

Daro Ohadras stared unblinkingly at the massive castle from a safe distance. The veil of the night kept the castle shrouded in darkness, but his sight was not the only sense in perceiving the world. Years of training to become a warlock of the House of Undying had gifted him with senses beyond compare. His ability to perceive magic was the greatest among his fellow warlocks, which was why he was chosen for this particular mission.

“What do you see, Daro?” asked Crayat, a fellow warlock from Qarth.

“It is most fascinating. The castle is surrounded by protective magic, the likes of which I’ve never encountered. There is a great source of magic inside the walls of that castle.” Daro said, his eyes never leaving the giant silhouette of the castle and its many tall towers.

“So, warlock Pyat Pree’s warnings were not without merit.” Crayat mused aloud.

Daro stopped himself from scoffing at the mention of that weak fool Payat Pree. The man was a subpar warlock living off the name of his ancestors and overly relying on the Shade of Evening for even a spark of magic. One of the reasons for the decadence of the House of the Undying was legacy warlocks like Pyat Pree, who kept warlocks outside the bloodlines of former warlocks from positions of power in their ancient order. Many great warlocks had left the order to join the many pyromancer guilds and even some of the shadow orders of Asshai.

“No, it was not. Come, we’ll need to circle the castle to see whether there are any weaknesses to the magic woven around the walls.” Daro muttered.

“Maybe we should’ve brought Brox, Nephthy and Willow. That way, we could cover more ground.” Crayat muttered.

Daro scoffed at the prospect of those two useless self-proclaimed warlocks. In his eyes, they were nothing but waste. He suspected Pyat Pree sent those three morons with him as an insult. One of these days, he would leave the House of the Undying. Perhaps, his services could be better served in the Red Temple or a Pyromancer guild in Myr. If the mission succeeded, he supposed he’d gain more contracts from the wealthy merchants and magisters of Myr.

Mayhaps, he could even leave Qarth and take up residence in Myr. There were ample opportunities for him to gain a lot of contracts if he was to settle in Myr.

‘Once this mission is over, I’ll get in touch with some old friends. I’ve had enough of getting sidelined by worthless fools like Pyat Pree.’ Daro thought, walking in the dark, studying the magical protections of Winterfell.

It was quite fascinating as he studied the magic surrounding the castle from different positions of the outer wall. Try as he might, he could not find the source of magic protecting the castle because it felt like the whole castle was imbued with magic. Usually, magical protections always had a point of origin, but he could not discern the source powering the protection of this castle. The strange part was that he could not understand how the magical protections functioned.

What was the magic protecting? Was it merely the castle or something more specific inside the castle? Just how exactly does the magical protection function? Does it act against intruders or ensnare intruders in traps like the protections in the House of the Undying?

Many such questions haunted Daro's mind, but the answers eluded him.

'There is no other option. I'll need to use it.' Daro thought grimly, displeased that his natural talents were not enough to breach the protections around the castle.

He picked up a small vial from his belt in the dark. He opened the lid of the vial and took three drops of the evening shade into his mouth with his eyes closed. Daro frowned as the foul elixir made its way down his throat. Many of the 'warlocks' of the House of the Undying had overused the potion rendering them useless without the elixir. Even after the warlocks of the ancient order had become blue from head to toe, they refused to give up their overreliance on the potion.

'Despite the dislike I have for the elixir, in certain situations, it is useful.' Daro thought, securing the vial back on his belt.

As the potion entered his body, he could feel his senses heighten. Daro could feel his magic rising beneath his skin, heightening his natural powers. When he opened his eyes, an explosion of colours greeted his eyes as he looked at the castle.

"What the...?" Daro muttered, gaping at the massive shroud of magical energy covering the castle stretching out for miles.

He gulped as he saw threads of intricate magic woven around the castle and across vast tracts of land outside the castle.

"We need to leave now!" Daro said as he noticed that he had unknowingly walked past several layers of magic whose intent he could not wholly discern.

"Did you not hear what I just said, Crayat? We need to..." Daro trailed off as he finally noted the absence of his companion.

Only the sound of crickets and flies greeted him as he looked for his colleague.

"Crayat..." Daro breathed, looking around in panic, but he could only see darkness around him.

Even the moon was shrouded under the clouds making Daro's heart beat faster as fear settled in. Seeing no other option, he ran, taking care not to attract the attention of the guards patrolling the wall or manning the towers of Winterfell. He didn't dare to look back or search for Crayat. His priority was now to ensure his survival. He tried to blend into the darkness and move as swiftly as the wind.

Daro didn't know how long it took, but he finally reached the hiding spot where he and Crayat were observing the castle. He was slightly out of breath and quickly dived onto the ground to avoid notice from any hostiles. He kept his eye on the magical protections surrounding the castle and for any sign of his missing companion.

"This mission is not going to be easy." Daro muttered.

"Nothing worthwhile happens easily."

Daro suddenly looked up at the voice, and froze in fright as he saw a boy floating a few feet above him on a carpet, of all things!

“Wha...?” Daro never got to say anything else as he suddenly felt all his limbs freeze in place.

“Now, let’s see what I’ve got. I hope you are more interested than your friend here.” said the boy pointing a stick to the side.

Daro couldn’t move his head, but he could move his eyes. He followed the stick with his eyes and found Crayat hanging upside down on a tree branch. He saw all that clearly as the moon emerged from the dark clouds, bathing the immediate surroundings in the moonlight. But all that skipped his notice the moment his eyes connected with a pair of stormy grey eyes. He saw visions of the forests of Qohor, the Dothraki Sea, the Shadow Lands, the Bone Mountains, the horrors he saw in the Smoking Sea, and then the southern lands along the shores of the Jade Sea where ancient cities dwelled. The last vision that lingered in his mind was the Five Forts, and after that, he found himself staring at the boy sitting on a flying carpet. He felt like he got stabbed behind his eyes.

“Hmm. You are well travelled and more interesting than your friend. Oh, I almost forgot. Please accept my warm greetings. You shall be my treasured guest in Winterfell.” the grey-eyed boy said, and then a flash of red light filled his vision before darkness consumed him whole.

When he finally regained his bearings, Daro found himself in a dark room with chains binding him to a wall. He tried to move his hand, but it barely moved as the chains were as heavy as an elephant for some reason. There was a dull light from a small opening on the prison door, which allowed him to see Crayat bound in chains across from him on the wall in a similar fashion.

Daro used all his strength to lift his limbs, but the chains were unnaturally heavy. It refused to so much as budge an inch from the wall, making it impossible for him to move. After repeated attempts, he was out of breath, which left his muscles strained and weak.

‘There is some kind of magic on the chains.’ Daro deduced, taking deep breaths after his failed attempts to break out of the chains.

Daro gritted his teeth as he had no choice but to use his magic against the chains. But the problem was that he was not in a position to use his magic effectively. He had no idea where he was or what sort of guard detail was outside the cell. At the same time, he was not confident whether he’d get a chance to escape. It was likely that he’d get executed for trespassing into Winterfell. Not to mention that blasted devil child was terrible news.

He was almost certain the Stark boy, his target, was now his captor. The terrifying display of magical power the Stark boy had displayed the last time was enough for Daro to see that this was a mission beyond his capabilities. He doubted even the most powerful of the Faceless men could take on the Stark boy. He was even starting to realise with growing horror that Harrion Stark, his target for this mission, might not even be a child of man.

‘Perhaps, some mighty spirit or demon had taken over the child’s body.’ Daro thought with fear.

It’d explain the terrible power he had witnessed. He had travelled far and wide across Essos and never had encountered magic as potent and powerful as he had from Harrion Stark.

With this premonition in his mind, Daro summed as much magic as he could into his fingertips and used it on the chains binding him to the wall. At first, he tried to layer his magic on the chains, but the chain repelled all his attempts to subvert it to his will.

“There is definitely powerful magic on these chains.” Daro muttered after failing to take control of the chains.

But he was not willing to admit defeat yet. Daro closed his eyes and pulled on the inner fire that slept within his soul. He braced himself as he called forth that sacred power that powered the soul and the body. He could feel his magical presence strengthen, and in the next moment, his fingers glowed with unnatural heat. It was the soul flame, one of the most potent flames in the known world and the greatest defence against shadow creatures and demons. The spell was only supposed to be used sparingly, but he had no choice. He had a feeling that normal pyromancy spells would not break away these chains. To his relief, the soul fire he managed to conjure on his fingers managed to eat through whatever magic was bound to the chains.

“Fascinating! You continue to impress me, warlock Daro Ohadras.”

Daro was startled at the sound coming from inside the cell, but he could not see anyone other than Crayat. He couldn't help but gape as Harrion Stark materialised before him all of a sudden out of thin air as if the child was covered in a veil of invisibility.

“Wha...? How?” Daro stuttered in fear as he looked into the eerily glowing grey eyes of the Stark boy with immense power.

“Using your soul to fuel and shape your magic into a fire-natured spell. This is quite impressive. You're becoming quite an interesting individual, Daro.”

“You! Release me this instant.” Daro demanded. “You'll attract the wrath of the House of the Undying.”

“Hmm. Going by your memories, anyone the House of the Undying would send here would be far weaker than you.” Harrion said mockingly.

“You...! You saw my memories! You... saw my mind!” Daro gasped, shaking with fear at the terrifying power the child was displaying.

“You are like an open book to me, little warlock.” Harrion mocked.

“But I digress. Your friend was not of much great use. He seems to depend on casting petty illusions. Parlour tricks that might impress a crowd of donkeys.” Harrion scoffed. “But you have travelled to distant lands and battled beasts of darkness. You are an interesting man, warlock.”

“What do you want?” Daro asked, shaking with fear as he felt the overwhelming aura of power blanket the whole room.

To make matters worse, Daro felt his magic collapsing in on itself as the Stark boy pressed his thumb on his forehead and began hissing like a snake.

“I want your total allegiance.”

Daro heard the Stark boy mutter, and once again, he felt his vision get clouded by darkness.

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Harry closed the door behind him, leaving the warlocks he captured surrounded in the darkness of Winterfell's dungeons. Three more warlocks were bunkering down in the woods a few miles east of Winterfell. He'd deal with them come morning.

"Keep some of your best men outside the cell, Alyn. And make sure they know not to interact with the prisoners." Harry ordered, handing over the key to the cell to Alyn, who was now in charge of the household guards in the absence of Jory.

"As you command, Lord Harrion." Alyn bowed before assigning additional guards to ensure the warlocks were kept safely behind bars.

Harry walked back to his chamber while the castle guards did their duty. His family remained blissfully unaware, and that was how he preferred.

"If they are warlocks of the House of the Undying, then it'll not be wise to keep them together and in a cell. As much as I'm loath to suggest, there is no better option than relieving them of their heads. They are too dangerous to be left alive, Harrion." said Maester Luwin, who joined him in traversing the hallways of the castle.

"You overestimate their strength Maester Luwin. They have magic but use it for tricks and sleight of hand. I'll start fearing them when pigs learn to fly." Harry said, waving away the concerns of Maester Luwin.

"If you are not executing them, what are you going to do with them?" asked Maester Luwin, a frown on his face indicating that he was not particularly happy with the warlocks living in the bowels of Winterfell.

"I intend to learn more about their order and the distant lands of Essos. They hold many secrets of distant lands and obscure magic in their minds. I wish to learn them. There is also my wish to send a message to their patrons. And in time, should they learn to cooperate with me, I shall make use of them and their knowledge for my benefit."

"You intend to use them as assassins?" Maester Luwin asked incredulously. "You'd dishonour yourself and your house with such actions, Harrion."

"Honour is an abstract concept Maester Luwin. In warfare, all methods to victory are honourable."

"You are not at war, Harrion." Maester Luwin said with a troubled look.

"No. Not yet." Harry muttered, knowing that it was always necessary to prepare for the eventuality of war.

With the number of assassins coming after his head increasing, it was only a matter of time before his enemies in the Free Cities looked to other avenues to take him on. If more assassins failed in their tasks, he had no doubt his enemies would look to hire armies or enemies with access to armies.

Besides, he'd not spill magical blood if he could avoid it. His kind was already a rare breed in Westeros. He'd not thin the numbers further by spilling magical blood needlessly.

"Maester Luwin. Send a raven to Lord Manderly, thanking him for his diligence. Tell him we have captured the assassins. Invite him and his family to Winterfell for a small feast to express my appreciation for his timely warning." Harry ordered.

"A feast? That can be arranged. If there is a feast, it'd be better to invite other Northern houses as well, not to give any offence."

Harry thought briefly before giving his assent to the idea. He only wanted Lord Manderly here to discuss the possibility of sending a strong message to these disgruntled Magisters of Myr. But he could roll with a few more Northern lords in his home. Perhaps, this could be beneficial in its own way.

"Has there been any word from father? Has he put Golden Tooth on siege?" Harry asked.

"I'm afraid no raven have come from the south, my lord."

"Hmm." Harry grunted. "I suppose we'll know soon enough."

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Jon Arryn was relieved to hear the developments coming from the Riverlands. He could rest easy knowing that another setback had struck the Lannister cause.

"Are you sure this is accurate, Lord Varys?" Jon asked, looking at the bald spymaster sitting to his left in the small council chamber.

"I am, Lord Hand. Lord Eddard has negotiated passage for the combined host of the North and the Riverlands. It'd seem Lord Lefford was convinced House Lannister's days are numbered." said Varys.

"I wonder what price Lord Lefford asked for this generosity?" Lord Baelish mused aloud.

Jon was also curious to learn of Lord Lefford's sudden turnaround. The Lord of Golden Tooth had been refusing all overtures till now.

"It seems Lord Eddard brokered a betrothal for Lord Lefford's only daughter and heir with Ser Edmure Tully. It was more than enough for Lord Leo Lefford to strike his banners and join the king's side." Varys reported.

"Truly? I thought Lord Tully was keeping his Riverrun out of the war. How come Lord Eddard convince Lord Lefford of this betrothal?" asked Lord Baelish.

"It'd seem Ser Edmure and Ser Brynden do not share Lord Hoster's views about the war. They have led a considerable host from the Riverlands in support of Lord Stark. My little birds tell me they've joined the Northern lords and the rest of the loyal Riverlords to invade the Westerlands."

"I see." Jon said, refusing to comment anything else on the matter.

Few people knew that Lord Hoster was physically weak, and they had come to an arrangement of sorts regarding the succession of Harrenhall. It was the reason House Tully was openly in the field. For now, he held on to the royal proclamation of granting Harrenhall to House Tully in the event of Lady Whent's passing until the war was won. He exchanged a look with Lord Horton Redfort, the newly made Master of Laws, as they knew the negotiations that happened in the shadows. The succession of Harrenhall was a tough decision to make because, historically, the Iron Throne had been the one to decide that lordship. But Hoster was adamant about getting control over Harrenhall, and Jon was inclined to give it to Hoster as all the other kingdoms followed the word of their Lords Paramount.

The second and perhaps the most important of demands from Hoster Tully was to ensure the succession of Casterly Rock and Lannisport never fell into the hands of Tywin's sister and her children by Ser Emmon Frey. This was far more difficult to ensure as war tends to throw all plans on its head. Regardless he had promised to make sure the Freys don't gain the upper hand should Robert decide to make any changes to the succession of Casterly Rock and Lannisport.

"This is indeed good news for his grace's planned invasion. The Lannisters have no choice but to split their attention with Lord Stark invading the Westerlands from Golden Tooth." Lord Horton commented.

"Indeed. I suppose it's now time for the Vale to join the fray." Jon said, looking at Varys. "Send word to Lord Royce. He may start marching through the Gold Road. That should further make Lord Tywin see his position untenable."

"I shall pass on the message, Lord Hand." Varys dipped his head.

"What about the Dornish? Have they kept their word? I've been getting many complaints from merchants from both sides of the Narrow Sea about the Dornish fleet disrupting the trade." said Lord Baelish.

Jon quietly sighed as he knew what the Dornish were doing. They were using the pretence of war to disrupt shipping to the Reach. The Marcher lords had refused passage of the Dornish army through their lands as grudges were aplenty.

"They'll join the Redwyne fleet to siege Lannisport." said Jon, and that was all he would say about the Dornish.

Some of the demands Prince Oberyne made were quite outlandish and far out of his power. Yet, he had given some concessions for the stability of the Seven Kingdoms. The most adamant demand of House Martell was the betrothal of Princess Arianne to Harrion Stark. He had remained noncommittal to such flagrant demands as he was hardly the person of authority to make such agreements on behalf of House Stark. Then there were the frankly horrifying demands of House Martell getting to kill all Lannisters as revenge for the murder of Princess Elia Martell and her children.

“Leave the matters of the Dornish aside. We’ll revisit them another day. Tell me more about your efforts to restore law and order in the city, Lord Redfort.” Said Jon, redirecting the meeting to more local matters far closer to King’s Landing.

After all, it was equally important to ensure the capital was restored and functioning when the King returned from the war. It was now only a matter of time for House Baratheon to secure victory over House Lannister. The lions were on their last leg.

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“I cannot thank you enough for convincing father to let me come with you, uncle.” said Tyrion happily, looking around at the harbour's rows and rows of inns and alehouses.

Gerion smiled at his littlest nephew as he, too, enjoyed the peace of Saltpans. Compared to the wailing and dreadful faces back home because of the war, the salty scent of the harbour was heaven. The harbour was bustling with activity as grain, fish, and many wares exchanged hands between the merchants. The town was flush with traders selling their wares to foreign and local merchants alike. Eastward from the port lay the Bay of Crabs, its waters shimmering blue and, if rumours were to be true, ripe with red crabs and white pearls. Further east lay their destination and the task his brother entrusted him.

“Uncle, look. I can see the crabs.”

It was none other than his daughter, Joy Hill, calling for Tyrion’s attention.

“Go, nephew. Keep her company. She’ll be as excited as you, and you could regale with her stories as I have done for you.” Gerion nodded encouragingly at Tyrion.

“He doesn’t know, does he?” Briony whispered as she stood by his side.

He eyed the mother of his daughter out of the corner of his eyes.

“No. Let it remain that way.” he whispered back.

The raven-haired woman nodded and fell silent beside him. Their ship slowly moved away from the harbour, sailing to the east. It was now his duty to protect the son of his brother. Tywin was the one who insisted that he take Tyrion to Essos. His brother rightly feared all his children would suffer should Robert Baratheon come out of this war victorious. Under such circumstances, Tywin wanted at least one of his children to survive.

‘Perhaps, Tywin sees the situation for what it is. Without some miracle happening, this war is lost.’ Gerion thought.

Gerion sighed tiredly, turning away from the shores of Westeros. All the battle and death were behind him as he drew ever closer to the east, where the Free City of Braavos lay in wait. What waited for them on the shores of the Braavosi was unknown, but staying in Westeros would only

invite the wrath of Robert Baratheon and a storm of swords. He looked at his daughter, his woman, and his nephew. He supposed he could start anew in Essos should Westeros become hostile to a Lannister.

Once he met with the Iron Bank accountants, he could revive the trade networks House Lannister had built over the centuries. First, he'd have to secure their finances, and after that, he could look for Cersei and Myrcella and secure their safety. The rest would be in the hands of the gods.

'May the Seven shine fortune on us all.' Gerion prayed, looking east where a land of hope awaited him.