otherwise the squabbling at the summit would have convinced me of my error.”

I kept them both in front of me anyway as I looked at the map. It was an uncomfortable feeling among men who were if not my friends, then trusted allies, but the Mantle and my instincts were objecting to having Syrio at my back. “How long does it take to sail to Pentos?”

“Five or six days with a fair wind.” The First Sword had prowled closer, also studying the map.

“And you guys beat them so they have no army or navy right?”

Ferrego fielded that one. “Officially.”

“Well little enough that you could land troops then?” Both of them looked confused by my sudden militarism. I wasn’t completely sold on the idea, but giving them a prospect of action would calm them. “Past the explosives I’m working on something else, a guardian.” It was time for a gesture, a big one. “Aparturum.”

Their reactions didn’t disappoint, Ferrego gasping and nearly stumbling at the sudden tear. I stepped through and leaned on my staff looking back at them. “Coming?”

Syrio paused for a second, looking towards the door, but then strode forward through the hole. Ferrego was more cautious, pausing to get a cane he conspicuously didn’t lean on as he walked.

“What is this place?” I took the chance to look around before answering. The crash of waves filled the air, but the island we stood on was alien. The surface was perfectly smooth, glistening black stone with long golden tracks laid into it and curving above it. Men and ships moved along the rails, curving towards the center and then away, vanishing beneath the sides of the plateau. It gave the island the appearance of an orrery crossed with a model train set.
I realized that I hadn’t answered Syrio’s question, but he didn’t seem to mind, captivated by the entirely new world around him. Ferrego was more focused on the statues that circled the island, staring at their faces. At last he shook himself free from his study, giving the rest of the world a quick scan and then visibly forced himself to look at me. “I’m also curious. Where have you brought us Dresden?”

“Another reality,” I pulled open another portal, showing them the back of his desk, “just on the other side of the mirror.”

“Is this a heaven-” I cut Syrio off before he could continue.

“Or hell? Yes and no. It’s the Nevernever, it’s made of dreams and magic.” I took a few steps further onto the island, carefully stepping over the galley beating its oars against the air. “It’s also fairly new here.”

“More fresh magic?” Syrio had made it to the edge of the structure and was watching the traveling objects.

“Of a sort, I can assure you the dragons had nothing to do with it.” I was trying to orientate myself, it was a lot harder from closer to sea level then from the top of my tower. Ferrego noticed my confusion and after a few seconds understanding appeared on his face.

“Is there a reason the layout matches Braavos?” As he spoke I had at last discovered the way I wanted to go.

“Yep. Infriga.” The ice flowed easier here, the Nevernever was suggestible, and a frozen bridge arched from our island to the next. “I hope you’re both up for a little bit of a walk.”

“T-he day I can’t walk my own city is the day I should die.” The Sealord strode onto the icy surface without flinching, I was a little impressed. “Where are we going?” I followed Syrio onto the ice and walked onto the next far larger island, purple undulating stone that seemed to be shifting ever so slightly beneath our feet.

“The nature of our world imprints on this one, but more so. Everything here gets turned up to-” idioms still sometimes caught me, “everything is more here.”

“How so?” We were headed towards the water at the edge of the island that was also a harbor.

“Right now it seems much less.”

I stopped at the edge, trying to think of how I could pull this off, then decided to wing it. “Like I said it’s new.” I crouched down and dipped my staff in the water, the waves washing over it. “Stand back a little please.” They complied hurriedly, and I started to pull in power.

The Nevernever was made of magic, and like everything else on this world it was largely empty. There weren’t any spirits of the sea or winds or waves to resist me, that left the world mostly under my command. I still had limits, but they were far looser than a younger me would have ever imagined.

I wanted this spell to be something special, something that would match the atmosphere around us, something cinematic. Luckily I’d practiced something similar with Maggie. “Emergo!”
The bowsprit broke the water first, waves churning around it. I kept pulling, feeding power into the structure as it split from the water. Ribs grew from the water as a central keel took shape, the sideboards flowed into position between them. At last I was satisfied, a gondola made of water floated before us, the grey light passing through it giving it a ghostly look with occasional flashes of silvered glass. I was tempted to leave it, except there was no way I could hold the water against any weight other than its own. “Infriga!”

With that frost spread along the boat, solidifying with a series of cracks and groans. I stepped aboard, being careful to keep it close to shore. “Come aboard, we’ve got a little bit of a trip left.” Syrio leapt on, I nearly jerked to catch him but he kept his footing effortlessly on the slick surface. Ferrego followed more sedately as I set the boat in motion.

“I asked about the travel time to Pentos because I was half thinking about traveling there.”

“I would implore you to reconsider, your points about the dragons attacking in your absence were well reasoned.” For a man sitting on a bench made of ice on a ship held together by ice and willpower the Sealord was quite collected. “If Volantis doesn’t seek conquest so much as preventing us from moving, their dragons could do much with a single day free in the sky.”

“What I’m about to show you should be able to prevent that.” The mists were thickening as we sailed and I was mindful of Lydia’s prediction, at some point we’d just show up on the other side. Not yet though, I could feel a presence and I could hear the splashing of waves. Syrio had noticed it too, he was peering into the fog, trying to pierce it through sheer force of will. Luckily I could actually do that. “Vento.” The breeze cleared the air and Ferrego wasn’t quite able to hold back a gasp. The Titan stood before us.

He was big, nothing like the real thing but he was giant, at least fourteen feet tall. He was facing into the mist but his head ponderously turned to look at us, accompanied by the sound of breaking rock. His feet, his lower legs were encased in stone but it seemed to be slowly shattering as he grew more aware. I could just see the top of his greaves above the rock, the rest still concealed by the stone. The Titan cut an impressive figure, but also an alien one that was typical of the Nevernever. His armor was a dark grey metal at first glance, only a more thorough inspection revealed that the edges were fuzzy, bits of fog emanating from his breastplate and shrouding him, mist rolling over his back like a cloak. His sword and shield were wood, sanded and varnished in such a deep purple that they were nearly black. I didn’t doubt his longsword would cut better than steel, but with the sort of muscles he had anything would.

“But what- how?” The time I’d spent studying him hadn’t let Ferrego recover.

“I said this world was made of belief.” I waved at the Titan who had apparently decided we weren’t a threat and turned back towards the fog. “Well, people believe in the Titan. More than almost anything in this city.”

“And he will fight the dragons in your absence?” Syrio was still staring at the spirit, mouth slightly open in awe.

I glanced back at him before turning the boat back towards the shore. “In a little while he’ll kill them.”
The clash of steel was the sort of thing that woke you up in the morning. After introducing Ferrego and Syrio to the Titan I’d started inviting myself to the guard’s morning practices. Currently I was staring across the ring at Quence, a man who threw off the vibe that he’d gleefully murder anyone who even noticed how short he was. I suspected Syrio had paired us together as something of a joke.

“So how long have you been a guard here?” I spun the blunted blade lightly, warming up my arm for the bout. The Mantle gave me skill and strength, but it still used my muscles. If I was going to be fighting a war I wanted to have every edge I could find, not to solely rely on the memories of dead knights.

“Five years this Unmasking.” He lunged forward in that sort of controlled burst of speed I’d always envied. I could move fast, but it was always a struggle to get all of my limbs moving together. With less to keep track of he didn’t seem to have that problem. I resolved not to mention it, even without his suspected hair trigger temper Murphy had never liked it either.

My block seemed to surprise him with its solidity. He’d apparently been guilty of thinking that my long arms were as thin as they looked, not merely disproportionate. I made him pay for it, forcing him back as I lunged forward, Quence barely managed to stay on his feet as he recovered.

“Any good stories?” I kept my eyes on his core as he paced. I’d always been told that everything else could be faked but when the torso moved it was real.

“One or two.” My sudden attack took him by surprise, I’d been content to counterpunch before, and it took him three parries and a particularly athletic dodge for him to get free. I could have ended it during the sequence, but I wasn’t willing to use the moves that would leave him maimed and broken on the floor. The Mantle seemed to understand that we were training, but I could still feel the missed opportunities.

“I like to think I’ve been in my share of weird stories—” his new attack was different, he’d apparently learned that he couldn’t hope to match my strength and was instead launching a flurry of lighter blows. “But I’m always up for new ones.”

“Well there was this one time,” he was sweating now and I suspected his story was simply an attempt to buy time, “that I saw something peculiar.” I feinted, and then with a swing that should have broken my wrist I was inside his guard, the point of my sword at his sternum. He looked down and swore, even with my sword touching him I was still out of reach.

I stepped back and grabbed a towel from a hook on the wall, wiping my face off. He’d been the third man I’d fought and it was starting to get warm in the training salle. “Go on finish the story, we can go again then.”

Quence nodded, went to a barrel of water and filled the attached cup. “So it was a normal night,” he took a swig, swishing the water around his mouth before swallowing, “well normal for Braavos, fog everywhere and those pricks wandering around fighting for the honor of whores.” The guards uniformly held a poor opinion of the bravos, strange considering their leaders and half their men were recruited from their ranks. “It was me and Tobho, he went back to Qohor sometime after, and we were patrolling the Isle of the Gods.”

I knew the area well, especially now since it was one of the places I was monitoring most in the Nevernever. When other entities emerged I was pretty sure they’d be there. “It’s normally a quiet patrol, the kind of place you want to use to finish your beat. All the temples have guards, and most
footpads aren’t quite bold enough to rob a priest.” That was a change from Earth, there I’d met a gang who specifically robbed churches. “But you know, every rule gets broken.”

“So what did you see?” I started moving back towards the ring we were using, shaking my arms to get the blood flowing again, he followed.

“I’m getting to that.” He hefted his sword and gave a few exploratory swings before settling into his stance. “So we’re walking along, chatting, making fun of the other’s girl, that sort of thing.” My block and riposte were almost a formality, I was more interested in the story than the fight now. “All of a sudden we hear footsteps, there’s this fellow, a boy really, who’s just tearing through the fog half dressed, a big man racing after him.” He tried something fancy, a strike with a twist that didn’t seem to do what he wanted it to. I almost wished it had, the Mantle’s experience was incredible but if I was relying on it and if it was surprised I’d be in trouble.

“So we share a look and take off after them, calling for them to stop.” His attack was much more serious this time, quick and precise and I actually felt a little pressed before I was able to leverage my strength and reach in a grapple that tossed him over my hip. I was over him before he could rise and he tapped the ground with his fist, acknowledging defeat. I gave him a hand up and he walked towards the water barrel, unstrapping his armor as he went. “They didn’t stop, they never do.”

We reached the barrel and a quick spell froze the top inch or so before I broke it with the pommel of my sword. “I’ll admit my first reflex when I hear people shouting for me to stop is to speed up.” He didn’t reply immediately, staring at the ice. I cleared my throat and he startled, grabbing the cup and filling it almost nervously.

“Right well,” Quence took a hesitant sip, when he didn’t turn into a newt or something he seemed to regain his confidence, “that’s regrettably normal. So we chased them, pounding through the streets. We’re catching up, but the big man is catching up to the boy faster and he’s looking back, he sees this. So,” he took another sip, now he was just enjoying the novelty of magic water, “he cuts into a temple. It doesn’t stop the other guy but Tobho and I were a little more hesitant, it doesn’t pay to upset the priests.”

“You followed him in?”

“Yeah, a little incident for Syrio is one thing, murder is another. We go in.” He paused, clearly waiting for more active audience participation.

“Then what?”

“Well the temple, it was Gelenei’s, you know the gardens?”

I nodded, I did, they were beautiful. The temple garden was nearly an acre of walled and terraced land filled with exquisitely manicured plants and flowers which were maintained by a small army of landscaper priests. I’d heard of weirder faiths, but from what I knew of them I liked them. Something about a sect that said “we can’t control the world, but we can make your decorative plants bloom,” appealed to me. It was a nice simple creed, and it didn’t seem to lend itself to mass murder by immolation. Of course I hadn’t really looked into them, it was possible that they were really devotees of Poison Ivy’s dogma and were planning on killing all fauna in favor of flora. In this, as so many other things, ignorance was bliss.

“So they’re open day and night, the boy had gone right through the gate. So there’s that path that spirals up to the center, to that gold tree.” The tree wasn’t truly gold but the entirety of its trunk was
gilded. Due its position at the heart and summit of the garden it was visible from all of it, on clear
days its shining crown could even be seen from across the city. Quence hung his armor and practice
sword on hooks as we left the salle. “They don’t take the path.”

I imagined them plunging into the greenery. “The priests must have been pissed.”

“You’d think that yeah, so they’re tearing their way up the slope, jumping those little walls and
leaving a trail of wrecked plants in their wake. We just keep following, because at this point if there’s
a murder we’ll have trashed the garden for nothing.”

We were in the palace now, moving through its dark halls towards the back, where the hoi polloi and
servants came and went. “So we get to the top of the hill and the tree maybe ten seconds after them,
and the two of them are climbing, the gold was scraped right off the trunk wherever their feet
touched, it was just a thin layer, but there’s some priests there and they didn’t let us climb after them.
Tobho and I, we’re both thinking that this was not how the night was supposed to go and we’re all
watching the two guys climb the tree, leaving streaks of bark as they went. At this point we’re
expecting to have to dodge a body and arrest the other guy when he comes back down.”

I nodded to the two men at the gate, I’d sparred with both of them previously, as we exited to the
street. “And?”

“Well that tree’s pretty full, they’re getting up there and there’s a lot of branches in the way. We’re
only catching glimpses of them, hearing the swearing and the occasional twig and leaf falling.” We
were standing next to the canal now, he was headed home and I was going the other way but I
wanted to hear the end of the story. “I’m starting to think we’ll need a shovel to scrape the loser off
the ground, and then I noticed the priests, they’re all staring up and chanting something, low under
their breaths. I think, whatever, that’s what priests do, but the two men, they’re getting quieter and
it’s been awhile since I’ve seen them. I do a quick circle of the trunk, can’t see them at all.”

Quence spat into the canal, looking out towards the harbor. “Now it was night, and it was dark, but
two men up a tree, they can’t hide that well, especially against gold. But you know, maybe the drink
or whatever wore off and the two of them decided that it was better to settle their differences in
private and wait for us to leave. Tobho and I, we’d chased them for the better part of a mile and
through a temple, we were staying. So we waited till dawn, if you’ve never seen the gardens as the
sun rises it’s worth seeing, but with the light we could see the whole tree clearly. They weren’t up
there and they never came down.”

That got my entire attention. “They vanished up the tree?”

“I mean we could have missed them, maybe they climbed down like invisible squirrels, but they
went up that tree and no one saw them come down. The really weird thing was that none of the
priests were surprised. One stayed with us all night and the others went back to their work, but he
stuck there and when they disappeared he treated it like it was nothing.” I turned towards the center
of the city, looking for the tree above the skyline. All of a sudden the gardeners seemed much less
laudable. “We left eventually, but that was the last we heard of it, no complaints from the temple, but
a week later there were two men reported missing, and from the descriptions they sounded an awful
lot like the guys we were chasing.”

I gave a low whistle which seemed to satisfy him. No doubt impressing a wizard was good for
several reputation points. “Crazy.”

With his story done Quence vanished into the city, and I headed out thinking about what he’d told
me. It sounded like an urban legend, but he’d seen it. Considering back home in Chicago I’d been an urban legend I wasn’t inclined to doubt him on that front. When I’d arrived I hadn’t found any magic, but maybe I just hadn’t looked hard enough. Either way with the resurgence of magic in the world, and with the Nevernever my type of magic, stories like Quence’s were going to become more common. I’d have to stay vigilant but for now, with the grey skies above me I headed for Koren’s. The blacksmith said he had something for me.

129.

As I walked towards Koren’s I did my best to move on from the ghost story. Intriguing as a chase ending in an infinite climb was, I had other things to worry about. Chief amongst them right now was whatever Koren had produced. He’d been present at the gunpowder revelation, his association with me had raised his stature immensely, and I was worried I was going to see the first fruits of the revolution.

I’d carried a gun my entire adult life, well prior to arriving in Braavos, and any mystique they’d once had was long since scrapped off. You couldn’t be an American without hearing endless debates over guns, even being unable to watch cable news couldn’t spare me, and I’d heard all the arguments. There were pros and cons, but I was a wizard. Essos was a fantasy world, and adding guns seemed to be another step towards all the corners of the map being filled in.

I wasn’t in any position to complain of course, I’d set much more in motion that would make the world recognizably modern within my lifetime. Somehow though, guns felt different than the printing press, the steam engine, and germ theory. I was worried that with them I’d only exchanged dragonfire for the smoke of countless battlefields. Maybe that was just sentiment though, it was hardly worse for a man to die from a bullet than a sword, and humans had been fighting wars since before they could write. It was out of my hands now though, whatever Koren or the others came up with would be here and I’d have to deal with it.

I’d been slowing down as I traveled, but I was still moving forward and eventually I was confronted with Koren’s new factory. There really wasn’t a better word for it, the printing presses had made us both rich and while I’d barely spent any of my wealth he’d plowed the profits back into his work. He owned most of an island just off of a main canal. He'd chosen it because the channel was deep and wide enough that anything he made could be directly loaded on riverine ships or barges for the harbor. I hadn’t thought there would be enough demand for the presses to merit it, literacy wasn’t entirely common, but we’d started something bigger than either of us. His presses had made it as far as Volantis, and I didn’t doubt they’d soon be further afield.

Koren had also benefitted from the other improvements I’d been able to help with, and I suspected he had worked on some of the steam engines. He’d hit the ground running before, I assumed he’d be able to do it again, he seemed the type. Now that I was looking there was a thick column of smoke leaving from a chimney, of course it was a forge, fires were expected. I steeled myself, was briefly amused by the idea, then went in.

I wasn’t really sure what I’d been expecting, maybe a dark timber framed barn like structure, full of flickering flames and smoke with Koren presiding over it like some sort of devil. The neat antechamber with only a dull pounding distinguishing it from any other business threw me for a loop. There was a young man with a ledger in front of him who looked up as I entered, and then kept looking up. My height was even more noteworthy here and I gave him a few seconds to fill with jealousy over not being able to go through doors without ducking.
“Hello,” I startled him from his hoop dreams, “Koren invited me?”

“Right, right,” he glanced down to his ledger, or something else, maybe Koren had invented calendars, before looking up. “You’re Ser Harry Dresden?” At my nod he waved me through a door, leading to something far closer to what I had first imagined.

The large windows and air interior detracted from the effect, but the room was at least twenty degrees hotter than the entrance and I could hear and see a man in the back pounding away at a piece of cherry red metal. Around me though, that was the real difference. I was surrounded by presses in various stages of assembly, and two apprentices were making molds for type. It was an impressive setup, I walked past varnished wooden frames and forged blocks as I looked for Koren.

He emerged from another room, the door sending a swirl of smoke to follow him. “Harry, you made it!”

Only the Winter Mantle allowed me to even partly match his handshake, without it my hand would have had an extra twenty seven bones or so.

“Well you said I’d want to see something,” I glanced back around the factory, “I came running.”

“Of course, you won’t be disappointed.” He led me to the room he’d just came from and I pulled my coat a little tighter around me. It was pretty hot, but if he was playing with gunpowder I’d rather make sure what protection I had against inadvertent explosions was in place.

I didn’t see anything particularly dangerous looking as I walked in. There were no barrels leaking blackpowder, no cylinders with fluted ends, nor even the slightest hint of sulphur in the air. I was stumped, but part of being a detective was knowing what the right questions were. “So what is the big mystery?”

He dramatically moved to the corner of the room, where a large tarp he seized the edge of covered some hulking structure. “The future!” With a sudden motion he yanked the covering free revealing, well something. It was a mix of cast iron and wood, I could see arrays of gears and levers, but my knowledge of the future didn’t help much.

I moved closer, trying to puzzle it out. “And what future is it?” I was pretty confident it wasn’t a weapon, but I’d like him to confirm it.

“Well you mentioned once how in your land there were thousands of pages printed a day, your man at the shop and I got to thinking about it.” A bit of guilt washed through me, I barely thought of the shop these days other than to resent the demand making compasses placed on my time. If one of the clerks Johannes had recommended had a clever idea I should have been around to help out, rather than finding out from Koren. “I had some spare time and a few journeymen with too little to do, so we built this.” Knowing it was related to the printing process assuaged my worries, but it was still opaque, he noticed and took pity on me.

“This here,” he grabbed an arm that rotated out, revealing what looked like a barrel covered in groves, the same grooves the type fit into, “holds the letters and it rotates. If we get enough paper-”

“You can print as fast as you can run it through.” With the reveal I could see it, there were dowels that I suspected would hold reams of paper and a smooth surface below where the printing barrel would rest. It was a neat device, very steampunk and entirely anachronistic. I was honestly surprised that they’d advanced this fast, I was hardly an expert on the history of printing but I was willing to bet there was more than a year or three between the invention and a press geared for mass production. Well Koren and others were smart men, perhaps just knowing it was possible was
enough to drive them forward. “What are you going to use it for?”

“Well I’m selling one to you,” he didn’t look surprised I didn’t know. “Another I’m talking to the Iron Bank about, someone there was thinking about publishing the location and cargo of every single ship they insure among other things. I don’t quite know what good that’ll do but,” he shrugged expansively, “it’s their money and it’s not like this works worse than the others.”

It half sounded like a prototypical newspaper, an Iron Canal Journal, but that reminded me of a half forgotten idea. “Who were you talking to at the Bank?” Ancalagon and related adventures had distracted me from my plan to set up communication links across the world, but tying them to mass media was an obvious idea.

Koren agreed and we set off across the city. We stopped at my lab to pick up a set of matched crystals and then took a gondola to meet his contact. I barely paid attention as we negotiated, letting him do the bulk of the talking. He’d easily grasped the idea of newspapers and their potential, and was doing a better job of selling it than I could.

We left the bank successful, I’d committed to building at least ten sets of the crystals and the bank, well the keyholder we’d spoken too, had agreed to purchase Koren’s new model press for each of the cities he established a paper in.

I’d once wanted to set up the business entirely myself, but considering all the damage I was soon going to be directly and indirectly responsible for I was happy just to get the idea off the ground. It was another blow to the size of the world, hearing about the news from a thousand miles away over breakfast could only shrink it, but putting people in contact would lead to a better world. Or so I hoped, with any luck there wouldn’t be an Elliot Carver or USS Maine in the near future.
George was looking at me balefully as I sat with my daughters in my lab. He didn’t quite dare to come towards us, something about the lightning flickering over Maggie deterred him. Gato didn’t mind it though, his fur was sticking up as much as his mistress’s hair. I couldn’t imagine Mister putting up with it, but it seemed there was a difference in getting a kitten and surrendering sovereignty to a miniature mountain lion.

“Didn’t we say he had to stay out of the lab?”

“You said he had to stay out unless I was there,” Maggie was doing a very credible Blofeld, her pop culture osmosis was a continuing source of pride. “And here we all are. So what is the family meeting about?”

“The next stage in this little arms race.” I rocked back onto my chair’s back legs as they let the topic percolate through their brains.

“I thought you were planning on raiding Pentos.” Maggie’s poker face had improved over the years, I knew she was strongly against that plan but I could barely tell from her expression.

“I was, kind of still am.” I let the chair thump back down onto four legs. “But I’m not certain if that’s the best idea.”

“You wanted to show your strength I thought.” Lydia was examining the runes I’d carved into one of my crafting tools as she spoke, barely paying attention. “Everyone knows you can kill dragons, that’s never been in doubt.” My mind flashed back to Selhorys and I nodded.

“They also know that I have limits, sailing down and taking out the Pentoshi dragons would make them wonder if I’d been describing them accurately.”

“Hardly.” Gato apparently had enough of the static and jumped from Maggie’s lap as she leaned forward. “It just would mean that you were willing to leave Braavos undefended. Until the Titan shows itself they’ll still be able to threaten any city you or other dragons aren’t in.”

“I think the Titan could kill one now.” We both turned to Lydia who was still occupied although she now seemed to be laughing at a prototype of the D Flat. “He’s not very energetic, but I think a dragon would stir him into motion.”

“So what then? Like Maggie says that doesn’t change anything until anyone actually does attack and they won’t as long as I’m here.” A raid on Pentos could bait them into attacking, but if we were wrong about the Titan I might return to a burnt city.

Lydia raised an eyebrow at me, which was only slightly better than her mocking my enchantments. “Tell them, spread the news. No one knows what you can do which means the Titan is a credible threat.”

I missed the times when I only had to worry about my friends rather than the fate of the world. Money was nice, but it was nice to defer some problems to anyone over my pay grade. “Do you
think they’d buy it without a demonstration? MAD only worked because everyone knew the risks.”

“There’s actually some doubt about that, apparently the Soviet Union-”

I cut her off before she started a dissertation. “Do you think they’ll risk a dragon to find out if I’m bluffing?”

Maggie answered before she could. “It depends on how many they have, and how fast they can breed them.”

Lydia drifted back over, more engaged in the conversation. “From what you said they seem to have some method of accelerating their dragon’s growth, the Red Priests I mean.”

“They must, unless they had them well before the Targaryens’ hatched and somehow hid them.” Her clarification made me remember why Varys had sought me out to start. “But the method is probably unique to them. Varys was hoping to get my help to control his set. I doubt they were in any shape to roid up their dragons if they couldn’t even fly them.”

Maggie was paying more attention to the cat in her lap but still managed to toss out a comment. “If they’re wild and small you could just sail to Pentos and they’d come up and die, unless they’re chained down or something.”

Something about her comment struck me, something about dragonlore. The Targaryens had built a colossal hanger-stable in the heart of King’s Landing, the Dragonpit. It had led to the deaths of several dragons in riots and some other negative consequences. “No they won’t be chained down. That was thought to stunt their growth and I don’t think they’d be taking any chances on that with how important size is in battle.”

“If they aren’t chained down then how can they even hope to keep them in the city?” Maggie’s lightning was shrinking back down, fading as her concentration shifted to the conversation from her cat and spells. “Do we even know they’re in Pentos?”

That was a good point, as well as possibly fatal to my plan. It was hardly difficult to acquire a private island, I had one and the Pentoshi Magisters could buy and sell me a dozen times each. Invading Pentos and coming up empty handed would commit Braavos to hostility and a possible occupation, something the smaller city could hardly sustain. “I don’t know.”

“Well if you sail down there and there aren’t any dragons you won’t look powerful, you’ll just look foolish.”

“I am good at that.”

“Trust me,” she waved to her orbiting sister, “we’re well aware.”

I acknowledged the touch, then got back to plotting. Pentos had only ever been a thought, I’d hoped to seize the initiative by striking first but my daughters had mostly persuaded me against it. I was glad not to do it, I’d fought enough battles to not want more, but I still needed to do something. I didn’t want to cede all of Essos and Westeros except Braavos to dragonlords.

“What if you revealed the Titan, and then just left Braavos?” Lydia nodded and continued her sister’s thought.
“If no one knew where you were it would increase the risk of attacking any city and they’d have to be worried that you were headed towards Volantis or Pentos.”

“Two things about that. First, they might be willing to take the hit. Send one dragon to Qohor and the other to Norvos and take their chances. Second, there are spies everywhere.” I made sure both of them were looking at me, I wanted them to see how serious I was, to recognize the threat vanilla mortals could be. “We can’t even leave the house without watchers, they’ll be looking for us everywhere.”

“We can vanish beyond their ability to track.”

“Sure, we can hide in the Nevernever as long as we want, but just hiding won’t do anything to solve our problems.” Right now our only real plan was wait for the technology to take dragons out of the sky to develop, and I doubted that would be soon enough for any city but Braavos. Viserys might be able to win in the short term, but if the Red Priests had more dragons numbers would decide the battle eventually. They held the advantage and I didn’t see a way to change that. “They’re controlling the pace, for all we know they’ve already taken Myr or Lys. We need to do something.”

“It’s possible there’s nothing we really can do.” I didn’t have an immediate response for Maggie and we watched George as he shuffled along his perch and contemplated murder.

“We can go back to Mini Tirith.” Lydia had been campaigning for that ever since she’d set up her ward and lost most of her linked power. “If we take a ship there and dock it we won’t be too much farther from anywhere and we won’t have to worry about spies or assassins.”

“And you can get another tap on the magma chamber.” Maggie was drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair, looking remarkably unenthused about the prospect. “I don’t see why that’s worth leaving the city.”

The magma chamber was attractive, if Lydia could replicate her bubble in other places creatures like the Titan might spring into being. Past that, I could do all sorts of things with the permanent power I’d have available. If nothing else I could reinforce the wards around the house to a breathtaking extent. I doubted that was enough to persuade my elder daughter though.

“We could hit the Wall next.” We both turned to Lydia who had known exactly what to say to get her sister on her side. “From the island it’s a short trip to White Harbor, or even Eastwatch-by-the-sea.”

I could see that swayed Maggie, but I wasn’t going to commit to another trip to Westeros just yet. “We’ll see.” It was a line as old as parenting, and it usually meant no, but with the prize of seeing the wall she was apparently willing to play the odds.

“Fine then, I’ll go.” She still tried to make it seem like she was resistant but I knew better. “We’re bringing better food this time.”

Cheap at twice the price. “Done.”

The osprey’s eyes lit up with green fire as Lydia slid behind them. “And we’re bringing George.”

Maggie and I shared a glance as she scooped up her pet and held him away from the raptor. “Why do you even need him? There’s plenty of birds already there.”
Lydia flapped her way towards the window, her wingbeats scattering papers from the workbench. “He’s essential for my work. He’s also well trained now.”

The first maybe, but the second was completely untrue. I let it pass in the interest of sibling harmony. “Sure, we can make it a trip for the whole family.”

Leaving Braavos for fairer climes had a few prerequisites, many of which sufficient money solved easily. Maggie blew more than the average family made in a decade on seeds and spices, and Lydia wanted to spend something similar on supplies for whatever her next project was. I was half thinking she was going to build another bubble over the island but she hated to be repetitive. For all I knew she was going to write the great Braavosi novel and wanted it on a single scroll Kerouac style. I didn’t ask, I just paid for the giant roll of paper which they assured me wouldn’t dissolve as soon as the sea air touched it.

The wood pulp paper was rough, but it beat parchment and was a little easier to mass produce with the new market for it. I also didn’t have to think about all the sheep skinned when I wrote on it which wasn’t a big concern, but it’s nice to live virtuously. I cared a lot less about trees and deforestation than poor Lamb-Chop, especially after one had attacked me during a soul gaze. Either way I had quite a lot of paper and ink for our little trip.

Material things weren’t the most important part though, before leaving I had to make sure Braavos’s guardian was up to the challenge. That led directly to Syrio and I standing next to a borrowed rowboat on the steps down to the Purple Harbor, half concealed by the seawall.

“Last time we were here the harbor was a plane was it not?” His sword was in the boat and he already had a hand on the rope tied to the bow, clearly he was ready in case it ended up being wet. “I remember it undulating and thinking it was strange for solid ground to do that. And then you made a boat that didn’t need to be begged for from the customs inspector.”

“That was last time, it might be different.” I also didn’t feel like pulling another boat out of the water, but that didn’t fit my image so I didn’t mention it. Instead I gathered my will and ripped a hole through reality with a single word.

The gate revealed the surface of the purple island, but I could see a wave moving through it towards us and I didn’t really want to find out what happened if the ground moved beneath a way. I stepped through, hurriedly tugging Syrio and the boat after me. They just barely got out in time to avoid being sliced by the portal as it dissipated. Or that might not have been a concern, I’ve never really been sure what happens if real matters comes into contact with the edge of a way. It seemed sensible not to find out the hard way.

I didn’t mention the risk to Syrio, again banking on wizardly inscrutability, and together we dragged the rowboat towards the water’s edge.

“So you don’t want to storm Pentos anymore?” The Sealord had mostly agreed with me, however he was still determined to do something. I had a feeling he was waiting for the result of our visit before he committed to any firm plans, but he had called the Admiral to his office as Syrio and I were leaving. Despite his age Antaryon was a man of action, he wouldn’t be satisfied with waiting for technological progress or some new magic. Presumably in his career as the closest thing to a leader
of the Free World he’d have picked up some ability to think outside the box. I hoped so, because I
didn’t see how to avoid dragonfire without it.

“Yeah, the summer weather is bad for my complexion.”

Syrio nodded as we lowered the boat to the water and waited for the next wave and the island’s level
to drop. “I understand it’s very easy to tan too much outdoors there, you can get burned very
rapidly.”

“Not to mention last time I visited a city with dragons one ended up chasing me a few hundred
miles.” He hopped in and steadied the boat as I lowered myself into it. The rowboat seemed sturdy
but I didn’t want to jump into it and discover the planks weren’t quite up to my weight landing on
them from a a few feet above. “So do you want to row or shout directions?”

The swordsman elected to keep watch so I started pulling us through the water, into the mists
surrounding the city’s doppelganger. From my position I could see most of Braavos, my island was
still a tower of unmatched height but the rest of the city was still changing rapidly from day to day. I
didn’t have quite the same view as from home, but from sea level it still seemed to match the city’s
layout.

The weirder aspects of the Nevernever, its non-Euclidean mapping for one, didn’t seem to exist here.
It might be that ways couldn’t form with such a small connection space, or that the ones that did were
too subtle to be found easily. Lydia’s bubble was an amazing work of magic, but the Nevernever
was far grander in scope than what she’d made, even as it filled with dreams.

The thickening fog eventually obscured the city leaving us dependent on Syrio’s keen eyes. The
splashing of the water on rock indicated we were close and I craned my neck around to see where
we were going. At last the shroud of mist parted and we found the Titan.

He pivoted as we approached, looking down on us from its island. The stone that had bound him on
our last visit was gone, the remnants crumbled around his feet. His sword was out but he held it
loosely. If he were human I’d say it was non-threatening, but as a being of the Nevernever things like
form and readiness meant slightly less to him. Despite that I was looking at it as a good sign.

It was a little awkward sitting in the boat in silence. I had been hoping he’d start the conversation off,
but it seemed like I’d be doing all the heavy lifting. I twisted around, shifting my legs was a
production in the cramped boat, and tried to face him.

“First Sword.” Naturally he spoke right when I was straddling the bench and in the least ready
position possible. In retrospect it would have made sense to turn the boat so Syrio and I were both
perpendicular to the Titan, but that sort of idea only came after the giant embodiment of the city’s
defenses started talking. “Why have you come? The seas are clear.” Of course he was also talking to
Syrio, which was a bit of a surprise. It made sense after a little thought, but I hadn’t expected it.

The swordsman glanced at me, I attempted to convey “greet him politely” with a shrug, and he
nodded.

“There is a threat to the city.” Or he’d say precisely the thing to get a guardian riled up.

The Titan reared back, his wooden sword flickering into a ready position as he spun to scan the
horizon. “What is it? Tell me!” His voice had been deep before, but in his urgency it was a roar that
sent ripples through the water. I could feel the planks of the boat thrum beneath my hands as I
grabbed the rails to keep steady, the Titan was still frantically searching.

“They’re not here!” Syrio’s shout didn’t seem to do much at first, but after a few more turns it sunk in and he slowed, his eyes locked on us.

“Then explain.” Syrio glanced at me, pleading for help, and I decided that perhaps after last time I should give it a try.

“There are dragons that might attack the city.” I almost made an illusion in case he didn’t know what dragons were, but he hadn’t really given me the impression that he was that intelligent. I didn’t feel like finding out if he’d blindly attack even the image of the lizards. “If they come, can you defend it?”

“I will fight anything that threatens my city Warden.” Hell’s bells, what was it with everything here calling me that? It was just a piece of fabric and a sword, and I never even got the sword. “In this world or the waking one-” he raised his sword and I tensed. I was still messily seated on the bench, but when he brought it down it wasn’t at us. He sliced cleanly through the air, leaving a rip into Braavos in its wake. “They will fall before me.” He stepped through, Syrio and I shared an incredulous glance before he leapt onto the island and I followed.

I burst through the portal seconds after, the shorter man was incredibly quick, and found myself atop the crown of the Titan. Our walking one was scanning the skies as the guards around us were going through a very well trained panic. Luckily the presence of Syrio and I seemed to reassure them a little. Syrio was of course the First Sword and something of a celebrity, while I was at the Titan and other forts of Braavos somewhat irregularly to ensure their wards stayed intact. If we were there and not freaking out things must not be completely terrible.

A guard, based on his unique uniform I assumed he was the leader of the little detachment, carefully circled around the platform to us, staying as far from the Titan as possible.

“Sers, what is that?” He whispered his question, clearly afraid to draw the attention of the still spinning spirit.

“He’s the guardian of Braavos.” Syrio answered him in a conversational tone, not showing any of the nerves I was sure he felt. “Our wizard unlocked the realm he stood in, and let him come here to help defend us from our enemies.” His voice got louder as he went on, he wanted everyone to hear him.

It was a good idea, cementing the Titan as a protector would hopefully keep it from shifting over time. The few people who saw the manifestation didn’t compare to the entire city being aware, but rumors would spread. Part of me wanted to attribute the creation of the Nevernever to its proper author, but I stayed quiet. Lydia hardly cared, and more importantly I didn’t want people to know what she could do.

We stayed on the crown for a few more minutes, watching knots of guards sprint up the stairs to stare before returning to their posts, before I felt like it was time to go. I walked up to the still circling Titan and waited for him to notice me before speaking.

“You’ll be able to watch over the city from the Nevernever?” I was pretty sure he’d be able to, Lea had always managed to be aware of me, but it didn’t hurt to confirm it. Just because he was able to casually cross between the worlds didn’t mean he could see all.
“I can see all that approaches, no matter where from.” Or he could.

“Well great,” I gestured at the center of the deck, “so want to head back then? ‘Cause I kind of need to return that boat.”

From his expression I didn’t think property rights really were that important to him, but with another wave of his sword the way opened and we returned to his rock in the fog. Naturally our boat had drifted off and with the mist there was no way we were going to find it. Syrio shook his head and we stepped back into the real world. “You’re telling the story to the Port Authority.”

Originally I’d planned to borrow a boat from the navy to get out to the island. I’d hoped to sort of lease it and have it remain on station. Unfortunately the whole fire breathing dragons thing had given the navy new problems to worry about. I’d thought that people would be reluctant to go out and fight invaders in the middle of the ocean on pieces of wood soaked in oil, and it turned out they were. That didn’t mean they left their ships in port though, the captains and crew instead took their ships and left their cities, taking up piracy instead of fighting Volantis.

The defections weren’t total of course, but enough trained and equipped ships had left that they shifted the piracy dynamics. The naval vessels pushed the previous flotsam from the Stepstones and they scattered across the oceans. It was odd to think that despite the changes magic had brought to the world for the most part life continued onward. Traders still sailed, and so did the pirates who preyed on them. In some ways it was nice, but it was inconvenient. The increased patrols coupled with the ongoing modernization meant that there wasn’t a ship and crew the Admiral was willing to spare to be my personal chauffeur. If I’d simply wanted to be dropped off and picked up at a certain time they’d help, but I wanted the freedom to move. That led me to my current activity, being lectured on ships by Oliva as we wandered through the shipyards.

“Your needs are fairly unusual as ships go.” The man seemed happy to be out of the Arsenal, even for the short time I was there the pounding pistons had gotten old. “There are few who just travel for the sake of it, most have a reason beyond just arriving at the destination.”

“I’ve never really bought into the journey being the important part anyway.” I’d worked with wood enough, and known a talented Carpenter or two, to see the skill of the workers as we walked past the ribs of ships in progress. Trading cogs, a few galleys, all rested on slipways for their eventual launch. “I’ll settle for a ship that’s overkill, as long as I can get it soon to immediately.”

Oliva nodded and then waved to man atop a nearly completed hull. “I figured that, these ones are already sold in any case.”

“So then why are we here?” I had enjoyed learning and looking, but if I couldn’t get a ship here I would default to my original plan B, just charter a ship for however long I needed.

“Well sometimes a ship is ordered, and the buyers never come to pick it up or pay for it.” We were coming to the end of the island, our path had led us down the bay facing side of it and we were rounding back towards the city. “I’m of necessity acquainted with the shipwrights here, and when you came with your request one ship in particular came to mind.”

The ships on the inner edge were smaller than those that were to be launched directly into the bay.
The canal seemed large enough to accommodate the other vessels, but perhaps it was too shallow. It might also have been tradition, but there was probably a reason. Oliva was actively looking now, where before he had only pointed out things that he happened to see. “There.”

I followed his outstretched arm past another ship’s skeleton to see a completed vessel resting on blocks of wood. It was long and narrow, streamlined unlike the cogs I’d just seen. It didn’t have oar ports, only a single mast. On the whole it looked like a modern sailboat, a little anachronistic. I knew nothing about ships though, perhaps things like this had been floating around back then.

“A few of my older foremen got bored making galleys at the Arsenal.” Oliva led us closer to the vessel as I kept examining it. “They struck out for themselves, and brought in some newer talents and ideas from sailors from across the world who ended up here.”

“So this is an experimental ship?” The idea partly appealed to me, but I wasn’t up for taking a prototype on its maiden voyage. Someone else could handle the teething problems. It was pretty though, the smooth lines made it seem ready to launch itself into the waves unprompted.

“Not quite, this is the fourth or fifth one they’ve built, the others have been seaworthy, and quite quick with the new sail plan.” We’d finally reached the ship and Oliva didn’t hesitate to climb aboard, I followed less gracefully. “An older man ordered it when he started to miss the sea. Sadly he didn’t live to see it completed and his wife and children don’t care for the idea of owning it. I was half thinking of buying it for myself, but I don’t have the time to get out in it anymore.”

Standing on the deck did nothing to change the ship’s modernity, there was a low cabin down the center of the boat with aisles on either side. It was almost the sort of thing you might find on Lake Michigan, if a little larger. There wasn’t much room, but we’d only be on it for a few days, cramped conditions wouldn’t be our largest concern. That did bring to mind another concern.

“Who’s going to drive this thing?”

“Three or four men, it’s only got the one mast to tend to and it’s built for easy handling.” Oliva led the way below to the cabin and holds, I had to crouch a little, but that was expected. “It has enough room for you and your daughter as well. I expect you’d be fairly comfortable on board for about two weeks assuming you don’t have anyway to magic up more food?” I gave a vague grunt in reply to his fishing, and after a quick circuit stepped back out into the open air.

The ship seemed to meet my needs, and I liked the idea of a small crew far better than paying for an entire ship. “How much do you think this will cost me?” Oliva named a figure, and I was shocked to realize I could easily afford it. At some point I was going to internalize being wealthy, but now was not the time. “Well then, all it needs now is a name and a crew.”

—

Life aboard the Zephyr, it turned out it already had a name which saved me from indulging either my inner nerd or my resistance to change, was pretty easy. We had three actual sailors to do the hard work, men I would once have called older before I realized they were within five or six years of my own age. As a rule they’d made their money on a few more exotic voyages, and now in their later careers they were happy to take a lower paying easy job which mostly involved sitting around on a wizard’s island. Apparently I’d been around long enough that I was a known quantity and bizarre magics weren’t a deal breaker.
They had adapted rapidly to the ship, the two triangular sails let us sail quite close to the wind which excited all of them. I didn’t quite share their glee, especially since with the wind coming from behind us they were only testing how far into the wind we could go by adding distance to our trip. It was fun though, the Zephyr skimmed through the waves with the sea spray misting over the bow.

All good things had to come to an end though, after several days of racing the breezes we were getting close to the island. The captain had been eyeing the compasses to make sure we were on the right course, and after I made sure once more he knew not to sail into the fog I headed to the front.

Maggie and Lydia were there, along with Addam an extravagantly tattooed Westerosi. He had stories from across the world, he’d sailed from his home in Lannisport to Leng, through all the known world’s oceans. It was a pity that the one city he’d never visited was the one I was most curious about, Asshai. He’d decided early in his nautical career that he had no interest in going anywhere cursed, and he considered his continuing survival a vindication.

“Past the Cinnamon Straits there’s Port Moraq, the wealth of the world flows through there. I was there a few times, once on a trading ship that had stopped along the corsair’s road and we had these lizards aboard.” He sketched out their shape with his hands, indicating a size for the things that would have put their heads at my chest level. “They were nasty, they figured out the handles to their cage, if it wasn’t for the cat screaming as it ran we’d never have known one got out.” Before he could continue his story about his ill fated trip aboard what I was assuming was the Nostromo they noticed me approaching.

“How goes it up here?”

“No complaints, just passing the time telling stories about the misadventures at sea.”

“And for most of them a decent breeze would have solved it,” Maggie looked excited at that, she was planning something. “We could sell those knotted breezes we made for more than our compasses.” That sounded like a terrible idea waiting to happen, repeating Odysseus’s experience was hardly the worst case scenario.

“It’s something to think about for sure.” Hopefully she’d forget about it. I didn’t want to sell storms to people, the obvious uses were dangerous and there were probably more that I wouldn’t like. Luckily the captain provided a distraction.

“Land!” Standing at my full height I could see a faint haze on the horizon, his more experienced eye could see things I couldn’t.

Maggie was just as blind, but she chose to do a bit more about it. Her lense of shaped air appeared before her and I crouched behind her as she worked to focus it. As she struggled everything jumped from an almost painful blur to razor sharpness. I had expected to find only fog, but of course there was something more. Three galleys were anchored at the edge of the mist.
Owning my own personal island was seeming less attractive each time I visited. The first time had been an exile, the second to battle a giant sea monster with pirates, and now more pirates. Probably. Maggie kept her lens up and all of us stared through it, with only Captain Jommo remaining at the helm and making comments.

“Expecting guests?” I shook my head at his attempt to lighten the mood, but looking back I could see him tensing up.

The galleys looked fairly normal as ships went, their sails were reefed and their decks were covered with scurrying men but past the paint job they could have come right from the Arsenal. Maybe there were subtle differences that my landlubberly eyes couldn’t see, but I couldn’t bring myself to care as drums began to beat over the water.

“What should we do Dresden?” It was a question I was asking myself. As always in this world I had the power to utterly destroy my enemies, and based on my prior experiences I could even cut my way through a pirate vessel without violating any of the laws. It was risky though, and I’d have to pull deeply on the Mantle. There was also the fact we could only see three ships, far more could be hidden in the fog or they could have been ferrying men out here for months. With that thought and my daughters aboard there was only one option.

“Get us out of here.” I had barely finished speaking before the captain started barking out orders to his crew.

“Pull the spinnaker, prepare to come about!” I’d mentioned the idea of steering wheels to a few members of the Voyagers’ Club, if anything had come of it, one wasn’t here. The captain threw his weight against the tiller and the Zephyr instantly swung, the long boom swaying as Addam and Hazrak adjusted the sails. For a long moment we almost seemed to stall before the sails inflated and the boat leapt forward, leaning hard as we raced across the wind.

The tempo of the drums had doubled as we rounded our curve, and our long arc had brought us closer to them and the island than I’d have particularly enjoyed. I joined the captain at the stern, he’d tied off the tiller and was staring back at our pursuers. “Will we outrun them?”

“We should.” He was peering through a squat cylinder, it took me a moment to realize it was a monocural as opposed to the more classical pirate type spyglasses I was used to seeing here. He was actually twisting a ring to focus it, other than the ornate filigree and engraving it was almost something I could have found in any sporting goods store back home. “But nothing is ever certain on the poison water.”

The phrase was enough to distract me from technological advancement and our pursuers. “The poison water?”

He gave a brief grunt in acknowledgment as he turned away from the galleys and started to inspect the swells in the distance, presumably looking for clues about the wind. “My father was Dothraki, when his khalasar was shattered he was stranded near Qarth. Some sailor called him a coward for fearing the ocean, blood was shed, and to pay off the debt he agreed to work in the dead man’s place
for a season. He met my mother and I suspect you know how the rest of the story goes.”

He was clearly more focused on our imminent danger than on assuaging my curiosity, but there were many people who would agree I had a skewed set of priorities. “But the poison water?”

“The Dothraki are superstitious about the sea, about all water horses can’t drink, it’s almost an atavistic terror. It’s what he always called the ocean, and he would often warn me about how the poison was the true heart of the sea.”

“I’d have thought he’d learn to like it.”

“I’m pretty sure he was terrified of the sea until the day he died. His pride was stronger though.”

Speaking of stronger, the drums had only gotten louder as we talked. Part of me hoped that it was only some property of the wind and waves magnifying it, but a single glance astern was enough to dispel that illusion. They were gaining, and gaining fast.

Their oars were churning the water to a froth as the beats hammered across the distance. I’d seen heats by crew teams in Chicago, and from chatting with the spectators knew that the longest races only lasted about twenty minutes. I wasn’t prepared to choose between modern diets and conditioning and the motivation that literal slave drivers could produce, but even giving them the benefit of the doubt I didn’t think they’d be able to keep up their pace. However I’d retained expertise to answer that sort of question more definitely. “How long can they keep the sprint up?”

“Not too long, and after that their sail plan won’t give them half our speed.” The galleys were square sailed, and I could see them flapping slightly unlike the Zephyr’s tight canvas. “If the wind drops though, they’ll be able to take their time.”

I nodded, that was a problem I could handle. “The wind won’t drop.”

That got a shocked reaction, more than any of the little tricks I’d done before. Sparkling lights, a spirit flitting through the air in an osprey, the captain had greeted it all with equanimity. My ability to control something that had always been ineffable, that made an impact. He gathered himself quickly though, showing the character that had led him to be recommended as the man to hire.

“Then we’re fine, that pace will have their rowers exhausted well before they’re even in ballista range.”

Of course that was only part of the problem, we might be able to escape the galleys, but they were still present on my island. It was certainly annoying they were there, but I wasn’t too worried about the things I’d built there. Most of it was stone and would be far too much effort to destroy, and the rest they couldn’t use. The real problem was that while they were there I couldn’t be. I needed another magma tap for Lydia’s ward, evidently new defenses for the island, and I’d had plans to replicate my townhouse workshop on a larger scale for a time when I wasn’t tied so closely to the city.

Other than the ward none were particularly time sensitive. I’d really only left Braavos just to prove I could and Mini Tirith was just a convenient destination. Which reminded me, we probably needed a new one. “Jommo, where can we make landfall if we keep running this way?”

Doubling back to Braavos was an attractive proposition, maybe the Sea Lord could whistle up a squadron and reclaim my island, but it would negate the whole point of the trip. The other Free Cities
were risky at best, Pentos was actively inimical and it was hard to say how far Volantis’s fingers reached. That only really left one option, and I knew it before the captain answered me.

“The sunset lands, we’ll have to pick a port and restock, we only had provisions for a short trip.”

Westeros, a continent I had no particular desire to return to. Even before I’d been labeled as a Targaryen sympathizer it had been a dangerous place, far more dangerous than the city I’d made my home. Now, with Robert Baratheon champing at the bit for his upcoming war with dragonriders it wasn’t likely to be much better. We’d have to slip into some harbor, hopefully a small town that had never heard of me, and then figure out our next move. I let my mind drift for a moment, as I considered our options. Staying under the radar for long enough to convince people I wasn’t lurking in Braavos should demonstrate my confidence in its defenses, and then I could head back and-

“Papa!” Maggie’s shout made me twist to see her, and her outstretched arm pointing made me keeping going around, far enough to see a heavy arrow arcing towards us. I called power, ready to deflect the missile but it fell well short. The rowers were still going strong, their oars moving to the same rapid tempo they’d been following since the chase started. Captain Jommo was astonished, pulling out his monocular again as he muttered something beneath his breath.

“There’s no way they should be doing that, even the finest men-” His head turned minutely, and then his hand twitched open. Only my reach and quick grab prevented his device from smashing on the deck, as for only the second time in our trip he was shocked. “Those rowers aren’t men, they’re Unsullied.”

I pulled his telescope up to my eye and spun it into focus on the closest galley, with sailors already cranking another ballista bolt into place. The rowers were facing away from me, but even at our distance I could see the uniformity. Each and every one was clean shaven, and there was a certain roundness to their features that even hard labor couldn’t erase. It wasn’t proof, but it was certainly suggestive.

You couldn’t spend much time learning about the east and not hear of the Unsullied. Their legendary efficiency was only matched by the cruelty of the slavemasters’ methods to create them. If the tales were true the eunuch soldiers didn’t feel pain, having been fed a diet of drugs and indoctrination to make automatons out of men.

Voyagers I knew and trusted, guys who’d been around the block, told stories of what they’d seen Unsullied endure without flinching nor complaint. If the rowers were truly Unsullied they’d die before they stopped rowing. All of a sudden our escape seemed far less certain.

“Maggie, get my coat and staff!”

I could have retrieved them myself, but the task would at least get her below deck for all the good it would do. It also left me in position to deal with any better aimed shots while I tried to think of a way to stop them.

Last time I’d fought a galley I’d flown over and murdered everyone. I’d been frozen deep in the mantle then, and while I could feel it stirring even now I wasn’t quite ready to go that far. My concern wasn’t entirely with the morality, although I’d prefer not to kill the choice between them and
mine was easy, but more that even with superhuman strength and speed I was still mortal. The pirates had broken and fled before me, Unsullied were famed for doing the complete opposite.

My eldest daughter’s arrival with an armful of magically enhanced leather and wood distracted me from the problem, almost as much as the scabbarded longsword falling from the bundled coat as she handed it to me. I belted the blade on, hoping that I wouldn’t need it.

Without Mini Tirith’s tower I couldn’t replicate the trick of cleanly snapping the oars at a distance, the sort of force needed for that had to be focused or I’d be pulping the other rowers as the solid wooden shafts levered back and crushed them. My other go to solution of freezing things probably wouldn’t work over the distances needed, the ocean water dissipated my magic and freezing enough water rapidly enough to delay them would be a challenge.

“Papa!”

Another bolt was arcing in, this one better aimed. Maggie’s alert had been well timed though, it was easy enough to deflect the giant arrow at range. The barest tap on its wickedly pointed front was enough to send it tumbling through the air, splashing down a hundred yards behind us. Our pursuers passed the impact site depressingly quickly though, they were catching up.

I could see the gunners on the other ships stringing their own siege weapons, and behind them the rowers continued on following the implacable drums. If they were content to hang back I’d play missile defender all day, even with three of them I didn’t doubt that I could handle shielding us.

From this close I could see the single commander, the captains, of each of the ships. They were simply dressed, but through Jommo’s monocular I could see their faces. This was just another day at the office for them, if they were concerned about chasing down a wizard it didn’t seem to register.

Of course they might not know they were dealing with a wizard, missing twice was hardly proof of supernatural intervention.

“Fuego!” A lance of fire incinerating the shaft of a bolt in flight should have provided pretty conclusive evidence who they were dealing with, but despite momentary surprise on their faces the ships kept coming. That was a bit of a blow to the pirate theory. I wasn’t quite sure how the story of what I’d done to the kraken had gotten out so widely given the few surviving witnesses, but I suspected the Sealord attempting to inflate my reputation as an anti-dragon weapon. However it happened my feat was fairly well known, even as far as Volantis.

A single man who had eviscerated a pirate ship after killing a monster seemed like a high risk piracy target, and pirates were essentially predators. They should be playing the odds, and messing with me was a poor bet, especially given I was running. Our retreat might have enticed them, but even so I’d hoped they’d just accept good fortune. In the end though, well-adjusted risk averse people didn’t become pirates. They might be bold, stupid, or as I was beginning to think they might not be pirates.

Unsullied were expensive, they were essentially sold as weapon systems to states and the super rich. Cross training the infantrymen as sailors added even further costs, if a pirate king was outfitting his ships with them he could probably afford to retire on an island with slaves and debaucheries enough for Caligula. A government would have the funds though, and having a secret supply of galleys that could outrace any others afloat could be just the thing to deal with Braavos’s temporary naval dominance.

It would also explain how they knew about my island, it was by no means secret but prior to my
acquisition it had been a barren rock covered in guano. The intelligence services of a city, such as they were, would have better odds of finding out the precise coordinates.

Whoever was behind them was irrelevant at the moment though. They were still coming on, driven by patriotism or greed, and I’d have to deal with the captains and their crews of brainwashed automatons.

“Forzare!” It was getting a little harder to slap the shots away, they had more kinetic energy as they got closer and I had to hit them with more force to make sure they missed in their shorter flights. I also had less time, but the cranking and aiming gave ample time to prepare, far more than bullets. The ballista crews at each of the ships could have been interchangeable, three Unsullied moving with a slow grace as they readied their weapons.

Interchangeable.

“Last chance!” My shout across the waves was amplified, but none of the listeners reacted at all. That was fine with me, they were about to learn a lesson.

I fixed my eyes on one of the rowers and looked at him, just barely short of truly Seeing him. I thought back to what I knew of the slave soldiers, ripped from their families as children, mutilated, and more than that their very names were cut away. Names had power, and for this group of nameless slaves I was about to show them why.

Holding the image of the man in my mind I glanced at his fellows, and convinced myself that they were in the important ways the same man. It wasn’t much of a jump, and as I drew on my power I felt regret that whoever they’d been had died without ever knowing who they were or would be. It didn’t matter, their relative lack of agency wouldn’t stop them from being dangerous, but I felt the barest guilt for living in a world where Unsullied were made and having not stormed Astapor and razed it to its foundations.

“Dormio!” It was a simple spell, and normally it took a minor effort of will and power. This was different, I was at range, across ocean, and utilizing a surprisingly strong thaumaturgical link. Its effects were instantaneous.

The order and discipline that had characterized the rowing was gone as the spell took them at slightly different moments. A few lasted an extra stroke and their oars splintered as they smashed into the non-moving sweeps. The captains’ equanimity was broken, a sudden fear filling them as they tried and failed to wake their crew. They wouldn’t have any luck, I’d poured in enough power that they wouldn’t wake for hours.

Part of me wanted to keep running, to use the time to get far enough away that they’d never even have the slightest chance of catching us, but I’d had enough of fleeing. People were awfully willing to challenge me here, a few sharp lessons would hopefully teach them better.

“Stay close.” Jommo didn’t seem to register my order, instead staring at the motionless ships and sailors. I was about to repeat myself, then realized he probably thought I’d just killed them all with a single word. I turned to Maggie instead, and gave her the same instructions along with my staff, although she was just as surprised.

“Wait! What are-“

I took four long steps back, and then sprinted towards the stern. My first spell ever had been a long
jump, this one would be a bit more. I flew over the water, rising for an instant before the water beneath me started getting closer.

“Ventas Servitas!” Unassisted flight was dangerous as hell, mostly because no matter how strong you were in magic you were still squishy and filled with easily shattered bones. This wasn’t flight though, or so I tried to convince myself as I spread myself to catch the wind flinging me towards the lead vessel.

It was approaching worryingly quickly, but with an arctic blast of hurricane force wind I managed to land on the foredeck without splattering, and the Mantle even gave me enough grace to stay on my feet. If the captain had been scared before he was terrified now, the rasp of my sword clearing its sheath the soundtrack as I advanced towards him.

The sudden darkening of his pants was enough to make me end the farce. With a sharp gesture and a word I encased him in a thin layer of ice, captured motionless as his crew except in a servile cringe rather than instant slumber.

“I have questions.” I swept my hand and his ship’s ballista ripped itself free with a scream of wood and sped towards the closer galley, crashing into its hull. “You have answers.”

I’d left his head free, and I started to think that might be a mistake as he nodded almost hard enough to break the ice. “Anything! Please! Spare me!” It was disgusting the way humans could flip as quickly as the weakest ghouls.

“Who are you working for?”

He regained the semblance of a spine for an instant, until he met my glare. “Ilyrio Mopatis!” Once the name was out the dam was broken. “We were sent to find something, some magic, and to kill everyone who saw us.”

The Cheesemonger. I wasn’t quite sure why that was his name, he didn’t seem to be in dairy, but it was proof that any title could be intimidating with sufficient power behind it. Dragons and wealth were practically the definition of power, but coming after me seemed like a dangerous move. I’d killed the weapons of mass destruction on this world, sending men after me didn’t seem like the logical next step.

Could they have puzzled out the laws that bound me? It didn’t seem likely. To the uneducated killing with my superhuman strength and speed wouldn’t be different than simply freezing or burning people, but it was foolish to underestimate enemies. I still didn’t know how Quaithe knew I was a warden, it was something to ask her, but whatever her source of information was it could theoretically know more about me.

“Have you seen Ilyrio do any magic, or have any done?” Varys had been looking for power when we first met, maybe he’d found some. Another thought came to me before he could answer. “Have you seen his dragons?”

“No! No, nothing!” It seemed that they understood compartmentalization, that was inconvenient. It was annoying that someone so trusted with the command of Unsullied wasn’t that well informed, but if Illyrio had fleets it made sense a captain wouldn’t be clued in.

He was also the only man on the ship still awake, no other enforcers to keep down the brainwashed slaves. It made me wonder what kept them so obedient, but then I realized I had someone who
probably knew.

“Why are they following you?” The change in topic threw him for a moment, a jerk of my head indicated who I was speaking about.

“They? I have the lashes for this squadron,” his eyes went to an ornate whip with several strands. I strode to it and bent to pick it up, part of me recoiling from the concept of absolute control it represented.

“Who leads them today?” His eyes were locked on me as I stood in front of him, sword in one hand, lash in the other.

Awareness of what was about to happen seemed to come to him, but his circumstances, frozen to the deck by a sorcerer, had broken him. “The drummer. Red Beetle.”

I left him in his restraints and walked to the stern of the ship, the whip hanging heavy in my hand. It was simple enough to break the spell on the slave, the only danger was making sure I didn’t wake the rest, but I managed it. As he woke I made sure the whip was in his field of view, I didn’t want a supersoldier attacking me even if I felt I’d win.

“Red Beetle?”

“That is this one’s name master.” He didn’t look up at me, keeping his eyes on the swinging tails.

“All of you will follow whoever holds this thing correct?”

“Yes master.”

“Even those on the other ships?”

“All three ships, yes master.”

His servility was just as disgusting as the captain’s had been, but for a different reason. I could hardly fathom that in this world of men alone there was sufficient capacity for cruelty and the torture that produced a broken man. I knew that mortals could be just as evil as any monster or angel, more even, but to have the fact made so clear was sickening.

“So, if I wake them up and they see me with it they’ll obey my orders?”

“Yes master.”

“Alright then. Exsucito!”

Across the fleet the Unsullied jerked awake, some started to row confusedly, but I put a stop to that. “Listen to me!”

My voice boomed across the waves as I waved the whip over my head. “I’ve got this now, so stop rowing!”

As one they did, the screams and exhortations of their captains falling on deaf ears. “I have two commands for you! First, navigate safely to Braavos,” the helmsman on each ship immediately turned their rudders as the rowers started to back water. “And after this never let yourselves be
enslaved again! *Fuego!*

I flung the burning whip over the side as a knot of fighting men erupted around the captains of the other ships. I didn’t really think that with one act I’d made their lives perfect, but freeing slaves from bondage to monsters, even human ones, wasn’t something I’d regret.

I turned to the suddenly freed drummer, with the slightest worry, the apparent conditioning and brainwashing was strong enough that removing it could have strange effects, but he was just staring at me. “Red Beetle,” no he needed a name, I wasn’t going to call him what his masters had and if he didn’t like mine he could choose another, “Ted Kord, can you make sure that he,” I flicked my head towards the Capsicle, ”makes it to the Sealord of Braavos well enough to talk?”

I could see confusion in his eyes, and perhaps the slightest fear that true freedom sometimes brings, but he nodded. “This one will see it done.” The missing word at the end of the sentence was loud in its absence, and for a moment I let myself hope that everything would work out fine.

“Well good luck then, and if you’re still in Braavos when I return feel free to look me up.” The other galleys had already turned east and were moving at a decent if more sedate clip and I could see the Zephyr curving to keep a constant radius from us. I walked down the center lane between the openly staring and muttering oarsmen, gave them one last wave and repeated my leap back towards my ship.

Because it’s my life with a friendly audience I couldn’t stick the landing. Hopefully sprawling across half the deck would prevent the crew from seeing me too differently.

135.

The Three Sisters were a collection of ugly rocks in the middle of the Bite. As a proud owner of an ugly rock I felt I had some grounds to criticize what the owners had done with their places. Sisterton looked like a low market Tortuga, with muddy streets connecting shacks that looked one stiff breeze from blowing over. I’d been doing well recently with regards to smashing buildings, but in this one case I felt that a minor natural disaster might actually improve the real estate value.

“There wasn’t anywhere cleaner?” Maggie voiced the complaint that I’d been considering. She was picking her way through the muck, doing her best to stay on the moldy planks that were meant to keep pedestrians out of the slop. “White Harbor was a day further and it was much nicer last time we were there.”

“I think we’d cause problems for Lord Manderly if we showed up there.” Unlike Maggie I’d enchanted my boots to keep them waterproof. She hadn’t bothered, both because she had far more shoes than I did, and she kept out growing them. Yet more proof fashion was a mug’s game.

“And other nicer ports won’t guarantee that you’re recognized.” Jommo was with us as our guide to the mean streets. “Gulltown you could possibly be missed in the hubbub, the minor coastal towns would be too slow to share their news if they even realized it, and we probably couldn’t have made King’s Landing.”

The Dothraki stood out among the crowd, almost as much as I did. His pitch-black hair and copper skin marked him as utterly distinct from the Westerosis, most of whom could have been colleagues of the muck farmers of Monty Python. It was often sobering to realize how far above the common people I remained, even without electricity or freely running water. I knew that the perception of the
middle ages as a wasteland of disease and dirt was somewhat exaggerated, but Sisterton was rank.

“You know what, screw this.” I fished in my coat for a moment, trying to find the bits of knotted string I’d been making prior to every voyage. “If we’re here to get noticed I’m going to do something to make our lives a bit more comfortable.”

I had a fistful of cords and I stretched them out in my hands, trying to read the labels. Maggie and I had tied up several winds, ranging from a northern gale to an easterly breeze. I wanted something from the west, a nice crisp breeze that would carry the cool sea air into the harbor and blow away the stench of rotted fish and god knows what else. It turned out that Maggie had made one, her neat handwriting easier to distinguish than my own scrawl, I still hadn’t truly gotten the hang of writing in the flowing Valyrian characters.

There was a burst of wind around us as the knots came undone, the wet ground almost rippling before the current of air established itself. I swore I could hear the buildings creaking as the sustained breeze pressed on them, but when nothing catastrophically dropped I decided it had been my imagination. Even if something had the fresh air off the sea would have made it worth it.

The pedestrians had certainly noticed the sudden breeze, but none of them seemed to have connected it to me. It had been pretty subtle, one of the advantages of doing the magic in advance meant that no effort had to be expended at the time of usage. I’d have to do something a little bolder, but it would probably be wise to wait until we had what we needed before possibly inciting a witchhunt.

Jommo just shook his head at my spell. He was more jaded to the elemental magic, and I was sure he was trying to not react to anything I did, especially after I’d knocked out the Unsullied. He was a proud man, and showing fear or uncertainty must have stung. “Where are we going to go next, depending on the quantity of supplies we need we’ll have to go to different chandleries.”

Part of me wanted to just answer Braavos, but we’d barely been gone a week. We needed more time for my absence to be noticed, especially if we wanted to convince others that the city’s defenses would work without me. Westeros wasn’t the best place to stay, I didn’t doubt that I was viewed as an adversary and hanging around seemed like a mistake. Pentos was also out, as were points further south. The Red Priests would have armies marching beneath the wings of their dragons, and I didn’t especially want to meet one.

That left Lorath unless I really wanted to travel, but the Shivering Sea was dangerous. The Zephyr was a good ship, but it wasn’t designed for longer voyages. It had the legs to reach past Braavos, but if something went wrong on the way there we’d be low on supplies. Magic could do a lot, I was confident I could desalinate water without much trouble and there were always fish in the ocean, but spending more than a week or two on the ship was pushing it.

I also had no desire to visit the city of mazes. Everywhere I went I seemed to find old magic rearing up, and I didn’t like the implication of cyclopean constructions. With my luck, it would end with the stars being right and the rise of the dead and dreaming from their non-Euclidean cities.

“We’re going to follow the coast north after we ensure that we’re spotted here.” That perked Maggie up, I could see what she was thinking as Jommo nodded. “And yes, we’ll check out Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, but we’re only looking at the Wall. We’re not doing anything to it no matter what.”

It was hardly ideal, but it would let us kill two birds with one stone. As Jommo had pointed out we’d probably be anonymous in the smaller coastal towns, but the time spent moving up would serve our purposes. The Wall was worth seeing in and of itself as well, I was a little curious what a seven
hundred foot tall ice sculpture would look like.

“Then we won’t need much, we’ll be able to restock our food at each village. I’d like to lay in some more sail cloth as well as rope, with the strain we put on the sails I’d like to have a bit more in reserve than I initially budgeted.” Jommo led us up away from the water, towards the slab sided keep that loomed over the town. “The town is obligated to have stores for the Royal Fleet, but the Westerosi Shiplord demands that they be replaced every year which means that new and high quality supplies are always available for sale.”

“We’re getting surplus military equipment?” Maggie’s question made Jommo and I share a look, carefully calibrated to not include eye contact.

“Yes, this is definitely extra.”

Successfully purchasing a coil of rope and a bale of sailcloth that had fallen off the side of the truck I drew the attention of passerbys by hoisting it onto my shoulder. It wasn’t obviously supernatural, the tightly folded fabric probably only weighed two hundred pounds, but lifting it easily with one arm was a decent feat of strength.

Of course carrying it through the slop was more of a challenge, and I did want to leave a more blatant calling card.

“Sicco.” I’d been getting better at water magic, mostly as a consequence of playing with molten metal and stone, but drying things out was easier in some ways. I was just spreading the liquid out and heating it a little, the mist would evaporate and hopefully leave dry ground.

It didn’t work as well as I’d hoped, but there was a noticeable effect. The street went quiet as people connected the suddenly harder ground with the tall man in incredibly fashionable clothes. Or that was one reason they went quiet, quite a few of the people weren’t looking at me but instead at the harbor. Neat ships were sailing in, with their oars benched the galleys rode my wind to the wharves, as a golden stag banner flapped above them.

“We should leave.” Jommo suited actions to words as he accelerated down the hill. “That’s the Royal Fleet, and if they’re flying that emblem it means the Shiplord is with them.” I glanced at my suddenly uncomfortably hot purchase and followed the captain.

“Is this Shiplord the accommodating and humorous type?”

That was met with a sharp negation. “I heard he once cut the hand off a man who saved his life.”

I wasn’t too worried about being called a thief, not least because I could make the evidence literally disappear, but it seemed foolish to stick around. “Then let’s make tracks.”

We were almost to our berth when we saw the first of the navy men onshore, we only got a second look from them, before my luck manifested.

“Ser Harry!” I debated ignoring the call for a second, then decided that abandoning diplomacy for absolutely no reason was a poor choice. I turned, setting the bale of cloth down as I looked for who had called my name.

It was a large man, his dark hair thinning above a harsh face. He looked familiar, and it took me an instant to recognize him. He’d been at the conference with the Westerosis, and had been the most
pugnacious. Stannis Baratheon was striding towards me across the muddy docks.
I let the nobleman approach while I tried to get my brain in gear. The last time I’d seen the head of
the Westerosi navy had been at Ferrrego’s mess of a summit. He hadn’t been too happy then. The
revelation of the Targaryen’s continued survival would have been enough for that, to say nothing of
the third set of dragons flapping around. This conversation probably wouldn’t change that.

“Ser Harry.” Stannis was a big man, solidly built but easily six inches shorter than I was. That gave
me an excellent view of his bald spot, which gave him something regrettably close to a tonsure.

“Lord Stannis.” I gave a slight bow, and Maggie followed with something that might be called a
curtsey.

“What brings you to Westeros? To Sisterton?” His tone matched his blunt words, and the platoon of
guards behind him made him seem even more aggressive.

“Provisioning.” I gave the bale of sailcloth at my feet a light kick. “Time and tides wear on
everything at sea.”

“Doesn’t Braavos provide for her protector?” He was skeptical, which wasn’t unfair, but in this case
it was actually convenient.

“When I’m protecting it of course they do.”

“When? Why aren’t you doing that now?” He asked the obvious question as I’d hoped he would.

“I managed to secure them the services of another, one that will guard the city from all threats
whether or not I’m there.” Spreading the word was the nominal point of this trip after all.

“Are there any more of these available?” He didn’t believe me, and my response didn’t change his
mind.

“Not yet.” The Titan had probably been a one off, I wasn’t aware of any other easily
anthromoporized tutelaries running around. It wouldn’t hurt to look though. “And I’d need a volcano
or something to wake one up anyway.” Stannis’s expression sharpened.

“A volcano? Why?”

I answered honestly for a lack of anything better to do. “It takes a lot of power, more than I have.” In
this world I’d tried to avoid describing my limits, which I didn’t regret. Other’s uncertainty about my
power had proven to have some drawbacks though, I didn’t think expanding on this one would
cause problems. “Magic on that scale isn’t free, the earth’s fire can do the work if I can direct it.”

“Is that all you need?” The volcano had interested him, and I didn’t know why. Past the one I’d
luckied into, the only other set I was aware of were the ones that scorched Valyria.

“It’s a good start, but there are other requirements.” I glanced at the Zephyr and then down to the
bundle of sailcloth, hoping he’d take the hint. “Why do you ask?”
“My holding, Dragonstone, is built on the slopes of a volcano.” Inwardly I cursed. This is what I got for breaking the first rule of wizarding, keeping secrets. “Would it serve as a source?”

“I’d have to see it.” The implications were running through my head, on one hand it would stop anyone, Viserys included from attacking, on the other hand it would just shift the battlefields. It wasn’t really a choice, I’d warned everyone that dragons weren’t to be used on cities. Preserving half a million people’s lives was well worth any diplomatic difficulties. “I can’t promise anything though.”

“The King would reward you greatly for any efforts I’m sure.” Stannis looked as if he had swallowed something bitter. “He is well known for his generosity.”

“Yes, I’ve heard as much.”

Stannis must have heard something in my voice. I’d tried for scrupulous neutrality, but apparently I hadn’t succeeded. “The Martells’ version of events no doubt differs.”

“Less than you’d think.” I bent down and picked up the heavy bale one handed. The show of strength as well as the action ought to remind him he was asking me something.

“You pledged to defend cities against dragons. Will you honor your word?” I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes. Was simply asking too much for him?

I didn’t want to just say yes, my image as being a dangerous wildcard wouldn’t last too long if I backed down when first challenged. I wasn’t going to abandon people to dragon fire though.

“You are requesting my assistance?” I gathered power as I spoke, enough to make Stannis’s guards shift uneasily. The hair on the back of their necks would be standing up, and somewhere in their hindbrains they’d be aware of danger. Stannis was unfazed, something I couldn’t help but be impressed by.

“You promised. Is a wizard’s word worth so little?”

“Ask the Hightowers, the Red Priests, or perhaps the Shrouded Lord.” We’d drawn a crowd, onlookers forming a rough circle around us. “Now Lord Stannis Baratheon,” I’d never heard his name from his own lips, but sometimes power can make up for technicalities and he twitched as I said it. “Are you going to ask for my help, or am I free to leave?” I’d probably wind up paying for being difficult somehow, but it had to be done.

He ground his teeth, hard enough that I could hear them, and nodded. “Ser Harry, will you defend Westeros from the threat of dragons?”

“I’ll try to give you the same protection I gave Braavos.” It wasn’t what he asked for, but it was what I was willing to promise.

“When?”

“Whenever. We left Braavos on our own errands, and none of them are especially time sensitive.” Maggie shifted at my side, but my hand on her shoulder stilled her.

“The sooner the better then.” Stannis looked to the castle guarding the town. “We’ll sail for
Dragonstone at the turn of the tide. My business here will be concluded by then.”

Back aboard the Zephyr I brought Maggie to the bow while the crew dealt with the minor repairs.

“Sorry about the delay, but..”

“No, I understand.” She glanced at the black stone castle that controlled the bay. “Having the help of the government here will make our investigation easier in any case.”

“Probably.” I wasn’t so sure that the government was at all fond of us, certainly Stannis wasn’t now.

“Besides, Dragonstone was shaped by the Valyrians, maybe we can learn something!” Lydia chimed in much to my surprise, she’d been mostly possessing George and when she had the osprey she was far easier to notice approaching. “And with a larger magma chamber I can do more! Maybe even kick start some Ley lines!”

Her enthusiasm was as always worrisome. “Just run it by me before you do something this time.” I was avoiding thinking about anything that could go wrong, some monstrosity was bound to be awoken based on past results but I’d burn that bridge when I got to it.

“King’s Landing could be interesting too, last time we didn’t really explore it.”

I thought back to the stench and couldn’t bring myself to agree. Maybe I’d get used to it, as horrifying an idea that was.

As the morning ended I helped the crew with their work. Jommo wanted to check one of the spars for cracks, and with my strength it was easy to get in and out of position. Drums rolling across the harbor caught our attention as the ships from the Royal fleet began to cast off. Their crews knew their business as they backed water, pushing against the light breeze that had lingered after my spell had faded.

Jommo was watching closely, considering how we could follow them without oars. “We’ll have to kedge a bit, the tide will take us out once we get into the main harbor, but until then..”

“Would some wind help?” I was hoping he’d say yes, I wanted to make sure that people knew and remembered I was here. I grinned as he nodded. “Which way?”

I wasn’t very nautical, and was used to engines, so some of the impact was lost on me, but our exit from the quay without even raising sails drew stares. I did my best not to acknowledge them as I stood on the bow with my staff raised, tugging the ship through the water. It was a relief to let the wind take over, but I felt that I’d reminded the spectators of who I was, of who we were.

Sailing out of the Bite and around the fingers was far more laborious than I’d expected. The Zephyr continued to live up to her reputation, easily outdistancing the galleys in the open water. We stayed in loose contact with the fleet, as Jommo and the others mocked their seamanship. It was odd to realize that soon all of their skill would be obsolete. I doubted that Mangini and Oliva would slacken
their pace in development of steam ships.

It would be a sea change, the pun was just bad enough to share, but I wondered what this world’s advancement would be like. Back on ours gunpowder had preceded engines by centuries, here it was in its infancy. Would there be armored ramming ships, some sort of trebuchet monitors, or perhaps even stranger developments? Despite their relative ignorance the people of this world were just as smart as mine, and clever minds would be working to exploit anything new.

That would be for the future, one I’d probably see. The present was here, after a week and a half of sailing I could once against see the black rock of Dragonstone.

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Dragonstone was breathtaking.

The legacies of the Valyrians I had seen before had mostly been crude. Impressive certainly, but crude. The Dragon roads stretching hundreds of miles, Chroyane left cursed by dragonfire after centuries, Volantis’s titanic walls of black stone. They spoke of power, enormous power, but no subtlety.

Dragonstone was different. Every structure was draconic, the towers captured the energy of the monsters even sculpted in repose. The architecture was alien, the freedom from the constraints of masonry and scaffolding had let its creators indulge themselves. In some ways it reminded me of the tear-drop shaped solar powered cars, the fortification had the same purpose as all the others, but like the electric cars the means by which it accomplished them were different leading to incredible divergences. It wasn’t like the Hightower, something that was incomprehensible in a medieval world, this was instead the culmination of the stone shaping I’d been playing with, something to aspire to.

Needless to say, I was glad we were on our own ship sailing into the harbor, so that no one could see Maggie’s and my jaw dropping awe. And a little jealousy.

“We need to remake Mini Tirith.” I nodded dumbly. Maybe more than a little.

Jommo deftly got us into a dock, something that still surprised me. I was used to yachts tying up away from shore, but as a nominal cargo vessel we had to be close to be loaded and unloaded. In any case the workers on the shore caught the thrown hawser and looped them around heavy bollards, far heavier than the Zephyr needed.

It was a reminder that we were in the primary base of the Westerosi navy, taking up space that was usually allocated to dromonds and other heavy war galleys. If things went south it would be an adventure getting out. Stannis’s personal squadron was in port to say nothing of the others that were back from their various errands. I had no intention of letting it come to that, but as Maggie and I walked towards the shore and our greeting party I tried to cement the layout in my mind.

Stannis was there, at the center of the group, and he looked just as sour as he always had. I recognized one of the men behind him, Seaworth, Davos Seaworth. He’d been part of the Lannister delegation to purchase compasses, shortly before the dragon hatching incident.
There’d never been proof of who paid for the assassins, at least none I’d heard of, but it was certainly someone from this side of the sea. Davos had been part of the delegation, meaning he was probably involved in sourcing the killers. I fought down my dislike for someone who was willing to kill children, I was here to protect a lot of them here and focusing on the less scrupulous who would also benefit would only make me angry.

I didn’t acknowledge him, only nodding to Stannis.

“Ser Harry. Welcome to Dragonstone.” A boy emerged from behind him carrying a loaf of bread. Maggie and I both grabbed a piece, there was no sliced bread here sadly, and did our part for the hospitality ritual. It wasn’t quite the guest right of the fae, but it had some societal power.

We didn’t keel over immediately, indicating that our value as suppliers of dragon deterrent was considerable or that Stannis wasn’t a sociopath. It was a low bar to clear, but something about the man just rubbed me the wrong way. We followed him in silence up a steep and narrow road to the castle, passing through a gatehouse in the shape of a snarling dragon. The dragon’s spines doubled as crenellation, protecting a battlement that ran along its back before merging into a curtain wall that while smoother still had engravings of dragons in flight, along with other stranger things.

Murder holes inside the gatehouse were predictably in the shape of dragons’ heads spitting flame, if we hadn’t been led through at a decent clip I could have spent all day admiring the carvings and puzzling out how to duplicate them. Familiarity apparently bred contempt as no one else even bothered to look up.

Past the wall, I stopped, I couldn’t help myself. Before the dragons had simply been ornamentation, now, seeing the interior of the castle in all its glory I understand that that had just been the start. The towers and keeps were massive, but more than that they were complete. The only comparison that came to mind was if the Statue of Liberty and Mount Rushmore’s presidents had kids and they turned out to be twisted dragon monstrosities. It wasn’t a very good comparison, but my mind was still stumbling over the sight.

I could barely imagine the time, effort, and power it would have taken to make even one of them, especially in a world where my personal power was so much greater than anyone else I’d seen. They must have had armies of their masons, or perhaps before the Doom magic was just that potent that my experiences were utterly unrepresentative.

“Ser Harry?” The question had the tone of one that had been asked before. I shook myself, nodded, and fell back into step, barely aware of anything past the architecture.

I kept my head on a swivel as I followed them, into a building through a dragon’s mouth, and inside there was more, not just dragons but other beasts. The Moai we’d played with came off a distant second, and it almost made me turn around to go evict the pirates and practice building my own. Manfully I resisted and continued through the castle, until at last Stannis led us into a room dominated by an irregularly shaped table. It took a moment to see what it was, a map of the continent. I’d heard of this room, this was the painted table where Aegon planned his conquest. Europeans might scoff at American timescales, but a piece of history three hundred years old was cool by any true standard.

I resolved to continue my geek out later as I walked around to find a chair, sitting when Stannis did.

“Well? We’re here.” He wasn’t a man for pleasantries, so without any further words I drew in power
and sent it out.

It was something I’d gotten better at in this world, it helped that so much of it was magically inert compared to mine where it was just hiding. I’d practiced scrying more on the island, feeling for things that I couldn’t see. The magma, the nascent genius loci, even the tide beyond the wards were all things that influenced my magic. I was expecting confusing results, it didn’t correlate nicely to the senses. I didn’t expect the backlash.

It struck me like lightning and my muscles spasmed, only the Mantle let me keep upright as my chair fell from my sudden rise. The guards had their swords half out of their sheathes, but Stannis’s raised hand stopped them.

“What was that?” I took a moment to recover, the impact was rapidly fading but I wanted to gather my thoughts.

“When they built this place,” I gave a vague wave at the castle, “magic must have been more of a concern. They took steps to prevent easy scanning.” I was curious how they did it, it was probably something horrific but hope springs eternal. “I’ll try again from outside the walls, I’d rather not mess with the protections unless I have to.” If Stannis had opinions on what I said they weren’t apparent on his face. He simply stood and strode towards the door and we all trooped after him.

The castle was no less spectacular on a second walk through, this time Stannis led us further in, towards the mountain I was assuming was the volcano. There was another smaller gate, the word postern came to mind, and we walked beneath the thick walls onto the black slopes of the Dragonmount. I had to resist jokes about Rand al’Thor, or I had to think about resisting them, none came to mind. It was a shame I’d never know how they ended, or even who killed Asmodean.

This close to the volcano I could physically feel its heat, the rocks were warm when I knelt to feel them. I could see scrapes and odd discontinuities in the rock, things I recognized as the result of bored dragons. It seemed like we were headed back to that state of affairs, with wild dragons roaming wherever they willed.

“You haven’t seen any dragons around here, have you?” Stannis looked almost startled by the question, so I pushed on. “Varys said that they lost a few, and for a while they lived here so…”

“No. Once I heard of their return I searched for anything, anything at all, and I found nothing.” He sounded annoyed, but that seemed to be his perpetual state so I decided to ignore it.

“Viserys’s set originated here, presumably Ser Darry took everything he knew about.” That was just met with more grinding of Stannis’s teeth, so I went back to the reason I was here.

This time there was no reaction to prevent my scrying. I could feel fire all around me. There was magma beneath our feet, hotter and closer than on my island, and a different sort of blaze, more hostile that I could tell matched the walls of Dragonstone. I probed the wards as closely as I dared. Their flames flickered and billowed out unpredictably, and I was willing to bet they were less friendly from this side.

At last I felt I’d learned all I needed, and spent enough time to seem impressive without being boring. I let go of the magic, opened my eyes and stood with creaking joints. No one was near. There was an open space around me, and the rocks at my feet were blurred by a heat haze. My duster’s charms had protected me from the temperatures, I’d had excellent reason to perfect them over the years, but the others weren’t so lucky. When I was reaching out for the heat some had leaked back, thaumaturgy
could be dangerous and that overflow was just one of the many things that could go wrong with it.

“Infirga.” A carpet of ice formed beneath me as I walked towards the spectators, the rocks cracking and snapping in protest to the thermal shift. Only Stannis and Maggie were unaffected by the heat and display of power, even with his bald spot shining and sweat dripping from his beard he managed to stay stalwart. Maggie in contrast had removed the heat like a cheating wizard was supposed to, I’d compliment her later.

“Well?”

I gave Stannis a quick nod. “Your island has the power, but that’s not enough on its own.” I looked back towards the ocean, and the bay the fortress commanded. “We’ll need to go to King’s Landing to see about the rest.”

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Compared to the outside I wasn’t quite as impressed with the interior of Stannis’s castle. Apparently, the basic needs of humanity dominated the quest for themed architecture. The rooms Maggie and I were given could have been anywhere. They weren’t even that nice, especially not for the home of the man second in line for the throne.

It could have been an insult, that we didn’t deserve the best, but the inside of the whole castle seemed a little run down. Stannis invited us to dinner, grudgingly, and the meal was at best mediocre. His court was strange, it lacked the pageantry I’d seen elsewhere in Westeros, even in the nominally poorer North. Historically Dragonstone had been the property of the heir to the Iron Throne, Daenerys had been born here, and the narrow sea houses were wealthy from trade. The money wasn’t evident here.

The fleet had been efficient and well maintained, as had the fortifications. Perhaps the explanation was simply that Stannis didn’t care about his comfort, or at least not enough to spend gold that he could be using more productively. I could respect that, back in Chicago my apartment had been spartan and a little dingy. If I had a fortress to maintain I’d probably have let it get a little dusty in exchange for taller walls too. My standards had changed though. Twenty first century America was impossibly luxurious in comparison, even with my peculiar limits, and in Braavos my tastes had seemed somewhat decadent. Past that I’d done my best to provide for Maggie, and as we did better so did our expectations. Somehow, I’d reached the point where I was judging a man by his castle’s interior decorating.

Thomas could never find out.

The thought of my brother was always accompanied by regret. I’d resigned myself to never seeing him, or anyone, ever again, but Maggie’s desire to seek a way home made the grief sharper. The Nevernever being partially accessible again indicated a return was possible, making the separation a matter of choice not necessity.

That was getting ahead of myself. There were undoubtedly far more obstacles between Chicago and me than simply getting into the Nevernever, but a little hope went a long way. Besides, there were
other things than Thomas and my friends back there, my enemies and my even more dangerous allies.

I dragged my mind back to the ‘feast’ as I realized I’d been staring into space. We’d been seated in a position of honor, above the salt, but not at the main table. Stannis was there, as was his wife with a young child in her arms. Hopefully the girl wouldn’t take after her parents. It was unkind to say but Lady Baratheon was one of the dangers of arranged marriages. I’d normally try to assume that her personality might make up for it, but on the few occasions she’d looked at Maggie and me her eyes had been cold.

It didn’t matter truly. We’d come here with the intention of protecting people from dragon fire, and the character of the lords and ladies was irrelevant. My left hand twinged, something it hadn’t done in ages, fire was an awful way to go.

Being back on the Zephyr was nice, we had a few hundred yards of water between us and anyone from Westeros. Stannis and his men had been scrupulously correct, but it was a relief to relax in privacy. It would be a brief break. The distance from Dragonstone to King’s Landing was about five hundred miles, which Jommo thought with the right wind could be done in a day and half.

We were limited by the squadron of galleys escorting us, the Zephyr had the potential for much higher speeds, but I didn’t want to outdistance Stannis and arrive without warning. I’d never been hostile to the Iron Throne, but I’d certainly been unfriendly. The distinction could be lost, especially since I doubted they’d see initially aiding the Targaryens the same way I did. Sailing in with the man in charge of Westeros’s fleets should keep tensions a little lower.

The density of shipping increased as we passed Driftmark and into Blackwater Bay. It was a massive expanse of water, but King’s Landing and its suburbs were the greatest concentration of people on the continent and it was a rare occasion when there wasn’t a mast of some random merchant visible.

“It used to be more.” I’d shared my latest thought with the captain and he’d disagreed. “We’d all follow the shoreline, it was slower but we knew where we were. Now with the compasses we just head straight in.”

“I haven’t been to Duskendale in years.” Addam was near enough to hear as he was doing something nautical with a line. “We used to stop in on most trips, but it costs too much time to beat out of its bay now. The direct route is too much quicker.”

“Staying out in the deep water keeps the rocks away from the hull too. No route is entirely safe, but it’s nice to not have to worry about the wind driving you into the shore.”

Addam nodded his agreement. “Pirates too, not that there’s many here, but with the whole ocean to roam they’re easier to avoid.”

Jommo grunted noncommittally. “You hear about anchor stones getting put onto particularly rich merchants, or pirates getting access to ship locations.”

“I’d have thought they’d be too valuable to risk like that.” If they weren’t it could be a nice excuse to stop making them.
“It depends on the cargo really. Spices and silks are worth enough that gambling a block can be justified.”

I’d made a few thousand of the compasses, I had a precise count somewhere, but I’d never imagined that they’d be used this widely. Once the current issues had cooled down a little I’d have to start thinking about what I should do with them in the long term. Ideally someone would invent a GPS or something to take the pressure off me, but until then I was entirely responsible for a lot of disruption past the dragons. I vaguely remembered a British prize for navigation, maybe I could sponsor something similar.

The smell of King’s Landing greeted us before we could see it. Or at least it greeted Lydia who’d taken George out for a spin. I’d thought ospreys were primarily sight based hunters, but she claimed that she’d been able to detect an odor. In any case we’d get our chance to experience it soon enough.

When we woke up on the last day of our trip we were passing the fishing fleet of the city, the crews didn’t stop casting their nets as we cruised past them. Last time we’d been to Westeros we’d barely stopped in the city, we’d sailed in and ridden out as quickly as possible. This time we our pace was a bit more leisurely as we navigated our way up the Bay. The foolishness of my earlier thoughts on the number of vessels was revealed as it seemed like a forest of masts covered the sea, bound for who knows where.

I found myself distracted by other sights, the shores were dotted with camps and groups of men running in formation. They hadn’t been there when I last came through, nor had the squat towers that dotted the walls and surrounding town. They weren’t very big, twenty feet tall at most, but their flat tops all had ballistae mounted on them. I wasn’t sure how well they’d work, but it was a sign of the tensions. King Robert wasn’t giving up without a fight.

The harbor wasn’t much as they went, nothing like Braavos’s peculiar topology, White Harbor, or even Boston. Instead ships just docked on wharfs and quays perpendicular to the flow of the Blackwater Rush. It didn’t seem particularly sheltered, but it had been here for three hundred years so something must be working about it.

In any case we followed Stannis’s galleys in as their oars beat metronomically. I’d worried that I’d need to use another breeze to get us in without difficulty, but luckily the wind and tide were with us. Jommo called out directions as Addam and Hazrak did their jobs calmly. Waiting deckhands caught our thrown ropes and drew us to a halt, a minute later we were ashore. I could see Stannis walking towards us, so with Lydia on my shoulder and Maggie at my side I moved to meet him.

He wasn’t completely able to mask his confusion as to why I was carrying a large raptor, but he didn’t mention it. As ever he went straight to business.

“We have horses, but none are fit for a lady.”

“Maggie will manage.” She was taller than most men here, even the nobles. Even back home she’d have been hounded by the basketball and volleyball teams. She had the strength and skill needed to control more rambunctious creatures, I wasn’t worried. Stannis didn’t argue as he led us to several already saddled horses, we all mounted and followed him towards the gates.

The smell inside the walls was an order of magnitude worse, the ocean breeze had provided some comfort. Hopefully we’d be able to ignore it soon enough, but I wasn’t optimistic. Stannis didn’t seem any fonder of the stench than we were, driving his horse at a trot heedless of the confusion caused by pedestrians scattering from our path.
George seemed to struggle as we passed through a fish market, but Lydia kept him on my shoulder. It was lucky my duster was stab proof, if this was to become the new normal I’d need a cushion or something to soften his punishing grip. We followed a road that curved east after leaving the square, and started to climb. I could see the steep hill in front of us, and the castle on its summit.

It grew rapidly as we approached, and I couldn’t help but compare it unfavorably to Dragonstone. The fortress looked perfectly sufficient as far as castles went, it reminded me a little of Edinburgh, but it lacked supernatural grandeur as well as the sheer size of other Westerosi castles. I had no idea how Highgarden or the Hightower had been built, the Red Keep was much more understandable.

The hill it was built on gave us an excellent view of the rest of the city. I recognized the Dragonpit but I couldn’t pull up a name for the building crowning the third hill. It looked religious, so I assumed it was a church but there’d been enough off kilter kings here that I wasn’t positive.

We were close enough to the Red Keep that I turned back to studying it, and I had to revise my earlier impression. The walls were topped with metal, iron from the red streaks below it, and the quantity was immense. The open gates were solid bronze, and as we quickly rode through unchallenged it took ten seconds to clear the gatehouse. This was considerably more than Edinburgh. There was a parade ground behind the gates and Stannis reigned his horse in as servants rushed to take his mount.

I followed once again, and with Maggie we headed towards the next gate, deeper into the castle. Tall doors were opened by soldiers in gold, leading to an antechamber Stannis continued to stride impatiently through. I’d have liked to slow down to see more of it, but we weren’t here to play tourist. The next set of doors, oak banded in iron and inlayed with gold, revealed a cavernous hall where Stannis at last paused.

“Lord Stannis Baratheon of Dragonstone,” a herald, an actual herald announced the man. I had to restrain my nerdy glee, even with the absence of a fanfare.

It was my turn, and I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t amused by the way the herald’s eye’s widened on seeing me.

“Ser Harry Dresden, the wizard of Braavos.”

It was the least of my titles, but probably my second favorite. I walked towards the Iron Throne with Maggie, Lydia, and a grin on my face.

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